

Sermon—March 8th and 9th, 1997
Rich & Marlene Nathan
Loving Your Spouse for a Life-Time

Loving Your Spouse Despite All the Differences

Rich:

Last week I began a series on marriage that I called “Loving Your Spouse for the a Life-Time.” This week I decided that it would be nice to teach together with my wife, Marlene, on the subject of “Loving Your Spouse Despite All the Differences.” I was going to call today’s sermon, “Learning to Love the Lunatic You Live With” but I thought it might not really be a good title for our tape catalog or for our radio audience, so we will stick with the more conventional and safer “Loving Your Spouse Despite All the Differences.”

Now I believe that God has a wonderful sense of humor in bringing the two of us together. We should have been alerted very early on in our relationship that we had some major differences that we were going to have to learn how to negotiate to have a successful marriage.

I don’t know how many of you have ever seen the old Woody Allen movie, “Annie Hall,” in which Woody Allen, a Jewish guy from New York falls in love with and eventually marries a white, Protestant Gentile girl from the Midwest named Annie Hall. But after Marlene and I got married, we saw that married and we said, “Oh my goodness, they are us.” There is one particular scene in the movie where they show the two families eating at a holiday meal. In the first scene, you see Woody Allen’s family. Everyone is screaming and grabbing things off of each other’s plates. It is just like feeding time at the zoo. People are telling jokes and singing and carrying on. That was my family at Passover dinner. The first

time Marlene ate at my family's there were like 16 of us around a huge table, including cousins and my two sisters who got up and sang a song. People didn't talk as they do in the Midwest in whispered tones, begging permission to be alive. Folks in New York are much more direct. They say things like, "You going to eat that?" as they are reaching onto your plate.

Marlene sat there all night in shock. She was afraid to speak. She just kept thinking, "What have I gotten myself into with this family?"

The first time I met her family, Marlene was an only child, we sat down for Easter dinner. Nobody said anything. A couple of mentions were made of the news and the weather. They put a couple of chicken wings on my plate and then began to clear the table. Marlene's family comes from a German background, so they were washing everything after dinner. I joke about how they were scrubbing the walls. I was sitting alone in the dining room while they were scouring the kitchen cabinets. Finally, after a few minutes, her father came back in and said, "Rich, are you still hungry? We can try to find you some more food." So, we should have been tipped off pretty early on that we were coming from different places.

But I am of the conviction that God loves diversity. Last week we had a little choir on Sunday morning. I thought it added so much richness to the worship as an adjunct to our band. There is something really beautiful about a choir as it brings together unity out of diversity. That is what heaven is going to be like. I don't know what your impression is of heaven, but I can tell you that everyone in heaven is not going to be changed into white, middle-class suburban people. I believe that we are going to retain some of our diversity – our diverse dress, sound, language, and colors. The book of Revelation says, "That after this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every

nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne. They cried out in a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.’” A different people from different a background wearing their different garb and speaking in their different languages.

John Piper’s book *Let the Nations Be Glad*, a book about world missions, says that the reason for the diversity is because it magnifies the greatness of God in a way that uniformity never could. If three movie critics all from the same racial background, education, and political philosophy all praise a movie, we might say big deal. That doesn’t say anything about the greatness of the movie. But if you get millions and millions of movie goers the world over, all praising a movie, and they do so not only the moment it is released, but they do so decade after decade in India, France, China, the United States, and South America, you might say, “We have an enduring classic on our hands.”

The more different kinds of people that praise something, the greater that thing is. And the greatness of God is ultimately going to be shown through the fact that He is the only one who has been able to capture praise and worship from every single different people group and language group and ethnicity that exists in the world. And He is the only one who is great enough to pull all of these different people together into one body called the church.

And I see the greatness of God every time I look at my wife, Marlene, and realize how God has enabled two very different people to fall in love and to live together in love for 21 years. Of course, along the way he has forced us to stretch and to grow beyond ourselves and beyond what we considered normal and the right way to think and the right way to do things. But what we are going to talk about today, Marlene and me, is “Loving Your Spouse Despite All the Differences.” Let’s pray.

Let me introduce the subject of “Loving Your Spouse Despite all the Differences” by talking with you about some of the differences Marlene and I encountered in our marriage early on. I hinted at that in my introduction, but we certainly encountered family background differences, like the differences in our dads. Marlene’s dad is and was Mr. Fix-It. His tools to this day hang neatly in the garage. They are all oiled so they don’t get any rust on them. He is extremely perfectionistic. We once painted our living room and there was drop of paint that fell behind a banister on the staircase that we didn’t get a chance to clean up before Marlene’s parents came over. Marlene’s dad walked in the house and looked over the living room and immediately noticed the dime-sized drop of paint that was behind one of the banisters and said, “Oh my goodness, that is an eye-sore. Do you need help in cleaning that up?”

Everything is done so well in her family – perfectly, in fact. Marlene’s dad is 82 years old, so last summer I went over to help him mow the grass. He walked after me while I was mowing, telling me to slow down, I guess because he has discovered that there is an optimal blade to pace ratio that cuts the grass exactly the same length. In fact, when he did his grass, he always cut it twice. But her family background was extremely orderly. Her dad ate the same breakfast every morning for 20 years – corn flakes and milk, coffee and juice. They had the same routines on the weekends. They always shopped for groceries on Saturday and on Sunday they had a big dinner after church and visited extended family. Dinner was always on the table at the same time, 6:00. Marlene lived in the same home from the time she was an infant until the time she went to college. The sidewalks were washed every week. The neighborhood was suburban, white, Protestant. The minority in the community were white Catholics who all went to the parochial school who were a very hard working, very

frugal German family. You could sum it all up by saying her family background was quiet, clean, orderly, and very stable.

Marlene:

Rich's home couldn't have been any more different than mine. Rich grew up in New York City, a very cosmopolitan, metropolitan part of the country. From the end of the street at his childhood home you can see the skyscrapers of downtown Manhattan. Rich's family was Jewish and very ethnic. They had all of those kinds of characteristics, which were very different from my family.

In every way that my home was quiet, clean, orderly, and stable, Rich's home was loud, disorderly, and unstable. Rich's dad was a private contractor. Although he was in construction, he never did any repairs at home. In fact, he would start jobs at home and never finish them. So their house was filled with unfinished projects and half done rooms -- walls with holes in them. He was very different from my dad who never started anything without completely finishing it and doing it, of course, the right way.

Rich's dad also had a very interesting system of paying bills and taking care of the family's important papers. He had this filing system where he would hold up mail to the light and look inside the envelope. He would then deposit these envelopes into a paper sack. That was his filing system. Not at all like my family's. My parents had their taxes done by the second week of January. They had stacks of boxes in the closet filled with all their important papers and bills from years past all labeled and in order.

Rich's dad had all of their important papers in a sack. He must have believed that if you didn't open these bills you really didn't have to pay them. Unfortunately, this was not really a good system when it was combined with Rich's mom whose favorite pastime was shopping. She really could have been a professional shopper. Shopping was the thing she

liked to do the most and the thing that she did the best. She needed one of those bumper stickers on her car – “I live to shop.”

So, as a result of his dad and mom, the family was constantly in financial distress. They had bill collectors calling constantly on the phone. They had things repossessed regularly. They had several cars taken right out of their driveway. Even one of their homes was foreclosed on and they were forced to move quickly.

This was in stark contrast to my family. My parents were extremely responsible, always had the bills paid, never had one hint of any financial difficulty for the 18 years I was growing up.

Rich's home was disorderly and disorganized in small ways too. On a day-to-day basis there was just no routines to life. He never knew in the evening when they were going to have dinner. They could have dinner anywhere from 6:00 or 7:00 to 9:00 or 10:00 at night. It depended on when Dad got home, if he had to go to the grocery store, and what he was going to fix. They ate out a lot too, which is probably a consequence of living in a metropolitan area. People tend to eat out more there. But there were absolutely no routines in their daily life.

So in every way that my home was very stable, Rich's home was very unstable and very unpredictable.

There were some real positives aspects to Rich's family that happened to be very different from mine. One, his family is very affectionate. They, despite all of their fighting and instability, are very warm and demonstrative. That was quite different than my family, which generally was reserved and not at all demonstrative or affectionate whether physically or verbally.

Also, his family was very funny. His father, despite his disorganization and poor financial management, could have been a comedian. He is very, very funny. So a lot of our time with his family was spent telling funny stories from the past and jokes and things that happened. You would be laughing until you were crying. That is quite different from my family, which really in every way was very serious and kind of dull.

And so when Rich and I met, I think one of the things that attracted us to each other was that we were looking for something very different than what we had experienced in our homes growing up. Rich was very much looking for stability and organization and dependability in someone in a relationship. And I was looking for some excitement. I was looking for a little bit of adventure and something that would be fun. And so I think that this was something that initially attracted us to each other.

But it is not too hard to see that coming from the drastically different backgrounds that we did, that we would eventually run into some difficulties in our relationship. One area of difficulty is dealing with change. Even things like traveling created a lot of anxiety in me. When Rich started pastoring and would have opportunities to travel, we soon discovered that my going along with him created a lot of tension within our relationship.

Another point of conflict was that I was very much used to having an extremely orderly, clean home. And so every time he offered to help me in any way, whether it was to load the dishwasher or clean up after dinner, I would come along after him to “do it right” and get those last bit of crumbs and put the dishes in the dishwasher straight.

There is a biblical principle that is so important to lay hold of in our relationships with our spouses. That is the principle of leaving. It is brought out in the very beginning of Genesis 2 right after the creation of woman. God provides woman with Eve and lays out

this principle, “For this reason, a man shall leave his mother and father and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one.”

So, for me I had to come up with new standards. Perfection wasn’t the only acceptable standard. I needed to relax when it came to things like the cleanliness of the house. I know some of you are struggling with the opposite problem. You have trouble getting all of your dishes done by the end of the day or getting the laundry done so people have clean clothes. We all have something that we are struggling with. But for me and for our relationship, this was something that I needed to do. And I really needed to leave that standard behind and adopt something that would work with Rich and I, something that was more relaxed.

I think sometimes we can get so stuck into thinking that “the way my family did it is the right way, is the correct way. Our perspective is the only one that should work.” But once we come to marriage, we are going to find that there are other perspectives out there and other ways of doing things. So there needs to be a willingness to leave that and to create something new.

Rich:

Now, not only did we have family background issues to resolve and differences to overcome, but also we are very different temperamentally. Over the years Marlene and I have probably read together maybe 20 books on marriage and probably 15 books on child raising. We used to do it a lot more than we have in the last few years, but we would read out loud to each other. That was one of our recreational activities. Just finding out more about how to have a good marriage and how to be good parents.

One of the books that we found particularly helpful to us was a book called Please Understand Me by David Keirse and Marilyn Bates. What Please Understand Me does is

that it breaks up people's temperaments along four temperament characteristics according to the personality inventory called the Meyers-Briggs test.

The first temperamental grid that they employ is one of extravert/introvert. But on their test, I am the ultimate extravert. I like mingling and I enjoy lots of people contact, although not as much as I used to some years ago. I am moving more toward the middle, but I still enjoy lots of people contact. I think out loud. I like to share every new discovery. I get energized by being around people. If I am locked up too long by myself, I start getting uneasy. I would not do well in prison in isolation.

Marlene is more introverted, although again over the years she has moved toward the middle of the spectrum. She is actually a little more balanced than my extreme extraversion. But she enjoys working alone. She enjoys having a few close friends. She is very warm and very nurturing. But she gets drained by having lots of relationships.

Early on in our marriage we had a real struggle with our temperamental differences because I tried to push Marlene into what I thought was healthy ways of relating and healthy ministry. I tried to push her into lots of social relationships, making lots of phone calls in ministry areas. Pushing her into certain roles that involve maximum people contact. That left her feeling drained and exhausted and resentful.

On the other hand, Marlene felt somewhat threatened and jealous by my network of relationships. She wondered why I didn't want to just spend time alone with her. And why I wanted to go out with friends. Or "Let's invite over some more people." Again, that has changed over the course of our marriage. In fact, any more she is the one who is dialing up at parties while I am fading fast after 11:30. But we definitely have that temperamental difference.

Marlene:

Another area of temperamental difference is the difference between a sensing person and an intuitive person. There are two types of people probably along the continuum. One type gathers information via their five senses. They see it. They hear it. They touch it. They smell it. They taste it. And that is a sensing person. They use their five senses.

The other type of person is an intuitive person. They use a sixth sense. They feel something. They intuit it. It is unperceivable with the five senses, but somehow they are gathering information.

Well, in our relationship I happen to be a very strong sensing person. I am the kind of person who is very practical. I have my feet on the ground so to speak. I focus in on the facts and the details of things. For instance, I will notice what a room looks like. If Rich and I go to someone's home for dinner, I will notice the colors in the living room or the pattern on the sofa. I will notice what everyone is wearing and what the side dishes were. What the spice was that was used. I am very much in touch with my environment and the details of my environment.

Rich, on the other hand, would probably say something like, "They were dressed?" Because an intuitive person is not focusing on those types of things at all. They have their heads in the clouds, preoccupied with the world of ideas.

When we were first married we walked from our apartment in Cleveland, we lived in Little Italy in Cleveland, and we walked about a mile to campus where we had classes. We would always walk together in the morning down a particular road. Over a period of five months they leveled about five old houses on this one block. They tore them down and bulldozed the debris away and erected a senior citizen high-rise apartment. This had been going on. One morning we were walking to school together as usual and Rich looked over and said, "When did that go up?" We had walked down this block for several months. I

watched the whole process. I noticed everything that was going on. But he, on the other hand, was totally oblivious. We had been talking about something. He had been thinking about it and just wasn't paying attention.

So Rich and I pretty much have learned to work with our strengths in our relationship. There are certain things, because of the way I am, that I am good at. And there are other things, because of the way he is, that he is good at. For example, I really like to do a lot of the fixing up around the house, the painting and the decorating, simply because I pay attention to the details. It would really drive me nuts if the paint wasn't put on straight or the wallpaper wasn't completely smooth on the wall or something like that. We have been comfortable with these types of divisions. I take care of the details of the monthly bills. It is much easier for me to do that.

Rich does a lot of our planning which he's good at. He does all kinds of planning for our future as far as investing for retirement and putting money away for the kids' college education. He sits down and goes through their school schedule. He thinks about where they might go to school. He does these very visionary things in planning for the future.

We have really learned to work with our strengths and not try to force each other into areas that are not what we are good at.

Another area of difference is just gender differences and this has become an extremely popular hot topic in recent years. There have been a rush of books out on the market on this subject on how men and women are different – *Men are From Mars and Women are From Venus*. Even Tim Allen's book deals with that topic. And so it has become very popular. There are TV shows about it. I think ABC had a news report about these differences. They ran it a couple of times. I think that people are on to something. There really is something here.

I personally believe that men and women are different down to their very core in every way. They have done incredible studies delving into all these different aspects of human behavior and human biology and have come up with loads of differences. For example, they have done studies about how men and women focus on things, not just with their eyes, but also with how their brains work. They have determined that men are much better than women at things that require eye-hand coordination. Men are able to focus on small details, which make them better at things that require eye-hand coordination like throwing. So there really is something to the old saying, “You throw like a girl.” It has something to do with how the brain works.

On the other hand, women are much more in touch with their environment and can sense what is going on around them, particularly in social interactions. They can pick up on things like someone is upset or discomfort or fear or things like that. I am not just talking about someone who is intuitive like Rich is or someone who has a spiritual gift. But I know that I am able to do that much more readily than Rich just by observation.

Women are better able to focus on many things at one time. I find that I have no trouble, especially when my kids were younger, to be cooking dinner, answering the phone, feeding the dog, doing a load of wash, and keeping my eye on a couple of toddlers to keep them out of trouble. Most men in this kind of situation would be highly frustrated because men are very good at focusing in on detail and not being distracted and paying close attention to one thing. This makes them very good at getting jobs done and, perhaps, better at high pressure situations where what is needed is not someone who is easily distracted and able to concentrate on what they are doing. It also explains why when they are watching TV or a football game it is hard to get their attention. When Rich is reading a book, I usually have to say something ten times before he hears me.

I think when we look at scripture it is pretty clear that God designed men and women to be different. When we look at the creation account in Genesis 2 we see that God created Adam and decided afterward that it wasn't good for Adam to be alone. So he begins to look for a helpmate for Adam, someone that is suitable for him. He goes through the process of looking through the animal kingdom, all of the other creatures that he has created, and no suitable helper is found for Adam. So he puts Adam to sleep and creates Eve out of Adam's ribs.

And in the Hebrew when it says that God is looking for a helper that is suitable for Adam, what it literally means is a match that is like opposite him. The Hebrew word is different than the Hebrew word for like. It is a match. It is someone who is like opposite him. The whole idea here is that God is looking for someone that is similar to Adam, yet will compliment him, who will complete him, who will fill him up and make him perfect. It is clear from the account that God did not create another man. That wouldn't have fit the bill. That wouldn't have met the requirement to remedy Adam's aloneness. He created someone who was different, yet the same. Because Adam, of course, when he gets his first glimpse of Eve says, "Now this is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh." Adam recognizes right away that Eve was very much like him.

Of course, men and women are very much alike. We are both human beings. We both can have relationship with God. And yet there is difference. There is this complimentary nature.

Unfortunately, our culture – not only our culture but probably throughout history – men and women have turned their differences not into something that is complimentary, but into something that is more on the order of war. There has been the battle of the sexes going on for ages. The differences that I think God designed into men and women to enable them to

be this complementariness and actual unity and oneness has really been distorted because of sin. So there are all these difficulties.

And so Rich and I have also had to work through these. These have been areas of difference between us. One big area of difference that we have conflicted on, which I think is typical, is how we deal with stress. I know for myself, and I think this is typical of a lot of women, when I am under stress I really want to talk about it. If something has happened to upset me or there is a problem that I am concerned about, I want to talk about it. And I want to talk about it at great length. And I want to get it all out in the open. So I am looking for someone to listen to all of my talking.

Now, men do not deal with their stress in the same way that women do typically. Men do not like to talk about their problems and difficulties. The tendency is to withdraw and to sort through problems privately. In the book Men are From Mars; Women are From Venus the author uses the cute little phrase that men like to go into their caves. They like to be alone and work through their problems.

So there is this vast difference. And when I come to Rich really wanting to talk about something, first of all, it makes him uncomfortable because when he has a problem that is the last thing he wants to do. He wants to go off and think about it, work it through, and then when it is resolved he feels more comfortable. But that is not where I am at.

So when I do begin talking about the difficulty, the problem or my concern with the kids, he feels it is that I want him to solve it. Since I have not retreated into my cave to work out my stress, I must be looking to him for help. And so he listens for a short time, determines what it is that I need to do, and presents me with a solution. Well, that was not what I was needing. I didn't need someone to solve the problem. I was needing to alleviate my stress and my concern about it. I just wanted him to listen.

In reverse, when Rich is having a difficulty or is under stress or is having a problem, my highly developed female sensors are picking up on this. I assume that he needs to talk about it. That this is what will help him the most. So I begin to pry.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

And when a woman says that, by the way, that is not the end of the story. When a woman says “nothing” to your question “what is the matter” she really wants you to pry. She really wants you to drag it out of her. At least, that is the way I am. I remember when we were first married I would make it very clear that I was upset about something. I would give him the old Eskimo treatment, as Rich says. He would ask what is wrong and I would say nothing. Well, I just wanted him to dig deeper, to keep at me. If he really loved me, he would want to know what was wrong. He would question me and question me until I finally blurted it out.

Rich:

Now a third temperamental difference and the last one we are going to cover because I think that you are getting the idea, is a difference in how you process information that you gain either through sensing or intuition. Do you process with your head or do you process with your heart? Myers-Briggs folks would break that distinction up between thinkers and feelers. Now, both Marlene and I are both thinkers. And that has made it pretty easy for us to understand each other. A more typical marriage involves a man who is a thinker married to a woman who is a feeler. That would be the more traditional breakdown. Although, that of course is a generalization. There are high feeling men married to high thinking women. But when you get thinkers and feelers together there can definitely be some sparks.

You know, the feeler is constantly saying things and feeling like “How could you be so insensitive? How could you possibly say that? Don’t you care? I am so hurt.” When you ask a feeler their opinion, they will say, “I feel that...” On the other hand, when you ask a thinker that, they will say, “I think that...” Feelers are always projecting their feelings onto thinkers. Well I am sure that after that particular event you must have felt so upset and so disturbed and so hurt. The thinker is scratching their head and saying, “I didn’t feel any of those things.”

Even though Marlene is a thinker, she does have a higher degree of feeling component to her personality than I do. And where it comes out very definitely for us is in our approach to raising our children. I constantly think about what my kids are becoming. What sort of person are they becoming as they grow toward adulthood? And so firmly in my mind almost all of the time is how will this decision or this particular behavior play itself out as they move toward becoming a husband or a wife, an employee, worker? Where is all of this going to end up?

So, my approach to child raising is to encourage the kids a lot to face different life challenges, to tell them constantly “you can do this,” “you can master this.” If something is a struggle, so what? If something is hard for them, I just think well, this is good. This is going to help them to be able to handle problems and trials later on. It doesn’t bother me if they are temporarily unhappy. They wanted to watch TV or play with friends and I believe that it is going to be better for them to study for a test. I don’t second guess myself and say, “This really hurts me to deny them TV time or play time.” I just say, “No. This is good for them. This is going to result for their good.”

Marlene, as a deeper feeler, constantly tells me that her first thought is how they feel. And so if Sharon has had a tough day at school or is going through a friendship struggle,

Marlene just immediately connects with that and she wants to comfort her. She wants things not to be too hard for the kids. She hates it when they are in pain or when they are encountering difficulties. She is very in touch with how they feel.

I have learned to love and appreciate the balance that Marlene brings to my style of parenting. And I believe that she has learned to love and appreciate the balance that I have brought to her style of parenting coming from a very different temperamental base, because I know that people need comfort and nurturance to be healthy. In fact God describes Himself as a comforter. There is a part of us that needs to have someone there for us when we are hurting and not just urging us on. Someone to identify with us; someone who connects with us.

But there is another part of us that needs encouragement to press on through difficulties and who can see that there is a future for us and has a plan for our lives. God is a father who is like that. God is not afraid of allowing difficulties to come into our lives or trials because He knows that they are going to produce good in us if we exercise faith and overcome.

The short of it is that over the years we have learned to respect each other's parenting styles and we have fewer, although not entirely eliminated in any way the "that is a crazy thing to do in dealing with Sharon or Daniel" or "that is not normal – nobody thinks that way, nobody would do it that way" kind of criticism of each other. We both realize that the kids need two parents. That they need nurturance and they need guidance. They need someone to embrace them and they need someone to point them.

I want to end "Loving Your Spouse Despite all the Differences" by taking a look at Philippians 2:1-4. Paul writes, "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness or

compassion, then make my joy completed by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to his own interests, but to the interests of others.”

Now, clearly this was spoken in the context of church relationships. But I think it has some very obvious application to having a good marriage, having a marriage work in spite of all the differences. I really appreciate the Reformation perspective that the family is really a little church. That we do have a goal in the family of discipling our kids, and loving each other through our diversity while serving one another. Here in Philippians 2, I think we have really clear principles regarding how to negotiate all the differences, and in your lives you may be able to multiply many more differences than the ones we have listed. You might add to it work style differences, neatness differences, recreational differences, taste differences. You might like the room hot, your spouse might like the room cold.

Well, I think in negotiating all of this, the first principle is one of abiding. Paul writes, “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ...” The next clause ought to literally read, “...if any comfort of love [not comfort from his love], if any fellowship of the spirit...” I think what Paul is talking about here is that bringing unity out of diversity starts with the Triune God. He speaks of encouragement in Christ, comfort from the Father’s love, and then fellowship with the Spirit. The apostle Paul also refers to the Trinity when he talks about the source of our relationship with each other. If you want a nice cross-reference go to 2 Corinthians 13:14. “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

See, our ability to deal with differences starts with our own individual connectedness, our own abiding in and leaning into God. And lots of married couples are trying to have a

healthy relationship with each other and they are trying to work things out, but one or both of them are distant from God. The problem with that is that we are trying to give out of what we ourselves don't have. We have very limited resources in terms of our capacity to encourage or our capacity to comfort or our capacity to love. Not only do we try to give out of what we don't have, but also we try to get what someone else can't give us if we are not connected to God.

Look at this here. Paul says, "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ..." The truth is that yes, I need encouragement. Marlene needs encouragement. The marriage manuals say that we need six or seven words of encouragement, six or seven praises for every criticism in a marriage for it to be a good marriage. For every negative, you need six or seven positives. But the truth is that we will never get enough encouragements from a person to meet our need to be noticed. What is encouragement, other than saying "I performed, please notice me. Acknowledge me. Pat me on the back. Tell me good job."

We not only need encouragement, but we need comfort. Paul talks about, "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, any comfort of love..." We see encouragement as, I performed, please notice me, or comfort me if I hurt, or please heal me, or fix me. Again, married couples can help each other get well, but as I said last week for those of you who were here, we really can't heal each other. We can't fix one another. We really can't rescue each other. We can bring one another to the Rescuer and we can bring one another to the Healer. But God is the only Healer. There are places of brokenness in me and in Marlene and in you and your spouse that no one other than God can ever touch.

Then Paul goes on and talks about "...If any fellowship with the Spirit." We need fellowship. The heart's cry is that I am lonely, relate to me. I am telling you, brothers and sisters, that no amount of human relationship from the most loving spouse in the world, can

meet our deep seeded feelings of loneliness that are designed for fellowship, relationship with God.

One author, Larry Crabb, says that unless people are leaning into God, both people in the relationship, unless both are connected to God and drawing encouragement and fellowship and comfort from God, what you end up with is a situation of having two ticks but no dog. Both husband and wife are trying to feed off of each other – meet my needs. Meet my needs. But ultimately there is no one supplying them with the resource. Two ticks, no dog. So in dealing with differences we have to abide.

And then, at a fundamental level, we have to agree. Verse 2: “Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.” I know that the great temptation in the Christian life when you read about being entirely united, which is after all the goal of Christian marriage, that two would become one, Paul here spells out what oneness looks like in the context of church relationships. But we could apply the same thing to marital relationships. Like-minded – having the same love, being one in spirit, one in purpose. The great temptation here is to lower the bar, to say that we will never be able to have complete unity, me and my spouse. That is impossible. I will settle for not having major fights all the time. I will settle for living together in a business partnership. We do that in so many areas of the Christian life. We read what the Bible says. The bar is so high and we just lower it. We say that there is no hope in having total peace in our relationships and reconciliation because this thing is so broken between me and another person. I will just settle for no open warfare.

I talked about the need for great commonness in picking a spouse. The truth is that in spite all of our differences, from day one Marlene and I really had a high degree of commonness at a foundational level. We both put Christ absolutely first in our lives. We

both knew that the Christian life was a life submitted to Him and His will. That if Jesus told us to do something, we were both committed to doing it. From day one we understood that Sundays would be spent at church, and that we would be involved in a small group. We did that. We have been in a small group for 21 years of some kind or other.

From day one we understood that a percentage of our income was absolutely going to be tithed. That wasn't an issue. We understood that we both needed to be individually connected to God. We both needed to read the Bible. We both needed to pray on a daily basis. Discipleship issues were locked into our lives.

To deal with all the differences, there must be agreement about fundamental issues. That you are building a home off the same set of plans. That your goals in life are together goals, mutual goals, they are not conflicting. And I can't think of anything that will pull a couple together other than two people, both committed, to put Christ first in their life. The closer they get to Christ, the closer they are going to get to each other.

And Paul goes on and says, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit." I would say as a third command, along with abide and agree, we must abandon. To make marriage work despite all the differences, it is important for us to both be in touch with our natural temperaments and to abandon, at times, or at least to temper our temperaments. It may be that my tendency is to take the initiative, to speak more than to listen. To offer advice when Marlene wants comfort. But because I am committed to loving her and to making this work, I realize that at times I need to abandon my natural strengths and do certain things that come unnaturally to me – like shut-up or just listen and hold her and not offer a fix-it solution.

And certainly, part of abandoning vain conceit would be to realize that our perspectives, men and women, husbands and wives, our viewpoints are not the only valid ones. I know

we think that we are normal. All of us do. That our perspective is normal, middle of the stream that everyone else is just pushed one way or the other. They are too conservative or too liberal. They are too loud or too quiet. We are normal and everyone else is out there somewhere. But abandoning vain conceit makes us realize that our perspective is not the only one. Our temperament is not necessarily the right one. Our thinking about our kids is not the best thinking about our kids. That if you feel that you are normal, believe your spouse is as well, and that they have an equal claim on normalcy.

And accept in humility, Paul says, you must consider others better than yourselves. You know, one of the things that a person does when they, in humility, value their mate and their mate's opinion even more than their own is that they start accepting their mate. In conceit, all of us try to change our mates in some way. To chisel them and make them shaped up and that their opinions would be like our opinions. Their feelings would be just the way ours are, that they would feel as we feel.

Friends, how about for a little while, stop trying to change your mate. I am not talking about issues of sin or clear wrongdoing that we would confront our mates about and challenge and really demand change in. I mean their natural strengths, gifting, and temperaments and preferences. How about for a little while we just stop trying to change our mates? Instead we simply received them as God's gift to us. I know certainly in ministry that the place of maximum success is figuring out who you are, what you love doing, and just doing that. And one of the things that I discovered in trying to bring Marlene to success was that if I just left her alone, if I stopped trying to push her into my preconceived mold and notions of what successful ministry looked like, that God had already prepared a place for her. That she is an excellent Bible student. She is a great writer. She is a good communicator.

Accept the differences. And appreciate the diversity. Not only tolerate it. OK, I guess I will have to live with this man or this woman. But learn to appreciate them. God has paired you with someone else to compliment you and to bring strength to your weaknesses.

I mentioned before how much I love Marlene's approach with the children. And how much I see that there would be such a lack of balance if I were the only parent or if she was. How God has really designed the kids to have two parents.

And I appreciate our differences as it comes to making a home and the way we relate to others. And the balance we bring in terms of what is the most loving and the wisest thing to do in various situations. Paul writes, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves."

Accept and appreciate your mate and their differences.

Finally, learn to adapt. Each of you should not only look to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Is it not the case that so many conflicts and sparks in our lives are the result of us simply digging in our heels and being willful? Saying, "Well, doggone it, I am right. My perspective is right. My viewpoint is right." To make a good marriage work, both parties have to be highly adaptable, to be flexible and willing to move and bend with each other, and to cross the bridge toward one another.

Jesus was our model for that. He didn't sit on the throne. Paul writes, "Though he was in the form of God, he didn't count equality with God something to be held onto. But he made himself nothing and taking on the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in the appearance of man he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross." Jesus crossed the entire gulf between God and us. He came all the way over to our side.

That is what Paul is ultimately saying. Can you, despite the differences, come all the way over to your spouse's side, to walk around in their shoes, to feel what they feel? Think what they think. See life the way they see life. Can you bend that far? Can you adapt that much?

With God's help you can. In fact, it is kind of fun to see life through another person's lens. And I kind of like my home now ordered and stable and quiet and clean. There is something to some of those virtues. Marlene has fallen in love with some of the adventure and risk taking and passion that I bring to the table.

God has given you your mate as a gift. And with His help, you can really learn to love them despite all the differences.

Let's pray.