

God, Marriage, and Singleness

Please open your Bible to the book of Ephesians and chapter 5, or turn to page ____ in the Bible under the chair in front of you. We normally preach through books of the Bible here at Cornerstone. That's the regular diet of our church. But a from time to time, we turn our attention to particular topics or doctrines and look at what the Scriptures as a whole have to say about that issue.

My words are not life-giving, God's Word is. And our goal with a topical series like this one is to rightly understand and apply different sections of the Scriptures and put those truths in line with one another.

When then are we choosing to talk about marriage & relationships? Why this series? One just pastoral reason is that we've been dealing with a lot of issues among couples in our church. There are people who asking for help – help with their marriage, help as they plan for marriage, help as they talk to others who are in relationships. And so we want to take some time to focus on what God has said together as a church.

And that may raise another question that some of you have. And I just want to get out in front and address it right away. What will this series have for me if I'm not married? Maybe you're single and you've never been married, or you have divorce as a part of your story, or your spouse has passed away. Should I even come to these messages?

Well, I do believe that the Word of God is profitable for you, wherever you find yourself. Maybe you'll be married someday, or you will interact with people who are married, or you go to a church in which helping others strengthen their marriages is a part of making disciples – that's this church, by the way.

So this series will help each of us understand what marriage is all about, and thus how to help each other as we prepare for marriage or live within marriage, or think about marriages from a biblical perspective. That's true.

But there's a much bigger reason to hear what God has to say about marriages, even if you're not married. And that has to do with God's purpose in creating marriages in the first place.

We've called this series "Intimate Connection" because marriage is a picture that points to the intimate connection that God desires with His people. And brothers and sisters, God wants you to know His love and care and desire for you whether or not you are married. Marriage portrays a beautiful reality, but you don't need marriage to experience that reality. Marriage is a picture – but you can have the real thing with God.

Again, God designed marriage to show the kind of love and closeness and relationship He wants to have with His people. He didn't create marriage and then say, "Oh what's a good illustration for how I want to relate to my people? How about marriage!" That's exactly backwards. Rather, God created humanity to enjoy an intimate connection with Him and then created marriage to represent that intimate connection as a picture in the world. I know I'm just asserting that now, but we'll see that in Ephesians 5 in a moment.

The point is that as we study marriage, we will learn and see the kind of connection that God created us to enjoy with Him. And you can know that kind of intimacy with or without marriage.

One of the other main reasons that this topic deserves attention is that marriage is important to God. God explicitly calls us to honor marriage.

Hebrews 13:4

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

God says that marriage should be held in honor among all – every person should have a high view of marriage. And the marriage bed should be undefiled, kept pure. Why? Because God will judge. Marriage is important to God.

And it's probably not controversial to observe that in the time we find ourselves today, marriage is under attack. The culture in which we live does not honor marriage. It is increasingly the case that people are refraining from marriage and choosing instead to simply live with their romantic partners and move from one to the next when their needs are no longer being met. People are increasingly avoiding marriage because it's seen as too restrictive, too outdated, and too hard to get out of when things go bad.

But as we'll see, the plan God has for marriage is miles away from what our culture thinks marriage is about. And maybe that's a good question for us to consider as we begin this series: What do you think marriage is for? What's it supposed to be about? Why did God design marriage in the first place? And how then, should we live if we are married? With those questions in mind, let's read our text.

Read Ephesians 5:18-33

Intro

There are some topics that are intimidating to preach about as a pastor. On one hand, there are those things which may be controversial: politics, hot button issues like race/ethnicity or immigration – those kind of things.

On the other hand, there are things which are intimidating to preach about because I feel so personally inadequate to talk about them. Prayer for example, that's one that's maybe always going to feel a bit intimidating because I so often feel weak in my prayer life. Another one of those is marriage. It's hard because I feel my failures and see my sin probably more often in my marriage than any other place. My wife knows me better than anyone else, and I'm going to stand up here and talk about what God says about marriage, knowing that she's going to be listening.

And just because I think Satan loves to do things like this – this was a hard week for my marriage. Eve and I just weren't connecting all that well. And we found ourselves saying hurtful things to one another.

So I'm up here this morning, recognizing that I've got a long way to go in learning how to cultivate a healthy, flourishing marriage. I'm in the trenches alongside you.

But I do believe that there's a lot of truth that we should think about together as we begin this series. So I want to ask two questions this morning: why marriage? Why did God create the institution of marriage? That's question one.

I believe it was Groucho Marx who joked and said, "They say marriage is an institution, but who wants to live in an institution?"

That's the first question – why marriage? What's it for? And then the second question flows out of the first one, what is marriage anyway? How do we define it?

And we'll try to draw out some implications for us to apply today, but fair warning, most of the application in this series will come later. We want to get some big ideas about marriage in front of us first, especially in a culture that's so confused about these things.

Why marriage? What is marriage about?

So the first question is – why did God create marriage? What's it for?

Christopher Ash has a great book on marriage called “Married for God” and in it he points out that many times we come to God looking for help to make our marriage better as we think it should be. He's like our lifestyle coach, and if we do the right things, then He'll help me get what I want out of marriage. Maybe that's you this morning. Oh we're talking about marriage? Great, maybe God will help me change my spouse or we'll finally learn to communicate about what we want, or God will show my partner that they need to step it up.

But the truth is the exact opposite. We need to ask God what He wants through our marriage and then align our goals behind His, rather than expecting Him to line up His goals behind ours.¹

So the wrong question is, “What can marriage do for me?” The right question is “What does God want to do in and through my marriage?” What's His purpose in it?

I see in the Bible several purposes that God has for marriage.

Marriage is to serve God

First, marriage was created to serve God. Think back to the early chapters of Genesis. We'll be looking at those more closely next week, but there are some things that I want us to see today. So look at...

Genesis 1:28

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

¹ Christopher Ash, *Married for God*, 16

This is just after God creates man and woman. More detail on how that happened is given in chapter 2. But here in chapter one, the emphasis is on the equality and shared mission that God gives to both the man and the woman who both bear His image.

He gives them what has become known as the creation mandate. It's got two parts – first, they are to be fruitful and multiply. And then secondly they are to subdue the earth and exercise dominion over it.

God has created mankind in order to be His representatives on the earth. And He wants to fill the earth with these representatives who will be like gardeners who are tasked with keeping and cultivating the earth and exercising loving dominion over it and all the animals and things on the earth.

This is what God created marriage to do – to exercise good and loving dominion over the earth like gardeners who bear His image. And then these marriages are to fill the earth with more gardeners through bearing children.

So God intends for husbands and wives to share in this common task of exercising dominion over the earth. He's speaking to both the man and the woman here. This isn't just the husband's job or the wife's. It belongs to all of mankind. (And it belongs to those who are not married as well, by the way). That's the original design from Genesis one and two.

But the problem, of course, is that the Bible keeps going into Genesis three. And in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve sin. They disobey God and rebel against His good commands. And as a result, God pronounces judgment.

Genesis 3:16-18

To the woman he said,

"I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you."

17 And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,'

cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;

18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.

So this judgment has two parts. There will be pain in child-bearing and the relationship between man and woman will now be strained. And then secondly, the earth will now be cursed and cause pain as mankind seeks to cultivate it.

So you see the connection? The two things that mankind are supposed to do – exercise dominion over the earth and being fruitful and multiplying. They are the two things that are affected by the curse of God for our sin. Being fruitful and multiplying will be hard and painful. And exercising dominion over the earth will be frustrating and painful as well.

The two things that marriage is supposed to do are both going to be harder now. And that shows up in all kinds of ways, from the frustrations you feel at your job to the difficulties in finding a spouse to the hardships of married life.

And what's more, just bearing children no longer accomplishes the goal of being fruitful and multiplying. Why? Because all people are born in sin, rather than creating more gardeners, now we're just creating more sinners who vandalize the garden, rather than keep it. We fail at our task of representing Him as image bearers.

And that's why, this command gets transformed through the covenant with Abraham and His offspring to bless the whole world of nations. And ultimately in the New Testament this command is applied to the making of disciples through the spread of the gospel. More and more people are to follow Jesus and bear His image. I don't have time to trace all of that, but we did that a few years ago when we preached through the book of Colossians which is one of the places this idea shows up.

So that was a lot. What's the point? The point is that marriage has been created to serve God. Your marriage was designed to exercise godly dominion over the earth and multiply disciples of Jesus Christ. God intends to work through your marriage, not just in it. He wants you as husbands and wives to think bigger about your marriage.

And if you're single today, this truth still applies to you. God has designed you to exercise dominion over the earth and to make disciples of all nations and the next generation for His glory.

Marriage is to sanctify

Secondly, and more briefly. God designed marriage to sanctify or make you holy. Did you notice that the work of Jesus mentioned in Ephesians five is to sanctify her and cleanse her by the washing of water with the word?

Husbands, your wife has been given to you so that you might be more like Jesus and help her be more like Jesus. Wives, your husband has been given to you so that you might be more like Jesus and help him be more like Jesus.

Marriage is one of the primary environments where the Lord seeks to refine us and shape us and lead us deeper into dependance on Him. Your marriage is where your sin may be the most visible. It's hard to hide it forever. God will use your spouse to help you see that you are selfish in ways that you didn't know before you got married. Can I get an amen from the married people?

The author Gary Thomas in his book, Sacred Marriage asks the question: What if God designed marriage to make you holy instead of happy? Now, he's not saying that marriage isn't supposed to make you happy. That's not the point. But what he is saying, and saying rightly – is that God has designed marriage as a means of sanctification. God intends for your spouse to help you live like Jesus.

Marriage is to order society

And then third, and maybe somewhat surprisingly, God has created marriage in order to help order society. There are public effects of strong, healthy marriages. Marriage is a gift of God given to humanity so that the sexual union between a husband and wife might flourish in a committed covenant. Proverbs speaks about the danger of promiscuity and sexual immorality like a fire.

Marriage is designed to be a stabilizing force for good in society. It's best for young men to pursue marriage rather than sleeping around with whomever will say yes. It's best for young women to pursue marriage than to seek out partners who are unwilling to commit to them exclusively in a marriage relationship.

A stable marriage is the best environment for the raising of children. That's not to say that in our fallen world with the presence of sin that single moms and single dads can't raise godly, healthy kids. But it is to say that the ideal design is for kids to have the

nurturing influence of both a mom and a dad who are committed to one another in the home. Marriage has been given by God, in part, to order society for good.

So... I realize that we're talking about some things at a pretty high level. Let me try to bring it down for a moment.

What are some of the myths that people believe about marriage?
Let me give you three of them.

1. Marriage is about my comfort.

Some people think or they just assume that marriage is all about my comfort. It's about being loved by someone and all the feelings and security that go along with that. So a person who thinks this way may go into marriage or look for marriage as a means to make their own life better. It's a way to have my needs met by someone who can't go anywhere.

This is really a reflection of a consumer mentality. It sees the function of marriage as a means to get someone from the other person. It's the opposite of seeing marriage as a vehicle for serving God together through the one flesh relationship. It makes marriage all about me and what I want from it.

That's a myth. It's not what marriage is for.

2. Marriage is about my completion.

Some may look to marriage as though it's the answer to solve your loneliness. Marriage will finally mean that I'm no longer going to be lonely. Now I'll have someone with me. Or a person within a marriage or a dating relationship will enmesh themselves with another person such that they become co-dependent. In other words, they make their life all about trying to become all things for their partner such that they lose themselves.

And the problem is that a codependent relationship is not honest. It's not real love if it's never able to confront the other person's sins. It's not real love if it's not walking in the truth. And a marriage with this dynamic will do a poor job of serving God or helping sanctify one another to be more like Christ. They'll spend all of their effort simply trying to enable or control their spouse so that they don't feel so lonely or worthless at the end of the day.

Marriage was not designed to give you what you can only find in Christ. To prioritize or worship something above God, even a good thing like your spouse, is idolatry and it will not satisfy in the end. Marriage was built to serve Christ and point you and your spouse outward beyond yourselves. It cannot bear the weight of completing each other.

3. Marriage is about my cravings.

Some today would simply believe that marriage is about having sanctioned sex, though they may hesitate to say it out loud. It's about having my cravings met in a way that God allows. And again, this is just another form of the comfort myth. It makes marriage about you instead of about God.

Marriage is more than just an outlet for sexual desire. And if that's the only thing you hope will sustain your marriage, then you're headed for trouble.

And the problem with these three myths, like a lot of false thinking, is that there is some truth in each of them. Yes, marriage is a wonderful opportunity to love another person and work to serve them and meet their needs. Yes, marriage is a helpful way to build connection and friendship and companionship with another person. And yes, marriage is the proper place for sexual desire to be met. Those things are true.

But all of them can be twisted. And all of them can be turned into a selfish way to treat marriage. They put a weight on marriage that it cannot bear. Marriage is intended to serve God through a shared commitment to make disciples, to be fruitful, and to show loving dominion as stewards of creation, cultivating beauty and goodness in the world. Marriage is meant to serve God and help us live like Jesus.

What is marriage?

So we've talked about what marriage is for, the why question. Now, let's think about what marriage is. How do we define it?

Here's where we go back for a moment to Ephesians, though really we're looking through Ephesians at another passage that Paul is quoting – Genesis 2.

Ephesians 5:31

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

Here Paul looks back and draws on one of the most foundational texts on marriage from Genesis 2:24. Jesus does the same thing in Matthew 19.

Paul is picking up this idea from that verse in Genesis 2:24 that marriage is a covenant relationship. It's a covenant relationship.

That's often hard for us to understand because we don't live in a world that's used to covenants. We live in a consumer world. We are used to transactional relationships whereby we measure the strength of the relationship by what we're getting out of it.

This is how we choose the businesses or restaurants we go to and even our friendships. We think about – what will we get out of it? What are the pros and cons?

But covenant relationships are different. They're not a consumer relationship that's about what we can get out of it. It is a binding relationship entered into in the presence of God. That's what a covenant is – it's a promise made before God.

And so I want to expand a bit on the significance of marriage as a covenant for us. And the reason is that marriage isn't just some 21st century idea. It's not that someone came up with it and then went around convincing everyone to do it. No, marriage as a covenant is an idea that we have received from the Scriptures. It was established from the very beginning in the creation account of Adam and Eve. And so we need to understand what it means to think rightly about marriage as a covenant.

So what does the Bible say about covenants?

Exclusive

One of the first things we should note about covenants in the Bible is that they are exclusive relationships.

In the ancient world, when two people or tribes or nations entered into covenant with one another, you would form these covenant relationships. And those relationships were meant to be exclusive. You didn't just enter into covenants with anyone.

And that meant that if one kingdom or tribe entered into a covenant with another kingdom or tribe, and someone decided they wanted to be joined in covenant with another kingdom, a different one, then that would be seen as treason. It would violate the stipulations of the covenant. They were meant to be exclusive.

That means that in order to say “Yes” to one covenant, you must also be saying “No” to all others. That’s pretty clear in God’s covenants with His people. Think about the first stipulation of God’s covenant with His people seen in the 10 commandments. What’s He say?

Exodus 20:1-3

And God spoke all these words, saying, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. “You shall have no other gods before me.

God is not going to be one of many covenant partners. He commands exclusivity. That means that He’s first in priority above all other relationships. That’s why Genesis says, a man will leave His father and mother and hold fast to his wife. There is a new priority. This marriage is to be the priority over all other earthly relationships, even that of a parent and child.

Marriage is intended to be exclusive. There is no room in the marriage covenant for multiple partners. You can’t be faithful to the vows you took if you’re also pursuing the attention or approval of other people above your spouse. Faithfulness to your spouse means that he or she alone has your heart.

One sign that you’re on a dangerous road is that you find yourself being ‘open’ to the attention of other people who are not your spouse. You begin to follow an old boyfriend or girlfriend on social media and secretly hope for that to grow into something. You daydream about that other person showing you attention. You hope that he or she will be at that party or event.

You may be hearing this message this morning and you’ve begun to flirt with being emotionally involved with someone who is not your spouse. Let me just warn you as clearly as I can – you need to put that to death before it kills you. You need to confess your sin and repent. Don’t continue to chase after that which will lead you to your own destruction.

For others of us, the temptation at the moment may not be another romantic interest – maybe it's your career. It's the chasing of money or power. Or it could even be your kids. And you've made your life all about your kids – that's where all your energy and focus goes. So whatever it is, you may have put that thing or those people as the priority in your heart above your marriage.

That may a good question to ask your spouse if you're married – honey, have you felt like I've put other things as a priority over our marriage?

Now, let's not forget what we've already said. Marriage itself is about serving God and being sanctified into the image of Christ. To prioritize marriage doesn't mean that you abandon all other responsibilities like your job or your kids. But it does mean that there should be priority on the marriage. And to prioritize marriage is to prioritize serving the Lord as a married person. To leave other relationships behind and cleave to your spouse so that you will exercise dominion and make disciples now as one flesh. Covenant marriage is exclusive.

Commitment

Secondly, covenant relationships are based on commitment. And in the case of marriage that commitment is permanent, til death do us part. Jesus says in Matthew 19, 'what God has joined together, let not man separate.'

Now, let me recognize that the Bible does make some allowance for times when the marriage covenant can or even should be dissolved. But those are exceptions which prove the rule. The created design, the plan from the beginning was that a man and a woman would be joined in marriage until natural death would separate them.

So the question for us who are married is – what sustains the relationship through the highs and lows of life? Life has highs and lows, right? So what sustains a marriage through those seasons? Is it going to be your commitment to one another or is it going to be based on feelings?

And this is hard because what we've been told again and again and again by our culture is that if you find the right person, your soul mate, the one who you are compatible with, then your love and passion for that person will sustain you through all the highs

and lows of life. But the problem is that you may begin a relationship believing that, and only later discover that your feelings have changed. And this is because...feelings change. They're fickle. They're here one day and gone tomorrow.

So if you're going to build your relationships on feelings, then it isn't any wonder that many times those relationships don't last because your feelings don't last.

Biblically speaking, covenant relationships are based on vows, on commitments that are made with the parties involved. We won't go to all of these texts, but if you think about the covenant promises that God made with Abraham – I'm going to bless you. I'm going to give you this land. I'm going to make you into a great nation. And through your Offspring, all the world will be blessed. Or think of the covenant with David – God says, I'm going to put a king on the throne forever. Or the New Covenant in which God says to His people, I'm going to put my Spirit within you and forgive your sins. These are covenant promises that God has made. He has made commitments, vows.

And this idea should sound like what we do with wedding vows. Maybe you wrote your own vows, and that's fine. But some of you may have used the traditional ones that come to us through the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. And your vows included phrases like "to have and to hold, for better for worsen, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, til death do us part."

Do you hear anything about feelings there? No, this is the language of commitment. They're promises made before God. And that's not to say that feelings have no part to play in a healthy marriage! Certainly they do. But the lead in a marriage is the commitment, not the feelings.

We see this even in the language the Scriptures use to describe the covenant love of God for His people. It's the word "hesed."

Hesed =Loyal Love

If you were to look up the definition of that word, you will find it defined or translated by words like 'loyal love' or 'steadfast love' or 'lovingkindness.' If you're reading along in the old testament and you come across that word or phrase 'steadfast love,' it's more than likely the word 'hesed.' And that's because we don't have a good word in English for this concept of covenant love.

So when we think about the kind of love that marriages are based upon, it's not a love defined by feelings or emotions. It's at its core the loyal, steadfast commitment to be faithful to the vows you've made. In other words, your love is not defined by your feelings but by your faithfulness to your commitments.

Love isn't just something you fall into and out of. Love is a choice to be faithful to your commitments, to serve the other, to desire their good, to appreciate their being who they are. That's why 1 Corinthians 13, the great love chapter, talks about love in terms of being patient and kind, not envious or boastful, not arrogant or rude. Love is an action.

And that's good news because what you really need in a marriage partner is not someone who is only going to love you on your good days. You need someone who will love you on your bad days, when you feel depressed or anxious, feeling overwhelmed or exhausted, you want someone to love you with a hesed, loyal kind of love. You don't want someone who will only love you when you're at your best, not just when you have your best body or when you're doing everything right. Marriage is about commitment and permanence, not feelings that come and go.

So putting these ideas together. Let me give you a definition that I've adjusted from Ryan T. Anderson's book *What is Marriage?* Definition:

Marriage is an exclusive, comprehensive, and permanent covenant between one man and one woman.

That's what I've been arguing the Bible means when it talks about marriage. It's an exclusive relationship. It's comprehensive – that has to do with being one flesh and being united physically, emotionally, relationally, the whole of you and your spouse together (we'll talk more about that in the weeks to come). It's permanent, not based on feelings but on commitment. And it's a covenant between one man and one woman in the presence of God.

What does marriage show?

Finally, I want to revisit a part of the why question that we started with. Yes, marriage is about serving God. Yes, it's designed to sanctify us and make us more like Jesus. And yes, it's been given by God for the good and ordering of society.

But there's a fourth reason as well. God created marriage in order to reveal a mystery – the love and connection and intimacy that He desires with His people.

Ephesians 5:31-32

31 “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” **32** This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

Paul says that the one flesh relationship between a husband and wife in covenant marriage refers to or points to the relationship between Christ and the church. God wanted to create an institution to put on display the love and submission and intimacy that He designed for Himself and His people – and that's why He created marriage.

You see, God has shown, He has proven, He has demonstrated His deep love for us as His people by becoming one of us. Jesus took on a human body like yours and mine. He lived among us, facing the same temptations and trials that we face. And He laid down His life for us, subjecting Himself to death on a cross in order that He might take away our sin and give us His perfect righteousness. He rose again on the third day, having fully and completely satisfied the wrath of God, never to die again. And He ascended to the right hand of the Father where He rules and reigns as His kingdom grows and draws men and women, boys and girls, from every tribe and nation and tongue to Himself.

And He did all of that and is still doing that so that He might show us the incredible and bottomless love of God. Jesus loves you and He likes you and He sees you all the way down. He knows you better than you know yourself, and He loves you. And He created marriage as a sign to show people that this is how great and close and intimate He wants to be with you.

So what should we do? If you're married, then think rightly about purpose of your marriage. What does God want to do in and through you and your spouse? And be committed to one another. Love each other with an exclusive, *hesed* kind of love.

If you're not married, then pursue the purpose of God in your life. He has created you for intimacy with Him, to make disciples, and to exercise dominion over the earth. And let's all of us look to Jesus and the reality that marriage pictures for us and the great love that God has for us as His people. Let's pray...