

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to worship the Lord Jesus Christ and unite these two people in holy matrimony.” If you’ve ever attended a wedding, you likely heard something like that song, and those words, to kick it off. I love weddings. In fact, one of my most favorite things about ministry is getting two people married. I love the anticipation, the preparation, the expectation, and the celebration. It is a moment of pure joy.

Marriage is close to God’s heart. It is an institution ordained by him, and the image of a bride and groom is found throughout Scripture to express God’s relationship with his people. This morning we finish our series called *To Be Continued*, and to end this series, we’re going to see how it all ends for the church. We are going to be looking at Ephesians 5 where Paul explains that marriage is a picture of Jesus’ relationship with the Church. We often go to this passage for instruction on how to be a godly husband and wife, but in the midst of that instruction is a clear picture of how our Heavenly Husband loves his Bride, the Church, and what his plans are for her in eternity.

To understand fully what Paul is saying, though, we first have to understand how marriage worked in the time and culture he wrote this. The engagements and weddings we are used to in western culture is somewhat different than how it was executed in biblical times. That entailed a three-step process. First was the betrothal. It was more like a promise of marriage, similar to our engagement, but it was binding. It was the agreement, usually between a young man’s father and a young woman’s father that their kids would get married. And while they still lived apart, it included a commitment of exclusivity and faithfulness on behalf of the bride and groom-to-be. The breaking of the agreement required a bill of divorce. That’s why you read that Joseph was quietly going to divorce Mary because it appeared she had been unfaithful. They were betrothed to one another, but the marriage had not yet been consummated.

Once the betrothal was initiated, the bride prepared herself while waiting for the groom to come and claim her. After an indefinitely period of time, he would approach her home with a group of friends (the wedding party) and take her up to his home, which would be their future home together. Finally, at their future home, the bride would be presented to the groom and the ceremony would take place, including a marriage supper or feast. That process is a beautiful picture of how Jesus is ultimately united with his Church. This passage tells us what Jesus has done, is doing, and will do for us.

[Ephesians 5:25-30] ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body.

What Jesus has done: Jesus loved us so much that he gave himself for us. The word for love that Paul uses *agape*. It is a love that goes beyond familial or erotic love. It’s a love that is concerned with only one thing: the highest good for the other. It is a love that willingly sacrifices because of the value one has for the other, and it’s a love that betrothed us to our Savior.

Jesus sacrificed himself to cleanse us from our sin and set us apart for himself, to declare that we are the one for him. In Beyonce-speak, he put a ring on it. In biblical times, a bride-price was often paid by the father of the groom for the daughter's hand in marriage. Our Heavenly Father paid the price by sending his Son, and Jesus' sacrifice was God's proposal to us. But instead of bending down on one knee, Jesus climbed up on a cross to declare his love for us and ask that we be his forever.

The most remarkable aspect of God's proposal is that it was extended to an enemy. I've seen some fiancées mad at each other as they entered into their wedding day, but generally, they're pretty in love and pretty excited to get married. Not so with Jesus and the Church, because, as Romans says, while we were still enemies, Christ died for us. If you think God could never love you because you just don't measure up, know you are in good company, and be at peace this morning and accept his love without reservation. His love made us both lovable and loving. It's only because of his love for us that our hearts are changed. Through his love for us, we are able to love him back.

Jesus' work on the cross is our betrothal. We currently live covenanted to him, spiritually bound, and eternally his. But just like a marriage in Jesus' day, there is still more to come. We are here in our birth home as we await him to come get us and take us to his home. So what happens while we wait? This passage also tells us what Jesus is now doing for his bride.

What Jesus is doing: Vv. 28-30 says a husband should nourish and cherish his wife. This is what Jesus is doing for us. A husband who loves with this kind of love pours himself out for his wife because he is eager to see her flourish. While we wait for Jesus return, he is pouring himself out to us to grow us up in himself.

Nourish means to feed. Nourishment changes the chemistry of the body and promotes health and growth. Jesus nourishes us and changes the chemistry of our character, shaping us into his likeness, and enabling us to live out the purpose for which he created us. Additionally, a nourished person is a satisfied person. You can imagine a betrothed bride growing impatient if her husband-to-be is taking his sweet time in coming to get her. The Church faces the same challenge. But Jesus does not leave us to fend for ourselves or allow uncertainty to grow as we await his return. He nourishes us now and, by doing so, makes us full, allowing us to be content and patient in this life.

A husband also cares for his wife by cherishing her. In every wedding ceremony I officiate, I tell the husband one of his central roles is to care for his wife's heart by reminding her of how much she means to him. To communicate that she is enough and that he chooses her not only this day, but each and every day after. There is no guessing game regarding how Jesus feels about us. The church is eternally and abundantly valuable to him. His past actions are evidence, and his Word is the reminder. Jesus says we are enough because he has made us enough. The cross is proof he loves us and has chosen us, and his Word is an ongoing testimony of that unalterable truth.

When we gather as a church, we are nourished by feeding on God's Word. We are filled up and equipped to fulfill the purpose for which he has built us. He also gives us his Word, his Spirit,

and each other as a reminder of how much he cherishes us. If you are struggling in your relationship with Jesus, or if you are growing impatient in this life, I encourage you to look at your involvement in his body. This is not a call to participate in a bunch of programs. It's a call to belong to a group of people. God has given us each other as sources of nourishment and cherishment to live a life pleasing to him now, and to patiently and faithfully await his return.

What Jesus will do: The highlight of most wedding ceremonies is when the bride is presented. The doors are thrown open and there stands the beautiful beaming bride, who then makes her way down to be united to her husband. Our tradition is for a father to walk his daughter down the aisle and, in Jesus' day, a friend would present the bride to the groom. But for the Bride of Christ, there is no one worthy enough to walk us down the aisle except for God himself. V27 says Jesus will present us to himself.

Like the groom in biblical times, Jesus will come gather us to himself. He will come to claim his bride. We call this moment the rapture, and you can read about it in John 14/1 Thessalonians 4. He will take us from our earthly home to our heavenly home to be united with him. Jesus will present us in splendor, free of spots and wrinkles, free from the stain of sin and the decay of death. And there will be a great ceremony. The apostle John speaks of that day.

[Revelation 19:6-8] ⁶ Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. ⁷ Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; ⁸ it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

There are two things every good wedding has: adoration and celebration. I tell every couple that asks me to marry them that their wedding is to be a worship service. They can have flowers, decorations, and a beautiful location...and hopefully some good food...but a wedding ceremony is ultimately about magnifying God. It is a gathering of God's people to worship him and celebrate a covenant ordained by him. The wedding between Jesus and his Bride is no different, except that the groom is the center of attention. We will worship him not only as the reigning King, but also as the Lamb. Remember that Jesus loved his wife by giving himself up for her. He was the sacrificial lamb that paid for our sins and made us worthy to be his bride. If you think we praise God now, wait until we are praising him because his work of reconciliation is complete.

This will also be a moment of celebration. Think of the best wedding reception you've ever been to, then multiply by infinity (though I don't know if we'll do the chicken dance in heaven). This will be a party full of joy, exultation, and God's glory. So then what are we to do while we wait for this event to take place? Baptism, and two applications.

Make yourself ready. I've never met a bride who was indifferent to how she looked when she came down the aisle and was presented to her groom. At the marriage of the Lamb to his Bride, we will be adorned with fine linen made from our righteous deeds. Now, we have no righteousness on our own. The only righteousness we have is what Jesus has given us. But you see "it was granted to her to clothe herself." By God's grace, we have been declared righteous

and empowered to live righteously. The life we live now is in response to God's grace. As Jesus nourishes and cherishes us by his grace, we are enabled to live a life pleasing to him and perform these righteous deeds as we await the coming of our Redeemer-Husband.

If you've been a believer for a while, you've likely heard talk about how Jesus will find you when he returns, and it's usually in the context of "Don't let him catch you doing something wrong!" As if he's looking to get us in trouble or will reject us if he finds us spotted and wrinkled. But that's the wrong attitude. A bride doesn't beautify herself to save herself from her husband's disappointment or rejection. A bride beautifies herself because she loves her husband and wants to please him. We make ourselves ready by clothing ourselves in the fine linen of righteous deeds. And we do this because we love our Savior and want to please him. We want to live faithfully to the New Covenant and honor the boundaries of our relationship with Jesus. Don't live your life afraid of being left at the altar by God. Live your life knowing you will be fully accepted when Christ returns, that he will take you to himself, and let that inspire and move you to live a life faithful to him now.

Rejoice. We rejoice when we focus on the presence and promises of God. If we really took the time to regularly ponder who God is and what he has done for us, and what he will do for us, we couldn't help but live joyful lives. Over the next six weeks, I want you to have an opportunity to do that. Believe it or not, the holidays are upon us. Next week's sermon will be pumpkin spiced! We are going to spend the next two Sundays considering the spiritual practice, the spiritual discipline, of thanksgiving. How we live a life of gratitude and what happens when we do. Then we'll have our Christmas series seeing how the characters of the Christmas story live while expecting the arrival of the Messiah. They were preparing for his first advent. We prepare for his second. These two series will be opportunity to prepare our hearts individually, and as the church, as we joyfully and hopefully await the coming of our Lord, Savior, and Heavenly Husband.

When he comes, I think I have an idea of how we are going to respond. There is an image that has been branded into my heart and mind for the last few years. One of the highlights of my pastoral career was when I officiated a wedding of a couple I had grown to love. They had been through a lot in the year or so leading up to their wedding, and they couldn't wait for their big day. The ceremony went fine. It was quite beautiful and moving, but then we got to the end, got the pronouncement. And I'll never forget what the bride did when I said, "I now pronounce you husband and wife." In that moment, she jumped up and down, pumped her, and exclaimed "Yes!" And what I saw on her face was pure joy that she was finally one with her husband. I believe that's how we'll all respond when we are united with Jesus.

There are so many things I could still say about the church. And I will...I've got some time. But at the end of this series, I remind you of how I said we would close. We'd answer "why" Jesus is building his church. The story told in the Bible is of a God who wants to be with his people. God walked with Adam and Eve, Enoch, Noah. He created a people for his own through a man named Abraham and dwelled among them in his temple. Jesus came to earth, the Word became flesh and dwelt among man. God built his Church and through his Spirit created a dwelling place for himself. And, at the end of all things, God will continue that work. The book that begins with a wedding ends with a wedding.

[Revelation 21:1-3] Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

The heart of God is to be with his people. The heart of the Gospel is God himself. It is a free gift of himself. You can't earn it, and it will never be taken away. That means it's yours forever. That means HE is yours forever, and YOU are forever his.

Baptism is the public “yes” to Jesus’ proposal to us to be his bride. It’s a ceremony that declares we are set apart for him. It is a picture that we are eternally united to him through his death and resurrection. And going in and out of the water reminds us that we have been washed clean by Jesus so that he can present us to himself in splendor!