

MARRIAGE HAS A SANCTIFYING MISSION

THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE: SESSION FIVE

A man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery... (Ephesians 5:31-32)

When the apostle Paul refers to marriage as a “profound mystery”, he is describing how the significance of marriage is intended to have a hidden meaning that has now been revealed in Christ. By quoting the original passage on marriage from the Genesis account, Paul describes how the original creation of the union between a husband and wife was meant to foreshadow the future union between Christ and the church. And so, marriage from its original design has always been about more than just you and your spouse living happily ever after.

There is more to marriage than a man and his wife. God created the institution of marriage as a holy exclusive union between a man and a woman. It is a relationship intended to display love, faithfulness and purity. It is much much more than two people who love each other getting together under one roof to do life together.

Marriage is not simply about an overwhelming feeling of love between two people. In its original purpose and design, marriage is about a sacrificial commitment to love someone else and to help that person become all that God has created them to be. It’s meant to be an image of God’s sacrificial commitment to love and to sanctify us as his own special people. And so, the institution of marriage is God’s sacred illustration of his love and redemptive plan for mankind that has our future glory as a new creation as its end goal.

- **Question:** What is your goal in marriage? What is the end goal that you are striving for in your relationship with your spouse?

As we've mentioned in a previous session, Scripture reveals that God considered his creation of mankind as being incomplete and "not good" apart from relational community with one another.¹ We have been created and purposefully designed for relationships.

We were created first and foremost to experience a relationship with God, but then we were also created for the intentional purpose of experiencing relationships with one another. In his creation of mankind, God purposely made it where we would not be completely fulfilled only by our "vertical" relationship with him. God made us as creatures in need of "horizontal" relationships with other human beings as well.

In his book, *The Meaning of Marriage*, Timothy Keller writes:

"God designed us to need 'horizontal' relationships with other human beings. That is why even in paradise, loneliness was a terrible thing. We should therefore not be surprised to find that all the money, comforts, and pleasures in the world – our efforts to re-create a paradise for ourselves – are unable to fulfill us like love can. This is confirmation of our intuition that family and relationships are a greater blessing and provide greater satisfaction than anything money can buy."²

And so, we are incomplete in our humanity apart from relationships with other human beings. And not only are we incomplete in our humanity, but we will also remain unable to fulfill our true God-ordained meaning, mission and purpose in life apart from relationships.

After all, there is no forgiveness, repentance, love, grace, mercy, trust or service apart from real relationships.

- **Question:** What might you consider to be the most devastating thing you could lose in this life? At the end of your life, do you think it's possible that you would say something like, "I sure wished I would have worked more and spent less time with other people"?

¹ see Genesis 2:18

² Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, (Penguin Group: 2011), 111

Protecting Ourselves

If horizontal relationships are vital to fulfilling our identity and mission in this world then it is worth identifying why so many of us struggle to have deep meaningful relationships in our own life. Perhaps our greatest hindrance to experiencing relationships with another person is our fear of trusting another person and our inability to open ourselves up enough to truly receive love from someone else.

Getting to know a person's backstory is a crucial element to getting to know someone else. When we are able to gain an understanding of where they have come from, what they have been through and how it has impacted them then we are more properly prepared to truly touch that person's heart. If we fail to take the time needed to truly get to know someone or if that person refuses to open themselves up enough to be known by us then a deep and meaningful relationship will never manifest.

[Brian] I often ask individuals that I am ministering to, "How many people in your life truly understand and know the depths of your soul?"

So many of us are afraid of the vulnerability of being completely opened up to another person that we settle for an alternative type of relationship. But what is that alternative and is that alternative worth the trouble?

Many of us, if not all of us, have past experiences of relational pain, betrayal, and hurt at some level but choosing to make sure that we never experience those feelings again will inevitably turn into a decision to never allow another person into the depths of your heart.

Whether we realize it or not, a decision to avoid ever being hurt again is a decision to never truly receive love from another person ever again either.

Past relationships can cause persistent wounds that we attempt to cover up rather than seeking the cure. Pain is a reality that each of us have faced, must face and will face again. Does this mean that we ought to protect ourselves by never fully trusting another human being or even worse to trust ourselves and our own inclinations, reason and experience more than we trust God?

Ravi Zacharias was once asked the critical question, "If God is the Creator of all things, then isn't it only true to admit that he also created evil?"

To which he replied, "GM makes cars, right? Do they create the wrecks?"

We live in a sinful world among sinful people, and it is inevitable that we are all going to hurt one another at some time and in some way. Wounds will be afflicted, but healing is also readily available as we trust in the cure offered in the cross of Christ.

God has shown the depths of his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). Jesus risked everything in order to experience a loving relationship with us. Those who truly trust in the love of Christ will find themselves willing to risk the pain and hurt that we might endure in order to experience a true loving relationship with someone else.

Many of us fail to realize how much past experiences influence our present lives until something happens in our marriage that exposes the things that we've tried to keep hidden. This often leads to one spouse taking out past pain and frustration on their spouse or even worse their children who are not the ones responsible for these particular feelings and frustrations. Being honest about our past can protect us from being hurt or hurting others in the present and the future.

Is it enough for God to be the only one that knows the depths of your soul and the hidden pain of your past experiences? If we continue to live in fear of trusting another person, and if we continue to refuse to open ourselves up to be truly known by our spouse then we will be holding our spouse back from ever being able to truly love us, and we will be holding ourselves back from ever experiencing the fullness of what marriage was created and designed to be. A lack of honesty with yourself and hiding your hurt from your spouse will hinder the intended meaning and mission of marriage.

- **Question:** What are some of the dangers of putting up protective walls around yourself in order to not be hurt by others? If you choose to keep past experiences of pain and hurt hidden, is it possible for those past experiences and pain to control the way you live in the present and future?

Purifying One Another

The institution of marriage is God's sacred illustration of his love and redemptive plan for mankind that has our future glory as a new creation as its end goal. And so, when properly understood in this light, we come to understand that marriage has a sanctifying mission with a specific end goal in mind.

The apostle Paul writes;

"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." (Ephesians 5:25-27)

- **Question:** Think of someone that you are really good friends with. How did you two become friends? What drew you to one another in the first place? What keeps you close?

The most valuable and enjoyable relationships that we experience here on earth are those in which the relationship is never merely about the relationship itself. The most meaningful relationships in our lives are those in which both parties in the relationship share a common vision and passion about something greater than themselves. Someone who desperately wants to be your friend will never end up being your friend. But someone who is passionate about the same things that you are also passionate about will more than likely end up being a good friend of yours.

And so, those who will find themselves most satisfied in marriage are those who share a common vision and passion. And the greatest vision that two people created in the image of God can share is the vision and passion that keeps us focused on that Day where we will finally see our Lord face-to-face. The significance of our marriage reaches its greatest heights when we mutually embrace marriage's sanctifying mission. We are to share in a spiritual union in which we purify one another by willingly helping one another know, serve, love and resemble our Lord through increasing faith in him and obedience to his Word anticipating that Day in which we will stand in his glorious presence.

As he interprets marriage through the lens of the gospel and Christ's relationship with his church, the apostle Paul points out the way in which Christ willingly and sacrificially gave all of himself for us in order to have us and to sanctify us through his love into the new creation that we were intended to be.

So how can we go about sacrificially loving one another in a way that falls in line with Christ's sanctifying work?

Paul provides the answer by writing;

"In the same way husbands should love their wives..." (Ephesians 5:28)

Paul says husbands should love their wives, "in the same way". What way? In the way that he was just describing when he was describing Christ's love for the church. Paul reiterates this point by saying husbands should love their wives "as their own bodies" just like Christ does his body (the church). And while the command is being directed primarily towards the husband as the head of the marriage relationship, the sanctifying mission of marriage requires the mutual vision of helping one another love Jesus more than we love each other.

[Brian] I remember a time a few years ago when my daughter, Ellie, asked me, "Do you love Jesus more than you love mom?" I responded with the truth by saying, "Yes, I love Jesus more than I love mom." So then she asked if I loved Jesus more than I loved her and her two sisters. I gently informed her that the answer was yes, but then I helped her understand that because of my increasing love for Jesus, he helps me to love her, mom and her two sisters better than I ever could apart from knowing him. Those who truly trust in the love of Christ will find themselves empowered to truly love their spouse well.

- **Question:** In what ways does loving Jesus more than we love each other help us love each other better?

And so, in looking at Paul's command to love our spouse as we love our own bodies, we can make a few observations on what it looks like to love one another in accordance with the sanctifying mission of marriage.

First, we must acknowledge that whenever we abuse our bodies or neglect our bodies or take our bodies for granted, we open up the door for all sorts of harm, suffering and health problems to come in and destroy our strength and quality of life. In the same way, whenever we abuse, neglect or take our spouse for granted, we open up the door for all sorts of harm, suffering and marriage problems to come in and destroy the strength and quality of our relationship with one another. Just as maintaining physical health requires proactive disciplines, maintaining the health of our marriage requires proactive practices of sacrificial love that keeps the ultimate meaning and sanctifying mission of marriage at the forefront of our minds.

That being said, we can come up with four practical principles for loving our spouse with marriage's sanctifying mission in mind:

1. We ought to be constantly thinking about and pursuing what pleases our spouse.

Whenever we become aware of our bodies need for food, we often think about what we would find most tasteful and desirable for that particular snack or meal and fill ourselves with the type of food that we find the most pleasurable. In much the same way, we ought to be constantly considering the types of things that please our spouse and look to 'fill them up' with the types of things that they appreciate or the things that bring them the most pleasure. We ought to ask ourselves, "According to what I read in Scripture, what are some of the best ways for me to truly bless my spouse?"

2. We ought to be constantly thinking about and pursuing what enhances our spouse.

In order to enhance our physical condition, we must eat right and exercise regularly. In much the same way, we ought to be constantly considering what we can do to enhance our spouse's condition by serving them through a steady diet of God's Word and the regular exercise of godliness.³

³ see Deuteronomy 8:3 & 1 Timothy 4:8

3. We ought to be constantly thinking about and pursuing what protects our spouse.

As cold and flu season approaches, we might seek to protect our bodies from suffering illness by making sure that we dress warmly and wear a jacket in the harsh conditions of winter. In much the same way, we ought to be constantly considering how we can protect our spouse spiritually from suffering the darkness and destruction that comes upon those who are not walking in accordance with the truth of God's Word. Are we praying for our spouse on a regular basis and are we praying together admitting our mutual dependence upon our Lord to love one another like we should?

4. We ought to be constantly thinking about and pursuing what prepares our spouse.

The professional athlete spends the entire offseason preparing himself for the upcoming season. In much the same way, we ought to be preparing one another through mutual encouragement and exhortation for that Day where we will finally see our Lord face-to-face.

Our Lord willingly and sacrificially risked everything and gave all of himself for us in order to sanctify us and to transform us through his love into the new creation that we were intended to be. He did not love us because we were lovely, but he loved us in order to make us lovely. And so, may we look to the sanctifying mission of our marriage and together look to spur one another on in mutual love and service towards becoming the man and woman that our Lord desires for us to be. And no matter what, may we love our spouse not because they are lovely, but may we love our spouse primarily because Christ is lovely.

- **Question:** What are some practical ways that you and your spouse can begin to proactively keep the ultimate meaning and sanctifying mission of marriage at the forefront of your minds?
- **Question:** Timothy Keller writes, ""No other human being should get more of your love, energy, industry, and commitment than your spouse." Do you sometimes feel as if your spouse is giving the best of themselves to their job, hobby or others, and at the end of the day, you are just receiving what's left of them?