

Series: ***FIT TO BE TIED*** - February 10, 2008

BUILDING A HEALTHY MARRIAGE
1 Corinthians 7:1-7

I. INTRO

A. I want to say at the front end this morning—what I'm going to be dealing with are basic principles that will apply to any relationship. The **specific** relationship I'm going to be applying them to is marriage—but don't let that put you off. The broad topic is relational intelligence! And I think that's something we could all use a little more of, right?

-Since I'm going to be dealing specifically with marriage—what is a **wedding**, a marriage between a man and a woman—built on? If you've ever planned one—you know how many details someone needs to plan for.

1. For example, **what will we wear?** A wedding dress; bridesmaid's dresses. Most guys rent a tux, but, truth is—no one gives a rip what the groom looks like. But you can have a wedding without expensive clothes, right?
2. At most weddings, there is someone with a vision who wants to be total control of the wedding. And that person is...? The mother of the bride. But, actually, the mother of the bride is optional. Sorry if you are one!
3. And there's a **lot** of planning that goes into the reception. Some of you had a **big** (i.e., expensive) reception with dancing and champagne. Some of you had red punch and cookies in the basement of the church. Receptions are optional.
4. And, of course, there's the **Honeymoon!** Lori and I had our honeymoon in North Bay in a cottage with no shower and an outhouse. Lori would tell you that honeymoons are optional! Actually, after the honeymoon, **I** was optional!
5. There's a **lot** of stuff in weddings to plan for: music, candles, guest books, flower girls, rings, invitations, photographers, videographers—but it's **all** optional.
-What about the **vows?** How many of you think that vows are optional? Actually, no—even though most couples spend a **lot** more time and thought on all the other stuff.

B. At the very core, a wedding is a vow. An author by the name of Walter Wangerin says this: Marriage begins with a promise. A man and a woman stand in a church, or a chapel, ...or in a garden, or in a backyard before each other and before witnesses and before the God who created them. And they make a vow. They make a promise. They give their word. A promise offered; a promise received; a promise witnessed; a promise kept.

-The promise people make usually goes something like this. Get your nitro-glycerin tablets—this could be quite shocking: **Will you take her to be your wedded wife? Will you love and comfort her, honor and keep her, and in joy and sorrow, preserve with her this wedding bond, holy and unbroken, until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, or God by death shall separate you?**

-Did you notice that you're not vowing to **receive** love and sex and lots of other good things. You're vowing to give your life and yourself and your full devotion—even... **when good times go bad!** Even when you're disappointed and hurt.

-That is a **tough** promise to keep, isn't it? And that's what I want to talk about. Keeping your promises—even when it's tough.

II. **YOU PROMISED...!**

- A. In a sexually charged world like ours, the prevailing sense is that if a married person is going to break their promises or violate the marriage in some way—it will involve, at least at some point, sexual unfaithfulness. That they'll get tired of the person they're married to, tired of fighting, tired of trying—and just drift off into someone else's arms. We've been studying a church the Paul, an early church leader, wrote to about the issues they were struggling with.

-One of those issues was sexual unfaithfulness. But the **other** side was a group of people who felt that there should be **no** sex—not even in marriage. Period. Anyone remember **churchlady** from Saturday Night Life? For some of you—churchlady was a **real** person. You could probably tell us his/her name. Instead of sex being a beautiful, exhilarating experience between a man and a woman—protected by **till death do us part**, it was implied that sex was dirty. Shameful. To be talked about as **s-e-x!**

-That's understandable for churchlady, but what do you say to a marriage partner who says, "I don't want to make love with you because it's hindering me spiritually! God told me not to!" What do you do with **that?**

1. From what we know, this was an attitude more prevalent among women than men—which makes sense in a culture where they were both devalued and treated as sexual objects. They could see the devastating effects on the culture, both in terms of the brokenness, rampant sexually transmitted disease, and social chaos.

-So Paul finds himself in the position of having to protect the sexual oneness God intended—both from being treated like just another—and those who wanted to do away with it all together. Strange place to be, isn't it?

-Paul starts by quoting their campaign slogan:

"It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

(1 Corinthians 7:1 TNIV) Then he addresses it. Let me read what he says from The Message:

It's good for a man to have a wife, and for a woman to have a husband. Sexual drives are strong, but marriage is strong enough to contain them and provide for a balanced and fulfilling sexual life in a world of sexual disorder. The marriage bed must be a place of mutuality—the husband seeking to satisfy his wife, the wife seeking to satisfy her husband. Marriage is not a place to "stand up for your rights." Marriage is a decision to serve the other, whether in bed or out. Abstaining from sex is permissible for a period of time if you both agree to it, and if it's for the purposes of prayer and fasting—but only for such times. Then come back together again. Satan has an ingenious way of tempting us when we least

expect it. I'm not, understand, commanding these periods of abstinence—only providing my best counsel if you should choose them. Sometimes I wish everyone were single like me—a simpler life in many ways! But celibacy is not for everyone any more than marriage is. God gives the gift of the single life to some, the gift of the married life to others.
(1 Corinthians 7:1-7 MSG)

2. Let me give you some insight into what marriage was like in that culture—which may you understand this a little better.

First, couples didn't fall in love and then go plan a marriage. Marriages were usually arranged—based either on money or status. Typically, an older—let's say **more mature** man, would go to the father and arrange a marriage with her daughter. Remember Lazar Wolfe in *Fiddler On The Roof*?

-So here's this young bride whose Dad has made a deal with an older man—and all she can look forward to is pretty much being a trophy wife and raising a whole bunch of kids. Among the people of Jesus, the message was, "Jesus has broken down **all** the barriers! Men and women? **Equals!** Slave and free? **Equals!**

-If you had experienced some brokenness as a result of being treated as a sexual object—and your husband was this crusty old dude, and you would likely be tied to caring for a brood of children—all one or two years apart—can you see why a doctrine of **no sex** might be attractive to women? Especially if they found a whole new identity among followers of Jesus?

3. Paul is **very** direct here. I mean, the first comment he gives is a **du-u-uh** comment. He says, "In a sex-crazed culture, why would you tempt each other by denying a sexual relationship! Don't dance in a canoe! Celibacy is reserved for single people—like me. If you try living that way in a marriage—you are courting disaster!"

-Secondly, God will **never** ask you to do something that will harm the oneness of your marriage or treat your spouse as inferior—or as unnecessary. God will never call you to be selfish—for spiritual reasons, or for **any** reason.

The marriage bed must be a place of mutuality—the husband seeking to satisfy his wife, the wife seeking to satisfy her husband. Marriage is not a place to "stand up for your rights." Marriage is a decision to serve the other, whether in bed or out. (1 Corinthians 7:3-5 MSG)

-Friends—this is **profound**. Know how we say around here, **this is not about us!?** If you're married, your marriage is **not** about you. And if you make it about you, you will kill it.

Paul is very clear here about a sexual relationship. What he's saying is that the key to sexual happiness in a marriage is giving yourself completely to seeking to satisfy the other person. When this **doesn't** happen, the other person feels used. And I think women find themselves more in this position than men.

- B. I'll tell you what I think the core issue is that Paul is dealing with—the issue that is at the very center of a healthy marriage. Oneness. **Serving** someone else out of love.

Here's my bottom line statement: **If you make any relationship in your life all about you, you will KILL it.** This is the core of relational intelligence. **If you make any relationship in your life all about you, you will KILL it.**

-How many of you **are** married, **were** married, **will** be married, **might** get married someday, or know someone who **is** married? Let me read what Jesus, Son of God said about God's original plan for marriage:

"Haven't you read the Scriptures?" Jesus replied. "They record that from the beginning 'God made them male and female.' And he said, 'This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.' (Matthew 19:4-5 NLT)

-I want you to notice two words that summarize what this **oneness** means--what you are vowing to do when you get married: **leave** and **joined to** or **united into one**.

1. This sounds fairly simple when we agree to it. "**Leave?** I'll be more than **glad** to leave my parents, or my room-mate, or my past!" **Be joined?** Can't wait! Yessiree! **Superglued together for life?** Sounds good to me! Then we actually **do** it...

-We find out that **leaving** our family, our past isn't as easy as we thought. We've been pre-programmed. And **not** leaving creates problems with the glue that hold us together with the other person.

-This **leaving** thing, until I understood it better, created all kinds of problems in my relationship with Lori. She was a **lot, a LOT** better at it than I was. Just a question: What is the word the Bible uses to describe a parent's relationship with a child? **It's LEAVE.** That means the relationship changes. It's secondary. The word that describes our relationship with a person we marry is **CLEAVE; joined; united—forever.** It's a primary relationship. It always comes first.

-If you get that backwards—if you make your relationship with your parents primary and your relationship with your spouse secondary—it **ruins the glue that holds you together!** And that's all I have to say about that!

-To have the **oneness** you need in a marriage—to make it work—you have to leave. Leave your home. Leave your past. Leave previous hurts, previous relationships, previous loyalties.

2. The image that grabbed my attention on this **leaving** part came from a time when Lori and I were at Elim Lodge visiting her parents—and a float plane landed and docked there. I've **always** been fascinated with float planes. I even got to touch it! I was like a little kid!

-This float plane was the last thing my Dad made for me. Ever been close to a float plane? The one I held the line on was quite light and fragile—kind of like a marriage, maybe. The relationship that a float plane has with a dock is temporary, right? I thought--which gives you some insight into my twisted mind--what if the plane tried to take off while it was tied to the dock? The scene

would be pretty messy. Engine racing—stuff flying. It would probably destroy the dock and the plane.

-Float planes are meant to **fly**. The dock is where they get loaded and unloaded; gassed up. Where people get on or get off. Trying to make a marriage fly without **leaving**—leaving your family, leaving your past way of doing things, leaving all your previous relationships—is like trying to fly a float plane while it’s tied to the dock.

-A word to parents on this: If you don’t untie the ropes and let your children go—your relationship with them will get damaged. Just another note on this. If you’ve gone through a death or divorce from a spouse—you need to make sure that you have adequately dealt with your **stuff** before you marry. It’s **dock** stuff. You need to leave.

3. Here’s my point. Marriage is about **oneness**. Here’s the deal, see; if you won’t do the leaving, you can’t have the oneness, unity, joined-together-ness that God intended—and the intimacy it brings.

- C. This oneness, at it’s core, is created by self-giving love on **both** sides. Remember how Jesus described love? You love God with **all** your heart, soul, mind and strength.

You love your neighbor **as yourself**. Paul, in Philippians 2, told people to consider others better than themselves. Jesus said, “You know how you would like others to treat you? Well, **treat THEM like that!** Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 defines love as follows:

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. (1 Corinthians 13:4-5 NLT)

-How many of you think that getting married automatically creates feelings in your that help you do this for the rest of your life? Love is **always** a choice. And when you **make** that choice, love grows. If you don’t, love goes downhill.

-See, marriage vows are promises, not to **receive** love—but to **give** love and **grow** love. But the sneaky little question keeps popping up: **What about me?** And it’s deadly. It’s a killer. Because, see, the hope for any marriage or any long term relationship is making it about **others**, not about us. And I’m not talking about being a doormat. I’m talking about the dignity of choosing to serve and love someone else—because you promised to do that.

-Know what happens sometimes? People tend, as they go into a marriage, to think of all the things it will do for them.

-One author described it as a couple treating their marriage as a kind of gift box filled with good things. So, they keep reaching into the box and pulling out the good things—thinking, “Wow! This is great!” But—one day they reach—and the box is empty. What they don’t realize is that every time they reached into the box, they were **taking** something from someone else. What makes a marriage or **any** relationship

work is two people concentrating on filling the box, not taking from it. Because, you see, love is about giving—not taking!

-What Paul is saying to these people is that this oneness, both spiritual and sexual is so important to God that nothing should serve as an exit ramp from it—not even a quest for spirituality!

III. EXIT RAMPS

A. Remember how I talked about the original design of marriage—to leave and become one; be joined together? United? Cleave? Sometimes people lose hope, or get angry, or get careless—and start looking for an exit ramp from the relationship. At the core, that’s what Paul was dealing with here; people who were trying to use spirituality as an exit ramp from their marriage.

1. In our world, some people take **big splashy** exits; some take small exits—barely noticeable. The big exits are usually pretty obvious. Dramatic.

The little exits are subtle. It’s really important to know the difference, so we’re going to do a little quiz. I’ll put an “exit ramp” on the screen behind me—and you tell me if it’s a big exit or a little exit.

DIVORCE

POUTING

NFL GAMES, FISHING, OR GOLF

WORK

MURDER

BLAMING YOUR SPOUSE

-A year or so ago, I watched with **quite** a bit of interest as a young, slight woman—a preacher’s wife—was hauled off to jail for taking a shotgun and blowing a big hole through her husband.

I wondered, “Wow! Was the message **that** bad...?” That’s the kind of exit ramp that gets big press in our world. The real question is: **How** does a couple end up at a big exit like that?

-Can anyone imagine a couple standing, making vows to love someone for the rest of their lives—all the while plotting an exit strategy? I don’t think that’s how it happens. I think big exits are actually made of hundreds—maybe thousands of little ones?

2. I’ll tell you how I think this happens. I think people engage in stuff that erodes oneness, little by little—over and over and over and over.

-We don't say nasty, ugly things necessarily; we just withhold instead of giving compliments, kind words, little thoughtful actions—that could've built oneness and tenderness. The subtle message is, "You're not worth the trouble."

-And in those moments, no one ever says, "Wow! I think my marriage could be at stake here!" or "I think today is the day I'll break my promise." They're just tiny little exits. But when you add them all together, it's exit ramp. It's just a matter of time.

Remember the song by Barbara Streisand and Neil Diamond?

You hardly talk to me anymore
When you come thru the door
At the end of the day

It used to be so natural
To talk about forever
But "used to be's" don't count anymore
They just lay on the floor
'Til we sweep them away

...You don't say you love me
You don't say you need me
You don't sing me love songs
You don't bring me flowers anymore

- B. I'll tell you where the hope lies for any relationship. It's getting clarity on the dozens of little exits that lead to the big ones. If you currently aren't married—seeing this principle can help you avoid problems. If you have a great marriage—seeing this could take you to new levels of growth and intimacy. If you're here, and your marriage is strained—and you will open your heart to God's help—to admitting where you've been taking little exits, and say, "No more! I'm going to build bridges"—things could change. Drastically.

-What you want to do is focus on **oneness**. Strengthening the glue that unites you; joins you.

1. I'll tell you what's huge when it comes to strengthening oneness. Honesty. When you marry someone, you promise to be **faithful**. That doesn't just mean not sleeping with someone else. That's the big exit. The **small exit** on this is untruthfulness. For a relationship to work, for their to be intimacy—there needs to be **trust**. I've found that trust is hard to gain—and very, **very** easy to lose.
 - When you are married to someone—and you find out that their life, in one area, has been a lie—that they've been regularly deceiving you over a period of time, first you feel hurt. Then you feel stupid. Then you feel angry.
 - a. Know where this starts? It starts in little acts of untruthfulness about how you're feeling—and then little acts of creating distance. Your spouse does something you don't like. But instead of being honest about it—you just withdraw a little of your affection, or a little of your time. They say, "Is something wrong?" You say, "No. I'm fine! Is something wrong with you?" When the truth is, you're frustrated and angry.

- b. There needs to be this commitment between two people who marry, “You can **always** tell me the truth—about me, about you, about your struggles. It may not be pretty—but I won’t blow up all over you and cauterize the artery of truth-telling.”
-If you’re someone who’s volatile—and telling you the truth is a risky, scary thing cause you’ve **got** to be perfect, the shining star—whatever—that, too, is an exit ramp. You can’t grow if you can’t hear the truth.
- c. People think, “Well, what if I can’t say it in a smooth-sounding way? What if I can’t say it right—or resolve it? What if I look dumb or childish?” Let me tell you a very important secret! I’m already dumb and childish—and so are you! And guess who knows that. Lori knows it—and so does the person you’re married to. Inside all of the well-kept, seemingly well-adjusted people sitting here this morning is a foolish, childish human being—deeply affected by what the Bible simply calls **sin! That’s** the truth about us—and if you hide that—won’t see it—you can’t grow!
- d. Some of you this morning have been hiding for a long time. Some of you are carrying secrets about money, about what you’re watching, about what you’re up to—and my question to you is, will you close off the exit of hiding and pretending. If you will, you can, over time, have one of the most amazing gifts in the world; someone who knows your secrets and faults—and **still loves you!**
2. There’s a second place where people take tiny exits—that lead to exits. It’s with what they say. Words. The gift of speech is an **amazing** thing. It’s what sets us apart from animals. Yeah, I know—they’ve taught chimps to do sign language. Sometimes that’s all we guys can muster. Various grunts and other noises of satisfaction or dissatisfaction.
-It’s with this gift of speech that we actually make our promises to each other, express our love and give the gift of words. But in marriage, if you’re not careful, your mouth can be used like a nailgun that puts the last nails in the coffin where your marriage lies cold and still.
- a. Let’s just be honest here. There are people who leave a trail of blood behind them. Their tongue, their mouth seems to do it’s best work when throwing knives, shooting arrows, and firing bullets. Sometimes it’s like a flamethrower. I have never met a couple where both haven’t said something they wish they could retract—but these words, especially the hurtful ones, get carved right into the hearts of people around us.
-Friends, this doesn’t just apply to marriage; this is relational intelligence 101. It applies to friendships, relationships between parents and children—**all** relationships. I recently heard author, Philip Yancey, say that he has it down to a formula: It takes him 17 good, positive letters to get over one nasty one.
- b. David once said, “Oh, God! Put a muzzle on my mouth!” See, the problem is that communication is very, **very** important in marriage.

Letting the other person look into your soul. Talking through difficult issues. Keeping abreast of each other's lives. But the mouth can both give life—and take it. Words matter. God sees them and hears them and feels them. Sometimes people are real sweet and soft and gushy—until you cross them. Then—**look out!**

-It's possible that if you're deeply into sarcasm or cursing, or destructive, damning words. You may need some help, maybe from a good counselor—in stopping the damage you're doing to the people you make your promises to. You may be using your mouth to excavate a big exit ramp—or even dig a grave for the relationships that matter most!

3. There's a final area where you can take an exit—or build a bridge—in any relationship, really. It's how you handle conflict. How many of you have ever experienced conflict—at least once—with someone you're close with—or married to? Conflict is normal—but bitterness, resentment, grudges—all optional.
 - a. The Bible has some fantastic advice on this—and it gets into the whole mouth thing. It says, **Be angry—don't sin. Don't let the sun go down on your anger.** See, when you let anger—the result of conflict—sit for a while, it's like planting a seed. It starts to develop a root system to nourish itself.
 - Here's the question: What do you do when you get angry? If we were to interview the people around you—what are you like?
 - b. Lori and I are quite different when it comes to how we express anger. Let's just do a kind of poll here:
 - How many of you would consider yourself, let's say, **expressive** when it comes to anger. You think, "Why should I hold it all in and poison myself? Get it out—and get it over with! A little blood and guts never hurt anyone!"
 - How many of you just withdraw. You think, "Mess with me—and I'll just treat you like you don't exist and make you suffer!" When you begin to see things my way, **then** we'll talk!"
 - How many of you, when you're in conflict, just get nervous. Uptight? You stuff it—and the resentment festers down inside?
 - How many of you never get angry, but the person beside you sure has anger issues, and you'd like to confess their sins for them?
 - c. When you don't deal with conflict, when it goes underground, it creates little exits. Let me describe a few:
 - *You pour all your energy into your work. And you've had so many arguments about it with your spouse, that you don't even talk about it anymore. And, if the truth be known, you love your work more than the person you made the promise to.
 - *Or maybe you talk to another person about your spouse—instead of actually talking to them about the problems. And you blame them for everything—and, of course, that allows you to focus on his or her problems—instead of yours.

*Or maybe you've gotten into patterns of mishandling your sexuality—whether it's through internet porn or inappropriate movies or chat rooms—or something else. Maybe it's flirting—playing little games with your eyes and your words to see if anyone's interested. And in your own mind, you excuse your behavior by dwelling on your spouses faults—as if that makes it okay.

*Or maybe you escape to romance novels, or fantasies about what it would be like to be married to someone else—and you're actually more faithful, more devoted to your fantasy than to the person you married.

*Or maybe it's some form of escape. After dinner, you hide in your den and watch sports, or try to anesthetize the pain by drinking too much or shopping too much or gambling.

- d. Know what the danger is with all this stuff? It's telling yourself that because you haven't actually slept with someone else—or because you still sleep in the same house with the one you've married—you're keeping your promises. "I didn't walk out the door! I'm not having an affair! I didn't take the big exit ramp!"
- But, truth is, when you stood in front of God and friends and made your promises, you didn't promise, "I will keep my body in the same house as yours" or "I promise not to have sex with another human being."
- What you actually **promised** is that you would be one with this person. That this **oneness** would receive your best efforts—day after day, month after month, and year after year. You promised, "I will love you, comfort you and cherish you—till death do us part." You promised! You gave your word!

IV. CLOSING

- A. I know what I've been talking about this morning may have been painful for some of you.

-What you can do today, right now, is be honest. Say, "I've been involved in taking some of those little exits—and instead of creating exits, I want to build bridges. You can say that to God—and to the one you made your promises to. You would not **believe** the power of simple, sincere words of affection and commitment. You would not **believe** the power of simple, well-chosen acts of love and service. Do what you don't normally do. Court them. Write notes, make the bed, fix a meal. **Touch** them! And get help if you need it.

-Maybe you've taken one of the big exit ramps already. You need to know that there is grace and healing from God. God doesn't stomp into the pain of our lives to bring judgment. He knocks on the door—and offers hope; life; companionship. What's happened is not the unforgivable sin. I'm going to be talking more about this next week—how sometimes "I Do" doesn't last forever. And I hope you'll come back.

- B. One thing I want to mention in closing. We stand before God and family and make promises, vows, to the ones we marry. Having children, becoming a Mom or Dad, involves unspoken promises to the children we have.

-I think it's a really **good** thing to formalize those promises before God and friends—just so it's clear. And that's what's going to happen right now.