

Beyond the Myths of Marriage

Series: Making Relationships Work: Love, Sex & Marriage
September 17, 2017 – Brad Bailey

Focus: Marriage is less about personal fulfillment and more about personal growth... a truth which frees the unmarried and married alike from false pursuits and expectations.

Introduction

*What do you think is an essential important factor in marital satisfaction and success? No doubt... there are many that are important... communication, resolving conflict, decision making and finances, a positive mutual sexual relationship.... All of those are significant issues.. But the most important factor in determining satisfaction in a marriage may be one that is often missed. It is **expectations**.*

We experience contentment in relationship to our expectations.

What you expect of something... is the often unconscious factor that most effects our satisfaction.

*Satisfaction is derived from expectations... and expectations are **derived from the purpose we deem something to hold**.*

How content are you with the chair you are sitting on... or the pen in hand?
The answer is directly related to it's purpose...what you think it should do.

Expectations are the unseen link between what we experience and how satisfied we are. And it is every bit as true in marriage.

Here is what becomes so notable regarding marriage. The vast majority of people can describe the purpose of their job, their home, their car, and of most everything they are connected with... but **struggle to have a clear sense of the purpose of marriage**.

And in truth...**many of us** carry some **false expectations** that can **lead to trouble**.

There is a cartoon that reads..

“When I got married I was looking for an ideal.

Therefore it became an ordeal.

Now I want a new deal.”

The ideal creates the ordeal... that then wants a new deal.

So today...we are **continuing** our **Fall focus** on **Making Relationships Work: Love, Sex, and Marriage**. Last week...we began with God's declaration that it is not good for man to be alone....and I today God wants to speak to us about the creation of marriage...and it's purpose. I want us to engage getting beyond the myths of marriage.

As I said last week, **some aspects** of this series may **speak uniquely into the life of marriage**...and those married ... but **there is significance for every one of us**.

For every life that is married... your heart towards your partner is being defined by the expectations you have held...and I believe many of our hearts can be served by how God may reorient our expectations.

For every life that anticipates a future of being married...but may recognize that the idea of marriage comes with a mixture of both ideals and fears ... God may offer a healthier idea about marriage is about.

When we hear that 50% of marriages end in divorce... it may sound logical to become cynical about marriage. But here's the more sobering truth we may need to realize.

Marriage is not failing us ... we are failing at marriage.

(And I am not speaking about those who have become divorced...but the very nature of our struggle for any of us to love well.)

For every life that has considered that a marriage relationship may not be a part of your earthly life...and wonders what all does that mean ... God knows that it may serve your heart to understand what marriage is and isn't designed to be.

For those old enough to have watched the movie Jerry Maguire...you may still hear Tom Cruise declaring to Renee Zellweger..."You complete me." We may need to let heaven speak more deeply than Hollywood.

So let's hear again the how Scriptures declare God's formation of marriage in the poetic summary in the early chapters of the Book of Genesis. Our tendency as modern western lives is to let reality be as big as we can see...and understand. But here God declares a larger reality.

The Divine Formation of Marriage

Genesis 1:1, 1:26-28, 1:31a

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth....Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.

**So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.**

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground....God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. "

Then we get a second description of this formation of male and female...

Genesis 2:15, 22-24 (NIV)

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ...²² Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. ²³ The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." ²⁴ For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

Are these beings given a purpose? Yes... God who brought order from chaos...creates a final being who is distinctly created to bear his image and to that being he says...“be fruitful and multiply.... and take care of creation.”

Who was given a purpose? BOTH.

We were created to bear and reflect God’s nature in PURPOSE... to serve as stewards or servants of creation.

And who was given a partner to serve that purpose.

Ultimately both. (As they are complimentary in nature... and creative only in that union.)
[1]

What does this reveal about who we are and the purpose of marriage? That most simply stated...

Marriage is a PARTNERSHIP with PURPOSE.

The true nature of marriage is to be a PARTNERSHIP that reflects God’s nature to be joined in God-given PURPOSE.

This brings out one of the foundations for marriage.

1. Marriage is not two arrows pointed at each other, but two arrows pointed in the SAME DIRECTION.

God called two to be partners in **something bigger than themselves**. It would require uniting in a complimentary fashion to fulfill. Together they would be looking out towards a world in need of care...each fully human and filled with purpose.

*To express it the way the author of The Little Prince did,
"Love does not consist in gazing at each other... but in looking outward together in the same direction."- Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*

Beneath the challenge that so many marriages face today... is a loss of purpose. Even the basic practical needs which marriage has long served, such as producing, protection, education, and such... almost all are met outside the marriage or family system.

Whereas marriage was a partnership in life from which a **byproduct was intimacy**... now we are often left with nothing but the goal of personal fulfillment and intimacy as the bond.

Rather than two arrows pointing in the same direction and enjoying the partnership in a purpose that transcends us... we can **easily become more like two arrows pointed at each other.**

Separation from God leaves us separated from our ultimate true source of security and significance... we are stripped of our true identity and worth.. and in a state of being ‘naked’ and ‘ashamed.’ [2] Apart from God we’re operating out of a state of alienation rather than acceptance...and left trying to find our security and significance in others.

We can find that a part of us is depending on some partner to validate us and fulfill our sense of significance... while another part of us is afraid of intimacy because we sense that we can’t fulfill that expectation in another... we don’t have within us what they may think we can fulfill.

Without a basis of meaning and purpose... we are left trying to find this in one another. The two arrows are looking towards another to provide something that they cannot completely fulfill.

We are like **two ticks and no dog...** or **two bankrupt businessmen** trying to take a loan out from each other.

As Tim Keller describes...

“You can only afford to be generous if you actually have some money in the bank to give. In the same way, if your only source of love and meaning is your spouse, then anytime he or she fails you, it will not just cause grief but a psychological cataclysm. If, however, you know something of the work of the Spirit in your life, you have enough love "in the bank" to be generous to your spouse even when you are not getting much affection or kindness at the moment.” – Tim Keller

Marriage was meant to be a partnership rooted in a common purpose... in which each partner finds their deepest security and significance from God. [3]

This leads to another point...

2. Marriage is less about the process of FINDING the right person and more about BECOMING the right person.

A part of me can be a romantic... so I have had to confront some of my own western cultural ideas about marriage.

I have grown up with a story about how special it can be to find one’s true soul mate...that special one. The prince finds the maiden...the one true love that can rescue her and ...and immediately it ends saying “they lived ever happily after.” They seem to have a hard time depicting how that works out. [3b]

And I wonder....**is the romantic version maybe a cheap excuse for love...and learning to love?**

Story – The day I asked my wife to marry. I had plans to ask her that evening...and I had spoken at a conference that morning in Orange County...and was driving up the 405 freeway. It seems appropriate to pray one more time...check in with God...get a little confirmation. I felt clear and confident about marrying Leah...but aa check in seemed appropriate. SO I prayed: “Lord, is the Leah the right one to marry?” And in a way more striking than I have usually experienced...immediately I heard God respond in my spirit... “You are ready to commit the rest of your life to someone.”

That of course was not an answer to what I asked...but I was silenced...because it was the answer to the deeper question at hand.

It spoke confidence into a level I hadn’t even realized was more essential....beyond saying simply ‘yes’ or ‘no’ regarding who I was choosing... because it spoke to what mattered most.

(It wasn’t really any grand compliment...I was thirty years old...and it was really only a word that I was ready to start.)

The shift in the question became a shift in focus.

I don’t want to dismiss the term “soul mate”... if we can understand...that it such a soul mate is not our soul source...and that such a connection is not that which is found...as much as it is developed.

As Keller says,

“It is the illusion that if we find our one true soul mate, everything wrong with us will be healed; but that makes the lover into God, and no human being can live up to that. If we look to our spouses to fill up our tanks in a way that only God can do, we are demanding an impossibility.” – Tim Keller

This leads to another basic truth...

3. Marriage is more about personal GROWTH than personal fulfillment.

Jesus said we were to **become like him.**

The apostle Paul said that **marriage in particular** is a **mysterious reflection** of Christ’s divine sacrificial love for his people.

“Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it. ... That’s why a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two will be one. This is a great mystery. (I’m talking about Christ’s relationship to the church.) But every husband must love his wife as he loves himself, and wives should respect their husbands.”
- Ephesians 5:25, 31-33 (GW)

Paul is standing back and grasping a great mystery.

Everything called for on earth is a reflection of what is in the eternal heaven.
The covenant love of husband and wife...is to **reflect the nature of God's love.**

“God has planted marriage among humans as yet another sign-post pointing to His own eternal, spiritual existence.” – Gary Thomas

The covenant of marriage is a model and means to develop the Divine nature of sacrificial love. [4]

“Self-giving love”...is a helpful term...because we **tend to think** of the **opposite** of being **“selfish”** as that of being **“selfless”**....but that can suggest that one has no self...or that we love best **when we exist least.**

But Christ gave out of the fullness of his being... and here Paul describes how a man must love his wife **AS HE LOVES HIMSELF.**

The love that God now makes possible for all lives to grow in...is not that which demeans one's own value...but that which decentralizes one's own will. It is not about becoming “self-less”...but “self-giving.”

Again to quote Keller...

“When the Bible speaks of love, it measures it primarily not by how much you want to receive it but by how much you are willing to give yourself to someone else. The essence of marriage is a sacrificial commitment to the good of the other.” – Tim Keller

It's important to realize that God wants to grow such love in all of us. When the Bible describes how marriage is a mysterious reflection of such love...it is unique in it's covenantal form...but not it's fundamental quality.

I see this in every time we stop to do what is not self-serving... from helping a stranger ...a neighbor...a friend...to the profound nature of a parent giving up so much for a child...a special needs child...or caring for parent in need.

This is the deep challenge...and marriage is simply the unique context for what is so hard...and healthy. [5]

As Paul Billheimer wrote,

“One of God's main purposes in ordaining marriage and the home is not primarily for pleasure, as is ordinarily supposed, but **to decentralize the self**, to teach agape love. The stresses of marriage and the home are designed to produce brokenness, and to wean one from self-centeredness, and **to produce the graces of sacrificial love and gentleness.** Because so few people understand the nature and purpose of marriage, when unexpected stresses and strains develop they are tempted to feel they have made a mistake and perhaps have married the wrong person.... If the couple can comprehend that neither life nor marriage is made primarily for pleasure, but for learning sacrificial love, they may not waste their sorrows.” [5b]- From Paul Billheimer's Don't Waste Your Sorrows.

That is a statement one does well to sit with.

It is about realizing that the growth is hard...but good.

Some may think this suggest that pleasure is bad. No... it's just that the pleasure and personal happiness that marriage (or any aspect of life) can bring...is not a good end in itself. When becoming more loving....in God's love...is the end... pleasure and happiness enjoy their place.

"If you understand what holiness is, you come to see that real happiness is on the far side of holiness, not the near side." – Tim Keller

And in this sense, marriage is challenging because it exposes our sin and selfishness. [5c]

The part of any person that wants to maintain the 'ideal self' that they may have at the age of 18...or 25... should avoid staying too close to anyone...and particularly avoid marriage. The very nature of marriage is that you will have to become more honest and holy if it's going to succeed. [5d]

"One of the best wedding gifts God gave you was a full-length mirror called your spouse. Had there been a card attached, it would have read, "Here's to helping you discover what you're really like!" – Gary & Betsy Ricucci

"Marriage is the operation by which a woman's vanity and a man's egotism are extracted without anesthetic." - Helen Rowland

Now some may think such a process sounds like a choice to suffer... and that marriage is a choice to be crucified. [6]

So let's be clear...

To become more like God...like Christ...is to follow him in our willingness to surrender and suffer for what is needed in order to love.

It is a matter of what something done to us...but of what we chose within us.

God never said look at how good the violence inflicted upon Christ was.

God never said look at how good harm inflicted upon a spouse is.

What God says to look at and follow...is how Christ gave himself redemptively and sacrificially to love those who may hurt him.

We grow in God's love not because we are crucified by another...but when we put to death what is not of God in ourselves.

God does not want us to suffer because of another person's harm...but he can use every element to become more sacrificial like himself.

Conclusion: I believe that if we can shake off some of the myths about marriage...and allow God to reorient our expectations... each of us, can find our hearts are served well.

When your head hits the pillow at night... and your heart does an assessment of it's life situation... I believe God wants each of us to draw upon good expectations. We each will find well being if we listen to heaven more than Hollywood.

For every life that is considers marriage in light of the longings but fears.

You may find you are in the midst of a culture signed onto a romantic idea... and is now ambivalent about how finding Mr or Mrs Right really works out.

God's word is to go forward... realizing that in truth...it's not marriage that is failing people...but we who may be failing at marriage...in part by our false expectations. The best investment you will make in your future...is the investment you make in God's love and purposes.

- Develop time alone in which you let God shape you
- Make commitments and learn to keep them regardless of what you feel in the moment.

For every life that has considered that marriage may not be a part of your earthly life...and wonders what that means

When God spoke of marriage...of man being alone... once human family and community existed... he does not speak of one having no companionship apart from marriage. In fact he speaks of leaving father and mother... as a transition to another primary partnership. The point is that there is partnership with a purpose.

I believe God understand what marriage truly provides more than any of us...so He does want to support you in longings that may be unmet. But he also understands better than anyone that marriage is not the end many believe it is...it does not complete anyone on earth...and it is not a part of eternity. [7]

You have the ultimate example to follow.

Jesus declared God's design for marriage.... And...he chose to remain unmarried... but lived with more partnership...and purpose than any human life ever has.

For every life that is married...

If the reference point for our marital assessment is simply that of personal fulfillment... we'll likely find our hearts navigating between fulfillment and frustration... when in fact marriage is most fundamentally a means for sharing in the Divine nature.

Resources: This message was primarily drawn from the initial session of a Pre-Marriage Course which I have developed over the years. I have added many parallel thoughts from Tim Keller's book: *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*

Notes:

1. The nature of the marriage partnership is defined by these key qualities ...each which reflects that we are created to bear the image of God.

1. **Complimentary nature** - God created sexual identity in our unique complimentary nature as male and female. (Scripture says the suitable partner for the man was a woman.)

2. **Creating power** - Our ability to create (reproduce) life is a part of this created order. The Divine image bearers are blessed in their creativity... with life creating potential. (While the Bible celebrates the pleasures of sexual intimacy, sexuality is rooted in both the complimentary nature that can join as 'one flesh,' but also sharing in the sacred God-reflecting ability to create life....to be "fruitful and multiply.")

3. **Covenantal commitment** (The leaving from one's original life bonds of father and mother to create a new life bond of family underlies the powerful oneness of sexual union...and the context for creating and cultivating new life.)

2. The nature of human life apart from God...becoming controlled by other attachments...is what is described in the next part of the original description of the divine drama...

"Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

"You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made covering for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. " Genesis 3:1-8

3. "Both men and women today see marriage not as a way of creating character and community but as a way to reach personal life goals. They are looking for a marriage partner who will 'fulfill their emotional, sexual, and spiritual desires.' And that creates an extreme idealism that in turn leads to a deep pessimism that you will ever find the right person to marry."

— Timothy J. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*

"Sociologists argue that in contemporary Western society the marketplace has become so dominant that the consumer model increasingly characterizes most relationships that historically were covenantal, including marriage. Today we stay connected to people only as long as they are meeting our particular needs at an acceptable cost to us. When we cease to make a profit - that is, when the relationship appears to require more love and affirmation from us than we are getting

back - then we "cut our loses" and drop the relationship. This has also been called "commodification," a process by which social relationships are reduced to economic exchange relationships, and so the very idea of "covenant" is disappearing in our culture. Covenant is therefore a concept increasingly foreign to us, and yet the Bible says it is the essence of marriage."

— Timothy J. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*

3b. As one described the Hollywood story of love - *"Nothing is more exciting or fulfilling than finding and pursuing your one true love."* This is the basis of countless stories. If you find that special someone, that "soul mate" you think is your perfect fit, you need to heed the call of destiny and do everything in your power to pursue this new love. This is the fantasy we dream of before we're married; and if marriage doesn't work out we may revive the dream and continue pursuing that soul mate.

4. The nature of the marital covenant is rooted in the new covenant God has made through Christ.

It is the power of covenantal love that restores us...and which we then model in marriage.

It is God who acts towards His special image bearers... as a Father toward His children... that establishes the power to reclaim and restore us to our truest nature. In the original covenant made with Abraham, we can capture something of the Divine nature at work. God calls out Abraham... and begins to declare how he is to leave his country to go to another place God will lead him. God declares how HE will bless him and make him a great nation. (Genesis 12) Then again in chapter seventeen we read of God reaffirming this new covenant...

*"When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God almighty, walk before me and be blameless. **I will confirm** my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."*

*"Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, **"As for me, this is my covenant with you:** You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram, your name will be Abraham, for **I have made you** a father of many nations. **I will make you** very fruitful, **I will make nations** of you, and kings will come from you. **I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you** and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you."* Genesis 17:1-7

This commitment of blessing is entirely initiated by God. It is neither earned nor based on any merits of the other.

God would establish such a covenant with all human life...

"The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." Jeremiah 31:31-34

“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:6-8

Therefore we must understand that marriage is not a contract based upon the merits of the other, but a covenantal love in which one chooses to commit to another with unconditional love... as a reflection or sign of God’s covenantal love and nature.

When you purchase either a product or a service... there is a contract of some type at work based upon what was determined to be of equal value. If either party fails to fulfill their side of the transaction, then the contract is broken. A covenant is different in that it is a commitment that is not based on the merits of the other or the premise of equal value ... and as such, it isn't simply broken by any particular unfulfilled expectation. In a covenant, failure is understood more as the other party facing the consequences of walking outside the fruit of the covenant love.

This quality of unconditional love and commitment becomes the means and model for our won covenantal love. It is rooted in self-giving love...not merit. And it is rooted not in what one feels...but chooses.

Marital vows are not a declaration of what I feel at the moment...but of the love I am promising I will give in the future.

5. Keller points out the fact that feelings and emotions cannot be commanded out of someone. Yet Jesus commands us in Matthew 22:39, **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”** Also, Jesus says in John 14:15, *“If you love me, you will obey what I command.”* Jesus commands us to love and says if we obey Him, it shows that we love him. Jesus doesn't command that we feel love, He is commanding that we show love through our actions!

Marriage vows are a declaration of our future love for our spouse. Vows are not just excited words we use to describe present feelings, rather they are a covenant made before God of the love you will commit to as you continue into the future with your spouse.

“Whether we are husband or wife, we are not to live for ourselves but for the other. And that is the hardest yet single most important function of being a husband or a wife in marriage.” – Tim Keller

5b. From Paul Billheimer's Don't Waste Your Sorrows.

5c. T.S. Eliot describes coming to embrace marriage's growth requirement: "Marriage is the greatest test in the world...but now I welcome the test instead of dreading it. It is much more than a test of sweetness of temper, as people sometimes think; it is a test of the whole character and affects every action." -T.S. Eliot

5d. *“While your character flaws may have created mild problems for other people, they will create major problems for your spouse and your marriage.” – Tim Keller*

6. To carry our cross... is not to carry Christ's cross. He alone was crucified to pay for our sin. He never called us to carry his cross...and he never called us to go seek to be crucified because it is good.

"If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it." (Luke 9:23-24).

7. Matthew 22:30 (NIV) – Jesus said: "At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven."

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... That's why a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two will be one. This is a great mystery. (I'm talking about Christ's relationship to the church.) But every husband must love his wife as he loves himself, and wives should respect their husbands.” - Ephesians 5:25, 31-33 (GW)