

LOVE FOR A LIFETIME

Fireproof Your Marriage: Sermon Three
Matthew 19:3-8

My Dearest Susan,

Sweetie of my heart. I've been so desolate ever since I broke off our engagement. Simply devastated. Won't you please consider coming back to me? You hold a place in my heart no other woman can fill. I can never marry another woman quite like you. I need you so much. Won't you forgive me and let us make a new beginning? I love you so.

Yours always and truly, John

P.S. Congratulations on winning the state lottery.

When we get married we are all, to some degree, like John. What I mean is that our love is to a high degree self-centered. We get married in large part because of how the other person makes us feel. Unless that love matures, many marriages fail. What happens when we're not having fun anymore with our partner? Many folks begin to rethink their commitment to the marriage.

That's where Caleb Holt is in his marriage to Catherine. Caleb and Catherine have been married for seven years and their relationship is at the breaking point. Caleb is a firefighter and he's been trying to follow the *Love Dare* book by doing one loving thing for Catherine each day. But it isn't "working"; Catherine is not responding in the way Caleb wants her to respond and, as we will see in a few moments, Caleb is considering his options.

Caleb and Catherine's marriage is not unusual. In fact, their experience is normal for most marriages. It has taken seven years for them to arrive at this point and they have moved through at least three stages of what marriage experts say are four typical stages of lasting marriages.

The first stage of marriage is

THE ROMANCE / DESIRE STAGE

This stage actually precedes marriage and carries over into marriage. We all know this stage – we meet that beautiful girl, that handsome guy and we're smitten. It's magic every time we're together and misery every moment we're apart. During the Romance/Desire stage women lose weight and men lose money: she'd rather spend time thinking about him than eating; he'd rather spend money on her than pay the rent.

During the Romance/Desire stage we're on our best behavior. We love the way our boyfriend makes us feel; we love the way our girlfriend makes us feel. We fantasize about spending the rest of our lives with this strong, caring man who listens to every word I say and is sensitive to my feelings. We fantasize about spending the rest of our

lives with this gorgeous girl who laughs at all our jokes and believes we're the greatest guy in the world.

And all of this is a normal part of the process of wooing and winning the heart and hand of our mate. But our marriages can't make it on the romantic feelings and the passionate desires of the Romance/Desire stage and here's why: the Romance/Desire stage is really driven by self-interest. I don't doubt the genuineness of our love for the other person, but it is primarily a self-centered love. Yes, we really do care about our fiancée, but at the same time we're getting married because of what we believe we will get from the marriage.

It's ironic that the very thing that drives this intoxicating stage of marriage is the very thing that has the potential to kill it. Unless our self-centered love – what we are also calling conditional love – unless our self-centered love matures and becomes more centered on loving and doing good to our spouse, our marriages will sour. Our marriages will sour because every marriage goes through a stage called:

THE REALITY / DISAPPOINTMENT STAGE

There was a man who said, "I never knew what happiness was until I got married...and then it was too late!"

Another person has written that: "Marriage is the process of finding out what kind of man your wife would have preferred."

In the reality stage, I see her without make-up and with morning breath. On the other hand she hears my bodily noises and sees my nose hair clipper. Character traits we once thought were so cute and wonderful now start irritating the heck out of us.

He says, "When we first started dating, I saw her as such a neat person—never a hair out of place, never a wrinkle in her blouse. Now I'm seeing that she's *compulsive*. We can never go anywhere on a whim, because she's got to get ready first. She's so meticulous, she even irons my underwear!

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The Reality/Disappointment Stage shatters the façade of the Romance stage.

And that's when we move into the third stage of marriage.

THE RESENTMENT / DOUBT STAGE

Someone has written that

“Married life is full of excitement and frustration:

- * In the first year of marriage, the man speaks and the woman listens.
- * In the second year, the woman speaks and the man listens.
- * In the third year, they both speak and the neighbors listen.”

In the resentment/doubt stage of our marriages we wonder what we got ourselves into and whether or not things are going to get better. During the resentment/doubt phase, the one who was once the object of our affection now causes us frustration and pain.

When we're in this stage we find ourselves tending to blame our spouse for all the evils in the world, even if they are only remotely connected to the problem. If there are financial stresses, it's her fault because she spends too much. Or his fault, because he makes too little. If there is friction, he started it, or she was too sensitive. If there's blame to be cast, we're quick to cast it on our spouse.

The resentment/doubt stage brings us to a crisis in our marriages: how are we going to respond to our disappointment in our spouse?

Some folks, because of their religious background or their family of origin values, will stay married, but they will divorce emotionally. They will essentially become lifelong roommates that get along, but have no intimacy or warmth in their relationship.

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Other couples will stay married, but their resentment will come out in constant bickering and criticism. Friends of my parents were like that – it was embarrassing to be around them because they constantly corrected one another or disagreed with one another when others were around. I remember having a conversation with another couple that when the husband had his back to me, the wife mouthed the words to me, “He's such a son of a bitch”.

Others begin to think that life would be better if they were no longer married or if they were married to someone else. When we continue to live out of a self-centered love we buy the lie that “The most important thing is that I'm happy and that you're happy and our marriage is not making either one of us happy.” When we continue to live out of a self-centered love we are very vulnerable to the advances of someone who makes us feel like we did in the Romance Stage.

Catherine Holt is very much in the Resentment/Doubt stage.

A handsome doctor in the hospital where Catherine works begins to show her attention and shower compliments on her. Catherine begins to pursue a relationship with this man not knowing that he is married. Do you not see the foolishness of this – Catherine is going right back into the romance cycle with a man who is on his best behavior to make her feel good, but concealing his true identity. Where do you think that relationship is going to end up?

Caleb Holt is very much in the Resentment/Doubt stage. He's thinking that divorce is the way to go. Caleb's idea is that he and Catherine are no longer in love, so they might as well end the relationship. And here is the lie they are both believing – divorce will make everything better and leave no scars.

Listen to Caleb as he discusses his plans with his friend Michael. Remember that all of this happens before Caleb trusts in Jesus as his Savior. Pay close attention to the great illustration Michael gives of the true effects of divorce.

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Its interesting that divorce, which is the furthest thing from our minds at the beginning of our marriages, can, in our minds, become the best thing when we're in the resentment/doubt stage of our marriages.

But divorce is seldom a good solution. Perhaps in cases of chronic abuse divorce is the lesser of two evils. But for a couple like Caleb and Catherine, divorce is not a good solution for at least two reasons. First,

➤ **Divorce is out of step with God's design for marriage.**

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Genesis 2:24-25

God's design for marriage is that we become united with our spouse for life. When we decide to divorce we're saying, "God, I just don't think your design applies to me in my marriage." Please know that I understand that some of us are divorced because our spouse initiated it against our will or we are divorced because our spouse abandoned us or was seriously abusing us. This point is people like Caleb who think divorce is the solution to our marital problems – it isn't and if you insist on initiating a divorce you do it without God's blessing.

Divorce is not the solution to our marital problems for this second reason:

➤ **Divorce perpetuates the core problem.**

Jesus was challenged on the issue of divorce and remarriage by His enemies the Pharisees. Matthew recorded the confrontation in Matthew 19:3-8...

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

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Did you catch what the core problem is in our marriages? Hardness of heart. What happens in the reality stage? We see our spouse for who they really are and we begin to have feelings of disappointment. If we don't deal wisely with our disappointment our disappointment becomes bitterness and bitterness leads to a hard heart.

Didn't you see it and hear it in Caleb? For seven years he's shared his life with Catherine, but he's become so bitter and callous he's talking about divorcing Catherine as if it's some kind of business deal. You just end it and go on.

And there's the lie – you may go on, but you go on with you. And you carry your self centered love and your hard heart into the next relationship. It doesn't come out in the Romance Stage does it? No, in the romance stage everything is roses and romance again, but then the reality stage hits and what do you have? You have the same person you were in the first marriage only now you have practice shutting down and disconnecting from a marriage partner.

That's why divorce is not the answer. And that's why I said at the beginning of this sermon that unless our love matures our marriages will fail. Unless our love matures from self-centered conditional to other centered unconditional love, our marriages will not enter the fourth stage of marriage called

THE REBUILDING STAGE

➤ **“Lord Jesus, rebuild me.”**

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Matthew 11:28-30

We can actually avoid the resentment stage altogether if we come into our marriages surrendered to Jesus Christ. Because by the very act of surrendering our lives to Jesus we are humbling ourselves and admitting that we need Jesus to teach us and change us from the inside out. This is the only antidote to the hard heart.

But even if we're like Caleb and Catherine in the resentment stage, there is still hope for our marriage. It is not in trying to fix our spouse, it is humbling ourselves and seeking Jesus' help.

The picture Jesus is drawing is that of a young, inexperienced ox getting into a yoke with a stronger, experienced ox. The two oxen stayed yoked together 24/7 until the younger ox is thoroughly trained.

Jesus is offering to retrain us and He promises it will bring rest for our souls. How do we get in the yoke with Jesus?

First, we have to want His yoke. We want it when we finally admit to ourselves we don't know how to live life and we don't have the power to change ourselves, but we know we need to change. We have to surrender our will to Jesus and let Him rebuild us.

Second, we need to learn from Jesus. We need to spend long periods of time in His Word letting His wisdom and truth renew our minds. We need to spend time with other Christians to glean from their experience and to receive their counsel in our lives.

Third, we need to obey what Jesus teaches us. Knowledge alone does not lead to change. I may be very knowledgeable about having a healthy lifestyle, but it's not until I apply that knowledge that my life changes. Our character changes through obedience.

It's our character that we need to first focus on our marriages. Before we can talk about rebuilding our marriages we first need to focus on rebuilding ourselves in Christ. Then we cry out...

➤ **“Lord Jesus, rebuild our marriage.”**

Only when we're surrendered can Jesus begin to rebuild our marriage because He will lead us to do some tough things starting with forgiving each other. And if we really listen to and obey Jesus He will train us to love each other unconditionally which is the key to a good marriage and the key to the rebuilding stage of marriage.

One teacher sums it up really well:

“The older I get, the more conscious I am that I only have one life. So my choice is, instead of trading in difficult relationships for new relationships and starting the whole process over again, I want to keep and deepen my marriage.

In ancient times, when a city was destroyed by an earthquake or a fire or a flood, the survivors would rebuild on top of the ruins of the old city. But I don't want to build on top of ruined relationships. I want to live one life, one time, for 60 or 80 or 100 years. I don't want to repeat the same life and the same mistakes with a different person every 10 or 15 years. When I'm old, I want to be able to say to my wife, “Remember our first Christmas together? Remember when we brought our children home from the hospital? Remember those vacations..., that tragedy we weathered..., the discoveries we made during that period of our lives...?”

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Folks, all marriages go through seasons. For most people, rebuilding is a normal state. After the first round of Romance and Reality and Resentment, most marriages come back to rebuilding in one area or another of their relationship, because there is always someway in which our relationship needs to grow and we ourselves are always in need of growth.

If we humble ourselves and let Jesus rebuild us and our marriages, we will come back around to romance. It might not be as sizzling hot as the first time, but it will be deeply satisfying to our souls.

I don't know what stage your marriage is in. But I do know that surrender to Jesus Christ is the key to weathering each of the seasons of your marriage. So our Love Dare this week is...

LOVE DARE CHALLENGE:

Sometime this week, renew your wedding vows to each other.

If you don't have a copy of them, or remember what they are, we've supplied a sample you can use in your Message Notes:

*I, _____, take you _____ to be my wife/husband.
To have and to hold from this day forward,
For better, for worse,
For richer, for poorer,
In sickness and in health.
To love and cherish as long as we both shall live.*

After renewing your vows together, spend a few minutes praying together about your marriage.

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And all of this is a normal part of the process of wooing and winning the heart and hand of our mate. But our marriages can't make it on the romantic feelings and the passionate desires of the Romance/Desire stage and here's why: the Romance/Desire stage is really driven by self-interest. I don't doubt the genuineness of our love for the other person, but it is primarily a self-centered love. Yes, we really do care about our fiancée, but at the same time we're getting married because of what we believe we will get from the marriage.

It's ironic that the very thing that drives this intoxicating stage of marriage is the very thing that has the potential to kill it. Unless our self-centered love – what we are also calling conditional love – unless our self-centered love matures and becomes more centered on loving and doing good to our spouse, our marriages will sour. Our marriages will sour because every marriage goes through a stage called:

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In the resentment/doubt stage of our marriages we wonder what we got ourselves into and whether or not things are going to get better. During the resentment/doubt phase, the one who was once the object of our affection now causes us frustration and pain.

When we're in this stage we find ourselves tending to blame our spouse for all the evils in the world, even if they are only remotely connected to the problem. If there are financial stresses, it's her fault because she spends too much. Or his fault, because he makes too little. If there is friction, he started it, or she was too sensitive. If there's blame to be cast, we're quick to cast it on our spouse.

The resentment/doubt stage brings us to a crisis in our marriages: how are we going to respond to our disappointment in our spouse?

Some folks, because of their religious background or their family of origin values, will stay married, but they will divorce emotionally. They will essentially become lifelong roommates that get along, but have no intimacy or warmth in their relationship.

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Catherine Holt is very much in the Resentment/Doubt stage.

A handsome doctor in the hospital where Catherine works begins to show her attention and shower compliments on her. Catherine begins to pursue a relationship with this man not knowing that he is married. Do you not see the foolishness of this – Catherine is going right back into the romance cycle with a man who is on his best behavior to make her feel good, but concealing his true identity. Where do you think that relationship is going to end up?

Caleb Holt is very much in the Resentment/Doubt stage. He's thinking that divorce is the way to go. Caleb's idea is that he and Catherine are no longer in love, so they might as well end the relationship. And here is the lie they are both believing – divorce will make everything better and leave no scars.

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But divorce is seldom a good solution. Perhaps in cases of chronic abuse divorce is the lesser of two evils. But for a couple like Caleb and Catherine, divorce is not a good solution for at least two reasons. First,

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Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

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God's design for marriage is that we become united with our spouse for life. When we decide to divorce we're saying, "God, I just don't think your design applies to me in my marriage." Please know that I understand that some of us are divorced because our spouse initiated it against our will or we are divorced because our spouse abandoned us or was seriously abusing us. This point is people like Caleb who think divorce is the solution to our marital problems – it isn't and if you insist on initiating a divorce you do it without God's blessing.

Divorce is not the solution to our marital problems for this second reason:

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Did you catch what the core problem is in our marriages? Hardness of heart. What happens in the reality stage? We see our spouse for who they really are and we begin to have feelings of disappointment. If we don't deal wisely with our disappointment our disappointment becomes bitterness and bitterness leads to a hard heart.

Didn't you see it and hear it in Caleb? For seven years he's shared his life with Catherine, but he's become so bitter and callous he's talking about divorcing Catherine as if it's some kind of business deal. You just end it and go on.

And there's the lie – you may go on, but you go on with you. And you carry your self centered love and your hard heart into the next relationship. It doesn't come out in the Romance Stage does it? No, in the romance stage everything is roses and romance again, but then the reality stage hits and what do you have? You have the same person you were in the first marriage only now you have practice shutting down and disconnecting from a marriage partner.

That's why divorce is not the answer. And that's why I said at the beginning of this sermon that unless our love matures our marriages will fail. Unless our love matures from self-centered conditional to other centered unconditional love, our marriages will not enter the fourth stage of marriage called

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Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

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We can actually avoid the resentment stage altogether if we come into our marriages surrendered to Jesus Christ. Because by the very act of surrendering our lives to Jesus we are humbling ourselves and admitting that we need Jesus to teach us and change us from the inside out. This is the only antidote to the hard heart.

But even if we're like Caleb and Catherine in the resentment stage, there is still hope for our marriage. It is not in trying to fix our spouse, it is humbling ourselves and seeking Jesus' help.

The picture Jesus is drawing is that of a young, inexperienced ox getting into a yoke with a stronger, experienced ox. The two oxen stayed yoked together 24/7 until the younger ox is thoroughly trained.

Jesus is offering to retrain us and He promises it will bring rest for our souls. How do we get in the yoke with Jesus?

First, we have to want His yoke. We want it when we finally admit to ourselves we don't know how to live life and we don't have the power to change ourselves, but we know we need to change. We have to surrender our will to Jesus and let Him rebuild us.

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It's our character that we need to first focus on our marriages. Before we can talk about rebuilding our marriages we first need to focus on rebuilding ourselves in Christ. Then we cry out...

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Only when we're surrendered can Jesus begin to rebuild our marriage because He will lead us to do some tough things starting with forgiving each other. And if we really listen to and obey Jesus He will train us to love each other unconditionally which is the key to a good marriage and the key to the rebuilding stage of marriage.

One teacher sums it up really well:

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I don't know what stage your marriage is in. But I do know that surrender to Jesus Christ is the key to weathering each of the seasons of your marriage. So our Love Dare this week is...

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If you don't have a copy of them, or remember what they are, we've supplied a sample you can use in your Message Notes:

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After renewing your vows together, spend a few minutes praying together about your marriage.

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And all of this is a normal part of the process of wooing and winning the heart and hand of our mate. But our marriages can't make it on the romantic feelings and the passionate desires of the Romance/Desire stage and here's why: the Romance/Desire stage is really driven by self-interest. I don't doubt the genuineness of our love for the other person, but it is primarily a self-centered love. Yes, we really do care about our fiancée, but at the same time we're getting married because of what we believe we will get from the marriage.

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In the resentment/doubt stage of our marriages we wonder what we got ourselves into and whether or not things are going to get better. During the resentment/doubt phase, the one who was once the object of our affection now causes us frustration and pain.

When we're in this stage we find ourselves tending to blame our spouse for all the evils in the world, even if they are only remotely connected to the problem. If there are financial stresses, it's her fault because she spends too much. Or his fault, because he makes too little. If there is friction, he started it, or she was too sensitive. If there's blame to be cast, we're quick to cast it on our spouse.

The resentment/doubt stage brings us to a crisis in our marriages: how are we going to respond to our disappointment in our spouse?

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Catherine Holt is very much in the Resentment/Doubt stage.

A handsome doctor in the hospital where Catherine works begins to show her attention and shower compliments on her. Catherine begins to pursue a relationship with this man not knowing that he is married. Do you not see the foolishness of this – Catherine is going right back into the romance cycle with a man who is on his best behavior to make her feel good, but concealing his true identity. Where do you think that relationship is going to end up?

Caleb Holt is very much in the Resentment/Doubt stage. He's thinking that divorce is the way to go. Caleb's idea is that he and Catherine are no longer in love, so they might as well end the relationship. And here is the lie they are both believing – divorce will make everything better and leave no scars.

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But divorce is seldom a good solution. Perhaps in cases of chronic abuse divorce is the lesser of two evils. But for a couple like Caleb and Catherine, divorce is not a good solution for at least two reasons. First,

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God's design for marriage is that we become united with our spouse for life. When we decide to divorce we're saying, "God, I just don't think your design applies to me in my marriage." Please know that I understand that some of us are divorced because our spouse initiated it against our will or we are divorced because our spouse abandoned us or was seriously abusing us. This point is people like Caleb who think divorce is the solution to our marital problems – it isn't and if you insist on initiating a divorce you do it without God's blessing.

Divorce is not the solution to our marital problems for this second reason:

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Did you catch what the core problem is in our marriages? Hardness of heart. What happens in the reality stage? We see our spouse for who they really are and we begin to have feelings of disappointment. If we don't deal wisely with our disappointment our disappointment becomes bitterness and bitterness leads to a hard heart.

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That's why divorce is not the answer. And that's why I said at the beginning of this sermon that unless our love matures our marriages will fail. Unless our love matures from self-centered conditional to other centered unconditional love, our marriages will not enter the fourth stage of marriage called

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We can actually avoid the resentment stage altogether if we come into our marriages surrendered to Jesus Christ. Because by the very act of surrendering our lives to Jesus we are humbling ourselves and admitting that we need Jesus to teach us and change us from the inside out. This is the only antidote to the hard heart.

But even if we're like Caleb and Catherine in the resentment stage, there is still hope for our marriage. It is not in trying to fix our spouse, it is humbling ourselves and seeking Jesus' help.

The picture Jesus is drawing is that of a young, inexperienced ox getting into a yoke with a stronger, experienced ox. The two oxen stayed yoked together 24/7 until the younger ox is thoroughly trained.

Jesus is offering to retrain us and He promises it will bring rest for our souls. How do we get in the yoke with Jesus?

First, we have to want His yoke. We want it when we finally admit to ourselves we don't know how to live life and we don't have the power to change ourselves, but we know we need to change. We have to surrender our will to Jesus and let Him rebuild us.

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Only when we're surrendered can Jesus begin to rebuild our marriage because He will lead us to do some tough things starting with forgiving each other. And if we really listen to and obey Jesus He will train us to love each other unconditionally which is the key to a good marriage and the key to the rebuilding stage of marriage.

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When we get married we are all, to some degree, like John. What I mean is that our love is to a high degree self-centered. We get married in large part because of how the other person makes us feel. Unless that love matures, many marriages fail. What happens when we're not having fun anymore with our partner? Many folks begin to rethink their commitment to the marriage.

That's where Caleb Holt is in his marriage to Catherine. Caleb and Catherine have been married for seven years and their relationship is at the breaking point. Caleb is a firefighter and he's been trying to follow the *Love Dare* book by doing one loving thing for Catherine each day. But it isn't "working"; Catherine is not responding in the way Caleb wants her to respond and, as we will see in a few moments, Caleb is considering his options.

Caleb and Catherine's marriage is not unusual. In fact, their experience is normal for most marriages. It has taken seven years for them to arrive at this point and they have moved through at least three stages of what marriage experts say are four typical stages of lasting marriages.

The first stage of marriage is

THE ROMANCE / DESIRE STAGE

This stage actually precedes marriage and carries over into marriage. We all know this stage – we meet that beautiful girl, that handsome guy and we're smitten. It's magic every time we're together and misery every moment we're apart. During the Romance/Desire stage women lose weight and men lose money: she'd rather spend time thinking about him than eating; he'd rather spend money on her than pay the rent.

During the Romance/Desire stage we're on our best behavior. We love the way our boyfriend makes us feel; we love the way our girlfriend makes us feel. We fantasize about spending the rest of our lives with this strong, caring man who listens to every word I say and is sensitive to my feelings. We fantasize about spending the rest of our

lives with this gorgeous girl who laughs at all our jokes and believes we're the greatest guy in the world.

And all of this is a normal part of the process of wooing and winning the heart and hand of our mate. But our marriages can't make it on the romantic feelings and the passionate desires of the Romance/Desire stage and here's why: the Romance/Desire stage is really driven by self-interest. I don't doubt the genuineness of our love for the other person, but it is primarily a self-centered love. Yes, we really do care about our fiancée, but at the same time we're getting married because of what we believe we will get from the marriage.

It's ironic that the very thing that drives this intoxicating stage of marriage is the very thing that has the potential to kill it. Unless our self-centered love – what we are also calling conditional love – unless our self-centered love matures and becomes more centered on loving and doing good to our spouse, our marriages will sour. Our marriages will sour because every marriage goes through a stage called:

THE REALITY / DISAPPOINTMENT STAGE

There was a man who said, "I never knew what happiness was until I got married...and then it was too late!"

Another person has written that: "Marriage is the process of finding out what kind of man your wife would have preferred."

In the reality stage, I see her without make-up and with morning breath. On the other hand she hears my bodily noises and sees my nose hair clipper. Character traits we once thought were so cute and wonderful now start irritating the heck out of us.

He says, "When we first started dating, I saw her as such a neat person—never a hair out of place, never a wrinkle in her blouse. Now I'm seeing that she's *compulsive*. We can never go anywhere on a whim, because she's got to get ready first. She's so meticulous, she even irons my underwear!

She says, "While we were dating, he was always the life of the party. He would do outrageous things and light up the room. I was so proud to be with him. Now I'm seeing how impulsive he is. He never thinks before acting. Sometimes he does things that are so outrageous they make me embarrassed to be with him."

In the Reality/Disappointment Stage we reveal our real selves. What was covered up or glossed over in the Romance stage now comes out in color. I'm no longer on my best behavior because I've got you; we closed the deal and you're stuck with me. If I am self-centered in this reality stage then I'm little motivated to change and I don't appreciate it when you try to change me. If I'm self-centered in this stage of my marriage I'm really bummed to find out what you're really like and that I might have to live with you the way you are for a long time.

The Reality/Disappointment Stage shatters the façade of the Romance stage.

And that's when we move into the third stage of marriage.

THE RESENTMENT / DOUBT STAGE

Someone has written that

“Married life is full of excitement and frustration:

- * In the first year of marriage, the man speaks and the woman listens.
- * In the second year, the woman speaks and the man listens.
- * In the third year, they both speak and the neighbors listen.”

In the resentment/doubt stage of our marriages we wonder what we got ourselves into and whether or not things are going to get better. During the resentment/doubt phase, the one who was once the object of our affection now causes us frustration and pain.

When we're in this stage we find ourselves tending to blame our spouse for all the evils in the world, even if they are only remotely connected to the problem. If there are financial stresses, it's her fault because she spends too much. Or his fault, because he makes too little. If there is friction, he started it, or she was too sensitive. If there's blame to be cast, we're quick to cast it on our spouse.

The resentment/doubt stage brings us to a crisis in our marriages: how are we going to respond to our disappointment in our spouse?

Some folks, because of their religious background or their family of origin values, will stay married, but they will divorce emotionally. They will essentially become lifelong roommates that get along, but have no intimacy or warmth in their relationship.

Others will stay married, divorce emotionally and have affairs of the heart or affairs of the bed to fulfill their unmet needs.

Other couples will stay married, but their resentment will come out in constant bickering and criticism. Friends of my parents were like that – it was embarrassing to be around them because they constantly corrected one another or disagreed with one another when others were around. I remember having a conversation with another couple that when the husband had his back to me, the wife mouthed the words to me, “He's such a son of a bitch”.

Others begin to think that life would be better if they were no longer married or if they were married to someone else. When we continue to live out of a self-centered love we buy the lie that “The most important thing is that I'm happy and that you're happy and our marriage is not making either one of us happy.” When we continue to live out of a self-centered love we are very vulnerable to the advances of someone who makes us feel like we did in the Romance Stage.

Catherine Holt is very much in the Resentment/Doubt stage.

A handsome doctor in the hospital where Catherine works begins to show her attention and shower compliments on her. Catherine begins to pursue a relationship with this man not knowing that he is married. Do you not see the foolishness of this – Catherine is going right back into the romance cycle with a man who is on his best behavior to make her feel good, but concealing his true identity. Where do you think that relationship is going to end up?

Caleb Holt is very much in the Resentment/Doubt stage. He's thinking that divorce is the way to go. Caleb's idea is that he and Catherine are no longer in love, so they might as well end the relationship. And here is the lie they are both believing – divorce will make everything better and leave no scars.

Listen to Caleb as he discusses his plans with his friend Michael. Remember that all of this happens before Caleb trusts in Jesus as his Savior. Pay close attention to the great illustration Michael gives of the true effects of divorce.

Watch this clip with me.

(Play Session 3 from your *Fireproof Your Marriage DVD*)

Its interesting that divorce, which is the furthest thing from our minds at the beginning of our marriages, can, in our minds, become the best thing when we're in the resentment/doubt stage of our marriages.

But divorce is seldom a good solution. Perhaps in cases of chronic abuse divorce is the lesser of two evils. But for a couple like Caleb and Catherine, divorce is not a good solution for at least two reasons. First,

➤ **Divorce is out of step with God's design for marriage.**

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Genesis 2:24-25

God's design for marriage is that we become united with our spouse for life. When we decide to divorce we're saying, "God, I just don't think your design applies to me in my marriage." Please know that I understand that some of us are divorced because our spouse initiated it against our will or we are divorced because our spouse abandoned us or was seriously abusing us. This point is people like Caleb who think divorce is the solution to our marital problems – it isn't and if you insist on initiating a divorce you do it without God's blessing.

Divorce is not the solution to our marital problems for this second reason:

➤ **Divorce perpetuates the core problem.**

Jesus was challenged on the issue of divorce and remarriage by His enemies the Pharisees. Matthew recorded the confrontation in Matthew 19:3-8...

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

Matthew 19:3-8

Did you catch what the core problem is in our marriages? Hardness of heart. What happens in the reality stage? We see our spouse for who they really are and we begin to have feelings of disappointment. If we don't deal wisely with our disappointment our disappointment becomes bitterness and bitterness leads to a hard heart.

Didn't you see it and hear it in Caleb? For seven years he's shared his life with Catherine, but he's become so bitter and callous he's talking about divorcing Catherine as if it's some kind of business deal. You just end it and go on.

And there's the lie – you may go on, but you go on with you. And you carry your self centered love and your hard heart into the next relationship. It doesn't come out in the Romance Stage does it? No, in the romance stage everything is roses and romance again, but then the reality stage hits and what do you have? You have the same person you were in the first marriage only now you have practice shutting down and disconnecting from a marriage partner.

That's why divorce is not the answer. And that's why I said at the beginning of this sermon that unless our love matures our marriages will fail. Unless our love matures from self-centered conditional to other centered unconditional love, our marriages will not enter the fourth stage of marriage called

THE REBUILDING STAGE

➤ **“Lord Jesus, rebuild me.”**

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Matthew 11:28-30

We can actually avoid the resentment stage altogether if we come into our marriages surrendered to Jesus Christ. Because by the very act of surrendering our lives to Jesus we are humbling ourselves and admitting that we need Jesus to teach us and change us from the inside out. This is the only antidote to the hard heart.

But even if we're like Caleb and Catherine in the resentment stage, there is still hope for our marriage. It is not in trying to fix our spouse, it is humbling ourselves and seeking Jesus' help.

The picture Jesus is drawing is that of a young, inexperienced ox getting into a yoke with a stronger, experienced ox. The two oxen stayed yoked together 24/7 until the younger ox is thoroughly trained.

Jesus is offering to retrain us and He promises it will bring rest for our souls. How do we get in the yoke with Jesus?

First, we have to want His yoke. We want it when we finally admit to ourselves we don't know how to live life and we don't have the power to change ourselves, but we know we need to change. We have to surrender our will to Jesus and let Him rebuild us.

Second, we need to learn from Jesus. We need to spend long periods of time in His Word letting His wisdom and truth renew our minds. We need to spend time with other Christians to glean from their experience and to receive their counsel in our lives.

Third, we need to obey what Jesus teaches us. Knowledge alone does not lead to change. I may be very knowledgeable about having a healthy lifestyle, but it's not until I apply that knowledge that my life changes. Our character changes through obedience.

It's our character that we need to first focus on our marriages. Before we can talk about rebuilding our marriages we first need to focus on rebuilding ourselves in Christ. Then we cry out...

➤ **“Lord Jesus, rebuild our marriage.”**

Only when we're surrendered can Jesus begin to rebuild our marriage because He will lead us to do some tough things starting with forgiving each other. And if we really listen to and obey Jesus He will train us to love each other unconditionally which is the key to a good marriage and the key to the rebuilding stage of marriage.

One teacher sums it up really well:

“The older I get, the more conscious I am that I only have one life. So my choice is, instead of trading in difficult relationships for new relationships and starting the whole process over again, I want to keep and deepen my marriage.

In ancient times, when a city was destroyed by an earthquake or a fire or a flood, the survivors would rebuild on top of the ruins of the old city. But I don't want to build on top of ruined relationships. I want to live one life, one time, for 60 or 80 or 100 years. I don't want to repeat the same life and the same mistakes with a different person every 10 or 15 years. When I'm old, I want to be able to say to my wife, “Remember our first Christmas together? Remember when we brought our children home from the hospital? Remember those vacations..., that tragedy we weathered..., the discoveries we made during that period of our lives...?”

I don't want short bursts of life repeated over and over again. I want one life, where I learn in successively deeper levels how to love and build up one woman for one lifetime.”

I love that. This needs to be our mindset as well.

Folks, all marriages go through seasons. For most people, rebuilding is a normal state. After the first round of Romance and Reality and Resentment, most marriages come back to rebuilding in one area or another of their relationship, because there is always someway in which our relationship needs to grow and we ourselves are always in need of growth.

If we humble ourselves and let Jesus rebuild us and our marriages, we will come back around to romance. It might not be as sizzling hot as the first time, but it will be deeply satisfying to our souls.

I don't know what stage your marriage is in. But I do know that surrender to Jesus Christ is the key to weathering each of the seasons of your marriage. So our Love Dare this week is...

LOVE DARE CHALLENGE:

Sometime this week, renew your wedding vows to each other.

If you don't have a copy of them, or remember what they are, we've supplied a sample you can use in your Message Notes:

*I, _____, take you _____ to be my wife/husband.
To have and to hold from this day forward,
For better, for worse,
For richer, for poorer,
In sickness and in health.
To love and cherish as long as we both shall live.*

After renewing your vows together, spend a few minutes praying together about your marriage.