

MARRIAGE REVOLVES AROUND SERVICE

THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE: SESSION FOUR

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)

In the session three, we discussed that the only way we will maintain a marriage environment that promotes mutual honesty and love is for each spouse to become very good at forgiving and very good at repenting. Extending mutual grace is the key to keeping honesty and love working together. However, as vital as forgiveness and repentance are for the health of our marriage, both of these practices are also reactive responses to conflict or confrontation.

If we only focused on the forgiving and repenting aspect of marriage then we would live our lives together in a reactionary state where we would more than likely have to do a lot of forgiving and repenting. And so, we must seek to become properly proactive in making good things happen on a daily basis. Yes, we must become very good at forgiving and very good at repenting, but if we become very good at serving one another then we will find ourselves having to forgive and repent less frequently.

And so, marriage requires mutual grace, but marriage revolves around service – both spouses continually serving one another in love.

- **Question:** Do you tend to be someone who doesn't mind confrontation or are you more likely to run for the hills whenever conflict arises? Do you tend to believe that conflict is an unnecessary or a bad thing that should be avoided at all costs?

If we were to compile a list of the various '*marriage killers*' today, we would typically mention things like adultery, financial stress, poor communication, lack of compatibility and the list might go on and on. But, if we were to deeply examine our lists of potential marriage killers, we would come to realize that almost all of the things that we attribute to our difficulties and failures in marriage are in reality not the real issue.

If we gave it enough time and careful consideration, we would more than likely come to realize that the things we often label as marriage killers are actually mere symptoms of a much larger issue.

If you were to read through the entirety of Scripture, you might find that the Bible doesn't have as many verses on marriage and parenting as you might assume. But you would quickly realize that from cover to cover the Bible is full of verses on our need to trust God and to realize that having him at the center of our soul is the key to a full and satisfying life.

The Bible has an awful lot to say about our pride and selfishness. And it is our own pride and selfishness that most often leads to our difficulties and failures in marriage.

- **Question:** What has your marriage/relationship taught you about yourself so far? In what ways has it revealed some of your own selfish tendencies or struggles with pride?

As we discussed in session three, it is our pride and selfishness that leads us to build our case in response to conflict and confrontation. Do you often find yourself trying to prove that you are right in particular circumstances and that your spouse is wrong? And has building and defending your case ever ended positively for you and your spouse? After presenting your defense for why you are right and why your spouse is wrong, has your spouse ever looked at you and responded by saying, "You're right honey. I'm so thankful that you have pointed out the various ways in which I was wrong. I was really hoping you were right about this, and by the grace of God it turns out that you were. You know what we should do? We should have sex and celebrate your wisdom and victory in this matter."

[Brian] A few days into our marriage, there seemed to be an expectation that I would share in the responsibility of washing the dishes in our home. Realizing this expectation, I decided to stubbornly tell Kim that I grew up washing dishes (working in my parents' restaurant), and now my days of washing dishes are over. How do you think that was received?

My bold declaration to never wash dishes again lasted a mere few hours. You see, our selfishness has a way of manifesting itself when we find ourselves being asked to do something that we find inconvenient or disagreeable with what we'd prefer for ourself.

In his book, *Twisted Thinking Trasformed*, Jerry Price writes:

“Stubborn thinkers live to find short cuts so that they can avoid being inconvenienced or responsible. It’s their way of being in control over anything that’s boring or disagreeable. In reality, it’s a form of laziness.”¹

[Brian] Prior to getting married, I failed to realize the extent of my selfishness because I was pretty much in control of making sure I never found myself in situations that I didn’t like or that I thought were inconvenient or disagreeable. But once I was married and found myself committed to another person other than myself, my selfishness was manifested each and every time that Kim asked me to do something that was inconvenient or something that I considered disagreeable with what I preferred to do. Being married to Kim quickly exposed my stubborn thinking and my selfish tendencies and immediately challenged me in what it means to truly serve someone else in love.

So why do we have so much difficulty serving the desires of our spouse over our own selfish desires? Why do so many people go into marriage expecting their spouse to serve them without realizing that marriage revolves around serving others?

If we have any hope of fulfilling God’s design and purpose for what our marriage was intended to be, then we must learn to let go of our pride and selfishness and instead live by and be led by the pattern of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit.

- **Question:** Do you believe that time eventually heals all wounds? When you say, “I would never do this or do that”, what are you really saying about yourself and the person you are addressing?

And so, as we walk through the rest of this session, we are going to compare and contrast the problem with selfishness and the power for service.

¹ Jerry Price, *Twisted Thinking Transformed*, 126

The Problem of Selfishness

There's a tension in all of us that prevents us from doing the things that we want to do. We have a natural tendency to serve ourselves before truly serving those around us. In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul diagnoses our desire to serve ourselves over serving others as being a result of our own self-conceit.² Our self-conceit is what leads us to gratify selfish desires and therefore reap the corruption that sin guarantees.

Self-conceit is our deep sense of lacking the honor or glory that we feel like we deserve. It is the insecurity buried deep within our souls that makes us feel like we need to prove that we have value and worth. It is the very thing that causes the various difficulties that we have in our relationships with others because it leads us to focus heavily on how others make us feel rather than on how we might make them feel.

This form of selfishness leads many of us into one of two very destructive dispositions. We will either take on an inferiority complex that manifests our selfishness through self-pity and envy. Or we will take on a superiority complex that manifests our selfishness through self-exaltation and pride. Both are forms of selfishness, and both are road blocks to serving someone else in love.

When we begin to operate from an inferiority complex, we will find ourselves trying to prove ourselves in our marriage through competition and comparison with our spouse. When we begin to feel like we are unable to measure up to what we are trying to be then we have a tendency to become dissatisfied and discouraged by who we are, and we may even find ourselves looking for our spouse to slip up in order to feel better about ourselves.

This kind of selfishness will lead us to focus on our gain or our spouse's loss but never purely on our willingness to lose something for our spouse's gain. And so, living with this kind of inferiority complex will never allow us to truly live our lives with a sacrificial love that looks for opportunities to serve and to joyfully do good to our spouse.

² see Galatians 5:26

On the other hand, when we begin to operate from a superiority complex, we will again find ourselves trying to prove ourselves in our marriage through competition and comparison with our spouse. When we begin to feel as if we are “winning” at being the better spouse then we will become condescending and critical of our spouse and find ourselves constantly comparing our own strengths to their weaknesses.

This kind of selfishness will lead us to focus on how our spouse’s weaknesses prove our superior strength, but never on our own weaknesses or how to strengthen our spouse. And so, this too will never allow us to truly live our lives with a sacrificial love that looks for opportunities to serve others and to joyfully do good to our spouse.

The problem with our pride and selfishness is that it causes us to be so self-consumed that it makes it nearly impossible to serve our spouse through love and self-sacrifice. We will either look up to our spouse for what they can give us or look down on our spouse for what they are failing to give but rarely will we find ourselves simply loving our spouse for who they are.

- **Question:** How might being overly competitive negatively affect your marriage? In what ways do you find yourself trying to prove your worth and value to yourself or others? In what ways does this hinder your service to others?

The Power for Service

Whenever we find ourselves facing any problems within our marriage, we must learn to look within ourselves before looking to our spouse. We must look beyond the external symptoms and underneath the behavioral surface in order to identify the measure of selfishness and unwillingness on our part to serve our spouse like we should.

We also must learn to let go of our pride and selfishness if we are to have any hope of truly serving our spouse in love. However, this will seem like (and prove to be) an impossible task until we have learned the basic Christian principle of what it means to serve others by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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

“The Christian principle that needs to be at work is Spirit-generated selflessness – not thinking less of yourself or more of yourself but thinking of yourself less. It means taking your mind off yourself and realizing that in Christ your needs are going to be met and are, in fact, being met so that you don’t look at your spouse as your savior.”³

So the big question obviously arises: How do we serve our spouse with this Spirit-generated selflessness?

- **Question:** Who is the Holy Spirit? In what ways does he equip and empower us? In what ways have you personally experienced his work in your marriage/relationship or at some memorable moment in your life?

As we mentioned in our previous study, the power to extend grace cannot be naturally manufactured but only supernaturally reflected. The same is true when it comes to serving our spouse in love. **The power we need to serve our spouse in love cannot be naturally produced but only supernaturally empowered.** And perhaps this provides us with the key to understanding why the apostle Paul introduces his most famous paragraph on marriage (Ephesians 5:22-33) with this introductory statement,

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”⁴

Scripture declares that we are to submit to one another in marriage out of our overwhelming wonder and awe at the goodness of our Lord and his love for us.

We will never find ourselves fulfilling our duty to serve our spouse in love until we come to realize that this was not simply a principle taught by Jesus, but rather a pattern of his own life and the posture of our Lord Himself.

³ Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, (Penguin Group: 2011), 66

⁴ Ephesians 5:21

As James Edwards puts it:

“The life to which the gospel calls believers is not an ethical system but ‘the way of the Lord’, of which Jesus is the pattern and incarnation.”⁵

In his narrative concerning the life of Christ, the apostle John provides us with what is perhaps one of the most powerful examples of Jesus’ life of service to those whom he loved.

John writes;

“Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.” Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” (John 13:1-9)

Jesus’ act of love in washing his disciples feet is all the more remarkable when we come to realize that culturally during this time washing people’s feet was considered to be a task reserved for non-Jewish slaves. In a society where people walked long distances on dusty roads in sandals, it was customary for the host of a dinner to arrange for the availability of water to be used for the washing of everyone’s feet. Traditionally, this was done upon the guest’s arrival and certainly not done during the meal (normal dining consisted of reclining at the table which meant everyone’s feet were somewhat exposed during the meal).

⁵ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 326

So try and picture yourself in the shoes (or the feet) of the disciples. You arrive at the house to have dinner with Jesus, and when you arrive there is no slave there to wash your feet before dinner. You begin to look at one another thinking, "I'm no slave. I'm not washing feet. I'm a disciple. I'm one of *The Twelve*. I roll with the Christ. Someone should wash my feet."

Since there's no slave present in the house, you just figure you'll eat with dirty feet. And then, as you're sitting at the table, Jesus gets up from his seat, goes over and grabs a towel and a bucket of water, takes his shirt off and then gets down on a knee to wash your feet.

What's going on in your head at that moment? How would you respond?

John points out that Jesus already knew that the Father had given him all authority and that he had come from God and was soon going to return to God, and yet he still rose from the table to wash his disciples' feet.

If you knew that you had been given all authority from God, what might you do with such power? In what kind of world would you find a king who humbles himself to the point of being a slave for the sake of his people?

You see, if Christ came as a King reigning and ruling on a throne then we would be forced to submit to his command to serve others out of obligation and because we have to. However, in coming as the King who first devoted his own life to serving others and who gave his life as a substitutionary sacrifice for his own people, now we can submit to his command to serve others out of a heart of true love and total trust.

What a tremendous burden it would be to serve our spouse for a king simply telling you to do so. However, what a tremendous encouragement it is to know that the King who calls us to serve our spouse is the One who first served us by suffering on the cross on our behalf.

- **Question:** What are some of the excuses that we come up with for not submitting and serving our spouse on a daily basis like our Lord calls us to? In what ways does the gospel of our Servant-King empower you to serve?

If there is an ounce of pride and selfishness infecting the condition of our hearts then we will constantly struggle with the thought of submitting ourselves to the service of our spouse.

Service to our spouse will normally play itself out in one of four particular ways:

1. We can serve our spouse selfishly (meaning we only serve on our terms).
2. We can serve our spouse superficially (desire to gain something for yourself).
3. We can serve our spouse reluctantly (with coldness or resentment).
4. We can serve our spouse joyfully (completely out of a desire to bless them).

Only when we are truly captivated by the work of Christ and the way in which he has served us will we find ourselves properly motivated to serve our spouse joyfully and out of our love and sincere desire to just want to bless them.

And the mysterious beauty of this truth is that when we find ourselves persistently practicing this Spirit-generated selflessness in service to our spouse, we will soon discover that what we thought would be painful sacrifice turns out to bring more personal satisfaction.

Timothy Keller writes:

“Seek to serve one another rather than to be happy, and you will find a new and deeper happiness. Many couples have discovered this wonderful, unlooked-for reality. Why would this be true? It is because marriage is ‘instituted by God’. It was established by the God for whom self-giving love is an essential attribute, and therefore it reflects his nature, particularly as it is revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ.”⁶

The power we need to serve our spouse in love cannot be naturally produced but only supernaturally empowered by the Holy Spirit – the one Jesus refers to as the Helper who has come to guide us in the truth of the gospel and this sacrificial way of service patterned by our Lord himself.

⁶ Keller, 59

After washing his disciples' feet, Jesus declared, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."⁷

A Christian marriage must revolve around this "new commandment" of serving one another in love.

Walking by the Spirit and recognizing ourselves as those who belong to Christ is the only way we will find ourselves able to walk the tight rope of keeping in step with the way of Christ without falling off to the left into an inferiority complex or falling off to the right into a superiority complex. Only the good news of who Christ is and what Christ has done for us possesses the power to recreate a natural person into a new creation.

The Christian spouse is a new kind of spouse. The Christian spouse is distinct from the average spouse and a different kind of spouse than what you would naturally find here on earth. The Christian spouse is someone who has the gospel dwelling in their heart richly⁸ and therefore recognizes that he or she is completely underserving of anything. But at the same time, they are someone who rejoices that God considers them worthy of everything.

Only this new identity given to us by the gospel of Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit can transform our perception from viewing our spouse as someone who should be serving us to viewing them as someone that we have the privilege of serving.

Our security in who God says we are and what he's done for us through Christ provides us with the supernatural strength and the powerful motivation that we need to truly live our lives with a sacrificial love that looks for opportunities to joyfully serve our spouse in love.

- **Question:** So how do we get to a place of truly serving our spouse joyfully without any other ulterior motives for doing so?

⁷ John 13:34-35

⁸ see Colossians 3:16