

“Love Handles” / Sermon 3: To Love and To Cherish / June 2, 2019

Key Texts: 1 Corinthians 13; Song of Solomon; Romans 12.2; Philippians 4.8

Key Words: Love, Cherish, Neuroplasticity, Agape, Choice, Sacrifice, Hug, Royalty

Summary: We promise to love, and to “cherish.” What’s the difference? And how do we do it? A very practical exploration of the art of “cherishing.”

Listen, I do still love my truck. It’s been the best vehicle I’ve ever owned. A 2008 Honda Ridgeline. I bought it new, and over the past 11 years I’ve put over 190,000 miles on it. And I still want a couple more years out of it. But I do treat it a little differently now than I did back then. It was brand new! So, “Do you need a ride? I got you! Hop in my truck!” ... I would talk as if I had this servant-heart or something. But I really just wanted to show it off! I treated it with such tenderness, carefully avoiding the potholes. I took care of it so meticulously. When that light would come on telling me it was due for an oil change, I’d pull over to the shoulder on the Interstate and get it done - right there, right now! If it got dirty, I’d wash it, vacuum it, wax it, polish it. I ... “cherished” my truck. ... And you should have seen me when I bought some new golf clubs: Ping i3, cavity back, oversize irons; Callaway Heavenwood Hybrids ... I know how to cherish! ... But why is it we are often better at cherishing things ... than people?! Ever watch a girl show off her engagement ring? She cherishes it! Wouldn’t it be something if, 10 years later, she was showing off her ... husband ... like that?

Now I’m going to steal most of my “big ideas” this morning from Gary Thomas. He has written some great books on marriage, worship, Christian living. And he opens his book called “Cherish” with a story of Khanittha Phasaeng (I guess). Apparently they call her “Mint.” She won a beauty pageant in Thailand, and it changed her life: film, advertising, television contracts. But what made her internationally famous was this photograph, when she honored her trash-collector mom by kneeling at her feet, on the street, in front of the trashcans.

That’s what her mom did to raise her family. She would scour the trash, and sell whatever was sellable. So, when “Mint” got back from her win -- still dressed in her gown, and tiara, and sash -- that’s where she found her mom - by the trash bins. And she bowed at her feet, to honor her mom. And that picture blew people away! But without shame, “Mint” called her mom’s trade an honorable profession, that kept her family from starvation, and she praised her mom’s commitment, and her care. How cool is that!

Guys, that's cherish! She didn't just give her mom a shout-out on her Instagram page, or send her a thank-you card, or give her a careful hug so as not to muss up her dress. No, she just dropped to her knees in front of the trash cans and bowed to an old woman in plastic shoes. Respect, adoration, gratitude, honor. Going out of her way to show respect, adoration, gratitude, honor. She believed it in her mind, she felt it in her heart, and she expressed it physically. Because that's what cherish does.

Now, this is week 3 in a series we're calling "Love Handles." It's not about these, I've got some good ones, I'm an expert on these!" No, it's about how a God-honoring love handles some pretty tough stuff. And our focus in this series is on marriage. The principles go beyond marriage, but our focus is on marriage. To have and to hold, from this day forward ... How does a God-honoring love do that? For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health ... How does a God-honoring love do that? To love and to cherish ... That's today. What's that even mean? What's the difference? And finally, forsaking all others, keeping only to you, till death do us part? That's next week.

To love and to cherish ... Now, we pastors usually focus on the "love" part, because people in our world are so confused, so messed up about what a God-honoring love really is. Most people think the kind of love that really matters is a feeling; you've either got it, or you don't. You fall into it, or you don't. But the most powerful kind of love is not a feeling ... that is not the kind of love that will hold a marriage together. Sometimes we pastors talk about the 3 or 4 different words for love ... in the Greek. Because the Greeks were smart enough to understand that there are different kinds of love.

- There is eros. Eros is the love of passion, romance, sensual desire. Eros is the kind of love we ... love.
- And then there is philia. Philia is a love between friends. It's the kind of love you have for someone when you stand shoulder to shoulder with them and do something good together.
- And then there is storge, which is Greek for a "family kind of love." This is the love we have for people just because they are blood, just because we are related.
- The fourth Greek word for love is agape. Have you heard that word before? Agape. The Greeks didn't use that word for love very often until Christians came along. But agape was the word we settled on. That's the kind of love that became most important to us. Not eros; or philia; or storge - but agape. It is an unbreakable commitment kind of love. It is a

selfless kind of love. It's an unconditional, a self-sacrificing kind of love. It's not as much a feeling as a choice we make. We choose agape, whether someone is loveable at the moment, or not.

- It's the kind of love God has for us - unconditional, sacrificial love. The Bible says, "God is agape." (1 John 4.8) God is love. God will never not love you ... because that's who he is, that's what he does. And agape is the kind of love he tells us to give each other. And agape is the kind of love that will hold a marriage together ... till death do you part. It never quits. It's the love that takes over when the other kinds fade ... for a time. They come and go; agape sticks.

That's the love part, but what's this cherish part mean? To love ... and to cherish. How is cherish different from love? And how can you promise to keep on cherishing? Is that something you can control? And what if this "cherish" part really is a huge thing, a difference maker? What if getting this one right is transformational - relationally, emotionally, spiritually, and even physically?

Listen, you don't park a brand new, 2008 Honda Ridgeline on a manure pile. But, it wouldn't bother me now. I still love my truck, with an unconditional, selfless kind of love - agape like. But I don't cherish it like that anymore. In fact, I haven't washed it in months. And I don't invite people to ride very often because, (1) It's pretty dirty, inside and out, and (2) The back seat is just covered with stuff. I love my truck, but I don't cherish it ... much.

Listen, the way we treat something ... the way we treat someone ... reveals whether we cherish them ... or not. In this one, words without the actions are meaningless. To cherish is go out of your way show it off, protect it, honor it. We want others to see, and to recognize, and to affirm the value of what we see, value, and honor. If it's a person, we want to protect them. We want to protect them physically, emotionally, spiritually. We want to protect their reputation, their happiness, their joy. If it's a person we want to treat them with tenderness, and look for ways to nurture them. If it's a person we'll even try to indulge them occasionally ... to do those things that bring a smile to their face, a warmth in their heart.

In his book called "Cherish," Gary Thomas compares love and cherish by comparing the love chapter - 1 Corinthians 13, with the love manual - the Song of Solomon. 1 C 13 is all about agape; the Song of Solomon is kind of like a Hallmark movie or a Lifetime movie on steroids ... at least it was back then. It doesn't work as well today. Here are some pick-up lines from the Song of Solomon. Ready guys? You may want to write these down.

- Try this one on the love of your life: “Your hair falls in waves, like flocks of goats frisking across the slopes of Gilead.” It works! I used that one on Julie. Got me a second date!
- Or try this one: “Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn, coming up from washing. Each has its twin; not one of them is alone.” Now that’s hot stuff! She’s got all her teeth!
- Or this one, “Your breasts are like twin fawns of a gazelle, (cute little things) feeding among the lilies.” That one got me smacked.
- Or this one, “Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon, looking toward Damascus.” Try that one out on your babe! It could work!?! It’s in the Bible!
- Or this one: “You are tall and slim like a palm tree. I will climb up into the palm tree and take hold of its branches.” You’ve got to laugh at that one! And, you ladies can use that on a guy, too!

That stuff’s free. Well, here’s that Gary Thomas does: he contrasts the love of 1 Corinthians 13 with the cherish of the Song of Solomon.

- “Love ... is patient and kind.” (1 Corinthians 13.4) Which means agape is gracious, and it’s mannered, and it’s selfless.
 - Cherish says, “Your love is better than wine, your perfume more fragrant than spices.” (Song of Solomon 4.10) Because cherish is captivated, entranced, enthralled.
- “Love ... does not envy, and it does not boast.” (1 Corinthians 13.4) Love tends to be quiet, understated, modest, minimalist.
 - Cherish says, “My lover is dark and dazzling, better than ten thousand others!” (Song of Solomon 5.10) Cherish boasts loudly, and boldly.
- “Agape love ... is not proud ... and it is not self-seeking.” (1 Corinthians 13.4-5)
 - But cherish ... “Let me see your face; let me hear your voice. For your voice is pleasant, and your face is (so) lovely.” “You blow me away!” (Song of Solomon 2.14) Cherish celebrates your lover.
- “Agape love ... does not delight in evil.” (1 Corinthians 13.6) It never wants the worst for someone. Which is huge!
 - But cherish ... Cherish celebrates the best in someone. “How beautiful you are, my darling! (Honey Bunch, Baby Cakes, Cuddle Muffin, Snuggly Bear, Angel Baby, Sugar Lips) Oh, how beautiful ... you are!” (Song of Solomon 1.15) That’s cherish!

- Agape love ... Agape love puts up with a lot. A God-honoring “Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.” It perseveres.
 - Cherish ... well cherish enjoys, in the moment. “His mouth is sweetness itself; he is desirable in every way. Such, O women of Jerusalem, is my lover, my friend.” She’s bragging on him! How cool is that!
- Agape love ... is about commitment. I make a promise, and I keep my word. “Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.” (1 Corinthians 13.7)
 - Cherish is about passion, about desire, about delight. “How pleasing is your fragrance (you smell so good!); your name is like the spreading fragrance of scented oils. No wonder all the young women love you!” (Song of Solomon 1.3) That’s what Julie still says about me!

Listen guys: Love and cherish don’t compete. A healthy, God-honoring marriage requires both. They complement each other, they complete each other ... and they are both ... Listen! ... They are both a choice. Agape is the backbone, the glue that holds the marriage together. Cherish makes it sparkle; cherish makes it fun. And it’s a choice! Listen, your spouse wants you to love him, or her. But they ache for something more than that, too. And you promised more than that! You promised to love, and to cherish. So, guys: Are you going to keep your promise? Ladies, are you? ...

One guy I read about asked 7 of his friends: “Do your wives love you?” They were Christian guys, I think, with Christian wives. Every one of them said, “Yes.” And then he asked them a follow-up question: “Do your wives ... like you?” And every one of them said, “No.” And I think they were normal.

Now the stuff I am going to talk about is not just for those who are newlyweds. In fact, it may even bite harder on those of us who have been married for decades. And it’s not just for Jesus followers, although for us this is really not an option. This is how to do it as a Jesus follower, I think. But it will work for those of you who are not Jesus followers yet, too. And, it’s not just for those who are married right now. If you are ever going to think about marriage, you need to listen. If there are people you care about who are married, you need to listen. In fact, these ideas apply to some degree to relationships other than marriage. One more thing: I’ll be talking to you this mornng, not the person next to you. Don’t sit there thinking, “I hope he’s listening to this!” Or, “I hope

she's paying attention." That's between them and God. You listen for you. No elbows!

Here it is: like love, cherish is a choice. There are times when it's easy, and there are times when it is really, really hard. But it's still a choice! It's not a feeling that comes and goes over which you have no control. It is an attitude that can be learned and cultivated. And you can learn to cherish a very imperfect spouse. In fact, they are the only kind you'll ever find. With God's help, you can choose to cherish someone as flawed as you are. God does, with you; and you can too ... with his help.

Do you know how? ... Well ... Did you know that there is a neuroplasticity to your brain? There is! That's what they call it. No matter how old you are ... there is this neuroplasticity. That means your brain is being literally reshaped by your experiences over time. When we do something over, and over, and over again, we are actually creating these pathways, these grooves in our brains. And if we choose to repeat something often enough, it just becomes natural for us. Didn't use to be; but it is now. Every time we repeat a thought, or an action, or an emotion even ... we reshape or reinforce a neural pathway, and we can literally recreate ourselves. Because the small changes we make, if we repeat them often enough, transform how our brains work.

This neuroplasticity is on steroids when we're young; our kids' brains are very plastic. But even we old guys can do it. Not as easily: our brains are not as plastic, and we are more fixed in how we think and act. But we can do it too, if we try hard enough.

- When you are learning to play an instrument, at first you have to think about each movement. If you do it often enough, it becomes automatic.
- When you learn to play a sport, you practice over and over and over until the movement becomes natural to you. You're not just training your body, you're actually reshaping your brain.

And it works in a marriage too. Guys, we are basically ... barbarians. For a long time, I have called myself a barbarian with a thin veneer of Christianity. And I'm not lying. There's a lot of self-centered in me, a lot of pride, some lust, some gluttony, some greed, some sloth, some wrath, some envy ... all those deadly sins. Are they in you? So how do people like me overcome all that so I can learn to love and to cherish God's way? It's not going to happen by accident! It may happen occasionally by accident, but to be what God wants me to be, to be what I want me to be, will take some work on my part, and a boatload of help on His part. It's not about doing what we feel. It's

about choosing what is right 100 times, 1,000 times, 10,000 times till it's our default. That's neuroplasticity. We can grow cherish. We can plant it as a seed, fertilize it, water it, weed around it, until it changes who we are.

Guys, I think this is the idea behind what the apostle Paul says in Romans 12. He says, "Don't copy (don't copy; choose not to copy) the behavior and customs of this world, (you choose differently) but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you."

Now, some of you are pushing back: "Not me, what you see is what you get. This is just the way I am. This is who I am, take it or leave it. In fact, this is how God made me. If you don't like what I am, blame him, not me." And all that is ... poppycock. God will transform us - if we cooperate. God does change us - if we cooperate. You are never too old for God to transform you. He's God!

Well, let's get down in the dirt practical. How? How do you grow cherish? Here are some strategies. Here are some choices you can make to reshape your heart. Here's how to choose to cherish your husband, or your wife. I wish I had the time to unpack each one. I don't. If you want more detail, get the book. Chapter 11: The Art of Cherishing Your Spouse. 8 pieces. By the way; as your listening, pick one or two that you can start working on today. Ready?

Piece 1: Use your mind to change your heart. Gary tells the story of a couple getting on an elevator he was in. She reminds him, "Floor 9." And he's like ... confused; looking all over the keypad for the 9. Gary says he thinking to himself, "It's between the 8 and the 10, you dork!" But here's what the wife does. She smiles, squeezes his arm, kisses his shoulder, and says, "You're thinking about that deal, aren't you?" "Yeah." "It'll work out." Now that's a woman!

How many of you are masters of sarcasm, maybe of ridicule? I'm pretty good at it; in fact, I am exceptionally good at it. Well, how about ... biting your tongue! What if, instead of seizing the opening to be sarcastic, what if you choose gentleness. What if instead of assuming the worst, you actually look for the best.

Did you know that's right out of our New Testament? The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians ... here's what God says through him. He says, "Fix your thoughts" ... Fix your thoughts. In other words, control what you think.

Choose to focus “on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about (Fix your minds on) things that are excellent and worthy of praise.” (Philippians 4.8) So, what would happen if you took that verse and laid it over your marriage? It would get a whole lot better, wouldn't it? Here it is: If you chose to dwell on what is not honorable, what is distasteful, or frustrating, or shameful, or deserving of criticism in your spouse - and you will find plenty of it, all of us can - your heart will follow. But if you choose to focus on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable in your spouse - and that stuff is there too - your heart will follow ... eventually. Use your mind to change your heart.

Piece 2: Sacrifice for your spouse. Sacrifice for him, or her. Have you ever noticed that the most patriotic people tend to be the soldiers? Because, when you have sacrificed for a flag, maybe even risked your life for it, it makes that flag and what it represents more precious to you. It works the same with people. Those you sacrifice for tend to become even more precious to you. The more you sacrifice for your spouse - whether it's your time, your energy, your comfort, or even your safety - that sacrifice can fuel your “cherish.” Because sacrifice shapes your heart.

Gary Thomas tells about one middle-aged guy who loved craft beers. It was his hobby. He traveled a lot for his job, so he was always near some local micro-brewery. But he wouldn't go, because he had promised his wife, “I won't drink when I'm not with you.” Because he knew that drinking makes a person vulnerable when they're alone on the road. His promise, his sacrifice, shaped his heart. Whereas drinking might make him forget who he was, not drinking helped him remember his wife. He was choosing to “cherish,” through sacrifice.

Piece 3: Hug ... a lot. I hate what this “Me Too” world is doing to us. It's making us afraid to touch each other ... even innocently. And people need to be touched ... lovingly. Especially a husband, or a wife! So many people are starving - so many people in this room are starving - emotionally, because all they get is an occasional handshake or fist-bump.

Go online, just google the “power of touch.” They talk about a “touch hunger.” Babies can wither if they are not touched; we adults do too! Your husband, or your wife, can too. Some of you guys are killing each other!

- Research shows that when there is more healthy touch during childhood, the rates of adult physical violence go lower.

- Research shows that even an incidental touch can lower blood pressure and cortisol - the stress hormone. A good cuddle drains away stress.
- Research shows that 20 seconds of healthy touching will trigger the release of oxytocin ... the cuddle chemical. A good hug, a back-rub, holding hands, sex - they build a sense of connectedness, of trust.
- Research shows that healthy touch makes people nicer; and it makes people easier to work with.

And there are a boatload of other “benefits.” Bottom line: don’t deprive your partner of the gift of healthy touch. It’s what we were wired for, by God. And it’s part of cherish. Hold each other’s hands. Scratch a back. Cuddle. Play around ... that one is just for the married folk! It’s part of “cherish,” and it’s a choice, and it can reshape your brain, and it can transform your marriage.

Piece 4: (I need to go a little faster. Again, if you want more on these, go online, or read the book. I think we’ve got a couple copies for sale in our Connections Room, and we’ll order more if we run out.) Piece 4: Need your spouse ... and let them know it. Sometimes a lady wants to be treated like a porcelain doll, up on a pedestal. And I suppose a little of that is okay. But I’m talking about way more than that. God gave Adam a “helper.” And if you don’t see her as a helper, a partner, a colleague, or if you don’t see him as a helper, a partner, a colleague, she or he will never really feel “cherished.” God didn’t create Eve simply because Adam was lonely; he created Eve because Adam needed a helper. Because God made you ladies better at some things we’re not so good at; and he made us guys better at some things you ladies aren’t so good at. So we would need each other. And we need to be needed. Need your spouse!

Piece 5: Think of your spouse as royalty ... because he is - ladies, you married a prince! and guys - you married a princess. You married a royal. Some of you girls used to fantasize about being a princess, and having a royal wedding. Some of you never outgrow that fantasy. What we don’t recognize is that if you are married, your dream has already come true! On day 6 of the creation story, God creates Adam and Eve - the royal couple, and God gave them sovereignty - king and queen -- over this amazing earth. And you are kin ... all of you. You are God’s special possession! You are God’s kids. I love how, in the Chronicles of Narnia, C. S. Lewis calls the children - Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy -- Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve, the rightful rulers of Narnia (under Aslan, of course). Because that really is who we are.

Listen, when a prince misbehaves, he is still a prince. He still has a dad who expects his kid to be treated well ... like any dad should. So be careful how you treat him, ladies. When a princess misbehaves, she is still a princess. She still has a dad who expects his daughter to be treated well ... like any dad should. So be careful, guys! Never forget whose kid you married! Think of your spouse as royalty. Don't forget that; He won't!

Piece 6: If you can, make your spouse's dreams come true. Now usually this "cherish" is built by 100, by 1,000, by 10,000 little affirmations, reshaping our brains. But sometimes you need to try to go big. Do you even know what your spouse's dreams are? Can you make any of them come true? Well can you? Even once a decade or two?

And it's not usually something material. There was a study done at San Francisco State which discovered that most people think that money spent on physical stuff is better spent than money spent on "experiences." But in reality, they found, experiences lead to more happiness than stuff! A meal out, a movie, a bed and breakfast, theater tickets, a vacation (I was terrible at that), a trip. They satisfy a higher order of needs than stuff can. So if you can, every once in a while, make your spouse's dreams come true, even if it takes you years to save up for it. That's a boatload of cherish.

Piece 7: (Almost done) Watch, and delight. Watch him - step back and watch him. Guys, every once in a while, really watch her - step back and watch her, and see if you can see what attracted you to her, years ago. Or maybe you'll see something even better. We get so familiar with each other, that we rarely take the time to really watch, and to appreciate, and to enjoy, and to applaud. And if you brag about what you see to someone else, so much the better. Watch, and applaud ... your spouse!

Last one, Piece 8: Conserve your energy. This one is huge: Conserve your energy. Have you ever been so caught up in something lesser that you neglect something greater? Have you ever gotten so caught up in a book or a game or whatever that you neglect your work? So caught up in a sport that you neglect your church, or your God? So caught up in your job that you neglect your spouse, and your kids?

Addictions will do that to you. You get so caught up in porn, or drugs, or alcohol, that you neglect things that should be way more important to you, like your job, your family, your God. But it's not just the bad stuff. You've seen wives who get so caught up in their kids that they neglect their husbands.

And you've seen husbands - and wives - who get so caught up in their jobs that they neglect their families. And you've seen guys, and ladies, who get so caught up in a hobby, or a sport, that their lives get so out of balance, their priorities get so God-dishonoring. I've seen guys who live for golf. I've seen guys who live for building a church - which sounds so godly - but they spend so much time at church they neglect their families. I've seen guys so obsessed with computer games that they dishonor their families, and their God.

That stuff is not bad, but it can sap your energy so you have none left for more important things. For those of you who are Jesus followers. God is #1, in everything. If you're married, your spouse is #2. Not your kids, not your job, not your gym, not your hobby ... your spouse is #2. If you have kids, they are #3. Then whatever else. Are you conserving enough energy that you can give quality time to what claim are your priorities? If you're not, in reality, your priorities are out of whack. When you cherish, you conserve some energy for him, or her.

Okay, I don't have time to wrap this up right, so let me leave you with this. You don't cherish by accident. It's something you do, and you do, and you keep on doing ... intentionally, until it becomes who you are. Keep cherishing up here (head), until it's rooted here (heart), and eventually it'll define you. And you'll be more like him.

If you are married, you probably made this promise: "To have and to hold, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, and forsaking all others, keeping only to you, for as long as we both shall live. I promise." ... You made a promise, guys. Keep it.

To love ... and to cherish. I've talked about 8 different ways. That's too many to work on. How about picking one or two to get better at. Maybe even ask you husband, or your wife, at lunch, which of these they think would make the biggest difference. They might surprise you.

Now ... we're about to sing a song of worship. Before we do, let me ask you a couple questions.

- Do you love God? ... Do you like him? I suspect that more of us love him than like him. Because we don't know him well enough.
- How about this. Do you think God loves you? ... Do you think he likes you? I suspect way more of us think he loves us than think he likes us. Because we don't know him well enough.

- I love my kids, and my grandkids. And I like them too. Even when they mess up. And my love and my like for them isn't a shadow of his. ...