
What's up Traders Point family? It's good to see all of you. I want to welcome all our physical locations, overflow spaces, and those of you joining us online. I'm really glad to have you today. If you have a Bible, go ahead and find Song of Songs. It may be called Song of Solomon. It's the same thing. That's where we're going to be today.

Before we get rolling, I've got something to celebrate, and some information to share with you. It was hard to believe, but a year ago this Sunday we made the difficult decision to stop physical worship gatherings and go completely online when the pandemic started.

It was a year ago this weekend. We stayed online for six months, and then in September of last year we began to regather and rebuild the physical gathering. Our numbers have kind of gone up and down, depending on how the pandemic is going. But over the last four or five weeks we've noticed a significant increase in our physical worship gatherings.

In fact, I want to show you this graph to illustrate this. This has been since the beginning of the year, but just in the last month or so we've seen a significant increase in our physical gathering. Not today, because it's daylight savings. I hate today. I vote we change it to Saturday. All in favor?

Anyway, we just noticed a significant increase. I talk to people every single Sunday over the past five weeks who've said this is their first time back in a year, or their first time ever. They've joined us online during the pandemic and have come to one of our physical gatherings because they live in the Indy area.

A number of people have said Easter is going to be their first time to gather. All of this is great, we celebrate it, we give God the glory for it. It's really amazing to see. Yet, the problem is that we're running out of room. So, we're trying to be conscientious of everybody's comfort and safety. We have overflow spaces. Last Sunday we had more people at all of our physical gatherings than we've had in a year. We had people everywhere, in all the rooms we could maximize.

What I wanted to share with you is that we have prayed about this, talked to all the right people, and beginning next weekend in preparation for Easter, we are going to remove the every-other-row restrictions in the rooms. And, I want you to know if you're not quite ready for that, there are still going to be overflow spaces in and around the buildings.

Here is the reason why. We're not trying to like rush back to any sort of pre-pandemic normal. What we're trying to do is make room for people who are isolated, struggling, need community, and need to come. We don't want to turn anybody away, especially on Easter weekend. So, I just want to express my appreciation to all of you for your grace, understanding, and cooperation as we rebuild this and navigate it together.

If you missed last week, we started a new series of messages called *Rally Cry*. The big idea around this is that we want to rally around some significant areas of our lives that have taken a big hit in this past pandemic year.

Rally Cry: a word, phrase, or idea that brings people together in support of something important or worthwhile.

Rally cry is usually something that happens when our backs are against the wall. We want to rally around our families, our marriages, our relationships, the mission of the church because all of those things have taken big hits in this past pandemic year.

Last week, if you missed the message, we talked about rallying around our kids, grandkids, and the next generation. I said this: Your most significant contribution to the Kingdom of God may not be something you do, but someone you raise or influence.

And I've got to be honest. Last week's message kind of caught me by surprise with the kind of response and feedback I got. It was overwhelming. I had all kinds of people reaching out. It really struck a nerve. I don't know that I've ever preached a message on parenting that hit that hard. It doesn't surprise me because we've all taken some big hits in that area of our lives over the past year.

Well, today I want to talk about marriage. I've titled this message:

MARRIAGE: HARDER THAN YOU THINK, BETTER THAN YOU THOUGHT!

Lindsay and I will celebrate 22 years of marriage this coming June. I know you are thinking, "You don't look old enough to be married 22 years." I know, right. We got married when we were 12. It was Missouri, it was the 90's, it was a thing.

Lindsay and I would both tell you that our marriage has been harder than we thought it would be when we walked the aisle in June, 1999. And it's been better than we thought it could ever be. It's been both of those things simultaneously.

I've told this story before, but many of you haven't heard it. Several years ago, I was in my office on a Monday afternoon. My office has a window to the front parking lot. It's very glamorous. I was looking out the window. My wife walked out the front door walking toward her Suburban. I saw this as an opportunity to give her a compliment.

I texted her and said, "You look hot today." And she texted me right back and said, "I am at home right now. Who are you looking at?"

True story.

And I've got to tell you, the next minute felt like an eternity. What do I do? What do I say? And then she texted back one word, "Gotcha." She knows where my office is and she drove by really slowly in the Suburban. She rolled down her window and had her sunglasses on. She gave me one of these waves. You see, sometimes in marriage you've got to laugh because if you don't, you'll cry.

I know that just like last week, but in a different way, when you hear that I'm preaching on marriage or you read the title to the message today, it likely evoked a strong emotional response from you.

Now, I realize that many of you listening to this today, maybe you're happily married and you're like, "This is going to be great." Others of you are happily married, but that's because you've only been married for two minutes. Just buckle up, there are rougher waters ahead.

But for others of you, this is a bit of a challenging subject. Maybe there is an emotional response that comes when you hear this. Maybe because you're single. And traditionally the church has not spoken to you or about you in ways that were very helpful.

So, maybe you're here today and you are single and not yet married, but want to be one day. Maybe you're single, and you used to be married. Maybe you're single, and you don't really want to be married and have sort of resented the way the church, maybe unintentionally, has spoken to and about you.

And I just want to go ahead and address that up front. I just want to say this to you. Marriage is not ultimate. You are not an incomplete person without it. For starters, Jesus himself never married. He was single his whole earthly life. And he lived the most fulfilling life any human being could ever live.

Now, even with that said, let me say this. All of us are going to end up single one day. All of us married people will end up single because in heaven there will be no marriage. I know for some of you, maybe you've never heard that before and it blows your mind and makes you sad and confused.

And others of you, you have never heard that before, and you're celebrating right now. "That's amazing." And I don't have time to like unpack the theology around all that in this message just yet, but if you have questions about that just email rbramlett@tpcc. He's going to so get me back.

I know, on a more serious note, that others of you, this evokes a strong emotional response because maybe you are separated, divorced, or widowed.

Maybe this evokes a strong emotional response because right now you are stuck in a loveless, affectionless, abusive marriage relationship that feels hopeless. It just doesn't ever feel like you can please her. And it doesn't ever feel like he loves you well. You are doing everything you can right now to make this marriage work, and it isn't working.

Maybe you did all you needed to do to save your marriage, and you still lost it. And the result of that has been a sense of personal loss, loneliness, and guilt. Can I say that the church traditionally has not handled this very well either?

And unfortunately, many of you who have experienced divorce, whether you were to blame in that, you shared the blame, or maybe it was unwanted—you didn't want it, and it happened anyway. And maybe you got the message loud and clear from the church, "You're not welcome here anymore."

And can I just say that I'm so sorry. That is so counter to the heart of God the Father. In fact, Jesus one time is speaking to a woman from Samaria who had a string of broken relationships, and the guy she was currently living with, things were severely strained. Jesus spoke to her with tenderness, compassion, and a sense of redemption that completely changed her life.

Listen to me. God does not hate divorced people, he hates what divorce does to people. He hates the loneliness, the shame, and the guilt that oftentimes is associated with it. Do you know who else hates divorce? Divorced people. If you've ever experienced it, if you've ever gone through it, there is a new beginning and a new sense of hope God the Father wants for you.

I just want to thank you for hanging with me today as we talk about this subject. There's going to be some application for you regardless of your marital status or what you've been through.

Let me start with this, very similar to what I did last week. There is a reason why marriage is so hard, aside from interpersonal conflict and differences in personality. One of the reasons marriage is so hard is the unfortunate truth I shared with you last week to kick off this series.

It's simply this. We have an enemy who is real. He has a name. His name is Satan. And he hates you, and he hates your marriage. What they didn't tell you the day you walked the aisle all those years ago, if you're married, is that when you walk the aisle you walk right into his crosshairs. He wants to do everything he can be bring your marriage down.

Here is why. Contrary to what you have heard, marriage is not some manmade idea that's sort of been invented by society to make society a little bit more stable. No, marriage is God's idea. God designed marriage as a reflection of his nature and his love for you and for me. It is his crowning achievement. So, Satan is like, "That's your crowning achievement? I'll go after that." And it was one of the very first things he went after.

The Bible begins with a marriage and ends with a marriage. Here's what I mean. In Genesis we see God doing his thing in creation. He created the whole world, and he looked back and thought, "This is all good," except for one thing. Adam was alone. And so, it says in chapter 2, verse 21:

"So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. While the man slept, the LORD God took out one of the man's ribs and closed up the opening. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib, and he brought her to the man. 'At last!' the man exclaimed."

You see the sense of celebration and relief that Adam has in those words. Why? Because up until that moment he was lonely. Now there were animals around, and I'm sure that was great. But he couldn't emotionally connect with an animal. And all of the sudden he's got somebody standing in front of him that is beautiful. She is so much like him, but distinct from him.

He's like, "Finally, somebody who I can emotionally and physically connect with." Biologically, their bodies fit together forming an intimate connection. And then it says in verse 24:

"This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one."

So, the Bible begins with a marriage. Now, you fast-forward to the very last book of the Bible, and it ends with a marriage. John is on the island of Patmos, and Jesus is revealing to him, that's where we get the word Revelation, it's the revelation of the new heaven and the new earth from Jesus to John. He writes these words in chapter 19 verse 7:

"For the time has come for the wedding feast of the Lamb, and his bride has prepared herself."

Lamb is capitalized, because that refers to Jesus. The bride is us, his church. So, we see the Bible often uses marriage as a metaphor for God's relationship with us, with the church. And we see that it is meant to show a sacrificial love Jesus has for you and for me.

So, the Bible begins with a marriage, and it ends with a marriage. And smack dab in the middle of the Bible we get this unfiltered picture of the marriage relationship from Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon. And if you're not familiar with this great book of the Bible, you need to read it sometime.

This is a collection of anthems written by a married couple later in life as they are reflecting on the good times and the bad, the ups and the downs of their marriage relationship. There is so much we can learn from this, listen to me, regardless of your current marital status.

And the reason why I say that is because Song of Songs is not a romance novel. Song of Songs is a book of wisdom. It is one of the wisdom pieces of literature in the Bible. There is Job, which gives us wisdom about how to endure suffering. There is the Psalms, which is a whole collection of worship anthems written to God. We have been in that a lot lately.

There is Proverbs, which is principles of wisdom for daily living. There is Ecclesiastes, which helps us to understand an overall perspective of life. And then there is Song of Songs, which I find fascinating. It's a book of wisdom on romantic relationships and marriage, which we need more of, by the way, because many of us, our view of romance and dating has been informed by Hollywood, romantic comedies, romance novels, all of that. They all have their place.

But we don't use enough wisdom in our romance, dating, and marriage relationships. That is the intent of this book—to shed some wisdom on this really important subject. Because, here is the thing, even though your dating relationship or marriage relationship may start off steamy and kind of hot and heavy, it's not always going to stay there. It's not always inspiring.

And this was true for Mr. and Mrs. Solomon. Look at what it says in chapter 1, verse 2, at the beginnings of their relationship:

"Kiss me and kiss me again, for your love is sweeter than wine."

That's in the Bible you know. And then it goes on, and they are talking to each other. He says this:

"How beautiful you are, my darling, how beautiful! Your eyes are like doves." And she responds. "You are so handsome, my love, pleasing beyond words!"

We see on down:

"Like a lily among thistles is my darling among women."

And then she comes right back and goes:

"Like the finest apple tree in the orchard is my lover among other young men. I sit in his delightful shade and taste his delicious fruit. He escorts me to the banquet hall, and it's obvious how much he loves me. Strengthen me with raisin cakes, refresh me with apples, for I am weak with love."

I'm blushing reading this right now. And it gets much more R rated than that. I encourage you to check it out sometime. I would just say this is just a fun time in the life of every budding

relationship. It's like the sweet nothings, the flirting, the hot and heavy talk. I would highly recommend it, and I would highly recommend you keep it alive in your marriage relationship.

Lindsay, she is just no longer surprised anymore by how I can take ordinary things she might say to me around the house and I'll just make them sexual. She'll be like, "Honey, I think the tires need to be rotated." I'll be like, "I'd like to rotate your tires."

She'd be like, "Can you please unload the dishwasher?" I'd be like, "After I unload your dishwasher." She's like, "What does that even mean?" I'm like, "I'm reaching at this point."

So, it's a lot of fun, however not realistic, to think your relationship is always going to stay at that kind of hot and heavy steamy level year after year. Why? Well, because, you know, in life we go through changes. Circumstances change. Bodies change. Looks change. Beliefs change. Perspectives change. Feelings change. Jobs change. Emotions change. Finances change. Friends change. Kids for sure change. A whole bunch of things (can I get an amen?) making it really challenging, even for the most compatible of couples.

I love what pastor and author Tim Keller says about it.

"Marriage is the most vulnerable relationship there is—you get exposed for who you really are."

And that can be a good thing or a bad thing. You see, whenever it comes to our dating relationships many times we are presenting the best possible version of ourselves. It's like one long extended job interview. And this is kind of revealed when they asked a bunch of kids about dating and marriage relationships.

"On the first date they just tell each other lies...and that usually gets them interested enough to go for a second date." - Mike, age 10

"Why do people fall in love?"

"No one is sure why it happens, but I heard it has something to do with how you smell. That's why perfume and deodorant are so popular. - Jan, age 9

"When is it OK to kiss someone?"

"When they're rich." -Pam, age 8

"How can you make a marriage work?"

"Tell your wife that she looks pretty—even if she looks like a truck." - Ricky, age 10

"What's the right age to get married?"

"At 84, because at that age you don't have to work anymore and you can spend all your time loving each other in your bedroom." – Judy, age 8

You see, what happens in dating and courtship is we present the best possible version of ourselves. But in marriage it just isn't possible to hide, pretend, or cover up your flaws, weaknesses, and imperfections from this other person for very long. Eventually the masks come off.

Here's the deal. That isn't necessarily all bad news. The masks come off, which can be an opportunity for greater intimacy if you apply wisdom to the relationship. Or, it's an opportunity for greater distance, depending upon how you navigate it.

What was endearing oftentimes to you in your dating relationship can easily become annoying to you in your marriage relationship. And that's when we have conflict. This was true for Mr. and Mrs. Solomon. By the time we get to chapter 5, all the sweet nothings have disappeared. It's quite obvious a conflict has arisen.

He has moved out of the apple orchard and into the doghouse. Look what it says in chapter 5, verse 2. She says this:

"I slept, but my heart was awake, when I heard my lover knocking and calling..."

What I want you to see is this is a picture where she is in bed, but she can't sleep. Her heart is awake, meaning she is filled with emotion. She is tossing and she is turning. Maybe earlier that evening they got into an argument. She snapped at him. He said something mean about her mother. She stormed out. He slammed the door.

Maybe they've both been working a lot lately, and they've been missing each other. And perhaps the problem is they haven't been communicating very well. There has been this growing distance between the two of them.

But whatever the specific issue is, there is tension in the relationship. It's the middle of the night when he knocks on her door:

"Open to me, my treasure, my darling, my dove, my perfect one. My head is drenched with dew, my hair with the dampness of the night."

Now what I want you see is this is early morning. His hair is dampened by the dew. And he knocks on the door. This is his attempt at an apology, and she is not ready to receive his apology yet. Look at verse 3:

"But I responded, 'I have taken off my robe. Should I get dressed again? I have washed my feet. Should I get them soiled?'"

We know right there that she is not happy. She wants him to know it. This is a whole lot different than what she says in verse 16 when she invited him into her garden to taste its finest fruits.

And I think it's really important to be reminded of the fact that in every relationship, even very healthy ones, conflict is inevitable. Whenever you put two flawed, sinful, imperfect people together they are eventually going to hurt each other. They're eventually going to have a disagreement. They are eventually going to have these expectations they brought into the marriage relationship the two are not fulfilling. Now, listen to me. That doesn't mean that there is anything wrong with your relationship, or that you married the wrong person. Conflict is normal.

Some of you grew up in a home where your parents never let you see them fight. You just never saw them argue. And then you got married, and all of a sudden you had an argument and it rocked your world because you thought, "Something is wrong. Our marriage is messed up. Maybe I married the wrong person."

This unfortunately gets fed by a myth that is perpetuated in our culture. And the myth that will hurt all our relationships is this:

The myth of “The One”

And the myth of the one is that there is the perfect soul mate for every single person, and your primary job is to be on the lookout for the one. And even though we logically know that is probably not true, it still seeps into all our romantic movies. We’re like, “We’ve got to look for the one. They are out there somewhere.”

This got popularized by a movie in the 1990’s called *Jerry Maguire*. Some of you remember it. And Renee Zellweger and Jerry Maguire early in the movie get into this elevator. There is this couple that gets on. He is deaf and he signs something to this girl. And Renee Zellweger’s character knows what he says, but Tom Cruise doesn’t. She turns to him when they get out of the elevator. She says, “That was so sweet. He said that she completes him.”

And at the end of the movie, Tom Cruise, his character comes in. He walks in and he says to Renee Zellweger, “This was a very big night for us. This was a very big night for our little experiment in our company. But it wasn’t nearly as good as it could have been, because you weren’t there with me.”

He looks at her and he goes, “You complete me.”

And she says, “Shut up. Shut up. You had me at hello.”

And I have to tell you that out of everybody in my family, I’ll be the one tearing up at that scene. Because I’m like the hopeless romantic. *The Notebook* messes me up every single time.

The first time we watched *The Notebook*... I don’t know if you remember the opening scene. There were like these geese flying across the pond, or whatever. And I looked at Lindsay and I was like, “I don’t want to watch this. I’m going to be asleep in 10 minutes.”

At the end of the movie, I’m balling like a baby and I look at her, “I’m going to buy a journal, and we’re going to record our love story just in case you ever catch the amnesia. I’m going to read it, and you’ll come back to me.”

I’m a hopeless romantic, alright? So, I hate to burst the bubble of other hopeless romantics, but the whole idea of you-complete-me is a steaming pile of garbage. It just is, for all kinds of reasons.

Now, besides the mathematical logic of it, if there is only one person perfect for you, all it takes is one person to get it wrong, and then it messes it up for everybody. Aside from that, here is why this myth is so damaging for single people:

It shifts the focus from BECOMING to FINDING

So, our whole focus is, “I’ve got to find the one. I’ve got to find the right person who is going to complete me,” when the Bible has a whole lot more to say about the kind of person you’re becoming.

If you ever get a group of teenage guys together and say, “Just describe your dream girl,” they are going to describe a unicorn. They are going to describe somebody who is as beautiful as

Selena Gomez, has the godliness of Mother Theresa, and the sense of humor of Zooey Deschanel.

And you're just like, "Wow guys, that is amazing. She is incredible. She doesn't exist, but she is incredible. And if you ever find her, she ain't going to marry you because you don't have a job and you're playing too much Call of Duty."

Listen, the Bible says nothing about finding the right person. It says a whole lot about becoming the right person. It's found in every page. I recommend you read it sometime, but I'll give you the cliff notes version:

If you BECOME the right person, you'll ATTRACT the right person.

If you become the right person, you'll attract the right person. Can I say it this way? This might be a little hard to follow. Become the type of person the type of person you are looking for is looking for.

Here is why. Marriage does not make your problems go away when you find the one. What marriage does is it magnifies the problems you already have, as well as theirs. You've got two imperfect people looking to complete each other with all their problems and baggage, it's a recipe for disaster.

Now here is why this myth is so problematic for married people:

It shifts the focus from WE to ME

Here is what I mean. You'll begin expecting your spouse to do some things for you that they just cannot do. Those words from Jerry Maguire, "You complete me," sound so amazing until you stop and think about the amount of pressure that puts on another person. It places a tremendous amount of weight and expectations on an imperfect, flawed human being. And he cannot possibly fulfill them every single time. And you're setting yourself up for failure.

You see, in all relationships, and this is true in marriage in particular, you will either live from a place of for-filling or from-filling. Think of like an empty cup. I'm either going to live from a place of filling a cup, or I'm looking to have my cup filled.

All of us walk into a relationship, even just friendship, with these questions running the back of our mind. Will you make me happy? Will you take away my loneliness? Will you ease my insecurities? Will you give me peace, comfort, and safety?

Here's what those questions sound like in a marriage that is struggling. You're not loving enough. There is not enough time. There is not enough support. There is not enough help. There is not enough affirmation. There is not enough affection. There is not enough sex, not enough spontaneity, not enough money, not enough emotional connection, not making me happy enough.

And do you know what sound it makes when two empty people come into a marriage relationship looking for each other to do something for them that only God can? The sound that makes is a large sucking sound that eventually will suck your marriage dry.

Dr. Henry Cloud puts it so well when he says this:

“Marriage, while it is an utterly unique relationship, was never intended to be the place where someone gets all of their needs met. An unresolved dependency on another person for my completeness and happiness is death to my marriage, and I need to stop looking for the spouse that I want and start loving the spouse that I have to give my marriage a chance to be great.”

At this particular point, because I haven't said anything about this yet, I want to offer this disclaimer right here. I'm not talking about dysfunction and abuse. Anything outside of that. I'm talking about your normal day-to-day imperfection, flaws, simple mistakes.

Here's the deal. When God fills your cup, you put him in the one spot and your spouse in the two, so you are living from a place where you both have something to give. According to God's word, it's not two halves that become whole, but two who become one. And if two halves walk into a marriage, they don't make a whole. They make a hell.

Here is what living from filling will do. It will give you the emotional reserves and spiritual insights to face conflict and navigate it together in a way that fuels intimacy rather than stifles it.

In Lindsay and my relationship, it has been not just the times when we've been on vacation together on some beach somewhere that we felt the closeness and had great intimacy. Those are great. But it's been the times when we've been in conflict and had to get face-to-face with each other and communicate. It was hard, but when we broke through that, that's when we had our greater moments of intimacy.

And you come back to Mr. and Mrs. Solomon. They get into this conflict, and they go back and forth. She gets her friends involved, and thankfully her friends give her really, really wise counsel. Listen to the conclusion that she comes to at the end of verses 10-16:

“My lover is dark and dazzling, better than ten thousand others! His head is finest gold, his wavy hair is black as a raven. His eyes sparkle like doves beside springs of water; they are set like jewels washed in milk. His cheeks are like gardens of spices giving off fragrance. His lips are like lilies, perfumed with myrrh.

“His arms are like rounded bars of gold, set with beryl. His body is like bright ivory, glowing with lapis lazuli. His legs are like marble pillars set in sockets of finest gold. His posture is stately, like the noble cedars of Lebanon. His mouth is sweetness itself; he is desirable in every way. Such, O women of Jerusalem, is my lover, my friend.”

She comes down to this conclusion that is really at the foundation of every solid relationship. She realizes they have been in conflict. They are working their way through it, and she lands on the truth. He is her friend. And this exposes another myth that can be detrimental to so many dating and marriage relationships:

The myth that “romance” doesn't have much to do with “friendship”

This myth gets perpetuated in adolescence, particularly with us guys. It goes both ways, but probably more guys have this story than the ladies do. You see that girl in the hallway, she catches your eye, and you start hanging out with her. You sort of declare your attraction or affection towards her.

And then she looks at you and says the words that are like kryptonite to your heart. She says, "I just like you as a friend." And you are like, "Oh," and all of a sudden right there you got banished to the friend zone. And something developed in your mind in those early moments that you are either friends or you're romantic, but never the two shall meet.

This is really unfortunate. And many of us, we just have just sort of carried that into our other relationships. Here is why this is so unfortunate. Friendship is so critical in the foundation of your relationship, and in the ongoing nature of your relationship.

There is a phrase that oftentimes gets used in our society when you get married to someone. It is called tying the knot. You tied the knot on your wedding day. The definition of a knot is this:

Fastening made by interweaving material designed to bear a load

So, when you tie a knot it is designed to bear a load. How many of you have ever tied a knot? Maybe you've been moving, maybe you tied a knot on the trailer. You were going down the road, there were lots of bumps, you hit a pothole, and all of a sudden you see stuff falling out on the road because the knot came untied. And you don't just go, "Well, I tied it once. It should hold." No, you actually go back and re-tie the knot and strengthen the knot.

Many of us, when we got married, we tied the knot and we thought the knot would hold if we found the one. If we married the right person, the knot should hold. We've kind of been conditioned in our culture to fall in love. Here's the deal. Anybody can tie the knot and anybody can fall in love. All it takes to fall in love is just chemicals and hormones. But to stay in love requires a decision and commitment. And many of us thought the knot would hold.

But then we experienced some changes in life. And we went through some seasons of real struggle, difficulty, and challenge in our marriage relationships. And the knot came lose.

One of the things I've heard from a lot of couples over the years, whether they found themselves in my office talking things through, or if they'd been in a season of conflict for a long, long time. They tried everything. They'd been to counseling, therapy. They've read books together. They've been in and out of a pastor's office, and they just look exhausted. They look up at me and they'll say, "It just shouldn't be this hard."

And with all compassion, I want to look back and say, "Where did you hear that? Where did you get that idea?" It's going to be hard even if you're completely compatible. Why? Because I'm a sinful, flawed, broken, imperfect human being, and so are you.

It's going to be a struggle. But, you know what? Anything worthwhile in life is worth the hard work. Can I just say I'm not talking about dysfunction? I'm not talking about repeated unfaithfulness. I'm not talking about abuse. But aside from those things, when did you ever get the idea it was supposed to be easy?

A professional baseball player doesn't walk back to the dugout and go, "Man, it just shouldn't be this hard to hit a fast ball." A surgeon shouldn't say, "It just shouldn't be this hard to do open heart surgery." A woman in labor never says, "It shouldn't be this hard to give birth to..." Well, maybe she does.

But for all of us, anything that is worthwhile in life is going to require some effort. And it's going to be a lot of hard work. Tying the knot is one thing, but you've got to come back and re-tie the

knot over and over and over again, through ongoing and consistent communication, connection, and maybe periodic counseling.

Now listen, you've likely heard all that before. But all this fits under this umbrella right here:

The key to keeping "the knot" tight in your marriage is friendship.

Don't just work on your marriage, but work on your friendship. Begin to think about it that way. Many times, our marriage relationships get into trouble because we've been neglecting the friendship for far too long. We just sort of drifted from each other. Like when we were dating and courting, we were great friends.

Guys are notorious for this. We study the girl we're going after. We know her favorite drink at Starbucks, her favorite color, her favorite flowers, her favorite movie. We are constantly just thinking about her and how we can woo her. What are we doing? We are taking a great interest. And then, once we finally get married, we're all like, "We've got her." We stop chasing her and stop pursuing her.

Ladies, you oftentimes in dating relationships will speak words of courage into that man. You'll admire him, you'll love on him. And then you get married, and maybe the focus gets directed toward somewhere else.

What ends up happening, and we don't mean for it to happen, is we just slowly begin to drift. The friendship gets picked away at little by little but little by little.

There are three postures to every marriage relationship:

Back to back: adversarial...defensive...blame

There is another posture:

Shoulder to shoulder: glorified roommates, business partners trying to raise a family

Then there is:

Face to face.

This is what we want to continue to come back to on a consistent basis. We're going to get back to back sometimes. There are times when we're going to argue and we're not going to see eye to eye.

We're going to be shoulder to shoulder. The calendar is coming. We've got to get the kids around to do their appointments. We've got work responsibilities.

We've got to keep going back to face to face. It's intentionally making time to communicate and connect. You begin to ask the question, "What are the keys to my spouse's heart?"

This is where date nights come into play. This was like—when was the last time you took a vacation with your spouse without kids? Hey, if your kids are along, it's great, but it's not a vacation, it's a trip. You need a vacation just with your spouse to re-connect.

Guys, this means lots of non-sexual affection. This is a hug with no other strings attached. If you think of something kind to say to your spouse, don't just think it, say it. Text it right then, "I was just thinking about you today. You do such a good job with the kids. You work so hard. I'm so grateful for you every single day."

Ladies, I know many of you are married to a man and he is not the spiritual leader you want him to be. My heart goes out to you. Can I just say he will not become the spiritual leader you want him to be by you continuing to tell him he is not the spiritual leader you want him to be? Here's why? He becomes what you see him as. Did you know that? He may not let you know this, but your opinion of him matters more than anyone else in the world.

Listen, as soon as I get done preaching every Sunday, after I talk to a few people in the lobby, I go back to my office. That's where I meet my wife and my kids. Usually we kind of huddle up. It's usually the first time I've seen them during the day because I usually leave before they get up. And then we'll go to lunch.

I just sit in my office like this. As soon as Lindsay walks around the corner, I'm like, "What did you think?" I just want to know what she thought of the message. If she walks in and she says, "Aaron, that was incredible. God really spoke to me through that. That message was so powerful." That's all I need to hear. I don't care what you all think. "My wife thought it was good." I just want to know what she thought.

Ladies, you have no idea the power of your words.

Oftentimes, the thing that will help restore sick marriages back to health is just a couple beginning to work on their friendship again. When was the last time you looked at your spouse and said, "Will you be my friend?" I know it kind of sounds corny, but maybe that's the place to begin, especially if things have begun to disintegrate.

You know in John 15, Jesus talks about this. John 15, if you are familiar with that, is often called the vine and the branches. Jesus is giving us insight into how we grow spiritually. He says, "It's not about what you do. It's not about how much you achieve. It's everything to do with remaining connected to me. Abide."

And he goes, "I'm the vine, and you are the branches. All the branches have to do is stay connected to me." If you go and read John 15 later today, one of the things you'll see is that Jesus uses these three words over and over again. Remain in me. Remain in me. He keeps saying it over and over again.

Half way down he switches it and says, "Remain in my love." And then he says these words in verse 12:

"This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends..."

What an amazing statement by Jesus, himself. This is God in the flesh, who is using friendship to describe how we remain in him. I want you to see how this works:

Cultivate your faith by strengthening your friendship with God.

You want to grow in your faith? Then grow in friendship toward God. Jesus says, "That's simple. Spend lots of time with me." That's why we talk all the time about getting people to Jesus. It's not just something we say. It's what Jesus, himself said about cultivating faith.

Cultivate your romance by strengthening the friendship with your spouse.

And I know right now maybe some of you are in a marriage relationship, and your horns are so locked up with each other, you are cross-eyed looking at each other. Take a deep breath, push back from the table. Say, "What would it look like if we just begin to work on our friendship again and see what would happen from that?"

Not long ago I was talking to a pastor friend of mine, and he was telling me about a married couple in his church who were separated. They'd been married for over 10 years, had kids, been in and out of counseling. He had moved out.

It was their first time to get together in several months just to talk. And both of them were hurting. They didn't know fully what to say. They talked for about two hours trying to just sort through some stuff.

At the very end of the conversation, she said it was very awkward to say goodbye. She said, "We'd been married for over 10 years, but now we hadn't seen each other for several weeks and we didn't know how to say good bye. Do we say, 'I love you?' Do we hug. Do we high-five? What do we do?"

She said, "My husband picked up on that. It was very awkward, like we were dating again. He just simply looked back at me and very tenderly said, 'Can we pray?'" She said those words hit her with a flood of emotion, because he had never asked her that question before.

And maybe that's where you can just begin to rebuild. Maybe right now you could just go home. And you just keep running into dead end after dead end after dead end in your marriage relationship.

One of the things I'm just perceiving in this past pandemic year, I've talked to couples and they've said, "We've never felt closer. This pandemic brought us so close together."

And then other couples who have said, "This actually pulled us further apart." There is very little in between. And maybe right now your heart is like, "This is pulling us apart."

And maybe where you begin is you can go home today and simply say, "Can we pray?" Can we pray? Can we just cry out to God? You've done everything, read all the self help books, talked to your friends, and gone to counseling, but you haven't prayed. What if you just got down on your knees together and prayed? And ask God to give you're the strength to build your friendship. And that's where it's at.

And I'll tell you what will give you the strength to do this. When you get right with God. When you come back into relationship with Jesus. And maybe today, that's the first step you need to take so the next step can be reconciliation with your spouse. You can simply text the word Jesus to 87221 and our team would love to come around you and help you take those next steps.

Hey, can I just tell you this? I know this is a heavy message. I know it's super-emotional, especially if you're in a troubled relationship right now. I love you. I love you, and don't give up. There is a God who loves you way more than I do, and he is the God of second chances.

Let's pray.

Father, we come to you right now. I thank you so much for this church and these people. I know this is a tough subject to listen to for all kinds of reasons, but God I pray that your Spirit would give us just what we need to hear.

And I pray we would have the courage to apply it to our lives. And to not take one more step without crying out to you and asking you for the strength only you can give. We want to abide in you. We want to stay connected to you so that we can live from a place of fullness rather than emptiness.

So, God please hear our prayers and our cries in this moment together. I pray God that you would simply declare to Satan right now, "You don't touch our marriages." That right now you would bind them and protect them, because we know there is an enemy that wants to bring them down.

So, we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.