

Marriage in the Mirror

January 3, 2016

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January 2016 at Bethel Church is Family Month. Why do a series on the family? Three reasons:

Family relationships are biblically defined

What does it mean to be a husband, wife, son, daughter, even grandparent? These roles are the foundation of society. God's Word gives the blueprint for what and how these roles should function. The church is called to embody these as not only good practices but also true and grounded in the unchanging character of God.

Family relationships are sinfully distorted

Ask our pastors, *what is the most common subject of pastoral counseling?* Easy. Marital troubles. Family relationships. Ask law enforcement, what is their scariest police call? Domestic disturbance. When mankind fell into sin, it is most painfully felt in family relationships.

Family relationships are spiritually restored

Since the causes of the breakdown of the family are spiritual, the solutions are primarily spiritual. For some, this is Jesus taking hold of the family through salvation. Jesus becomes Lord over a home and the effect is a revolution. Now the home has a center and the marriage has a purpose. Maybe God will bring families to salvation in this series. However, most people in our church are Christians, so why is there still dysfunction?

My family drove back from Kansas City this week. We were there seeing my wife Jennifer's family. You may have seen on the news that Missouri is dealing with historic flooding. We saw it as we went over the Mississippi. The Mississippi defines what Missouri is supposed to look like. It is its eastern border. When it is within its banks, the Mississippi is a great blessing. When the river goes where isn't supposed to, the destruction is incredible. Marriage is like the Mississippi; within the banks of God's purposes and plan, it is a blessing. When a marriage flows outside those banks, there is great destruction.

Christian marriages have to constantly be refreshed and reminded of God's lines and God's purposes. We must look at God's map and be reminded, *Oh, that's where the river is supposed to be.* In this message, we are looking at God's map, God's blueprint for marriage. Next week will be, *"When My Family isn't Perfect."*

Now a quick word to those who are not married. Why listen to a message about a category of life that doesn't apply currently? I was single till I was 44. Not only did I have to listen to marriage messages, I had to preach them. I am sympathetic to the challenge; I think singles need a good theology of marriage just like married people need a good theology of singleness. The Bible honors both categories and we should as well. One way to do that is to care deeply about what the Bible says about both.

It is wonderful and convicting now to speak on marriage as a married man. I hold up the biblical standard today with plenty of personal examples of missing the mark. I need next week's sermon as much as this week. Praise God for grace.

The Purpose of Marriage

At some point in all marriages, one or the other spouses will ask, *really? What's the point?* Biblically, there are no pointless marriages; there are only marriages that are missing the point. God made marriage for several points, several reasons.

Companionship

"Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.'" (Genesis 2:18 ESV)

A helper fit for him. A suitable helper. One designed to fit Adam. God made Eve as the perfect complement to Adam. We tend to think of this physically. Yes, she suited him well there, but it is deeper than that. Eve fit Adam emotionally and relationally. Adam fit Eve too. This is hard for us to see because both masculinity and femininity have been distorted by sin. But think of the godliest couple and the most wonderful marriage you've ever seen. The way they relate to each other and care for each other. Some of them even start looking the same because there's such a unity between them.

Marriage by God's design was even better than the best marriage we know. Eve was the "helper fit for him." "Helper" is not demeaning in any way biblically because roles don't have anything to do with value. If they did, you wouldn't have a trinity—a tri-unity of equals serving different roles.

As a bachelor into my 40s, I'm here to tell all you husbands who think you'd be happier single, that you probably take for granted how nice it is to have someone else to do life with. We've all seen widowers who are eager to remarry. They miss someone but they miss something about her in his life. She's there. Doing life with you. A life companion. Someone to giggle with, cry with, cuddle with, go to the grocery store with, support in the ups and downs.

Ecclesiastes 4:9 highlights this: *"two are better than one"* and then it lists life situations where alone is hard. It is one of my favorite things about marriage.

Reproduction

"And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.'" (Genesis 1:28)

We are sometimes embarrassed by this reality. This isn't something you hear from an engaged couple much: why do you want to get married? *To have children. To fill the earth.* They will talk about doing life, and in private, sexual fulfillment. But God doesn't command them to have sex here, he commands filling the earth. One is the means to the other. Marriage wasn't made for sex, sex was made for marriage and reproduction and pleasure. Our culture has enshrined sex itself and has disconnected sex from reproduction. Why? Sex without children allows for self-gratification. Children do not. There is much more to this but I don't have time to go into it in this message.

I simply want to show that as God allows and provides, having children and reproduction are part of God's purpose for marriage. Children and family are not the unfortunate result of a pleasurable experience; they are the intended and blessed result. The world exalts sex and diminishes children. The Bible honors and elevates both.

Parable - heaven on Earth

Before you couples roll your eyes and accuse me of still being on my honeymoon, hear what I mean by this. Think of how hard it was for Jesus to answer some of the questions he got. What is the kingdom of God like? What is eternity like? What is love? etc. As the Son of God, Jesus could have explained these divine realities in a way that was so far above their heads or ability to understand. These are truths only God can fully understand.

Yet, what did Jesus do? He told parables. Parables are often defined as earthly stories with heavenly meaning. He would say, *the kingdom of God is like*, and then tell a story about a mustard seed or a man building a house on sand. Everyone listening was like, *I can understand that*. It was earthly and accessible explaining the eternal and ineffable. Marriage is a parable. Marriage is an earthly reality with a heavenly meaning.

How Christ Loves, Serves, and Dies for the Church

*"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. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.'** This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."* (Ephesians 5:25–32, emphasis mine)

This is arguably the most important section on marriage in the New Testament. I'm not reading or explaining all of it, simply pointing out the parabolic nature of marriage. This is like what that is. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed and Christ's love and self-sacrifice is like a husband who gives himself totally to his wife.

Paul gets through this whole section which you would think is about marriage but then in verse 32 he says, *I'm actually talking about Jesus and the church*. So we take from this that a Christian marriage has as its goal to mirror in the marriage relationship the essence of the gospel—Jesus and the church. Because that is marriage's purpose, the quality of a Christian marriage will reveal the quality of each spouse's commitment and personal understanding of God's grace to them.

I wish I could post this on the top of ChristianMingle.com's website. *Hey all you Christian singles looking for love, what makes for a great spouse?* Now that I'm married and have a few years behind me, I see how marriage reveals whether I really get the gospel or not. Why? After the honeymoon, you go home with a sinner. He or she is a sinner on the honeymoon too. She just doesn't seem like one. She was more like an angel.

But then after the honeymoon, two sinners go home with each other. Now what? Romantic momentum will only get you so far, like a week or so. Now the two sinners are forced to deal with certain realities about the other. The real test begins. Since sinners chronically are

selfish, prideful, obnoxious, disrespectful, and generally difficult to live with, how will these two sinners fulfill their vows?

God's plan after the Fall is for a Christian marriage to reflect toward each other the gospel grace God has given to us. Or to say it another way, the need for Ephesians 4 kicks in: "*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*" (Ephesians 4:32) That sounds like a great marriage, doesn't it? There is a huge assumption in this verse that we understand and are broken over what God has forgiven us! If you marry a sinner who doesn't get God's gracious forgiveness, life will be very hard. Or if you forget what God has forgiven you, life will be hard as unresolved conflict and gracelessness suffocates your marriage.

I married a wonderful woman, not a perfect one. She married a very imperfect man. In our marriage, it is shocking to me how often I have to hope that Jennifer remembers what God forgave her. It's like my whole happiness is largely dependent on her forgiving me for my failures.

I feel sometimes like that boy in *Apollo 13* waiting to see the parachute of his dad's capsule. I've done something less than loving or I have failed to serve her. "*I blew it. I'm sorry. Please forgive me.*" And then there are those tortured moments waiting for her to say, "Yes, I forgive you." Poof! There's the parachute. Wow.

Try and do marriage to a sinner without this and your marriage will quickly freeze over. This point alone makes me wonder why anyone would intentionally marry a non-believer, someone who doesn't get the gospel.

The point I am making is Paul's point. Marriage is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. As a couple purposes to treat each other as best they are able with the kindness and grace that God has given to them personally, it reflects the true nature of the gospel. It tells the story and the blessing comes to the marriage just like God is blessed by its reflection. This leads to the roles in marriage.

How is the Gospel Displayed?

Husbands love, lead, and serve their wives...like Jesus

- "*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*" (Ephesians 5:25)
- "*For the husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the Church.*" (Ephesians 5:23)
- "*Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.*" (1 Peter 3:7)

Each of these verses could be a whole sermon. "*Love your wives.*" As we think about the character of Jesus' relationship toward us, love surely comes first. *Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.* How did Jesus love us? First. Most. Sacrificially.

- "*We love him because he **first** loved us.*" (1 John 4:19, emphasis added)

- **"Greater love** has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13, emphasis added)
- "By this we know love, that **he laid down his life** for us." (1 John 3:16, emphasis added)

The pattern husbands are called to follow comes from the pattern of Jesus' headship and leadership of the church. He loved first. Husbands, our love should be initiating. Our words, our actions, our attitudes should communicate to our wives that we are active in our love. Not passive. Not get around to it. Not only if she nags. *First* love.

Most. Is there any question that Jesus loves the church more than the church loves Jesus? This is a hard calling as most of our wives outdo us in love, yet the pattern is clear.

Sacrificial, like Jesus who laid down his life. Part of our sacrificial love is providing for our wives. Husbands, provide for her needs. If you aren't in a position to do this, don't get married. This means providing for her materially with food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. You may not get that new Ping driver, for example, so that she can have something she needs or wants. Our wives should feel taken care of. Get a will, insurance, change the oil on the car. Cherish her in ways that meet her needs and some of her wants.

If you were to ask me, what is the biggest lesson you've learned in your three years as a husband, I would say, the ongoing need to die to my selfishness. Love is the death of self so to love our wives means the basic inclination to do what is best for them. This requires me putting my own personal needs and preferences aside to pursue her happiness.

Here's what I find. I can't outdo Jennifer in this. The more I give to her, the more her heart responds. Wives are really good at out-loving us when they see us sacrificing for them. This is marital leadership. There is much more to it but for our time today, a Christian marriage begins with a husband loving, leading, and serving his wife.

Wives love, serve, and submit to their husbands...like the church

"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands." (Ephesians 5:22-24)

This is another whole message and we've done them here in the past. Wives take their pattern from how the church should respond to Jesus' servant leadership. Should the church resent Jesus' leadership? Should the church usurp Jesus' leadership? Should the church talk bad about Jesus when she's getting her hair done? Nag Jesus? Fantasize about having a different Savior? Enjoy entertainment that celebrates unfaithfulness to Jesus? All that sounds so completely wrong when we are talking about how the church should relate to Jesus. Yet a wife who insists on taking the lead or demeans her husband to others is saying by her actions what isn't true. That is not the gospel.

Wives, what if our church treated Jesus the way you treat your husband? Wives are called to honor their husbands, submit willingly to their leadership, and be a helpmate, friend, and lover. That will look a little different in every marriage, but the principles are consistent. Wives, how are you doing? Why does this matter?

Together a husband and wife purpose to show the gospel

Covenant – the permanence of God’s love

Grace – the freedom of God’s forgiveness

Love – the joy of God’s selflessness

Would anyone be drawn to believe in Jesus by personally observing your marriage? Before you lose heart because of the state of your marriage, failure might be your best opportunity. The gospel is not that we are perfect people and Jesus loved us. The gospel is that we are failures—sinners—yet God has shown grace to us. Forgiven us. Your willingness to show grace to your perception of failure in your spouse may be the greatest gospel moment your marriage will ever know.

Jennifer and I call it hitting the reset button. We get cranky at each other or maybe something was said that shouldn’t have been said and we will sometimes say, *can we hit the reset button?* How can we do that? *“Be kind to one another, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us.”* (Ephesians 4:32) The gospel restores us to God AND the gospel applied to marriage provides a means for reconciliation, forgiveness, and a restart.

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