

WHY WE RENT TUXEDOS

40th in a Series in Ephesians called, “Messages to the Misfits”

Ephesians 6:24

Tim Sanders, former chief solutions officer at Yahoo, has written a book titled, *Love Is the Killer App*. He shares some thoughts about priorities. He suggests that we should take everything in our lives and put them in one of three categories: glass, metal and rubber.

He says things that are rubber bounce if dropped. So in his case he says if he misses a football game or an entire season of football, his whole life will bounce. Nothing will change, nothing will get broken, and nothing gets lost. Then there are metal items. If they are dropped they will make a lot of noise, but you can recover. If you miss a meeting at work, you can get a summary of it from someone. If you forget to balance your checkbook and spend more money than you have in your account, it will make some noise, but you can recover from it. Then there are glass things. If you drop one of these it will shatter and will never be the same. It may be broken for good. At best you might be able to glue it back together but it will never look the same and probably won't function properly ever again. Glass things are the most important things in our lives.

Today I want you to think with me about the most important, most precious glass of all. It is of immense value, in part because everything else in your life hinges on this precious glass item. I once watched a football game that looked like a mismatch. One team moved the ball up and down the field so easily it looked like they could almost move it at will. The other team's offense appeared to be trying to set offensive football back 70 years. They couldn't do anything. Their offense was a three and out machine, their most valuable player was their punter. By the end of the game the better team had possessed the ball twice as long as their opponents. They had outgained them by 300 yards. They had five times as many first downs. The only stat where the lesser team was better was on the scoreboard. Somehow, improbably, the better team outplayed their opponent in every way but one. Somehow they lost the game. They did everything except the most important thing, which was win the game. The last thing we want to do with our lives is to do that same thing, to accomplish everything but the most important thing. Let's see what it is. It is mentioned in Ephesians 6:24.

LOVING CHRIST IS JOB ONE

This last verse of Paul's letter to the Ephesian Christians contains some beautiful words. He asks for grace to all “who love Jesus Christ with an undying love.” Undying love is something we all aspire to in several ways, but certainly anyone who is a genuine believer in Jesus desires to have love for him that nothing can ever take away. We want to be people who never waver in our love for him.

Paul wrote this because he believed it was true of the majority of the people his letter was intended for, the people of the church in Ephesus. They were following Christ at cost to themselves. It was not the popular thing to do in their culture, but they followed him anyway, and paid a price for it. So we can be confident that this group of people was generally characterized by the undying love for Jesus Christ that Paul mentioned here.

This letter was written between 60 and 62 AD. The book of Revelation was written sometime in the 80's AD, possibly around 85, so about 25 years after this letter. Revelation 2:1 begins a statement from the Lord to the church at Ephesus, the group addressed in Ephesians. In verse 2 he says, "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance." That sounds good. It sounds like the church at Ephesus was doing well. But then... we come to verses 4-5: "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen!" Oh no! These people, who had been known for their undying love for Christ, somehow had allowed that love to cool. They had left that undying love. They were still doing good things. They still believed in Jesus and had not abandoned him. But something was missing. That same devotion and passion for Jesus that had once been there was gone.

It is disheartening to find out that such a devoted group of people could lose that passion over time, but that's the nature of life, isn't it? When something is new and fresh it's exciting and absorbing. But over the long haul the new and exciting just naturally tends to become routine. Yesterday we took care of our granddaughters for a bit so their parents could have a date. At one point little Ella was showing me this chart they have for her to earn rewards. It includes things like brushing teeth by herself, getting dressed, going to bed, listening to mom and dad and some chores. Her parents bought it so it includes things she is not quite old enough for. She pointed to one and asked me what it was since she can't read yet. I told her, "do your homework." She said, "I don't have that yet, but *someday* I *will* get to have homework!" I almost blurted, "Get to? Are you kidding me? Homework is going to become the bane of your life." But I restrained myself. She will be excited some day when she gets her first homework. Do you think that excitement will last? It will wear off in a hurry. I have done lots of weddings over the last 40 years, and sadly, many of those couples who have so much love and passion on their wedding day, have lost that 25 years down the road. Oh, they might still be married, and glad that they are, but they don't have that same glow, that same ardor.

This can happen to us in regard to our love for Christ as well. It happened to the Ephesians. And this ought to be of concern to all of us because according to Jesus, loving God is the most important thing we can do. Matthew 22:35 says that after Jesus had run theological circles around the religious leaders of his day, one of them, an expert in the Law of Moses, tested him. In other words, he was one of the brightest minds of their day and he felt he had to give his best shot at exposing Jesus as an unsophisticated fraud. Being maybe the smartest man in the room he thought perhaps he could succeed where others had failed so badly. In verse 36 he asked, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

This was the kind of thing the ancient rabbis loved to debate. It also was viewed by ancient Jews as a question of enormous importance. In their worldview, nothing was as important as the Law of Moses. It held God's truth. It was God's revealed wisdom for how to live. It was the necessary instruction for mastering life as well as the litmus test for who would be acceptable to God. So in their minds following that Law was by far the most important thing a person could do. In asking what the greatest commandment was, this expert was saying, "Of all the most important things we must do to have life, what is the most urgent part of those critical truths?" In other words, what is the single most important thing in life a person must do? He's asking what is at the very tip of the pyramid of most important things. My guess is he was hoping to trip Jesus up. I suspect he figured that Jesus would pick on some command from the Law and then using his own superior knowledge he would proceed to show why several others were at least as important, if not even more important. Thus he would reveal Jesus' naiveté and possibly his ignorance.

When my son was in high school he helped start a hockey team at his school. The administration was somewhat open to the idea because he told them it wouldn't cost them anything because he volunteered his dad to be the coach as a non-paid volunteer. So I coached high school hockey for two years. I remember a conversation I had with a parent of a potential player. The parent wanted to find out whether she wanted her son to be involved in this new untested activity and to entrust her son to this unknown coach. She asked me several questions, one of them being, "What do you think is most important in how you approach coaching this team?" I said, "Two things. First, That I treat each of them with dignity, fairness and respect; and second, that they have fun, because this is, after all, a game." That seemed to satisfy her, because her son did play for us, and he turned out to be really good. She was testing me, looking for something that might, from her perspective, disqualify me as a coach. That's a bit like what this man was doing with Jesus. He wanted to disqualify him.

Verses 37-40 give us Jesus' answer. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." The most important thing of all of the most important things in the world, is to love God with all your heart, soul and mind. In other words, have an undying passion for him. Notice Jesus' words that all Law and the Prophets, which was a shorthand way of saying, "everything else that God tells us to be and do," hangs on these two commandments. They all depend on loving God first, then loving people. If you don't love God above all else, if it isn't Job One every day of your life, then you won't be doing the rest of what God tells you to do. You might make it *look like* you're doing some of it, but it will only be an act, and not a very good one. You can't do all of that without starting with undying, zealous passion for God. If that undying love isn't there as the foundation, then the rest of it is necessarily going to be a sham.

Matthew doesn't tell us how the religious expert felt about that answer, but Mark does. In his account of this conversation in Mark 12:32 he responded, "Well said, Teacher." In other words, he admitted defeat because Jesus had passed his test with flying colors. Francois de Salignac de Mothe-Fenelon, 17th century bishop, theologian and writer, said in regard to God, "Love him, and I will tell you to do no more. For if you love him, everything else will work out."

There are two things crucial for us to remember in regard to loving God. First, if you are not loving God, then in some way you are doing evil. Laurie has what I consider to be an often unenviable job. She teaches voice. She also teaches piano, but that's much easier. It's easier because it's quite obvious when you don't know how to play the piano and you need help. But most people think they know how to sing. They may not think they're especially good at it, but at least they know how. Most of her voice students are young girls who have stars in their eyes. They see themselves singing and performing on stage. She has had a few, like Maika Parks, who are really talented singers. But many of them are not all that great. She can help them improve. The problem is they come to Laurie because they think they already have good voices and can sing very well. Unfortunately, most of us, and most of those girls, actually don't know how to sing. We don't realize that the voice is an instrument, and it takes as much knowledge and practice and effort to master it as it does to master any instrument. Most people sing incorrectly.

Laurie begins her students with the basics. That starts with breathing. If you don't breathe properly when you sing, you absolutely will not sing properly. There are a lot of other things Laurie teaches her students, but breathing is the foundation. If a student doesn't use her breath correctly she won't be able to produce much volume, the tone will not be as good, and worst of all, she may strain her vocal chords and can damage them. So a student can do everything else right, but if she doesn't breathe right, she will be singing wrong.

That's how we need to see loving God. It is the basics, the foundation of living. You can do a lot of other things, even do things that are right, but if you are not loving God, you will be living wrong. You will even do the right things in the wrong way. You will be doing evil. Even the things that appear to be attempts to do God's will somehow be off. They may appear to be good and right, but in fact will be efforts to prove something about yourself, to create an image, to get people to see you in a particular way and maybe admire you, or to even manipulate them in order to get what you want.

Second, loving God is the source of true life and joy. It doesn't take much thinking to realize why this is so. Consider this: What do people think about if they are confronted with the sudden possibility of dying? You've probably heard or read stories of people on an airplane

where there is a sudden, frightening emergency, and they realize this could be it for them. How do they respond? Do they think, “Oh, man, I need to dash off a quick email about the details of that merger deal at work so it can get finished?” Or are they thinking about their investment portfolio? Absolutely not. The idea is absurd. Inevitably they think about people they love. They try to record or send some message telling those they care about how much they love them.

What does that tell you? It tells you that the core of real life, that which is most important, the thing that brings us the most joy and is the engine of truly living, is loving and being loved. There are other evidences of this. For instance, I generally don't like the idea of renting clothes. I have done it on a few occasions. Usually it is for the same reason. There are exceptions. I've rented skates at an ice rink and bowling shoes at the bowling alley. But when it comes to renting and wearing an entire rented suit, it has always been for the same reason. Wedding. I have rented a tuxedo because I'm in a wedding, mine or someone else's. Have you noticed the whole wedding racket? Women study brides' magazines and shop endlessly to find just the right wedding dress, which they then spend astronomical sums of money on so they can wear it once! And the details of the wedding planning are immense. They are only slightly less complicated, stressful and expensive than mounting a military invasion of enemy occupied territory. Why do people keep spending outrageous amounts of money they can't afford and put themselves through the ordeal of weddings? It is because that event marks the most important thing in their lives. Nothing else comes close. We know that because they don't celebrate anything else the way they celebrate their wedding.

Being chosen by one human being to be loved uniquely and forever, and loving that person back, is the most profound, fulfilling, joyful thing we can ever do. That's why we mark that event as we mark nothing else. That's why we rent tuxedos and buy frightfully expensive dresses we wouldn't wear anywhere else. It's because we know that down at its core, life is about loving and being loved. Nothing hurts as much as not being loved, and nothing fills us like loving and being loved. *We are created to love and be loved, and life will never be truly whole without it.*

Should it be a surprise, then, to learn that all of that starts with being loved by God and loving him? Should we be surprised if we know that being loved by and loving another person can bring us so much joy and fulfillment, that we can and must experience an even deeper joy and fulfillment by being loved by God and loving him? We certainly should not.

Nothing else can substitute for loving God, and nothing else can bring us the peace, the joy, the fullness of life that comes from being loved by him and loving him. Without that relationship, life will always be painful and empty at its core. No amount of religious activity can ever substitute for loving God.

LOVING CHRIST IS SIMILAR TO LOVING ANOTHER PERSON

One of the problems we often have is we don't understand what it means to love Christ. We get what it means to love another human being whom we can see, hear, converse with, touch. Although if you observe how people sometimes treat people they claim to love you likely will question whether they have any idea what it means to love. But let's assume we mostly know how to love other people. That's not quite so easy when it comes to loving God. How do we love Christ, whom we can't see, hear or touch? What does that look like? It turns out there are many parallels between loving him and loving another person.

There will be positive feelings and affection for that person

Is it possible to love a person without having positive feelings and affection for them? Yes, it is. However, over the long haul, generally speaking if we're going to have real passion for a person and love them, that will involve some real affection for them as well. In a marriage, for instance, there will be moments when a spouse is mostly irritated by the other spouse. But those moments should be the exception rather than the rule. If there was no passion and affection for the person, why would you marry them in the first place? Obviously you wouldn't.

I have to admit that I am an exceedingly fortunate man. I really think it is hollow of me to give advice about marriage. It's common to hear people talk about how having a good marriage takes a lot of work. Here's my confession: being married to Laurie hasn't taken any work that I can see. It's about as hard as eating jelly doughnuts. Anybody who married Laurie was going to have a great marriage. I just happened to be the lucky lottery winner. Honestly, I can't recall the last time I was irritated by Laurie. Intellectually I know it has happened, I just can't remember it. Anna, our daughter in law, said the closest she has seen happened a couple of weeks ago. Laurie and I were at a fast food restaurant with Toby, Anna and their daughters. Laurie took Ella and Cara to a booth while I went to the counter to order our food. Laurie had told me what to order for her, but she changed her mind about what she wanted. She went back and forth, undecided about what to choose, but I was now up at the counter. It was fish or cut bait time, so I called across the restaurant to her, "just tell me what you want." That's about it. At times she puzzles me. Before Christmas when I asked her what she'd like to get for Christmas she listed a few items then said, "Don't get me a sweater. I have lots of sweaters." That was good to know because I had thought about getting her a sweater. About a week later she came home from a store and she had bought herself...a sweater! I wasn't irritated, but I admit I was confused.

That is trivial compared with the huge joy of going through life with Laurie. I take daily delight in her. She is positive, affirming, smart, joyful and funny, to say nothing of beautiful inside and out. The love I have for her is filled with affection and joyful feelings.

Loving Christ Jesus means we will also have affection for him. Oh there will be times when what he does in our lives confuses us, sort of like Laurie and the sweater she didn't need. But those times will be continually eclipsed by how good, wise, loving, encouraging, and holy he is. At the end of the day it means we will love being with him, living in his presence. It will be a place we are happy to be, because it is a joy to live life in his presence.

No one has ever loved you like Jesus loves you. No one has ever sacrificed even a significant fraction of what Jesus sacrificed to love you and to have you in his kingdom. No one has ever given you as much grace as he has lavished on you and continues to pour out on you as he does. No one has ever looked out for you the way he does. No one even comes close to being as wise and as good as he is. Isn't he someone you absolutely delight in and love to be with? Isn't it amazing that he can't wait for you just to talk to him?

That person will take precedence over everything else

When you love someone that person becomes a priority for you. Being with them, doing what they'd like to do is more important to you than the myriad other things you might do. A few weeks ago Laurie and I were talking about New Year's Eve. We decided that it would be fun to have a date that night, maybe go out to dinner and see a movie. So we planned on doing that. Then Anna asked us if we would be willing to baby sit for their kids so she and Toby could go out that evening. There wasn't even a slight hesitation. We said absolutely. We didn't even mention what we were thinking. We instantly shelved our plans because we love Toby and Anna and we love their daughters. As it turned out, their plans fell through, so we didn't baby sit, but the point is, loving them meant we were thrilled to ditch our plans in order to care for them. Loving them was more important than just doing something that might be fun for us. And of course, taking care of their kids is more fun for us than just about anything else we could do.

When I say I love my wife, I am saying she takes precedence. Being with her is more important than anything else I can do. And the same is true when it comes to loving Christ. It means he is the priority in our lives, more important than anything else. One of the great stories of heroic faith in the Bible is found in Daniel 3. Many of the Jewish people were living in Babylon after being captured by the conquering Babylonian forces. At one point the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, built a huge golden idol and decreed that at the given time everyone in leadership in Babylon had to bow down and worship this idol. It was apparently intended as some sort of test of loyalty and allegiance to the king. Anyone who refused to bow to the idol would be burned to death in a blast furnace. Yikes. Some of the Jewish people had been given high government positions, among them three guys named Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. These men loved God and knew he had commanded them not to worship any idols. So they humbly refused to bow to the king's idol. You likely know them by their Babylonian names, Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego. In Daniel 3:17-18 after the king threatened them

that if they insisted in their civil disobedience he'd have them immediately thrown into the blazing fire, they responded. They said, "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

They essentially said worshiping God took precedence over everything else, including preserving their own lives! Loving him was more important than anything else.

There will be a deep desire to please and serve that person

When you love someone, you want them to be happy. You want to avoid things that irk them and to do things that put a smile on their face. In fact, one of the greatest joys of your life is doing something that makes a person you love happy.

I have mentioned this before, but Laurie has said on several occasions that one thing that would be on her bucket list is getting an opportunity to swim and interact with dolphins. It has not been an obsession with her, but I knew she'd really like to do it. I've told you before that this past fall we got to take a trip to celebrate our 40th anniversary. Part of the trip we were going to be on the Big Island of Hawaii, a place we'd never gone before. The Hilton Waikoloa has a swim with dolphins program. So I made a reservation for Laurie to get to do that. It was more than a little pricey, so she said she didn't think she should do it, but I insisted. So at the designated time we went to the Hilton and Laurie got to swim with dolphins for a half hour. I was glad to arrange that for her, because I love her. What I didn't anticipate was how much joy I got out of watching her. I could not stop smiling, because I could see how much she loved doing that. I think it's possible that I got more joy out of watching her than even she got out of doing it!

So if we love Christ, we will have a desire to please him and serve him. We will want to do what we know makes him happy. That means we will get a kick out of obeying him. We will be eager to love people, because he said that's what he wants us to do most of all. Obeying him and serving him won't be an onerous chore, it will be a delight, a thing of joy, because we get to do it for him!

APPLICATION

The fact that the Ephesians had that undying love for Christ, but, at least to some degree, later lost it, is a cautionary tale for us. How easily we can wander from our love for him and fall into religious routine. We need to freshen and nourish our love for Christ continually. But how can we do that? What can we do that will strengthen our love for Christ?

BE ROOTED IN HIS UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Remember 1 John 4:19. "We love because he first loved us." It is a great challenge to love someone who doesn't love you. It is much easier to love someone who loves you unconditionally. That makes Jesus Christ the easiest person to love who has ever lived. We love him because he loved us first and best. Nothing can ever separate us from his love.

When you think of Christ, do you think of him loving you? You should. He died for you, and he rose for you and he has worked a miracle to bring you to life spiritually. He pours out his love on you every minute of every day of your life, and nothing can ever stop him. The thing that most enables us to love Christ is living in, knowing, experiencing his magnificent, unstoppable, limitless love. In Ephesians 3:19 Paul wrote that he prays that we would, "know this love that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." The way we are filled to the fullness of God, including the fullness of love, is to know his love.

REMIND YOURSELF OF HIS GREAT VALUE

Laurie and I have been meeting once a month with a group of young couples. Of course, at my age, most couples are young couples, but these are couples mostly in their 20's and 30's, whom we know because I officiated at all their weddings. At one of our gatherings I asked them, "What is it that attracted you to your spouse?" I wanted them to think about that and share it with the group, because it is awfully easy for us to forget about the great things that drew us to the person we married. Remembering those wonderful things is important for appreciating and valuing them, for loving them.

The same is true of God. The more we see him as he is, the more we will see his majesty, his beauty, his value. That's one reason why it is so important that we gather and sing his praises, because it reminds us of who he is, and that enables us to love him.

REMEMBER HOW UNDESERVING YOU ARE

More and more I have been seeing what a weird dude I am. I am a real outlier, because there are so many things that the whole world loves, but I hate. Things like chocolate, coffee, sodas, wine, many herbs and spices. Poor Laurie would love to enjoy a cup of coffee with her husband, but no. She loves to have dessert after a nice meal in a restaurant. They are always too big for her so she'd like to split one with me. But they are almost always chocolate, which I don't like. So no dessert. We once had a friend who after being at our house told his parents that it was "kind of nice to once in a while eat some nice, bland Myatt food." It's not nice bland Myatt food because Laurie can't cook, but because her husband can't eat. At least not like most people. These are just trivial things, the tip of the iceberg. There are way more things

that are weird about me, things that make me not much fun to live with. Poor Laurie is stuck with me.

Not once in the last 40 plus years have I have thought, "Laurie is lucky to have me as a husband." Not once. But every day of my life I think, "I have no idea why Laurie loves me as she does, but I do know she loves me, and I know for sure I am the luckiest man alive because she does. I hope she never wakes up and sees the truth." One thing that does for me is it makes me eternally thankful for her. I simply don't deserve her, and I know it.

Being overwhelmed by God's grace is key to us loving him. The more aware we are of how far from deserving his love and acceptance, the more we will be thankful for how he loves us. The more thankful we are, the more we will love him back.

LIVE IN HIS PRESENCE

Fenelon wrote, "Come to God often just to sit in his presence and renew yourself." Enjoy being with the God who delights in you and loves you. Live with him everywhere you go and you will find that his grace, his love, his wisdom will comfort and strengthen you, and you'll love him even more. In everything we deal with, Jesus is with us. We can trust him. So let's just enjoy being with him.

ASK HIM TO INCREASE YOUR LOVE

This is fairly obvious, but given that God says loving him is the most important thing we can do, I feel confident that if we ask God to give us more love for him, he will answer that prayer.

CHOOSE!

In Deuteronomy 6:5 the Lord commanded, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." That is a command. What does that tell you? You have a choice. It makes no sense to command us to do something that just happens to us, something over which we have no control. The fact that God commands us says we have control. We can choose to love Christ with an undying love. And we know that love in the end is a choice. Christ didn't feel especially affectionate toward the people who put him on a cross, but he chose to love them and die for them anyway. There are days when our spouse may be in a bad mood, be downright difficult, and we have to choose to love them. If we can choose to love a sometimes difficult human, surely we can choose to love Christ, who died for us and who loves us unconditionally.