You Before Me Leads to We
Marriage Series
Phil 2:1-4

Good morning church, my name is Mark Potter and I’m one of the pastors here. Last Sunday we launched a four-week marriage series and although this series is geared toward married people, our hope is that it would be relevant and applicable not just for marriage relationships but also for all relationships because a healthy marriage, like any healthy relationship, is intended to reflect the sacrificial, selfless, covenantal relationship between God and His people, which the Bible refers to as the bride of Christ.

The title of today’s sermon is, “You Before Me Leads to We,” and the passage we’re going to look at is Phil 2:1-4. But before we dive in, I want to invite my wife Emily up on stage. Emily hates being on stage so this might be the only time you ever see her up here.

Emily and I met in the youth group here at Colonial back when we were in sixth grade. We started dating our sophomore year of high school right after we both began to drive. During our junior year of high school, Pastor Ted Nissen led us through his final New Members class here at Colonial when we were 17 years old. After graduating high school, we continued dating throughout most of college. We both did Summer Staff here at Colonial together for two summers and then during the middle of our senior year we got married right here in this sanctuary when we were 22 years old after six years of dating. We were one of Pastor Bob’s 435 weddings. We have now been married for 15 years and we have four boys. (You were going to offer to babysit until I told you we had all boys... Pray for our children’s staff, they have their hands full).

Here’s a picture of our family from this past Father’s Day. (Show pic). Aren’t we cute?

Another reason I wanted to bring my wife onto this stage is to publicly tell you all that I married a superhero. This last year was an incredibly hard year – she was an unbelievable support through all my cancer treatments, to me feeling nauseous and tired all the time, to surgery, and not being able to lift our kids after surgery, to dealing with online school for our oldest while parenting twin preschoolers and nursing a baby, to running her own business, doing the laundry, making meals, and dealing with her own health issues while taking care of the six of us... Thank you! Thank you for being the most loving, caring, supportive, nurturing, strong woman that I know. I love you! Ok, I’m done embarrassing you now.

Emily is a Marriage and Family Therapist and I’m a pastor so you might assume that we have the perfect marriage but we definitely don’t. I don’t want to give you the wrong impression. We are two imperfect, sinful people who fell in love and are working through many of the same stressors and challenges of any other marriage.

This sermon series is not meant to create comparison or guilt trip anyone. Our marriage is far from perfect, but we have realized that our marriage is not our marriage; it’s God’s marriage.
And in our shortcomings, we are committed to cultivating the love that we share in sickness and in health for as long as we both shall live.

With that said, Re-Engage is a 12 week marriage course that will be offered right here at our South KC campus on Sunday afternoons during the Fall semester from 3:30-5:30. Childcare will be available. We’ve had about 100 couples go through the class over the years but this is the first time we’re offering it at our campus, so I hope you’ll register here in a few weeks when the time comes.

Ok, let us stand and read our scripture passage for today, Phil 2:1-4:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Will you pray with me? (Pray).

My sermon falls under three subheadings:
1. The Nearness of Christ
2. Oneness in Christ
3. You Before Me

1. **Nearness of Christ**

This passage of scripture is written by the Apostle Paul to the church at Philippi. Our passage begins by saying, “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy…”

Let me pause right there. Paul didn’t pen these words with marriage in the forefront of his mind. But doesn’t verse one remind you of a Godly marriage? Encouraging, comforting, loving, Spirit-led, affectionate, sympathetic. Those words are descriptors of a healthy marriage.

Two of the first words Paul uses here start with the prefix *para*- *paraklesis* which is translated encouragement, and *paramythion* which is translated comfort, or consolation. And the prefix para means “near” or “beside.”

So the encouragement and comfort we have for our marriages and our relationships with others comes from the fact that Christ is with us; He is beside us; He is near. What incredible news!
See, you might have come here today with a false idea that God doesn’t exist, or even if He does exist that He doesn’t care, or that He’s distant, or that your problems don’t matter to Him. But the Bible says that nothing could be further from the truth because in Christ, God is near.

God knows you and He loves you, flaws and all. He knows exactly what you’ve gone through and what you’re going through because He’s right there with you, beside you, encouraging you and comforting you. He is near!

Psalm 34:18 says, “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.”

If you came here today with a broken heart or a crushed spirit, I’m so very sorry for your situation, and I want you to know with full and complete assurance that even though it might not seem like it right now, the truth is that God is near.

When you or your loved one is sick, God is near. When you experience infertility or miscarriage, God is near. When people make false accusations against you, God is near. When your kids or grandkids are rebelling, God is near. When you’re on the verge of losing your job, God is near. When your marriage is on the verge of falling apart, God is near.

Church, do you hear me!?

Speaking of being near, Emily values togetherness and affection... quality time and physical touch. Those are her two primary love languages, as described by Gary Chapman in his book, *The Five Love Languages*. Time and affection are how she receives and gives love.

After a long day, Emily is eager for us to spend time together and draw close to one another. But she doesn’t just sit down across from me or lay somewhat close to me... she prefers to be right beside me touching. For example, when we’re in church, she likes sitting hip to hip with my arm around her shoulder and there can’t be any space between us. But if I scoot over or turn my back to her, she often feels rejected.

Back when we started dating, I quickly learned that public displays of affection didn’t make her uncomfortable. In fact, she loved making me uncomfortable with her PDA. I know, I have such a hard life...

But the thing is, there is a reason Emily values physical touch and quality time, and it’s because God has hardwired her with those specific desires. Therefore, it’s my job as her husband to honor those desires and serve her by filling up her love tank within the context of a healthy marital relationship.

Emily never tires of quality time and physical affection, and I have news for you: neither does God. That’s because our God is a God of quality time and physical affection. God delights in spending time with you – yes you! And He delights in wrapping his loving, comforting arms around you through His Spirit’s presence.
But it’s not just quality time and physical affection that Emily and I need to give to one another. We also need to create an environment for emotional connection, or as therapists say, “emotional availability and responsiveness.” See, I’m learning. Don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean.... You’ve been to therapy, too. There’s no shame.

The word used for emotional availability and responsiveness in verse one is translated sympathy, or compassion.

Can I confess something? I’m bad at showing sympathy. I’m not proud of it, but it doesn’t come naturally to me. I have to work at it. When Emily comes to me with a burden she’s carrying or an issue she’s working through, I have a tendency to interrupt her by trying to solve the problem rather than by simply giving her a hug and being emotionally responsive to her. Guys, don’t do that! Too often I listen to respond but instead, I need to listen to understand, validate, and empathize.

There’s an acronym that was developed by Dr. Timothy Nelson and Dr. Jennifer Nelson who used to lead the Marriage and Family Therapy program at Friends University called LUVER:

- Listen
- Understand
- Validate
- Empathize
- Repeat

See, I just saved some of you hundreds of dollars on counseling... It’s so simple but so profound, isn’t it? This is how we can become emotionally available and responsive to one another, by practicing the LUVER acronym. What if all of our relationships were marked by these things? If we lived according to this acronym, our marriages and parenting and friendships and relationships with our coworkers would thrive!

Friends, the good news for us is that God is physically, spiritually, and emotionally available and responsive to our needs. In other words, God is full of sympathy and compassion.

So, when we draw near to our spouse by demonstrating affection and sympathy toward him or her, we are reflecting the very heart and presence of God in His affection and sympathy toward us.

In Christ, God is near. He is emotionally available to you today. This leads me to my second subheading:

2. Oneness in Christ

Referring back to our text, Paul says, “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”
I like how the New American Standard Bible translates verse 2: “Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.” (Phil 2:2 NASB)

This is an “if/then” statement by Paul. If these things exist in Christ (and the implication is that they do), then fulfill my joy by being one in mind, spirit, purpose and love.

How does this apply to marriage? Simply put, marriage is about growing our oneness in Christ.

Genesis 2:24 says that “a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” And part of becoming “one flesh” is experiencing physical intimacy, which is absolutely important in a healthy marriage. But true intimacy is so much more than just physical intimacy. True intimacy involves growing together in mind, spirit, purpose, and love as the verse says.

In fact, in a healthy marriage, physical intimacy is a byproduct of a couple’s mental, spiritual, and emotional oneness in Christ. In other words, the connectedness that a couple feels in these other areas leads to physical intimacy.

Dr. Tim and Dr. Jen Nelson, who I referenced earlier, define intimacy as, “In-to-me-see.” Everyone say, “in-to-me-see.” We racked up 30K of grad school debt so you could learn that for free. You’re welcome.

Marriage is about growing in oneness which involves developing intimacy, learning about each other, and creating emotional and spiritual connection.

By the way, have you noticed that after a couple has been married a while, they start finishing each other’s sentences? And they generally know what each other’s thinking? And they begin to view the world in a similar way? And have similar parenting styles, and similar goals, and so on? This is part of what it means to be likeminded.

But what about the love aspect that Paul is referring to? And how does that differ from the cultural definition of love? I’m so glad you asked.

The culture has made love about me, my feelings, my happiness, and my ‘needs.’ But that’s not love; that’s entitlement. So when my feelings change, or my happiness fades, or my needs aren’t being met how and when I expect them to be, then I’m out. I’m going to move on and try to find someone else that can do those things for me. Because it’s all about me.

The Bible, on the other hand, says my marriage is not about me. Let’s all say it together: My marriage is not about me. Some of you just said that and you’re not even married…. Thank you for succumbing to peer pressure.
My marriage is not about me. Instead, it’s all about the steadfast love of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The love the Bible speaks of is best summarized by children’s author Sally Lloyd-Jones, who wrote *The Jesus Storybook Bible* which I am currently reading to our four-year-olds. She describes God’s love as a “Never-stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love.”

This is what covenantal love is all about. This is God’s kind of love. It’s the kind of love present within healthy marriages, and healthy families, and healthy churches. And it’s the kind of love that leads to the fullness of joy Paul describes in Phil 2.

This brings me to my third and final subheading:

3. **You Before Me**

Our Philippians passage continues: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”

These are super challenging words, aren’t they? Do *nothing* from selfish ambition, Paul says.  

Now usually when I’m looking for a loophole in the text I go back and check the original language. So I went back and looked at the word translated “nothing” in the Greek and sure enough, the word nothing means... nothing. Paul leaves no gray area or wiggle room for even a sliver of selfish ambition to creep into our relationship with others and this includes our relationship with our spouse.

This seems impossible to achieve, but Paul didn’t write this to guilt trip us or discourage us – he’s just trying to encourage the church to follow the example of Christ. And Paul knows that if they (we) started to live this way, it would truly transform our marriages, our homes, our churches, and our world.

Our passage concludes with this: “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Basically, Paul is saying be selfless, not selfish.

Of all relationships, marriages in particular have a way of revealing each spouse’s selfishness.

Timothy and Kathy Keller wrote a book called, *The Meaning of Marriage* which I definitely recommend. And in their book they say this about addressing one’s selfishness:

“Only you have complete access to your own selfishness, and only you have complete responsibility for it. So each spouse should take the Bible seriously, should make a commitment to ‘give yourself up.’ You should stop making excuses for selfishness, you should begin to root it out as it’s revealed to you, and you should do so regardless of what your spouse is doing. If two
spouses each say, ‘I’m going to treat my self-centeredness as the main problem in the marriage,’ you have the prospect of a truly great marriage.”
-Timothy and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*

On a personal note, working in vocational ministry has been both amazing for my marriage and hard on my marriage. In fact, the longest ongoing marital conflict Emily and I have ever faced had to do with my work schedule back when I was on youth staff. Believe it or not, I worked constantly for 8.5 years including many, many long nights and weekends. I participated in 55 youth trips in eight plus years of youth ministry. I was the youth director here at Colonial, and I volunteered with Young Life, and I was taking seminary classes, all while we were trying to start a family.

But the thing is, I loved it. And I thought I was doing the right thing because relational ministry never stops. It was great work, Kingdom work. However, Emily felt neglected. Our marriage wasn’t my top priority – the church was.

Meanwhile, I tricked myself into believing that I was being *selfless* when I was actually being *selfish*. Remember, Emily’s love languages are quality time and physical touch. And those can’t happen when I’m gone. I failed to prioritize my most important relationship on this earth.

So now, I try my best to put her and our kids first, but every year or two God has to remind me by getting my attention. Most recently, He got my attention through my cancer diagnosis. It’s amazing how your priorities tend to shift when you are faced with a life-threatening diagnosis. Listen church – don’t wait to receive a scary diagnosis before you prioritize what’s most important– your faith, your spouse, and your family.

Maybe it’s time for you, like me, to apologize for not putting your spouse first, and take steps toward change. You won’t regret it.

Some of you may be thinking, yeah but I don’t have anything to apologize for because I didn’t mean to hurt him or her. My intentions were pure.

I hear you. But apologize anyway.

Emily and I have a saying that she uses with her clients: Good intentions don’t take away a bad impact. Say it with me: good intentions don’t take away a bad impact. You might have the best of intentions but if you accidentally offended or hurt the other person in any way, shape, or form, you should still apologize to repair the hurt. Any marital conflict unfinished or unrepaired will just repeat itself.

The two most important words in marriage, according to wedding czar Bob Lehleitner, are “forgive me.” See, I just said it out loud. It’s not that hard.
Seriously though, the most important thing to maintaining your emotional closeness in marriage is by coming back together after feelings have been hurt and having a moment of genuine and intentional repair with one another. Making this a normal habit will prevent resentment from creeping into your marriage.

Some of us here today need to apologize to our spouse or a loved one before we make it back home. Make it happen. Don’t put it off any longer.

On the other hand, some of you are having trouble with forgiving the one who hurt you.

Now I want to be very clear with my words. I’m not saying that if you’re in a verbally or physically abusive relationship that you should stay in that relationship. If that’s you, you need to seek help immediately and find a way out as soon as possible. But for the rest of us who are struggling with the normal resentment and hurt that comes from years of being in a committed relationship, I have two words of advice:

1. Be vulnerable and tell them exactly how you feel in a way that’s loving and non-defensive.
2. Look to the cross.


On the cross, Jesus experienced all the lies, hurt, rejection, abandonment, unfaithfulness, and agony that any one person could endure. The physical pain Jesus experienced on that cross was a tiny fraction of the emotional pain of feeling betrayed by a people whom He loved that had broken their end of the covenant...

Not to mention the spiritual agony of the Father turning away from Him.... And yet, He stayed on that cross until the final demonstration of his sacrificial love was accomplished.

In the midst of the most intense betrayal, suffering and pain that has ever occurred, Jesus didn’t leave us or forsake us.... He forgave us.

So I can look at my spouse in the eye and say even though you hurt me, I forgive you, and I will continue to forgive you. Because when I continually hurt Jesus, He forgives me.

Jesus was the prime example of, “You Before Me Leads to We.”

Let’s pray.