

## UPSIDE DOWN RELATIONSHIPS

Title: Part 2 – “Love Doesn’t Keep Score”

Date: September 27, 2026

While everyone is saying “Hi” here in the house I want to say “Hi” to everyone joining us online or on our app! We don’t think of you as an audience, we think you are a part of our church family, so let us know how we can pray for you or serve you in any way that we can. You can always reach out through the Care & Prayer tab on our app.

Well, this past week I was working with my counselor / coach trying to understand the difference between how I define my various roles in life versus the subconscious expectations I tell myself in my head that drives me to do too much, if that makes sense. I won’t get into all the subconscious stuff because, honestly, that’s nobody’s business, but here is what I mean, here is what I defined as my role as a husband:

**To lay down my wants and wishes and desires to put Cheryl’s first. To make her feel safe and secure. To make her laugh and not break her heart.**

Now, I am not saying I always get that right. But when I boiled down my role as a husband, that’s what I have to do, NOT the 15 other things I have made some kind of agreement with thinking that’s what a husband does.

AND the biggest thing that informed my definition of a husband came from something the Apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians chapter 5. So, if you have a Bible or the Bible app on your phone, grab it and meet me there:

### **Ephesians 5**

For context, this is a letter that Paul wrote to some early believers in the city of Ephesus. And, chapter 5, even though he didn’t call it chapter 5, but this section of his writing deals with how Christ-followers are to relate to each other in marriage. **AND** don’t miss how he begins it, verse 21 is the key that unlocks everything else he writes. Turn to someone next you that looks awake and tell them, “Don’t miss the key!”

<sup>21</sup> Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. [What is the key?] <sup>22</sup> Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. <sup>24</sup> Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. <sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her <sup>26</sup> to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, <sup>27</sup> and to present

her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. <sup>28</sup> In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup> After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— <sup>30</sup> for we are members of his body. <sup>31</sup> “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” <sup>32</sup> This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. <sup>33</sup> However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Some of you got a little tense there, I could feel it from up here. Hang with me today and I promise by the end this will be some of the most life-giving stuff you have ever heard about relationships.

Just to get us back up to speed, last week, we began a new collection of messages called “Upside Down Relationships” which is all about *what to do when you've tried everything else*. AND last week we did something strange for the opening message. We didn't talk about a single one of your relationships... on purpose! We spent the entire message on one thing, surrendering the self.

We said the deepest problem in every relationship you have isn't your spouse, your mother-in-law, or your circumstances. It's the self. In fact, Augustine had a phrase for it, [*in-koor-VAH-tus in SAY*] “incurvatus in se.” Which translates as the self, curved in, on itself. That is the root of every relationship issue you have **AND** every religious and philosophical system in human history has tried to do something about it.

Enter Jesus, 2,000 years ago, and he offered something unique. Not the elimination of the self, not just affirmation of the self, but SURRENDER of the self. Hand it over to God and receive it back, cleansed and finally free.

E. Stanley Jones said it like this:

“The self on your own hands is a problem and a pain; in the hands of God is a possibility and a power.”

That is the foundation for everything we are going to talk about for the next 4 weeks. One surrender, four overflows. Out of a self that is finally safe, finally held, love starts to spill in all directions—into your marriage, your kids, your friends and extended family, even your church family.

If you missed last week's message on surrender, please, please, please go back and watch or listen to it on our app. Because everything else flows out of that.

Today, I want to preach a message out of the first overflow called:

## **Love Doesn't Keep Score**

Everybody say, "Love Doesn't Keep Score."

SO, here is the tension in every marriage this morning—and your spouse didn't even have to email me to know it. But two people fall in love. Everyone say "awe." When you're falling in love, giving is the easiest thing in the world. You'd drive four hours just to sit across from them and watch them eat a sandwich. Right? You write the notes. You plan surprises. You buy gifts. You listen to stories about their coworkers that you do not care about even a little bit, and you listen with your whole being because you're not keeping score.

Then you get married. And somewhere in year two, or year seven, or after the second kid, a score card shows up. Nobody handed it to you. You never agreed to it. But it appears and you start keeping score. The mental tally sounds like this, "I did the dishes last night. I got up with the baby. I planned the last three date nights. I'm the one who took care of your mother's birthday. I am carrying more of this than they are." I won't make you raise your hands, but I bet that sounds familiar!

And here's the crazy part. You're not wrong! From where you're sitting, your math is right. You have the receipts. The problem is that your spouse is sitting on the other end of that same couch running the exact same math and getting the exact same answer, "I'm doing more!"

We call this the "compromise" marriage or the "50/50" marriage. You do your part and I'll do mine and we will meet in the middle. AND it sounds fair and reasonable. BUT it has never once worked successfully long term, and even if it does, there is zero love in that home.

SO, if you are taking notes today, if you have tried everything else, every magazine article, every blog post suggestion, every Tik Tok relationship hack and nothing has worked, here is my first big takeaway:

### **1. Put down the scorecard.**

This has been duplicated since, but back in 1979, two psychologists took husbands and wives, separated them, and asked each one privately: what percentage of the household work do YOU do? The cleaning, the planning, the providing. Then they added the two

numbers together. AND they should have come out to a hundred, right? That's how percentages work. That's how fractions work. BUT as you can guess, they didn't come out to a hundred percent. Not even close. Both partners, separately, sincerely, believed they were doing the majority of the work.

BUT get this, the researchers didn't conclude that the couples were lying. The reason they concluded is our own contributions are more vivid. Meaning in your mind, YOU were there for every single trash bag you took out, every load of laundry you folded, every time you bit your tongue and kept the peace. You've got the full-color, high-definition memory of your own effort. But their effort, you only caught a few frames of it, right?

I wrote in my notes this way: **Your giving is a movie you starred in. Their giving is a rumor you heard.** We just see ourselves more clearly than we see anybody else, for better and for worse, put another tally mark on your scorecard.

AND we all do this. I keep score in my marriage, and I am the one teaching this to you. AND here is the worst version of it. I really shouldn't share this out loud. But the worst version of this is the small, genuinely kind things I do and then... I watch. Did she notice? Is she going to match it? I do the nice thing and then I stand there like a street performer waiting for somebody to drop a coin in the hat.

BUT that's not love, church! That's an investment strategy. And here's what happens to a marriage that's run like a portfolio: the moment you feel like the returns are bad; you quietly pull your capital out. You stop giving—because why should I give if they're not giving? And when BOTH people run that strategy at the same time, you get a slow, polite, staying together for the kids divorce. Two people in the same house, same bed, same last name, both keeping the books.

There is a word for that. Contempt. AND look it up for yourself, contempt is the strongest predictor of divorce. Contempt is the sulfuric acid of a relationship. Contempt is the eye roll. It's a sarcastic little laugh. It's the tone that says, "you are beneath me."

BUT contempt doesn't show up out of nowhere. Contempt is what a score card turns into when you carry it long enough. It's resentment that sat in the dark and festered. You keep score for ten years and you don't just get a tally, you get acid, and acid doesn't care what it's dissolving.

Marriage as a contract says: I'll give if you give. Fifty-fifty and I'm keeping score. But marriage was never designed to be a contract. It was designed to be a covenant. And a covenant says something completely different, a covenant says: **I'll give even if you never give.**

And I want you to hear the Gospel in that, because it's the entire message this morning, John 3:16 in a modern paraphrase says it like this:

<sup>16</sup> For God expressed His love for the world in this way: He GAVE...

God did not wait for us to go first; he gave FIRST and with zero guarantee of our response. This is a covenant relationship. AND this is our model for marriage.

What did Paul write at the opening of our text, what was the key?

<sup>21</sup> Submit to one another out of reverence for [for Who?] Christ.

Because God so loved, He sacrificed the Son, and with that as our model we then love each other because 50/50 doesn't work. Paul then takes this principle and applies it to both wives and husbands. Write this down and I will show you:

## **2. Don't wait, go first.**

I know the saying is ladies first, but let's skip to verse 25 at how Paul applies this to husbands and then come back to wives. Paul says:

<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and GAVE HIMSELF UP for her.

Now, we hear that and it doesn't really register today the way it should. BUT the phrase "gave Himself up" that Paul uses for what Jesus did as our example is interesting when you dig into it. In the original language that Paul wrote this, it is a single word. It is the Greek word {par-eh-DOH-ken} paredōken. Everyone say {par-eh-DOH-ken}.

Paredōken means to hand over, to deliver someone into the power of somebody else. To surrender them up and out of your control, into whatever happens next.

AND get this, it is the word the Gospel writers use when Judas hands Jesus over to the chief priests. And it's also the word used when Pilate delivers Jesus up to be crucified. AND—stick with me here—there's one more place this word turns up, Romans 8:32. Paul writes that God did not spare his own Son, but GAVE Him up for us all. Same verb!

So, follow the whole thread with me. The betrayer Judas handed Jesus over, the governor Pilate handed Jesus over, the Son handed Himself over, and God the Father handed the Son over. At the cross, everybody was handing Jesus over. Some of them out of greed. Some out of cowardice. Some out of a love that doesn't have limits.

But Paul reaches into that dark, blood-stained word... and hands it to us as husbands and how we are to love our wives.

Do you see it? The same verb that describes Judas handing Jesus over to be killed is the verb Paul uses to describe Jesus handing Himself over to save. What Judas did to Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, Jesus did for His bride (the church) for free. The verb of betrayal became the verb of love. It's the same action, complete loss of control over what happens next, BUT Jesus flipped it completely upside down.

Men hear me, that's the word God picked for YOU! Not "provide for your wife." Not "control your wife." Not even "stay married to your wife," which some of you have been treating as the finish line. No, God says to hand yourself over for your wife the way Christ handed Himself over for the church. Lose control of what happens next. **Give with no guarantee of the return!**

Now watch how far Paul takes this, because he's not done. Verse 28:

<sup>28</sup> In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup> After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church.

Here's a nugget. That phrase "feed and care for"—Paul is going to reuse that same phrase one chapter later when he talks about raising children. It's nursing language, nourishing language.

Paul is saying: men, you already know how to instinctively take care of a body, yours! You feed it when it's hungry. You rest it when it's tired. You don't make it fill out a request form, you don't make it earn your kindness, when your body hurts, you don't roll your eyes at it or belittle it... you tend to it! **Now do all of that... for her!**

You know what that is? That's not 50/50. That's all 100 poured out with the expectation of zero in return AND it is the exact opposite of keeping score.

And now look at what that kind of love actually produces, verse 26 & 27:

<sup>26</sup> to make her HOLY, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, <sup>27</sup> and to present her to himself as a RADIANT church, ***without STAIN*** or WRINKLE or any other BLEMISH, but holy and BLAMELESS.

Catch what Paul is saying, Jesus, our model as husbands, didn't find her holy, radiant, blameless... He MADE her all those things! **The giving came first and the**

**beauty came second!** Let me say that again in case someone missed it, the giving came first and the beauty came second!

Christ did not survey the church, determine she was worth it, and then decide to die. NO! He handed Himself over to a bride who was—in Paul's own words a couple of chapters earlier in this same letter—dead in her sins! His self-giving is what made her shine! Come on, His self-giving is what made her shine!

Husbands, you have been handed the power to make somebody radiant, not by fixing her, not by critiquing her into improvement, but by handing yourself over. When you pour yourself out for her with no score card in your hand, something happens in her that no amount of correction could ever produce. She becomes MORE herself. Not less.

NOW... ladies, as much as I want that for you, this same principle runs the other direction whether he gives that to you or not. The honor you give him isn't just keeping the peace, it calls something out of him that nagging never will. That's the upside-down of this whole thing. You do not get a better spouse by demanding one. You get one by becoming the person who doesn't wait, but goes first.

Write this down, number 3:

### **3. Take the lower position.**

Put down the scorecard, don't wait, go first, and then take the lower position. Let's go back to the part that made some of you clench up. Paul writes in verse 22:

<sup>22</sup> Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. <sup>24</sup> Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Here's what usually happens with Ephesians 5. Either it gets dismissed totally as having no relevance to modern life or somebody camps on verse 22, rips it clean out of its context, and turns it into a leash. And I understand why some of you carry a scar there. Some of you had this verse quoted at you by somebody who used it to control you and not to love you. If that's you, I want you to lean in, because I don't think you've ever been shown what this passage actually says.

The passage doesn't begin at verse 22. It begins at verse 21. Verse 21 is the key, right? Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. One another! Before Paul says one word to wives, before he says one word to husbands, he puts them both on their knees, mutually submitted to Christ.

Paul then says specific things to husbands and specific things to wives. I'm not going to stand up here and pretend the text says something it doesn't. He's not erasing the distinction as is popular today. But look at what he actually assigns and look at who gets the heavier load.

To the wife: respect, and a call to follow. To the husband—the one that culture handed all the power to—he says DIE! Hand yourself over! Pour yourself out like Jesus did, with no leverage, no guarantee, and no scoreboard.

And understand how that landed on the men who first heard this letter read out loud. In the Roman world of the first century, a husband's authority over his household was close to absolute, and his affection was entirely optional. Nobody was telling those men to sacrifice. And here comes this letter saying the model for your marriage is a crucified Jewish carpenter who took off His outer robe, wrapped a towel around His waist, and washed the feet of the men who were about to run out on Him.

Upside down relationships.

So, hear this clearly. This passage was never written to push a wife down. It was written to lift a wife up to a place the ancient world had never dreamed of putting her, loved the way Christ loves the church.

Tim Keller, once speaking about marriage, said something that gets at why this matters so much:

“To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God.”

That's what covenant creates. A place where somebody has seen the whole thing, the temper, the insecurity, the version of you that shows up empty when the day went badly... and they hand themselves over anyway.

BUT notice where Paul lands at the end of all this. He quotes Genesis, verse 31:

<sup>31</sup> “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” [And then he says something we often blow right past, verse 32] <sup>32</sup> This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Do you see what he just did? Paul says the deepest meaning of your marriage is not your marriage. Your marriage is a pointer, a small, cracked, living picture of something enormous—Christ handing Himself over for His people.

Which means every time you give yourself to your spouse without keeping score, every time you take the lower position, you're not just being nice to somebody you live with. You're preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Your marriage is a sermon your kids watch every single day and one your neighbors watch every weekend! No pressure...

So, what's my interpretation of verse 22? Here is what I believe to be true. BOTH husbands and wives are called to the cross in surrender of self. The shape looks different, but the direction is identical. You're both called to take the lower place because that is the only way for true, unconditional love to flourish.

Number 4:

#### **4. Give yourself away without giving yourself up.**

Self-giving love is not self-erasure. Remember what we said last week? You never surrender your SELF to a person. Only to God. Surrender is vertical, what flows horizontally to your spouse is self-giving.

And here's why that matters. The only reason you can safely give yourself away inside a marriage is that your self was never in your spouse's hands to begin with. It's in God's. A drowning person cannot rescue a drowning person; they just pull each other under. But a person standing on solid ground can reach down into deep water and pull somebody out and GIVE, and give, and give... and not be destroyed by it.

WHY? Because their identity, their security, their soul was never riding on their spouse.

What I am saying is, this is not a message telling a wife or a husband who has been slowly disappearing for fifteen years to disappear a little faster. It is the opposite. It's telling you to go get your self back from wherever you buried it and put it in the hands of God where it always belonged. AND then—standing on that solid ground—love your spouse out of strength instead of out of fear. Amen?

And sometimes the most self-giving, Christ-honoring thing love can possibly do is tell the truth, or hold a boundary, or call a counselor.

Alright, last takeaway today, how does this work in real life, write this down:

#### **5. Out give each other.**

We've spent this whole morning tearing the score card up, so let me end by handing you the only form of competition God actually blesses in a marriage. Paul writing to the church in Rome this time says: (Rom 12)

**<sup>10</sup> Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.**

You want to keep score? Fine! Compete to see which one of you can out-honor the other. Race each other to the towel and the basin to wash each other's feet. Try to out-forgive, out-honor, out-give your spouse—and then here's what you've got. Not two people waiting to receive, but two people tripping over each other to give. That's not 50/50, that's 100/100, two cups both overflowing, both pouring into the other faster than either one can be emptied.

And can I tell you what that actually is? That is a picture of the Trinity. That is precisely what the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have been doing since before time began. Pouring into one another, self-giving love with no score card, no scarcity, no waiting to receive.

Which means when your marriage runs on out-giving instead of out-scoring, your kitchen starts to look like heaven! Your minivan starts to look like heaven! Come on, your bedroom starts to look like heaven! Even a marriage that everyone had written off starts to look like a rumor of the Trinity!

And I know somebody's thinking it's too late for that. You've kept the books so long you think your marriage is just arithmetic now. Cold, functional, and workable until the kids are grown. BUT let me tell you what God does with dead things. He raises them!

The same God who took the word for betrayal and made it the word for love. The same God who took an instrument of execution and turned it into a throne. The same God who took a Friday that looked like the end of everything and turned it into a Sunday that changed the world... that God can walk into a marriage everybody's given up on and say, watch this! Nobody who serves a risen Savior is ever too far gone for resurrection!

SO, what do we actually do with this? Because I don't want you to just know something this morning, I want you to do something. So, here's the assignment. I'm calling it the Seven Day Give a Thon.

For the next seven days, once a day, you do one hidden act of self-giving for your spouse. Something where you give yourself over with no guarantee of the outcome. And here is the key, you don't tell anyone! Not them. Not your buddies in your group chat. Not your mama. No credit! You just quietly do the thing, and you let it go unseen because when nobody else can possibly see it, there's only one Person left to be doing it

for. And that is the entire point. Secret giving kills the score card because you cannot keep score in a game nobody knows you're playing.

Do it for seven days and watch what happens, and not to your spouse, watch what happens to YOU. Watch what happens to the curve in your own soul when you give with no expectation of return.

"But Pastor Brian, what if I do all that and they don't do a single thing back?" And there it is... the scorecard! Listen to me, you're not doing it for the return. You're doing it because **He gave**. You hand yourself over the way Christ handed Himself over for you! He did that while you were still keeping score against Him! While you were still running your own tally on God!

That's the Gospel. You love because He first loved you. You give because He first gave. You go first... because two thousand years ago, on a cross, He already went first.

If you're married and your spouse is here, reach over and take their hand. If your spouse isn't here this morning, or that season has passed, then just open your hands in front of you as we pray.

**[PRAYER TIME]**