

Part 6 - First Love

TODAY IS DAY THIRTY-EIGHT OF THE LOVE DARE!

Let's do a brief review of the principles we have been learning ...

Last week ("Love Meets Sexual Needs"), one of the guys asked me if I was going to give any homework. ☺

While I am trying to lead a decent, restrained life, TV and movies propagate the notion that everybody else is having a wild, debauched time and that I may be missing out. The true power of mass media is its ability to REDEFINE NORMAL. The harmful behavior that we see glamorized not only conveys powerful messages of what's ACCEPTED, but what is EXPECTED. The unreal world of the media becomes, over time, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

About 350 characters appear each night on prime-time TV, with an average of 7 of them murdered every night. If this rate applied in reality, then in just two months, everyone in North America would be killed – and the last one left could turn off the TV! Every year on prime-time TV, there are 65,000 sexual references. Seven out of eight of the sexual encounters in TV dramas involve extra-marital relations. But is this even close to reality? A 1994 University of Chicago study showed that both sexual satisfaction and frequency is greater among married people than among single people. But in Hollywood, the only kind of sex that seems to be banned is intimacy between husband and wife!

The world works overtime to shape your perceptions of what is true and most desirable in life. And it shouts these ideas so loudly and frequently that if we're not careful, we can start believing that these warped values are true. God's Word is the ultimate expression of what real life is – it is the "OWNER'S MANUAL" for the human heart. God's ideals and instructions are the only pathway to real living, and to eternal life.

Matthew 7:24-27 (NLT) Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock. But anyone who hears my teaching and ignores it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash.

Whatever you want God to bless, put Him FIRST in that area of your life!

Revelation 2:4 (TEV) But this is what I have against you: you do not love me now as you did at first.

If I could talk to every couple dealing with difficulties in their marriage, I could basically sum up the feelings of their spouse in this one verse!

We start out madly in love, with good intentions. But then, for all of us, life happens. It just comes at us with its interruptions and upsets, bumps and bruises. Good times and bad times. For better or for worse. For richer or for poorer. In sickness and in health. We laugh, but we also cry. We love, but we also fight. Life just happens ... hurt just happens. And often, relationships that started out strong end up barely surviving life. What started out as "one flesh" ends up feeling like "two strangers."

We were created by God to enjoy (and NEED!) this "one flesh" marriage relationship, and no amount of success or pleasure outside that relationship will ever make up for its failure. And a FUN marriage is what God intends for us to have. But most people are still only wishing for that kind of relationship, because they have a natural desire to try and CONTROL their lives that is destructive to their own happiness.

- **We try to control our image.**
We want to control what other people think of us; we don't want them to know what we are really like. So we wear masks and deny our feelings, hoping to impress them. Why am I afraid to tell you who I am? Because if I'm honest and you don't like me, ME is all I've got!
- **We try to control other people.**
Parents try to control kids, kids try to control parents, wives try to control husbands, husbands try to control wives, friends try to control friends. We use lots of tools to attempt to manipulate each other (i.e. guilt, fear, praise, silent treatment, anger, moods, etc.).
- **We try to control our problems.**
We're really quite good at this – we say: "I can handle it," "It's really not a problem," "I'm fine," "I don't need any help," "I can quit any time," "I'll work it out on my own." That's just somebody trying to play God! But the more you try to fix the problem, the worse it gets!
- **We try to control our pain.**
Have you ever thought how much time you spend running from pain? Trying to avoid it, deny it, escape it, reduce it, or just postpone it. People try to postpone pain by eating, not eating, getting drunk, smoking, doing drugs, or by getting in and out of relationships.

The Bible has a word for this self-defeating behavior – **SIN!** My sinful nature gets me in all kinds of problems. I do things that aren't good for me and I don't do things that are good for me. I respond the wrong way when I'm hurt and it increases the hurt, rather than lessening it. I try to fix problems and often when I finish they are worse than when I started.
TRYING TO CONTROL PUTS ME OUT OF CONTROL!

Romans 7:15-17 For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.

Proverbs 14:12 There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.

Eventually, many couples end up on opposite sides of a huge chasm, each refusing to be controlled any more by the other, and each at the same time continuing to try to control their own happiness. It is futile, it is self-defeating, it destroys relationships, and it doesn't bring happiness!

Behind every divorce is a case of UNFORGIVENESS, two hurt people who continue to hurt each other. And as long as we both insist on CONTROL, this chasm cannot be crossed. Some couples just call an uneasy truce, learn to cope with things as they are, and resolve to tough it out – they are not technically divorced, but they are not “one flesh.”

DIVORCE comes from the same root as the word DIVERT, which means “to turn away.” Letting distance grow between you and your spouse is actually permitting the “spirit of divorce” to take root in your marriage.

RECONCILIATION is what is needed, and to reconcile simply means “to make friendly again” (RE-CONCILIATE). But even though reconciliation mostly just involves getting people to open up and talk to each other, it is not easy to achieve. It is actually one of the most difficult things that people are ever called on to do emotionally, because we (rightly!) feel that we are being called upon to give up CONTROL of the situation. But have you ever stopped to consider the fallout from your stubbornness?

Counselors call this unfortunate cycle the “fear dance.” It happens simply because we are AFRAID that we will not receive what we need from our relationships, so we get angry at others and try to control them.



James 4:1-3 (NLT) What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.

You can't control how someone else acts in a relationship, but you can choose how **YOU** will act and react. All it takes to interrupt this vicious cycle is for someone to change the parameters by ACTING BIBLICALLY. When we set aside our advantages, privileges and rights in favor of others, we will be successful in our relationships! The best relationships are not where each partner gives 50% - they are where one partner chooses to give 100% regardless of what the other partner does!

Albert Einstein said, “The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them.” He also defined insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” Porcia Nelson also said it creatively ... ☺

Autobiography in Five Short Chapters (by Porcia Nelson)

Chapter 1 – I walk down the street. There's a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in. I'm lost, I'm helpless, it isn't my fault. It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter 2 – I walk down the same street. There's a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again. I can't believe I'm in the same place, but it isn't my fault. It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter 3 – I walk down the same street. There's a deep hole in the sidewalk. I see that it is there. I still fall in. It's become a habit. My eyes are open, I know where I am. It is my fault. I get out immediately.

Chapter 4 – I walk down the same street. There's a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it.

Chapter 5 – I walk down another street.

WHEN YOU CHOOSE TO GIVE 100% YOU BUILD A BRIDGE THAT YOUR SPOUSE CAN WALK ACROSS. THAT IS FORGIVENESS.

Even though you may feel that you have done nothing wrong, you inconvenience yourself and offer them a restored relationship!

The “forgiveness side” of reconciliation is like one side of a handshake – you can't have a handshake without TWO parties!

The “other side” of the reconciliation process involves a change in the person who is being forgiven, so that the relationship can be restored! THEY HAVE TO CHOOSE TO WALK ACROSS THE BRIDGE!

Forgiveness does not establish relationship, only reconciliation does – TWO PARTIES HAVE TO CHOOSE TO BE RECONCILED! Forgiveness depends on ONE, but reconciliation depends on TWO.

The ONLY reason anyone would ever take the risk to build a bridge of forgiveness is UNCONDITIONAL LOVE. And the only reason anyone would ever cross that bridge is to have RECONCILIATION.

VIDEO CLIP: “HE FIRST LOVED US”

The “RECONCILIATION BRIDGE” is so important that marriages can’t survive without it. But there is another bridge that is even more important – it doesn’t just save your marriage, it saves YOU for eternity!

The problem in our lives, in our marriages, and in society is that there is a moral gap – an ideal we have fallen short of – and we need outside assistance to bridge it. We don’t merely need therapy – we need someone to break into our human situation who can bring forgiveness and reconciliation, and who can help us live the lives we ought to live but can’t live on our own.

The Bible teaches me that I was created to enjoy a personal relationship with God, and that I will never be truly fulfilled outside of that relationship.

John 10:10 The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

This is the kind of lifestyle that God intends for us to live. But most people are still searching for real fulfillment, because mankind has a natural desire to sin and rebel against God’s principles for living.

We learn it in our marriages ... Behind all of my problems is this attitude: **I WANT TO BE IN CONTROL**. But what I’m really saying is: **I WANT TO BE GOD**. It is mankind’s oldest problem; it is humanity’s original sin. I want to decide what’s right and wrong. I want to call the shots and make my own rules. I want to put myself at the center of the universe, be my own boss and live my own way. If it feels good, then I want to do it! I don’t want anyone else telling me how I should act. That’s called playing God. And the more insecure you are, the more you’re driven to control.

Throughout life, we all learn various coping systems that seem to work for a time when we need to get attention, block out pain, or CONTROL. But as the years progress, these same ideas confuse and cloud our view of the truth, our perception of ourselves, and our expectations of those around us. The longer we hold on to them, the more unrealistic and distorted they become ... and eventually they grow into DENIAL!

2 Peter 2:19 (TEV) They promise them freedom while they themselves are slaves of destructive habits—for we are slaves of anything that has conquered us.

What is it that you are afraid will happen if you give God control of your life? You say, "I don't want anybody controlling me." Who are you kidding? You're being controlled all the time. You're controlled by the opinions of other people. You're controlled by hurts you can't forget. You controlled by the media, habits, hang-ups, or even your own ego!

But you get to CHOOSE who you’re being controlled by when you let God control your life. Real freedom is choosing who your master will be. **REAL FREEDOM IS CHOOSING WHO CONTROLS YOU**. And unless you give control over to God, you remain separated from Him and from the incredible life He designed you to live.

Isaiah 59:2 But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.

Sin breaks our relationship with God, causing us to fear Him and try to live our lives outside of His will. And when our relationship with God isn’t right, it leaves a void in our inner man. We instinctively try many different ways of coping, trying to find happiness, but none of them bring lasting fulfillment. Some people even try religion or good works to feel good about themselves, but though some may achieve much more than others, every one of us fall short of God’s standard of perfection.

Romans 3:23 For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

Not finding fulfillment and happiness in this life is only the “tip of the iceberg” where the sin problem is concerned. The real problem is that the penalty for sin is eternal death, punishment and separation from God.

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The solution to your sin problem is not found in your efforts. Instead, God came to earth as a man to bring us back to Himself, so we could have a second chance to be His children through being born again.

1 Peter 3:18a For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.

1 Timothy 2:5 For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;

God has done His part to restore our relationship. He took the initiative! He offered FORGIVENESS. But forgiveness is only one side of the handshake! Now God waits for each of us to respond to Him; otherwise there can be no reconciliation because we haven’t yet crossed the bridge

Forgiveness does not establish relationship, only reconciliation does - God forgave the whole world, but we still have to choose to be reconciled! In the Bible, men are invited to be “reconciled” to God; that is, they must change their attitude and accept the provision God has made. **NOT ONCE IS GOD SAID TO BE “RECONCILED” TO US – IT WAS WE WHO NEEDED TO BE “RECONCILED” TO GOD!**

2 Corinthians 5:17-21 Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath **reconciled** us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of **reconciliation**; To wit, that God was in Christ, **reconciling** the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of **reconciliation**. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye **reconciled** to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

HOW DID GOD DO THIS? BY TAKING OUR PUNISHMENT HIMSELF!
He gave 100% before we were even interested in having a relationship!

When we believe the gospel, the cross becomes more than a historical event to us – it actually becomes a bridge that can cross the chasm created by sin and get us back to God! Jesus' blood shed on the cross has the power to cancel out our penalty of eternal death!

Colossians 2:14 Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross;

BUT WE STILL HAVEN'T CROSSED THE BRIDGE! Jesus' sacrifice makes FORGIVENESS possible, but if we want a relationship with God we have to relinquish CONTROL and OBEY the gospel. That is the other side of the handshake! That is RECONCILIATION!

We cross the bridge to salvation not by BELIEVING in what Jesus did for us, but by APPLYING what Jesus did for us to our own lives!

Acts 2:38 (TEV) Peter said to them, Each one of you must turn away from your sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven; and you will receive God's gift, the Holy Spirit.

GOD IS WAITING TO MEET YOU AT THE END OF THE BRIDGE!

Many times, the reason for our problems in life and marriage is MISPLACED EXPECTATIONS. We have been expecting another human being to give us what only God can give us! Even when we give 100% to our relationships, things may not be perfect ... because the very best we can give to a relationship still includes our own faults, failures, brokenness, hurts, and sinful tendencies. But when God gives 100% to His relationship with us, there is no downside – because there is no fault or failure in Him! All we have to do is be willing to relinquish CONTROL and OBEY what His Word teaches – that brings RECONCILIATION.

Crossing the bridge to a personal relationship with God is the best thing you can do for yourself, your marriage, your family, your future, and – most of all – your eternity.

1 John 4:19 (TEV) We love because God first loved us.

THE LOVE DARE CHALLENGE:

Dare to take God at His word and give your life – and your marriage – to Him. The Bible tells us how: “Each one of you must turn away from your sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven; and you will receive God's gift, the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38, TEV)

TOMORROW IN THE LOVE DARE: “LOVE ENDURES”