

“Love is a Thorny Path”

Ephesians 5:21-33

September 19, 2010

Pastor John Bronson

Order of Worship for September 12, 2010

Pre-service Song

Welcome and Announcements

Call to Worship: 1Corinthians 13:1-13 and Prayer

Songs of Worship:

“Come, Now is the Time for Worship”

“This is the Day”

“We Have Come to Join in Worship”

“He is Here”

Overhead

Song # 209

Song # 207

Song # 220

Offering and Offertory

Special Music:

Message:

“Love is a Thorny Path”, (Ephesians 5:21-33)

By Pastor Bronson

Closing Song

“I Know Whom I Have Believed”

Song # 527

Parting Word of Grace

Sunday Evening: Issues in Faith and Life

“Silencing the Christians”

5:30 pm – 7:00 pm in the Music Building

“The Prayer Closet”

September 19, 2010

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”
(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying for:

1. **Russel and Sharla Weisner serving in Malaysia:** that the grace of the Lord will empower them for an effective witness amongst Muslims and Hindus, amongst the native Malays commercially active Chinese, and that the volunteer teaching team will demonstrate the love of God to the English language students; that they will be joyful in Christ
2. **President Obama:** that the Spirit will open his heart and mind to the joy of salvation in Christ; that God will overshadow his mind for wisdom and justice; that he will be protected from all evil
3. **Women’s Fall Retreat:** Barb Conley, head of Women’s Ministries, will be empowered to meet all the organizational and logistic challenge; that the Spirit will ensure the right women will attend for spiritual growth and blessing; that the speakers will be Spirit filled and the worship joyful
4. **Military Personnel of the Week: SPC Rebecca Rankin** (sister of Pam Cervantes):
5. **College Student of the Week: Megan Cardwell at Butte College** (daughter of Allison Cardwell):

Americans have grown increasingly cynical regarding love over the past forty to fifty years. If you examine entertainment, the joy of romantic love has been separated from married life, as if romance was incompatible with marriage. Marriage, in fact, is consistently portrayed as a dreary business of endless struggles and disappointments, with more expenses than income, more demands than time, many obligations and few rewards. With few exceptions the modern media portrays real life as being lived not at home, not with the family; but rather “life” is a solo adventure out there in the world with as many chance encounters of as intense a degree of emotional involvement as remains compatible with no ties or long term commitments. Much could be said about that, much needs to be. What the media portrays as love is a mockery and a deceit which betrays reality and leads foolish people into personal ruin. But it is not just the modern media that tells a cautionary tale regarding marriage.

In a fallen world love is a difficulty. It is not just that it is difficult to love; it is that love itself is a difficulty. That truth is the background to the title of today’s message which is [“Love is] A Thorny Path”. The scriptures will not only once again return to our central passage, which Ephesians 5:21-33, but today my intent is to add to it to deepen our understanding of God’s Word addressing us about the world we actually live in, by referring us to I Corinthians 7. You might want to find both of those [passages] in the scriptures because we will be referencing those a little bit later.

The difficulty that we find with love and loving is an effect of sin. Sin separates humanity from God. We know that. Sin also separates us from one another, putting us at odds. In the curse pronounced in Genesis 3:16, we hear this: *“To the woman [God] said, ‘I will surely multiply your pain in child-bearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.’”* In that comment, the woman’s desire is the desire to control. That is what is brought home to us when you look at Genesis 4:6 (you might recall that we looked at this a couple of weeks ago.) There we read that the word “Desire” was used in reference to sin and sin’s desire to establish control over the life of Cain. You see in this comment the forecast of the sustained contest of power, a battle for control between husbands and wives.

But of course it is not just our external relationships that are broken by sin. Sin also dis-integrates our emotions, desires, convictions and perceptions. We find that suddenly we are now at odds with ourselves and not just at odds with those around us and at odds with our God. We want things, of course; we want good things, but we want other things as well. We want things to go well for those around us, but we will sacrifice that hope on the altar of something we want more for ourselves. The world is, after all, a difficult place in which there is simply not enough time and not enough wealth to satisfy every desire, so choices have to be made. In the process of making them we both make and reveal our souls to the world. What we show is not always very pretty.

I say all of this in order to introduce that other major teaching passage on marriage in the New Testament which is I Corinthians 7:1-10 and actually 1-40. This deals with the practical realities of marriage. So far our main focus has been on Ephesians 5:21-33 which presents, as I have said before, the ideal of Christian marriage: the husband and wife are to live in mutual submission.

They are to live in mutual submission out of reverence for Christ. The marriage is supposed to be a kind of living parable, a picture of the love of Christ for his church. So our married lives are to bear witness to the grace and truth of God. We added to that over the last couple of weeks a remembrance of the cultural mandate. When God created us in the first place He created us with the intention that we would maintain the Garden and gradually transform the whole world into a garden, a place suitable for humanity to live in, to flourish and prosper. But when we look at the realities, we realize we are not doing very well at keeping the garden. There is too much trouble and pain and sorrow.

Reading Ephesians 5:21-33 and I Corinthians 7 almost creates something of a shock if you do them right next to each other. It seems like you are in two different realms. You can hardly imagine that the same author wrote both accounts. What we see is the disordering effect of sin. I want us to capture a sense of that tension, that dramatic kind of struggle that emerges just simply by reading these scriptures. I am going to select just two portions out that chapter. The first is I Corinthians 7:8 and 9. This is what he says: *“To the unmarried and the widows, I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.”* Paul’s counsel here assumes, notice, that sexual desire has separated out from the larger reality of love as the driving force in human relationships. We know of course, that sexual desire ought to be in submission and to work in perfect harmony with covenantal love; but we also know that often it is not so. So did Paul. Much later in his life, Paul instructed Timothy, as we read in I Timothy 5:9-12, that widows less than sixty years old should be encouraged to marry, for they were too likely to shipwreck vows of chastity on their passions. But at the same time this Paul in the first seven verses of I Corinthians 7 emphasizes the need and therefore the duty for married couples to maintain an active and satisfying physical relationship. Do we sense disorder here? On the one hand we have unmarried people, either never married or after-married because of death, being driven by passion to the point where they compromise vows to God and moral purity, and on the other side we have married couples who need to be exhorted to not neglect the physical dimension of their relationship. What on earth has happened?

God intends for our married lives to be fully satisfying because God wants our marriages to model the full satisfaction and contentment of the church in Christ. That’s God’s desire and intention. That mirrors the ideal of Christian marriage. Of course there is the practical side. Our necessity is that if we are not fully satisfied in our marriages, then our unsatisfied passions are likely to lead us elsewhere, and we will neglect our spouse and we will bring shame to the name of Christ.

As in modern media, so in real life, human love under the influence of sin disintegrates into conflicting elements, driving us to self-defeating behaviors. The Greeks recognized that there are three distinct kinds of love. I have spoken of these before. They are the erotic, brotherly and covenantal or moral loves. (Over the weekend I remembered and reached back and pulled out a wonderful book by CS Lewis entitled “The Four Loves”. I highly recommend that you read that book. It is beautifully written, and happily he agrees with everything I have to say! Then I remember that the book that the men are studying on Wednesday nights, “The Masculine

Mandate”, also finds four loves – but I will write him a note to straighten him out!) The simplest way of distinguishing between these three, to understand them, I think is like this. Erotic love is delight in having or possessing. Brotherly love is delight in sharing. Covenantal love is delight in giving and a delight in what is good. Of course all three such simple definition are in danger of being more misleading than helpful if you leave them at that, which is why it is a good idea to read Lewis’s book. You have to go further. Associated with erotic love is delight in the sensual: good food, good drink, cloth well made, wood well polished, door frames and automobiles well designed and crafted would all be included in the delight we have in the sensual. None of this is wrong, none is wicked or evil, but any of it can be. Erotic love can become toxic. What happens when erotic love is toxic? Then it has delight in such things as the exercise of power; delight in instilling fear in others; delight in having fame. We see this in Daniel 4:30 – you might remember a man named Nebuchadnezzar standing upon the roof-top of his palace and looks out over the city of Babylon and he says in his heart, *“Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?”* Nebuchadnezzar was in the grip of a toxic erotic love in which he was celebrating that which was his and brought glory to his own name.

The classic model of brotherly love is usually considered to be that of Jonathan and David in the Bible. In that instance as well as in a more broad understanding we see that brotherly love bridges all social, economic and other differences. The delight that two individuals have in one another which manifests itself in mutual acceptance and respect is able to erase all the distinction that we create within ourselves. Of course brotherly love is the essence of friendship, and the perfect embodiment of brotherly love is the Lord Jesus. Recall what He said in John 15:12-17; He says that “I have laid down my life for my friends.” So all of those for whom the Lord Jesus laid down His life He calls friends. You might recall that it is part of the glory of the gospel that nationality, race, economic standing and even the strength or absence of moral character makes no difference to Jesus at all, for He dies for all men, no matter their standing.

But brotherly love can become toxic also. Toxic brotherly love: we see this exemplified in the relation that suddenly emerges between Ahab the king of Israel and his enemy Ben-hadad the king of Syria. Twice God gave Ahab victory over his enemy Ben-hadad. Faced with total defeat, Ben-hadad sent a delegation to Ahab. This is what we are told (1 Kings 20:32): *“...they tied sackcloth around their waists and put ropes on their heads and went to the king of Israel (Ahab) and said, ‘Your servant Ben-hadad says, ‘Please, let me live.’” And [Ahab] said, ‘Does he still live? He is my brother.’”* So Ahab had Ben-hadad brought to him, took him up into his chariot and let him go. Brotherly love when toxic blinds judgment. Brotherly love when toxic will protect and even foster evil in the name of unity.

Covenantal love and moral love: this is the love of what is good. This is delight in what is righteous, good, just. This is the love which is rooted in integrity, delight in honesty, a love for excellence. It delights in doing good because it is good, being compassionate and seeking justice because these are the right things to do. Upholding moral values, principles and practices: you honor what is honorable. This is moral love, covenantal love. Yet this love also is subject to corruption; it can become toxic and so lead us into self-destructive behavior. It is hard to find

specific instances of this in scripture because almost by definition when moral love becomes toxic it is because some other passion has slipped in and destroyed its integrity. But perhaps we can see it in blind patriotism in which love for country supersedes all other considerations and I say, “My country right or wrong.” We think, “Wait a minute!” Or perhaps we can see it in the co-dependent person, the person whose delight in giving and helping becomes greater than actually wanting to see the person they think they are helping become well. Or perhaps we can see this love in its toxic form in the Pharisees love for law and order, so that the love of law and order results in self-righteousness and spiritual blindness. Love in a fallen world can become toxic; it can become a denial of its own character; it can betray us so that we become the slaves of our desires instead of being those who exercise self-control in all things.

When love is healthy, when you have a healthy marriage, you will have all three of those kinds of love. Sin will seek to shatter that unity even as it distorts each kind of love, turning it toxic to the soul. This is why the plan of salvation is not simply an escape route from hell. God’s intention in dealing with us is not simply to let us off the hook of judgment. He wants to change us. If God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in Him – that wonderful phrase by John Piper – then we are most satisfied in God when by His grace and truth we are healed not only of guilt but also of sin’s devastating power and effect in our lives. Paul puts it this way in Romans 12:1-2, *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual [or “rational”] worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”* Are we thinking about our marriages? We are talking about marriage. We are talking about the most intimate interpersonal relationship upon the face of the earth. That is the intention of God and needs to be the aspiration of our lives in faith. Notice that Paul’s words apply first of all to true covenantal or moral love, the love of goodness. If that love is on track through faith in God through Christ, then the others can and will be recovered. But there are many challenges along the way, and that is the substance of Paul’s warning to the Corinthians.

I am going to have us move now to I Corinthians 7. But as we do so I want to encourage each one here whether or not the three loves are found in your married lives, and whether or not the love which you manifest in your married lives is healthy according to the standards of God’s Word. In case your mind kind of reach around and says, “Good heavens, I can’t remember all that!” remember that these messages are available on the web, they are available on CD and they are available in text form. We make them available to you free of charge.

This brings us to the second portion of I Corinthians 7 we need to consider. In this case I want us to look at verses 25-35. I am going to read that through and invite you to do the same.

“Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy. I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will

have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.”

As with the passage in Genesis that we looked at last week, these verses have been subjected to intensive interpretive debate and widely differing understandings. The problem tends to hinge around what Paul meant by these three phrases: (v.26) “the present distress”; (v.29) “the appointed time has grown very short”; and (v.31) “the present form of this world is passing away.” As most know who have tried, rightly understanding the time frame especially of prophetic statements in the Bible is exceedingly difficult. Verse 31, the third reference, has the character of a prophetic statement. Paul’s reference to the “present form of this world” refers to the underlying structure and dynamic of the creation. We actually find a similar statement in Romans 8:21. This is what he says there: “...the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” When the Fall occurred, God altered the form of the world, the way it works. Specifically, as we have already learned and been told in the Word, there is increased pain in childbirth and it is far more difficult to gain food out of the soil. Returning to I Corinthians, many if not most interpret verses 26 and 29 in terms of 31, and so see them as expressing conviction that Jesus was going to return very soon. And because Jesus is returning very soon, don’t make any changes. But Jesus did not return. So we are left with some questions. Do we write off the verses as if Paul made a mistake? That has rather profound implications regarding the inspiration and authority of the Word of God. Or do we see if they mean something different than what we first thought? To say that the present form of the world is passing away is to say nothing about how quickly. That prompts me to remind all of us that the doctrine or the teaching of the imminent return of Christ, the “at any moment return of Jesus Christ”, does not primarily rest on a time reference but on an appreciation of the finality of Christ’s victory. How ever long it takes, whatever happens between the resurrection of Jesus Christ and His return, is just a mopping up operation against a defeated enemy. Indeed, if you turn to I John 2:18 he says that this entire age is “the last hour”.

If we are not going to understand Paul’s frame of reference as a radical shortening of time, what might we make of “present distress” and “the appointed time”? As to the first simply consider what sort of distressing realities might bear upon the advisability of marrying or not. Perhaps an outbreak of disease; perhaps a plague; perhaps a time of famine, or war; perhaps civil unrest; or perhaps persecution which frequently was experienced by the church in its early days, the first three

hundred years of its life – and as we know from Dennis’ comments there are more Christians being persecuted today than at any other time in the history of the church. Perhaps in the midst of some of these distress in the course of life it would militate against marriage and instead recommend a heightened state of spiritual awareness. As to “the appointed time”, it is obvious that Paul considers some decisive moment was drawing near. That moment bore directly on the advisability of marriage in Corinth. That is where he wrote the letter. The question is whether or not Paul was saying that all marriages really should be suspended in light of the end of the age, the return of Christ. But if that was the case, can we imagine him saying about getting married both in I Corinthians 7 and Ephesians 5? How can the man write in Ephesians 5 that marriage is the embodiment of the relationship between Jesus Christ and the church if he thinks that nobody should get married? It is not reasonable. So whatever the appointed time was, it was not the appointed time of Jesus’ return, for that makes no sense. Really, if Paul’s consideration was that Jesus was going to return next Tuesday... (or what is the latest date: next March or April. I don’t know!) If that is what he said, why wouldn’t he say this: “You two love birds, you want to get married? Dumb. Jesus is coming back. You sit [apart from each other] over there: End of problem!” Honestly, people, sometimes when we approach prophetic scriptures we forget common sense. My reasoning may seem rather mundane to some, but it is precisely mundane consideration that Paul was concerned with in this chapter. And it is the bearing of the mundane on Christian marriage that I want us to consider.

Consider again, go back to the words in I Corinthians 7:32-35, listening carefully to what he says:

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.”

First an observation on the relationship between these verses and Paul’s concern in vv.25-26. In between those two sections you will read that Paul counsels us not to change our status but with a special caution against marriage. This is what he said in v.28, “*Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.*” Paul’s initial concern and advice sprang from his consideration of “this present distress” and the impending “appointed time” which had “grown short.” But it should not surprise us that he moves quickly on to more general considerations. What do verses 32 & 35 tell us? Well they tell us something very simple: two things. Life is anxious; it is especially anxious for married people. We may protest against this, but the protest is futile. Rich or poor, young or old, healthy or sick: virtually all people are anxious at one level or another. Oh, it is not well advised: Jesus told us at Matthew 6:25-34 that we are to be anxious for nothing, neither for food nor for clothing for the Father will take care of us. I am sure that Jesus never had an anxious day in His life. Paul said that we “*...are to be anxious for nothing but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving we are to make our requests known to God...*” If we do this, he said God would keep our hearts and our minds through Christ Jesus. Elsewhere, namely in Matthew 6:24, Jesus said, “*No man can serve two masters,*” (are you listening

to me?) “...no man can serve two masters, for either he will love the one and hate the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.” Yet what does Paul say in I Corinthians 7? He says that husbands and wives are in exactly that condition! They are to love God and their spouse! They serve two loves, pursue two devotions. This deserves some consideration. Are you thinking of getting married? Is this a good time to get married? Are there distresses that you face? Do you find that you cannot get employment? Are you in profound confusion about the direction of your life? Has sudden illness come into either your life or the life of your family and suddenly you realize there are obligations in front of you that you never even dreamt of before? If we are married, we need to ask some questions. Are we serving two masters? Is it husband against wife? Is it worldly goods against God?

Paul closes this passage in v.35 by saying, “I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to secure good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.” In a perfect world pleasing our spouse and pleasing the Lord would be in perfect agreement. But we do not live in a perfect world. In the real world we face difficult choices, and we are wise to know and admit that they are difficult. They are difficult under the best of conditions, that is, when husbands and wives love each other and seek to bless each other and work as a team meeting the demands of life and raising their children. But what happens when the husband and wife are at odds? What happens when they are engaged in a power struggle? What happens when they are simply drifting away from one another on paths of increasing self-absorption, each with their deepening indifference to the other?

But let us return to Ephesians 5:21-33. Now you know the passage; we have been through it at least five times! Beloved, marriage is tough, but it holds the highest promise for personal spiritual growth and fulfillment of any challenge on the face of the earth. That is why in I Timothy Paul says I want men who are mature and in control of their marriages to be leaders of the church. Not domineering lords, but men who understand the principle of mutual submission, seeking the perfection of their wives to the glory of God, and wives who understand and give the highest honor to God’s call upon their husbands. You see, it is in marriage that love can be perfected after the model of and teaching of Christ. Therefore I heartily recommend that you seek to be married in the Lord.

Let us pray: our gracious heavenly Father, we thank you for Your word which often stretches us in ways that we did not anticipate, and would ask us to go places which we know in our own strength we cannot reach. But You are faithful; You do not ask us to do anything but what You will empower us to do. Therefore we rest in the assurance of Your sustaining love, Your guiding wisdom and Your indwelling Spirit. Grant that we by Your grace will take advantage of all the means by which we are strengthened in the soul to be Your faithful servants. O God we pray that our marriages will be a living showcase of the love of Jesus for the church that the world around us might be blessed to know He is the Savior they need. It is in His name, Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. How does romantic love differ from married love, or does it?
2. In your experience and opinion, what makes love difficult? What most challenges love in marriage?
3. Do you tend to see “duty” or “obligation” as contradictory to or supportive of true love?
4. What has most disordered or distorted love in our day?
5. Three kinds of love were mentioned in the sermon: erotic, brotherly and moral love. Remembering that erotic love includes far more than the sexual, how do these three work together for a healthy marriage?
6. In what ways does our culture tend to make each kind of love toxic?
7. How important is friendship for marriage? How might it be cultivated in a marriage?
8. Why might covenantal or moral love be the most critical of the three for ensuring a healthy marriage?
9. What might be some good reasons (present distresses), generally rather than personally, for putting off a marriage?
10. What challenges has being married brought in the way of growth in Christian devotion and service?