

**Turn Toward, Not Away**  
Happily Ever After Week 2  
Oct. 25, 2015

**Big Idea: the path to happily ever after is made up of thousands of small stones that read “I turned toward not away”**

Welcome/vision

If you're just joining us, this is week 2 of a marriage series we're calling “Happily Ever After”

Everyone WANTS happily ever after, but getting there takes work and the reality is that we don't get a whole lot of help from the culture or the people around us

And if you're just joining us, my true confession is that I never thought I'd do a marriage series when I first got here 3 years ago

But over the past 3 years there have been a number of difficult marriage situations that I've been a part of

And one of the things that has come as a result of these situations is I've had to learn real quick about marriage

And so what I want to do here in this series is share some of what I've learned and share some of the things that have been helpful for others

In the hopes that I can help those of us who are married to get to the happily ever after place that we all wanted on our wedding day

And if you're new with us today and you're not married

if you're single, divorced, widowed, been married multiple times and so sick and tired of marriage that you're pretty sure you'll never make THAT mistake again

We want to very much welcome you here. Sometimes in church-world it can feel like if you don't have that perfect leave-it-to-beaver family or history that you're not welcome

Some of you have left or avoided church for a long time after a divorce because you felt like suddenly you weren't welcome or didn't fit in any more

But we have a bunch of folks here who are single, widowed, divorced, a good number of us have had several marriages

And again this week I want to re-iterate: we would not be a real church without YOU here with us.

Thank you. Thank you for gracing us with your presence and participation in our community. You are essential to us being a real church

So throughout this whole series as we're talking about Biblical principles in areas like forgiveness, conflict, and communication

we're going to take time each week to make specific application that is OUTSIDE of marriage

that applies to your co-workers, family relationships, friendships, boss, your volunteer work, or any number of other contexts

So if you're new and you're not married, don't walk out just yet, stick with us today and see if this might actually resonate with you.

Now one of the tricks of talking about marriage in this context is that we've each got particularities to our situations

And if I was sitting over coffee talking with six different people or couples about your marriage or your former marriage

I might take the exact same principle we're talking about and apply to each specific situation in slightly different ways

So I want to encourage you to take the principles we talk about here on Sunday mornings and do some thoughtful evaluation of it before you make application

And I want to also make this disclaimer: throughout this series I'm talking about marriages that are facing and dealing with the day-to-day normal range of ups and downs and challenges and conflicts in marriage

But there are a whole set of challenges or situations where it might be a different conversation

If there's physical or emotional abuse happening

that's outside the range of what we're talking about and requires a more significant level of intervention and a different conversation

If you're married to someone with significant mental illness like narcissism and they refuse to get help or treatment, that's also a different conversation

If you're dealing with an affair or with someone who's got an addiction of some sort that they refuse to get help for, that's also a different conversation

If your marriage is in one of these types of categories and you haven't talked to anyone about it yet

my hope in this series is that talking about this might help to free you to step into the light and deal with this stuff

Here's my email address: alex@chathamchurch.org

I'm hoping that at least a couple of you in these more difficult places in your marriages might contact me  
and either myself or one of the other leaders in our community might be able to bring you to a healthier and more life-giving place

Now today I'm going to fill in a gap in your history that you didn't know that you had.

See, I haven't officiated any of the marriages of any of the people here at Chatham Community Church—I've only done weddings for the college students that I used to work with before I came to work here

What that means is that all of you were fortunate enough to have someone ELSE to give the homily at your wedding

And so today we're going to go back in time to your wedding day  
and I'm going to give you the homily that I would have given to you if I had been privileged enough to know you back then

And every so often as we go through this I will go off-road and do what I've promised to do which is to make sure that we make application to those of you who aren't married

And since I've got a little more room to roam, and you're all sitting down I'm not worried about someone passing out from standing too long  
I'll fill it out a little more detail than I would normally do in a wedding context just because I can!

What we're going to talk about today is vitally important because it's a mission-critical dynamic to a healthy marriage  
that's actually totally counter-intuitive and contrary to how most everything else works

When you were a little kid, how many of you touched the hot stove or skillet *after* your mom told you not to do so?

If you were smart and not a stubborn persnickety little bugger, what lesson did you learn?

Don't do it again! If you get burned once, you don't touch the hot stove or skillet or toaster again unless you've got serious issues!  
You retreat, you withdraw, you don't ever do that again!

But here's the counter-intuitive thing about marriage: again, within the range of normal day-to-day challenges and tiffs and arguments and mis-understandings

The most critical practice you can cultivate to get to happily ever after, is simply this: ***turn towards, not away in difficulty and hardship, as long as you both shall live.***

In spite of what it costs you, in spite of feeling a little bit burned by that last interaction

in spite of all our instincts to want to withdraw and retreat in the midst of conflict or out of emotional self-preservation

the key habit to cultivate in spite of getting burned last time is to turn toward, not away

We all want happily ever after. Here's the punchline for today for getting there: the choice to turn towards and not away

And cultivating this as our basic heart posture towards our spouse and where the power to do that comes from, that's what we're going to talk about today

Now at this point if you're not married you might be feeling rather relieved that you're not married--maybe this will be a good series for you after all!

You get to sit back and laugh at all these poor married people

who have to figure out how to keep turning towards and not away in the midst of all the hard stuff about marriage!

But in the passage we're going to look at today and the place where we're going to get this command actually isn't about marriage.

It's about how Jesus-followers are to relate to each other in general.

Turning towards and not away is what the Scriptures are going to call ALL OF US who are Jesus-people to do for each other

it just also happens to be one of the most important keys to a happily ever after marriage

So if you're here today and you're single AND you're not a Jesus-person, then welcome and huzzah! Party for you today! YOU get the cat bird seat today whatever that means!

You don't HAVE to do any of this.

But I want to invite you to consider what the Scriptures are calling us to, and IF the power to DO this is actually available like the Scriptures say it is, then can you imagine what kind of a difference it would make in our lives, in our world, in our marriages, if we actually did this.

What if following Jesus actually meant that we had the power and strength to turn toward one another and not away

in the face of difficulty and hardship, as long as we all shall live?

That's what we'll be talking about today as without further ado, we go back in time to your wedding day or the wedding of a significant friend of yours

And I give the homily I would have given had I been there to be a part of it.

*[cue wedding march while two guys clip on my bow tie and put on my sportcoat]*

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are gathered here today from all over the country to celebrate this great event!

And it IS a great event!

Woman, you look beautiful, man, you look about as good as you can look

there's so much that's great about you all and about your families and friends that it's a great day to celebrate

And you need to know this: the Lord delights to be here, delights to celebrate this great wedding day along with you.

Now all my weddings have been from working with college students, so at this point in my homily I reference the college where they met.

And if you're like me when I was a college student, there was probably at least one class where you experienced first day of class, syllabus shock—it's like sticker shock, only much more personal

Some professors enjoy making sport of undergrads by trying to scare them out of their classes by handing you a syllabus on the first day of class that you look at and instantaneously break out into a cold sweat:

“This is impossible! The only way to get this amount of work done would be to drop all friends, drop all my other classes, give up on eating and sleeping and going to the bathroom, hook up a permanent caffeine drip on my arm and work this class 24/7 for the entire semester”

And if you're at all like me, there was probably at least one class where the professors evil intentions worked and you dropped the class at the earliest possible moment because they had scared you away with their impossible, impossible syllabus.

Well, in just a couple of minutes you two are about to exchange vows and in doing so you will subscribe to a syllabus that's more impossible and intimidating than any syllabus you were handed in college.

See, we've all gathered here to watch and celebrate you two making promises to each other that are outrageous

And if we're going to be perfectly honest, they are promises that are beyond your ability to *perfectly* keep

If it's just up to the two of you, no matter how warm and fuzzy your love looks now and no matter how beautiful this day is, the promises that you're about to make are going to be bigger than you can deliver on perfectly

And this is why it's critical that we understand what we're doing here. This is a worship service.

And it can get confusing because there's so much about you two in the midst of all of this

it can start to feel like we're worshipping you or worshipping the potential of human love or something equally as sentimental and empty as that.

But the reality is far different and it's far better news. We're not worshipping you two, nor are we worshipping the potential of human love.

We're here to worship Jesus, we're celebrating the two of you. It's a subtle but important distinction.

We worship Jesus because your life together and your marriage is too great a thing to be built on the fickleness and arbitrary-ness of human love.

Your marriage is too profound, too wonderful a thing to be left to your own devices to figure out.

And so I've chosen a great passage for today's ceremony that applies perfectly from Colossians 3:

***12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.***

Colossians 3 is a great picture of how the gospel is to be lived out in community in concrete and specific ways

Paul starts by giving us these great names: chosen, holy, dearly loved—the Scriptures repeatedly declare that when we come to faith in Christ, we get these new identities

These are our FIRST and MOST IMPORTANT names and identities as Christ-followers

None of us is primarily single or married or divorced or widowed—that is not our primary name. Our primary identities and truest things about all of us are these words: chosen, holy, dearly loved. That's who we are.

So when the Scriptures proceed to call us to do crazy things like clothe ourselves with humility, it's not like putting on a Halloween costume that's not really us for a few minutes and then taking it off

To put on humility for a Jesus-follower is simply to act in line with who you now are as God's child

The antidote to some of our deepest fears in life, that nobody would ever choose us, love us, or that we'll never amount to much is that in Christ you are holy, chosen, and dearly loved

And so the Scriptures declare the truth over us and then it calls us to live into it.

The key practice or discipline that Paul talks about in Colossians is bearing with each other, forgiveness—forgiving one another as the Lord Jesus has forgiven us

And the over-arching power that binds it all together is love.

In the Biblical understanding of love, it's God's love that is to bind us together

and indeed God himself who is love, he's the one who's the third party and fully present in your marriage.

And since this passage is written to a church, not to married couples, we can pause here make application to a much broader audience—to all of us here, as we figure out what it means to be a church community together

One of the things we love around here are small groups. Part of what we love and fear about small groups is that things come up in conversations where people don't agree with each other!

It's every small group leader's nightmare to have to referee a super-loaded conversation--whether it's a theological issue or a political issue or personal decisions people are making

In our broader culture in media and social media, there is so much anger and vitriol that we are moving to the point where we cannot have honest, good, hard conversations where we disagree respectfully and lovingly

In contrast to this, the Scriptures give us the power to do so and then demand and command Jesus-followers to do so.

The world cannot disagree and still love one another. Jesus followers do not have that option

How wonderful would it be if one of the most distinctive things about the church was that because of Christ we had the power and patience and the love to actually have disagreements and even heated discussions

That did not degenerate into toxicity and hatred and instead ended with disagreeing in love

I want to call us as a church to bear with, forgive, and love one another in an election year, in the midst of all the ways we have different takes on different issues, because Christ has called us holy, chosen, and dearly loved

And our love for Christ and Christ's love for us empowers us and compels us to be about something more important than making sure our opinions get heard and everyone agrees with us

Without the love and forgiveness of God experienced and then shared with each other freely, our relationships will not flourish the way that God has intended it.

Back to our homily: the good news about marriage is that it is a gift!

And part of that gift is that marriage becomes one of the primary ways that God will shape both of your characters for the rest of your lives

Sometimes that will be a welcome shaping, sometimes it will be a little less welcome!

And sometimes, honestly, it will feel literally like death—because it is death. There are things about each of us that need to die—selfishness, apathy, ambition, control, pride, and others.

He often uses people to free us from these things. And it hurts.

Let me invite you and charge you if I might be so bold to do two things, in this order. I believe that if build on these two things in your marriage in this order, it will set you on the right trajectory in love as you share in your married life together.

The first is to cling to the love of God first and foremost. God's love has been poured out onto each of you through the death and resurrection of his Son.

The Scriptures declare that we were made in God's image to be his free and loving and happy children.

But we've run from God—we've decided we didn't want to live in his house and live by his rules.

Sin is broken relationship. We had broken our relationship with God.

And so God had a choice to make—he could leave us to our own wanderings or he could continue to love us and come get us.

In his love, what the Scriptures declare and what the whole Jesus thing is all about, is that God came and got us.

Jesus dies on the cross to absorb all our sins and to reconcile us to our perfect Father. The invitation to all of us is to accept that gift and walk in a newly reconciled relationship with the God who loves us: free of charge, not based on how good you are!

I want to challenge and remind you that for both of you, you come into this marriage with a prior commitment and a greater love: Jesus Christ himself.

He is the source of this love that the passage in Colossians talks about that binds the two of you together.

And sometimes you're going to have to remind each other of that as various things attempt pull you away from your first love

The siren call of career and work, kids, even one another and even service to others will attempt to call you away from abiding in Christ and towards trusting and attempting to find life in other things.

It can be a tricky thing to tell the love of your life that they're just not supposed to be that into you. But that's your first job towards one another—to point one another to Christ.

The second thing I want to charge you to do after you've made abiding in Christ your priority is that second key element from that description we just read in Colossians: Forgiveness

There's going to be times when you have conflict, get frustrated with each other, drive each other more than just a little crazy.

And while here and now we smile and laugh and everyone here who's married can identify with this

The honest truth is that conflict is where the true battles are fought for the quality, character, intimacy and direction of your marriage.

How we handle conflict is often what makes or breaks our marriage relationship

And I want to call you, and charge you with this: in the midst of difficulty and hardship, as long as you both shall live, turn toward each other, not away from each other.

Turn towards each other, not away from each other

In those hard moments, those conflicts where you can't see how you can work around it or manage it,

When the other person appears to you at that moment to be the most obstinate, wrong-headed person you have ever met in your entire life and you just honestly can't stand them

You have a choice to make: will I harden my heart toward this man, this woman, will I shut down, check out, give up on him or her, roll my eyes and just quit?

There are all kinds of forms that turning AWAY takes, some of them are dramatic and deliberate like the silent treatment, the cold shoulder, the deliberate hardening of my heart towards this person, looking for love in all kinds of other places

Some of the ways we turn away are more subtle and often not intentional at all: sometimes career will pull us away, sometimes our extended families or other relationships, sometimes hobbies or kids

All those are good things, but we're not to turn permanently towards those things. We're to stay turning towards our spouse as our primary and first relationship here on earth.

Will you allow these other things to seep in, or will you turn toward him, turn towards her? Will I fight to keep my heart soft? Will I turn toward and not away?

Because we all want happily ever after. But the path to getting there is made up of thousands of small little rocks that read on them

“I turned toward and not away in this season, at this point in our marriage, in this situation, at this boring season of our marriage, at this exciting point in my career, at this point with the kids, in the face of this temptation, at this point in our financial crisis—I turned toward and not away”

The path to happily ever after is made up of hundreds of thousands of small little stones that all read “I turned towards and not away.”

And the good news is that this isn't entirely up to you to do: Jesus Christ is in you and he has already done it.

About six months ago here at Chatham Community Church we did a series on forgiveness.

It was a little bit traumatic for some of us, but for many of us we took some significant steps in cutting loose from some of the pain and baggage we'd been carrying around with us for a long time

I want to circle back to the core truth that changed all sorts of things for me about forgiveness because the most difficult things and often the most important things require a second and third pass to really get and apply and habituate

In the Christian story, this is where the power comes from to really extend forgiveness to other people who have hurt us whether it's in a marriage or a family situation or a work environment

The Scriptures declare that Jesus Christ is the one who takes away the sins of the ENTIRE WORLD—all the sins ever committed by anyone were put on Jesus

And when we accept that gift, Jesus sets up shop in our hearts, he dwells inside of us

And then he invites us to *allow* his already love and his *already-done* forgiveness to work through us to bless and love other people

So when you are in the midst of conflicts, hardships, difficulties, when you get sinned against by this person who says that they love you

Remember that Jesus Christ IN YOU has already absorbed the other person's sin. He has already forgiven all of it—yours and theirs.

Every sin that you'll ever commit against each other has already been pre-paid for.

Here's the good news to all of us who would receive it: I'm calling you to turn toward each other and not away from one another, but the bottom line is that Jesus has already done this AND he has taken up residence inside of you

And so your job is not to GENERATE this turning toward but simply to DEMONSTRATE this turning toward

You don't have to generate forgiveness, you don't have to drum it up, try to work harder to squeeze it out of you or figure out a way to do it

You just have to cooperate and participate with Jesus, access Jesus' forgiveness that already resides in you

To LET HIM extend His perfected forgiveness THROUGH you.

Forgiveness is both toxic and exhausting! And we know we need to do it or should do it and so we try to get to work doing it

But what if the power for forgiveness DOESN'T START WITH YOU!?!

What if the real power for forgiveness is the fact that Jesus IN YOU has already forgiven them

And so what we do is COOPERATE, AGREE WITH, SUBMIT TO, EMBRACE this larger, more wonderful reality

I used this analogy several months ago but I'm not afraid to use it again:

We read in the Scriptures that we have to deliver the pizza of forgiveness to those who sin against us and hurt us

So someone sins against us, we know we have to forgive them

And so what we do is go to work in the kitchen trying to make the forgiveness pizza, trying to create it from scratch, so we can deliver it to them:

Gotta' forgive, gotta forgive, gotta forgive, we're slaving away in the kitchen, trying to make this pizza of forgiveness

And some of you are terrible cooks! And others of you are really good cooks! But what happens to just about anyone if they feel like they're always the ones in the kitchen having to do the hard work of cooking up everything for everyone else?

They get bitter! So here's the good news of what the Scriptures tell us: when someone sins against us, we don't have to make the forgiveness pizza!

What Christ has done is already bake the perfect forgiveness pizza—we don't MAKE the forgiveness pizza, we just DELIVER the forgiveness pizza, it's already done, it's already cooked and ready and waiting

Your pizza stinks compared to his! The perfect forgiveness pizza is already cooked and hot and now!

We don't MAKE the forgiveness pizza, we just DELIVER the forgiveness pizza; our job is to demonstrate forgiveness, not generate forgiveness

You don't have to generate turning toward the other, you simply have to demonstrate—because Christ in you has already done it. It is already reality, the most real thing imaginable.

In marriage we make wonderful and audacious and incredible promises to each other. This is a good and holy thing.

And at points it is going to be impossible to live out these promises perfectly—but the good news is that there's one who did—there's One who lives out all of his promises perfectly.

And he has taken up residence inside of us

And he invites you two, on your retrospective wedding days, to remain in that love, and to allow that love to flow through you to one another especially in the form of forgiveness

And my prayer for your marriage is that it is one that is marked by first abiding in the love of Christ and then by turning toward each other and not away, through difficulty and hardship, as long as you both shall live.

Amen, Lord, and may it be so—Amen!

Thus endeth your homily, and the real question for many of us in light of this call and in light of the fact that many of us know that we haven't done this is simply "what do we do now?"

What do I do about the fact that I HAVE turned away, not towards, I HAVE made decisions, whether consciously or sort of just drifted to the point where at least in some areas in my relationship with a spouse or some other person is strained and I know it needs some sort of repair

Here are a couple of next steps for you—a day-by-day process of doing some work in this area this week in really practical ways:

1. Sunday: Identify one relationship where you've turned away instead of towards the other person and there was something broken or strained about it.

We're not talking here about a friend who moved away to the other side of the country and you kind of drifted as friends

We're talking about something like your marriage or a particular place in your marriage where you've withdrawn or turned away

Or a friendship or family relationship that's strained or broken where you've turned away and that you have a sense that you need to figure it out, do some work

2. Monday: Why did you turn away?
  - a. Is there something you need to forgive about the other person?
  - b. Or was it just that something or someone better came along?

I totally remember in high school ditching one friend of mine for some new friends. Terrible! What a jerk! Who let that guy be the pastor, right?

I turned away because some better, other options came along and in the process I hurt someone who had been kind to me

Be totally honest here with yourself: why did you turn away? Was it something they did? Was it more about you? Was it some combination of both?

Most of the time we are sinned against and then we sin in response. Can you be fully honest about both sides of that equation?

3. Tuesday: What does it mean to demonstrate not generate forgiveness in this instance
  - a. If you need to forgive the other person, can you begin to imagine and pray about how you might demonstrate, not generate forgiveness towards them?
  - b. If the person who needs forgiveness is you, how does Christ's death on the cross apply to you?

If you're not a Jesus person, that's totally fine, just think about this hypothetically—if it's true that Christ's death took on all the sin and brokenness of the entire world, then how would that set you free to have healthier, more life-giving relationships?

4. Wednesday through Friday: What's one step of "turning towards" you can make this week?

After you've done some head and heart work, you've still got this strained relationship where you feel like things are not quite right

Forgiveness and love requires not just mental gymnastics but action, movement—turning towards someone is a decision that has practical movement to it.

So what we're talking about here is a phone call, an email, a request to go on a date night to talk about something

Or maybe offering an apology for your part of something that went bad recently

Some sort of turning towards the other person, a deliberate rolling back of a previous decision to turn away

One catch to this is that not every relationship is safe to jump back into, is it? And for some of you, you've got a parent or sibling or ex-spouse who's really not safe to re-engage in relationship with

But you still need to do this kind work of forgiveness with in your heart—otherwise, we're still a slave to them and the damage that they did to us

And then maybe you just need to send a really random, out of the blue card or note letting them know that you're thinking about them and hoping that they are well

You are turning toward them in a safe, careful way that doesn't set you up to give power back to someone who's not safe or unhealthy

Nobody writes letters any more, so maybe write them a very short, very simple note, mail it and feel free to hope that they don't respond!

For our marriages, if we've got a track record of NOT turning towards you and NOT engaging with our spouse

Especially when it comes to one area or a crucial conversation like money or sex or your in-laws or your work schedule

Then we need to start un-doing that habit because what I find is that if we start to turn away instead of towards in one or two key areas where we just can't seem to agree

Then it becomes much, much easier to turn away in other areas as well, even areas where we relate well to one another

Some of us are in places where we've done so much turning away that it's become our default and our habit and we need to learn new habits of figuring out what it looks like to learn a new habit

So start this week, do the heart stuff first, start by getting really honest with yourself and with God—where have you turned away, why, and what does it mean to have the cross of Christ meet that strained relationship

And then find one way to move towards the other person, whether it's your spouse or some other person where there is strain

Now next week we'll tackle what many professionals say is one of the biggest issues in marriage or any relationship and that is communication

And what we're going to find is that Jesus addresses the core problem we have with communication and gives us some coaching on how to improve how we communicate with one another

In our marriages, we all want happily ever after. But getting there takes work. Sometimes that work looks herculean and heroic.

But what I've found is that the path to happily ever after is mostly paved with thousands and thousands of small rocks that say

“I turned toward you and not away in this situation” over and over and over again.

My prayer is that we'd walk this path as a church community and in our marriages—the path to happily ever after.

PRAY