

Perseverance in Marriage

Please open your Bible to the book of Romans and chapter 8. It's on page _____ in the Bible under the chair in front of you. I want to begin with this reminder from God's Word about the great love of God from which nothing can separate us – not even death. As we think about perseverance in marriage; we must remember that our love is rooted in the great love of God.

Intro

There have been many songs written on the topic of love and relationships, lost love, breaking up, and desiring to escape a relationship. There's a song called "Escape" by Rupert Holmes, also known as the Pina Colada Song. You may or may not be familiar with it. It was the last number one hit of the 70's in the U.S. It sounds whimsical and has vacation vibes. "If you like Pina Coladas and getting caught in the rain..."

I'm not going to try to sing all of it, but it tells the tragic story of a man who is tired of his wife, and reads a personal ad in the paper advertising for someone who likes pina colada and getting caught in the rain. (young people, personal ads are like the precursor to online dating). So he responds with a personal ad of his own and offers a plan to meet up at a bar with this other person. But when he arrives at the bar, he realizes that his wife is the one who wrote the initial personal ad. And they recognize that though they were trying to cheat on each other, they both are tired of the same old routine. And they plan their escape together.

It's a cautionary tale of a couple who had failed to communicate and allowed their relationship to become something that neither of them wanted. They thought their only option was to pursue something outside of their marriage. But they were spared the pain of committing adultery. They thought the grass was greener on the other side, and narrowly avoided catastrophe.

It's really a tragic tale. And even though they find each other, they must realize that they had each been willing to leave if they found something they thought was better. Their hearts had already left. And so it should be a warning for us.

And what I want to do today is to encourage you who are married to persevere in your marriage, to keep your vows and to remain faithful to God and one another even in your hearts. And this is not intended to be a drudgery or something that you just have to endure. It is designed to be for your good and for your joy in Christ. By calling us to be faithful in our marriages, God is calling us to the abundant, flourishing life.

As we've already looked at several of the passages that speak to marriage directly, today I want to take a broader view of this idea of how God calls us to remain faithful and persevere. And we could look at it more negatively – as in, how do we avoid divorce? But I want to take an alternate approach and ask, how do we reinforce our marriages so that we can persevere with joy and grace as the years pass? So we'll look at some verses and then talk about how they apply specifically to persevering in marriage.

I'm also aware that I'm talking about something that I've not fully lived out. My wife and I have been married for 16 years. So I've asked a few people in our church who have been married for a while longer if they would be willing to share a piece of marriage advice, so I've collected a few of their statements to share with us this morning. And I'll sprinkle them throughout our time. So there will be a lot of application and some questions to consider this morning – just take one or a few things that God would have you work on, rather than trying to do everything at once, ok?

I have three pillars or principles of a persevering marriage that I'd like us to see today. And the first is this...

Keep Pursuing

If you want a marriage that lasts and lasts with joy, then you must continue to pursue your spouse with love and service and honor. This theme of perseverance and love is found throughout the Bible.

1 Peter 4:8

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

Galatians 6:9

And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up

2 Thessalonians 3:13

As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant **5** or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; **6** it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. **7** Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends.

Each of these passages is not speaking directly about marriage, but there is certainly application for marriage that we can draw out from them. God desires that we would keep loving our spouse earnestly. Continue to do good and bless your spouse. Don't get tired of it and stop. To love your spouse means that you will be patient and kind, that you will bear with one another's weaknesses and sins. And love never ends, so keep on doing those things. Don't stop.

When I asked some of our folks who have been married for a while what advice they had, several touched on this idea. "You need to love each other sincerely," one husband said. Another admitted that early on in his marriage, he was living for himself and had to repent and love his wife as Christ loves the church. He needed to stop being selfish and give up his life for her as the Word says. One wife said that marriage is work and it doesn't get easier with time, it's just different.

One husband wrote that they had gone through some difficulties, even separation for a time, and they had to learn the lesson that love is a choice that you have to make every day, through the good and the bad.

I think that's so wise. To persevere in marriage, you must daily choose to love, choose to serve, choose to give and to bless and to honor.

And just practically, that kind of choosing to love looks like spending intentional time together. It means continuing to play and to learn and to delight in one another. Ask each other if you like Pina Colada's. Make plans to try new things, travel to new places, or participate in something you've not done before. Again, one wife said her piece of advice is to plan a date – doesn't have to be expensive, but you need to make time for each other.

This kind of pursuing one another doesn't just happen. It means that someone needs to take the initiative and start the conversation or suggest something – and I'm looking at you husbands. Look ahead, put something on the calendar that you can both look forward to. Anticipate when your schedule is going to be particularly challenging and do something fun or restful on the other side or in the midst of it.

Part of pursuing one another is to be proactive in your love for one another. When Paul writes that "love is kind," this is the idea behind it. It's not just being reactive and nice. It's more than that. So husbands, I know you love your wife and you'd be willing to protect her should an intruder come into your house. You'd give her the shirt off your back, right? But are you willing to intentionally be thoughtful about showing love for her in small acts of kindness every day? Do you seek to win her heart with small gifts or an encouraging text message or simple gestures of love? I'm talking about things like holding doors and scrapping off her car window in the winter and trying to make her life easier. Do you ask her how you can help around the house? Or even better – look around yourself and find something that needs to be done, and do it.

Again, when I asked for marriage advice, one man shared about a time when he asked his grandmother the same question. She had been married for over sixty years, and she replied very quickly, "Be kind." That's it – be kind. And as he thought about her answer, he realized how profound it is. When life gets hard – be kind. Don't be angry or passive or bitter, be kind.

How kind are you being in your marriage? Are you intentional and proactive about loving and serving your spouse? Do you know what he likes? Do you know what helps her feel most loved and cherished? What could you do to bless your spouse this week?

This is where things like love languages and personality quirks can be helpful. They're not inspired, and they have limited value. But my wife and I found that sometimes the things that I do to try to serve and show love to her don't mean all that much to her. Or she can do or say things that I appreciate, but don't really resonate with me all that much. So work at that – outdo one another in showing honor, prefer the other person's interests ahead of your own, serve each other.

Now, this can be taken too far. You both need to learn to appreciate how your spouse shows you love, even if it's not perfect, **and** you need to grow in expressing your love in ways that will bless your partner the most.

And what does your partner need most from you? The best gift you can give your spouse is your own holiness. The way that you grow in intimacy and connection and love across the years is by keeping God at the center.

Pastor Josh preached about this a few weeks ago when he spoke about pursuing marriage. The key to starting off a relationship well is the same thing that will sustain you – keep God at the center. Again, this was echoed in the marriage advice that our people gave. Keep God at the center.

What does that look like? Well, a big part of that is prayer. One wife said that sometimes she needed to just “shut up and pray.” (her words, not mine!) Another couple shared that praying together, particularly with a prayer journal would be the one piece of advice they would share. Still another advised going to God in prayer when you face trials and struggles in life, and He will lift you up and carry you through.

Years ago, my mom told me before Eve and I were married that you have to be intentional about talking about Jesus. You have include the truth of the gospel as you discuss parenting and finances and schedules and the future.

We saw in the first message of this series that marriage is about serving God. God wants something more than your personal fulfillment. Your marriage is for something bigger – the glory of God – in your life and your spouse's and in other people whom God wants to bless through you. Your spouse is to help you grow to be more like Christ. Your aim is to help your spouse be more like Christ.

One piece of advice I got from a wife was to admit that you can't change each other, only God can do that. That's the job of the Spirit, not you. Your role is to help and encourage, not judge and criticize and try to conform them into the image you desire.

One husband said that a super-helpful practice for them has been to identify when God is calling one of you to take a step of faith in some way and then be their biggest

cheerleader in that process. That's so good. How is it that God is working on you to grow? How is He working in your spouse? How can you be an encouragement to him or to her as they step forward in faith?

As you pursue each other in this way, one way to build unity is to be intentional about investing in others. So for those of you who have been married for a while, and maybe you're in the second half of life, the questions you ask are probably changing. You should be thinking about and asking more questions around how God would have you invest in others in this season of your life.

The Bible speaks in several places about the beneficial role of older saints and grandparents. Listen to...

Psalm 78:4-8

He [God] established a testimony in Jacob
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our fathers
to teach to their children, [Deut 6]
6 that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and arise and tell them to their children, [why?]
7 so that they should set their hope in God
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments;
8 and that they should not be like their fathers,
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,
whose spirit was not faithful to God.

God established in His law that parents should teach their children, and that their children should do the same, so that their hope is in God and they do not fall into the rebellion of the generations before.

A few people, when I asked them for advice, said something like, "I can tell you a lot about what not to do!" And hey, that's biblical. You need to tell the next generations what not to do. God wants one generation to teach the next. Listen to Psalm 71...

Psalm 71:17-18

O God, from my youth you have taught me,
and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.

18 So even to old age and gray hairs,
O God, do not forsake me,
until I proclaim your might to another generation,
your power to all those to come.

Here the Psalmist is asking that he would be sustained so that He might be able to declare the character and works of the Lord to his children and grandchildren. This is a wonderful ministry that you can have, both as a married couple and individually.

As time passes, many married couples will see kids grow up and leave (hopefully) and then you may find yourself caring for your own parents. And that can be hard and bring challenges in itself. The Bible's command to 'honor your father and mother' isn't just for children. Sometimes, keeping God at the center and pursuing God together as a married couple in the second half of life means investing time and energy in serving others, including your parents.

But even as you navigate challenges and the difficulties that growing older brings, don't forget your first love. Keep Christ at the center of your life and draw closer to one another by continually pursuing one another.

So this may mean that you need to ask yourself some questions. How are we doing at pursuing one another? In this season of our lives, how can I show you that I love you? Where is God calling us to step forward in faith and how can we support each other through that?

Keep Returning

If you want to persevere in your marriage, you need to keep pursuing your spouse. And then secondly, you need to keep returning to your spouse. What do I mean by that?

Well, one wife that I spoke with said that there will be times in your marriage where you just don't like each other. Now, I don't know if we should say 'amen' to that too loudly,

but I think it's probably true. When you're together long enough, you can start to annoy each other. You are probably very different people. That's what probably drew you to each other in the first place. But those differences can also become a struggle. And so you'll find yourself drifting apart from one another, sometimes because of sin and sometimes not, just the normal pressures of life.

So here's my radical advice - when you feel like you don't like each other, keep returning. Come back again. This involves turning toward each other and not away from one another. When you notice that there has been some drift or there's a disconnection, then do something about it. Return again and seek to reconnect.

And when there's sin involved, you need to forgive each other. Listen to Paul's words to the church in Ephesus:

Ephesians 4:32

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

You need to be regularly practicing forgiveness in order to persevere in your marriage. This is an ongoing thing. And to forgive means that you are making some commitments. When you say, "I forgive you" you are promising that you will release the other person from the condemnation that you may want to give them. You are saying, I will no longer hold this over you. I will absorb the cost and the hurt. I will not dwell on it or become embittered against you. I forgive you. And then you seek to move on together.

I really loved the advice I got from one couple. They mentioned that marriage is a cycle of repentance, forgiveness, and love. Admitting your sin, putting it off, and seeking and granting forgiveness is an ongoing cycle. It's not something you do once and then you don't have to think about it again. You just need to figure out which part of the cycle you're in at any given moment. Isn't that helpful?

I think that's good because, did you notice how we are to forgive others? As God forgave you in Christ. And yes, there's a definitive, once-for-all, kind of forgiveness that we experience when we put our trust in Christ. But even as believers, we continually come to God, asking for forgiveness and being reminded of the grace that we have in Jesus in order to keep our fellowship close and intimate with Him.

So return to one another through forgiveness. And the flip side of that is being willing to take ownership of your mistakes, to confess your sins as the book of James tells us to do. You know who the Bible says should be the first one to go and seek reconciliation? Is it the one who sinned or the one who was sinned against?

That's actually a trick question. The Bible calls for both to go. In Luke 17, if your brother sins against you, go to him to be reconciled. And in Matthew 5, if you remember that your brother has something against you, that is, he thinks you've sinned and you're not in good relationship, then you should leave your gift at the altar and be reconciled to your brother.

So what would that look like in your marriage? It means that neither of you should just sit back and wait for the other one to apologize. If you know there's something between you, then go and make it right. Solve problems quickly. Don't try to sweep it under the rug – it'll eventually force you to deal with it. But be smart about it. Agree to talk at times when you can both be attentive and compassionate. And that requires another key in conflict resolution – listening.

Husbands, wives – how well are you doing at listening to one another, truly listening? Do you know what stresses your spouse is facing right now? Have you asked? Are you aware of the burdens that he or she is carrying? What is it that is going on in her heart? What is he afraid of or worried about?

Jesus said that out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. What's in our hearts comes out in our words and our behaviors. So are you seeking to listen and pursue your spouse's heart?

Listen to this Proverb...

Proverbs 20:5

The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water,
but a man of understanding will draw it out.

Are you living like a person of understanding who can draw out the heart of your spouse? And let me just tell you, listening doesn't just mean that you wait until your

spouse stops talking. That's not what a man of understanding does. He asks questions. He pursues. He's curious and attentive. Husbands are commanded in 1st Peter to live with your wife according to knowledge or in an understanding way (1 Peter 3:7). So to do that, you need to be a student of your wife. Listen to her. Study her.

And if you're not married here today, can I just pause and say that these things are skills that God desires all of us would grow in? We should all be people who are growing in honesty and forgiveness and listening well. If you're single and interested in marriage, then these are the kinds of things that you should be working on, even now with your friends and family and others in the church.

And if you're married, then this may be something God wants to remind you of today. Do you need to practice returning to your spouse? Are you prone to isolate or give the silent treatment? Instead of returning to solve problems, do you seek to fight in order to win and prove that you're right? God calls us to walk in humility and forgiveness, so keep coming back to one another. Return to each other. Be honest and forgive as part of the ongoing cycle in a marriage that perseveres. So keep pursuing, keep returning. And then finally...

Keep Perspective

The Bible teaches that we should keep marriage in right perspective. That is, we must understand that as important as it is and deserving of honor and protection and all of that, marriage is not ultimate. In fact, there will be a day when marriage itself will give way to a greater reality in the kingdom of God.

Jesus gives some challenging words in Matthew 22. This group of religious leaders have come to Jesus to try to trap him with a question. And so they ask, if a man dies and his widow marries his brother, and then he dies, so she marries another brother, and so on through all seven brothers, then whose wife is she in the resurrection? That's their question. They're trying to make a statement really – this idea of the resurrection is nonsense. That's what they believe. We pick up in verse 29...

Matthew 22:29-30

But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. **30** For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

Jesus's reply is basically, you don't understand what you're talking about. You've made some assumptions about marriage and the resurrection and misunderstood both. The rules of marriage are for this life, and they do not apply to the resurrection.

Now, we will eventually come to this passage again as we work through the gospel of Matthew. So my purpose here is to simply draw out this single truth that this passage teaches. And that is this – marriage as we know it in this life is not eternal. There are realities that persist beyond this life, and earthly marriage is not one of them. Marriage is to be a permanent covenant in this life. And marriage does not continue after death.

Now, I don't know how that strikes you. It's a hard truth to swallow if you're like me and love being married. What do you mean there is no marriage in the resurrection? Why would God do that? How can I be happy in heaven if I'm not married?

Well, to answer that question, let me point us to another passage. This is another challenging one found in Paul's writings to the church in Corinth. Look at

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. **33** But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, **34** and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. **35** I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

So Paul observes that people who are married are rightly divided in their attention. They are concerned with how to please and love and serve their spouse. And that's why he recommends singleness for those who can walk in it without sin. The single life is a good thing, he says, because you can be focused on how to please the Lord.

So putting those passages together, I think the Bible teaches us that there is something greater than marriage. Marriage is a good thing, but it is not the ultimate thing. As we've said repeatedly in this series, marriage is a picture that points beyond itself to a greater reality – the relationship of God and His bride, the church. That's the point.

Brothers and sisters, one day, the time for being married on earth as we know it, will end. As we say in our wedding vows, “til death do us part.” And death will part us. And when our time on earth is over, we will experience the love and intimacy of the love of God in all its fullness. On that day, after we are raised to live with Christ in the new heavens and new earth, we will all be wholly devoted to the love of God, with undivided devotion to the Lord like Paul says single people may be in this life. The picture that our marriages symbolize will give way to the reality of knowing and being known by Jesus.

This will be true for every one of us who is in Christ. All things being equal, those who are older may experience this before those who are younger. I thought about naming names here, listing out some of the couples in our church who have been married for a long time. One day, your marriage will be parted by death. But really, no matter where you would be on that list – from those who have been married a long time to those who have just recently been wed, this will be the reality for all of you. Earthly marriage ends with death. And on that day, it gives way to the far greater reality of personal communion with Christ.

As Paul says, though it’s sometimes hard to believe, he longs to depart and be with the Lord *for that is far better*. At His right hand are pleasures forevermore. And I know that there are some who have already experienced the loss of a spouse. And it’s hard. And there’s tremendous grief there. But we have hope that one day, Jesus Himself will wipe away our tears, and heaven will be greater than anything we’ve known on earth.

How does that help us? Why even bring this up, Nathan? It feels sad to think about. So why do it? Well, I think there is some real good that comes from keeping marriage in right perspective.

For one, keeping perspective on marriage frees us from trying to make marriage satisfy all of our longings. If you are tempted to put all your hope in marriage, then you’ll be tragically disappointed. Or you’ll be tempted to give up on your marriage too easily in the belief that it’s not doing for you what you thought it would. But if you remember that marriage is for God and is being used by Him in this life for your good and your sanctification and your joy in Christ, then it frees you from that lie.

And secondly, keeping right perspective on marriage gives us hope for change. Knowing that God has bigger purposes in mind for you and your spouse can help you keep hope alive in those times when you feel like it'll never get better. You see, one day you will be undivided in your devotion and attention to Christ. And until that day, He is working to free you from yourself and grow you in dependence on Him. He is teaching you that the way to true life is by loving and sacrificing and surrendering to Him. And He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

And finally, keeping right perspective on marriage strengthens us for the trials that will eventually come your way. If you're married long enough, then one day you will be faced with tremendous trials. I'm talking about things like cancer, dementia, sudden loss and grief. On that day, it won't be the love of your spouse which sustains your soul, at least not ultimately. It's only the love of God.

In fact, it's the love of God which enables and empowers you to continue to persevere in love when you may be called upon to lay down your life for your spouse. There may come a day when your marriage requires radical service and sacrifice – taking care of a spouse in sickness or disability. And what's harder, it may be you who is the one needing help. On that day, we must remember that our earthly marriages are but pointers to the great and radical love of God for us. It is by looking to Jesus that we'll be sustained on those days. It's by remembering His care and service of us that we are able to care for and serve one another.

Marriage is ended by death. But remember, nothing – not even death – can separate us from the love of God that is yours in Christ Jesus.

That's why it's important to keep marriage in right perspective.

So brothers and sisters, let's work to build marriages that persevere. Let's keep pursuing our spouses, let's keep returning again and again, and let us keep perspective on what marriage is, remembering it points us to the eternal love of God.

Let's pray...