

Marriage in Christ: the point of marriage

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Today, we are beginning a 4 week series I'm calling *Marriage in Christ*. I am well aware that this isn't the easiest subject to talk about and some of you are wondering if this will even be worth your time and attention. Maybe you're single and you're thinking, "Not for me." Or maybe you're divorced and you're afraid this is going to be too painful. If you're in HS, MS, or even elementary school, you might feel this is for the adults in the room. Even if you're married, but struggling, you might be hopeless or cynical to any discussion on marriage.

I get it, friends. There are all kinds of reasons you're tempted to disengage. The Bible gives us a very clear picture of where those temptations come from. The first thing the Bible tells us in James 1 is that our temptations come from our own, impure desires. We want the wrong thing so we're tempted to go in the wrong direction. In addition to that, God's word warns us that our Adversary, the Evil One, is the tempter of the whole world. So this temptation we are battling right now to disengage, to already resist what's in God's word about marriage, to run away is the result of these dark, impure desires inside of us and additionally stoked by the forces of Evil outside of us. And this darkness and evil are trying to hide from us the Light of Christ. Christ wants us to see that marriage matters. And one of my goals is to help you see why it matters far more than most think. So, whoever you are, whatever situation you are in, tell yourself, "God has something in this for me." Fight temptation with faith; believe that what God has for you, no matter your situation or trial, will be good for you. That will help you stay engaged and to keep listening.

Notice the title: *Marriage in Christ*. I could have just called this series *Marriage* or tried to find some witty title, which would have bombed, most likely, because I'm not all that witty. But I really believe strongly about the *in Christ* part. Marriage is God's idea. We didn't invent it; God designed it. And what we will see today of Christ is the key to understanding the point of marriage. That's very important to know because marriage as it is understood in our culture at-large is very different than what God designed. And so you need to understand, then, from the very beginning that marriage (because it is understood in light of Christ) is going to look unconventional, out-of-step or strange in comparison to the standards of many out in the world today. Marriages in Christ are just going to be different. In spite of all the challenges and in the midst of all the struggles, marriages in Christ stick when everybody else thinks a couple should pull the plug. Marriages in Christ have husbands that crucify every selfish tendency that emerges in his mind and heart for the purpose and goal of loving and serving and blessing his wife. Marriages in Christ have wives that ignore the world's messages that are centered on personal fulfillment so she can serve her husband and their mutual goal of honoring the Lord. Marriages in Christ comprise of couples who know the glory of God is at stake in their relationship. Married couples in Christ know that a loveless, faithless, deceptive relationship is a kind of false teaching that will lead their children astray so they work hard to put Christ at the center and practice love, fidelity, and honesty.

To get at what I'm trying to say, turn with me to Eph. 5. There are a number of important passages in the Bible about marriage; this one is as important as any of them. I'm going to start reading in vs. 22, but don't pay so much attention at the moment to the roles God gives husbands and wives just yet. In a few sermons, we'll talk directly about what it means for a wife to submit to her husband and how a husband submits to his wife through sacrificial leadership. Too many times when we read this passage we get distracted a tad by what *he's* supposed to do or what *she's* supposed to do. And then, of course, we usually butcher the idea of submission or use it as a club. We'll talk about these roles God has given to us in our marriage soon. But today, I want you to focus on something specific from this chapter: as we read notice how often Paul compares the relationship between a husband and his wife to Christ and his church. Listen to how often Paul says things like, "as Christ" and "as the church," "In the same way" and "just as Christ." Paul is working so hard in this passage to show that there's this comparison between Christ and his church, and a husband and his wife (READ vs. 22-33).

I'm guessing you noticed the comparisons Paul was making. A husband's love for his wife is like Christ's love for his church; he sacrifices for her, cherishes her, works for her good and for her spiritual growth just like Christ did and still does all those things for his church. A wife respects her husband like the church looks to Christ for help, for leadership, for nourishment, and care. A marriage in Christ is like this covenantal love found between Christ and his church. Now, consider this question: which one came first? Which one is the template and which one is the copy? A template is the original, right? If you're an artist, if you are a quilter, you might use a template. You want to see a certain pattern throughout your work so you use a template over and over again to make sure it all looks like the original. What's the original here? Christ and the church is the template, isn't it? Christ and the church sets the pattern; a marriage is patterned after this beautiful, mysterious, eternal relationship that God instituted before the foundation of the world. In fact, Paul goes back and forth so much in this passage between Christ and his church and marriage that he has to clarify things at the end in vs. 32 when he says, "This mystery is profound, and I am saying it refers to Christ and the church." They are so closely connected and I've been oscillating back and forth so much, just so you know for sure, the real relationship, the original, the template, is Christ and the church - that's the truly beautiful, glorious, and mysterious relationship. And marriage is supposed to be just like that.

That should tell you something very profound about your marriage, or, my single brothers and sisters, your possible future marriage: our marriages are designed to reflect the glorious relationship between Christ and his church (REPEAT). Based on what God's word is telling us about marriage, people should look at our marriages and see God's love for his lost people in them. Our marriages should be a story, a parable if you will, of God's sacrificial and pursuing love, his self-emptying commitment of service to lost sinners like you and me. And in addition, marriage in Christ should instruct us, his church, on what it looks like to follow, respect, and honor the sacrifices of grace God has given to us in Christ.

Think about the way marriage is meant to impact our children. Can you see how our marriage is one of the ways our kids learn and understand how God relates and treats people he died to save? By looking at mom and dad and their love for each other, kids will make conclusions (are meant to make conclusions) of what God's love is like. Friends, that's God's design; that's what he intends to do. That's why I said earlier that marriages in Christ understand that one of the worst kinds of false teaching our kids can receive is their parents' loveless, selfish, demanding, insensitive, ungrateful marriage. Our marriages instruct our kids; they tell the story of what God is like. That's not an option; you can't say, "Well, I don't mean for my marriage to say anything about God." It doesn't matter; our marriages do just that because that's the way God has made them. Think of the spiritual good or harm we do to our children by our marriage.

Brainstorm a little: what should you start doing different today to image Christ and the gospel better to your children? Husbands/dads, maybe it's refusing to put yourself first with everything. Maybe you're filling your home with all law and no grace. You have these high, unrealistic, selfish demands that your wife and your children just do whatever you want - that's your law. We're going here to eat; we're watching this movie; nobody better cross me and failure is not acceptable. If Christ was selfish and demanding like that he would have never died for a sinner like you. And you are teaching your children, especially your sons, to be selfish, demanding people who see no need for Christ.

Wives/moms, maybe you're constantly cutting your husband down. You make fun of him to those around you (though, you try to do it in this jokey way so that it looks like you're not being too mean). Yeah, he's not perfect, but you mock every attempt he makes rather than appreciating them. Deep down, you have no respect for your husband. Are you not instructing your kids through your example that Christ is not worthy of service, respect, or obedience?

Author and pastor, Paul Tripp, says this in his *What did you expect?* marriage material: *a marriage of love, unity, and understanding is not rooted in romance; it is rooted in worship.* It took me awhile to truly appreciate what Tripp was saying by this; and I won't be able to completely tease this out this morning. But the key to happily enduring in marriage is found in that statement. In my experience, there are two qualities, two activities that are often viewed as the Savior to marriages, but ultimately fail to deliver: romance and communication. Let's start with the latter one.

If we just had better communication, our marriage would be fixed - if I had a nickel for every time I've heard that I'd be a rich man. Yes, communication is important; better communication can certainly help you enjoy a stronger marriage, but that is not the key. You and your spouse can enjoy great communication in your marriage and still be selfish. You can communicate really well and still hate each other. That's why marriages fail: selfishness, dishonesty, unchecked impure desires... not bad communication. You tell me who has a better prospect of making their marriage work: the couple who struggles at communicating; who are constantly frustrated by their misunderstandings and misspoken words, but who confess their

sins to each other, who forgive each other, and who make sacrifices for each other on a daily basis OR the couple who are good with words, who actually are able to tell each what they want, but who hate each other; who think, “I’m not the problem, she is the problem;” who say to themselves, “I’m not going to change until he changes.” Improving communication is an external solution that only helps the external communicative challenges. But it doesn’t change your heart.

Neither does romance. Neither does rekindling that loving feeling. That’s another big myth; that our marriages would only be fixed if we just *felt* the same way we did when we first got married. I mean, think of it: why would we ever dream that marriage was going to feel the same way our dating felt or our first few months of marriage, especially if we got married when we were young kids? Think about the differences. When we first start dating and first get married, we know nothing. We know nothing about ourselves, nothing about our spouses, nothing about life. We’re not old and ugly yet. We pretty much have no responsibilities. We haven’t been forced to share much yet. We haven’t had to make real, life-altering compromises. All we know is that we are madly in love and can’t spend another day a part.

Korby and I have been married now for over 21 years. She now knows what I’m like when I’m sick, when I’m hungry and grumpy. She knows how selfish I can get. She knows how gross I can be. She knows that dense look on my face when I’m not following her simple instructions. My weird noises when I sleep keep her awake at night. And guess what, none of that stuff is romantic. It’s annoying. It’s a turnoff. But it’s real life. I know from experience, but more importantly, from God’s word: if you’re counting on romantic feelings carrying you through the ups and downs of marriage you will be disappointed.

So, if it’s not romance or communication, what is it? What will keep us going? What will keep us faithful? How will we endure the many challenges associated with marriage? Worship. That’s what will keep us going. Don’t think singing songs on Sunday morning; don’t think getting your worship on in your car as you blast your favorite worship music. No, worship is your devotion to God. It’s your commitment and faithfulness to God as your Lord and Savior. Worship is your obedience to his word. It’s your ongoing service to his way and kingdom. That’s the worship that will keep you going. When your communication stinks and the romantic feelings fade, say to yourself, “Honoring God is my greatest desire. Worshiping him is my life’s calling. He’s worth it; he’s deserving. And he told me to love my wife and stay faithful to her no matter what. He told me to respect my husband and be thankful for him. He’s told me to sacrifice; he’s told me to keep holding on. He’s told me to commit myself to my marriage in the same way he committed himself for the salvation of my soul.”

Can you see how this shifts your perspective on marriage? The question is not: do I love my wife? Do I love my husband? Will I remain faithful to my spouse? Do I want to wait for things to get better? The real question is: do I love God? Is he my Master and my Lord? Will I be faithful to God’s way and word? Will I wait and trust God through this season of disappointment, through this season of pain?

What you do in your marriage (and your future marriage for those of you aren't married now, but will be some day) is more about what you think about and how you view God than what you think about and how you view your spouse. So, can I challenge you now, my good brothers and sisters: no matter how old you might be, no matter how long you've been married are you devoted to God with your marriage? I want you to be devoted to your spouse; that's required by God. But that fixes itself when you devote yourself to God. So, how's your connection with God? Are you listening to him? Are you being obedient to him? Is he your greatest desire? That's your first question, your first step, as you prayerfully ask God to help you have a marriage in Christ.

Can I give you some encouragement? God is able, friends, to do far more than you ask or imagine. I know some of you married folks out there have given up. You have settled for a marriage that's less than God promises. Believe that God can make a difference. Not in your marriage; not in your spouse... in you. He can change you. He can change your desires. He can forgive your selfishness. He can help you see differently. God is able.