

Marriages that Last

This past Tuesday I preached the funeral for my Aunt Henrietta, the epitome of the Proverbs 31 lady. My heart was deeply moved as I saw my uncle, Pastor C. F. Edwards, now 90 years old, World War II hero of the South Pacific approach the casket where his wife of 67 years lay. I walked with him up to the casket, but as I saw his blue eyes fill with tears and his brave yet trembling hands reach for her cold hand, I stepped back, for I was intruding into spaces where lovers should only be included. I saw him tenderly address her only imagining what he may be saying. At the close of the service, I stood by as he leaned over for a final kiss--and down came the lid as my uncle bowed his head, wiping the tears. Oh, I did hear the last thing he said: "See you tomorrow, Sweetheart." Ah, tomorrow! It cannot come too soon for this couple! We *"...sorrow not, even as others which have no hope"* (I Thessalonians 4:13).

They were married for 67 years; he never cheated on her and she never cheated on him. They kept their wedding vows for just under 70 years! How sad these faithful ministers and their wives don't seem to attract the headlines. For forty-two years I have spent most of my outside speaking engagements around these faithful men who kept their promise to God and their spouses. For every preacher that ever messed up, I will show you five hundred or more who preached faithfully and backed up their ministry by a pure and holy life that has been true. To borrow the words of the Marines, "Semper Fidelis: Always Faithful!" Always Loyal! Ooh-rah!

On Wednesday evening, I preached with Pastor Clint Caviness at Mount Zion Baptist Camp in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California. I remember when his wife, Karen was the charming little preacher's daughter when I preached for her dad, Bob Smith many years ago in Baton Rouge. The Cavinesses have been married now for 29 years and last year Clint came very close several times to passing over into the glory--except for one great interruption--his wife, Karen. Clint had the worst heart condition of any patient his veteran heart surgeon had ever seen. For three months prior to his open heart surgery, Karen slept every night on her husband's chest with her ear strategically trained to his heart. Throughout the nights his heart would stop and the absence of sound and vibration would awaken her and she would immediately take her fist, striking him on the chest above the heart to awaken and keep it going. Clint's condition was a threefold problem, one of the serious problems being his heart strings had torn. Yes, there really are such things as heart strings attached to the valves and extending to the wall of the heart which provide reinforcements to aid the function of a healthy heart. You might say Karen had become his compensating heart strings, keeping him alive for three months until he was able to have surgery.

Clint and Karen have been faithful to one another for just under three decades; neither he nor she has cheated in all the years of their union. They have laid down their lives for one another. When I stepped up to the pulpit to preach, I could not help but notice them sitting like love birds in the services. Clint's heart has been repaired, but she still holds the heart strings...and he holds hers. *"Set me like a seal upon your heart...for love is as strong as death..."* (Song of Solomon 8:6).

Earlier in the summer I preached for a great servant of the Lord whose wife has been diagnosed with stage four cancer. With tears in his eyes he explained how the physical aspect of their union had become tenuous, but their love and devotion had actually become stronger. As we see beautiful marriages throughout the years that hold true and which cannot be duplicated by the world, we ask ourselves, who and/or what holds a marriage together? I present you two basic principles:

1. God has the power to hold us together; rely on His power.

"Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power..." (Hebrews 1:3). Our Lord's holding power works in the order of the universe and it works in the matter of the husband/wife relationship. We dare not take the glory for all that God does. He is not just interested in keeping gravity pulling, centrifugal force fleeing, the sun shining, the moon beaming and holding the stars in their unique sockets throughout the universe--God desires and does keep marriages intact. *"And He, (the Lord Jesus) answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder"* (Matthew 19: 4-6). God joins man and woman. Love is God's gift and when He gives it to a man and woman, it becomes the closest thing to the restoration of the Garden of Eden on earth.

Love is a miracle. It is activated when we believe. *"Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth"* (Mark 9:23). Don't give up on love; God gives it and God can hold it together by His sovereign power!

2. Love is a decision; decide correctly.

The Bible commands, *"Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth"* (Colossians 3:2). Although there is much more to loving than making a decision, it starts with a decision. Boy meets girl and immediately you begin to go through the mental reasoning: Shall I pursue this? Is he or she the one or shall I back off, say it's been nice knowing you and go my way? Behind every couple that ever got serious was a deliberate choice to love. Even in the ancient and in some modern cases of "pre-arranged" marriages, there is a choice

involved. Even when God sent his servant, Eleazer five hundred miles away to find a bride for his son Isaac, the condition was, the bride must be willing: *“And if the woman will not be willing to follow thee, then thou shalt be clear from this my oath...”* (Genesis 24:8). Later in the chapter it says, *“And they called Rebekah, and said unto her, Wilt thou go with this man? And she said, I will go”* (Genesis 24:58).

“Setting our affection” as Colossians 3:2 instructs us as to what can and should be done in the matter of marital fidelity. The nineteenth century Scottish preacher Thomas Chalmers preached an immortal sermon of over 7,000 words that says everything in the title: *“The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.”* Chalmers’ lofty language says beautifully that we, by our nature as human beings, find an object of adoration and set our heart on that object. When we embrace that object, the old affection evaporates like morning mist. This message is primarily talking about loving God, but it translates perfectly in the matter of loving our spouse. When we make the concerted effort, we continue to fall in love with them over and over again and the thrill of new love is always ours. This is what our Lord was referring to when He said, *“Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love”* (Revelation 2:4). How do we re-introduce the heat and fervor of the “expulsive power,” the power to drive out possible competitive affections? Our Lord follows up by saying, *“Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works...”* (Revelation 2:5). We do those things that brought us together: that look into each other’s eyes, the entertainment that interlocks us in laughter, or the simple act of worshipping together, loving the Lord with conjoined intimacy that brings us closer to each other. Any couple who has ever enjoyed the love that God has given knows what those “first works” were. Make the decision to love and stay in love.

-Pastor Pope-