

The Spirit Filled Marriage 4: The Institution of Marriage

OUTLINE

What makes a marriage?

What keeps a marriage?

INTRODUCTION

What is marriage? One mother says, 'marriage is just a fancy word for adopting an overgrown male child who cannot be handled by his parents anymore.' But speaking more seriously, modern views of marriage are descriptive not prescriptive. Anthropologists observe marriage as they find it, or as it have been practiced and then give as broad a definition as possible, here is an example, Edvard Westermarck says marriage is 'A more or less durable connection between a male and a female lasting beyond the mere act of propagation till after the birth of the offspring.' He adjusted his view to incorporate polygamy and wrote, 'a relation of one or more men to one or more women that is recognized by law.' Other more legally minded people have sought to give a definition to marriage as a set of legal rights. For example, marriage exists to establish a legal mother or father for a child. To give monopoly of one's sexuality to one's spouse. To give monopolistic or partial rights to domestic labour or services. To give your spouse total or partial control over property belonging to the other. To establish a fund of property for the benefit of the children.

We have been talking about the Spirit filled foundation for marriage and we are just about to move into the roles and responsibilities of husbands and wives. However, before we go and do that we need to say a few things about marriage itself. What is it that we are trying to make work? It is merely a tradition handed down from our parents, is it an unquestioned relic that is irrelevant to modern life, it is primarily legal in character, is it man centred and should be arranged according to the purpose of serving man's happiness, is it a relative social convention that has no rules? Marriage is being challenged and is deeply misunderstood even by Christians so we have to clarify our definition of marriage and the nature of it before we can commit to making our marriages work.

Let me give a biblically informed definition: Marriage is a God-wrought, universal, life-long covenant between one natural man and one natural woman; a mutually beneficial partnership with distinct roles and responsibilities for men and women; that exists for the purpose of companionship, procreation, mission, holiness and imaging God's redemptive grace. Let's unpack that just a little.

By 'God-wrought' we mean that marriage is God's idea not man's idea. He is the one who made it, designed its distinctive features and can determine its definition, purpose and boundaries. There is a second part to this meaning where we recognise that God actually unites people. marriage is finally legitimized not by the state or family but by God making them one, and therefore we should not separate what God has put together.

By 'universal' we mean that marriage can be found in every culture because it is one of those things like law and family that God has written upon our hearts. The endless variety we find in the many forms of marriage illustrate the many ways we as sinners go our own way, but the pervasive reality of marriage cannot be denied. It is a universal institution and commandment applicable to all.

By 'life-long' we mean that marriage is intended to be until death do us part. Marriage is a life-long partnership between a husband and wife and so we have to reject marriages for the purpose of sexual relations like Shiite Muslims in Iran who technically marry sex workers to legitimise their activities. We recognise that divorce is always the result of sin and is undesirable. And we likewise reject any definition of marriage that sociologists are suggesting where a relationship of convenience for 15 years is entered into and is up for review.

By 'covenant' we are reflecting the biblical view that marriage is viewed as a covenant made vertically with God and horizontally with our spouse, Prov. 2:17, Mal. 2:14. It is solemn promises given before God and witnesses in order to bind ourselves to our promises in the most serious fashion. This is the highest order of commitment and for the Christian especially is more weighty than the rule of law, culture or tradition.

By 'between one natural man and one natural woman' we are affirming with Christ that monogamous and heterosexual marriages are God's norm.

By 'mutually beneficial' we are stressing that the marriage relationship does not exist for the exclusive benefit of the husband or wife, nor does it heap responsibility on one side or the other, but by mutual servanthood and commitment both husband and wife are benefitted and are intended to flourish in a marriage.

By 'partnership' we are recognising that husbands and wives are given their unique roles in order to work together and compliment one another's strengths.

By 'with distinct roles for men and women' we are recognizing the differences between the genders and the God given roles of male leadership and female helping.

By 'for the purpose of companionship' we are recognising that God made marriage to alleviate the problem of loneliness and see marriage as a friendship implying all the responsibilities of maintaining the most intimate friendship we have.

By 'procreation' we are acknowledging that one of God's purposes, but not the only purpose for marriage is to produce godly offspring. By stating this we are critical of those who have defined their marriage by their careers and have cast off the God given purpose of parenting.

By 'social stability' we are acknowledging that marriage is the basic building block of society and that marriage is part of what God builds a stable society with. Marriage is not only a personal institution made to serve selfish ends but is interlocked with all of life.

By 'mission' we are acknowledging that every Christian family is also part of the church and God's larger scheme to bring salvation to the nations. This mission involves all we do as a Church as well as how we live out our lives as Christian families at home and work as well.

By 'holiness' we are stating that the differences and disagreements we have in marriage are used for good by God to mould our characters into Christlikeness. The conflicts that are inevitable in marriage as seen as 'good' for the purposes of our holiness. This also implies our call to pray with and for one another and to serve one another with all the gifts God has given us for the purpose of edifying one another.

By 'and imaging God's redemptive grace' we are alluding to Paul's words in Ephesians 5:22-33 where Paul tells us that marriage is intended to be a picture of Christ's relationship to the church. We image His love, servanthood and forgiving grace.

What makes marriage ?

Marriage is more than two people sleeping together. There has been the view that if you have sex with someone you are automatically married to them. Traditionally this was a very common view amongst older generations of Christians. However, this is not the view of the Scriptures. Jesus reveals to us that marriage is more than merely sex. When He was speaking to the woman at the well in John 4:18, 'for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.'" This woman of questionable morals had been in a series of relationships and was presently sleeping with a man, but this did not make her technically married.

This view becomes very important when we think about sexual unfaithfulness in marriage. Some people believe that if a husband or a wife sleeps with someone else that they are technically married to the other person or that sex somehow breaks the existing marriage. This is not true. We see this in Ex. 22:16-17 where we have the law of a virgin being seduced by a man. The father is not obligated to acknowledge a marriage in that instance because sex does not equal marriage. If we think that sex does make marriage then we will have trouble with the sin of sexual unfaithfulness for the bible does not imply that the adulterer is now a bigamist but an adulterer. He has sinned against a marriage not created a new one. We also see in Mal. 2:14 that God still sees a couple to be married even though the husband has been unfaithful, 'But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.' A marriage need not come to an end because a partner has been unfaithful.

Jesus clarifies for us that the only reason why divorce has to be allowed is because someone is being hard hearted, Matt. 19:8, 'He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.' Jesus is telling us that in the Garden of Eden there was no divorce and this is God's ideal for us. Why then did God allow divorce at all? Because there is hardness of heart in us. Now let me ask you, if we have two Christians who are committed to forgiving one another and rooting all sin out of their lives, even though one has been unfaithful, must they get divorced? The answer is no! Divorce only happens when someone is hard of heart, when someone refuses to stop sinning and they harden their hearts. It could be the guilty party who hardens their heart by pursuing their unfaithfulness. It could be the innocent party who refuses to forgive when the guilty party is seeking to reconcile. Sexual unfaithfulness does not end up with the automatic right of divorce, divorce only comes through hardness of heart.

God Himself is a divorcee, He divorced Israel. Even though He was the innocent party and perfectly faithful Israel was hardened in heart and so God divorced them and handed them over to judgement Jer. 3:8. So if we have two Christians and one is hard hearted and pursues sin, then they must be confronted with the discipline of the Church, and if they

refuse to repent and return to make their marriage work they must be disciplined as an unbeliever. They are called unbelievers because their actions deny their confession and the church announces what their behaviour describes. Their lack of repentance proves they have faith without works, and we pronounce them dead. The only way a Christian gets out of marriage is if Church discipline is enacted in some way and one or both are proven to be unrepentant and disciplined by the church. The point is sex does not make marriage, nor does it automatically break marriage.

Some will say, 'Ok sex does not make marriage, but what about a verbal exchange of promises where two people commit to one another and move in together, why do they need a piece of paper?' but here is how one theologian defines what constitutes a marriage. (1) It is an exclusive relationship between two people not three, for two became one flesh (Gen 2:24). (2) It is heterosexual, between a man and a woman not two men or two women. (3) It was a public ceremony, for leaving one's family in ancient culture was no small affair without a fanfare involving the community. (4) Marriage is permanent, as Christ reflecting on Eden says, "What God has joined together, let not man separate". (5) It must be consummated in sex, for Adam and Eve became one flesh (Gen 2:25). So then by implication its exclusivity excludes polygamy as an ideal form of marriage. Its heterosexual nature excludes homosexuality not simply as non-ideal, but the Bible condemns it as unnatural (Rom 1:18-32). Because of the ceremony, "private agreements" excluding law, family and society are not right. I would add that God instigates the institution of marriage by making Adam lonely, making Him a partner, making Eve and being the first father of the bride, and then by Holy Writ pronouncing, Gen. 2:24, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.' God decided marriage was the way for a man and woman to love one another and to be together, we cannot take that prerogative upon ourselves.

If one is stranded on a desert island, just a man and a woman, ceremony would be superfluous. However, they must covenant for a lifetime relationship for a legitimate marriage to be enacted. But the ceremony is vital when possible. It must be a public declaration as most serious life impacting vows are. And they are such for the value of accountability, a necessity after the fall. We need it because we want a recognition of the relationship, and that no other man would make advances on one's wife or vice versa. Adam and Eve had no community but God as witness; but the author of the account God by the Spirit included a vital detail of family involvement. For in ancient culture what girl was married without permission and without bridal price and an exchange of gifts and the permission of her father. We still have a vestige of this family involvement in our own day where the bride's family pays for the wedding. Marriage is a celebration which we do not celebrate alone. As Christians we resist the consumer is always right attitude and see submission to God's norm as right.

What keeps marriage?

'But I don't need a piece of paper to love you.' Yes you do! You see that statement comes from the assumption that love is a romantic feeling and not a commitment. If you truly love someone you will give them the piece of paper that says, 'I will love and cherish you until

death parts us.' The emotions of love, the romantic view of marriage, will run out and then what will keep you together? Some would say that because you don't love each other you should not stay together. This is naïve. Of course love will ebb and flow. We are sinful and therefore our love is imperfect and it vacillates and changes even though it felt eternal when we first experienced it. The covenant we make before God, the promise that we make before witnesses this is the essential thing that creates a secure environment for marriage to thrive. You see if the definition of marriage is determined by changing emotions then marriage is doomed to fail. But if marriage is defined by a covenant that we make before God, by making ourselves accountable to being punished by Him if we break that covenant, then we will make a safe place where our emotions can rise and fall, they can go through their seasons and changes, but the marriage does not break. We create a place where we can pick up the pieces and recommit, where we can work on things and the marriage still exist when things are not perfect, when one person is going through another, when one is sick, when one is unemployed, when there are immense emotional and physical stresses that cause us to overreact to situations and to each other. If my marriage depends on my always feeling in love, what will happen to it when my sinful spouse acts like a sinner and wounds me and our marriage in some way and all the happy feelings are gone? Remember the fickle nature of love and remember your promise as the greater definer of your marriage then your emotions.

Today marriage is no longer defined by covenant which is exactly how God defines it when He describes unfaithfulness to marriage in Prov. 2:16-17, 'So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words, who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God.' Marriage like everything else in the West is now subject to the consumerism that puts our personal pleasure at the centre reserving for us the right to complain, go to another service provider and expect a refund and compensation for failed services. Covenant, where one keeps his word even to his own hurt, when out of a fear of God because we place pleasing Him before ourselves in the forefront of our minds, is what drives us we will put away the consumer mentality to marriage. One should view the wedding vows one took as an inviolable law which hems you into your obedience. Stop looking for that out, stop taking all your energy and putting it into finding fault, and rationalising all the reasons you should be freed, and put it into putting the other person first, into loving like Christ, into seeing the other person and accepting them just as God has accepted you in Christ. The covenantal nature of your marriage is a stone wall which throws you back into your marriage when you are trying to get out that you look to God and His resources to make it work. If marriage is an arrangement of convenience and not a permanent arrangement then you give yourself no solid ground to build on.

God is our example of covenantal faithfulness as the model for marriage. He covenanted to love us in eternity past, with what the Bible calls the eternal covenant. He set His love upon us in Christ before the foundation of the world. Knowing our sin and all that we are He loved us. Then He created. He then views all our action in real time and yet on account of His faithfulness He does not cast the world away but sends a Saviour, and He draws us to

that Saviour, and keeps us in that Saviour and at every point we are not worth the effort but He is a God who has covenanted to save us.

I came across a very helpful distinction between consumer and covenant love. Think of children in a marriage. Children are born needy into this world, they are demanding, high maintenance, and give very little return. You serve them all your life and they will never serve you like you serve them. Yet you love them, your love is unconditional it is not based on what you get but on your commitment as a parent. This is covenant love and the type of grace oriented love we are to give in marriage.

However, the marriage covenant is not only law but love, the promise creates a high wall which hems you in but this is certainly not all there is to marriage. There are many people who dishonour marriage and all that God intended by it by living in marriage all their lives but being miserable until death parted them. No, the covenant cannot be in the place of love but creates a safe place for love to be nurtured. Think of marriage as a garden. The promise you make puts protective walls around it, but now you also need to nurture it. You need to plant, to water, to prune, to weed, to support, etc. There will be many things that we will say in this series that will be specific things that one has to do to make ones marriage work, but let me focus on two for now in closing.

C. S. Lewis is a famous apologist for the Christian faith and has written a book called Mere Christianity, he has some famous words on love when he writes, 'Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbour; act as if you did.... When you are behaving as if you loved someone you will presently come to love him.' (p116). One commentator explains, 'Though many today think of love as a feeling, Lewis explains that true love is an action. We don't exercise love by feeling loving thoughts; we exercise it by treating others in a loving way. Christian charity (love in Latin is 'caritas') does not mean feeling pity for the poor; it means helping them. Charity is not a burst of warm emotions; it is an act of the will. When Christ commands us to love our enemies, He does not mean that we are to like them (that is, experiencing good feelings when we are with them). He means that we are to treat them in a loving way.'¹ In other words, feelings follow actions. As sinners we will often have to do the right thing before we feel the right thing. In an ideal world we would want it the other way. In marriage the covenant creates a place of safety for us to pursue this line of action and allow the slow stirring of real affection. Husbands love your wives, wives respect your husbands, children honour your parents, act right and soon the Spirit will bless your yielded heart.

In order to keep the love alive in the garden of marriage we must not only do right but we must also think right. When Jesus was dying on the cross and considering his enemies, He was able to pray for their forgiveness because He saw their sin and His heart was moved to compassionate prayer for their forgiveness. As spouses we will have to remember that we are sinners living with sinners. We always focus on our rights and grievances but Jesus was thinking of others on the cross. He focused on their sinfulness, He focused on their need

1 www.cslewis.com/blog/lewiss-practical-theology/

and He focused on a gracious God who could save them unworthy as they are. This moved Him to real and loving prayer. In marriage we too will have to think right in order to feel right.

Marriage is a God-wrought, universal, life-long covenant between one natural man and one natural woman; a mutually beneficial partnership with distinct roles and responsibilities for men and women; that exists for the purpose of companionship, procreation, mission, holiness and imaging God's redemptive grace. Marriage is a garden with the stone wall of covenant where our promise before God creates a safe haven for us to do right and think right in order to feel right that our marriages might be places of love and happiness. DO you view marriage as a covenant? Are you nurturing the garden?