

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, October 28, 1990, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

EXODUS 20:14

“You shall not commit adultery.”

TEN STEPS TO THE GOOD LIFE
(7) HOW TO AFFAIR-PROOF YOUR MARRIAGE

I heard about a woman who was speaking about her husband, and someone said, “Where did you meet him?” And she said, “I met him at a travel agency. He was the last resort!” Well, marriage is not God’s last resort. To the contrary, it was God’s first institution. You realize, don’t you, that marriage came long before the Commandments. It came before government, before the Church; it came even before God gave us instructions as to how to worship Him. Marriage was the first institution in the Garden of Eden.

Look at Genesis 2:18: “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’” You see, man was incomplete without a woman. One Old Testament scholar tells us that when Adam saw Eve, and said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,” perhaps the best way to translate what Adam said when he saw Eve was “WOW!” You see, we didn’t think up the idea of boys and girls. God did, and God made us different that He might make us one.

In verse 24 of Genesis 2 God goes on to say, “For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Those two verbs, “leave” and “cleave” tell us what marriage is all about. You “leave” your family of origin, the family into which you were born, in order to establish, with your partner, a completely new family unit. And then you are to “cleave” to each other in absolute and uncompromising commitment “till death do you part.” And to “leave” and “cleave” I would add another word “weave”; for from the day of your marriage until the day you die, God expects you to weave the beautiful tapestry of a God-glorifying relationship.

“Leave,” “cleave,” and “weave.” Those verbs simply tell us that marriage is to be supreme in all earthly commitments. Your commitment to your husband, to your wife, should take precedence over your commitment to your children. Do you understand that? Children are not your supreme commitment. Children come, and children leave the home, but husbands and wives remain; and the wife or husband who pours out his or her full devotion and attention upon the children, at the expense of the spouse’s unfulfilled need for affection, often finds the marriage in trouble when the nest is empty, and sometimes even before that takes place.

And, your work is not your supreme commitment. Some men are married to their job, and some women are married to their career, rather than to their wives and husbands. Many big corporations today expect their young rising executives to sacrifice everything for job advancement and for the corporate welfare of the company. One young husband said, “If she wants to stay with me, she ought to realize that it’s my job that’s all-important. After all, I can

always find another wife.” What a miserable little jerk! Wouldn’t you like to wring his neck?

Now the verb “adulterate” means to “make impure,” to “harm,” to “mar something that is beautiful.” Now what is it that is so beautiful and so pure that God does not want it harmed or marred? Of course, it is the married life. Some would like us to believe that marriage, like the Model T Ford, or the kerosene lamp, is obsolete. Dr. David Mace quotes a judge who said, “Let’s face the facts. I suppose we’ll just have to allow our young people to have two or three marriages before they finally settle down.” Well, I don’t believe that, because marriage is a wonderful institution ordained by Almighty God: one man and one woman till death do you part.

I saw an advertisement for an Individual Retirement Account that said, “Guaranteed interest for life.” Unfortunately, that doesn’t always apply to marriage. How many of you would agree that it’s easier to get married than to stay married?

Now God wants your marriage to be satisfying. In Exodus 20:14, He says, “You shall not commit adultery.” And in Proverbs 5:15 (Good News Bible) He says, “Be faithful to your own wife and give your love to her alone.” Now how do you do that? How do you maintain that interest over the years? How do you keep from getting bored with your mate? How do you create a love that lasts a lifetime?

Today I want, very simply, to give you five words that I think will help you to have a love that lasts a lifetime. I might say that they have helped us now for 45 years! You see, love is not automatic. There’s a recipe for it. Remember, love is not something you just stumble on like a gold nugget which you pick up and say, “Oh I’ve struck it rich!” No. Love is more like a fragile flower that must be cultivated, and cared for, and nurtured, so that it may continue to grow and bloom, and become more beautiful with the passing of the years. Let me tell you something — if you don’t love your wife a whole lot more now than you did when you married her, the chances are you love her a whole lot less. And vice versa.

So, what are the ingredients in this recipe for a love that lasts a lifetime?

1. The first ingredient, I believe, is RESPECT. Love is built on the foundation of mutual respect. Look at Ephesians 5:33 (Good News Bible): “Every husband must love his wife as himself, and every wife must respect her husband.” Also look at 1 Peter 3:7: “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives and treat them with respect.” There is a mutual respect that is mandated.

Isn’t it sad to notice that some people are more rude to their spouse than they are to strangers? They interrupt them, they don’t listen, they ignore them, they contradict them, they put them down in public. A young bride was talking to her husband she had married that afternoon, and she said, “Honey, as we go into the hotel, let’s not act like newlyweds.” And he said, “O.K., you carry the bags!”

And it’s lack of respect that makes you treat your spouse with less consideration than you did before you were married. Some people have the philosophy “Why chase a bus after you’ve already caught it?” You married ladies — remember how you used to dress up when you were

trying to get him? And he was chasing you till you caught him! Remember how you used to put the perfume behind your ear? And now he comes home at 5:30 and you look like something dragged through a hedge backwards!

And you married men — remember how you used to shave twice a day? Remember how you used to open the car door for her? They say that now when a man opens the car door, it means one of two things -- either he's got a new car or a new wife! Respect cultivates and nurtures love.

How do you build respect? One way is -- don't compare your mate and don't compare your marriage. Every marriage is unique and there is no such thing as a perfect mate. I've told you many times my favorite definition of marriage -- marriage is a lifelong commitment to an imperfect person. There are problems that arise in every marriage, and if you change marriages, you usually just change problems. Don't compare. Any time you say, "Why can't you be like so-and-so?" -- that's marital murder, folks. And if you go on like that, building up resentment and bitterness, you reach the point where you claim to have incompatibility. I think this nonsense about incompatibility is just an excuse for not growing up emotionally and spiritually. You need to have respect. Brag on your mate; don't nag; and see how mutual respect will blossom and bloom.

Someone has said, "You can bury a marriage with a lot of little digs!" — cuts, jibes, put-downs. Eve took a rib from Adam, and women have been taking ribs from men ever since! Some people think it's funny to put down your mate, and I think that even husbands who sincerely love their wives often fall into this trap of making your wife the butt of your jokes. Respect your spouse.

2. The second ingredient is RESPONSIBILITY. Look at Philippians 2:4,5: "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." I think if we would follow that verse we would have a lot fewer divorces. The major problem in marriage is selfishness — "I want what I want when I want it. What are you going to do for me? What's in this relationship for me? You serve me, and I get all of the benefits."

Now being responsible means carrying your fair share of the load, doing your part. A lot of married people just need to grow up. They're immature and selfish. What does it mean to be responsible? It means to have the attitude of Jesus. Ask yourself in your marriage: Would Jesus do this? Would Jesus say this? Would Jesus expect this from my partner? In a crisis or a conflict, say to yourself, "How would Jesus react if He were in my shoes?"

3. The third ingredient is RECREATION. I think this is an important part of a marriage that will last. Look at Ecclesiastes 9:9 (Good News Bible): "Enjoy life with the woman you love." All work and no play makes for a dull marriage. "The marriage that prays together stays together," we are told, and I believe that is true. But I also believe that the marriage that plays together stays together. A recent poll reveals that the average husband and wife spend ten minutes a day in conversation with each other.

Is there a difference between being around someone and being with him? There is, isn't there? You need to have time together to pray and play and plan. Fit it into your schedule. Any football team that never huddled wouldn't make it to the dust bowl, much less the Super Bowl. I think we all need "huddle time" in our marriage, time when you just have fun together, time when you can relax. And you have to plan that kind of time together. Don't let anything push this out of your life. There's a danger sign in your marriage when you use the phrase "some other time." There's a myth today that says, "Oh I spend quality time with my wife and children." You know how I detest that phrase "quality time" -- it's invariably a cop-out for a person who is busier than God wants him to be, and as a result is really shortchanging his family. I think God wants us to spend quality and quantity time with our spouses. You'll never become best friends if you don't spend a lot of time together.

Let me ask you a question -- are you fun to live with? (Now stop nudging each other!) Are you fun to live with? Couples who learn to enjoy each other find that their marriage lasts.

4. The fourth ingredient is ROMANCE. I believe that if there were more courting in marriage there would be fewer marriages in court. Look at Proverbs 30:21 and 23: "Under three things the earth trembles, and under four it cannot bear up..." And the third thing is "an unloved woman who is married." What is the writer saying here? He's comparing a woman who's married but who does not feel loved to an earthquake! He says, "the earth trembles." Husbands, if your wife feels unloved, you're on shaky ground. Indeed, you're asking for an earthquake to strike, and if it does, you're to blame. But you say, "Oh, but my wife knows that I love her." Are you sure? Do you tell her? Do you show it? Or are you another Archie Bunker? It's often hard for men to express their emotions. They have a hard time saying, "I love you." It's like Adam. One day Eve came to Adam, and she said, "Adam, do you love me?" And he was this macho type, you know. He wasn't used to expressing his feelings, so he looked around and finally said, "Who else?" Now, if he had been cool, he could have said, "Eve, you're the only girl in the world for me!"

Men — say it. Show it. And you wives -- do likewise.

Look at Proverbs 5:18,19 (Living Bible): "Rejoice in your wife... Let her charms and tender embrace satisfy you. Let her love alone fill you with delight," Now that verse doesn't need any explanation, does it?

Did you know that God is pro-sex?! Who do you think thought it up? It's His idea! And God blesses it in the right context between a husband and wife. You know, one entire book of the Bible is really a manual on romantic sexual love — it's called the Song of Solomon.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:3, "The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband." It's a responsibility; it's a legitimate need; it's for your mutual benefit; either partner can initiate it; and it's a spiritual responsibility and privilege.

How do you affair-proof your marriage? You see, the devil works on your spouse as much as he works on you. How do you affair-proof your mate? Do you hire a private investigator? No. I'll tell you how you do it -- you keep your grass looking so green that everybody else's lawn

looks brown by comparison. Be the kind of spouse who would force your mate to say, “I would be crazy to give this up!”

5. The fifth and final ingredient in the recipe is RESOLVE. I’m talking about fidelity -- commitment at all costs. The problem is, many people say “I do,” and don’t. Look at Malachi 2:15: “Has not the Lord made you one in body and spirit?... So, guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.” And Proverbs 4:23 (Living Bible) says, “Above all else, guard your affections. For they influence everything else in your life.”

How do you guard your affections? I think you do it by protecting your mind. We live in a society that glorifies sex outside of marriage. Books, magazines, TV, movies, everything creates an environment that makes it look so inviting and so exciting. Have you ever noticed on TV that married people are never lovers? It’s always outside of a marriage relationship. And what happens? The devil starts painting pictures in your mind -- mental images. And he plants a seed. On TV, they rarely show how infidelity hurts people. And the devil makes your spouse seem dull by comparison. And maybe you start saying, “What if?... just pretend. Oh, I know it would be crazy. Oh no, I’d never do it; but just imagine...” And you say, “I haven’t done anything.” But you have. You have allowed a seed to be planted in your mind, and if you don’t root it out, you’re headed for deep trouble, because what you think about eventually shows up in your actions. So, guard your mind. Every night people sit at home and let people commit adultery in front of them in their living room on TV. And it insidiously influences your life, and it can erode your standards.

You see, you’re a sexual being, and so you will be attracted to people who are not your spouse. But what makes that wrong is if you allow a seed to be planted in your mind... Galatians 5:16 says, “Walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfil the desires of the flesh.” It doesn’t say you won’t have those desires. If you’re normal, you will have sexual desires. You will be attracted to people who are not your spouse. That is simply a temptation, but temptation is not sin. It becomes sin when you begin to dwell on it, when you begin to fantasize, when you allow the birds of temptation to build their nest in your hair. In your life, you will have normal desires. What do you do about them? You resolve. You make a commitment. You say, “Regardless of what society says, I will be faithful, because that is what God wants me to be.”

Job says in 31:1, “I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl.” “I made a covenant with my eyes.” In other words, I avoid all those books and movies that arouse sinful desire in my life. Jesus says, “It starts in your heart.” So, you protect your mind; you guard your affections.

Let us say this too — choose your friends wisely. This is so important. As a Christian, you should be very concerned about the kind of friends you choose, particularly in the friends you make at work; because most affairs start between friends, and between people you work with. And often at work you may be tempted to think, “I have more in common here than I have at home.” And you may be committed to your marriage, but the other person may not be; and that other person may have other plans and designs for you. So what am I saying? I’m saying — if you’re married, don’t choose close friends who are single, or are people who take their own marriage lightly. Keep your distance. Don’t enter the water where there is an undertow. That is

just godly prudence. Listen to Proverbs 6:27,28: “Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched?”

But someone says, “Oh, it’s just a little innocent flirtation.” Believe me, there is no such thing as an “innocent flirtation”; and if you’re not careful, you’ll discover that it is the gun you didn’t know was loaded. It’s defrauding. What is defrauding? It is arousing the desire in another person that you can not righteously fulfil. Twenty-seven times in the New Testament we’re told to run, to flee. Adultery is not a sin we are to fight; it’s a sin we are to flee from. If you deliberately place yourself in temptation, you’ve already sinned. Remember the Chinese proverb, “He who would not fall down ought not to walk in slippery places.”

Now let’s do a little review. How is your love life?

How about respect? Where are you on the respect scale of one to ten? Do you treat your spouse with respect? Or do you compare them — “I wish you were like this...” Do you criticize your partner all the time? Do you brag more or do you nag more? Do you ignore them? Husbands, when your wife talks, do you think, “I’ve heard all this before,” and you assume what she’s going to say? So you just tune her out. Respect means — I look you in the eye and I listen. When you look someone in the eye, it means, “I respect you. I value you and your opinion.”

How about responsibility? Are you carrying your share of the load.? There was an article a few years ago in Reader’s Digest on this subject of making marriages last. One man, married 29 years, talked about a midlife crisis; it was his wife’s. He said, “I had a very simple view of marriage when we began. I worked as many hours as I wanted to, and then I relaxed playing golf and tennis. Pamela took care of me and the children.” You see it was “all for me.” “Nine years ago, my world toppled... Pamela had an affair. She told me she hated my selfishness and my disinterest in her and the children; and she was ready to leave me. My family was the most important thing to me in my life, so I decided to win back my wife by changing myself. I put Pamela first, and my work as a very secondary consideration. And I soon came to enjoy the things we did together.” You see, he learned to enjoy the things they did together. “I regretted the wasted years, and now I have my family back, and that change is the thing I feel proudest about in my life.”

Are you responsible? Do you carry your share of the load? If you’re responsible you’re more interested in fixing the problem than you are in fixing the blame. So much time is wasted if we attack each other instead of attacking the problem. Responsibility means, “I don’t care, really, who’s to blame, but let’s work on the problem, and let’s get this thing solved, and let’s make our marriage work.” Responsibility means having the attitude of Jesus Who says, “Don’t think just about yourself, but think about the other person.”

How about recreation? Are you making time for each other? You can’t just take time, you must make time. You have to schedule it — time to pray, time to play, and time to plan.

How about romance? Have you let your love life go stale? Do you buy little gifts any more -- flowers and things? Do you ever write him a note and put it in his lunch bag? Maybe you say, “I don’t feel romantic.” Let me just say this: if you wait until you feel romantic to act romantic,

you can forget it, because feelings come and go. It is easier to act your way into a feeling than it is to feel your way into an action. If you say, "When I feel romantic, then I'll start treating my husband romantically," or "I'll start treating my wife romantically"; those feelings will wait. But if you act in a certain way, those feelings will come. Just try this: go home and act nice to your spouse, and you will feel nice, and she will feel nice, and she will start to act nice. That's the whole principle of affirmation. Someone says, "But I don't respect my husband." Treat him in a respectful way, and when you treat someone in a respectful way, he becomes respectful. Don't say, "When he starts to act respectful, then I'll respect him." No. Treat him in a respectful way and you will find, that the results will be very positive. Do nice things for your partner, and watch the feelings come back.

And the fifth ingredient, resolve. Can you be counted on to keep a commitment? Remember, you made that commitment not only to your partner; you made it to God.

Now how do you develop a love that lasts? Well, I think the starting point is to resolve this issue of faithfulness once for all. "Regardless of what happens in my world, and regardless of what happens in my marriage, I will be faithful" -- absolute fidelity no matter what happens. Just make up your mind by the grace of God, "I will be pure." Be like the Psalmist who said, "My heart is fixed, Oh God; my heart is fixed" (Psalm 57:7). Make up your mind that there are sins that you simply will not commit.

And then, I think you ought to commit your marriage to Christ and ask Him to help you. Actually, it takes three to make a marriage. It's like a three-legged stool -- you, your spouse, and God. Why? Because God created the institution of marriage. Psalm 127:1: "Except the Lord build the house, its builders labor in vain." It takes God. Christ is the glue. He, and He alone, can hold your marriage together by transforming you into the person He wants you to be.

AMEN.