

I begin with a question. Can anyone define when love actually begins? Boy meets girl, girl meets boy. A look, a spark of interest, that turns into pursuit. A first conversation, a sense of connection; a discovery of things held in common—interests, values, goals, or direction. This leads to time spent together—a growing friendship, the possibility of love, a budding romance.

What begins with romance, we assume will continue towards a fairy tale ending: *happily ever after*. When two people are first in love, an exciting, wonderful, dance begins; we hear the music and intuitively, it seems, we move to its rhythm. But all couples, at one point or another, stop hearing the music—the steps don't feel quite so intuitive—and our movement begins to feel less like dancing and more like wrestling.

It's difficult to define when love begins and it's equally difficult to pin point when it's interrupted. Mike Mason writes, "There is no hurt like the hurt that happens in the place where we love."¹

This morning our series on emotional and relational health comes to a close, and I'm going to conclude with a message on marriage. Everything we've said to date—about self-knowledge, understanding and embracing emotion, breaking free from past hurt, managing conflict, and dependence on God—comes to bear on the marriage relationship.

I've been saying throughout this series that we cannot pursue

spiritual maturity and remain emotionally and relationally unhealthy; the same is true of marriage. Marriage is one of life's most important, wonderful, difficult, and confusing of all human relationships. Like I said last week, we need God, and I know of no other relationship that reminds us of that need quite like marriage.

Again, quoting Mike Mason, "love convinces a couple that they are the greatest romance that has ever been, that no two people have ever loved as they do, and that they will sacrifice absolutely everything in order to be together. And then marriage asks them to prove it. Marriage is the down-to-earth dimension of romance, the translation of a romantic blueprint into costly reality. It is the practical working out of people's grandest dreams and ideals and promises in the realm of love. It is one of God's most powerful secret weapons for revolutionizing the human heart."²

Perhaps you find yourself stuck in old patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving; perhaps your marriage is stuck. God has a vision for your life and your marriage, and it includes growing in emotional and relational health. This morning I want you to think about marriage, not as a hindrance to growth, but rather, as a vehicle of the growth God has planned for you.

Listening to a message on "marriage" can be a difficult for many—for those who have never married but want to, for those whose marriage fell apart, and for those who feel "trapped" in a difficult

¹ Mike Mason, *The Mystery of Marriage*, 22.

² Mason, 58-59.

marriage. You and I both know that a 30 minute sermon on marriage isn't going to address every situation in this room.

The Scripture we are going to be looking at today isn't specifically directed towards marriage, and while I trust that couples will quickly see its relevance to marriage, most of what I will say today has relevance for every human relationship. I'm trusting that the Holy Spirit will take what I say this morning and apply it to everyone in some form.

At this time I would like to invite you to turn with me to Colossians 3:12-14. I will put the Scripture behind me on the screen—the New International Version is on the left, and I will be reading from The Message translation on the right.

The Apostle Paul writes, *“So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offence. Forgive as quickly and completely as [Jesus] forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.”*

illus: Every day, every one of us gets up and makes a decision about what we're going to wear—business or casual, functional or formal—where we're going and what we're doing determines the kind of clothes we choose for the day.

I'm not exactly a fashionista, but I seldom embarrass myself or my wife when it comes to choosing what I will wear. When Naomi and I are going out somewhere together, I'll often ask, *“Does it matter*

what I wear?” and she will typically respond, *“Wear whatever you'd like.”* But even after such a response, every so often, I'll come downstairs and she will take one look at me and say, *“You're not going to wear **that** are you?”*

Colossians 3:1-11 provides an important bridge to the text I just read in vs 12-14. Paul talks about our life in Christ in terms of taking off old clothes and putting on new ones. Since we died with Christ, and have been raised with Christ, we have become new people. And this new life calls for a new wardrobe—the old clothes no longer fit the contours of our new life with Jesus.

The New Testament says the following frequently: you have been saved, rescued, washed, and made new—all of this is God's work—but now that you've been made new, you are invited to embrace the new you. How do you embrace the new you? By **putting on** the attitudes, character qualities, and behaviours that we see when we look at Jesus. And while this **“putting on”** is God's work, it requires our willing cooperation and effort.

So let's look at our wardrobe one more time. God invites us to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love. Here's the question, *if you wore these clothes regularly, would it make a difference in how you looked, felt, and acted?* If you were growing in these attitudes, character qualities, and behaviours, would it affect the quality of your relationships? *If you and your spouse embraced this new way of living, would it change your marriage?*

Right about now, some of you husbands are probably thinking, *“But you don't know my wife! The second I get home, she goes up one side*

of me and down the other; I can't do anything right.” Right about now, some of you wives are probably thinking, “But you don't know my husband! He's more interested in his work, the kids, or the hockey game—I'm clearly not a priority in his life.”

Again, there is no hurt like the hurt that happens in the place where we love. In fact, many marriages wither because we respond to hurt by withholding, withdrawing, and punishing. We give our spouse the bare minimum thinking we are keeping our hopes from being crushed. But what we discover is that by giving the bare minimum, we resign ourselves to an endless cycle of hurt and disappointment in marriage.

You may not have confidence that you or your spouse could put on these new clothes, but the questions is: *can God form these attitudes, character qualities, and behaviours in your marriage?* And, *are you willing to cooperate with His forming work?* If you can honestly answer “yes” to these two questions, your marriage can thrive again.

So what is it that stands in the way? If these are the new clothes in our new wardrobe, what are the old clothes that need to be thrown out and burned?

I'm going to be relying on John Gottman's 40 years of research with thousands of couples—he is both well respected and well grounded in the Old Testament Scriptures. Gottman suggests that the four primary barriers to a healthy marriage are **criticism**, **defensiveness**, **contempt**, and **stone walling**.³

1. Criticism. We've all wilted in the face of criticism—we know what it is to be hurt, rejected, and made to feel worthless. In the face of criticism, our natural response is to run away or become defensive. Because this is true, the criticism we aim at our loved one rarely achieves our desired outcome.

What if we **took off criticism** and **put on kindness and gentleness**?

Elsewhere, the Apostle Paul lists “kindness” as a fruit of the Spirit's indwelling presence—as we do life with Jesus, the Spirit cultivates this character quality in our lives. All throughout the Scriptures, God is described as being “kind”: He is both merciful and gracious, giving to others what they have not earned.

“Gentleness” is also listed as a fruit of the Spirit's presence and it can be alternatively translated “meekness.” The Bible speaks of Jesus being meek and so we know that meekness doesn't equal “weakness.” When you think of meekness, think of strength under control. An appropriate analogy is a wild stallion that has been “broken”—it has all the same power, but it now has the ability to work with others.

An emotionally mature person is able to discuss their needs/wants/preferences in a mature and loving way. An emotionally mature person gives people room to make mistakes and not be perfect. We can take off criticism and still communicate honestly with our spouse. Instead of attacking our spouse, we put on kindness and meekness as we communicate what we want or need.

³ Go to www.gottmanblog.com and click on the link “Blog Series,” followed by “Four Horseman”. All references to Gottman stem from these articles

We could say, “*You never pay any attention to me! All you care about is watching that stupid TV show!*” Or, we could try the following, “*I’ve had a really hard day and I’m feeling isolated and lonely tonight. Can we please talk about my day?*” Proverbs 15:1 says, “*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*” The second barrier is...

2. Defensiveness. Gottman defines defensiveness as “self-protection in the form of righteous indignation or innocent victimhood in an attempt to ward off a perceived attack.” At its very essence, defensiveness is a way of blaming our partner. Gottman writes, “You’re saying, in effect, ‘The problem isn’t me, it’s you.’”

We’ve all felt the sting of accusation, whether it was just or unjust. And while putting up a defensive wall may end the conversation, it doesn’t heal the rift—it tells your spouse that you are unwilling to listen, that their concern is invalid, and that you have no responsibility to bear.

What if we **took off defensiveness** and **put on patience and humility**?

God is patient—He is patient with us; His love is willing to wait for us. Are we willing to wait for our spouse? To listen to their concerns?

And what about humility? Too often we think of humility wrongly, as though it has to do with assessing our relative worth over against another. Humility doesn’t mean treating others as if their needs were important and our needs are not. Instead, humility invites us to embrace an other-focus in relationships. This fits nicely with what

Jesus said in Matthew 22:39—we are to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Humility allows us to listen to our spouse’s concerns, and to accept responsibility for whatever our part might be in the problem. Gottman suggests that the third barrier to a healthy marriage is...

3. Contempt. Not only does Gottman name contempt as the worst of the four, he suggests that contempt is the #1 predictor of divorce. Contempt doesn’t happen overnight, it’s something we cultivate in mind and heart over a long period of time. Gottman writes, “Contempt is fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about the partner.” When we ignore our hurt, when we stuff our emotions, when we refuse to deal with conflict, contempt becomes our ultimate destination.

Contempt is defined as “the feeling that a person or a thing is beneath consideration, worthless, or deserving scorn.” Mocking, sarcasm, name-calling, and sneering are all forms of contempt—no relationship can grow in the soil of contempt.

But what if we **took off contempt** and **put on compassion and forgiveness**?

What if we asked God to fill us with compassion for our spouse? Is God not filled with compassion for us—hurts, issues, and all? Our brokenness moves Him to compassion, not towards contempt—He doesn’t use our flaws against us.

Putting on forgiveness is absolutely crucial in every marriage, in fact, this might be the most important aspect of love between a husband

and wife. The need to forgive in marriage, more than anything else, will make you aware of your need for God's help.

I like how The Message translates this part of Colossians 3, it says, be "*quick to forgive an offence. Forgive as quickly and completely as [Jesus] forgave you*". Now sometimes forgiveness takes time—a major betrayal in a marriage takes more than a moment to overcome. And more, in a marriage, forgiveness is best partnered with repentance—there needs to be a change in thoughts, attitudes, and behaviour.

But we need to remember the forgiveness we have received from Jesus. He doesn't withhold forgiveness from us—it is vast and wide. His forgiveness is a past, present, and future reality—we never get beyond our need for God's forgiveness. The same is true in marriage—we never get beyond our need to give and receive forgiveness.

In Ephesians 4:32 we read, "*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*" The fourth barrier Gottman names is stonewalling.

4. Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction, shutting down and closing themselves off from someone because they are feeling overwhelmed. Rather than engaging the situation, the stonewaller disengages by tuning out, turning away, or acting busy.

What if we **took off stonewalling and put on love?**

Love doesn't run away when it's frightened, it finds the courage to lean in.

Let me read a portion of a blog, written by a Christian woman, concerning marriage. She writes, "Over the past few months I've been thinking and praying a lot about marriages. Many of us have been married more than 5 years and what we're finding out is that our husbands are not perfect. That's right, people, my husband is not perfect. There, I said it. You say it too: '*My spouse is not perfect.*' Now that it's out in the open we can start getting over it."

She continues, "We did not marry Jesus. We married broken people who are constantly changing—so the man I said my vows to is not the man I am married to now. He is my man plus 8.5 years of change. When I talk to women my age somehow this basic truth seems lost on them...They are frustrated, annoyed and all out angry with their spouse because he is not the man they once knew, and he is not the man they dreamed he would become...[No]...the guys we are married to are regular guys. They are not...prince charming, or a super hero...they don't always do what those guys in the chick flicks do."

"[They] are regular guys – most of whom are trying to provide for their families, make their wives happy, be good fathers and get a little time off to be with their friends or take up a hobby.... And ladies, we are ON THEIR CASE. We don't like how they folded the clothes, or what they fed the kids for dinner. They came home 10 minutes too late, they didn't buy us what we wanted for Christmas, and they didn't make enough money this year to give us the new bathroom".

“WHAT HAPPENED? When was the last time you made him feel like he was at the TOP of your list? If it’s been a while, then let’s discuss...what happened.

You changed. He changed.

You had kids. You didn’t have kids.

He gained 10 lbs. You gained 10 lbs.

He stopped asking you on dates. You stopped asking him on dates.

You fought, but didn’t make up. And the list goes on and on.

So many things come into play when it comes to our marriages and Satan wants nothing more than to TAKE US DOWN. So the problems we face are real and if we don’t address them, we’ll find ourselves in a marriage headed toward divorce.”

At one point or another, all of us discover that we are powerless to change ourselves, let alone, to change our spouse. When that moment comes, God’s strength, His forgiveness, His love can be made available to us.

When we live in God’s love, we are filled with a love that spills over into our marriage—we can choose to cherish our spouse, nurturing gratitude for what we have with our partner instead of nurturing resentment for what we think is missing or imperfect. But unless we put off criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling, our marriage is heading towards destruction.

This morning I want you to hear a story from a couple in our church—their marriage was all but dead and gone, until God brought it back from the grave. Please turn your attention to the video screen for Erik and Sofia’s story. **Video (13 min)**

“So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offence. Forgive as quickly and completely as [Jesus] forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It’s your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.”

Perhaps your marriage is troubled, barely hanging on by a thread. I want you to know that there is hope—because God is present, there is always hope. When we **put on** God’s character qualities, our attitudes and behaviours begin to change—what might amount to a Berlin Wall between people can be torn down. With God’s help, with the help of a friends, wise counsellors, and a faith community, love can live again.

Husbands and wives, in Christ, you have been chosen by God--you belong to His family--and in choosing to get married, you two have chosen to belong to one another. If anyone is in Christ, they have become a brand new person—the old ways of relating to one another have been exposed as tattered and threadbare. This new way of life is to be accompanied by a new set of clothes. This morning, I want to exhort you to dress in the wardrobe God has picked out for you.

Prayer