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## SOLVING THE BLACKOUT

1 John 4:7-8

It's Valentine's Day, our culture's holiday dedicated to love and romance, a celebration that actually dates all the way back to the year 496. It's a day that especially focuses on love and marriage. Did you hear that two television antennas met, fell in love and got married? From what I hear the wedding ceremony wasn't great, but the reception was excellent. Do you know why melons have to get married in a planned church ceremony? Because they cantaloupe.

In his book, *Flesh And Machines*, MIT professor Rodney Brooks says that human beings are really nothing but machines. He says we are "a big bag of skin full of biomolecules" that interact by the laws of physics and chemistry and nothing more. If this is true so much of what we think about ourselves is wrong. Our lives really have no meaning. There is no such thing as morality and there certainly is nothing spiritual about us. And of course love is also just a figment of our imagination. Meaning, morality, spirituality and love are merely the product of physical processes and our mental machine running amok. All our talk about love and morality bear the same relation to reality that the hearts we see everywhere on this Valentine's Day bear to what an actual heart looks like, which is to say not much.

However, Brooks admits he doesn't operate by his own assertion. He says he can tell himself that his own children are nothing more than machines but, "that is not how I treat them. I interact with them on an entirely different level. They have my unconditional love, the furthest one might be able to get from rational analysis." He admits that he maintain two sets of inconsistent beliefs.

It is wise to apply the reality test to our beliefs. How do what you believe and its implications for daily living match up with reality? Can you actually live by the thing you say you believe? If you insist that humans are machines and that love does not exist but you cannot relate to your children that way and cannot speak of them without referring to love as a real and driving force in your relationship, there is probably something wrong with your beliefs and your supposed "rational analysis." If it doesn't work in the real world it's not rational at all.

Can you imagine what the world would be like if there were no such thing as love? Oscar Wilde said, "A life without love is like a sunless garden when the flowers are dead." His picture of a dreary, dead, gray and brown garden would make for a

depressing. life, but the reality is much worse. A world without love would actually be horrifying and evil.

Today on Valentine's Day it is appropriate to give some thought to the subject of love. In particular I want you to think about marriage relationships. If you are single don't check out, for most of what I say will apply to you, for you too need love relationships with family and friends. The thing about love relationships is they operate on the same principles. Love is love, whether it is married love, parental love, sibling love or friendship love. In fact, one of the fundamental errors many people make today is to fail to realize that marriage at its core is a friendship. For it to work well it has to be the best friendship two people have in all the world. So we all need to think about love, no matter our station in life. I will take some thoughts today from a familiar passage of scripture found in 1 John 4:7-8.

### WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

The first question we should think about is why is it important for us to care about love, and especially about marriage? For followers of Jesus this passage gives us all the reason we should ever need. Verse 7 says "let us love one another." That's not a suggestion. It's not a recommendation. It is a command. It is an order. If Michael's commanding officer gives him an order Michael doesn't say, "Well, that's an interesting suggestion. I'll think about it and get back to you." He obeys the order. Love one another is an order. It was given by Jesus himself. John recorded that in John 13:34. There Jesus said, "A new command I give you, that you love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." Galatians 5:6 says "the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 says that no matter what great thing you may do, if you do it without love you are nothing more than annoying noise.

That is an order that applies to every relationship in your life. It applies to your parents, your children if you have them, your siblings, your neighbors, your co-workers, your teachers, your boss, and most of all, your spouse. One of the most astounding things I have observed about us humans is our ability to totally believe that love is important, to completely endorse this command, then to miserably fail to live by it. I've noticed a common tendency to go with the "I love that person, but..." May I ask, where in this command do you see an exception clause? Is this like the offers you get in the mail for some deal that on the bottom has a lengthy exposition in the tiniest print imaginable qualifying it? Love one another unless the following apply..."

Love one another isn't limited to your spouse, but it should start there. Going all the way back to Genesis 2 God has been telling us "above all else, love your spouse." If you do not love your spouse, then you are disobeying God. Marriage has a purpose. The ultimate purpose is not to produce children, it is not to provide an appropriate and healthy outlet for our sexual urges, it is not so that we can experience fulfillment. It should do all those things. But the ultimate purpose of marriage according to Ephesians 5:32 is to be a picture of Christ's relationship with his people. It depicts his love.

I confess that while I've always had a soft, chewy center, meaning I've always been somewhat sentimental, after having children it got much worse, and as I have gotten old it has continued to get worse exponentially. You can ask Anna, my daughter-in-law. I think she gets a kick out of seeing me start crying...again. I am dismayed at how movies at times can elicit that response from me. Laurie is on the warpath to make Toby and me watch the movie *The Notebook*. I don't want any part of it. She says, "Rick, I know you'll cry if you watch it." Yes, I will. I will weep for my manhood. I probably would cry. Why would I cry at some sappy pretend story that is specifically designed to make people cry? That tells us the potential power of a movie, of visually depicting a beautiful and heart touching story. There are a few movies that I've seen multiple times yet they always make me cry. Movies can have a powerful and emotional impact on us.

That passage in Ephesians 5:32 says that God wants our marriages to be like a movie. He wants to use them to touch people's hearts in a powerful way. He wants them to display the love of Jesus lived out right in front of them. They want to see it. They long for it. I know they do. I have told you this before. We saw it when Carissa and Michael got married. Before the ceremony the photographers took pictures of Carissa, wearing her wedding gown, around the Hotel Del. We accompanied them. Everywhere she went everyone that saw her smiled and said, "Congratulations. What a beautiful bride." Just seeing someone get married made them happy. People want love to be real. They want to experience it and be touched by it. God wants to use the love in our marriages to profoundly impact others. Nothing else has quite the same power.

We are ordered by God to love, beginning with our spouses. Our love for one another glorifies him. That's the main reason for us to care about love. But there is another reason. It is that we were created with an enormous, endless, built in need to love and be loved. At the core of our souls is a drive to be connected with another human being, to have human intimacy.

We were created in the image of God. One of the unique things about the Christian faith is that it is the only faith that has a triune God. God somehow exists as three persons. Because of his unique and mysterious nature he has relationship embedded in his very character. Because we are made in his image we also have relationship embedded in our character. We are only truly and fully human when we are loving other people. A person who is not loving others, not connected to other people, is not really experiencing human life.

We know we have this unquenchable need for relationship because we feel it. And it is unquenchable. There will never be a time when we say, “Well, that’s all the love I need. I’m good, so I think I’ll go it alone from here on out.” Have you noticed that even the Lone Ranger wasn’t alone? Why is that? Because we know there’s something badly missing when a person is completely alone. What happens to a person who has no love in his or her life? They cannot bear it. It badly distorts them. It literally ruins them.

Laurie and I went to see the new *Star Wars* movie with Michael and Carissa. Toby and Anna saw it on its opening day. A week after we had seen it Toby wanted to see it again in IMAX. Anna didn’t want to leave Leilani, so I went with him. Toby, Jerry and I have all seen it twice and agreed we enjoyed seeing it a second time. Laurie has said she wants to see it again. She could go alone. Do you think she wants to do that? She’s not even slightly interested. Like all of us, she wants to share experiences. That’s built into us.

## WHAT ERODES LOVE?

### ***Failure of Effort***

Tim and Kathy Keller in their book, *The Meaning of Marriage*, wrote, “Marriage won’t work unless you put your spouse and your marriage first.” For it to fulfill its potential we must make marriage the priority that trumps all others except serving God. Laurie and I recently watched the movie *The Intern*. The movie made something of an effort to suggest that at some level family relationships are important. But the real message was that for the main character, a woman who started an online clothing business that was wildly successful, the most important thing was the business and her fulfilling herself through using her business and creative ability. The family needed to fit in around the business, because being this successful business leader was who this woman was. It was her identity and to be fulfilled she needed to run the business.

That’s a pretty consistent message from Hollywood. The idea of sacrificing career or success for a marriage relationship is not worth even considering for the

entertainment elites. The problem is that what the Kellers said is true. Marriage won't work unless you put your spouse and your marriage first. Which means that anyone following the lead of Hollywood in their life is torching their marriage relationship if they have one. It will not work. That's in part why marriage seems to be a disposable item in Hollywood.

I think of marriage, and any love relationship, as being like a crackling fire in the fireplace on a cold and stormy night. There is something hugely appealing about such a fire. It warms both the body and the soul. But the thing about a fire is you have to keep tending it and feeding it. If you ignore it the fire will eventually die. We'd like to think of love relationships as being like our gas fireplace. You just turn it on and it burns. You don't have to do anything else. But even that gas fire has to be continually fed gas. And relationships, all love relationships, not just marriage require being tended and fed. If we ignore them they die. That is true of friendships as well as marriage. You have to pay attention to them.

You have to expend some energy. You must put out some effort to keep romance alive, which is to say to keep love alive. This is always a big challenge for some of us when times like Valentine's Day roll around. We poor guys, who by and large are not overly blessed with a sense of the romantic, are faced with the conundrum of what is an appropriately romantic gift.

Here are a couple of rules of thumb for romance. First, if it's cool it isn't romantic. High powered rifles are not romantic. Tickets to a Los Angeles Kings hockey game are not romantic. If it has to do with fighter jets or football, it's not romantic. Second, if it's practical it isn't romantic. A new iron and ironing board are definitely not romantic. A new set of screwdrivers is not romantic. So let's imagine a piece of jewelry, perhaps a new necklace. Of what practical use is it? What does it do? It does nothing. Therefore it is very romantic. For guys in order to tend the fire we must learn and apply lessons like this.

A crucial effort we all need to make is to listen. Listen to what your spouse or your friend is saying. This can be a challenge for me, because Laurie is very open and communicative. She wants me to know all that is going on in her, so she has this sort of stream of consciousness continuous communication style. This is very good, because it means I rarely have to guess what she is thinking. The problem is this goes on even if I'm reading the newspaper or watching television. Often after we've talked about something and that conversation is done I will go back to reading, then suddenly realize she's talking again and I've missed the first half of what she's saying. It requires effort to tune back in.

But listening is more than just hearing the words. By listening to your spouse I mean hearing their heart. It means seeking to understand not just what your spouse is saying, but what they are feeling, what matters to them.

A hugely important way you can feed the fire is through expressions of love and especially words of affirmation. Proverbs 18:21 says “the tongue has the power of life and death.” We can bring death to our friends and to our spouses simply by the use of the tongue. Ephesians 4:29 tells us to say “only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

The world is not shy about revealing our faults and telling us that we don’t measure up. Over time we accumulate an awful lot of verdicts passed against us by others, and then we add our own condemnation of ourselves. A spouse has the opportunity to see a partner with all of his or her faults, better than anyone else. And the spouse who then expresses appreciation and affirmation anyway has tremendous power to overturn all those verdicts.

Tim Keller says that he was something of a nerd and was seen as uncool in his younger years, and was often excluded as a result. But Kathy, his wife, continually has told him that though the world might see him as Clark Kent, she knows underneath he has that blue underwear. She points out and celebrates every tiny courageous thing he does. He says bit by bit over the years her message has sunk in. “To my wife I’m Superman, and it makes me feel like a man in a way nothing else could.”

I can inflict great pain and harm on Laurie simply by thoughtless, insensitive or harsh words. She can do the same to me. All she need do is lash out with impatience or disgust or frustration at one of my many faults, and she can drive a huge wedge between us. Instead she lavishes words of praise and affirmation on me. It makes me want to live up to what she says and it makes me profoundly grateful for her.

Psychologist John Gottman is an expert on marriage and has amazing ability to analyze how healthy a marriage is. He says that a key he looks for is how frequently a husband and wife affirm each other.

What are you doing on a consistent basis to feed the fire of your love? How are you serving the one you love in real and practical ways? How are you making that person feel cherished above all else? What are you doing to express love to your spouse? What extraordinary thing have you done recently to express that love? If

you can't think of answers to those questions, you've been coasting. You are not feeding the fire, and my guess is the flames are dying out.

### ***Living For Self***

In Luke 9:23 after warning his disciples that he was going to be executed eventually Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." In those words he laid a stark choice before us. You can be a follower of Jesus, but to do so means denying yourself. Or you can choose to serve yourself, but to do so means denying Jesus.

In his marriage seminar Paul Tripp says that at every moment of every day we must choose which kingdom we are going to serve. We can live for our kingdom or we can live for God's kingdom. He is saying just what Jesus said. Notice that Jesus said this is a choice we make daily. To live for my kingdom is to try to make myself feel good above all else. It is to demand my way, to protect myself above all else, to work for me getting notice and credit, to try to have whatever I deem to be a need met. It is to get back at anyone who hurts me, to inflict pain on anyone who disappoints me or blocks me from my desires. To live for God's kingdom is to follow Jesus, to love with his unconditional love, to do the will of the Father, to bring his grace to any and every situation and relationship. It is to serve another person.

The greatest threat to love, intimacy and friendship, the greatest threat to our marriages, is when we live for our kingdoms. In fact, all of the pain, the suffering, the brutality, the injustice, the conflict and the ugliness of human history can be traced right to that same cause. Whenever we choose to live for our own kingdom, the horrific choice that Eve made in Eden, we are driving others away and we are doing severe damage to our relationships. Wherever a marriage has either blown up or slowly withered into a lifeless shell of what it is supposed to be, someone has been living for his or her own kingdom.

Marriage offers boundless opportunities for us to make that choice between our kingdom and God's. That's because it consists of countless little interactions between two flawed people who are both inherently addicted to self. Recently one evening we were in the kitchen getting ready for dinner. I was thirsty so I picked up a glass and got a drink of water. Then I realized I had picked up Laurie's glass. I told Laurie, "I'm sorry, I just drank out of your glass." She said, "Oh that's all right. I used your toothbrush this morning."

All these little interactions that take place day after day offer challenges to us regarding whether we will live for our kingdom or for God's kingdom. If we live for our kingdom our approach will always been to ask, "what are you doing to serve me?" Our own needs and desires become our focus, and our hurts and disappointments will become the major issue of life.

We had a recent interaction where I was trying to help in the kitchen and Laurie asked me not to what I was attempting. I insisted, "No, it's okay, I got this." And of course, I didn't have it. I ended up making a mess. Laurie, a little frustrated, said, "I told you to wait. I knew this was what would happen." I noticed that just that impatience, that frustration in her voice instantly sparked some things in me. I felt a little hurt and wanted to be angry. After all, I was just trying to help. I wanted to fire back with equal frustration with her. I wanted to defend myself. Ah, but wait, whose kingdom am I living for? Am I going to deny myself and follow Jesus, or am I going to serve myself?

I feel bad for Laurie. You should too. She has to deal with so many irritations from me. For instance, I am a real connoisseur. My favorite meals are pizza, a good hamburger and fries, Mexican food (without cilantro), Mom's fried chicken with mashed potatoes and gravy, and Laurie's macaroni and cheese. What does that sound like to you? Doesn't it sound like the favorite diet of a 10 year old? Poor Laurie occasionally tries to break out of the mold and create something different. She knows what will happen. I will eat it, but I probably won't like it much and she'll be frustrated yet again.

And, of course, there's the problem of my favorite sauce for food. It is ketchup. That's my favorite by far. I love ketchup (again, the 10 year old problem). I like the real stuff, Heinz 57 varieties. People try to serve me gourmet, organic ketchup and it's just disappointing to me. I want the real deal. Sadly, Laurie knows that without fail when I have my burger and fries drenched in ketchup, the food will not be the only thing with ketchup on it. Inevitably my clothing will also end up with more than its share as well. No matter how careful I try to be it always happens. Wouldn't you think that at this stage of life Laurie is entitled to feel that her husband should be grown up enough to keep from spilling on himself when he tries to eat?

In dealing with these things, Laurie faces the choice between irritation and frustration over being inconvenienced and annoyed or serving the kingdom of God by loving her pitiful husband. Yes, I can refuse to serve my kingdom by trying to eat a broader range of foods and maybe abstaining from ketchup. I have and do try



to branch out, just not very successfully. I still can't bear to give up on ketchup though.

To love like this is countercultural and utterly unnatural for fallen human beings. Something within us screams continually, "What about me? What about what I want?" The yelling is so loud at times it is almost like we cannot hear anything else. But remember Paul's profound description of love in 1 Corinthians 13. At the heart of it in verse 5 he said love "does not dishonor others, is not self-seeking, is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs."

Love does not dishonor. It doesn't denigrate the spouse. It doesn't keep nagging and alluding to the spouse's failures to be or do what their partner wants. Rather it continually honors the spouse. Are you always honoring your spouse with your words, your tone of voice, your facial expressions?

Love doesn't keep a record of wrongs. A couple came to see me because they were having trouble in their marriage. After initial pleasantries I asked what brought them to me. They began to talk about some recent problems they had been having. Within 5 minutes they were heatedly arguing about things that had happened 15 years earlier. They were both trotting out their lists of grievances that were miles long. I suggested that love isn't easily angered and keeps no record of wrongs. Now in addition to being mad at each other they were both mad at me.

The truth is that whoever your spouse or friend is that person will present you with countless opportunities to be impatient, to be annoyed, to be disappointed, to be hurt. If you are looking for them, or even if not, you will find them in abundance. But love doesn't track those things. Love doesn't react to them. Love continues to love and continues to give and to affirm.

Look especially at the second clause of verse 5. Love is not self-seeking. As long as we are saying, "what about me?" We are not loving the other person. It is as simple as that. When we stand on our wedding day and promise to love our spouse we are promising that from that day forward we will stop thinking of ourselves and building our little kingdom, and we will seek to serve and do good to the person we are marrying. Self simply doesn't enter the equation.

## HOW CAN WE LOVE?

This kind of love frankly is frightening to us. When we think of totally letting go of self and totally expending our lives to love another person it scares us. That little voice inside continually whimpers, "What about me?" We are convinced that

someone is going to take advantage of us, or that our needs will be ignored, we'll be treated as unimportant and it will feel like death to us.

Is it feasible to choose to live totally for God's kingdom, to say no to our own kingdom and expend ourselves completely in a glorious display of love? Humanly it is not possible. We are utterly addicted to self with an addiction that no amount of willpower can break. Without even conscious thought we will fall right back into working for our kingdom. It requires no effort. In fact it happens even against our will.

Remember what I said in the opening. We should always apply the reality test to our beliefs. If our belief in a God of love who orders us to give up self in the effort to love each other never shows up in our daily lives, if it has nothing to do with the real world, is it valid? It appears to me if it does not show up in the real world one of two things is true. Either the thing we claim to believe is false, that this God of love is not real, or it is real but we don't actually believe it. If either of those is the case, this whole Christian thing is a charade we should end immediately.

How then can we love like I have just described? First, we have to want it. We have to say, "Yes, I believe that this is what God orders me to do, and I believe it is what I really want deep down inside." Until we get to the place that we want this to happen, we will never take the scary steps necessary to truly love.

Ephesians 3:16-19 gives us then two factors necessary for us to really love as God loves and we want to love. In verse 16 Paul prayed that God would "strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being." We cannot live this life of love through sheer human will. We need the power of Christ's Spirit to do it. Fortunately he wants us to have that. So we start with living in God's grace. The gospel of grace, Romans 1:16 is the power of God. When we are given such mercy, kindness and love through Jesus, it changes us. It fills us with gratitude and humility and a passion to obey God. So as we live in that grace we only need ask God to give us the strength and the desire to give up self and love others. Paul prayed for this power to strengthen people, and if we pray the same thing I think it's a safe bet that God will answer that prayer.

Then in verse 19 Paul prayed that we might "know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to all the measure of the fullness of God." The love that surpasses knowledge is God's love for us, a love that nothing will separate from us according to Romans 8:38-39. It is a love that is high, wide, deep, and long beyond our ability to measure. Well how do you know something that is

beyond our ability to comprehend? Paul means he wants us to know it by experiencing it. We can't measure it, we can't comprehend its vastness, but we can live in it. We can know it by living in its reality. You know what, I don't understand television. I get that signals are sent that tell little pixels on a screen what color to display. I am aware of that, but I really don't understand how that happens. But that has never stopped me from experiencing television. I don't comprehend God's love either. I don't even come close. But I can experience it.

Paul said that key to being filled with the fullness of God is experiencing his love. 1 John 4:7-8 tells us that God is love. He is the ultimate and perfect example of love. He loves perfectly and fully. If we are filled up to his fullness, what will we be filled with? Perfect love! John tells us that love comes from God. All love comes from him. Every ounce of love that exists in this universe comes from God. He is the source of all of it. Every bit of love, every hint of it that you have ever experienced in your life is nothing but a gift of God's goodness, an overflow of his infinite abundance of love.

Do you remember September 8, 2011? That was the day of the great blackout, when all of San Diego lost electrical power and was thrown into chaos. That was so annoying. I flipped light switches and nothing happened. I turned on the television and nothing happened. Our refrigerator stopped working. I got mad at the light switches, at the fridge and the TV. The problem is they couldn't work because what they needed to work was no longer being supplied to them. They could only work when the electric power flowed back into our house. We are like that. We can't work, we can't love, without that source of love and power flowing into us from God. Only when we are living in his love can we get past ourselves and love unconditionally as he does.

The most romantic thing you can do is be filled with God's love. We usually can manage saying no to self for brief spurts. The young man who falls in love can think of nothing but his girl and would do anything for her. But how long does that last? When the fervor of romance dies out, as it will, out goes doing anything for that young woman. Only when God's overflowing love us filling our souls with a love that never runs dry, will we be able to consistently and continually say no to serving self and truly love one another.