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**First Comes Love**  
**Part 2 – Then Comes the Empty Nest**  
Pastor Ted Cunningham

Today, we're going to conclude this short series we started last week with *First Comes Love – Then come in-laws*. If you weren't here, we talked about boundaries and how to leave home well and how your family of origin influences you as a couple but does not define who you can become as a couple.

Today, we're talking about something we've never talked about so specifically in a message – First Comes Love – Then Comes the Empty Nest. We're going to talk to married couples in the empty nest, we're going to talk to widows and widowers, we're going to talk to adult children who have parents in that you see what your role is, what my role is as adult children with older parents or aging parents, and how we are to conduct ourselves in this season of life. The scripture actually says "so that it would be pleasing to God."

I have had this one encouragement from scripture I've tried to carry through all of my ministry life and I've not been good at it in all of my years as a pastor. This week it really came back to mind. It's 1 Timothy 5: 1 where Paul tells young Timothy in the church, "Do not rebuke an older man harshly but appeal to him as a father." I can tell you I've blown that passage many times in 25 years, but today, I am praying, and I've prayed all week that some of the harder things that need to be shared I would communicate that to my senior friends. In this season of life, I want to appeal to you as a father and not to rebuke you, but there are some things that need to be shared.

Bob Buford wrote a great book. I want to encourage those of you who are in the second half of your life or maybe you just retired, to pick up the book *Half Time*. It's a great book. What do you do after the mantle of responsibility on your job has been removed? Your kids have left so you've got no more school schedules, no more tuition payments. You've got more money than you've ever had and less responsibility. (woohoo from the crowd) We are going to address that very attitude right there, ma'am in the back.

Some would say, "It's time to party!! And we will address that but we're really addressing, with this series and the church, is encouraging those in the fourth quarter, maybe in the third quarter; some of you are in overtime, to make the most of this time.

Here's what Bob Buford said, "*In the first half of life, we're hunter/gathers, doing our best to provide for our families, to advance our careers*" to build up the 401K, to get that pension, "...and to pass our beliefs and values onto our children."

A couple of things about this that we are going to address today. Once your children leave home, it's not an end to the influence you have in passing on what you believe about Jesus, what you believe about the church, what you believe about loving one another, what you believe about caring and serving others. That doesn't end when your children leave home. Actually, right now, you're probably in a season that's the most influential season of your life. What's been removed from you is this burden of hunting and gathering and proving for a family. Maybe you have a large family and your like, *Man these kids eat a lot*, and this inflation time has been a difficult season for you. Gas now at \$4.09 in Branson and you're telling your kids, "Guess what? We're camping in the backyard this summer." What do you do once all that is lifted? And how do you continue to be an influence with your values and your beliefs as your kids leave home?

In Psalm 71: 18, we get this lament. You know what a lament is. A lament is deeply passionate. It's crying out to God. "I'm hurting, I'm frustrated, I'm overwhelmed. God, I need you to hear this." That's a strong prayer to bring to the Lord. "I need you to hear this. I don't know if you're listening right now." That's the tone and the message of a lament. "Incline your ear to me."

Look at what it says in Psalm 71: 18, ***Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God...*** I can't tell you how many times I've been by a bedside... Pat Kershaw, who was in the first service, and her mother, Muriel... The number of times I visited Muriel in her 90s as she lost her eyesight. She would just be sitting there in the chair. I would come in and say, "Hey, Muriel, it's Ted..." To hear Muriel say, toward the end of her life, "God has forgotten me." This is a true lament at the end with months or years left to live. She would say, "I get it. I don't have the responsibility. I can't care for someone right now. I don't have the energy. I don't have the abilities like I once did to do that, so I don't feel I'm being productive. I feel I've done all I can do; what is left for me?" It's this lament, "Why am I still here?"

These laments say, God, don't forget about me ...***till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come.*** I want those who come behind me to know who you are, all you did for me, and all you can do for them. I want to make the most of this season of life. That's why we say at this church that we equip parents and grandparents. We don't leave grandparents out because at Woodland Hills, we have a lot of grandparents who are raising their grandchildren in the home. I'm not talking they are dropped off three or four times a week for childcare, I'm talking fulltime caregiving for grandchildren. We believe you are the primary influence. The church wants to be your backup singer. We want to be an echo of what we know you're teaching your children about Jesus at home. So, you are the primary influence to lead your children and grandchildren to Christ.

Last week, we looked at this verse in Genesis 2:24 as we talked about boundaries with your father and mother. We talked about having firm boundaries, knowing that your parents, your family of origin that influences your marriage, definitely doesn't determine who you can become as a couple. We looked at all the baggage in the boxes each family of origin brings in. As we went through that, we talked about leaving well and the boundaries that are essential if you are going to have a thriving marriage, if you are going to be united and the two become one flesh.

Today, we're going to talk to Father and Mother and what happens to us when our kids begin to leave home. Young people, please lean in and take this with you because you have parents and grandparents

who are going to need your help. We taught Genesis 2: 24 to our kids for a long time and I'm sure I'll get another amen back there on this. We summed up Genesis 2: 24 with this. "We love you, you are a welcome addition to this home. Your mom and I have big plans after you leave." "What are you going to do?" "First of all, we're going to Disney World. We are going to start the whole thing off with a trip to Disney world to congratulate our selves to the Flower and Food Festival."

What are your big plans after your kids leave home? What are you doing with all of these resources, this time, your thoughts? You're not keeping kids' schedules and drop offs and pick-ups and doctor's appointments, academics, athletics, that's all not in your mind anymore. What are you doing? You're like, "Ted, here's my first big plan right here – taking a long nap. These children have sucked the life right out of me."

You've heard the story of the old couple. They got up, made breakfast, and are sitting at the breakfast table. The old man is looking out both side of the kitchen, wondering what was going on. He realized the sun was coming in on the wrong side of the kitchen. At that very moment, he realized that they had gone to bed so early that they got up before the sun set.

That is old age, my friends, right there. You have napped all day long. You only need 3 – 4 hours sleep. You go to bed after Jeopardy, and then you're up and it's 8:30 pm. So, rest. Hey, you can find rest in the empty nest, yes. We get that. Some of you are like, "It's not just rest for us; it's going to be a lot of golf and a lot of fishing."

I've met the person that did a lot of golf and a lot of fishing for three months after they moved to Branson. There were like, "There's gotta be something more." Yeah, we make you care pastors. We make you small group leaders. Golf! Have fun in the empty nest. You can find rest, you can have fun, but what we're talking about today is this right here – the influence that you have over your children, your grandchildren, and in this case right here with Lloyd and Corynn, your great grandchildren. And we want nothing about the way we live and the relationship we have with our kids to stand in the way of their relationship with Jesus.

I married into this family, but Lloyd, and his son, Denny... Denny is sitting in here today. As we started our family, we were told by Gary Smalley, 'You've got to get into camping. Camping is the secret to a close-knit family.' Because camping is scheduled disaster. And all the Treasure Lake people said... Amen, right. Things have got to break, things have got to freeze up...

Our very first camping trip was the Le Mieux Campground in Faribo, Minnesota. I'm not great at backing up campers and trailers. This makes no sense – you're turning the steering wheel this way and the trailer is going that way. I've never been able to put the two together. It's bad. So, I drove 12 hours with the camper and my whole job, the whole vacation, was don't get yourself into anywhere you have to back up. Everywhere is forward driving with this thing.

We get to the campground and the guy tells me, and Lloyd is right there with me, "You know we don't have full hook ups where you have to park this camper." I said, "Excuse me?" He said, "Yeah, as you need to dump your tanks, you're going to have to drive down the hill and dump them down there."

My wife enjoys showering. That's always been a big thing of hers that she enjoys. And the whole camp shower thing, she's never been into. I told him, "I'm going to have to dump this thing." He goes, "Well, you're going to have to drive it down..." I said, "I'm not driving this thing down." So, you know what I did? And I didn't tell Lloyd I was doing it. I went to Walmart, and I bought every single septic hose they had. About 220 yards of septic hose, from my camper, down the hill through the campground. This is why Treasure lake won't give me a spot. They won't let me at Treasure lake. Their like, "What kind of redneck... Even Trailer Parks have rules, Ted."

I'll never forget Lloyd walking around the corner to my septic field going down through the campground and he just laughed. Let me tell you something about this guy. He was the Patriarch of our family. He loved his family. He did it all – hunting, fishing, the outdoors. But to this day... He's been gone 12 years. He is still someone we talk about, someone we tell stories about, still someone we want to be like. That's what we're talking about today with influence. I can't go into an RV park without thinking about Lloyd and thinking about how it's convenient that you have your dumps right there.

Here's the feeling... Let me give you this feeling that comes from finding joy in the empty nest by Dr. Jim Burns. He sums up what a mom told him about the feeling from an empty nest and everything we just talked about. This is called the empty nest syndrome. This mom said, *"I was terrified. I had no idea what I was going to do now that I was no longer anchored by school runs and filling the refrigerator. When I looked at my life without my children in the house, it looked dark and gloomy. I dreaded it. My existence seemed almost meaningless, like part of me had died."*

I'm here today to tell you no. You could be in the most influential season of your life. There is still a lot to do. And there is still plenty of engagement. Actually, you're going to have more time to do it because the mantle of responsibility is lifted.

We quoted Dr. Jim Burns last week with the boundaries. He said to keep the welcome mat out and your mouth shut. Make sure you tell your face too. Remember, we said that. He says this, *"When your child leaves home and their life fills up with fresh experiences, follow their lead."*

I want to start by talking to the married couple. Just four quick things from the Song of Solomon. For you who find yourself in an empty nest and how to rekindle the marriage. By the way, if you're married with children at home, don't wait for the empty nest to do all this. Prioritize your marriage now. All of this you can practice now. But this is to the couple whose children have left home.

**1. Rethink your about each other.** Since you're not thinking about schedules, sports, academics, and all of that, you have more time to think about each other. Give each other thought time. Ask each other great questions. Listen, understand, validate, empathize with one another. Find out what the other one is going through. Remember when you were first dating and engaged. You used to fight over who was going to hang up the phone first. I can tell you that hasn't happened in a long time in your marriage.

The scripture says this, and I love this word picture from the Song of Solomon 1: 13. This is the Shulamite woman. They are not yet married. Chapter one and two, they are dating. Chapter three, they get married. ***My beloved to me is a sachet of myrrh*** speaking here of the myrrh that would rest

between a woman's breast at night that would perfume her body. She's saying, "I go to sleep thinking about him, I dream about him, I wake up thinking about him." **that lies between my breasts**. There are some ladies in here right now going "Pfft! I have to take care of myself; that's almost a fulltime job." And some of you are going, "Honey, I will not be dreaming about you tonight." Listen, rethink about each other. You now have time and energy to put into one another.

**2. Refresh each other.** You've got the time and the resources. I love this word picture that she gives in Chapter 2. **Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my beloved among the young men. I delight to sit in his shade...** "I enjoy just to be with him. He is refreshing to me." Yes, golf, yes, fish, but I have to encourage you, in the empty nest, find stuff you love doing together. Be together. Refresh each other in activities. I'm not saying you can't have your own, but just refresh each other. "But I enjoyed it. he was someone I enjoyed being around." "She is someone I enjoy being around." **...and his fruit is sweet to my taste.** And what does this tree provide? It provides shade, protection from the sun, but it also provides a snack. There are multiple functions to this sitting and enjoying time together.

**3. Retreat together.** After they had been married for a little bit, the Shulamite bride invites the busy Shepherd King out on a retreat. You've got time for this too. Take trips together. Be purposeful in these trips. I love what it says in Chapter 7: 11 - **Come, my beloved, let us go to the countryside, let us spend the night in the villages.** I wonder if this is where they got that Florida community. I doubt it. We need to get away from our home and from our town and spend time together. Be purposeful with this. Plan the next year of your marriage. Plan the next trips. Put some marriage goals in place. Speak words of high value over one another. Take an honor list with you on the trip. You've got the time. You've got the resources for it. Plan time away.

**4. Rekindle the intimacy.** I can barely look at you, my senior adult friends, when I share this. But on this retreat, rekindle the intimacy. This is so awkward speaking to my senior friends. In the Song of Solomon, on this retreat, when they got away to the country side and to the villages, she says while we're there checking out the vineyards, **There, I will give you my love.** You know what she's saying. She's saying, "Bow Bow Chickie Chickie Bow Bow!" Is what she's saying right there and that's where I'm leaving it, grandma and grandpa, I can't... I'm not saying anymore. That's all you're getting.

Can I just give you this? This is from experience that I share this with you as your pastor. You need to give your grandma and grandpa a little bit of notice before you show up. You need to call and say, "I'll be there in an hour."

Can we take a change now to a very important part of this message? And one that I share with fear and trembling, seriously. This is where I do not want to rebuke an older man but want to appeal to him as a father. Speaking to widows and widowers and then our responsibility as a church, our responsibility as children and grandchildren. Widows and widowers, you are free to remarry or remain single. The scripture is clear on this. After you lose a spouse, you are free to remarry, you are free to stay single, understanding whatever decision you make, both decisions have blessings and challenges. If you remarry, there will be great blessing and there will be challenges as well. If you stay single, there is a blessing to that. You're going to have time to serve, time to serve the church, time to serve others in a way that married people can't. Paul is very clear on that. But it will come with blessings and challenges

as well. At this church, we honor the widow and the widower. We love you, we mourned with you, we continue to mourn with you. We have been there graveside with you so know everything we're sharing in this is we don't want anything about your possibly new relationship to stand in the way of a child's or grandchild's relationship with Jesus.

In 1 Corinthians 7, we read, **39 A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes...** This isn't just an apostolic tag on here; this is key, the heart of Paul when he is sharing this to the Church at Corinth. All of this follows suit with **...only in the Lord**. In other words, if your spouse dies and you begin to date again, date someone who loves the Lord and walks with Jesus. Not someone who said on a profile or said in an email or in a message on an online dating site, "I've been a Christian my whole life." That's not what we're saying. Not someone who says, "I was baptized as a child, confirmed at the age of 12..." That's not what we're saying. Not someone who says, "I'm a Methodist, a Lutheran, a Baptist..." That's not what we're saying. To the widow and the widower in here, we're saying find someone that is walking with Jesus. Because you want someone who is going to encourage you in your walk with Jesus. You are free to remarry, in the Lord. Only in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 7: 8-9 says, **8 Now to the unmarried...** Which tends to be where we focus on this text. And when we hear unmarried... I know a lot of people hear unmarried and they think 20 something and single. But Paul says to the unmarried **...and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. 9 But...** Again, here is where you are free to do either. **...if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.**

So, whether you are 25 years old and single or 75 years old and a widow, everything we're talking about right now applies to both. There aren't different passages for the 25-year-old singles and the widow when it comes to marriage and honoring marriage. Which is what we read in Hebrews 13: 4 – **Marriage should be honored by all...** So, whether you're 20 and single or 80 and a widow or widower, honor marriage and **...keep the marriage bed pure.**

So, if I can give some practical ways that we need to do this. Again, to encourage you, those older in our congregation, appealing to you as a father. If you decide to date... I get it. I've talked to people just shortly after a funeral and they've told me, "The loneliness at night is the worst. Going home to an empty house, and then to a dark house, is a lonely feeling." I understand that. And you begin dating. Here are just a couple of things we need to encourage you, and I need the adult children and the young adults, teens to lean in on this more than anything.

If you begin dating as a senior or widow/widower, let your adult children know you are dating. Not for their approval, but for your care. I asked my mother-in-law if I could share this story. I'm not giving a lot of details; I'm just giving kind of a high-level understanding of this. When Amy's grandmother passed away, Linda's mom, Amy's grandfather, as he approached his 90s... None of us had a clue he was meeting people online. We had no idea. We really didn't know and didn't get involved until he had given away pretty much his entire life savings. That's hard when the post master from a town calls you and says, "I have an envelope with lots and lots of cash in it that's been going to..." That's hard to hear.

What's even harder to do is to sit down with Grandpa and explain to him, "The person you think you're in love with and that's going to move to Minnesota to be with you, the person who is in her 70s and has been talking to you and you've been falling in love with this person..."

How about this for a hard conversation – "Grandpa, that person doesn't even exist." Do you know how many times we've done that in this church? It's the first time we've talked about it from the front. Do you know how hard that is to look at someone who comes to us after they have given away all their money, asking for the church to give benevolence to help someone that doesn't even exist. That's hard to say, "No we're not giving you any benevolence." But you know what's harder is to look at them and say, "The person you think you're in love with isn't even a real person."

Amy and I can honor Denny and Linda and all they did to go up to Minnesota and get Roland and bring him down here. Can you imagine picking up your 90-year-old father, driving him to Branson, while he's calling the police on you, telling them "I've been kidnapped." I watched them walk through all of this with this man. I watched two people care for him and I watched a relationship reconciled and restored. Even after multiple attempts on his life when he tried to take his life. '

We read this in 1 Timothy 5: 3-4... You don't need to ask permission of your adult children. We'll talk about that in just a second because I know that's where angels dared to trod in a lot of families. But this is to the church. **3 Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need.** There are widow in here that are in need and our church has helped, benevolence has helped and will continue to Help.

But there are widows and widowers who are not in need. How do you determine if a widow or widower is in need? Paul shares that clearly. It's a widow who has no family to take care of her. That then falls on the church. So, first it's family and then second, it's church. Notice I haven't even mentioned government. It's not the role of the United States government to take care of my parents. It's not the role of the United States government to take care of Roland. That's my job. That's you're job. That's how you know who is really in need.

**4 But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents...** Some of you right now are applauding this. "They were so expensive, and I just need a little bit of it back at the end." You're repaying your parents and grandparents. Here is it **...for this is pleasing to God.**

Some of you right now are just thinking about the job you need to take care of yourself. Let me tell you that's not enough. You need to get after it. Get established in a job because yes, you have family to take care of, and as soon as those children get up and leave home, that responsibility is going to shift to taking care of a different side of the family. You have to work and provide for parents and grandparents. It doesn't fall on the church first; it falls on you, it falls on me so that our parents wouldn't really be in need. The whole point of sharing all of this, if I can just say to the widow/widower, is let your children do this for you. It's why they are going to ask questions. Again, you are not asking permission to date, but you need your adult child to come alongside and make sure that you're not sending \$25,000.00 in cash to a bogus post office box, that you're not sending a credit card to a bogus person who racks up 50,000.00 to \$100,000.00 worth of debt on a Discover card. That's what kids and grandkids can do very

well, help care for you. If you also start dating, if I can encourage you, follow the same dating guidelines you would want your grandchildren to follow. They are still watching, listening, and learning. Is the way you're living and carrying on right now what you would be okay with your 18-year-old granddaughter or grandson doing, that's the question you need to ask.

This is a picture of my grandma and her boyfriend. My grandma died at the age of 90. I think Leo was 98 when he passed away. I'd have to verify that. Both widow/widower. They were family friends. True story, they dated for 25 years, living in separate homes. This was their dating story. Leo picked up Mary Jane every single day and took her to church. And after church, they went to dinner. I, as a 20-year-old, would be over at my grandma's house, having a great conversation. When Leo's car pulled up in the driveway, there wasn't a "Love you, grandson, thanks for stopping by." The conversation was over, and grandma was out the door. I love this picture because you see how my grandma is holding her purse. Every time you saw my grandma, whether at home or in public, she had her purse strapped to her like that. Somebody was always going to steal her purse.

But can I encourage the widows in this church. What kind of man are you looking for? Do you know what you're looking for in a man who follows Jesus? Someone who will pick you up... I'm talking about dating right now. Someone who will pick you up, take you to Applebee's, drop you off at home, and go to his own home. That's what you're looking for in a man who follows Jesus, who honors marriage, and who keeps the marriage bed pure. That's what you're looking for. I know there are many struggles with this but after dating and you get married, you will need to establish clear boundaries, just like we talked about last week, with your adult children as you prioritize your marriage. There are couples in here who are remarried later in life who will tell you it's one of the greatest challenges of their life. The relationship they have with their adult children.

We talk about prioritizing marriage in this church all the time and it's no different whether your children are at home or adults. Marriage is a priority because that is two becoming one.

There are five reasons... I wouldn't call them the top reasons, but they are the most often heard reasons that I receive from adult children who are resisting a parent's new marriage.

**1. You child is still mourning the death of a parent.** You'll experience that.

**2. Personality conflict.** They just don't like the person you are dating. Can I just say this to the adult children in here? Can you give it some time? You have to get to know a new person too. I would have lots of grace there.

**3. Skeptical of new spouses' motives.** Gold digger.

**4. Fear loss of caregiving decisions.** Anybody here watch the show, This is Us? I hate to tell you this, but that is a great example of an enmeshed family. These three kids love their mom dearly. You know in the last episode she remarries Miguel. Miguel is making decisions for Rebecca's health in the final years of her life and the children keep butting in. Your like, "Well, they love their mother. Love your mother. Offer it but lean on Miguel who is of sound mind and body. Because marriage is the priority.

**5. Fear of losing inheritance.** Some of you are like, "I'm spending it all."

Can I just say? These are five reasons that should lead you to a great conversation, an open and honest conversation. None of these reasons should keep you from remarrying. They are not reasons to say "Okay, I'm not going to remarry because my son doesn't get along with my soon to be wife."

But I want to encourage adult children to have the conversation in a mature way and then, parent, the whole thing... this is so awkward, like talking to your mom and dad with this message right now. Have the conversation, lead it. I'm going to give you the same thing I opened with. Don't rebuke an older man harshly but appeal to him as a father.

Billy Graham says, *"The greatest legacy one can pass on to one's grandchildren is not money or other material things accumulated in one's life, but rather a legacy of character and faith."*

In your last quarter of life or for some of you who may be in overtime, this is why we take marriage so seriously, this is why we honor marriage, it's why we esteem it as highly valuable, and we keep the marriage bed pure. Because your children are still watching, listening, remembering, and repeating. And we want you to do this well. Long after you're gone, like we have with our grandparents still as we have these great conversations, they are no longer with us but boy the stories are. The influence is there, and we want that for each of you as you influence and lead your children to Jesus.

Father, it is in the name of Jesus that we come to you, thanking you for those adult children in our church who are doing this right now. They are repaying their parents and their grandparents. They are providing, building homes near them for mom and dad. They are building on an extra room in their house to care for them. They are providing the payments for assisted living and for their retirement homes or paying for a nursing home. They are paying the bills on the medication, pleasing you in the way they provide for and repay their parents. We honor them today. We mourn with the widow and the widower today who is still mourning over the loss of a spouse. We come along side them.

Continue to make generosity a part of the church so that for the widows who are really in need, we can provide for and care for that they would know this is a church that wants to. And that we would always be open to providing for their needs.

We pray for the one who has never placed faith in Jesus that today would be the day of their salvation, that they would confess with their mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that he has been raised from the dead that they might be saved.

We pray all of this in the authority of the name of Jesus, and everyone agreed and said... Amen.