

## “Love Handles” / Sermon 2: For Better or Worse / May 26, 2019

**Key Texts:** Romans 2.7-8; James 1.2-4; James 1.14; Galatians 6.9; Romans 5.2-4

**Key Words:** Better, Worse, Richer, Poorer, Sickness, Health, Wuss Warnings, Quitters, Marriage, Marti, Perseverance, Gary Thomas

**Summary:** As in our life with God, a healthy, God-honoring marriage requires “perseverance.” The “happily ever after” is on the other side of the better and worse, richer and poorer, sickness and health.

Truth and grace. We don't always get there, but that's our goal: God's truth, and God's grace, with no equivocation on either. We're going to shoot for both this morning.

Now, I'm going to start off by showing you some verses I don't like too much. These verses are ... bothersome. Because they pretty much guarantee that doing life God's way is going to be hard. Listen, I really believe that being a Jesus follower is the best way to live ... way better than any other way. It'll make your life better, and it will make you better at life. And if there really is a God, and if Jesus really is the Son of God - and I think he is - then following Jesus is just right!

But these verses pretty much guarantee that it won't always be easy. I'm going to call them “Wuss Warnings.” I like the word “wuss.” I use it quite a lot ... right up there with poppycock, and steroids. According to the dictionary a “wuss” is someone who “fails to do something as a result of fear or lack of confidence.” A wuss is a coward, a wimp, a whiner, a quitter, a deserter, a weakling. And these verses kind of say that Jesus following isn't for spiritual wusses. Listen to a few of these:

- This one is from James, the human brother of Jesus. First, he says, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds ...” Oh joy! And what's hard is that James doesn't say “if” - if you ever face a trial; he says “whenever” - whenever you face trials of many kinds. “They're coming,” he says. But it's okay, he says, “Because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1.2-4) Now that's a Wuss Warning?
- And then a few verses later James says, Blessed is the one who perseveres (who perseveres) under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life...” (James 1.14) Well, I'd rather not have to

“persevere” under trial. That sounds hard. But it’s coming, James says. That’s another Wuss Warning - don’t back up, back off, back down, back out, or backslide, he says!

- How about this one; this one is from the apostle Paul. He says, “Don’t get tired of doing what is right, what is good - don’t get tired of doing the right thing. Because at just the right time we will reap a harvest if ... if ... if ... we don’t give up.” If we persevere. (Galatians 6.9) That’s a Wuss Warning. You’re going to get tired of doing the right thing; you’re going to want to quit. Don’t, he says, ... it’s not worth it!
- Just one more. There are a boatload of these. The apostle Paul says, “We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials ...” Sounds like he’s been talking to James, the brother of Jesus, doesn’t it? Same stuff! He says, “because we know that problems and trials help us -- they help us -- develop endurance (perseverance). And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation.” (Romans 5.2-4) Ah! So this perseverance is linked to salvation, somehow. Which means the stakes are high! Wuss Warnings.

Well, what if ... What if these Wuss Warnings don’t just apply to how we behave out there, spiritually; what if they apply to how we behave in here, and maybe even, at home, relationally ... with your husband, or your wife. Let me read these verses one more time, and think of the context of a home.

- “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds ... at home. Because you know that the testing of your faith at home produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you two may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1.2-4) There’s a blessing on the other side of your trials ... if you persevere ... God’s way.
- Or how about this one: “Blessed are those husbands and wives who persevere under trial because, having stood the test, these people will receive the crown of life...” (James 1.14) Because sometimes, if there’s no blessing in this life, there will be an amazing one in the next! And we Jesus followers live for the next life too.
- Or this one: “Don’t get tired of doing what is right with your wife; Don’t get tired of doing what is good for your husband ... because at just the right time you will reap a harvest if ... if ... you don’t quit.” (Galatians 6.9) Is that a strategy, or a guarantee?
- Last Wuss Warning: “We can rejoice when we run into problems and trials in our marriages ... because they’re coming! “Because we know that problems and trials will help us -- develop endurance (perseverance). And

we know that endurance develops strength of character, and we know that character not only strengthens our marriages, it strengthens our hope of salvation.” (Romans 5.2-4) ... ..

A couple minutes ago I suggested that Jesus following isn't for spiritual wusses. Well, it seems to me that marriage isn't for relational wusses - if you're going to build a healthy, God-honoring marriage.

So ... here's the myth, the fairy tale, the Hallmark version of reality. “And they lived ...” you know the rest of it! “And they lived ... happily ever after.” Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel, Shrek, Princess Bride, and a thousand others ... in our fairy tales. You find that perfect one, you overcome some daunting obstacle, and you live together happily ever after, right? Right?! Really??!!

Well, whoever composed our wedding vows centuries ago wasn't taken in by our fairy tales. The best I can tell, our traditional vows go back a thousand years, maybe more. Here's the earliest English form I found (Sarum Manual): “I \_\_\_ take thee \_\_\_ to my weddyd wyf, to have and to holde fro thys day forwarde, for beter for wers, for richere for porere; in sykenesse and in hele [health]; tyl dethe us departe ... and thereto I plycht the my trouthe.” For better, for worse; for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health ... Husbands and wives have been vowing that for millennia. That's no fairy tale, that's real life. If you persevere long enough, chances are you'll experience every one of these ... together: better and worse, richer and poorer, sickness and health. And there is a “happily ever after” ... but you get to it by persevering through these; not by going around them, but by going through them. It's been that way since the beginning.

Now, before I go any further, I need to say a couple things.

- First, this morning I'm going to focus on the dark side of marriage. I'm going to focus on the hard times, the painful times, the valleys and the deserts of marriage. And every marriage will have them, if it lasts. If there were no dark times in marriage - we wouldn't need perseverance.
- Second, some of the things I am going to talk about this morning may be very painful for some of you - because some of you have experienced unfaithfulness. And some of you have experienced broken marriages. Some of you are in a God-dishonoring marriage right now. I don't want anyone to wallow in guilt this morning because of what we're talking

about. If you have been unfaithful in the past, if you've been divorced, if you are struggling in the present, it's not going to do you any good, or God any good, for you to fixate on things you can't undo now. That's what grace, and forgiveness are for. I want to focus on how we go forward God's way - not on our past.

Now, in some ways this "till death do us part" part is getting harder. Two reasons. Reason #1: We're getting better at not dying. For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health - till death do us part ... When the traditional wedding vows were first written, they only expected to have to keep them maybe 20 years, then one of you will likely be dead. Childbirth, disease, accidents, war ... People just didn't live as long. Julie and I will reach 45 years together next month. One hundred years ago, both of us would be dead by now. We are alive because of advances in our medical care. How many of you guys would be dead by now if it weren't for the medicines and the medical care we have now? This "till death do us part" is taking longer than it used to.

But there's another reason, a more sinister reason, that this perseverance is getting harder. A lot of folks just aren't trying very hard to persevere ... any more! In fact, A lot of folks in our world don't even see "sticking it out" in a tough marriage as a worthy goal! We have been called a nation of quitters. Some people hop from job to job because they have no perseverance when things get tough. Some bosses quit on their employees if profits dip, just a bit. A lot of people hop from church to church at the slightest provocation. Some people quit on faith altogether, when God doesn't end up behaving the way they think he should.

But maybe the place where our propensity for quitting is clearest is in our marriages. I showed you the numbers last week. Over 40% of first time marriages end in divorce; 60% of second marriages; almost 75% or 3<sup>rd</sup> marriages. And those numbers don't count the deadbeat husbands and wives who walk out on a spouse without bothering with a divorce. And they don't count the number of people who cohabit without marriage at all. By the way, did you know that those who live together before marriage "to see if they're compatible" increase their odds of divorce in marriage by 50%! They're not making it better; they're making it worse! Their "logic" doesn't hold! Neither do these numbers count the number of people who stay married on paper but who quit loving and respecting and serving each other. We are a nation of quitters ... and it's killing us ... relationally, financially, spiritually.

And, do you know what bothers me more than those numbers? If you are a Jesus follower, your odds of divorce are no different than for those who do not call Jesus their Lord. In fact, if you are a conservative Christian - some people say your odds are higher! Folks, that just shouldn't be. God calls us to a higher standard: A higher standard in how we love each other, how we treat each other; and He calls us to perseverance ... for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness, and in health ... Because if you can make it through those, there is, God says, a ... "happily ever after."

Now ... one of the pictures of God in both the Old Covenant, and the New Covenant is that God is kind of like the perfect husband, and God's people are the ... not so perfect wife. If you were to picture your relationship with God as a marriage, that would work, wouldn't it - he's the perfect husband, and we're the not-so-perfect wife? Well, especially in the Old Covenant - the Old Testament - it was an extremely rocky marriage. There were times when the relationship was sweet - times when Israel was madly in love with God. But there were also times of great anger and frustration - when God allowed other nations to punish his bride. And there were times of infidelity - when Israel turned her back on God and made love to others. And ... and there were times of excruciating silence.

Which kind of sounds like most marriages, doesn't it? At least those that persevere. There are times of joy and celebration, times of frustration and anger, there are times of infidelity - at least in the heart. I have never cheated on Julie physically; but Jesus says that if a man looks at a woman other than his wife with lust in his eyes, there is infidelity in his heart. By that standard ... most of us guys, and probably you ladies, don't fare so well.

And in most marriages there are these painful times of silence. Sometimes those times are harder than the better and worse, the richer and poorer, the sickness and health. So often our marriages are neither good nor bad; they just are. And sometimes we get tired of the routine, and sometimes our souls grow numb towards each other.

Well, did you know that there are no pains in your marriage that God has not felt ... with you? There is nothing you are experiencing that God does not understand. And do you know what held the relationship between God and Israel together? God's perseverance. When Israel turned her back on God, God didn't turn his back on Israel. He may have stepped back from time to time, created some space, but God never quits ... on us.

Do you know what has held your relationship with God together? It hasn't been your perseverance. It has been God's. When you have turned your back on God - and you have, many times -- he never turned his back on you. He may have stepped back for a time - but he has never quit on you, or me. Which is what he wants more of from us: Perseverance - a God-like perseverance -- a sticking in there during the good times, and during the bad times - and during all the rest of the times when things are neither all that good, nor all that bad.

Here's a guy who did it right ... God-like. True story. Her name was Marti, and she brought an enormous burden into her marriage. It wasn't her first sexual relationship - so she knew the pain that came with brokenness and separation. She struggled with feelings of insecurity - she couldn't get over the perception that conflict leads to breakup, and breakup leads to pain.

Well, after several years of marriage Marti and her husband began fighting over money - did you more marriages are broken over money problems than probably any other cause ... except maybe sex? Weeks of "vigorous discussion," sometimes outright yelling, drained their home of joy. Having been through a failed relationship, with all her insecurities, Marti couldn't imagine that her marriage would survive. Struggles like these, in her mind, led to a breakup - so she secretly began mourning a relationship that had not yet died.

Until one night, in the middle of an argument, her husband did something so profound, so powerful, she will never forget it as long as she lives. He wrapped his arms around her and he said, "Marti, you need to know that no matter what we decide or don't decide, I'm never going to quit on this marriage. Even if we have to live with this tension for the rest of our lives, I will never leave you."

She burst into tears as she told the story. Even with their issues, she didn't want her marriage to end - and now he was promising again that it wouldn't. And suddenly their problems seemed less immense. They found great meaning in the simple fact that their marriage would survive. Perseverance - a God-like perseverance, a God-honoring perseverance.

Well, I want to take what time I have left and drill down into two verses, that will transform our marriages God's way ... if we let them. They were written by the apostle Paul, in what most would call his finest letter. Most people don't read these as marriage verses; but perhaps we should. Romans 2.7-8, here they are: "He (God) will give eternal life to those who keep on doing good (persist in doing good), seeking after the glory and honor and immortality that God offers. But God will pour out his anger and wrath on those who live for

themselves (who live for themselves), who refuse to obey the truth and instead live lives of wickedness.” Three pieces.

Piece 1: Persistent good matters. At first I was going to say, Only persistent good matters, but I’m not sure that’s true. But this is true: Persistent good matters. Paul says, “He will give eternal life to those who persist (who persist, who don’t quit) in doing what is good.” Did you know that true righteousness, true goodness, true holiness is measured over time by your persistence? It’s easy to flirt with goodness. It’s easy to be courteous to other drivers occasionally, when we are in a good mood. It’s easy to help someone out by opening a door for them, if we have the time. It’s easy to throw a few extra bucks into the offering plate once in a while, as long as we won’t miss them. And it’s easy to be occasionally good - occasionally good -- to a husband, or a wife; to hold your tongue occasionally, to be gentle and considerate occasionally - often enough you can say you’ve tried. But real goodness isn’t measured by the times it is easy, or convenient, or a strategy. Real goodness is persistent. It’s a commitment to doing the right thing even when we feel pulled in the opposite direction. It is not occasional, it’s persistent surrender to God’s way. Do you buy that? Well ... God does.

Piece 2: Eternity matters. Paul says, “God will give *eternal life* - eternal life! -- to those who persist in doing what is good, seeking after the glory and honor and immortality - immortality -- that God offers.” Did you know that perseverance doesn’t always make sense unless we live, not just for the present, but for eternity?

You see, I know that sometimes perseverance is painful. Sometimes doing things God’s way will make us less happy and will bring us less pleasure in the short run, than doing things our way. But in the long run, doing things God’s way will always - always ... always -- bring his pleasure, and his glory, and his honor, and his immortality. And any sacrifice we make for God here will be infinitely small compared to the wonder of what he has in store for us, someday.

So ... preparing for eternity by sticking with a difficult spouse makes a whole lot more sense than destroying a marriage that can be saved and risking God’s displeasure. Most divorces are initiated by someone running from at most a few difficult decades, and risks the glory and honor that last an eternity. Folks, that is a horrible trade.

You see - listen, this is hard, but some of you need to hear this: The Bible doesn't promise the crown of heaven to the person who has had the happiest life here on earth. "I have the right to be happy," right; "even if it make your life miserable?" Poppycock! God doesn't award ribbons to the Christians who have been able to avoid the most pain. True goodness is proven when it is hard; we persevere because we don't just live for this life. We live for another, infinitely more precious.

Piece 3: Eternity matters (on the other side too). God will make things right. Paul says, "God will give eternal life to those who persist in doing what is good, seeking after the glory and honor and immortality that God offers. But ... But he will pour out his anger and wrath on those who live for themselves, who refuse to obey the truth and practice evil deeds." Eternity matters.

Gary Thomas is one of my heroes. His book, "Sacred Marriage," is one of the best books on marriage I've ever read. In that book he tells a story of woman he met. He flew into town to speak to a church, or at a conference, or something, and he was picked up by a woman and her small son. He was in his speaking clothes, and when they got to her van it was filthy. He was horrified that if he sat down, his slacks and his coat would be stained. So terrible, selfish thoughts, he said, began rolling around in his head: "How could this woman let her van get like this when she knew she would be picking me up?"

Within hours, he said, he found out she was divorced - a single mom. And then he found out that she was in the middle of chemotherapy. She got so sick she could only work one day a week, as a waitress. Then she would spend the rest of her week trying to gain enough strength to go in and work another day to make enough money to support herself and her three kids. ... And yet this woman had sacrificed her time, and her energy, and her money to taxi him around town. She was a hero. The embarrassment he might feel from having his clothes smudged paled compared to the challenges this woman was facing and the service she was offering him.

And then ... then he began to think about her husband. How could a man let his wife and children go through something like this alone? What kind of man, who had promised before God to be there for better for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health .... What kind of man would let the one he chose and the ones he fathered go through something like this alone?

Of course, when he divorced her - he didn't know. He couldn't have known she would get cancer. ... But that's the point. We don't know. None of us can see

into the future. This woman had set aside her career and had raised his children. She had made herself vulnerable to him. He didn't know what would happen when he left her, and them. But he didn't think of that! He thought of his own right to be happy, his own pleasure. The Bible says, "God will pour out his anger and wrath on those who live for themselves - who live for themselves, who refuse to obey the truth and practice evil deeds" ... somehow, some day, God will. Do you think this guy qualifies? Would he qualify as living for himself? I don't know what motivated him to leave his wife and kids; but is there any chance he was refusing to obey the truth and practicing evil deeds?

Guys, on this one the Bible - both covenants, old and new -- are crystal clear. Malachi 2.16: God says, "I hate divorce." Jesus said, "Moses permitted divorce only as a concession to your hard hearts, but it was not (it was not) what God had originally intended." (Matthew 19.8) Now, I know, God permits divorce in some circumstances. There are times when it is the least bad option. But the fact is, He hates it, because it means at least one of his kids refused to love another of his kids God's way. And our Father only permits divorce in places where sin has so mangled the relationship that his children can not, or will not put it back together again in a way that honors him. Occasionally divorce might be the right choice for a Jesus follower; and as a pastor I have counseled separation, and I have counseled divorce. But only after fighting a war to put things right God's way.

The Bible says, "God will pour out his anger and wrath on those who refuse to obey the truth." And the truth is, God hates divorce. It's amazing how many Christians leave their spouses and their kids for a new relationship, all the while trying to maintain the illusion that Jesus is Lord of their life. Our culture looks at divorce as courageous, and romantic, good for the kids sometimes, or just "a little thing." Our culture sees divorce as an easy way out. God doesn't.

Now, I said at the beginning of this sermon that some of the things I would talk about this morning may be very painful for some of you - because some of you have experienced unfaithfulness. And some of you have experienced broken marriages. And some of you are in the middle of a terrible, God-dishonoring marriage right now. And I don't want anyone here - anyone - to try to shame their partner into persevering while treating them in a God-dishonoring way. If someone abusing you, you need distance from them; safety.

And listen, I don't want anyone to wallow in guilt this morning because of the stuff I've gone over. God's ideals are high, but so is grace. If you have been

unfaithful in the past, if you've been divorced, if you are struggling right now, it's not going to do you any good, or God any good, for you to fixate on things you can't undo now. That's what grace, and forgiveness are for. Now is the time to start a new, God-honoring path. Some of you have fought, unsuccessfully, to stay married. None of this is meant to brand you as a failure. Instead, thank you for trying so hard, even if you didn't succeed. Here's the deal: God sets the bar high. We are not going to lower it. And when we fail to clear it, his love is relentless, his grace is amazing!

Just ... don't settle. Don't settle for less than God's dream for you, and his dream for your marriage. God is so great with do-overs. It doesn't matter where you've been, what matters is where you are with him ... right now ... and where you're going ... and how you finish. With his strength, just try loving each other his way!

This table is powerful evidence of the love of God and his incredible faithfulness to us. And this table is a place where we commit to that same kind of love and faithfulness to each other. In fact, unless we are committed to that same kind of love and faithfulness, we cannot experience the fullness of the blessings God wants to pour out on us. Use this time to give thanks to God. And use this time to commit yourself to loving the people in your life God's way.

Invitation ...

If you a victim of abuse, let's talk; we'll try to help  
If you want to work on marriage, we'll pray for you, and well try to help  
If you just want to come in and complain about your spouse, or if you're just looking for someone to bless you for quitting on a marriage that can salvaged, you probably wouldn't want to talk to us.

We will do whatever we can to share both God's truth, and God's grace.