

## Spouses That Give Life

It's still Easter: Christ has risen and He is the resurrection and the life, the supreme life-giver. Joined to Him we have life, just as He said, *I have come that they may have life to the full, John 10:10.* And by the Holy Spirit we have power to share life with others. Who doesn't want to be with people who are positive, encouraging, supportive, and giving? The world needs more "life-givers."

Last week I began this series of messages on "Life Givers," by talking about what it means to be a life-giving parent. Being a parent is the most challenging and most important job we'll ever have in life. And God has given us guidance and help to be great parents who give life to our children. Every adult here today can be a life-giver for any of the youth or children who are on this campus.

Last week I said that *life-giving parents are willing to sacrifice their own desires and ambitions for the sake of their child's future.* True love is action taken on behalf of another. At the same time, we must temper our self-sacrifice with instruction and discipline.

Today let's look at how we can be life-giving spouses. "Oh," you say, "I'm not married, so this doesn't have anything to do with me." Maybe you were married at one time, or think you'll be married sometime. But even if you're not married now, I encourage you to listen, because all of what I will say applies to all people who want to be life-givers.

## Intentions and Ideals

When couples enter into Christian marriage, they take vows to *remain faithful to one another "til death us do part."* Many couples get married with the words of 1 Corinthians 13 sounding over them.<sup>1</sup> There are often unspoken expectations that since they are so in love, they will easily get through all circumstances and challenges. [One married woman asks another: "Does your husband remember your wedding anniversary?"

Came the reply: "No! So, I remind him of it in January and June, and get two presents."]

Nonetheless, many couples hope for something like this in marriage: *Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken, Eccl. 4:9-12.* Life-giving spouses build each other up and make each other better. Many couples do achieve this kind of friendship – praise God. I think numerous studies have shown the financial, emotional, and social advantages that such married couples enjoy.

Unfortunately, some couples come together based on feelings of falling in love, and find out later that those feelings don't last. ["Here's something wonderful," said Mrs. Jones. "I've just been reading about a man who reached age 40 without learning how to read and write. He met a woman and, for her sake, he made a scholar of himself in two years."]

"That's nothing!" replied her husband. "I know a man who was a renowned scholar at age 40. He met a woman, and for her sake he made a complete fool of himself in two days."

**"Love is blind ... but marriage is a real eye-opener." And when eyes are opened, the love-birds may think love has flown the coop. But that's a false notion. What life-giving spouses know is that true love is about choices made, not feelings experienced.**

### **True Love**

The Bible speaks of love quite often – mostly the love of God. Perhaps we don't always understand the full import of God's love because of our cultural understandings. In the English language we use the word "love" to describe a multitude of relations. The New Testament was originally written in Greek which commonly used three different words for love.<sup>2</sup> Very often the word "agape" (αγαπε) is used; which means a self-sacrificial care. This is the word used in familiar bible verses: **'Love your neighbor as yourself' Mark 12:31. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends, John 15:13. And of course, God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son... John 3:16.**

**What makes for a life-giving spouse, rests on understanding God's love.** God so loved the world that He did not say, "I feel your pain." Or, "I really care for you." God so loved the world that He gave of Himself, totally, for our sakes. Notice the verb – it means action. True love is not sentimental emotions or feelings of affection. **True love is an act of the will – to choose to love someone, sometimes even when you don't feel like it or they don't deserve it.**

**But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us, Romans 5:8.** God chose to love us even when we were unlovable. Think about that and **why marriage vows are so important: they are a copy of God's fidelity to us.** Christian marriage vows are a promise to continue to love your spouse even on the days you don't feel like it; to do good by them, even in times when you're not sure they deserve it. That kind of love, a reflection of God's true love, is redemptive.

### **What The Bible Says**

From Genesis to Revelation, we can see that God had a plan in creating us and has our destiny in mind. At the beginning. **...God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them, Gen. 1:27.** Note the words "image" and "likeness." These are synonyms that tell us that man and woman are created to be like God. One of those Hebrew words was sometimes used for a statue. Just as a statue is the "image" of what it portrays, even so we are the "image" of God on earth. But what does that mean in practical terms?

**1. The image of God means that we are forever separated from the rest of creation.** You may well love your pet, but your pets are not made in the image of God. The great gulf fixed between Adam and Eve and all other creatures is called "the image of God."

**2. The image of God enables us to know God personally.** There is within each of us a "God-shaped" place that makes us want to know Him. Your dog doesn't pray and your cat doesn't seek the Lord. They can't. The same is true of every animal. Only humans have God-consciousness. Only we can know the God who made us; and make conscious moral choices to do good or evil.

**3. The image of God imparts true significance to every individual** wholly apart from their circumstances. Every person in this room, everyone in Bakersfield, everyone born on this earth, is made in God's image - regardless of race, color, nationality, gender, age, or physical condition. Therefore, everyone has worth and value. As C. S. Lewis notes, you've never met a "mere mortal" and you never will. In God's eyes each person matters because His image is in each person—small or great, rich or poor, young or old, educated or illiterate, healthy or sick, strong or weak; and His thoughtful care extends from the moment of conception when the unborn child is just a microscopic bundle of cells all the way to the moment of physical death.

There is a classic New Testament passage on marriage in Ephesians 5:22-33. It begins, ***Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord...*** and we do not hear what follows for we can hardly bear these words. Certainly, in our culture today and in the church as well, these words of Scripture are ignored or dismissed because in the past they have been used as justification to unfairly subjugate, even mistreat, women. (I suspect that in some quarters this still goes on.) Such misuse is contrary to the meaning of Scripture. Yet if we throw out Scripture because of how some have misused it, then we will find ourselves in worse shape than before.

We must begin from the perspective of understanding true love, which comes from God, and God's plan and purpose in creating us in His image. Last week I said (about parents) that **true love is about action taken on behalf of others.** It means giving up one's own ambitions and desires for the sake of another. This same principle applies to one's spouse. Remember that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son... God didn't have good feelings about us ... but He took action to save us. And so, when we come to passages of Scripture like this (*Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord...*), we ought to ask ourselves: do I unconsciously bring to Scripture the values and perspective of the world with its broken and adversarial relationships, and so read it through the world's lens? Or do I consciously attempt to read this passage from the perspective of those redeemed by Christ, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, letting God's love flow through me, which is spiritual wisdom? Whose worldview is interpreting this passage?

The verse right before these verses about husbands and wives is this: ***Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, Eph. 5:21.*** Chew on that one awhile, for it colors all that follows. [Customer walks into a book store and asks the salesgirl, "Have you a book entitled, *Man: The Master of Women?* She replies, "The fiction department is on the other side, sir."]

Immediately following his exhortation to wives, Paul launches into an exhortation to husbands that quickly veers in a new direction: ***Husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless, Eph. 5:25b-27.***

There's that word "love" again. In the original language it is the "agape" or self-sacrificial and Christ-like word for love. You see, God has something in mind for spouses that goes beyond sexual fulfillment and personal happiness. **When spouses come together as God intends, we get a glimpse of eternal truth.** Christian marriage is a divine object lesson through which the world learns something about the nature of Christ and His love for His bride, the Church, comprised of believers the world over.

How did Christ love the church? By giving up His life for her. Not just physical existence, He also gave up His dignity and status as Son of God. With His example, surely husbands and wives could give up pride, control, or unhelpful demands and expectations for one another.

The passage ends as it began: **...each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.** In between the relationship of husband and wife is woven imagery of Christ and the church, reminding us of **Eccl. 4:12 A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart. A braid of hair must have three strands to hold together. Christ is the third strand that holds together life giving-spouses. ...in Him all things hold together, Col. 1:17.**

God's intentions are shown in Revelation (the final book of the Bible) where it says, **I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband, Revelation 21:2.** The new Jerusalem is the church, the people redeemed back into God's family through Christ. And then, at the very end of the Bible there is a final gospel invitation: **The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life, Rev. 22:17.** The Holy Spirit and the bride of Christ (the church) offer life to all. It is the same image Paul uses in Ephesians 5. It all fits together.

**Life giving spouses are like life-giving parents: they glorify God by loving one another as God loved us in Christ, and as Christ loves the church. If Christ is the third strand in our relationships the cords of love will not be broken. (Gary Chapman, Christian counselor, has written a helpful book, *The 5 Love Languages*. I commend it to you).**

### **Reaching for the Ideal**

Maybe your current spouse isn't so life giving. Or maybe it was your past spouse. Maybe you don't have a spouse, yet. And just maybe you're the one who hasn't been life-giving. We know that the biblical model is not always played out in our own experience. [Husband: "We must think of the future. We need to manage our finances. If I were to die where would you be?" Wife: "Why, I'd be right here. The question is, where would you be?"]

**Nevertheless, though we sometimes mar God's image by our choices and behavior, God's true love has not given up on us. Through Christ we can live under and live by God's truthful love. We don't have to wait for others to be life-givers, we ourselves can begin today. Are you a Jesus-powered life-giver? If not, when are you going to start?**

**We can ask ourselves: If every spouse was like me, what kind of marriages and relationships would we see?**

**Always remember that Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, Eph. 5:25.**

**He expects us to do the same as spouses, and as members of His body, the Church.**

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<sup>1</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs... 1 Cor. 13:4-5.

<sup>2</sup> "Eros" - Ερως - refers to the love between a man and a woman and the attendant idea of romantic and sexual attraction. This word is *not* found in the N.T. "Phileo" - Φιλεω,- meaning to like or have deep feeling for, is often used to mean "brotherly love." This word *is* found in the N.T.