

## **“Love Handles” / Sermon 4: “Forsaking all others” / June 9, 2019**

**Key Texts:** Exodus 20.14, 17; Matthew 5.27-28; Jeremiah 17.9; Mark 7.21-22; Proverbs 4.23; 1 Corinthians 6.18; Proverbs 5.18-20

**Key Words:** Forsake, Till death, Infidelity, Affair, Adultery, Contract, Covenant, Heart, Guard, Path, Purity

**Summary:** We wrap our “Love Handles” series with a focus on “Forsaking all others, till death do us part.” Although some question whether that is possible or a worthy goal, it does reflect God’s will and is part of his growing us into the “godlike” creatures he meant us to be. It’s a choice we make, to like outside ourselves.

So today we’re going to wrap up this little series we’re calling “Love Handles.” How does a God-honoring love handle ... a marriage. And we’ve been walking through the wedding vows. Whoever put these together was pretty smart, and husbands and wives have been making these same promises to each other, literally, for over a thousand years. -- To have, and to hold ... from this day forward. For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. To love, and to cherish. This is about building a great marriage, in real life. This is no fairy tale “happily ever after.” How do you do this stuff in a God-honoring way? And this morning we wrap it up with: “And forsaking all others, keeping only to you, as long as we both shall live.” So ... did you make that promise? Did you mean it? Have you ever wondered whether it was a stupid promise? Or whether there are any loopholes?

“Forsaking all others, keeping only to you, as long as we both shall live.” I was goofing around last week and I found a few memes that were ... pertinent.

- How about this one: “Til death do us part. ... I’m on it!” Any of you guys marry that girl? I did. That’s a picture of Julie, 45 years ago.
- Or this one: “Joe, a nice man married for over 50 years dies. His wife, Sarah, was left devastated by the tragic loss. After a couple of months, Sarah also died. Once she reached heaven, she anxiously looked for her husband all around. Suddenly, behind a cloud, she could clearly see Joe with another woman. She ran towards him calling, “Joe ... Darling ... Joe!” Joe said, “Stop right there woman. And don’t “darling” me! The marriage vows were clear!”
- Or this one: “Till death do us part, or (till) you become a zombie. Then I’m shooting you in the head.”
- One more. “A couple was sitting down for dinner when the husband went to the fridge for a soda. He stood in the open doorway for several seconds before exclaiming, “We’re out of soda!?” the wife sighed and

said, “You are absolutely helpless!” Then she went to the fridge, moved some items out of the way, and pulled out a soda. Handing it to her husband, she said, “What would you do if I were to suddenly die tomorrow?” the husband, not even missing a beat, remarked, “I’d start rehearsing my alibi and then work to make sure I get acquitted.”

Now I think those are funny. But what would it sound like if we morphed the vow we made to what a whole lot of us actually do.

- “And forsaking all others, keeping only to you, as long as our love shall live.” Is that more reasonable?
- Or, “Forsaking most all others, keeping mostly to you, as long as our love shall live.” That sound crazy! But it’s how a lot of us live!
- Or, “Forsaking all others physically, keeping only to you physically, as long as our love shall live.” Because we think that as long as it’s not physical, then it’s not adultery, right? ... Right?!

But most of us promise more than we deliver, I think. Or, at some point we wonder whether our promise was wise. If you discover that you made a bad promise, should you still keep your word? What do you think? Children promise all kinds of things they can’t deliver. As adults we have all promised things we couldn’t deliver. Is this one different? We stand there, before God and men, and swear: “Forsaking all others, keeping only to you, as long as we both shall live.”

- Solomon was considered the smartest man in his world. He said, “If you make a promise to God, keep your promise.” (Ecclesiastes 5.4) Would this qualify?
- Moses said, “If a man makes a vow to the Lord that he will do something, or swears an oath that he won’t do something, he must not break his word.” (Numbers 30.2) Does that matter to you?

And I suspect this is a promise most of us meant, once. But, a lot of us get kind of squirrely. You’re thinking, what if you change your mind? Or, what if you learn that he or she isn’t the person you thought they were? Or, what if you no longer “love” the one you promised yourself to? Would it be hypocrisy to keep that promise? Or, what if your heart leads you to another? Wouldn’t your heart trump your promise? We are quite skilled at finding loopholes, we think.

According to an article published by CBS news last year, 93% of us Americans think that infidelity is morally wrong, it is morally unacceptable. That’s a pretty solid majority - way beyond just us Jesus followers. In fact, most of us

think it is one of the worst moral wrongs. “She cheated on him!” “He cheated on her! Crucify the bum!” “And they have kids!” It’s a sin that fires us up!

And yet ... it’s hard to pin down the numbers, they are all over the map ... And yet, according to one article I found in Psychology today, about 50% of our marriages will experience an affair. And I think they are only counting the affairs that are “physical,” and I’m not sure they are the only ones that count ... with God. So, we all think it’s wrong, but we still go there. And when we go there, we usually ... not always, but usually ... we convince ourselves that we are the exceptions. It’s wrong for most people, most of the time, but not for us, this time. This is right ... for me. And in the long run, this will be better ... for you ... and the kids.

Of course, there are some who are wondering whether “forsaking all others, and keeping only to you, till death do us part” is even a worthy goal. For some, it’s little old-fashioned, quaint, prudish. Even a little stupid, because it’s ... “unnatural” ... some are saying.

- They say stuff like: Forsaking all others needlessly limits a person’s romantic and sexual experiences, leading to disappointment, resentment, and heartbreak. So go for it!
- Or, Like most all the other animals, we weren’t made to be “monogamous.” And ... after all ... “It’s just sex,” right?
- One person wrote, “People say it’s unnatural (to keep yourself only to one), impossible, outdated, stifling - and sometimes, Yes it is! Especially if your wedding anniversary now contains two digits.” That sentiment is growing like a weed.
- Another one wrote, “I think some people are non-monogamous by orientation, and if they try to force themselves to be monogamous it’s going to hurt.” So, “Till death do us part” is misguided, unnatural, stifling, impossible ... right?

And yet, is their alternative working? There is this Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale. They use it to measure how much stress a person is feeling, and even to predict when it starts breaking a person down. It measures 43 different stressors: stuff like a serious illness, being fired, going to jail, a foreclosure, a kid leaving home, all the way down to things like the stresses of Christmas. The top 3 stressors: Death of a spouse, divorce, and separation. They tear people up, they break people down. Not forsaking all others, and not keeping only to you, till death do us part, is right there in 2, and 3. And you know the pain it causes, and the ripple effects we try to convince ourselves won’t happen, in our case.

But despite how hard it is to keep that promise, and despite those who are trying to tell us that the promise is stupid, there is still something in us ... We have this hunger, this dream of a “happily ever after,” this “till death do us part.” If not with this one, he has to be out there somewhere ... or she! We still stand there and make this promise, hoping it’s more than a fairy tale.

And as Jesus followers, it’s not just a wish, a hope, a fairy-tale like dream; it’s the will of our God. Do you buy that? It’s what he meant, it’s what he wants, it’s where he leads us ... if we’re willing to follow. In the old covenant with God, it was one of the big 10. Commandment #7: Thou shalt not commit adultery. (Exodus 20.14) And in case you missed it, it’s reinforced by Commandment #10: Thou shalt not covet your neighbor’s wife. (Exodus 20.17) Not a lot of loopholes there. And Jesus just raises the bar. He says, “You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” (Commandment #7) But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman (other than his wife) lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” ((Matthew 5.27-28) So don’t go there!

But ... But ... is it even possible to live that purely? On the other hand, no matter how hard it is, should we lower the bar? Should I promise to forsake most others, most of the time, till our love doth depart.” No ... that’s not going to work. So, how do we Jesus followers go after this one?

Let’s start here: You legal guys in here are probably going to quibble, because legal guys like quibbling. But a lot of people treat their promise like a contract. A contract is kind of an agreement that stays in effect as long as both parties deliver. They are kind of based on a mutual distrust. Here’s what I’ll do as long as you keep up your end of the deal. And if you don’t, here are the consequences. A contract is about protecting yourself, kind of like a pre-nup. Basically it’s rooted in someone’s distrust.

But a marriage vow isn’t a contract, it’s a covenant. The language is covenantal, not contractual. A covenant isn’t based on distrust, it’s based on commitment. It’s not about protecting my interests, it’s a promise to protect yours. ... We don’t talk much about covenants today, as much as we talk about contracts; but they talked about them a lot in the Bible. In fact, “Old Testament” and “New Testament,” testament just means covenant. The Old Testament contains the “Old Covenant” God made with us, and the “New Covenant” gives us the new covenant with God, through Jesus. A covenant is

an unconditional, binding agreement between two people in the presence of God; or with God.

Sometimes they'd seal a covenant with this weird, but graphic ceremony. The word for covenant in Hebrew -- "berith" -- literally means "to cut." They would "cut a covenant." Sometimes they would actually cut some animal in half. Then they'd walk between the two halves saying this, "If I break my covenant with you, may God do to me what I've done to this animal." "May God tear me in two if I break my vow to you." That would add a little spice to a wedding, wouldn't it?

In a marriage, it's a promise to surrender my rights, and to protect yours. It's not about me, anymore. It's not about what I want, what I like, what I feel. I am committed to you, what you want, what you like, what you feel. ... Think about it: I made a covenant with God, too -to live for what he wants, what he likes, what he feels. And Julie and I made a secondary covenant with each other. What our spouse wants, what our spouse likes, what our spouse feels. But that's a hard promise to keep? Because all of us have this ravenous "self" in us nudging us to follow ... not our God, not even our own minds ... but our heart. And following your heart will take you to some really bad places. Do you buy that?

I know, you hear that poppycock all the time, don't you? "You have to follow your heart!" And they say it as if it's obvious, as if it's true. And it's not! It's a lie from hell. It will destroy you, and it will destroy people around you, and it could even tear you away from God. Do you buy that? Do you really?

Maybe you don't agree with the prophet Jeremiah, but here's what he says. He says, "The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?" (Jeremiah 17.9) Is that true for yours? Sometimes it's a whole lot easier to see that in others than to admit for ourselves. But, if there is any truth to that at all - and I suspect that there is - why would we want to follow our hearts? Jesus put it like this. He said, "For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness." (Mark 7.21-22) Do you recognize any of that in you? And if there is any truth to what Jesus said, at all why would we want to follow our hearts?

We buy into profanities like these ...

- “I have never really loved you.” Which means you are either self-deluded or you’re a liar! And if there is any truth in it at all, “Shame on you!” Love is a choice! What you are saying is that you have never chosen to love her, or him, like you promised you would.
- Or we buy into this profanity, “But I don’t love you anymore.” As if love is something you fall into like falling into a ditch, and fall out of, like falling out of your bed ... instead of something you choose. We’re not animals, guys. We were made in the image of God! We don’t have to follow our hearts. We can follow God, instead.
- Or we buy into this profanity, “But I’m not happy, and I have a right to be happy, don’t I?” As if my happiness gives me the right to crush your happiness, and your security, and your hopes and dreams. As if my happiness gives me the right to disobey my God, my Savior, my Lord. As if the happiness I pursue for myself will exceed the happiness he wants to give me. Really?!

All these profanities come from following your heart, instead of guarding your heart. That’s how King Solomon put it, the guy who was supposed to be the wisest man in his world. Solomon said, “Guard your heart above all else, (above all else!) for it determines the course of your life.” (Proverbs 4.23) Don’t follow your heart, “guard” it. Watch what goes in, and watch what comes out. You are not an animal. Of all the creatures of this earth, you are the only ones God could say this to: “Guard your heart.” It’s not about what feels right, it’s about choosing what is right ... as determined by our God.

So, let’s get down to where the rubber hits the road. “Forsaking all others, keeping only to you, till death do us part.” How do we keep our word, our covenant. Because eventually, your world and your heart will try to undermine that promise. So how do we do it? First, we need to understand how that temptation works. Second, we need to nip it in the bud. The further you go, the harder it gets to do the right thing, the God-honoring thing.

First, understand what’s happening. Here it is: Most guys and most ladies don’t plan to violate their vows. Now a few do. There are a few who think that “forsaking all others” is quaint, and unnatural. And their goal is play around - and the more the merrier. But good men, and good women don’t plan to violate their vows. For most good men and good women, it’s almost as if there really is a tempter, a Satan, drawing us in! There is! And there’s a path he usually leads us down. Do you understand it?

- It usually begins with someone we're close to: we work in the same office, or our kids play on the same ball team, or we go to the same church, maybe we're in the same life group. "We just had so much in common, it was uncanny."
- And then, at some point, for some reason, we start comparing this person to our spouse: "He's so 'spiritual.'" Or, "She really takes care of herself." Or, "He's so thoughtful, way more than the jerk I married!"
- And then, at some point, that person starts noticing you back, and it's nice! They give you attention, they see your value, they give you the encouragement that you're not getting so much anymore ... at home. "He understood how I was feeling." Or, "She admired me and treated me like I was special. It felt so good." Ever been there, felt that? Is it adultery, yet?
- And then, at some point, you start looking forward to being with that other person, and you start thinking about them when they're not around ... as you're getting dressed, or driving to work, or daydreaming. Is it adultery, yet ... when your heart starts drifting to another?
- And then there are the lies, or maybe just "shading the truth," as maybe - not always - maybe your spouse starts getting suspicious. You pretend you're not smitten. When he asks, you hedge. Have you ever lied to a spouse to hide your feelings for another person?
- At first, it's platonic, non-physical ... but often it starts drifting. A little flirting, a little teasing. Instead of a glance, the eyes linger. Instead of a touch, the hand lingers. Is it adultery yet? Most people who are doing it don't think so; most of their spouses do think so. So do I.
- And then usually, it gets more personal. They begin confiding in each other, sharing their fears and dreams, drinking in each other's understanding and comfort. They become emotional confidants. Words that belong to a spouse are given to another. Is it ... adultery ... yet?! Usually they still don't think so; because it's not physical, which is the line ... they think.
- And then, as the emotions get deeper, so do the touches. An arousing touch, or squeeze, or hug. Not intimate yet, but it's heading there. Now even the most callous of us have to admit that lines have been crossed.
- And then maybe then there are the special little messages, or the special little gifts. The encouraging notes, or texts ... if you can figure a way to keep them hidden. And still, for many ... good people ... the denials. Because the farther we go down this path, the more irrational we get. We are quite skilled at fooling ourselves into thinking there is nothing really wrong. We can be so stupid.

- By this time, we have played out in our minds all of our spouse's inadequacies. We have convinced ourselves that we need this new person in our life. After all, we have a right to be happy, don't we? And I don't think I ever really loved my husband, or my wife - at least like I love this one. Is it adultery, yet? Even if you haven't gone all the way yet, physically.
- And when they get this far, getting it stopped pretty much takes an act of God. And what used to be one - we promised, becomes two, and the new two become one.

And then there follows the pain, and the shame, and the guilt ... overwhelming you, and those you had promised to love. And then there is this distance you feel from your God. And then there is this distance you feel from those of God's people you used to be close to. They used to be so close; but now they are like a nest of fleas in your bed of silk. So, if you hang on to God, often you move to another group of Jesus followers, where you don't feel so ... "judged."

And eventually, I hope, there comes this sense that we have settled for way less than God's dream. Not because your new passion is inferior to your old one, but because you sense ... you blew it. Guys, we were created in the image of God. Which means, of all the creatures of this earth we are the only ones who do not have to follow our hearts. And when we learn to live for someone bigger than ourselves, and for others we value as much as ourselves ... When we break the grip of self, we grow into something magnificent. In fact, we become ... godlike ... like we were created to be.

That's the path; and it captures so many of us. So, rubber hits the road, how do we pull it off, this "forsaking all others, and keeping only to you, till death do us part? Well, right off: nip it in the bud, the sooner the better; run away - no matter what your heart is telling you! It's not about trying to find the line so you can go up to it but not step across. If you are looking for the line, you'll cross it. Guys, our passion is stronger than our will. Jesus said, "Our spirit may be willing, but our flesh is weak." If we start down the path, it's nearly impossible to stop. So don't start. And if you are on it, get off it, right now! Run away!

More specifically, I'm going to give you four prescriptions. Are you ready?

Prescription #1: (This one is for you single folk) Fight for premarital purity. Our ability to be faithful in marriage is shaped by our desire for purity as a single. The apostle Paul says, "Flee sexual immorality." "Run from sexual sin." (1

Corinthians 6.18) That's that grab-bag word that includes you singles. It's about porn, sexting, heavy petting, premarital sex, friends with benefits, cohabiting. Guys, save it for marriage. Sex is God's gift to marriage. In marriage it's safe; in marriage it's pure; in marriage it builds up, instead of tearing down. Listen:

- Guys, immorality before marriage is another word for premarital adultery. When you singles commit sexual sins today, you are cheating on the person you will marry later. You are giving away your marriage partner's exclusive rights to your body. I know that's a new idea for some of you. Think about it!
- And listen, guys, when we choose to live outside God's standards before marriage, we actually condition ourselves to violate God's standards later, in marriage. We are shaping our character. If you keep on giving in to sin as a single, it will be that much harder to say no to sin when you're married. And it will tear you apart, and your kids apart, and the one you promised to love forever apart, and it will rip your life with God apart.

So, fight for premarital purity - and it will be a war, because our world will think you weird, and will pommel you with temptations.

Prescription # 2: Fight for marital purity. Guys, we wallow around in the dirt and wonder why it's so hard to stay clean. The apostle Paul says, "Flee sexual immorality." "Run from sexual sin." (1 Corinthians 6.18) Which is so hard, because it's all around us.

- The internet has brought porn into virtually every home, and the number of us getting caught up in it are staggering. If you are struggling with porn, there are porn filters that will not only block the sites, but send a report of where you've been to a couple friends who will hold you accountable.
- And maybe we need to do a little more screening of our TV habits, and movie habits, don't we? Some shows are just ... bad. You might find temptation easier to fight if it's not so readily available.
- And we have to be so careful with our other sex friendships. They are not bad: You ladies can have guy friends and you guys can have lady friends. But it's not wise to make them your closest friend, your confidante, without your husband or wife there. And if you sense yourself taking even the first steps down that path we were talking about - run away. Built a wall! You see, if we want to, we can develop feelings for someone other than our spouse quite easily. But we can choose not to. We can choose to run away when we start to feel that tug. We don't have to "follow our heart."

Prescription #3: Keep investing in God. This one is huge. Guys, in the face of sexual temptation, we nearly always push God away. We have to. But if you want victory in your battle with sin, you need God. Listen, temptation is stronger than we are; our will to sin is stronger than our will to be pure. We can't defeat our sin; but God can. If we stay in the word, if we stay connected with other Christians who can keep us accountable, if we respond when God convicts us of sin, we'll find the strength we need to win this war. Invest in God. When people start drifting towards adultery they almost always start drifting away from God. You keep pursuing God, and he'll keep you sane.

Last one, prescription #4: Keep investing in your marriage. I love the way Groeschel puts it. He says, "When the grass starts looking greener on the other side, water your lawn." The Bible puts it like this: "Rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer— may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love." (Proverbs 5.18-20) Some of you guys are thinking - A loving doe? A graceful deer? - Maybe a few years ago, or a few decades ago, but that's a bit of a stretch now! Some of you ladies are thinking - A powerful buck? A majestic stag? - Maybe a few years ago, but his parts don't fit together quite like they used to. But the point is this: keep drinking from your own well, keep watering your own lawn. A man and a woman can have a powerfully good marriage, a powerfully sensual marriage for a lifetime, if we keep investing in our marriages.

Okay. Let's wrap this up. "Forsaking all others, keeping only to you, as long as we both shall live." If you are married long enough, you'll face the temptation to violate your vow, your covenant. I'd be surprised if there is anyone in this room who hasn't battled these temptations, or these sins in the past, or who isn't battling one of these temptations, or one of these sins right now. For the past, guys, there is grace. We have an amazingly gracious God. Ask his forgiveness, and accept it.

But some of you are battling those sins today, hard. And some of you are losing that battle. Some of you are way down that path of adultery. The further down the path you are, the tougher the decision you have to make. What I will ask you to do today, what God is challenging you to do today, may be the toughest thing you have ever been asked. Run away from the one who is pulling you away from your family and your God, and run back to your God, and your family.