

Making Love Bloom Again – Part 2

Creating “sinner-safe” Marriages

Ephesians 5:21-33

May 7th, 2006

Have you ever been in the presence of a sinner-safe person? Have you ever experienced the liberating reality of being fully known and yet fully loved at the same time? When Julie and I attended a marriage renewal retreat, I met a man named Ron Vogt who modeled the perfect blend of being filled with truth and grace. At one point – the most painful time for me – Ron spent over an hour confronting me on stuff I needed to change in my life. He nailed me with tough love. And at the time it was almost as if Ron was performing spiritual open heart surgery on me as I listened to walk through the stages of surgery: “Okay, first of all, we’re going to cut right through your chest. And then we’re going to pull out your heart and your lungs and a few other organs just to be safe. Now we’ll lay them all on the table here and I’ll scrape your arteries, cleaning it all up and making it pump blood just like new. And, finally, now I’m reinserting everything and sewing you back up again.” Now the strangest thing was that through this entire process I felt utterly safe. I really had only one thought: I can trust this guy with the deepest, dirtiest things in my heart. I’m not afraid. He is treating my heart well. In his presence I can be fully known and fully accepted. Ron modeled what it means to be a sinner-safe person.

Of course Jesus was and is the ultimate sinner-safe Person in the universe. What does it mean to be sinner-safe? Perhaps a story from the life of Jesus will help. (See Matthew 9:9-11) ... Jesus never ignored the sin in our hearts, but for some reason people – especially religious outcasts – felt fully known and fully loved in his presence.

So as we get closer to Jesus, as we understand his heart, we will become more sinner-safe. But let me tell you one of the saddest things in the world: I’ve been a pastor for almost twenty years and I know from first-hand experience that being in the church can move us in the opposite direction. In other words, we become more religious, stiff, controlling, judgmental and less sinner-safe.

As we’re going to see in this passage marriage calls us into a sinner-safe. Marriage often acts like a mighty magnet that draws all the shavings of selfishness to the surface of our heart. So you can hide your sin from most people, but you usually can’t hide it you’re your spouse. But because marriage exposes our sin, God has also designed marriage as a **sinner-safe place** to change, grow and become more like Christ. Marriage has to be sinner-safe otherwise we won’t grow and change.

Only sinner-safe people can promote change. How do we create sinner-safe churches, and small groups? How do I become a sinner-safe marriage partner to my spouse? **First, by knowing that Christ loves us.** How did Jesus treat us? Verse 25 – “he gave himself up for us” – that’s referring to his entire life but it focuses on his sacrifice for us when he died on the cross. He gave himself up *for us* – He did it for us. But he not only loved us

and forgave us; he cleansed us from the dirt of sin in our lives – see verses 26-27. In other words, He knew all about my dirt and filth, and yet he still chose me, loved me, died for me and cleansed me. But please notice: He chose us before we were cleansed and beautiful. He chose us when we were covered with slime. Back up with me to Ephesians 1:4 – “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.”

If you’re a follower of Jesus, if you are trusting in him this morning, this is your story too. He loved you before you looked pretty or sounded wise or acted religious. Spiritually speaking, none of us were attractive. And yet, he died for us, he gave himself for us, he gave us a bath, he took away our filth, he made us new and clean, he adopted us as his children. (If you want a graphic picture of this truth, read Ezekiel 16:3-9). And no matter what I do, Christ will not remove his affection from me. I am the beloved of God the Father. That motivates me to repent. I can deal with anything in my heart. The Gospel tells me that I am “fully known” and “fully loved” at the same time.

Now in gratitude for his love, as the recipient of his love, as the object of his deep affection, as the beloved of God, I can allow Christ’s love to change my marriage. That’s the point in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 5 – “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and give himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” There is no fear in love and I have been “dearly loved” by God. Why do I flee from the truth about my sin? When relationships, especially marriage, draw my sin to the surface like shavings of metal, my tendency is to run, avoid, deny it or minimize it – all the regular defense mechanisms. The shame and guilt are too painful. So what do I do instead? I try to justify myself, defend myself – perhaps by blaming my wife. But the Gospel tells us so clearly that we don’t justify ourselves and that we can’t justify ourselves. Our justification, our righteousness, comes from Christ. So I can face and admit my sin and know that I am fully known and fully loved.

Of course, this has a very practical application in a marriage. Think of the last time you had an argument (or if you’re especially sanctified, think of the last time you had a “disagreement”). Go ahead, think about it. I would bet that somewhere in the midst of it all, you felt accused, misunderstood, attacked and treated unfairly. Your spouse flashed his or her sword and said, “On guard, you wretch. You never talk to me. Take that and take this.” So you probably took out your sword and said, “On guard yourself, you crazy person. Just three months ago we sat right here and talked for seven straight minutes.” Or perhaps you justify yourself by saying, “Crazy person alert: I’m off to the mall or I’m off to the basement to watch another episode of 24.” Either way, you’re trying to justify yourself. But when you’re trusting in Christ, you are justified already. He is your righteousness. See Romans 8:33-34. You can actually lay down your weapons, you can face your spouse’s feelings head on and say, “You may be right about that; tell me more and I’ll listen.” You see, our security isn’t what our spouse thinks about us; our security is in Christ. We become sinner-safe by knowing that in him we are deeply loved.

Which leads to the second way that we become sinner-safe people and sinner-safe marriage partners: **we confront our own sin first**. Why did God give us the church and Christian community and small groups? It's a safe place to deal with our dirt and sin. Why did God give us marriages? It's a safe community of two to deal with our dirt and sin and shame.

This comes as a shock to many people. We enter marriage with all kinds of hopes and dreams and longings. We're going to be best friends forever. We're going to be wild lovers forever. You're going to help me create a little castle, a refuge, where I can kick my feet up and rest, free from all the struggles of life. "And so (as author Mike Mason puts it) marriage becomes a form of institutionalized complacency, a hothouse of mutually nourished neuroses." God has another plan: marriage is God's gentle but powerful (and thorough) crucible to melt down our sin and turn it into gold. Marriage isn't "institutionalized complacency"; it's a mutual washing – not necessarily the washing of a nice bubble bath, but the washing that removes cuts and soothes wounds and bruises. We become an agent, a sinner-safe agent, of healing and cleansing in one another's lives.

But, unfortunately, we always want to start with this question first: what am I supposed to do with his faults or her faults? When you're dating someone you tend to think, "Faults in her? I could dig underneath the surface of her heart for fifty years, and I'd never find a speck of dirt on her." But married couples know that eventually the faults and the sin come to the surface and slap you in the face! How do I deal with that? How do I become like Jesus, a sinner-safe person? You start by spending more time looking at your own faults. You see, if you want to find your spouse's faults, you will. Actually, if you are married, you are the world's foremost authority on at least one topic - your spouse's sin. Isn't it great to be an expert? So every day you can use your expertise to judge, condemn and destroy your spouse. But Jesus gives us another way to live our lives, a path which is stunning in its simplicity and its difficulty. Here's the path: first and foremost, become an expert on your own sin (See Matthew 7:3-4). Jesus tells us, "Let me take that burden away from you; it's a burden you've been carrying most of your life: the burden of judging and condemning others. It makes you joyless and it makes everyone around you feel unloved and unsafe. It's really hard to enjoy life and judge people at the same time. Why don't you spend more time – much more time and energy – removing the plank from your own eye?"

Marriage will provide opportunities to apply this verse – like every day! I love what the 13th century spiritual writer named Thomas a Kempis wrote (remember this is from over 700 years ago): "If you have spoken to a man (or a woman) once and again without bringing him (or her) to a better mind, it is a mistake to go on nagging him, leave it all in God's hands ... Yes, you do well to cultivate patience in putting up with the shortcomings of others; only think of how much they have to put up with in you! When you make such a failure in organizing your own life, how can you expect everybody else to come up to your standards?" In other words, take the plank out your eye, buddy!

Marriage is a journey of spiritual transformation. Yes, it provides friendship and companionship. Yes, God designed it for sex. Yes, it provides the context for children. But it's also a place to deal with our sin. This scares people – ugh, I don't want to deal with my sin. But that is the essence of the spiritual journey. See Romans 8:29. Marriage isn't just about making me happy and comfortable; it's about making me holy. As someone has said, "On your wedding day you get the best present of all: a full-length mirror in which you can look every day and see what you are really like."

Story of the guy who retired – what is he doing? This guy does not have a clue what marriage is all about. He's as dense and as spiritually aware as an oak stump. Someone has to tell this guy what his life is all about: it can be a grand adventure of following Jesus, being forgiven by Christ, living your life for His glory and allowing him to expose and change your flaws and sin until you begin to radiate his goodness and tenderness and strength – not as a broken man but as a man who is broken and on his way towards wholeness in Christ..

Third, we create sinner-safe marriages by developing “future eyes.” Read verses 26-27. God wants us to become a “radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” Did you hear that? God has incredible plans for this church. God has incredible plans for you as part of this church. God wants to radiate his beauty and glory to the world through this church. And he wants to shine that beauty through us and through you. We're not just sinful people; we are God's people. We have been chosen in Christ. We are called to be radiant. To shine. To be without stain. God sees that in us. God sees that in you. And now God wants you to see that in your spouse as well. And husbands let me remind you: it begins with us. We don't wait for our wives to say, “Wow, you radiate God's strength and I respect everything about you.” It is their responsibility before God to live in respect, but even if you feel like Rodney Dangerfield (“I don't get no respect”), you start loving your wife like Christ loved the church.

Notice that there is glory here too. The husband, like Christ, does not try to twist and shape and manipulate his wife into some alien creature. No, he merely helps her become more herself, the redeemed and glorious self that God meant her to be. In Christian marriage, I don't just see my wife for the sinful person she is today; God gives me a vision for the glorious person she will become as Christ continues to work on her heart. One day, as C.S. Lewis once said, she will become a creature ... That is her destiny. That is my destiny. I am never called to just focus on the dirt; I am called to see glory, to be captured by her glory, to know that one day she will perfectly radiate the beauty of God's glory.

While we were on our marriage retreat, a man named Ron Vogt gently guided us and challenged us into God's view of marriage. At one point, as Ron listened to my wife's story (which by the way is a great story of redemption), Ron looked at me and said, “Matt, do you have any idea what a gift your wife is to the Kingdom of God?” And then tears started welling up in his eyes. Ron had a passion for Julie's present and future glory. He could see what Jesus could see. He could see that this was a woman who was and someday would shine forth and radiate God's glory.

A Christian husband or wife should have “future eyes.” Biblically speaking, “to fall in love” with my wife means that I fall in love the glory that she will radiate. Husbands and wives, do you see the glory of God in your spouse? Do you see the future glory? But do you have a foretaste, right now, of the glory of God in your spouse?

Fourth, then we deal honestly with sin. Remember the goal of verses 26-27. Remember the goal of Romans 8:29. What do we do if our spouse has some glaring spot or wrinkle. What if I’m dealing with my sin, I’m dealing with the plank in my eye, and my spouse still has some dirt in her eye? Should I just ignore it? Should I just pretend it isn’t that bad? Should I just enable my spouse to continue in sin and addiction or whatever? Married couples have the same calling that has been give to every member in the body of Christ. Listen to Galatians 6:1-2 and apply it to your marriage – “If someone is caught in a sin...” Let’s say the sin is workaholism or overspending or anger or bitterness or hardness of heart or prejudice towards people. How are we supposed to deal with that sin? “You who are spiritual should restore him gently.” I love those two words: restore and gently. “But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.”

If you never sin in your marriage, if you never argue, if you never get angry, if you never fight or disagree, if you never get hurt and disappointed, if you never feel like your spouse is stepping on your air hose of love or respect; you are either a saint or you’re just plain sick and shallow. You are married to a fallen and sinful spouse; and my spouse is married to a fallen and sinful person. We will fight. We will get hurt. There is no one who you will love as much as your spouse. And there is no one you will hate as much as your spouse. So sometimes you go at it. Sometimes we’ll need to confront each other. Sometimes your spouse needs tough love. But here’s the critical difference for the Christian who is married: we confront each other gently because we know what broken sinners we are. I know my sin. I know how sneaky, ugly, powerful and deceptive it is.

And furthermore, I know the depths of the mercy and forgiveness that Christ offers to me. Look, (verse 25-27) he loved me while I was covered in dirt. He washed me and cleansed me. He took the dirt off – he’s still taking the dirt off. He chose me before I was cleaned up. He still chooses me before I’m all cleaned up. Where do you find that kind of love? You will only meet that kind of love at the cross of Jesus. And when you begin to live under the cross – the place of being fully known and fully loved, fully lost but fully embraced, fully exposed in our sin and shame but fully forgiven and clothed with the righteousness of Christ himself – you become a sinner-safe person. Because when you live under the cross of Jesus, you discover the sin in your own heart. It all gets laid out on the table. Nothing gets covered up. When you look at the cross, you see the price – the horrible, ugly, messy, unfathomable price - that was paid to save your soul. And you know how that cross has led to your full forgiveness and your total acceptance by God the Father. So there is nothing that can shock or appall you about another human being. You will never stand and judgment and say, “Tisk, tisk” or “Well, I would never ...” Richard Foster quote.

This makes you a safe person. When you’re around a sinner-safe person you know it. You don’t feel anxious. You can relax. You don’t have to prove anything.

Are you a sinner-safe person? How do you become sinner safe? You start hanging around Jesus. You read about him. You listen to him. You spend time with people who love him. You allow his spirit to live within you? I didn't say, "Are you right on most issues? Are you spiritually correct? Are you knowledgeable about the Bible? Are you committed to the Lord? Are you a sinner-safe husband? Are you a sinner-safe wife?"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer quote. Are you a sinner safe person? (1) Know that you are loved. (2) That love creates a safety net so you can deal with *your* sin. And if your spouse points out your sin, you can say, "Thanks." (3) Deal with your spouse's sin honestly – but gently at the same time. (4) Deal with your spouse hopefully.