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West Valley Presbyterian Church
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KELLER – THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE I

EPHESIANS 5: selected verses...

²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.

²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... ²⁸ husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”^[c] ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

PRAYER...

I want to thank you all for your prayers and cards and flowers over the last couple of weeks as we traveled to New York for my father-in laws funeral. It was a good experience, albeit a sad one. Herb Engelmann lived a rich 92 years in his own home that he lived and help build from about the time Tim was 2 years old. We’ve been going there to visit him in Yonkers NY for years. You couldn’t have asked for a better transition to heaven for him, but we will miss him very much. And I couldn’t help but think as we were there how very blessed I had been

to know him. He was a deep Christian and loved the Lord with all his heart. He did many good and generous things (for the church youth, missionaries and Christian friends) in quiet, humble, uncomplicated ways that ended up having a deep and lasting impact on people. And I say this based on the testimonies I heard at the service...much gratitude was expressed with tears. But the thing that stands out for me, in all that I experienced of him down through the years was the way that he loved Mildred, his wife, Tim's Mom, who died about 4 years prior. In her later years she had what presented as Alzheimers, her short term memory was gone and it was a labor of love that Tim's Dad expressed day after day, year after year caring for her. It was not easy for him. It was exhausting. And yet there was a sweetness to that relationship at that time that I was awed by. He was patient, kind, and always put her needs first – even when she was difficult. Some of you know exactly what I am talking about – some of you are caregivers yourself and know how taxing this kind care-giving can be. I never heard my father in law complain once about his responsibilities in being there for her, assisting her with whatever she needed. It made him very housebound, but she died there, in that same home never having to be institutionalized, because of his faithfulness to her. This demonstration of selfless love is

the essence of Tim Keller's book "**The Meaning of Marriage**" that we will be talking about for three weeks. I hope all of you will come and learn from Keller's book... that is based on Ephesians 5 – the passage I just read to you at the start - this is one of the best Biblical passages on marriage in Scripture, I think. *Whether you are married or not, whether you are divorced, single, widowed...this study is for you because the principles we will be talking about, have to do with relationships of all different kinds, and also it pertains to the different ways we go through life – sometimes married, sometimes single, all this will be talked about. Mike Clark will be rounding out what I am saying in more depth right after the service and you don't want to miss this one...please stay...and hear from Mike right after this...*

In his book Keller emphasizes that marriage is hard, as much as love is hard. But it is well worth it. He cites C.S. Lewis who states the following

“Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements, lock it up safe in the casket of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation.”

So when we love another...we risk...we get hurt...but better to have loved and lived than to grow cold and calloused and die. Right? The next question is then, what do we mean by love as the Bible understands it? When we talk about marriage in particular we are talking about a specific relationship that God has put into place for our benefit. It is one of three institutions mentioned in scripture, so it is very important.

Keller gives us some interesting stats on marriage because the marriage relationship is under attack in our culture in many ways. Today the divorce rate is nearly twice the rate it was in 1960. In 1970, 89 percent of all births were to married parents, but today only 60 percent are. Over 72 percent of American adults were married in 1960, but only 50 percent in 2008. However, the amount of people wishing they were married is still the same...very high. Today more than half of all people also live together before getting married. In 1960, virtually no one did. Keller says that there is the *assumption in the culture that many marriages are unhappy. Living together before marriage allows you to discover if you are compatible.* Yet a Gallup survey indicates the following:

“a substantial body of evidence indicates that those who live together before marriage are more likely to break up after marriage.” And that while it is true that some 45 percent of marriages end in divorce, by far the greatest percentage of divorces happen to those who marry before the age of eighteen, who have dropped out of high school and who have had a baby together before marrying.

Probably the overarching thing that Keller emphasizes in his analysis of marriage... is that **we have idealized** the concept of **finding a perfect soul mate so much- that we have made it into a kind of a god...**We are told in this culture that there is this person out there that if we could only find him or her, this soul mate will fulfill us and finally give us what we've all been looking for all along; someone who can just accept us as we are, who will go through life with us, be a wonderful companion and this person will just be a joy to be with all the time, in every way fulfilling us emotionally, sexually, spiritually, intellectually. So when our marriage isn't working out, some tough times come along, we want to try something new. Find someone else. Give up. Go away. This kind of outlook, Keller says, makes marriage essentially about ME...Keller calls it **“the ME marriage”** .I am willing to give a little bit of this and that, I expect as much or at least almost as much in return.

Ultimately, marriage is about **ME** getting **my needs met** in the relationship, feeling fulfilled, and finding the perfect soul mate that is compatible with ME... No person can fill the hole in us, that only God himself can fill. When we try to make a person into a god...we will get disillusioned and disappointed.

This ME perspective has caused us to lose the essence of what Christian marriage is. **Christian marriage is about getting our fulfillment from God's love first, and then serving the other one with the unconditional love that he provides; in the journey together both of us change to become more like Jesus.**

We do not marry someone because we expect a person to fulfill us...and meet our needs completely; how can we expect a person to fill the void in our lives that God alone can fill? The truth is...marriage is complicated, messy and hard; we will not always have romantic passionate feelings for our spouse; that it is integral to marriage that we will not. There will be dry times. There will be times when we will be super aware of the weaknesses of the person that we married. We will feel misunderstood by that person. We will struggle to do the loving thing. Its part of the journey!

Keller cites many people who come to him and tell him about struggles they are having in their marriages and they say to him, **“Love shouldn’t be this hard; it should come naturally.”** In response Keller states, **“Why believe that? Would someone who wants to play professional baseball say, ‘It shouldn’t be so hard to hit a fastball?’. Would someone who wants to write the greatest American novel of this generation say, “It shouldn’t be hard to create believable characters and compelling narrative?”**

Often people retort *“But this is love...not baseball or literature...Love should just come naturally if two people are compatible, if they are truly soul mates.”* Much of Keller’s book is spent dispelling this myth and reminding the reader that love is hard.

One important thing to remember and know is that as soon as you marry, both you and your spouse begin to change. This is because marriage brings you into more intense proximity to another human being than any other relationship can. So you can’t know who your spouse will actually be in the future until you get there. Part of the journey of marriage is learning to love the stranger you find yourself with as you begin to see the weaknesses and flaws that are there, in both of you, as you are doing life together. There is no one who is perfect, no

one who is going to be completely compatible, wonderful to be with, all the time forevermore. And no one will indeed accept you “just the way you are” since they shouldn’t because you have weaknesses too, that need to change, and in marriage the honesty of the relationship helps you know that very quickly!

One of the *great* points Keller makes is that when we choose to love someone through thick and thin, in spite of their weaknesses and flaws, we are actually ***loving a person*** – not some idealized form of a person that we have made up in our minds that’s out there somewhere. When we talk about love, from a Biblical perspective, we are talking about serving each other, selflessly despite their weaknesses. In a sense we lose ourselves in the process of loving the other one. **“Wives submit to your husbands....Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”**

Do you hear the sacrifice of both parties in this scripture? This is so contrary to a culture that values individual freedom, autonomy, and personal fulfillment as the penultimate values of what is supposed to make us happy. In essence, the Biblical message is the opposite. The Bible says that when we lose our lives by loving another, selflessly, we find it again and in the losing of our lives, by serving another we are

paradoxically fulfilled. This is what I saw in Tim's Dad as he faithfully and patiently dealt with his wife when she was ill; it wasn't easy but there was always a light in his eyes as he did this, and a deep love for her that exceeded her ability to do anything for him. In the same way...love is a choice that you must make, even when it is hard. Even when the other person is not acting the way that you wish that they would. Love is something you do, and it demands sacrifice and service in a self-less way. Selfless love coming from selfish creatures, like us, does not just happen naturally. We have to work at it.

That's why **we promise** to love in sickness and in health before God and others on the day we are married. We make a promise before others and before God to choose to love the other one – even when it is hard – knowing that it will NOT always flow naturally. The marital promise pulls us up and out of our “natural instincts” and makes us reach beyond our passions and desires, and selfish needs, to something bigger that tells us who we really are – Christians...little Christ's. The promise we make in marriage is the kind of promise God makes to us. **“I will be there for you in thick and thin. I will sacrifice myself for you. I will never leave you no matter how dreadful you are.”** That is why in making a promise like this, the relationship that comes out of

such a commitment to another, makes us more like Christ. *(Now there are marriages that should not go on...there is abuse and infidelities that happen in marriages that should not be tolerated. Next week I am going to be talking about divorce, so if you have been through that very difficult experience, please hang in there. We have Divorce Care starting up next week, so if you need support going through a divorce find out more – contact info is in your bulletin).* However, our culture has made divorce far too easy. We are quick to get disillusioned with each other when things start to get dicey or boring and go to the next person, the next thrill, the next new thing. The problem is that thrill seeking, and the next new thing, is far less fulfilling over the long haul than the relationship that develops from going through the trenches together.

I turned to Tim the other day and I said, “You know I am so glad that we have stuck this out. It’s so great now. We are connected in a deep way because of all that we’ve been through together.” Now, we’ve been married 32 years and it hasn’t always been easy – we’ve shared our story with you – but today we have a deep sense of knowing one another, our weaknesses and our flaws , and yet we also know that come hell or high water, we will be there for each other. We love each

other...deeply...You don't get that kind of joy together unless you have commitment along with it.

That's why when the institution of marriage is challenged and someone says to a lover "I don't need a piece of paper that says that I love you. Forget about marriage! Its an antiquated institution." Keller would say..."In order to really love someone, you need that piece of paper...that commitment...that PROMISE that soars beyond just a kind of need fulfillment based relationship." That promise, that commitment is essential...moves us from acting simply on our needs and instincts to who we are meant to be in Christ. Selfless people who give love unconditionally.

I leave you with two things that if you are married today you can try practice over the next week and it comes from Keller:

THE ATM MACHINE: (IMAGE) One is the ATM machine. Keller talks about this....You've got to invest in the relationship that you do have. The years can pull spouses apart . Dissapointment, struggle, stress can make us look for other things to invest in, that we think will give us more fulfillment, rather than each other. The truth is though that if you want your marriage to work, you need to invest in your spouse selflessly – then it is much easier to make a withdrawal when you do

need one. How do you do this? By knowing your spouse well enough so that you can do the things, or say the words, or spend the time necessary with your spouse that builds them up rather than doing and saying things that tear them down. Make the sacrifice. Give the unconditional love. Serve one another.

A-FRAME HOUSE: LET CHRIST BE THE ONE WHO FULFILLS:

We can't possibly love selflessly until we stop trying to find our fulfillment in people (our spouse) – or if we are depleted. We've got to begin to find our fulfillment in Christ alone. So the second image is the A-frame house. Jesus Christ must be the source of our love – so that out of a close relationship with Jesus, we are then able to be filled up with his love, so that we can love the other one self-lessly – whether or not the other one is being pleasant and meeting our needs or not. So the A-frame house illustrates two things. First, Christ is the foundation on which we build our lives and our marriages. He comes first in everything – that's why growing to know him is so important. Second, if we can also imagine that Christ is above the house, and the couple is represented by two sides of the roof going up...as we grow closer to him, we grow closer to our spouse.

As we approach this table today... we are presented with the greatest self-less sacrifice ever made. **“While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”** Jesus Christ loved us unconditionally, when we were weak, caught in our despair, greed and selfish desires...he who created the universe humbled himself and became obedient unto death...even death on a cross. That’s why we can sit here today, and know that we are forgiven and set free. His command to his disciples and to us right before he died, **“Love one another as I have loved you.”** is daunting and almost impossible for us, as we look at this table and see Christ poured out for angry, bitter, selfish people... because we love based on merit. But that is not who God is. God’s love for us is unconditional, and because of the power of the Holy Spirit alive and at work in us.... we too can grow into showing that kind of love to others – especially to our spouses whom we often take for granted. May God have mercy on us all to love one another, and pour ourselves out for each other self-lessly ...as Christ did for us...especially in our marriages. Let us pray.