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Title: *Hidden Hurts #3 - Unhappy Marriage*

Scripture: 1 Samuel 25

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As I was preparing for this week knowing that we're in this series called *Hidden Hurts*, and today we're going to talk about unhappy marriages, I started to go back and try to reconstruct how many times I've officiated a wedding. I've been a pastor for over 30 years and I started to try to count, and that seemed futile after a while.

And so, then I just said, probably averaged about ten a year. So, well over 300 times I've stood at the front of a church, a barn, a field, or a roller rink. That's a true story. And couples have come and they've said, we're pledging our life, our love to one another for all time. I can probably count on one hand the number of times that those couples didn't actually believe that they were marrying well and that their future would be happier rather than filled with trauma.

And yet, you know the statistics, you've heard them. Even though the divorce rate is receding in our country, in part because people are choosing not to marry and just live together, a lot of relationships end. And even for those that make it, there's plenty of hardship and pain.

You may be here today and you may be saying, well, look, I'm in high school or middle school, and this is still far away. This doesn't apply to me. Or, I'm single. I'm single by choice. I'm single and I'm looking. And so, this doesn't apply to me. But I would just say this, there's probably no better time to think about marriage and what makes marriage right and good than before you get into a relationship because it will help you to understand the dynamics of what it is to be in a relationship that honors God and is good for one another.

Some of us may be here and we may be saying, well, look, I'm divorced and this is just a painful topic and we should announce the topics ahead of time. There's a reason we didn't announce the topics ahead of time. And so, for you, just even this topic feels heavy.

And then some of us are right now in an unhappy marriage. We're wondering if the marriage is going to make it, if it should make it, and if it does make it if it will ever be better. And some of us are in happy marriages. So, we're saying, people have unhappy marriages? Does this happen?

Well, what we've been doing is we have been looking at some stories from the life of David. His story is basically told that in the second half of first Samuel and in the first half of second Samuel and David's life, rather than working through normal chunks of scripture as we do on our weekends, we're just taking some of these stories, some of these accounts, and trying to understand and learn from the stories.

And so today, we're going to look at a story that David's involved in, but it's actually the story of Abigail and Nabal, and their stories are told in first Samuel 25. And so, I'm just going to read a portion of it, and this is when David had been on the run, so he was anointed king, and yet he didn't ascend to the throne.

Saul has been chasing him, trying to kill him. In fact, in chapter 24, David has escaped, in a sense, and had a chance to kill Saul, and he chose not to. In chapter 26, he has another chance to kill Saul and chooses not to. But in chapter 25 he has this run-in with this guy named Nabal, and he wants to take revenge.

And this is the backdrop for the story, chapter 25, beginning in verses one and two. It says, "Now Samuel died, and all Israel assembled and mourned for him; and they buried him at his home in Ramah. Then David moved down into the Desert of Paran. A certain man in Maon, who had property there at Carmel, was very wealthy. He had a thousand goats and three thousand sheep, which he was shearing in Carmel."

Now, just for context here, the goats, sheep, and numbers just point to wealth. The text says he was wealthy. One of the incidentals of this story is that sometimes wealth can make you think that because I'm good at one thing making money, I'm good at everything, and therefore I'm wise at everything. And sometimes when one person in a marriage makes a lot of money, it can create in its own way a little tension because they want to be able to dictate everything. And so, you see a little bit of this dynamic in these verses.

Verse three, "His name was Nabal and his wife's name was Abigail. She was an intelligent and beautiful woman, but her husband was surly and mean in his dealings—he was a Calebite."

So, here you have a juxtaposition. You have words that basically say that Abigail was beautiful and smart. In other words, Nabal married up. He was mean and surly, basically is what the text says. So, here's the tension. She married, maybe an arranged marriage. The text doesn't tell us, but that was common in those days.

But as she was married, over time, she started to say, this man doesn't have the character I respect. There's no chemistry here because everything he wants to do; I

want to do differently. I don't feel evenly matched with this person. And this is a painful scenario for her.

Verse four, "While David was in the wilderness, he heard that Nabal was shearing sheep. So he sent ten young men and said to them, "Go up to Nabal at Carmel and greet him in my name. Say to him: 'Long life to you! Good health to you and your household! And good health to all that is yours!'"

Now good health and this idea of saying long life is actually a repetition of a Hebrew word, shalom, which means peace and goodwill. And so, three times in this verse, shalom is spoken to Nabal. This is a greeting of saying I want to bring good to you is what is happening.

And then we see this and that is Nabal in the following verses basically felt that he was being somehow not respected it appears. And then verse 12 says this after he had basically said, Who's David? Because David had asked him for some things. Verse 12, "David's men turned around and went back. When they arrived, they reported every word. David said to his men, "Each of you strap on your sword!" So they did, and David strapped his on as well. About four hundred men went up with David, while two hundred stayed with the supplies."

So now David is ready to make war because he had said, peace to you, shalom to you. And Nabal said, who is David? I don't care about David. So, he basically was saying, I'm not going to receive your kindness. And David says, well, that's it. My 400 men are going to take you out. And so, they head down, and they're ready to go to war.

And what happens is in verse 14, "One of the servants told Abigail, Nabal's wife, "David sent messengers from the wilderness to give our master his greetings, but he hurled insults at them. Yet these men were very good to us. They did not mistreat us, and the whole time we were out in the fields near them nothing was missing. Night and day they were a wall around us the whole time we were herding our sheep near them. Now think it over and see what you can do, because disaster is hanging over our master and his whole household. He is such a wicked man that no one can talk to him."

So, now they go to Abigail and they say, we're about to get slaughtered. See if you can do something. Nabal is such a wicked man the text says, and no one can talk to him. By the way, if no one can talk to you, that's not a good thing. That means that you are in a place where you've said, I know everything, and the word Nabal actually

means fool in Hebrew. Part of being foolish is saying, I won't heed or hear from anybody.

Abigail basically knows that she can't even speak to him. And so, what she does is she prepares a meal. And in preparing this meal, she basically says, I'm going to intercept David and all of his men. She does this and pleads with David to say, don't do this evil and avenge yourself because I know you've been anointed king. You're going to be king, and when you become king what will happen is you'll have his blood on your hands. Don't do it.

And so, David basically says, okay, I'm not going to attack him. And even though we're told this, verse 21, that basically David just said it's useless all my watching over this fellow's property in the wilderness so nothing was missing and he's paid back evil for good. So, Nabal is saying I'm going to pay back evil for good.

Then verse 28 says this, "Please forgive your servant's presumption. The LORD your God will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my lord, because you fight the LORD's battles, and no wrongdoing will be found in you as long as you live."

And then verse 32, David said to Abigail, "Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands."

And what happens is Nabal is basically not attacked by David and his men because Abigail intercedes. Nabal falls dead a little later, David marries Abigail, and he lives happily ever after with his six wives. That's again, a message for another weekend in terms of the multiple-wife thing. We will actually talk about that at some point in this series.

But here's the temptation when you read a story like this, and that is to say, Nabal is bad, and Abigail is good. Do what Abigail did and you'll get what Abigail got. That's basically the idea here. And that's not a horrible temptation, but the problem with it is when you read your Bible this way you end up reading it a little bit like Aesop's Fables. You remember an Aesop fable where you have a story that has a little moral and then you say do what this character did because if you do what this character did, then you get with this character guy.

And the problem with that is here's what can happen. You can prepare a meal for your spouse's enemies if you want to use that word, and they may not drop dead and you may not marry the prince. So, you can't just simply say do what Abigail did, but we can learn some things from this passage, certainly, that are picked up in the New Testament that helps us understand something about marriage, something about life, and something about relationships.

Here's what I just want to suggest, and that is we see patterns in this instance with Nabal, David, and Abigail that are patterns in all relationships, especially patterns in marriage. And one of them is a pattern of what I'm going to call gospel reenactment in marriage.

So, here's the first, and that is Nabal basically returns ill for good. We see this again, in verse 21, this is what Nabal did. He basically returned ill for good. And when this happens, one of the things that you need to do, I need to do when we are in relationships with people, especially in a marriage, is decide, is this a pattern or is this an incident?

And what I mean by that is every marriage will have times when somebody returns ill for good because we're human, and it's part of just what we will do. But when somebody does this over and over and over again, then you are in a place where the relationship is in trouble. And if you're here and you find yourself the person who does that, it's unlikely that you will identify with that. But if you do, know that your path forward is not to justify yourself or be the person no one will talk to, but instead, it's to listen.

Henry Cloud wrote a book a few years ago called *Necessary Endings*, and in it, he talked about when a relationship needs to end or when it becomes unhealthy. And for some of us, when there's a pattern of somebody returning ill for good, in other words, we keep saying, I'm bringing good to the relationship and the person keeps bringing ill, there might be a time for us to say, it's time to end this relationship.

There are biblical times when you can end a relationship. I'm not going to go into the specifics of that today. We actually did that last year in our *Happier* series. I think in first Corinthians seven, we talked about when divorce makes sense in the Bible, but there is a time. But what we also need to see is that sometimes we can deal with this person or this pattern if it starts to exist without always leaving the relationship.

Now, clearly, if there's abuse happening or some kind of serial unfaithfulness, there's a time to say this is enough. But there's also a time to just say, I want to have some boundaries around this. And one of the things that you see here with Abigail is she

didn't make an excuse for Nabal's behavior. She simply acknowledged what is and said, I'm going to deal with it the best that I can.

Henry Cloud, I think in his book *Necessary Ending*, says that when you deal with somebody who's evil, and Nabal here was evil, he said, you can't really negotiate with this person. At some point, you have to bring lawyers, guns, and money to the discussion. You may be in a place where the person you're dealing with is so mean and surly that the only outcome is to say, how do I extricate myself from this?

Henry Cloud also wrote the book *Boundaries* years ago that talked about saying I'm going to put some boundaries around my life and in doing so, what I'm going to do is basically say that what I create and what I allow is what I'll ultimately get. And so, boundaries say I will not allow somebody to treat me like this. So, Nabal is ill for good.

And then there's David here, and David is basically doing what I think is most common in our world and in our culture. David is saying I'll give ill for ill and I'll give good for good. And so, his approach was, if Nabal is good to me, I'll be good to him or I'll be good to him and I expect him to be good to me. But if he gives me ill, I'm going to attack them with four hundred men.

Now we know that this was not David's default, because with Saul, chapter 24, chapter 26, he was willing to say, even though Saul's trying to kill me, I'm not going to raise my hand against the Lord's anointed. And we know from the way that Abigail spoke to David that even David knew that to avenge this slight with a slaughter was not God-honoring, but he was in the mindset of saying, if I can return good for good or ill for ill, then everything will work.

And here's how most marriages try to work. And that is what they'll do is they'll say, I'll be good, you be good, you'll be unkind to me, I'll be unkind to you. And here's the truth. We need some of that to make a foundation work. But the problem with it is, sooner or later, even the best marriages will find themselves in a place where you cannot always return good or you won't always experience good for good. And sometimes it will break down.

Many of you know that last summer I had an accident and I was basically incapacitated for a month plus. And by incapacitated, what I mean is I was on a sofa. I couldn't get off the sofa without help. I couldn't go to the bathroom without help. That's humbling on a lot of levels. One of the things my wife said to me in the middle of this was, I've got a vision of my future and I don't like it. I think she was kidding. And her point was, basically, someday I'm going to have to take care of you, and I

don't think I like this idea. It works for me when you can get off the sofa and bathe yourself better than it does when you can't.

But here's what's true. One day, no matter how strong you are, or how well you take care of yourself, one of you will be in need and not be able to keep up your end of the bargain of a good marriage. That's just true. And so, if this is your approach, you give me good, I'll give you good, you give me ill, I'll get even with you, then your marriage is susceptible. Your marriage is not as strong as you think it is, but it needs to be something different.

There was a study done recently. I think it came out last January. It was by the National Bureau of Economic Research, and they talked about how deaths of despair are rising in this country. Deaths of despair are things like overdose, things like liver disease, and suicide. And what they have said is that these deaths of despair have gone up in what coincides with a death of religion. And by death of religion, what they mean is that people are not seeking things in the faith realm as much as maybe they have in the past.

And here's why I found that interesting, certainly because you would say God answers some of our questions. But do you know what's happened in our modern world? We have so elevated romance that it is the defining thing for most people in our culture. We want human love because human love so closely mirrors divine love that we have made it so ultimate that if we don't get it, we're filled with despair.

And what many of us have done is substituted sexuality or sensuality for actual love because it's easier, and yet we're still filled with a little bit of a place in our heart, in our lives, where we say, this isn't working the way that I want it to. So, you can build a good marriage with a sense of saying, you do good, I'll do good. But sooner or later that's susceptible.

Now, Abigail, here and again, I know that this sounds a little bit like I'm saying, be like Abigail, but what I want to show you is that in some ways, she was the Christ figure for Samuel 25. And what I mean by that is she interceded on behalf of David and in interceding for him, what she did is she returned good for evil the way that Jesus does, good for ill, the way that Jesus does for you and for me. And so, what she does in many ways in coming to this moment is she steps into the gap and she says, don't do this thing that you're thinking of doing.

And what I would like to say is that this is not just good practice, but this is actually gospel reenactment. Here's why I say this, in Ephesians five, which gives us a prolonged teaching on marriage in the New Testament, here's what we read. Verses

21-23 say, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. 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." And then verse 25 says, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

Sometimes these verses are problematic for some people because they say submission, that feels really old-school, that feels bad. They will even argue and say submit appears in verse 21. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Then it doesn't appear in verse 22, that it's supplied in English. It's all true, although it's certainly implied, and the word is actually used in Colossians and first Peter three. So that doesn't really change the subject.

But here's my point. I actually don't think this is problematic and here's why. Because if you just hear this as wives submit, husbands love, what this is talking about is a demeanor and approach that basically says, it's not me first, it's me putting you first. How do we know that this is the gospel reenactment? In verse 32 he says, I'm not just talking about marriage. I'm talking about a mystery, which is Christ in the church.

And so, in Ephesians chapter five, what we're told is that marriage is actually a picture. It's a ground for saying, I am going to live out the gospel in the most intimate relationship, which means I'm going to choose to give good for ill. And when we identify not with our marriage as being ultimate, but with Christ as being ultimate, then what we're able to do is we're able to say, even if this person doesn't give back to me, I can give to them.

I know some of us are probably sitting here saying but if I do that if I return good for ill, this person will feel empowered. It'll feel like I'm becoming codependent. But the point here is to say God doesn't put conditions on His goodness to us. And gospel reenactment marriage means that what you do is you say, as God has given to me, who didn't deserve through the blood and finished work of Jesus Christ. So, I will give to somebody in my life in a way that they don't deserve it.

Now, it doesn't mean that you don't push and draw boundaries, but what it means is that you say my default approach will be this if I want to address marriage. Now, I know that talking about this, if you're in a crisis and you go home and try to do it and the person that you're with is still a little surly, you'll say this didn't work so well. But what it takes is a demeanor over time.

And if you're single, the thing you want to look for is somebody who returns good for ill and evil at times and is willing to say how will I interact when I'm mistreated? And

you see it in their relationships with others. Somebody who always wants to get even, always wants a settled score, has not understood what it is to live the gospel in the most important relationship.

And again, I know that if you're here and you're saying, well, you know, my life right now is really not that simple, that's straightforward. I understand that. And all I want to do today is just simply say to you that the biblical picture of marriage is saying, I will either love you as Christ loved the church, total sacrifice. I'll defer to you. Sacrifice. It's not, we make a perfect trade. And when two people can do that over time, what happens is then things can be healthy in a relationship. And sometimes what we need to do is start the process of saying, I'm going to do this even if the other person doesn't, as an act of worship to God.

Now, again, I'm not talking about abusive situations. I'm not saying there's never a time to get out. You can even start this if you're a child who's here and your parents are in an unhappy marriage, and your parents are hard for you to relate to. You can even start practicing these same skills by saying, what does it look like for me to embody what it is to be Jesus in this situation with my parents giving good for ill? We can practice it in our places of work, in our friendships, where we say, how do I return good for ill at every turn? That default approach changes things.

There's an account that was told years ago of Robertson McQuilkin, who is the president of a Bible college in the South. He was planning to retire, and he and his board had worked it out that he was going to retire in eight years. But his wife came down with Alzheimer's and he ended up retiring much earlier, about eight years before he had planned.

And in his announcement about his retirement, here's what he said. He said, "I haven't in my life experienced easy decision making on major decisions. But one of the simplest and clearest decisions I've had to make is this one because circumstances dictate it now. Muriel, that's his wife, now in the last couple of months seems to be almost happy with me and almost never happy when not with me.

In fact, she seems to feel trapped, become very fearful. Sometimes almost terror. And when she can't get to me, there can be anger. She's in distress. But when I'm with her, she's happy and contented and so I must be with her now at all times. It's not only that I promised this in sickness and in health, till death do us part, and I'm a man of my word, but as I've said, I don't know with this group or not, but I've said it publicly, it's only the fair thing to do.

She's sacrificed for me for 40 years to make my life possible. So, if I cared for her for 40 years, I'd still be in her debt. However, there's much more. It's not that I have to, it's that I get to. I love her very dearly, and as you can tell, it's not easy to talk about. She's a delight, and it's a great honor to care for such a wonderful person."

And my guess is whether you know who he is or not, there's a piece of you that says, I want somebody to love me with that kind of devotion. I think God has written it into our hearts and whether we find it in a romantic partner or some other kind of relationship, we want to be loved like that. And yet our default position is often to say, the way I'm going to love is I'll love if you can love me well. And the gospel, again, is we are loved even when we don't love God well.

And therefore, the Gospel reenactment is saying I will choose to return good for ill as often as I possibly can. Now no one's going to do it perfectly or consistently. And so, sometimes you're going to have to challenge one another and say, the way you talk to me today, that's not acceptable. But even though you've just talked to me this way, I'm going to choose to believe the best and extend good.

It's not acceptable today the way that you handled X. You went out and you drank too much again and we've talked about it. You can't do it with the family around. But even though you've chosen to do that, I'm going to choose to extend good. And again, I'm not saying there's not a time to step up, but I'm saying until that day, choosing to say I will extend good is your best chance of a happy marriage honoring God, and actually living the life that you want with people. And there are few things in this world that are as painful as romance. That's painful. But when you warm your heart at what God has done for you through the cross, then you can extend good even when it doesn't feel humanly possible.

God, I ask today that you would help each one of us who's here to learn just a little bit about our patterns and what your word teaches about how to interact. And that we would choose to live out the teachings of your word and what the Gospel looks like in our most important relationships. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.