

# ***Live Strong: Building Marriages that Last***

**A Sermon Preached by  
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*The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." ...So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, ...; then he took one of his ribs ... And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.*

*Genesis 2:15-18, 21-24 NRSV*

This story should have ended with, “and they lived happily ever after,” but it doesn’t. It ends with blame and heartache. One moment Adam is praising God for the gift of this woman, this ‘true companion,’ this “flesh of my flesh.” The next moment he is cursing God for bringing her into his life.

That’s how it can be between modern brides and grooms, too. We see a couple full of hope on their wedding day and then months or years later we get the news—they’re splitting up. It doesn’t happen all the time, but it happens so often that we are saddened but not shocked anymore.

This congregation knows the pain of divorce. My own family knows it. I’m not here to throw stones. I want to build marriages, marriages that will last. I want to enlist every person here—single, divorced, widowed, and married—in a battle to save marriages one by one.

Every couple's story is unique. But I think I know what went wrong with that first couple. Maybe that's a starting point for looking at what's going on in our own marriages.

What went wrong for Adam and Eve was the Serpent told them what they wanted to hear—and *they listened*. Genesis 3:

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.*

*Genesis 3:1-7*

The Serpent tells them *they can have it all*. God was really clear with Adam and Eve, wasn't he, that one tree is off limits in the Garden, but the Serpent is so persuasive. First he gets them to second-guess their memories, "did God *really* say you mustn't eat from any tree in the Garden?" Then he makes them doubt God's warning, saying, "Don't be silly, you aren't going to die." Finally, he appeals to their egos: "Eat the fruit and you'll be just like God," "eat the fruit and you won't need God telling you what you can and can't do." That's all the Serpent had to do: whisper a few sweet nothings. Adam and Eve did the rest.

Eve started thinking that it really did look like good food, and good for you, plenty of fiber and such. And when she had eaten and nothing happened to her, Adam figured that what was good for the goose was good for the gander. It didn't take much to get that couple into trouble, did it? No one twisted their arms. The Serpent simply played with their heads.

That Serpent still speaks. Every married couple hears three messages over and over again. The first message we hear is: “You can have it all.” This almost goes without saying for people born around 1945 or later. We have grown up expecting and demanding the very best of life, *now*. We were taught that there is nothing outside our grasp if we just go for it. Now guess what happens when you put together two people who firmly believe they *can* have—*should* have—*must* have--*everything*, right now?

We max out our credit cards and struggle to advance in our careers. We go to therapy to lift our depression and consider plastic surgery to tuck our chins. We lie in bed side by side, but miles apart, reading books like, “Women Who Love Too Much,” and “How to Get Your Wife to Love You More.” We fill our homes with things and our calendars with activities and then wonder why we are working so hard and where all the time goes. And we never stop to think that maybe we are not supposed to have “it all.” Maybe some trees are off limits.

No matter what the catalogs and magazines say, there is a price to the endless quest for more comfort, more bliss, more freedom, more, more, more. And the price, so often, for couples, is their marriage. So many couples have been convinced that they need it all, right now. Have you been to a wedding reception lately? How much do you think it cost? \$5,000? \$10,000? \$20,000? More? Sometimes couples or their parents have this kind of money. Lots of times they don’t; so they borrow it. And the Serpent has convinced more than one new couple that one night of extravagance is worth ten years of credit card debt. The Serpent doesn’t tell them that the leading cause of marital arguments is money. If the Serpent can get a couple to believe that it can have it all, he is well on his way to creating another divorce statistic.

The second thing the Serpent is saying these days is, “unconditional love is for suckers.” Many young adults today have grown up with no healthy model of unconditional, enduring, sacrificial, love. At one time you worked for an employer for life, married for life, and had children for life.

Imagine a twenty-five year old today. She has seen her father “downsized” in the prime of his career because of the company’s desire to boost profits. She listened attentively as that same Dad explained that he just wasn’t in love with her Mom anymore. And she knows the pain of seeing Dad move away to start a new life with new children. How is she

supposed to love for the long haul when everyone else seems to be cutting their losses at the first sign of pain and inconvenience? The last thing she wants is to play the fool in her own relationships.

So it seems to make sense when the Serpent whispers, “you have got to think of yourself first,” “marriage has to be 50/50,” “you only live once, don’t waste it on a relationship going nowhere.” Too often we think of marriage as a contract for an exchange of services: when the goods stop coming, we get going. Too often the real meaning of wedding vows is, “I will stay with you so long as I’m getting what I want out of it. And if something better comes along, we’ll renegotiate.” No marriage can last long by that standard.

I think God wants most married people to stay together. There are exceptions to be sure--when the relationship is abusive or adulterous or one partner has abandoned the other--but on the whole, I think God sees life-long marriage as one of the best ways a person can learn about God’s unconditional love. Maybe that’s why the Serpent tries to get inside couple’s heads early on, so they never get to the part of the marriage where they see God’s love at work in their lives.

The third thing the Serpent whispers in our ears is: “adultery is just about sex.” The truth is that in most adultery no one takes their clothes off. Adultery is about giving to someone else that which is rightly your spouse’s alone. Sometimes that means sexual intimacy. More often it means time, attention, and your very best energy. You can have an affair with your work, with a hobby, with the church. This kind of affair is so hard to fight because it doesn’t seem bad. To the rest of the world you are rising star in your company, a hard-working, fun-loving, pillar of the church. But when it comes to your spouse you might as well be sleeping around--because you are cheating them out of your best.

A question for married folks: is there something or someone drawing you away from the one you have sworn to stand by ‘til death do you part? When you get home pull out your calendar and take a look at where and with whom you are spending your time. If I said, “Let one who is without sin in this area cast the first stone,” I don’t think we’d see too many rocks fly in this sanctuary. The stained glass would be safe. The Serpent is having a field day with us, isn’t he?

That Serpent sure was slippery. With a few suggestions he got Adam and Eve going for each other's throats when *he*, of course, was the real enemy. I see this so often in troubled marriages. One spouse sees the other as the problem. And maybe that spouse even blames themselves. Most often, however, the real problem is the Serpent that they keep listening to.

The Serpent turns spouses into enemies, saying that he or she is keeping us from having it all or not keeping their end of the bargain so we have affairs of the heart--and before we know it the Serpent has won. No matter what the Serpent says, your spouse is not your enemy, not ultimately. St. Paul, the great champion of the bachelor life, was right when he said, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against . . . the powers of this dark world." [Ephesians 6:12] *Weddings* take place in fields of roses; *marriages* are lived out on spiritual battlefields.

Every person here this morning can do a lot to help couples in their struggle to live the life to which God has called them.

First, drown out the Serpent's voice with God's. Remind them that marriage is worth fighting for, and that most couples will probably have to at some point. Tell your married friends and your married children about the lies they are hearing. When you see them wandering into danger, warn them. Remind them of the commitments they have made to each other and to God.

Second, if you are a veteran married person, share with some new couple your own struggle to stay on the narrow path. Veteran couples make marriage look easy—deep down, they know it's not. Too few married people are honest with new couples about the choices they had to make to keep their vows. You could change that.

Finally, and this is something we can all do: pray for a married couple. Pray like Jesus did for his disciples, saying: "Make them of one heart and one mind, just as you are in me and I in you. Let them be as unified and together as we are . . . and then they will give this . . . world evidence that . . . you've loved them." (*The Message*, John 17:22-23). Pick a couple—maybe you are one half of it—and let's pray for that they might be one, no matter what the Serpent says. Let's start now:

Creator God, we give you thanks for the gift of marriage and the joy of lifelong companionship. We pray for all people whom you have blessed

in this sacred covenant, that they might hear your voice of comfort and encouragement above all the others and, if it is your will, endure to the end. We pray, too, for people caught in marriages that were never meant to be that they might know today what your good will is for them and their marriage. We pray for people who know firsthand the heartache of divorce, that they might heal and be renewed. We pray for single people, that they might experience your love in a unique way. We pray for people who are trying to discern whether you are calling them to marry the person they love, give them guidance, confidence, and hope.

Loving God, when the Serpent speaks to us in seductive tones, give us the strength and faith to resist, that we might be one with you and those we have promised to love, now and always. Amen.

*Dear Friend,*

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