

The Biblical View of Marriage
Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN
July 23-24, 2011

No. 1: Towards a Loving Marriage
Scripture: Ephesians 5:22-32

The wedding dance is a highpoint of a couple's wedding day. It represents their hopes for the future.

They are wrapped in each arms moving together in perfect harmony.

The Psalmist tells God, "You turn my wailing into dancing." We long for our marriage to be like that, dancing instead of wailing.

But sadly it doesn't always work out that way.

Far too often the couple are soon out of step and then one of them trips and the elegance is turned into embarrassment. The harmony has become discord.

Now the marriage is more like Jeremiah's observation that, "Our dancing has turned to mourning."

God wants the dance to go on for the rest of our life getting better and better and more and more passionate, until the couple can close their eyes knowing instinctly the steps of their partner.

That is why as part of our Summer of Love we are starting a new series entitled **Towards A Loving Marriage.**

Today I want to introduce the series by answering three questions that you will find in your message outline.

The first is, **WHY A SERIES ON MARRIAGE?**

Normally I like to tackle subjects that address everybody in the congregation. Yet less than half of us here are married and so many could feel excluded.

I confess this concerned me and my colleagues and I thought and prayed for a long time before launching this eight week series.

We felt it was right to go ahead for a number of reasons.

First, because **everybody is impacted by marriage.**

Eighty-five percent of Americans will be married at some point in their life. Many of you who are single will be married in the future so this series is good preparation. Studies show that couples who have premarital counseling do better than those who don't.

So think of this as a premarital preparation class.

15 percent of people never do marry yet they too are impacted by marriage. For example one of the most important things couples can do is to invite single people

into their home, but a couple won't do that unless their marriage is strong. Hurting couples are not hospitable.

So on a very practical level single people are also impacted by the marriages around them.

None of us can shrug off what happens to families in our country. Just as all of us are affected by the pollution of the environment, so all of us are affected by the disintegration of the family.

The family is the major transmitter of social values and without those values we all suffer.

God created three institutions for the health of society.

They are government, the church and the family.

Without government we have anarchy.

Without the church we have apostasy.

Without the family we have tragedy.

A second reason we are doing this series on marriage is because **marriages are in trouble.**

Now in one sense this is nothing new.

It started back in the Garden of Eden.

Yet half of the marriages performed this month will end in divorce and in the long run only 10 percent will be truly happy.

Those are not just cold statistics.

They represent personal tragedies.

If you have been divorced you know better than anybody the appalling pain of the death of your marriage.

That pain spreads to children and grandparents and siblings who tend to be drawn into any relationship battle.

At Autumn Ridge we believe that Jesus Christ can help the home.

We believe that the Holy Spirit is the glue who holds marriages together. We

believe that the church is the best environment to nurture marriage.

There is one thing I want you to remember long after this series is over. It is to understand that sooner or later every marriage will experience difficulties.

When that happens, please get help.

As pastors and elders we are aware of several marriages in crisis. But the tragedy is we don't know about them soon enough. In the past few months I have heard one man say, "My marriage has been awful for 20 years."

I have heard another say, "My marriage has been dysfunctional for 10 years." And I respond, "Why have you waited this long to tell anyone?"

The good news is that help is available.

God wants to help you. The pastors want to help you.
 The elders want to help you.
 Our marriage mentoring team want to help you.
 The Christian counselors in this community want to help you.

I am not suggesting that at the first sign of trouble you come running. Many problems resolve themselves in a week or two. But I am suggesting that if after a month things aren't right, you should get help.
 You owe it to yourself, you owe it to your children and you owe it to God whose reputation is at stake.

A third reason why we are doing a series on marriage is because **some think it is time to abolish marriage.**

There are those who believe that marriage is an outdated, irrelevant, unnecessary, enslaving, and miserable institution and the quicker it is abandoned the better.

Elizabeth Taylor was married 8 times but she said, "I don't see why anybody in this day and age needs to get married. Marriage can be a very selfish institution. I was so old-fashioned that I always thought that I had to get married but that is passé now."



When Brad Pitt split up with Jennifer Aniston he gave his philosophy of life long fidelity saying, "Marriage doesn't have to be for all time."



The Russian author Tolstoy said, "Marriage is hell."

Marlene Dixon wrote "The institution of marriage is the chief vehicle for the perpetration of the oppression of women. It is through the role of wife that the subjugation of women is maintained."



TV shows and movies almost never depict a happy marriage. The happy couples are living together outside of marriage.
 If they do show marriage it is usually miserable.

As a result of this incessant attack, marriage rates are dropping in America. In Minnesota seven percent of couples are not married. Marriage is no longer considered a prerequisite for parenthood. Over the past fifty years the share of children born to unmarried mothers has risen eight fold from five percent in 1960 to 41 percent in 2008.

In addition six states and the District of Columbia have legalized same sex marriage. 150,000 same sex marriages have now taken place in America further watering down and distorting the biblical view of marriage.

One gay activist was honest enough to admit their goal was not homosexual marriage but the destruction of heterosexual marriage.

There is a cynicism about marriage today.

You hear it in the jokes at wedding receptions like the veteran of marriage who remarked, "I like to run my wedding movies backwards so I can watch myself walk out of the church a free man."

This leads us to our second question,

IS MARRIAGE WORTH SAVING?

The answer is, it depends.

It depends on what we mean by marriage.

If by marriage we mean the self-centered individualistic, it's all about me relationship that seems to define many marriages today, the answer is no.

That is not worth saving.

Here is an example of a sappy view of marriage from *The Princess Bride*.

Thinking that marriage is a dream within a dream is not going to help you if it turns into a nightmare.

That meaning of marriage is not worth saving.

But if by marriage we mean a relationship that is ordained by God and is intended to be life giving and life long and that is a source of happiness and joy and growing intimacy and contentment.

And that recognizes that there are stages in a marriage where things may be a bit rocky for a year or two but with God's help we can be faithful to each other recognizing that when we do so God is glorified, we are edified and our children grow up in a secure, nurturing environment.

Then that is worth saving.

That is why despite widespread cynicism 93% of Americans rate "Having a happy marriage" as one of their most important objectives.

Yet they fear it may be impossible.

But with God all things are possible.

This series is different from anything I have ever done at Autumn Ridge. Back in February I asked a focus group of six couples to tell me what they wished they had known before they got married, what they have found are the major challenges in marriage, and what the church can do to help.

I am enormously grateful to them for their insights. Three of these couples then took this information and planned this series.



They suggested titles, scripture and all sorts of excellent resources. They gave it a breadth that I could not have achieved on my own so I want to acknowledge their work. If you see them, please thank them.



These couples stressed an important truth. They said it is helpful to hear hints on how to improve our marriage. Ideas like having a date night and knowing how to have a fair fight are good but they are not enough. We need to see the big picture.



We need to grasp the glory and magnificence of is. Our concept of marriage is often too small. When couples are in trouble they often can't see the point of continuing their relationship because they really don't know the purpose of their marriage in the first place.

So that is what we will do in the time left today. We will look at the biblical view of marriage. We will ask **WHAT DOES GOD SAY ABOUT MARRIAGE?**

One of the important New Testament passages that deal with marriage is Ephesians, chapter 5 that we read earlier and here God tells us five magnificent truths about marriage.

First God says **marriage is my idea.**

This whole passage is rooted in the creation story which tells us that marriage is made in heaven.

We know that because the Lord God said, "It is not good for man to be alone." God is the originator of marriage.

He announces man's needs because he knows of man's deepest longing. He provided Adam with a wife who perfectly fits his need.

God is the sovereign cause of the first marriage.

The first marriage did not originate with the passion of a man and woman but with the passion and purpose of God.

Marriage is God's doing because he personally had the honor of being the first father to give away the first bride. God spoke the design of marriage into existence when he said, "A man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife and they will become one flesh."

So when a couple speaks their vows and consummates their vows it is not a man, or woman or a pastor who is the main actor. God is. God joins a husband and wife into a one flesh union.

This weekend U2 have a concert in the TCF Bank Stadium in Minneapolis.



For its current world tour U2 has set a world record for constructing the largest concert touring stage structure in history. This thing is massive and has earned the nickname of The Claw. Concert goers report that the band sounds spectacular on this stage. It is getting rave reviews.

God is the stage on which the song of our marriage is sung. And when we do it right he gets the rave reviews.

Second God says that **marriage is a spiritual relationship.**

Paul's teaching on marriage begins with the command, **"Be filled with the Spirit." (v 18)**

That is the starting point of a good marriage.

Filled means to be controlled.

Christians are to be controlled by the Holy Spirit in every area of our life, especially our marriage.

When we are filled with the Spirit we enjoy the fruit of the Spirit. These include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Don't you think those characteristics are rather relevant to marriage?

Imagine a home like that.

You would never want to leave it.

Indeed Charles Haddon Spurgeon said, "When home is ruled according to God's word angels might be asked to stay and they would not find themselves out of their element."

Then God says that **marriage is a reflection of my Son.**

This theme runs throughout the passage.

First, Paul speaks to couples saying, **"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." (v 21)**

Then he talks to wives, **"Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord." (v 22)**

Finally he addresses husbands, **"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." (v 25)**

The glory of Christ is the motivation for working out our problems.

It is not just for my benefit or my wife's benefit, it is because the God who made and saved me commands me to love my wife as Jesus loves his people.

Ann Landers' famous question to a person having marriage difficulties is "Are you better off with him or without him?"

That misses the grand truth that my marriage is a reflection of Jesus.

Nothing is more worthy of my time and energy as a man than beating the demons of defeat and presenting a healthy and holy marriage to God.

Now we begin to see the big picture of marriage.

Back in Genesis 1 we learn that **"God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."** (Genesis 1:27)

That tells us that marriage is a representation of God.

In Ephesians we discover it is also a reflection of Christ.

Everything God does he does to proclaim his glory. Marriage isn't an end itself.

It is not ultimately about us at all. It is about reflecting the glory of God and the love of his Son.

As the Son submitted to the Father so we submit to one another in marriage.

That means we are not seeking to win arguments.

Rather we are looking for what will bring pleasure to God.

As Jesus sacrificed for us we will be sacrificing for our spouse.

From that I discover that marriage is not about me getting what I need or being personally fulfilled.

Marriage is not even about me being happy.

But it is about me being holy.

Then God tells us that **marriage is a mystery.**

By that I don't mean the comment that the grandfather said to his grandson on his wedding day.

"Young man, there are two ways to handle women and nobody knows what they are."

There is a far greater mystery and Paul speaks of it when he says, **"This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church."** (v 32)

In some mysterious way marriage depicts the relationship between Christ and his church.

What on earth does that mean?

What does my marriage to Gretchen have to do with Autumn Ridge Church or even more incredibly, with the worldwide church?

I don't think Paul can completely grasp this mystery himself but he does give us some clues in this passage.

He asks us to meditate on the relationship Christ and his church.

Christ has the physical body.

The church is his spiritual body.

So those two bodies are one.

So Christ loves his church because it is part of himself. So Paul writes, **"In the same way husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself." (v 28)**

It is also a mystery why Christ chose his church.
We are not that attractive but he called us to himself.
Every couple has a mystery in their relationship in the way they came together.

Just this week Gretchen was reflecting on how unlikely it was that we met. I lived in London. She lived in Los Angeles. But in the providence of God we met at a college retreat where I was speaking.
You have a similar mystery in your relationship.
That sort of mystery is worth preserving.

Then God tells us that **marriage is a covenant**.
You see Christ has made a covenant with his church.
He did this on the cross and we remember it each time we take communion. Jesus tells us, **"This cup is the new covenant in my blood." (1 Corinthians 11:25)**
In that covenant, Jesus was promising to love us forever.

Will Christ ever divorce his church? Absolutely not!
He is sometimes estranged from his church and disappointed by his church.
He writes to the seven churches of Revelation and has some severe words to say but they are still his.
He will never let them go.

We express that covenant in the wedding service when we vow that we will be faithful to our spouse "till death do us part." We say those words so easily on our wedding day and often don't reflect on the implications of them but we should.

I tell couples that the most important part of the wedding service is their vows. Everything else like the dresses and the rings and flowers and the music is there to support the beauty and majesty of the vows.
None of the accessories are necessary but we add them to accent the seriousness of the wedding vows.
When we say them we are making a covenant.
That is important, for people change and chemistry wanes but covenants don't. In terms of the long term happiness of our marriages the wedding gifts don't matter but the gift of keeping our covenant does.

Let me show you the amazing implications of grasping that marriage is a covenant. A woman goes to her best friend and says, "I don't love my husband anymore and I haven't for some time, what shall I do?"
The friend says, "You stay with your husband. What's love got to do with it?"
Feelings come and go. You did not promise to stay with him as long as you both shall love but as long as you both shall live.

With the help of the Holy Spirit you are going to stick this out. You are going to discover the grace of God.”

Or a husband confesses to his wife that he has an affair and asks her what they should do.

The wife replies, “We are going to stay together. I made a covenant to you. We are going to get some really good counseling. We are going to ask the elders of the church to pray over us. We are going to be accountable to our small group for our spiritual progress. But we are not going to let your sin bust up our home and ruin our children’s lives.”

Perhaps you are thinking “that is ridiculous.”

It is certainly hard and that is why God permits divorce for adultery.

But staying together is not impossible when we are filled with the Spirit. I have seen couples rebuild their lives even after marital unfaithfulness, because they understood that marriage is a covenant.

This is the big picture of marriage.

To help us we have a big God who has given us a big salvation.