

March 16, 2014

God's Purpose for Marriage

Ephesians 5:22 – 32

Last week we looked at God's plan for marriage and the first thing we noted was that His plan was that marriage is between one man and one woman: *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."* We have to say this because today there is great confusion about what constitutes a marriage. But God is not confused, and the Bible doesn't leave any room for doubt. In the beginning, God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve, or Alice and Eve. Marriage – God's way – is between one man and one woman. But I know some of you are thinking 'What about those guys in the Bible who had more than one wife?' And while it is not my intention to talk about polygamy in this sermon, I will say that the Bible has all kinds of stories in it – some showing us God's way to do things and some illustrating what happens when we don't follow God's plan. Without exception, every marriage that involved more than one wife always brought incredible pain, tragedy, trouble and confusion.

We also discovered that the **essence of marriage is a covenant** that mirrors His covenant with His people. A covenant is a formal promise between two people that binds them together to do or not do something. God's covenant with us is a unilateral covenant which means that He is the Initiator and the Fulfiller of the promise. In Jeremiah 31 God spelled out the terms of the New Covenant which He brought about in Christ: *"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people."* Jeremiah 31:33 Notice the emphasis on God – 'I will make...I will put...I will write...I will be' No talk of 'If you do this then I will do that'. Our marriage vows are based on this understanding.

You never hear couples take vows that say, 'I promise to love you if you love me in return' or 'I promise to be faithful to you if you promise to be faithful to me'. No – we make covenant promises that do not depend on the other party – just like God does. He doesn't say, 'I'll love you if you love Me in return'. God doesn't make a contract with us – He makes a covenant promise. A contract is a consumer-oriented agreement. In other words, 'What do I get out of this thing?' In a covenant marriage, the focus is always other-centered, 'What can I give you?' This is what Jesus did for us on the cross and Paul lays it out here in Ephesians: *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.* Ephesians 5:26-27 He loved, He gave, He sanctifies, He cleanses, He presents – everything is for her. This is the kind of covenant making God we have.

The problem with so many marriages today is that they have an unstable foundation. Not only are they not other-centered, but they have built a relationship on something other than a covenant – usually on shared passion or the idea of romance. Don't get me wrong, every marriage needs romance, but romantic love, the grand sweeping passionate love of eros, was never, before the 19th century, held up as a reasonable or sane basis for marriage. In the early 20th century, Katherine Ann Porter, a Pulitzer Prize writer and novelist, bemoaned how *'romantic love crept into the marriage bed, very stealthily by centuries, bringing its absurd notions about love as eternal springtime and marriage as a personal adventure meant to provide personal happiness.'* The red-hot passions of romantic love, as any who have been married for any length of time know, cannot sustain a lifetime of marriage – they were never intended to do so. **God's plan was that marriage was to be undergirded by a covenant commitment that would withstand the fickleness of passion and the uncertainties of life.**

Because **a marriage covenant is not the declaration of a present emotion, but the promise of future love.** It is not a promise to **feel** warm and loving all the time; it's a promise to **be** loving, and tender and faithful and cherishing and serving, regardless of your feelings, regardless of the circumstances. You see when you first hold hands or kiss the person you are in love with, the thrill you experience is mainly selfish. It isn't that they are so electrifying, but rather that you are blown away that this person is so into **you** – they want **you**, they are responding to **you**. And that is very satisfying to our need for significance. But it doesn't translate into a lifetime commitment. This discovery that 'This person likes me' is nowhere near the thrill of a lifetime of loving another person.

To actually be so in love with someone, to be absolutely committed to someone else's joy, and somebody else's happiness, and somebody else's well-being, that you would sacrifice your right arm for them, that you would die for them is a passion and a love that makes all other emotions and loves pale in comparison. You can have plenty of thrills in one night of passion and not be willing to make any sacrifice at all – which shows it is all about you. You see in the beginning, when you think you're falling in love with someone, you're really falling in love with your image of them, and it takes a long time to find out who they really are. And along the way you have to make sacrifices, you have to walk through troubles together, you'll have confrontations and reconciliations. And as time goes on, everything shifts from the tingle and thrill of this person liking me, to your love and desire for that person, to see them flourish and grow even at great cost to yourself. It's covenant – not chemistry. It's not the declaration of a present love, but the binding promise of future love.

That's the plan of marriage – God planned for marriage to mirror His image in a binding covenant relationship, with all the promise of love and faithfulness and steadfastness that implies. And now we can get on with our message today – what is God's purpose for marriage? And there might be several ways to answer this, but I want to focus on one today that actually incorporates all the other ways you might explain the purpose of God for marriage, and then break that down into two ways that happens. So if you'll look at verses 26 and 27 of our text you will read: *'...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.'* Ephesians 5:26-27

Simply put, **the grand design for marriage is that we might be sanctified – made holy.** Now if you were going to list the reasons why you would marry, this might not make it on the list. It sounds so – spiritual. Where's the passion – where's the love – where's the incentive to get married? Last week we talked about how people today are looking for someone who doesn't want to change and doesn't want to change me either. But marriage is all about change. And if it doesn't change it dies. Marriage is God's way of making you holy. Look at the passage. What is Christ's purpose when He comes into your life? What is His goal? If you really understand this passage you understand that He's coming to bring about change. He is coming in to change what is twisted, blemished and stained in our lives. He's bound Himself by a covenant promise to sanctify us – make us holy – take what is unattractive and ugly and make us into a radiant, beautiful bride. And then we're told that's the purpose of marriage. This passage inextricably links the two ideas. Your spouse comes into your life, not to be your Savior, but to partner with the Savior – to help make you into the person that Christ died to make you to be.

Our culture today looks at marriage as a way to enhance my life, to supplement what I already have. In other words most people think, 'I'm fine the way I am, I don't want anybody to try and change me. I want companionship, romance, lasting love – I'm not looking for someone to change me'. But real companionship, real romance, lasting love can only happen when you admit that you are not fine as you think you are. You are flawed, you've got all kinds of problems, you are nowhere near the person God created you to be. Remember I told you last week that my wife has been married to several men throughout our 35 years of marriage and they've all been me? I would say that nothing sanctifies you more thoroughly than marriage to another human being. You have no real understanding of the depth of your depravity and your selfishness and your self-promotion and your self-centeredness, until you are united in a covenant of marriage with someone. You'll often hear people say, 'Wow that first year or five years of marriage were rough!' Anytime you have two selfish, ego-centered sinners sharing a bathroom it's going to be rough.

Gary Thomas, in his book, Sacred Marriage poses a significant question: *What if God had an end in mind that went beyond our happiness, our comfort, and our desire to be infatuated and happy as if the world were a perfect place? What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?* Now right away I know some of you are saying, 'Aren't we supposed to be happy in our marriages?' and I say emphatically 'Yes!' But you need to know that happiness is not the goal, holiness is. In fact I would say that you cannot truly be happy unless there is holiness – unless you are being sanctified. Because if that is not happening, all you have are two unhappy sinners in their sins and they're going to make themselves and each other unhappy. Can anyone truly say that they would be content to stay the way they are through all eternity? That wouldn't be heaven, that would be hell.

Sanctification, being made holy, is a two-fold process. First of all by virtue of the death and resurrection of Christ applied to your life, you are set apart as holy unto God. That is done when you believe in Him and submit to His rule and reign in your life. You are reckoned righteous and sanctified – set apart for Him. But there are a lot of unholy areas in you that need the application of the power of the gospel. And that requires a lifetime. Even then the work is not done until we see Christ in His glory. Marriage vows call us to our highest and best – indeed – seemingly impossible – ideals. It is the way we want to live – the way we should live. But marriage reminds us nearly every day of the reality of living as sinful, broken people in a sinful, broken world. Marriage reminds us that we are not yet all what God intended us to be. God's purpose for marriage is that it be the crucible that forges holiness.

There are many ways that Christ sanctifies us through marriage, but I just want to focus for the last few minutes here on two – submission and love. Respectful submission and sacrificial love. First of all the text directs us to **respectful submission**. *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 part is directed at all the wives and all the women here today so I want you guys to close your ears for just a little bit as I talk to the women. Men, this is not a verse in your arsenal to whip out when things aren't going your way. God is speaking to the women of the species here.

And what He says is so counter-cultural and seen as so repressive and neanderthal that women immediately are up in arms when we come to passages like this. The reasons for that are many – a natural, sinful nature that resents and resists any thought of submission – after all, independence and self-realization were at the root of original sin. And also the fact that submission is seen as somehow the inferior position and nobody wants to be a second-class citizen. Also the fact that there are very few men if any, that women would willingly submit to. But the fact remains that the Bible over and over points out that wives should submit to their husbands.

And I know what some of you are thinking, 'Mike you just don't know my husband. He's an idiot'. And I'll grant you that. Most men are not the sharpest knives in the drawer. But there are two things here. The first is that he was an idiot when you married him. He didn't just spring that on you this year. He was never the brilliant knight in shining armor who sacrificed everything for you, and one day you notice, 'Something's changed'. And the second thing is him being somewhat less than brilliant or wise or wonderful doesn't change the fact that the Bible says, 'Wives submit to your own husbands'. I think it's instructive that Paul says 'to your own husbands' because the tendency is to look at someone else's husband and say, 'I could submit to him – he's wonderful'. No you couldn't, because it is not about who he is or his wonderfulness index.

Notice please the rest of the verse – Wives submit to your own husbands, **as to the Lord**. That is key. That's important. If you miss this you miss the entire point. Submission to your husband is submission to Christ. The trouble is, most of the time he doesn't seem very Christ-like or worthy of submission. *As to the Lord*, does not mean that your husband and Christ are the same. Christ is perfect – your husband is not. Christ is supreme – your husband is not. A wife's submission to her husband is in response to her love and devotion to the Lord first. She submits to the Lord out of a humble and grateful heart, not because she is a slave, but a servant. Likewise, biblical submission in marriage is servanthood, not enslavement. A godly wife is motivated to submit to her husband, not out of fear, self-interest, or self-protection, but out of love.

Submission as to the Lord means putting the Lord first. So here it means, **put your husband first**. It means to honor him and respect him. There are far too many cases of wives who never have an encouraging word for their husband. They never have an honoring or respectful thing to say about him or to him. Now listen to what the Bible says about this. Proverbs 21:19, "It is better to live in a desert land than with a quarrelsome and fretful woman." It is better for your husband to die in the desert than to live with you if you're a quarrelsome, fretful woman. Proverbs 19:13, "A foolish son is ruin to his father, and a wife's quarreling is a continual dripping of rain." If I could put it into today's language, '...it's better for your husband to be water-boarded than to let you berate him and belittle him constantly'. In other words, don't berate him, or belittle him, or attack him. Don't harp on his weaknesses.

You are his helpmate. That doesn't mean you're supposed to take the place of the Holy Spirit, nor does it mean you're his slave. God said in the beginning, *'It is not good for man to be alone, I will make a helper suitable for him'* and God created woman. Calling someone a 'helper' does not imply inferiority. In fact, the stronger we are, the more we can help. Far from being a subservient partner in this affair, woman was created to not only complete the picture but to help Adam become the man that God intended. Adam couldn't do it by himself – in fact God said, 'Not Good!' until He brought Eve to him. Listen, the more you treat your husband with honor and respect, the more you put him first, the more you act toward him as unto the Lord, the more he will be the kind of man that is worthy of honor and respect. Your job as his helpmate is to help him to holiness. Submission to your husband, as unto the Lord, will do that, and it will change you and make you holy.

First of all, marriage helps us to holiness by respectful submission – submitting to your husband, as to the Lord. Secondly, marriage helps us to holiness through **sacrificial love**. *Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her*. Ephesians 5:25 I would say this is the key to a successful happy, holy marriage. And the charge is to the husband, so wives it's the men's turn here. When things go south in a marriage, who is responsible? Who is the one God holds accountable? When things went south in Adam's marriage who was it that God went looking for in the garden? He didn't come looking for Eve. He came looking for Adam. 'Adam, where are you?' That is because God established the husband as the head of the marriage. Everything rises and falls on leadership.

Paul tells us here that *the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church*. In other words he is saying 'Wives let your husbands be the head in your marriage. What does that mean? What is **headship** then? I know this doesn't really fly in today's culture but here is what headship means. Whatever else the Bible says about headship, the essence of headship means **final say**. It means leadership and accountability. It means in the end, when you can't agree, let your husband have the final say. Now as soon as you hear that, your mind goes to a thousand scenarios and you begin to interpret what that means in light of your experience and culture. But don't. The Bible sets parameters around this – the Bible gets control of this – it won't just let you throw in your own content.

The Bible gives us two things that define what headship is all about. And the first thing it says is that **husbands must never exercise headship to please himself**. He is required to sacrifice his own pleasure, his own will, his own desires for those of his wife. Husbands, prospective husbands, did you read the charge? How did Christ exercise His headship? By dying for His bride. It is the husband's responsibility to always put the needs and desires of his wife ahead of his own. Always. Guys, there's really no escape clause here. Suppose you and your wife are buying a car. And she wants the red one – cause it's cute. But you want a more fuel-efficient model over here. And you can't agree. Does the husband say, 'Dear heart, remember Ephesians 5:22! I'm the head so it's this one?' No, because your wife will come back with, 'Honey, remember Ephesians 5:25! You're supposed to die for me. This falls a little short of that here, don't you think?'

And she's right. If you're following Christ, husbands, you must never use your headship to please yourself. In fact you must always try to find ways to put your wife's desires ahead of your own, and find ways to bring her joy, and if the red car brings her joy, by all means buy it. That's your job. But wait a minute you say, where does the final say thing come in? If you understand how Biblical headship is supposed to work, it really only comes into play when you and she are working through something and neither of you seem to have a handle on it but somebody has to make the call that is best for her and for you and for your marriage and you make the call. Only when you think you're doing the best thing for you both – never just to please yourself.

The second thing headship means is that **husbands are responsible to nourish and cherish** their wives. *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*, Ephesians 5:28-29 To nourish here is a word that means to **feed**. Husbands you are responsible to feed your wife. Unfortunately we have taken our cue from Eve who fed her husband and things went bad from there. I see this as Adam's failure to take seriously the role of headship by feeding his wife. Now I know we're talking about physical food here but the spiritual principle is what the Bible is trying to get across. When Paul talks about nourishing a man's body he takes a physical principle and turns it into a spiritual one that speaks to the spiritual welfare of our wives. Have you ever noticed how many churches are populated mainly by women? I think that speaks to a consequence of the fall where men take a back seat in their marriage with regards to spiritual things because Adam did.

Guys, husbands, you are supposed to **take the lead in spiritual things** in your marriage. This passage tells us that Christ as the head takes the lead to nourish His bride with the word of God. Husbands have the primary responsibility for speaking into the life of their wives with the Word of God. Husbands you are to be the one who takes the family to church, leads the devotions, initiates the prayers and leads your wife and family to the altar of God. You are supposed to be the one who loves God supremely and your neighbor as yourself and model the way for your wife.

Along with nourishing, husbands, you need to cherish your wife. Literally the word means '**to keep warm**' which has a very special meaning for any husband who has felt the frigid feet of his wife on his warm back. We have to ask ourselves, what is it that warms my wife? What is it that keeps the fires of romance burning in her heart? As husbands we have to know what **her love language** is. Do you know what your wife's love language is? If you've read any of Gary Smalley's stuff you know there are at least five: words of affirmation; acts of service; receiving gifts; quality time; and physical touch. Now usually your wife has a couple of those, and a good husband knows what they are. If your wife's love language is quality time for example, and you substitute gifts for time, what the gift actually says is, 'I don't really love you very much.' but if you really want to stir the fires of romance, forget the gift and spend the day with her. That warms her like nothing else will.

When we nourish and cherish our wives we are most like Christ. And the nourishing and cherishing has the effect of sanctifying our wives. It changes them into the beautiful being that God intended. I've told the story of Johnny Lingo, a man who lived in the South Pacific. The islanders all spoke highly of him. He was strong, good-looking, and very intelligent. But when it came time for him to find a wife, people shook their heads in disbelief. The woman Johnny chose was plain, skinny, and walked with her shoulders hunched and her head down. She was very hesitant and shy. She was also a bit older than the other married women in the village, which did nothing for her value. But this man loved her. What surprised everyone most was Johnny's offer. In order to obtain a wife, you paid for her by giving her father cows. Four to six cows was considered a high price. The other villagers thought he might pay two or even three cows at the most. But he gave eight cows for her!!

Everyone chuckled about it, since they believed his father-in-law put one over on him. Some thought it was a mistake. Several months after the wedding, a visitor from the United States came to the Islands to trade, and heard the story of Johnny Lingo and his eight-cow wife. Upon meeting Johnny and his wife the visitor was totally taken aback, since this wasn't a shy, plain, and hesitant woman, but one who was beautiful, poised, and confident. The visitor asked about this transformation, and Johnny Lingo's response was very simple. "I wanted an eight-cow woman, and when I paid that for her and treated her in that fashion, she began to believe that she was an eight-cow woman. She discovered she was worth more than any other woman in the islands. When we understand how much Christ paid for us on the cross, it transforms our lives forever.

This passage tells us what the gospel is all about. Do you see the incredible spousal love of Christ here? He was the perfect husband. He didn't abandon us when we turned against Him. He didn't say as so many of us say, 'Well you're not being the spouse you should be so I'm not going to be the spouse I should be'. No, He came to a people who were blemished and stained by sin and rebellion, and instead of leaving us to our destiny, He stood by His covenant and sacrificed Himself for our sakes. When He was up there on the cross, seeing our betrayal, our mocking, our denying, our killing Him, in one of the greatest acts of spousal faithfulness – He stayed. And through His death came resurrection, and healing and wholeness. If you know He loves you like that, you will love your spouse as Christ loved the church. But you have to have the reality of the gospel in your soul for you to have the kind of love that Jesus has for you, for your spouse.

So as we come to the table today, let it speak to you of Jesus' infinite love for you – He died for you to make you holy and blameless before Him. If you've never responded to the gospel, if you don't know Jesus as Lord and Savior, this table is not for you. This table speaks of a covenant love and only those in the covenant can participate. So on the one hand this is a warning – don't take these elements if you don't have a relationship with Christ. On the other it is an invitation. Respond right now to the sacrificial love of Christ who died for your sins to sanctify you and cleanse you from every spot and wrinkle and one day present you to Himself in splendor.

Our gracious heavenly Father,

We thank You for the magnificent love that reached down to rescue unworthy sinners like us. We praise You for the staggering covenant of grace that binds us to You eternally, clothes us with eternal righteousness and assures us of Your everlasting love. Christ we thank You that You loved us and gave Yourself up for us to make us a holy and spotless bride. Holy Spirit grant to us the power to live in that love with our husbands, our wives; and let our lives and our marriages testify to Your saving, transforming power, and reflect all the riches and love of our covenant-making God. Cause us to delight ourselves in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through this gospel to all people we pray in the mighty name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.