The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse – An Introduction
Revelation 6:1-8
(Grace – April 8, 2018)

I. Introduction

Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, "Come!" 2 I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.

3 When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, "Come!" 4 And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword.

5 When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, "Come!" I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, 6 and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!"

7 When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, "Come!" 8 I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth. (Revelation 6:1-8, NRSV)

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse...they have been the subject of innumerable sermons, teachings, and speculations.

They are beloved by doomsday prophets everywhere and have been used to explain current events in the world for almost two thousand years.

But the four horsemen have not just been the subject of Christian conversation, they have long captured the imagination of popular culture.

When I was doing my initial research, I found a popular cartoon series based on the four horsemen (X-men), a silent movie starring Rudolph Valentino from 1921 and another popular movie made in 1962, numerous songs (including one sung by Glen Campbell!), and countless books and YouTube videos.

Of course, you know that you have ingrained yourself in popular culture when you have your own meme, thousands of which can be found online. Unfortunately, most of the ones I found were either offensive or just not funny, so I chose not to show them here today.

Finally, you know that the four horsemen have truly made it into the mainstream of popular culture when Clint Eastwood stars as one of them in the mystical western “Pale Rider.”

So, what does all this have to do with this amazing sermon series we are beginning today on communication styles that will ruin a relationship, and how to change them?
Several years ago, Dr. John Gottlieb conducted a famous study at the University of Washington where he would have couples reenact a fight right in front of him or on video camera.

Not only was it amazing that these couples would genuinely fight knowing they were being watched, but Dr. Gottman identified four behaviors in couples that 90% of the time led to a future divorce.

Gottman later defined these four behaviors as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (who will usher in the end of the world), because these four behaviors, if not corrected, will bring an end to any marriage.

This is not a series on marriage, but on relationships. We believe that these “Four Horsemen” will bring an end to any relationship at any level.

This series will identify “apocalyptic” relational patterns and attempt to offer a different relational approach. Overall, this series is less about theology and more about being practical in cultivating healthy relationships.

As far as I know, Dr. Gottlieb is not a Christian, but he has conducted extensive research and has worked with couples for 40 years. While we are going to utilize some of his basic findings, we are going to provide biblical examples and biblical answers on how to build better relationships.

II. The Four Horsemen

So, what are the Four Horsemen?

A. The first horseman of the apocalypse is criticism.

Criticizing someone is different than offering a critique or voicing a complaint. The latter two are about specific issues, whereas the former is an attack on the person himself/herself.

In effect, you are dismantling his or her whole being when you criticize.

- Complaint: “I was scared when you were running late and didn’t call me. I thought we had agreed that we would do that for each other.”
- Criticism: “You never think about how your behavior is affecting other people. I don’t believe you are that forgetful, you’re just selfish! You never think of others! You never think of me!”

The problem with criticism is that, when it becomes pervasive in a relationship, it paves the way for the other, far deadlier horsemen.

It makes the victim feel assaulted, rejected, and hurt, and often causes the perpetrator and victim to fall into an escalating pattern where the first horseman reappears with greater and greater frequency and intensity.

B. The second horseman is contempt.

When we communicate in this state, we are truly mean—treating others with disrespect, mocking them with sarcasm, ridicule, name-calling, mimicking, and/or body language such as eye-rolling. The target of contempt is made to feel despised and worthless.
“You’re ‘tired?’ Cry me a river. I’ve been with the kids all day, running around like mad to keep this house going and all you do when you come home from work is flop down on that sofa like a child and play those idiotic video games. I don’t have time to deal with another kid – try to be more pathetic…”

Research has shown that people who are contemptuous of each other are more likely to suffer from infectious illness (colds, the flu, etc.) than others, as their immune systems weaken!

Contempt is fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about the other person—which come to a head in the perpetrator attacking the accused from a position of relative superiority.

Contempt is the single greatest predictor of divorce according to Dr. Gottman’s work. It must be eliminated.

C. The third horseman is **defensiveness**.

We’ve all been defensive. In fact, when I asked Sara which one of these four was I the guiltiest of, she gently mentioned defensiveness. Can you guess what my response was? “No, I’m not!”

This horseman is nearly omnipresent when relationships are on the rocks.

When we feel accused unjustly, we fish for excuses so that the other person will back off.

Unfortunately, this strategy is almost never successful. Our excuses just tell them that we don’t take them seriously.

- She: “Did you call Betty and Ralph to let them know that we’re not coming tonight as we discussed this morning?”
- He: “I was just too darn busy today. As a matter of fact, you know just how busy my schedule was. Why didn’t you just do it?”

He not only responds defensively, but turns the table and makes it her fault. A non-defensive response would have been:

“Oops, I forgot. I should have asked you this morning to do it because I knew my day would be packed. Let me call them right now.”

Although it is perfectly understandable for the male to defend himself in the example given above, this approach doesn’t have the desired effect. The attacking spouse does not back down or apologize. This is because defensiveness is really a way of blaming the other person.

D. The fourth horseman is **stonewalling**.

Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction. In other words, stonewalling is when one person shuts down and closes himself/herself off from the other.

It is a lack of responsiveness to the other person and terminates the interaction between the two of them.
Rather than confronting the issues (which tend to accumulate!), we make evasive maneuvers such as tuning out, turning away, acting busy, or engaging in obsessive behaviors. 

It takes time for the negativity created by the first three horsemen to become overwhelming enough that stonewalling becomes an understandable “out,” but when it does, it frequently becomes a habit, and nothing will be resolved.

III. Conclusion

Today is simply an introduction; the next four messages are going to focus on each of the Horsemen.

Not only will we define them, but we will show you examples of people in the Bible who engaged in them, with dire consequences.

And unlike today, we are going to also give practical steps that will help us change our behaviors and help bring life to our relationships.

This week, try to pay close attention the next time you find yourself engaged in a difficult conversation with your spouse, friend, co-worker, or even with your children. See if you can spot any of The Four Horsemen and try to observe their effects on the people involved.

Being able to identify The Four Horsemen in your conflict discussions is a necessary first step to eliminating them, but this knowledge is not enough.

To drive away destructive communication patterns, you must replace them with healthy, productive ones.

This will be the primary focus of our next four messages.