

Beyond Should I Stay or Should I Go
Happily Ever After Week 1
Galatians 5:13-25

Welcome/vision

This is week 1 of our Happily Ever After series

If you're just joining us, we're going to spend these next six weeks talking about a subject that I never thought I would talk about before I started here and that is marriage

I'm not a marriage therapist, I've had only some very basic training in this

But then I got here and I realized that whether or not I had any credentials in marriage therapy, people needed help in their marriages.

And whether or not I had any credentials, I was in places where I was dealing with very, very, difficult and important marriage challenges

And pretty much since about my third month here or so, I've been working with one to as many as four or five marriages at any given time that are in various levels of crisis

And THAT'S just the ones that I know about!

I figure for every one that I know about there's plenty more that nobody's talking to me or anyone else about!

So a few months ago as I was mapping out some series ideas

I felt this deep sense of conviction: am I just waiting around for more marriages to fall apart or hit these crisis moments

OR am I going to do something BEFORE the crisis happens to help each of us and help all of us to AVOID the crisis

We all WANT happily ever after, right?

Nobody goes into their wedding day hoping and praying for a boring marriage.

Nobody goes into their wedding day hoping that they'll be miserable at home ten years from now.

Nobody WANTS to end up living parallel lives, just sort of putting up with this other person that you know that you once loved but now just sort of annoys you or worse

We all want Happily Ever after but *to get there requires work.*

Marriage requires intentionality, we don't DRIFT into a rich, long-term happily ever after marriage

To get to happily ever after requires literally hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of big and mostly small decisions along the way

And so here's the thing that's really driving me to do this whole series: *Ain't nobody helping us.*

If you step back and take stock of the ways that marriage gets portrayed in media, on t.v, in movies

it's usually the boring thing that the people are finding various creative ways to get out of or to cheat on

Because happily ever after takes time, decades of small, good, wise, courageous, decisions in many contexts and situations, it does not make for great entertainment

It's too slow. It's too complicated. And so it doesn't make for great t.v.

But it does make for a great life.

And if what you want and what I want is happily ever after and if it's this much work, then we need help

and there's very little in our broader popular culture that's going to help us

So we're going to help fill that gap over these next six weeks or so.

Now the other reason why I've been hesitant to tackle this

is that I KNOW that there are so many of you who are here who are single, divorced, widowed, we've got teens in here too

And the very last thing I want to do is communicate to you that you're not welcome here or that there's not a place for you here

You are welcome here. Thank you for the gift of your presence. I mean this very seriously: we wouldn't be a real church without you being here. Thank you.

And for some of you, talking about marriage for the next few weeks could feel really difficult or painful because some of you are still smarting from a marriage that just ended or is in the process of ending

So here's what I'm committed to doing here in this series

every week we're going to talk about a principle of relating that has BROADER application to our lives than just marriage

As we talk about communication, conflict, owning our own stuff,

every week we're going to carve out some chunk of time or make some application

where we're talking about how the principle makes a difference in work environment or friendships or family situations

My hope is at the end of this series all of us will simply be better equipped to be in healthy relationships
whether it's a marriage or dealing with your boss or co-workers or neighbors

Now because I'm not a marriage therapist and because we're going to talk in some broad-strokes about principles that are broadly applicable to all of us

We also wanted to carve out a space where people could do a deeper dive in a marriage-specific environment.

So underneath your seats is a little card for a seminar that we'll be launching NEXT Sunday afternoon

It's called the Marriage Course—it's a video seminar that will have real trained marriage therapists talking about marriage

And it'll be a place for you and your spouse to put some chips in the bank in a more discussion-oriented context.

Here's who should go to this:

If you've never done any sort of marriage tune-up, this is for you.

If it's been longer than a couple of years since your last marriage tune-up, then this is for you.

If you're in a hard place with your spouse where you feel more like roommates than husband and wife, then this is for you.

There are a couple of CRITICAL transition points in the seasons of a marriage where the rules and dynamics suddenly shift and what you've been doing won't work any more:

newlywed, first child, kids hitting teen years, empty-nest, and retirement

If you're ***approaching or in the middle of*** one of those critical transition points in marriage, this is for you.

It will be facilitated by Mark and Michelle Stith, the folks who lead worship up here for us each week

they've done a marriage seminar for us before, they'll be hosting this for us this fall, thanks so much to you two

Childcare is available, we need you to RSVP if you need childcare.

I'd really, really encourage you to take this opportunity to drill down into your marriage and make this investment

Because we all want happily ever after, right? But getting there takes work.

And ain't nobody helping us, so we're going to fill this gap a bit here and see if we can't help all of us get there towards happily ever after

Now of course, happily ever after comes from the ending of fairy tales
Involving the beautiful woman and the handsome prince

And they heroically overcome all sorts of obstacles like witches and locked towers and evil spells and bad hair days and athlete's foot to come together

With the story ending right at the wedding day or pointing to the wedding day: happily ever after

One of the classic fairy tales of all times is Cinderella.

So to get us started this week, I thought we'd check in on Cinderella and her handsome prince, at happily ever after *plus* 10 years.

Ten years after happily ever after was pronounced over them, how are Cinderella and her prince doing?

And as I went looking for them to interview them for this message, I found them in the marriage counselor's office

And I asked them what was going on, and they opened up and told me that I was welcome to share their challenges with you

See, within a couple of years of getting married, Prince Charming's dad died and so he had fledged up to take dad's place running the company

And in the past couple years since taking the promotion he had gone from Prince Charming to King Works A Lot

And Cinderella felt like he was much more interested in making the kingdom bigger and better during the day and then in zoning out in front of the t.v. after work than he was in her or in their kids or their life at home together.

Another point of conflict was that Cinderella had taken a part-time job outside the home in part to keep up her skills and because she really enjoyed the work

What she didn't say was that she took the job in part because felt like she needed some place where she felt like she was valued and affirmed since she wasn't getting that at home.

He was pretending not to know that his lack of attentiveness to his wife was an issue
And instead was criticizing her for being too busy and for not taking care of things at home

King Works A Lot also complained that Cinderella had been a wonderful, devoted wife for the first couple of years and then the kids came along

And as much as he loved the kids, he felt like he'd lost his wife when that first child was born

He agreed that at times he over-worked but that the kingdom needed him to be king and besides that was how they afforded their 500,000 square foot castle and all the servants

And after a long day at work putting out all kinds of fires, he felt like he deserved and needed a place where he could relax and regroup at home

What he didn't say was that he had also developed a low-level porn addiction which he rationalized as a better option than actually having an affair

Cinderella suspected something but she expended a lot of energy pretending not to know

and blocking out the thought that it might lead to something more with the cute servant girl in the court

Meanwhile, she devoted more and more of herself to the kids and to the work

Both of which were good things, but at this point both were functioning as a safer option and a more preferable and less complicated option than trying to move towards her husband

The King for his part was expending a lot of energy pretending not to know that he was contributing to his wife's unhappiness with his unwillingness to make her a priority

And he was pretending not to know that his pattern of relating was a significant part in driving her and them together in the opposite direction of happily ever after

Even though that's exactly what they had both hoped for and wanted ten years earlier.

And now Cinderella and her Prince are at a crisis point in their marriage and in their minds they have what looks like just two options

And these two options are brilliantly summarized in the early 1980's by a band called "The Clash:" should I stay or should I go?

And the '80's band the Clash are ALSO not marriage therapists like me

but they sum up with incredible insight and deep poetic wisdom what many of us feel when we hit points in our marriage relationships where we feel like these are the two options:

If I go there will be trouble, and if I stay it will be double, so c'mon and let me know, should I stay or should I go?

The Scripture that we're going to look at today is going to help us because the people in the passage that we're going to read ALSO thought they only had two options

And what the apostle Paul does in this letter that we're going to read is he gives them a BETTER, 3RD option that opens up new ways of thinking and a better way than either of the two options that they thought they had

The passage of Scripture that we're going to look at is in Galatians 5. Let me frame this up for you

Galatia is a city where Paul visited after he converted to Christianity

So Paul visits these people and many of them become Christians and as best we can tell they're coming from different religious backgrounds

most of them are probably becoming Christians from paganism, others are becoming Christians and converting from Jewish backgrounds

Paul stays there for a while and then he leaves to go on to the next city after the community is established

But after he leaves, some Jewish teachers come in and say,

"that whole Jesus thing is nice and all, but there are all these OTHER things that you have to do to really be a part of God's people—here's the law we have from Moses, you have to do these things, too!"

And they bring in all the identity markers of circumcision and dietary restrictions and the like and add that to what Paul had told them

So the new Christians in Galatia start to do these practices as well.

Especially because they were surrounded by paganism in Galatia and many of those practices were things Paul had said NOT to do

And so they weren't supposed to do what the pagan people around them were doing and now these other teachers come in and say "here's a bunch of rules and practices that if you add these to your Christianity will steer you away from that stuff that you're not supposed to be doing"

And so they start adding that stuff, mostly the Jewish laws and rules, onto their practices and understanding of what it meant to be a Jesus person

See, they feel like they've only got two options:

either follow their appetites like the pagans do or follow these rules

And so to a people who feel like they've only got two options, Paul writes to them and tells them and us of a 3rd way

Galatians 5—to people who feel like they either obey their appetites or obey the law, Paul writes this:

16 So I say, walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ...¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are [also!] not under the law.

There's the 3rd way!

Beyond simply obeying whatever random thought or appetite blips across the screen

AND beyond simply gritting your teeth and being obligated to obeying all the rules—walk by the Spirit!

In other words, this walking by the Spirit is the better solution to the problem of the flesh than the law

merely outwardly going through the religious motions of trying to do what is right.

But it's not just about following the rules and being more religious and checking off the right religious boxes but this active, ongoing walking in step with God's Spirit

He goes on:

19 The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

So here he's agreeing that you want to avoid simply living by whatever appetite or passion happens to be surfacing at the moment

And yes, he's saying that this life is not the life of the people of God, we want to avoid participating in any of these things

But then he comes back to the BETTER 3rd option than merely trying to outwardly control the situation through making up more and more rules

He comes back to this whole being led by the Spirit and he says that this is the better option than a life lived by the flesh or a life led by the law:

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. [notice the dig at those who are saying that the law is the way to go] ...25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Let's start with applying this out of a marriage context for a minute and then we'll circle back and apply it to marriage

Last week I was talking with someone who's in a job that is driving him crazy and he's trying to decide if he should stay or if he should go.

And he really was conflicted—in some ways the job had been a good place for him for a long time

and he felt like the Lord had put him there and he felt like his default should be to stay given that God had seemed to put him there to begin with

But the reality was at this point he was feeling pretty miserable. And as he talked about how miserable he was, I began to be concerned about the staying option

Because if he stayed in the job merely out of obligation or just because he felt like he should

he could go from FEELING miserable to BECOMING MISERABLE

Have any of you ever known someone who went from FEELING miserable to BEING miserable?

They are miserable people for themselves and for everyone around them!

And moving from feeling miserable to BEING miserable is only made a hundred times worse when you get there because you did what you thought was the right thing outwardly

Someone who is miserable who is also SELF-RIGHTEOUS in his or her misery is one of the most pitiful categories of humanity on the planet

And so I said to this person who was feeling stuck in their job: 'you don't just have two options: stay or go. You've got 3.

-You can go, which might be good and maybe it's time

-Or you can stay but there are two different ways you can stay

One way of staying is a staying where you just suck it up, do what you think is right, and just kind of shoulder the burden of it

And I think that if you do that, you'll go from feeling miserable to being miserable.

The other option is to STAY in the Spirit.

That is, to stay but not out of duty or obligation but with a clear sense of partnership in the Spirit and in the joy and power of the Spirit

That the Spirit has called you to dig back into your work in that place and you are looking to God's Spirit for life and energy and joy in the midst of this work
maybe even looking to the Spirit for some fresh ways to come at the work you've been given

But if you just stay out of obligation and duty, then I'm afraid that you're going to move from FEELING miserable to BEING miserable.

And self-righteously miserable on top of that, because you feel like you're gritting your teeth and making the right, hard choice

In the passage we looked at in Galatians, Paul is telling people that you can do the right thing in the wrong way and if you do so it doesn't produce the same quality of fruit in our lives

There are three options here before the Galatians: life in the flesh results in us not inheriting the kingdom of God

But life by the law, duty, obligation, while it does keep us from doing these other things, doesn't bear good fruit in us either
It can make us proud and self-righteous

If you don't know the Jesus story, it was the religious people who were outwardly very very good that he had the most conflict with

Why? Because when we're doing the right thing for the wrong reasons it does weird things to our hearts and our minds

If inward heart change never happens and all we ever do is the right thing out of mere willpower and obligation
We become bitter, miserable, self-righteous people

In your work place, in your friendships, in your marriages, the only options are not should I stay or should I go?

The third option that we're striking out down this week is can I stay in the Spirit?

When it comes to marriage, the Scriptures are unapologetically biased towards staying.

That marriage is a sacred institution, not entered into lightly, and to be abandoned only in the direst of circumstances.

This is what the Scriptures call us to as people who follow Jesus.

And so what happens to us who want to take these commands seriously is the same thing that happened to the Galatians who wanted to take the commands of God seriously

Especially those of us who are more duty-bound, rule-following types: we just try to do the right thing, we follow the law, we stay

And the Scriptures affirm that by and large staying is a good thing, the right thing, but that if we merely stay out of obligation or duty, what does that do to us?

You know people who have done this, right? What are they like after 30, 40, 50 years of just staying out of duty or obligation?

The fruit of staying out of obligation or duty is becoming that miserable person, self-righteous, frustrated, discouraged, angry

But here's what staying in the Spirit does in us and through us: ***the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control***

This is the result of life lived the third way. Have you known people who look like this? I hope you do.

They are wonderful. Strong. Compelling. Courageous. Humble. Mighty. Beautiful. Radiant.

They're wow-people, even if they're quiet and unassuming

And every single person I've ever met who's had this kind of fruit in their lives is very, very, very happy.

If we all could step back and look at the 3 different paths offered: life in the flesh, life under the law, and life in the Spirit

And if we could all see the outcome or fruits that resulted from these 3 different lives and compare and contrast them

If we were sane and healthy, we'd all choose this path of life in the Spirit every single time

this is the life you and I were made for, it's the life that we want to live, it's the path to happily ever after.

If you wanted to walk down the path that bears the fruit that makes YOU REALLY ALIVE, what real humanity is supposed to look like, the path of real happiness, you'd choose this path in the Spirit

Another way of describing this path is that it's the path of holiness. Holiness just means set apart, the 3rd way in the Spirit is the set-apart way

When we talk about or think about what holiness might mean we often think of it in terms of what we DON'T do, all the fun stuff that we're avoiding.

But holiness is not primarily about what you're not doing, it's primarily about who you're becoming—and true holiness is the antidote to becoming miserable or self-righteous

True holiness means keeping in step with the Spirit, it means looking like this fruit of the Spirit over the course of your life

It means real, eternal, happiness. Holiness means happily ever after.

For many of our series we have a book over on our resource table to go along with the series

And for this series the book we've got on the book table is an outstanding book about what God's doing in and through marriage

And the title is called "Sacred Marriage" and the subtitle is "What if God designed marriage to make us holy rather than to make us happy?"

And what he's doing there is debunking our overly-romanticized picture of marriage and the demands we put on marriage to always be serving us and making us happy all the time

And I totally am on-board with his project and what he's doing and if you're married and you just read one book this fall, this should be it.

Because this is such a helpful re-framing of our expectations on our marriages lifting the burden off of our spouse or our marriage to always be making us happy.

But if I could tweak just one thing about this book, I'd tweak this sub-title from "What if God designed marriage to make us holy rather to make us happy?" to

"What if God designed marriage to make us holy, because that's the only way we'll ever be eternally happy?"

What if holiness is the only way to your true happily ever after?

When I first got married, I was super-conflict avoidant. I wanted everyone to like me

And so I thought the only to get there was to accommodate as much as possible and try to placate and keep everyone happy and not have hard conversations

And the Lord and my counselor forced me to deal with this issue

And eventually what I realized was the only way to real relationship was THROUGH the hard conversations, not AROUND the hard conversations

And if I spent my whole life trying to make her and everyone around me happy with me without having those hard conversations, I would be exhausted and miserable.

Because people-pleasing is making people into my god, using people to prop me up in an unhealthy and un-holy way
and that only leads down the road to misery and pain

On my own I would have followed the path of my flesh and I would have looked like a really nice guy doing it
but I would have been on the path to becoming a miserable and frustrated human being

Because how many of the people can you please all of the time? Zero! It's exhausting and ridiculous!

So God put me in my marriage in part to surface my sin pattern in order to get rid of it
in order that I might walk the path of holiness, walk in the step with the Spirit, and bear the fruit of the Spirit
because holiness is the only way to real eternal happiness.

That was what walking in step with the Spirit and keeping in step with the Spirit looked like in my first few years of marriage

But it wasn't my only option, right? I could have left. It freaked me out to think about having to wade into conflict. I was scared to death of it.

OR I could have just stayed because that's what Jesus tells me to do
and while I stayed I would have secretly blamed her for any conflict that surfaced

And if I would have stayed in that way I would have had this accruing resentment building up in my heart towards my wife
and become miserable and self-righteous in the process.

OR, by God's grace, I could do this third way:
staying in the marriage in the Spirit, dealing with MY issues as they surfaced, and walking the path of holiness that bears the fruit of the Spirit

The Christian story is the crazy, ridiculous, incredible story that says that God is so committed to your eternal happiness that he died to secure it for you

God is so committed to your eternal happiness, to your HAPPILY EVER AFTER that he laid down his life 2,000 years ago so that you might experience it

And then he meets us individually and he says,

“this is the path to happily ever after!

it’s staying in step with the Spirit, it’s bearing the fruit of the Spirit, it’s this holiness, which is the only way you can ever be eternally happy.

I made you, I love you, walk in this way—and even and where it’s hard, you can trust me that what I’m doing as I lead you down this path is life-giving.”

Marriage is not the only way that we get led down that happily ever after path
there are many ways and many situations that God calls us to walk in this 3rd way of the Spirit towards holiness

But for those of us who are married, it’s important for us to see and grapple with this idea:

That God designed marriage to make us holy, which is the only way we can ever truly live happily ever after

This morning, my big take-home question is simply this:

where are you wrestling between two options and feel stuck where God might be offering you this 3rd way of the Spirit?

In your marriage specifically, maybe you’re not at the point of should I stay or should I go

Maybe you’re just staying on auto-pilot rather than staying in step with the Spirit, looking for ways to engage your spouse in the Spirit.

Some of us are more inclined to follow our appetites, our whims and desires, we have a track record of doing things that Paul would say is of the flesh

Maybe in part because the only alternative looked like a bunch of rules which didn’t look like a whole lot of fun, right?

But what if your options aren’t JUST either follow your flesh down the path of regrets and pain and broken relationships all around me

OR follow a bunch of religious rules that make you grumpy and self-righteous

But a third option of keeping in step with the Spirit down a path that ultimately actually leads you to becoming the man or woman I think you actually want to be?

What if the path to happily ever after looks different than you thought it did?

Others of us, we're rules people. We work hard to do things the right way and we have a high value on duty and obligations and staying on the straight and narrow

And maybe that's in large part because you know that God doesn't want you going down that other path of just doing whatever your flesh feels like
you know that's just not quite right, so you're trying your best to follow the rules

But what if there's a 3rd way? A better way?

Because if you just follow down that road of rules and regulations, we can kind of tell you where it's likely to lead and we don't think that's who you want to become?

And what if that third way is both harder and easier?

What if that third way requires you give up some control and requires you giving up the ability to merely check-off a few boxes to feel good about yourself

And instead requires a full, ongoing engagement with God, looking to the Spirit of God to guide us and direct us into this third way?

What if the path to happily ever after isn't just following the rules
as if life was some formula that if we put all the right ingredients in we get the magical outcome that we can manufacture?

What if the path to happily ever after is this path to full-life engagement with God, affirming the goodness of the rules

But always looking for this third way of the Spirit so that we might inhabit the commands of God and the directions of God in ways that are life-giving and bear the fruit of the Spirit?

As we kick off this series, in some ways what we're going to be doing for these next six weeks is painting a picture of what it might look like to walk in this 3rd way

And next week, we're going to talk about what I think is probably the single most important small little practice we can cultivate in our marriages to help keep them strong over the long haul

And for these next few weeks, even if you're not a Jesus person, not sure you believe any of this stuff,

I want to invite you to entertain the idea that God designed marriage to make us holy, which is the only way to happily ever after as we bear the fruit of the Spirit in us

See if this might make sense, see if this third way might actually be the life-giving way to get you and me and all of us to the place where we all want to be

The place of happily ever after.