

# The Justified Marriage

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A message on marriage. It would be easier to cover quantum physics in a message than the universe that is marriage. So, please see this message as one of many we have done and will do as we continue to hold up marriage. Hebrews 13:4 (ESV) tells us, "*Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled.*" Bethel Church believes in marriage, and by the way, also believes in singleness. Both are legitimate contexts to glorify God and both have inherent worth. I was single until I was 44. I highly value my single years and I highly value my marriage years. That seems to me to be how we should all look at it.

While singleness has challenges, our culture is increasingly hostile to biblical marriage. One indication is the constitutional amendments our lawyers are urging us to make with the swirling controversies about gender, sexuality, and who can use what bathrooms. Churches 50 years ago would be shocked at such things. But not anymore.

There is huge confusion in our culture, with our children, and even in the church. What is marriage? What is a man? What is a woman? What is the role of a husband? What is the role of a wife? All this is being deconstructed in our culture, which means the church must teach regularly on it for biblical marriage to survive.

As you likely know, we have been teaching through Romans for a year. We have carefully considered Paul's in-depth explanation of how God saves sinners. Besides union with Christ, two key concepts have been prominent—justification and sanctification. Today, I'm putting before you these as essentials to a successful Christian marriage.

You say, *wait, I thought these were how God saved me.* Yes. And I'm saying the application of these will save your marriage too.

## Marriage Reenacts the Jesus/Church Relationship

Before we get to Romans, it is critical that husbands and wives realize the purpose of marriage. Ask an engaged couple, why are you getting married? They will give many answers. He's amazing. She completes me. Sex. Companionship. It's expected. Children.

Ephesians 5 makes this clear. "*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 5:31–32)

After explaining that the husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church and a wife is to submit to her husband as the church submits to Christ, Paul surprises by saying everything he's just said about marriage is about Christ and the church. What this means is that marriage is built on the basic relationship design of Jesus' relationship to his people, the church. Not the opposite. Don't think, the gospel is like marriage. The gospel illustrates marriage. No. One thing is the reality, the other is the reflection.

I saw an online post that said, "Marriage is like a walk in the park—Jurassic park." It struck me as funny. But there's a scene in the original *Jurassic Park* where the velociraptor is about to eat the girl in the kitchen. He opens his mouth and dives for the girl only to bash

into the stainless steel kitchen cabinet. He was seeing the reflection which he thought was the reality. My point? When it comes to marriage, don't be a velociraptor. Marriage is temporary. Jesus said as much that there are no married couples in heaven (Luke 20:34-36). Human marriage is a temporary picture of the enduring reality, which is Jesus' eternal relationship to his church and the church to Jesus our Savior.

Marriage is designed by God in such a way that when it is done right, it is very similar to the saving relationship between Jesus and the church. If so, how does Jesus save the church? This is what Romans explains better than anywhere else. It begins with justification.

### **What is Justification?**

*"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith." (Romans 3:21-25)*

There are many messages on this on our website. Justification is God's eternal judgment over a sinner declaring them completely and wholly righteous with the promise to treat us forever fully righteous. Within this are basic constructs in Romans 3:10, "*None is righteous, no, not one.*" All human beings are sinners. We are declared righteous by faith in Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross and are forgiven all our sins apart from obeying the law of God. This is an act of God's love for us and toward us.

Justification is ours without any personally contributing righteousness on our part. All we contribute is our sin. Everything is God's saving initiative which the Bible calls grace. Grace is God giving us not only what we don't deserve but the complete opposite of what we do deserve.

So, justification is undeserved righteousness, undeserved love, undeserved grace, and the undeserved and unearned promise of grace toward our sins forever. We might say it this way: God promises to love us for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, and death won't part us from his love because we live forever in his love.

There is the reality. Not the reflection. The reality. A marriage will succeed to the extent that both spouses intentionally seek to reflect that reality.

### **How should a marriage reflect justification?**

Let's start with a biblical understanding of who you are married to. To see if there is confusion here, wives, how many of you think you are married to the husbandly equivalent of Jesus? You aren't married to the perfect moral man? Are you saying your husband isn't your Messiah? Husbands, who are you married to? Cinderella or Cruella de Vil? Don't answer that. I'm only trying to get us to think "gospely" about our spouse.

### **Justification means "I'm a sinner married to a sinner"**

Any engaged couples reading this? Congratulations. All married couples were at one time where you are. We get it. It's awesome and fun and intoxicating. Enjoy. But hear me when I say, the wonderful person you are engaged to falls under Romans 3:23's assessment. He or she is unrighteous. A sinner. Fundamentally selfish. Proudful. Yeah, him. Her. The gospel is

not that God sent Jesus for basically good people who sometimes make sinful decisions, but utterly sinful people.

Too many Christian marriages celebrate the gospel in church and then wonder at the sinfulness of their spouse. We are Christians at church and atheists at home. Justification requires us to understand that our spouse is a sinner. The illusion of near perfection won't last long in marriage. Sometimes not even through the honeymoon. Very quickly the sheen of dating perfection goes away, and inevitable conflict arises. We're going to talk next week about resolving conflict in family relationships and I hope you'll come.

But here's the point: of all people, Christians should approach marriage with stark biblical realism. Can you look at your marriage through the Bible lens? Look at your spouse through the Bible. Wow. I'm married to an actual sinner. I have found it so very helpful as a married man to think, *I'm a sinner married to a sinner*. I'm a sinner married to a sinner. It explains my failures as a husband and my wife's failures as well. What else should I expect?

### ***Justification means I'm forgiven for far worse than anything my spouse can do***

Justification is the basis for God's forgiveness of our sins. Jesus' righteous death on our behalf allows God to forgive our sins while maintaining perfect justice. To be a Christian is to be a recipient of overwhelming forgiveness.

A justified marriage is really good at forgiveness.

- *"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."* (Ephesians 4:32)
- *"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."* (Romans 15:7, NIV)

This past summer, Jennifer and I were on a tour with Dr. Erwin Lutzer from Moody Church, (who by the way will be preaching here at Bethel the first Sunday in June). We were on a tour bus and Dr. Lutzer and his wife were taking questions. They have been married like around a thousand years. Someone asked, "What is the key to a good marriage?" Dr. Lutzer's wife, Rebecca, answered over the bus sound system, "You have to be really good at forgiving each other." Be really good at forgiveness? It's more important than financial stability. More important than sexual prowess. A more important character quality than perhaps anything else, is being good at forgiving.

I rarely hear that from single people who are looking for a spouse. What are you looking for in a spouse? The normal list comes out: attractive, funny, drives a truck, etc. I have never heard anyone say, *I'm looking for somebody really good at forgiving*. Yet, think of what that Christian quality implies.

This is somebody who loves the gospel enough to live it out enough to absorb the daily slights and offenses and the big deal wrongs and cover them with gospel grace. What a wonderful spouse to be married to! What a wonderful spouse to be! Where does this Christian virtue come from? Ephesians 4:32, forgive others as God has forgiven you. Jesus tells the parable in Matthew 18 of the man who was forgiven the billion-dollar debt by the king and then walks out and chokes a man who owes him \$10. The point? The big forgive was God's forgiveness of my sin. My pile of sin against God is far greater than anything my spouse can do against me.

Husband, are you good at forgiving? Are you able to move on from conflict? Wife, would your husband say one of your top five qualities is that you are quick to forgive? If not, let's ask, why not? Are we building our marriage on the paradigm of Christ's love and grace to us? Really, if you aren't good at forgiving it means you are actually good at damaging marital qualities: *resentment, holding a grudge, keeping score*, and a host of other vices that end up making both of you very unhappy. Have you forgotten how God justified you?

Think of this future moment with me. A Christian married couple. Not a good marriage. He failed to lead and love. She failed to respect. Whatever. Think of the coming moment in heaven when the Christian husband and wife see the glory of God. While no longer married as there is no marriage in eternity, they personally see and possibly touch Jesus and the scars in his hands. They see and feel the power of God's love. Perhaps they glimpse hell while experiencing heaven. I hope there is not a moment coming for you and your spouse when you will turn to one another and say, "I had no idea how much God forgave me. During our whole marriage, I was so, so wrong. I'm overwhelmed with regret." Think of that couple reflecting on the marriage they could have had if only they would have appropriated into the way they treat each other the way God had treated them.

Do you want to be that couple? Waste your marital life only to discover in glory what could have been? God's will for every marriage is the sweet communion like Jesus and the church. When a husband and wife turn their focus from their spouse's sin to the amazing grace of God toward their own sin, now the spouse's sin doesn't seem so big. Certainly not too big to cover with love. To forgive. Any true Christian spouse should be really good at forgiving and moving on. "*Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead*" (Philippians 3:13 ESV).

Marriage is nakedness in many ways. There's no hiding marital ache and this is why that reality is a blessing. It forces our noses in our problems and we share the bed every night with the source of the conflict. There's no escape and that's a good thing. Will my marriage be justified or not? If so, it's because we live daily with the awareness that God has forgiven me way more than I'll ever have to forgive my spouse.

### **What is Sanctification?**

Sanctification is the biblical word for change. Justification changes our position before God. Sanctification is God's work in us to change our lives. Our behavior. Toward what goal? Conforming us to the likeness of Jesus. His attitude and action paradigms for our attitudes. As the old book suggests, the regular practice of asking and following, what would Jesus do? Sanctification.

### **How should a marriage reflect sanctification?**

Are you discouraged about your marriage today? Why should you remain hopeful? Sanctification. Hopeless marriages say, *He'll never change. She'll always be like her mother!* Really? Are you an atheist? It seems to me the temptation is to be Christian toward my sins and atheist toward my spouse's. Grace for me, law for her. But wait, is there a God? Is the tomb empty? If it's not, I'll assure you your terrible marriage is nothing compared to what's coming.

But if Jesus is the risen Savior and my spouse is a Christian, then change is on the menu. Right now, you are thinking, *yeah, she better change*. I submit to you that the encouragement that sanctification brings is not primarily that my spouse can change but

that I can change. As marital conflict hardens, the desire to personally change does as well. But if I'm a Christian, I will change.

Kiralee had her first ballet class this week. I think she might have been the only new girl. Some girls around her age. Lots of older girls. Kiralee was in awe of the 2<sup>nd</sup> graders. So tall. So agile. So pink. She wants to be like them.

Who do you aspire to be like? We all have an idea of what we think our spouse should be like. Ways he or she should change. We're all for that and secretly many are praying that their spouse is reading carefully right now.

But if your happiness in your marriage is dependent on your spouse changing, you are going to be perpetually disappointed. There's only one spouse you have any direct influence on changing and it's you.

Sanctification is God's will. Sanctification is the goal of the Holy Spirit that dwells within us. This means that my spouse may never change, but I can change. My attitude can change. The way I treat my spouse can change. A justified Christian is a changing and improving spouse.

I don't care how stuck you feel in some conflict in your marriage. If the tomb is empty there is hope for your marriage. But it has to begin with you.

Husbands, can you honestly say before God today, *I want to change*? Wives, can you honestly say before God today, *I want to change*? If not, you need to repent. You're not desiring God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. You can scoff but you're about to go home to that same marriage. Who suffers in this?

*"When the shadow of the cross hangs over our marriage, we live and relate differently. We are no longer afraid to look at ourselves. We are no longer surprised by our sin. We no longer have to work to present ourselves as righteous. We say good-bye to finger pointing and self-excusing. We abandon our record of wrongs. We settle issues quickly. And we do all these things because we know that everything we need to confess has already been forgiven, and what is needed for every new step we will take has already been supplied. We can live in the liberating light of humility and honesty, a needy and tender sinner living with a needy and tender sinner, no longer defensive and no longer afraid, together growing nearer to one another as we grow to be more like him. Now, who wouldn't want a marriage like that?" -Paul David Tripp<sup>1</sup>*

That is a justified marriage. Is your marriage justified? If not, let's let today be the starting point of a new chapter. We have a unique opportunity to do so.

Today, we are coming to the Lord's table. This is open to all followers of Jesus. However, in light of our teaching today, the Lord's table is also called communion. Communion with Christ and union with one another. How many couples have taken the Lord's table blasphemously? You are not in unity with one another and yet you take the cup and the bread and it's a charade. I'm challenging each married couple to NOT take the Lord's table unless you can honestly say to each other, we are in unity. If not, could you say, forgive me for \_\_\_\_\_. For what? Both of you know. Perhaps now is not the time for specifics, but can you ask and extend forgiveness for not being good at forgiving? For an unwillingness to change?

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<sup>1</sup> Paul David Tripp: "What Did You Expect? Redeeming the Realities of Marriage", (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010) page 83.

Before we pass out the elements, we're giving some time for whispers between the two of you. If you're not in harmony, do not take the Lord's Supper. No judgment here. Just wanting God's best for your marriage.

Perhaps the bread and cup will bring to bear the gospel in a fresh way so that old hurts and habits of relating to each other could be confessed and forgiven. That is the justified marriage.

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