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Title: *Love for a Lifetime - Posture #4*

Scripture: Matthew 19

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Over the last several weeks, we've looked at Matthew 19. When you first hear it or read it, you say, this is about divorce and remarriage. This is Jesus telling us when we can divorce if the marriage is problematic. Certainly, that is true about this passage. But what we've tried to do over the last several weeks is look at some of the words that Jesus uses to describe the relationship. Look at the original meaning, context, and other places it's used in the Bible to understand something about Jesus' mindset, about romance and love. We have seen that part of having a lasting romance is turning face to face. We talked about voluntary attachment. It was in this little phrase, "Be united" that is found in this text. We talked about joining together. The phrase in the picture is shoulder to shoulder, learning to work and play together. We talked about this idea of being arm in arm, the word married and what it means about a public commitment, a permanent commitment, and the purity of that commitment.

Today, I want to talk about not just those areas, but really hearts that are united and being heart to heart in our relationship. That may sound kind of trivial, like heart to heart, but Jesus says something in this passage that I think points to really the crux of what goes wrong in relationships. Here's what Jesus says in Matthew 19:8. This is after the disciples had basically asked him, "Why did Moses permit divorce or permit you to get a certificate of divorce? If your vision of marriage is that it's permanent, that it's something that isn't to be separated?" And here's what Jesus says, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard, but it was not this way from the beginning." He then goes on again into what has often been called this exception clause.

Jesus tells us why relationships break down. He says it's because your heart is hard. Throughout the Bible the heart is the center of our inner world. It is the seat of our emotions. It's where we gain perception and make decisions. In fact, William Mounce, who is the New Testament scholar, put it this way, "the heart covers a whole range of activities that go on in your inner self." He then gives a bunch of biblical references for this. He says, "including thinking, grieving, rejoicing, desires, understanding and decision making." If our heart becomes hard, it becomes calcified. What that means is that our decision process, our thinking process becomes hardened, and we do not

have the same capacity to love. Jesus says is the reason that divorce happens is because your heart gets hard.

It is not just when divorce happens. There's a lot of relationships where people stay together, maybe for the kids, because it's convenient, because of a conviction about marriage. But there's still a hardness of the heart where when you think about the person that you're with, there's not a sense of joy and thankfulness, but there's a sense of anguish and there's a sense of frustration and annoyance and irritability. Well, that's hardness of heart. Jesus says that hardness of heart is what hurts relationships. What it means is that keeping our hearts soft rather than hard, keeping our heart open rather than closed is one of the most important things that we can do in human romance. If we find ourselves in boredom, drudgery and getting a hard heart, it means that we are on a pathway to something that isn't good.

Now, often what happens when you hear somebody talk about relationships and maybe the staleness or breakdown of a relationship, they'll say something along the lines of "well, love is a choice." In the Bible, love is a verb. People will say this whether they are church people or not church people. "You just need to love, act lovingly, and then your heart will catch up. So, if you're not feeling it, then keep loving, keep doing the right thing, and sooner or later you'll find yourself loving." Let me ask you, is that true? Well, kind of. It's true in the sense that sometimes the best thing you can do is when you don't feel like something is acting the way that you want to be, then good things follow. But it's not true in the sense that sometimes you can say, "I'm going to act lovingly" and the feelings don't necessarily follow. You can find yourself on a treadmill of drudgery, saying, "I'm just doing the same thing over and over, and it doesn't feel like my heart ever changes or softens."

In the New Testament, love is used as a verb 143 times and as a noun 116 times. What that means is that love is both a choice and a feeling. If we focus just on the choice, will be on that treadmill of drudgery, saying, "I just have to love, I just have to keep loving, I just have to keep doing, even when it doesn't feel like I'm getting anything back." But if we focus on only the noun, we will say, "well, it's a feeling, since I don't have the feeling, I shouldn't have to act." We need both sides of this for our human romance to be what we really desire and hoped it would be when we first entered a human relationship.

Now I try it each week to say something to those of you who aren't currently in a relationship. So let me just say this, that to the degree which you tolerate broken

relationships today in your life will lead to a greater ease of tolerating a broken relationship in a marriage or romance in the future. What I mean is the way that you get along with your siblings, your parents, your bosses, your roommates, your coworkers have a sense of being a little microcosm of what you'll tolerate in a marriage. Sometimes one of the best preparations for romance and marriage is a bad college roommate. What I mean by that is sometimes when you're forced to be in the same space with somebody day after day, all the time, what happens is you get the opportunity to work through, how do I relate to somebody when it isn't easy?

In Romance we like to think if I find the right person and like the movies we ride off into the sunset and everything is easy. In the movies no one ever must clean the toilets, pay the bills, or do some of the inane stuff of life. Sometimes we get the idea that it should be easy when we find the person.

I say this because I had an experience where my not bad college roommate ended up being a really good preparation for marriage. The guy who became one of my best friends still is to this day, a guy who was the best man at my wedding. I was the best man of his. We lived together. I was in one room. He was in another room. We had other roommates and there was a bathroom in between. One day, I think it only happened once, I decided to clean my dorm room that year. I brought the vacuum in. It was in the hall closet. I was vacuuming, cleaning, taking care of everything. He came over and he said, "Oh, that's a good idea." He said, "leave the vacuum when you're done and I'll vacuum my room." I said, "Sure." I left the vacuum. I went about my business. I came back. He evidently used the vacuum, and he returned it to the middle of my room. I'm thinking, "Oh, no, you don't. You're not going to leave the vacuum here for me to put away" So I thought through my options, and I landed on the incredibly mature option of taking the vacuum and putting it back in his room. Not a word had been spoken. I came back from class. The next time the vacuum is back in my room, I put it back in his room. I come back, the vacuum is in my room, and now I'm thinking, "Oh, no, oh no, no. I will not be the one who must walk across the hall and put the vacuum in the closet." That would be tough to put the vacuum in the closet. I will not be that one. I took the vacuum and I put it in his bed. I came back. The vacuum is on my desk. I put the vacuum in the shower. He put it on the toilet. I mean, we went back and forth for about four days. We never said a word. Then there was the blow up.

Oh, the reason I say this was actually good preparation for marriage is because he was one of the first people outside of my family that saw the worst of me and chose to

love me anyway. He was one of the first people that I got to see the worst of and I chose to stay in a relationship with, other than my spouse, other than my family. And here is what happens in marriage. You will sooner or later see the worst of the person you're married to. If you're not careful, a hard heart will go into your relationship, and it will create havoc. That is what Jesus says. Our whole thing is how do we keep our hearts open, our hearts pliable?

What I'd like to do is show you three factors that go into a hard heart and the solution that's in Ephesians 5, another passage about marriage.

Here is the first - offenses. When we're offended, sometimes it's big things, choices that your spouse makes, or decisions. Sometimes it's leaving a vacuum for you to put away and you have the vacuum standoff moment and you say, "Oh, no, you don't." But what happens when we're offended, and we don't deal with it, our offenses become hurts, our hurts become hardness. When our heart gets hard, we start to say, "you don't do for me what you once did."

This happens all the time in a relationship. You might have said, "Well when we were dating, you inquired of my soul. You did little things that showed that you love me. You do not do that anymore. Why don't you do that anymore? You used to be passionate about me. You used to be responsive. You're not that anymore." We get hardened and we say, "Why don't you do what you used to do?"

I think one of the reasons that happens is found in Ephesians 5. Here's what we read in Ephesians 5:25, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. This is the biblical view of masculinity. Here, husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church, sacrificially love your wives selflessly. But then it says this, why is a husband to do this? In Ephesians 5:26 - 27 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with the water through the word and to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. What? Paul says here about marriage is that part of what is supposed to happen in marriage is that the husband is supposed to love his wife in such a way that he presents her to God, holy and blameless. Okay, how many of you like that's your act of thought of what marriage is. My guess is that's not what most husbands think of when they think of marriage. Most of them think maybe today. I mean, that is real. Guys are like, what?

Some of you are in a place where you're thinking marriage should be about happiness. No, I'm not saying marriage isn't happy. In fact, in this passage, the turning face to face, the attraction, the voluntary attachment that's happy. Shoulder to shoulder, that is happy when it's good. Arm and arm, that's happy when it's good. But some of us have so elevated the idea of happiness that we assume that anything that doesn't feel happy in the moment is somehow wrong. We insist our spouse get on our happiness timetable. Then we're offended any time we're not happy. What the Bible says about marriage is that your marriage is about your character transformation. It is about God doing something in you that makes you the person that he wants you to be. God has given you a spouse in part to transform your character. I don't always want my spouse to transform my character. I don't want my wife to always speak into what should be or could be. And my guess is you don't either.

I heard somebody once say that marriage is like Miracle-Gro for character defects because we find ourselves always in that spot of "what's going on here." I know when I got married, I didn't think that I had an issue with being self-focused. I hear those chuckles, but I did. What happens is, you know how when you take a step from one stage to the next stage and you look back at the last stage and you say, that was a lot easier than I realized when I was in it. Anybody else? You're in college and you think you're so busy because you have to go to class on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Then you get a job, and they expect you to go Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Now I get hybrid and you can play pickleball all while you're logged on. I know how some of you roll. You can do that, but they still expect you to be there and sometimes they want you to come at night and at weekends. It is crazy. I am so busy.

Then you get married. At least that is what happened to me. I got married and now my spouse wants me to do things. I have in-laws. It is crazy. And then we had a baby and I recognized very quickly how even before that I was self-focused and we just didn't have one. We had two, we had three, we had four. And what happened was God started to work on some of the self-focus and just say you don't have an option anymore to be self-focused in the same way. Now, I'd love to tell you that I've grown through that and I'm now completely others focused. I would not be true. That's still an area of work.

What I'm saying is if you go to your marriage and say this is all about my happiness, rather than saying this is part of God's appointed way of developing in me character

things that won't be developed in me other any other way. Every time you're offended, get a hard heart, you'll short circuit the work of God in your life. The person that you chose to be your spouse to walk with you through this world. You will turn on them because you don't want them to point out, whether intentionally or unintentionally, some of the rough edges in your life. That's part of what Ephesians means when it says to present her holy and blameless.

I think there's a second issue here, and I'm just going to say it's overdrafts. You know what an overdraft is? It is where you've made deposits and then you start to make withdrawals and the withdrawals outpace the deposits. I mentioned that we had four children, at one point, under the age of seven, and my wife made the choice to stay home, to work, to raise our kids. If you have four little kids, basically a successful day is any day in which they're all alive at the end of the day. She was running hard just to take care of the kids and the house. I was working at a church that was growing and we were understaffed. I was working a lot and she was trying to help me with that. What we were constantly saying, "Could you help me with ___? Could you help me with ___?" We were doing the volley of "I Need, I Need." We had made some really good deposits early in our marriage, but we were in a high season of withdraw and we realized that it wasn't sustainable.

Now a good marriage will have seasons where maybe you make more withdrawals than deposits. If we start to get in a time where that season is not just a season, but it becomes something that we do in perpetuity, there will be something that happens inside of our lives that is not positive.

Here's what we see in Ephesians 5:28-29. It says this "In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife, loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church." The picture here again is saying there's self-care. In marriage, when you love somebody, you say, "How can I give to you what you need in this time?" Maybe a way to think about it is this, if you could get one car when you're 25 and it's the only car you could have for the rest of your life, do you think you would approach that car differently than if you knew you could get another car in five years or ten years after 100,000 miles? Of course, you would. When it snows and they put salt all over the road, you wouldn't want to take your car out on the highway. If you did, you'd crawl underneath and wipe the salt off, so it didn't rust the bottom away. If you were tempted to push the maintenance schedule just a little, you would say,

there's no way I'm pushing the maintenance schedule because this is the only one I get.

What some of us do when it comes to marriage, we treat our spouses like a car that we think, I'm just going to drive this for two years and 25,000 miles. We overdraft overextend instead of investing in the marriage. That leads to hardness sometimes because the other person feels the weight of the lack of deposits.

There is one more thing that I would say we see also in Ephesians 5, and that is overexposure. What I mean when I say overexposure is for some of us there is a constant awareness of other people, other options, and other things. In our 5 Good Minutes podcast this week we were in Proverbs 11, and I quoted one author who talked about how pornography is a shortcut to satisfy action because we try to get satisfaction without doing the work or intimacy without doing the work of relationship.

Naomi Wolf wrote an article for The New York Times; I believe it was years ago. Naomi Wolf is not a follower of Jesus, as far as I know. But listen to what she said. This was called the porn myth. She said Sex has become the wallpaper of our culture. People are looking for a narrative of how they will live, and sex provides the option. Then she talks about a friend of hers who moved from New York City, where they live, to an Eastern culture. She married and had kids and settled into that culture and Naomi went to visit her. Here is what she said. "She had abandoned her jeans and T-shirt for a headscarf, and she had allowed her wild blond waist length hair to be hidden below a scarf. And I asked her, 'Can I even see your hair?' 'No, she demurred quietly. Only my husband ever gets to see my hair.' When she showed me the little house and the bedroom where she lived with her husband and told me that the kids were never allowed to go into the bedroom, there was a sense of sensual intensity. It was archaic, it was overwhelming, it was private. It was a feeling of intensity that I picked up that I had never seen in the secular West, with its view of sexuality. I thought about our husbands back home and how often they see naked women in Times Square and on the web, and her husband never even sees another woman's hair. And I thought," this is Naomi Wolf's words, "she must feel so hot."

I don't know if Naomi Wolf is right, but here's what Ephesians 5 says, and it quotes Genesis 2. It's the same verse that Jesus quotes in Matthew 19. It says this, Ephesians 5:31. "For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.:

Well, one flesh here communicates the idea of prioritizing the beauty of an intimate relationship and keeping the overexposure to things on the outside away. But what happens when we're overexposed to all kinds of images, all kinds of fantasy, all kinds of ideas, is we can start to say, I'm hardened because this person doesn't give me what I think that person could give me or that image could give me or that ideal could give me. And as a result, we get hardened in our heart.

Now, you may hear this and you may say, well, so what I should do is I should get over offenses and realize my spouse has a gift. I should make sure I'm making deposits so that I'm giving enough to the relationship. I should make sure I limit exposure. Well, that is good. Yes. But as we said at the beginning, I don't think nearly saying choose to love alone is the answer. It's better than not, but I will give you those. You can see the idea of what a hard heart is and what the ideal can be.

But in the Bible, the issue of the heart is addressed in two ways. One way is, that the heart is something that God moves on. Acts 16:14 talks about how God changes the heart. That means is we can pray if we find ourselves having a hard heart towards somebody in our lives, toward a spouse, we can say, God, would you soften my heart? I know my heart is hard. I know that I am starting to have little resentments. I'm starting to have irritations, I'm starting to have frustrations, and they're adding up to a hardness in my heart. I don't feel the way that I want to feel toward this person. Would you soften my heart?

But in the Bible, we also see that God commands us not to harden our heart. And Hebrews 3:8 & 12, talking about the Israelites, he says, "Do not harden your heart." And the implication is not just that we pray and say, "Oh, well, I prayed, and God didn't take away my hard heart," but that we can do things that help us to have a soft heart. Now, this is obviously a spiritual issue in Hebrews 3. This is the same process that it goes to when it goes to our way of relating to others. What I mean by this is we will harden our heart toward God when we say "God, I do not want your ways. I think I know a better path. I do not care what you say. I'm going to take care of what I need to take care of here and now. Instead of "God, you are good. You are right."

In fact, there is a word that's used in the Bible for ungodliness. What does it mean to be ungodly? Well, what it means in part is that you don't give reverence to God, deference to God. You don't have a sense of all of God's greatness that governs your life. That is a hard heart. And the answer spiritually is to be so melted by what Jesus

Christ has done that you say, "Why wouldn't I surrender to this God? Why wouldn't I see his way as being the best way? Because Jesus has loved me when I wasn't lovable. So, I'm not going to harden my heart and I'm going to ask God to soften my heart toward God." And the same thing is true spiritually when we come to Jesus and say, "God, I'm giving my heart, in a sense back to you." And then relationally, when we find ourselves having a hard heart and we say, "God, would you melt my heart so much towards you and understand how you've loved me when I didn't do what I could or should do so that I can love somebody who maybe hasn't done everything I thought they should do."

Marriage and romance can be good without God in the equation. If everyone does everything right, all the time. But the best marriages usually have God in the equation because when God is part of the equation, what happens is you have something greater than just simply saying, I'll love you if you love me. You are living out of a sense of being loved by God that lets you love and that that sense of letting your heart be melted by God. Let your heart be softened to your spouse. Let your heart be softened to roommates, parents, coworkers. And when that happens, God is working in your heart to change you. I hope this series has helped create a vision for marriage. I know just doing a few talks around this doesn't answer somebody who's in crisis, but I hope at the same time just talking about these postures being face to face, shoulder to shoulder, arm in arm, heart to heart just gives you a new way to think about what God has for you in this area of our lives.

Let us pray together. God. I know there are some relationships in any room that are struggling. God, we pray right now for your grace on those relationships. God, I know in any room there are relationships that are good, but there is little lurking hardness of heart. And I pray you would bring about a softening God. I know that in any room there are people who are not in relationships for various reasons, and I pray that you would help the current relationships to be addressed in a way that helps create a pattern of not settling for broken heartedness in a relationship. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.