

"ONE FLESH": A SAMPLE SERMON OUTLINE

Scripture Text: Genesis 2:18-24

Introduction: Marriage Under Siege

Marriage is in trouble in America.

- The traditional idea that marriage is a lifelong commitment has been undermined by the divorce revolution. Today, nearly half of all marriages end in divorce.
- The traditional idea that marriage is the only appropriate context for sexual relations has been undermined by the sexual revolution. Premarital sex, cohabitation, promiscuity, and infidelity all stretch traditional boundaries to the breaking point.
- Now, the most fundamental definition of marriage itself - as the union of one man and one woman - is being challenged by homosexuals who demand the right for same-sex couples to "marry."

Yet at the same time, social science research has uncovered a large and growing body of evidence that marriage has significant benefits for husbands and wives, and for their children. Put simply, families headed by married husbands and wives are:

- happier
- healthier
- more prosperous

than people in other types of households.

Given the clear social benefits of marriage, and the threats now facing it, it is important to ask, what can we as the church do to protect marriage from being deconstructed, redefined, or simply rendered irrelevant?

To answer that question, we must first address a more fundamental one:

I. What is Marriage For?

Marriage is an institution created by God. That much is clear from Genesis 2:18-24 (NIV):

¹⁸ The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

¹⁹ Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.

²⁰ So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found.

²¹ So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh.

²² Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

²³ The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."

²⁴ For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

Because it was included as a part of the original creation, it is clear that God's fundamental intention for marriage applies to all human beings. However, a look at the whole of Scripture reveals that marriage has special meanings for the people of God.

A. Theological Meanings of Marriage

1. Reflecting the Nature of God

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity says that there is only one God, but that God exists as three persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Father, Son, and Spirit are the same in that they all possess the same divine nature; yet they differ in roles and personality.

This combination of "sameness" and "difference" also characterizes humanity. Indeed, it may be this combination that reflects "the image of God" (Gen. 1:26). In Genesis 2, Adam names the animals, but they are not "suitable" companions for him, because they are not the same as him - they are not human. To create a "suitable helper" for Adam, God takes a part of Adam's body to fashion one the same as Adam - another human being. Yet the person God creates is also different from Adam - a woman, not a man. The human race is incomplete without both male and female. Yet when they unite to become "one flesh" (Gen. 2:24), their oneness - despite their difference - reflects the oneness of God, despite the plurality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

2. Symbolism of Marriage

a. Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the covenant of marriage serves as a metaphor for the relationship between God and the people of Israel.

The worship of other gods (idolatry) is viewed as the equivalent of adultery, with Israel as the unfaithful spouse. (see Jeremiah 3:6, 8)

b. New Testament

In the New Testament, marriage is seen as a metaphor of the relationship between Christ and the Church. (Ephesians 5:21-33; Revelation 19:7-9).

3. Marriage advances God's purpose in salvation

a. Old Testament

In the Old Testament, God's desire to live in community with humankind (those who bear his image, yet are different from him) is manifest in his relationship with the nation of Israel. Yet the nation is the outgrowth of the 12 tribes, which are the outgrowth of extended patriarchal families, which are the fruit of marriage and procreation. Thus, marriage is the seed for the community of God's people on earth.

b. New Testament

In the New Testament, loyalty to the biological family of nation and tribe is largely supplanted by loyalty to the family of Christ - that is, the universal church. However, marriage, family, and home retain important roles in the spread of God's kingdom through evangelism. This role is fulfilled in the witness of a believing spouse (1 Peter 3:1-6), in the teaching of children (Ephesians 6:4), and in the service to the church offered by couples such as Priscilla and Aquila (1 Corinthians 16:19).

B. Universal Purposes of Marriage

While marriage has certain specific meanings, both symbolic and functional, within the order of salvation, it also has some broader purposes that are rooted in the order of creation itself. Therefore, these purposes apply to all marriages, even those of unbelievers or of other faiths. These purposes must therefore lie at the heart of our civil laws defining and regulating marriage.

1. Companionship

Psychologists say that human beings have a fundamental need for "stable primary bondings" with other people. Yet that merely confirms the Genesis account, in which God says simply, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). It is to provide "a helper suitable for him" that God creates the woman. And the two becoming "one flesh" is in part a spiritual event reflecting the emotional bonding of the two.

However, there is danger in assuming that companionship alone defines the purpose of marriage. Homosexual activists argue that this is the case, and that therefore same-sex pairings that provide a desired companion should also be recognized as marriage. Yet this same Genesis passage that speaks of the man's need for companionship (Gen. 2:18-24) also clearly shows God filling that need with another person who is like the man, yet also different. She is someone who, by being of the opposite sex, serves to complement the man, not merely mirror him. Marriage unites opposites, each of whom has what the other lacks, and only in this way does it resolve the incompleteness that each feels when alone.

Furthermore, if one focuses exclusively on companionship as the purpose of marriage, it may lead to an excessively individualistic approach, geared only toward meeting the self-centered desires of the individual. Yet marriage has a social function that goes beyond such limits.

2. Regulating sexual behavior

In one sense, regulations to limit sexual behavior outside of marriage - whether by religious teachings, social taboos, or civil laws - can be seen as attempts to protect the institution of marriage. The uniqueness and permanence of marriage, and the exclusiveness and trust necessary for its success, are all threatened by extra-marital sexual activity.

However, in another sense, marriage itself can be seen as an institution that serves the purpose of regulating sexual activity by channeling and containing it within specific boundaries. To do so is essential, because even the most private sexual acts can have destructive public consequences (see 1 Corinthians 6:12-20).

To cite only the most obvious examples, sex outside of marriage results in the birth of children who are deprived of the benefits of growing up with both a mother and a father, while sex with multiple partners results in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Ironically, both of these problems have increased, not decreased, since the invention of the birth control pill and penicillin - the technologies that were supposed to insulate us from these consequences.

Anthropologist Frank Beach has written, "There is not, and can never have been, a true society without sexual rules." Yet the U. S. Supreme Court seems to have endorsed exactly that nightmarish vision in its June 2003 decision striking down the Texas sodomy law.

As with the purpose of companionship, the purpose of marriage in regulating sexual behavior is particularly distorted - or denied outright - by the homosexual movement. Although a few so-called "conservative" homosexuals speak of the benefits of same-sex civil marriage in "civilizing" the behavior of homosexuals and taming their promiscuity, this is naive in the extreme. An abundance of research shows that homosexual men are particularly promiscuous, making provision for casual sex partners on the side even if they are in a "long-term partnership." And no homosexual activist group has ever said that they will call on homosexuals to abstain from sex outside of marriage if they are granted the right to legally marry.

Therefore, if same-sex couples are granted that "right," we can expect the following:

- A far smaller proportion of homosexuals than of heterosexuals will be willing to accept the responsibilities of marriage.
- Most of those homosexuals (particularly homosexual men) who marry for the financial benefits they can gain will continue to have relationships that are neither permanent nor sexually faithful and monogamous.
- Rather than changing the behavior of homosexuals, this radical social experiment will further undermine society's conception of marriage and thus weaken the institution.

3. Procreation and Child-Rearing

That reproduction of the human race is one of the central purposes of marriage is clear from God's mandate to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.

For the human race to "be fruitful and increase in number," it was clearly necessary that man and woman come together in a procreative act.

Throughout church history there have been disagreements, however, about whether procreation is an absolutely essential purpose of marriage. Some married couples are unable to bear children because of infertility, and some because of age. "Barrenness" no longer bears the stigma that it did, for example, in Old Testament times. Through artificial or natural family planning, some couples simply choose not to have children. Yet almost no one ever questions that such couples are legitimately married.

This has led some to dismiss procreation as a central purpose of marriage at all. Homosexual activists are particularly fond of this argument, for the obvious reason that same-sex couples are inherently incapable of reproducing without outside help.

But barring same-sex couples from marrying, while allowing infertile opposite-sex couples to do so, is not a contradiction. A couple that doesn't want children when they marry might change their minds. Birth control might fail for a couple that uses it. A couple that appears to be infertile may get a surprise and conceive a child. The marital commitment may deter an older man from conceiving children with a younger woman outside of marriage. Even a very elderly couple is of the structural type (i.e., a man and a woman) that could theoretically produce children (or could have in the past).

And the sexual union of all such couples is of the same type as that which reproduces the human race, even if it does not have that effect in particular cases. While the significance of man and woman becoming "one flesh" (Genesis 2:24) goes beyond the mere physical act of sexual union, it certainly encompasses that as well. The male and female bodies are clearly designed by God to complement one another in the act of intercourse. Two men or two women can achieve only a crude and often dangerous simulation.

It must be admitted that society's interest in marriages that do not produce children is less than its interest in marriages that do. However, we still recognize childless marriages because it would be an invasion of a heterosexual couple's privacy to require that they prove their intent or ability to bear children.

There is no need or reason, though, to extend "marriage" to same-sex couples, which are of a structural type (two men or two women) that is intrinsically incapable - ever, under any circumstances, regardless of age, health, or intent - of producing babies naturally. In fact, they

are incapable of even engaging in the type of "one-flesh" sexual union that results in natural reproduction. And it takes no invasion of privacy or drawing of arbitrary upper age boundaries to determine that.

Another way to view the relationship of marriage to reproduction is to turn the question around. Instead of asking whether actual reproduction is essential to marriage, ask this: If marriage never had anything to do with reproduction, would there be any reason for the government to be involved in regulating or rewarding it? Would we even tolerate the government intervening in such an intimate relationship, any more than if government defined the terms of who may be your "best friend?" The answer is undoubtedly "no" - which reinforces the conclusion that reproduction is a central (even if not obligatory) part of the social significance of marriage.

II. How Can We Protect Marriage?

Here are some steps that you can take personally to observe this first annual event:

- Work on the quality of your own marriage. Take time to be alone together and enjoy one another. Talk to your spouse openly and lovingly about any problems in your marriage. Seek counseling if you are having serious difficulties.
- Teach your children to honor marriage. Teach them to abstain from sexual relations before marriage. Be a good model for them of the proper relationship between man and woman, husband and wife, and mother and father.

There are also steps that churches can take:

- Require premarital counseling for every couple seeking to be married in your church.
- Offer marriage counseling for those who need help in their marriages.
- Set up mentoring programs whereby older married couples can serve as mentors to engaged or recently married couples.

And finally, there are steps that we can and must take as citizens to protect and defend marriage:

- Urge public officials to support marriage and family-friendly policies that give positive incentives for marriage and that reward responsible parents.
- Urge state legislators to roll back "no-fault divorce" laws and implement marriage reforms such as "covenant marriage."
- Urge schools to adopt marriage and family curricula that encourage sexual abstinence until marriage.
- Urge state legislators to adopt or strengthen Defense of Marriage Acts or state constitutional amendments that limit marriage and its legal benefits to unions of one man and one woman.
- Urge your Member of Congress, Senators, and President Bush to support a federal marriage amendment to the U. S. Constitution, which would define marriage as being limited to one man and one woman and would bar judges from granting marriage or its benefits to same-sex couples, the unmarried, or groups.

- Support, volunteer for, donate to, and vote for candidates for public office at all levels who pledge to limit marriage and its benefits to unions of one man and one woman.
- Actively oppose and vote against candidates who refuse to defend the definition and institution of marriage.
- Write letters to the editor of your local newspaper urging your neighbors to do all of the above.

Fifty years of the sexual revolution has led to an explosion of pornography, promiscuity, cohabitation, and divorce, and all have weakened marriage. Yet now, powerful forces in our society want to change the very definition of marriage itself - in effect, defining marriage out of existence.

Unless we as Christians (or as Jews, or simply as Americans) speak up, we could lose marriage within the next generation. The time to speak in defense of marriage is now.

Speak now - or forever hold your peace.

This sample sermon outline was prepared by the Reverend Peter Sprigg. Mr. Sprigg is Vice President for Policy at the Family Research Council in Washington, D.C. He is also an ordained minister in the American Baptist Churches USA, and previously served as Pastor of the Clifton Park Center Baptist Church in Clifton Park, New York.

*Many of the ideas in this outline were drawn from the book *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective*, by Stanley J. Grenz (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).*

Users of this sermon may adapt it by using personal illustrations and incorporating any theological distinctives of their own church tradition (such as a sacramental view of marriage).