

**Marriage No. 11****“The Language of Love: No. 2”****May 18, 2014****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

It has been some time since our last sermon in this series on marriage, so let me remind you where we were when the series was interrupted. Having considered the Bible’s theology of marriage, we are now considering its ethics of marriage, how husbands and wives are to live and relate to one another in marriage. We began by looking at Paul’s famous and newly controversial statement about men loving their wives and wives respecting their husbands in Ephesians 5. We argued that Paul assumes more than argues for the distinction of genders and concerns himself, therefore, not with the fact that men and women are different, but with the importance of both the man and the woman sanctifying themselves for the sake of their marriage. If husbands are *Christian* men and wives are *Christian* women, the distinction of the sexes will take care of itself and will enrich the lives of both husband and wife. It is only in the modern west, where we have come to doubt that one’s sex is a divinely created order of life and so a calling from God that we have found our problems with a passage that both Christians and non-Christians alike for ages regarded as a surpassingly beautiful text on the subject of marriage.

We also spoke from Genesis 3 and its account of the fall and the curse about the quintessentially masculine and feminine sins that have complicated marriage everywhere and always. We are all sinners in every way, to be sure, but there is a special tendency of men to be irresponsible in their relationships and there is a special tendency of women to be discontented with theirs. The evidence for this is everywhere one looks and so obvious that he who runs may read. Men thus need to mortify that sin first and foremost when they enter married life and women the same with the sin that comes most easily to them.

Then we began a two-part evening sermon on what the Bible regards as the principal *instrument of married love*, mainly the spoken word. We pointed out that, once again in that remarkably compressed and impossibly rich description of marriage in the closing verses of Genesis chapter 2, we find this fundamental emphasis. The only piece of recorded human speech prior to the entrance of sin is Adam’s words, in the form of poem, in praise and celebration of his wife. Awaking from the sleep into which God put him, he saw the beautiful creature lying beside him, felt the stitch in his side, smiled in the realization that God had perfectly fulfilled his newly recognized longing for a partner, one who was “like opposite him,” not a clone but a perfect match, a partner for love, and opened his mouth and said,

“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh; she shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man.”

Set, as I said, in poetic form, it is an expression of happiness, fulfillment, and perfect satisfaction,

And as the next verse goes on to unpack that statement in terms of a husband leaving his parents and “sticking-to” his wife, a term that implies if it does not actually connote passion and love, we may assume that Adam’s poem as well conveys the sentiment we recognize as romantic love – man/woman attraction for one another.

Adding point and emphasis to that snapshot of a perfect marriage -- a husband with his mouth open praising his wife -- is the stark contrast provided in 3:12. The damage done to the marital relationship by the entrance of sin is again described in terms of what the husband *says* to and about his wife. But this time it is not praise and celebration that comes out of his mouth, but blame, reproach, and passing the buck.

“The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree and I ate.”

As the perfect marriage was expressed in loving and celebratory speech, so the fallen marriage is characterized by speech that is now hurtful, unkind, and selfish. This is the Bible’s way, in that remarkably compressed but impossibly rich narrative, of teaching us that the speech of husbands and wives will reveal the relationship, whether good or bad, happy or sad.

But before going on to elaborate the significance of these earliest words out of the mouth of a husband, we paused to consider human speech in general as the *primary instrument of human life*. The reason speech looms so large in marriage is because it is the power that God has uniquely given to human beings to enable them to live that life we recognize as human life, which is, in particular, a life in relationship. If you remember, I introduced you to the argument of two new books, both of which argue, somewhat against the grain, that speech is a uniquely human power, extraordinary in its complexity, its facility, and its utility. Thomas Suddendorf’s *The Gap: The Science of what Separates Us from the Animals* and Stephen Anderson’s *Doctor Dolittle’s Delusion: Animals and the Uniqueness of Human Language* both argue, in defiance of the claims of some, that human language is unique, that there is nothing like it in the animal kingdom, not even in the animals nearest to us, the higher apes such as chimpanzees. As evolutionists, they struggle to understand why this is so, but *that* it is so they demonstrate with relentless arguments. They are fascinating books and I commend them to you. Both authors come to the same conclusion: viz. that human beings have built into them a capacity to communicate what is on their minds in ways that other human beings can understand and appreciate. And when one stops and thinks about it, virtually everything we know as human life depends upon that capacity. [I’ve been thinking a lot about our natural capacity for language, with my little grandsons now at home. Talking comes so naturally to them; they are relentless talkers! Have you ever heard the same question asked thirteen straight times without a break? No answer given, just the question. *I have!* But, of course, in this they are being prepared for life.] Everything in their future life is going to depend upon their ability to communicate through words, mostly spoken words, but written words as well.

It is language that makes relationships possible, whether that relationship is between God and man, husband and wife, parents and children, friends, bosses and employees, whatever. And, if that is so as it is, then it shouldn't surprise us that language must be an essential, a vital, a determinative feature of any marriage, for whatever else marriage is it is a relationship, indeed the supreme relationship of human life. Relationships, we learn in life as we've already learned in the Bible, are as the communication that passes back and forth within them. The words we speak, the choices we make as to which words to say, will have everything to do with what sort of marriage we have. Language is the instrument of married love.

I don't mean to suggest, of course, that there are no other ways to communicate love and to build a relationship other than the spoken or written word. Of course there are. As we learn in the Bible the supreme act of love is that of giving one's life for one's friend, what Jesus did for us. The giving of gifts, the kiss, even a parent's patting a child on his head, all of that can be love. But the fact is that even in the case of Christ's death for us, were it not for his speech to us about that death, his explanation of it in words, we would not recognize the love that was in it. At the last every act and gesture of love depends upon its being spoken. It is not for nothing that when the Savior came into the world, he was identified as "the *Word!*" The incarnate Son of God was many things, of course, but he was also the way God *spoke* to us of his love and grace.

Have you young people sometimes wondered, "What's the big deal about church? Why do we have to go to church every Sunday? What difference would it make if we didn't?" These are fair questions; you ought to have a ready answer to them because they have an answer. We go to worship God. Alright, but why? Is God vain? Does he need to hear his children tell him once a week how great he is? Does he need to have his ego stroked on a weekly basis? That would seem slightly creepy, wouldn't it? Well, of course God does not need our praise. He lived in the internal unity of his triune life for eternity before we came on the scene. He can do very well without us. Nor, to be frank, will our worship seem so compelling to a God who looks upon the heart; will it?

But God knows what we so often forget. Relationships are as the communication that passes between the parties. It is the character and quality of that speech that sustains and deepens the relationship or fails to do so. Relationships are as good as the speech exchanged by those in them. What is worship speech: praiseful, celebratory, appreciative, and thankful communication in words? God knows that such speech is vital to keeping our relationship with him vital and strong and happy. It is this practical need that explains the immense emphasis placed on worship in the Word of God. It is the importance of this speech, God's and ours in a real conversation, that makes it so important that the right things be said, that worship be rightly ordered. And so when we urge you to read your Bible and to pray every day, we are simply telling you that if you want a close and happy relationship with God, you must talk and the very best kind of talk, the most productive talk, the speech that deepens a relationship the most is worshipful, celebratory, appreciative speech, words of compliment, and praise. That is a great deal of what we find in the

God's speech to us in the Bible and it is what we are to return to God in prayer. And as with God, so with everyone else with whom we have a relationship. If you don't believe me, just put this to the test. Every now and then tell a friend how much he or she means to you and how grateful you are to him or to her and see how that person responds. And so in marriage. What we hear out of Adam's mouth in Gen. 2:23 is *worship*. "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman for she was taken out of man." Use a lower case "w" if you must, to distinguish this worship from divine worship, but worship is nevertheless what it is. It is one person speaking in praise and appreciation of another. And it is hardly only here.

In Proverbs 31, at the end of the account of the virtuous wife, the description of her industry, her integrity, and her skillful provision for her family, we read of her reward:

"Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also and he praises her: 'Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.'"

Lest anyone miss the obvious, *that* is worship, children and husband speaking in praise of mother and wife; and here in Proverbs 31 as in Genesis 2, that worship is the mark of a fine marriage. The principle is put more tersely in Prov. 27:5: "Better is open rebuke than hidden love."

You will find the same thing worked out in more detail in the *Song of Songs*, the Bible's most elaborate celebration of married love. Have you ever noticed what that book is? It begins with the woman saying how much she loves him; and then he says how much he loves her, how beautiful she is; how powerfully she affects him. Then she says some more about the strength of her love for him and he returns the favor with celebratory speech of his own. Then he describes her beauty starting at the top of her head and working his way down to her feet. He speaks of the strength of his desire for her. She responds similarly. Then he speaks of her beauty again, describing the features of her body a second time, this time starting at the feet and working his way up to her head. She replies in turn. By and large, the *Song of Songs* is composed of alternations of celebratory, appreciative, and complimentary speech. Do you want to know how to love your spouse, ladies and gentlemen? The Bible tells you and then it shows you: first and foremost, most of the time, and in the most important way, you love her, love him with your words. Here in a beautiful poem about married love we find this a peculiar emphasis. The Song is almost entirely direct address by one of the parties to another.

"My beloved speaks and says to me, 'Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away...'"

Everyone understands that as worship, the language of love and, in the Bible, that kind of speech is the mark of a great marriage because it is the instrument by which true love is preserved, grown, purified, and matured. We are not given a large amount of material descriptive of a happy

marriage in the Bible, but surely it is noteworthy that in those places where we find such a description, it is such loving speech that is brought to the fore!

It may seem an obvious point, but the fact is it is missed as often as it is grasped in human life. Men, in particular, so often fail to grasp the nettle. If you can believe it, I have actually had men answer me, when I asked them if they loved their wives,

“Of course; I put three squares on the table every day, a roof over her head, clothes on her back...”

I distinctly remember the first time a man said something like that to me. I was flummoxed because I couldn't imagine that a man would be dumb enough to say that, even if that is what he really thought. I had to think a bit before replying because “Man, you're dumb,” was not a response likely to earn me a hearing in the conversation! But that is men in marriage, so often clueless in their irresponsibility. A roof over the head, clothing, and food do not communicate love by themselves. Men who hate their wives have often done that for them; after all, he's also living in the house, under the roof, eating the food, wearing clothing. Who's to say whether he is serving her or himself? Those are only gifts of love when they are interpreted to be so; when they come with the words that convince a wife that what her husband does to care for her he counts a privilege because he loves her. And she will not know that if he doesn't say that.

No, take the point. Words are the most powerful tool we have in our kit, and not simply the most powerful tool, but far and away the most powerful. Look, we stick out our tongues as children and say, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” And, of course, it is whistling in the dark. It's the sort of thing a child says because a child does not yet know anything about life. If you break a bone, you can go to the hospital, have it set, and in six or twelve weeks, you'll be right as rain. Indeed, if you ever break that bone again, it will break north or south of where it broke before because at the healing site the bone will be stronger than anywhere else. But all of us adults know people who are still reeling in their adulthood because of words that were spoken to them or words that were never spoken to them when they were young. Words are potent things and they are potent things in marriage, more potent than anything else, potent for good and potent for ill.

As I look back over my life, I have much to regret, far too much. But many of the sad failures I remember most clearly, failures as a husband and a father, as a pastor, as a friend, are precisely the words I spoke I never should have spoken the and words I didn't speak that I should have. How much would have been different if only the right words had been spoken in the right way at the right time? And we know, don't we; how well our children, our spouses, our erstwhile friends can remember so well the wrong words that came out of our mouths, the words we wish somehow we could take back. Words are extraordinarily powerful things!

When a couple marries, in the back of their minds is one overarching question: are we going to have a great marriage, a marriage of lasting love, a romantic and happy marriage for years and years, or will we sag into an also-ran marriage like so many do? Even Christian people. They obviously were deeply attracted to one another or they wouldn't be getting married. They wanted to spend their lives together. But will that measure of delight and and preoccupation with one another last. It obviously doesn't in many marriages, even in many that last for a lifetime. We know well enough of marriages that are secure -- neither spouse is going anywhere -- but then they are not marriages we would want for ourselves. They have grown stale; the sparkle is gone; the sense of delight in one another. They have learned to take one another for granted.

That is our problem, isn't it? We are capable of taking almost anything for granted. We were on our way to hell; we weren't even looking for the way to heaven, and the Lord, in the nick of conversion, plucked us up and set us on the narrow road to everlasting life, on that road that comparatively few people walk. You would think we would spend our lives with shivers running up and down our spines. But the sad fact is that we can go days, even weeks, without thinking a very serious thought about what God has done for us and without our thanking him from the bottom of our hearts. If we can take God's saving love and heaven for granted, we can easily enough learn to take the love of our spouse for granted! Well that's why we go to church, young people, -- to counteract that tendency to take God and our salvation for granted and to counteract that tendency in the only way we know how to counteract it; to speak our love and gratitude to him and hearing his love spoken to us in return -- and that's why husbands and wives speak their love and gratitude in marriage, to counteract that infernal tendency to take the greatest things for granted, to allow them to lose their power over our hearts. Worshipful speech is *the divinely appointed instrument* to deepen and preserve love in a relationship. So, I tell the young couple, "If you want to keep your love fresh and powerful, if you want to be as much in love five years from now as today, ten years from now as five years from now, speak your love to one another." Do that you will do all; fail to do that, little else will matter.

When I was a young man about to get married, what I needed to know was how to love a woman. I was about to do that for the rest of my life and I needed to know how to do it. How does one go about doing that day by day? What is it that makes the difference? After all, there are only a relatively few marriages that any of us knows well that we would want for ourselves. So I needed to know as a young man getting married how to love my wife so that our love will be a power in our lives for years and years and years to come. What makes for a marriage such as everyone dreams of having but few actually find, and still fewer still have 10 or 20 years into their marriage? Is it just the lucky but quite rare convergence of genes or hormones or life experiences or compatibilities that make for a terrific marriage? I didn't know. I couldn't have told you if you had asked me. I'm afraid all that I knew about loving a woman was what I had gleaned from television love stories and the observation of life. If you had asked me what I ought to do to love my wife, I would have probably mentioned four or five things; I might even have mentioned the main thing, but I wouldn't have known that that one thing was the main thing; I

wouldn't have known that if I did *that* the rest would come in train and if I didn't do that the rest wouldn't much matter. The power of speech was a lesson that came later in my marriage, but how much I wish I had begun our marriage understanding that the way I spoke to my wife, in particularly the frequency and the sincerity with which I communicated my love to her, was going to be the key to everything. *Worship is the key to everything in life. That's why there is so much of it in the Bible.*

The Bible does not envisage Christian marriages growing stale. It obviously expects us to keep them fresh and vital to the end. How can it expect that of us? Because it knows how it is done! Worship builds life-long love in marriage, as it builds life-long love or friendship or respect in all our other relationships of life. Without the love and mutual delight that well-spoken words can create and sustain, sex grows stale and gifts become more a duty than a pleasure. It is by worship alone that we can keep that thrill that we knew when we first fell in love. The raw material is there or we wouldn't have been attracted to one another in the first place; we just have to keep from taking it for granted and loving, appreciative, grateful, celebratory speech, and complimentary speech is how that is done.

The failure to speak words of love is a particular failing of men. We speak of the strong, silent type. But we would never say that about a Christian man in regard to his worship of God in God's house on the Lord's Day: that he should stand stolidly in church and not speak his love in hymn or prayer. Worship requires the uttering of words. And so in marriage. But sin shuts men up or provokes them, if not to silence to words that are far from worship, are not even kind, and certainly have no power to cultivate love. We tend to think of sin first and foremost as the individual transgressions that we commit, the individual commandment that we broke in this way or that and that, of course, is sin. We did this; we didn't do that. But much more sin is that "ex-factor" deep within us that disinclines us to do what is really important. Take prayer. Prayer is very easy to do. You can teach a three-year-old to pray. Simply get on one's knees and talk to God. But if prayer is so easy, why do we have such a terribly difficult time doing it well and especially at length. The answer is that there is that within us that doesn't want to pray. Thomas Shepard, the New England Puritan, once admitted that there were times in his life when he would rather die than pray. That is sin and in more ways than one sin silences men when they ought to be speaking. You men who have been Christian men for a long time know this to be true. There are times in your marriage when you know that you need to say something. You know exactly what it is you want to say. You know that if you said it she would be happy and you would be happy, and you still can't get the words out of your mouth. That is sin and men in marriage need to appreciate that the reticence to speak, that reticence to worship, is sinful, pure and simple. The deep and dark mystery of sin!

Once again, these realities are so obvious to everyone that they show up in our humor. We chuckle to hear that a man says to his wife, "You don't keep running after you've caught the bus," or "I told you I loved you when I married you, if I ever change my mind, I'll let you

know.” But the only reason that is funny is because we know it is the way men actually think and behave at least to some degree. Of course, it isn’t so funny in real life!

One of the saddest demonstrations of the nature of fallen human life is that we have this power over the heart of another person, husbands have the power to send their wives into their day six inches off the ground, with just a few words of affection, compliment, and praise; but though they have this power, they rarely use it. That is life in sin; that is the sad, inexplicable failure and disappointment of human life.

I know that some of you will have heard this before, probably at a wedding service, but it remains for me the clearest illustration of this truth and I know of no better way to drive it home to your hearts this evening, so here it is again. When I was in Holland in 1984 for a half-year sabbatical, I was reading the school of Dutch theologians who were, in effect, the counterparts of the English Puritans. It was the time the Dutch call the *Nadere Reformatie*, the second or further reformation, the time in Britain of John Owen, John Bunyan, Samuel Rutherford, and the time in Holland of Willem Teellinck, Jean Taffin, and Gisbertus Voetius. Well, as it happened, I discovered that the world’s expert on that school of Dutch writers was a man, Simon van der Linde, who had just retired from years as a professor of theology at the University of Utrecht. So, with encouragement from others, I called him and asked if I might come down to Utrecht and interview him; ask him some of the questions that had accumulated from my reading. He spoke elegant English, was a devout Christian, was happy to have me come, and so we set a date. Upon the appointed day and at the appointed hour I found myself outside his Dutch row house, knocked on the door, and so began three of the most charmed hours of my life. We spoke about many things related to Reformed theology and its historical development and I have remembered ever since many of the things that he said to me that afternoon.

But when I got home that night, one of the things I confided to my diary was that I had learned more about Prof. van der Linde’s wife, than I had learned about him. He talked about her a lot. He told me where they had met and what a wonderful woman she was and what he had loved about her. At one point near the end of our afternoon together, he offered to give me a copy of a volume of some of his published essays and inscribe it for me. We went into his bedroom where he had a copy of the book, which still sits proudly on my shelf bearing the inscription:

“To Dr. Rayburn, a small present, Utrecht, 7 June, 1984, S. van der Linde, co-pastor.”

But while in his bedroom he stopped by his bed and picked up a framed picture of his wife off the bedside table. And there we stood -- an august, world class scholar and a wet-behind-the-ears American pastor -- and showing me his wife’s picture with tears in his eyes, he said that he never went to bed at night without thanking God for her. Mrs. Van der Linde had been dead for eight years when I arrived on the great man’s doorstep.

As I reflected on what I had heard and seen I realized that he hadn't begun to speak that way about his wife *after* she died. What I heard was the echo of their married life together. That is the way he spoke *to* her; only that can explain why he was still speaking that way *about* her long years after she had died.

Now, who will deny that such is the marriage every man and every woman everyone wants when he or she marries: a marriage of holy and happy love all the way to the end and even beyond: a love so strong that its momentum is still governing the surviving heart eight years after the other has gone. It should surprise no one with a Bible in his or her hand that such a marriage was shaped, even dominated by that kind of appreciative, grateful, celebratory speech that I heard from Prof. van der Linde about his wife. What Prof. van der Linde was saying was that his wife was "bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh," that a part of himself lay in a nearby cemetery. What he was saying was that while many women do excellently, his wife surpassed them all. What he was saying was that he was still faint with love, beautiful to him as she remained.

We speak of "the language of love." But don't miss the obvious: it is *language*, speech, words spoken and heard and returned. Such is the instrument of a strong and loving relationship, happy and fulfilling. I've almost never encountered a troubled marriage in which this kind of speech was not absent or sorely lacking; I've never encountered a great marriage in which this kind of speech was not characteristic of the relationship. You draw your own conclusions and act accordingly.