

The Mystery of Marriage

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We are living in one of those hinged times in history--one of those incredible transitional moments when the whole process and context of societal change is raising more fundamental issues than any previous generation ever had to face. It is like we are on a great expressway where issues and events and people and truths and lies are being sped along. As we as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ engage this dominant mass culture, it is easy just to get on the entrance ramp to this great expressway of confusion and be swept along so quickly that we forget to ask the most important questions of life. We fail to look at things as God would have His people to see them. We are living in a paganized time. But this isn't new: Read the Old Testament. Read the Book of Deuteronomy. It isn't a new thing, but there are many Christians who are being newly awakened to the fact that we live in a paganized age.

I want to give you the symptoms of a paganized age. Pagans speak of holy things as if they were lowly, and pagans speak of lowly things as if they were holy. Therein lies the confusion. The pagan world, the pagan mind, and the pagan culture worship lowly things and disparage holy things. That is the essence of paganism.

When we talk about sex and gender and marriage; therefore, we are going to be speaking about things the world talks a lot about. The problem is the world takes the lowly and calls it holy. The world doesn't know what to do with sex. It either corrupts sex into the lowest form of human expression or it elevates sex to the level of worship--as if sex was the greatest, highest, purest thing in all the world--which it is not and never has been. As God's people, however, we are not going to talk about lowly things in a holy way or holy things in a lowly way. We are going to talk about holy things in a holy way. Quite simply, we are the last people on earth who can talk about sex and know what we are talking about. We are the last people on earth who can have a sane, healthy, holy conversation about this incredible thing God has given us.

Today, marriage is a flashpoint of cultural confusion. Americans still marry, many of them again and again. Marriage is an opportunity for a festival or a party, but it has also been so humiliated and so redefined that it bears little resemblance to what we find in Scripture. Feminists hate the idea of marriage. It is seen, as Betty Freidan said 40 years ago, as a "prison of domestic captivity." Gloria Steinham, one of the most famous of the feminist theorists, said, "A woman needs a husband like a fish needs a bicycle." She got married in her sixties. Evidently, that fish decided she needed a bicycle.

The sad reality is that the world looks at marriage and says it is about limitation. To the heterosexual who thinks in a worldly way and with a paganized mind, marriage says "one" when no one wants to say "one." The homosexual also sees marriage as limitation, because marriage says of the union of man and woman, "This is norm; this is purpose; this is design." Thus, when you look at what is happening in the courts, in the culture, in our political conversation, you understand that marriage is a battleground. The world isn't sure it knows what to do with it, but it knows it is important: when we define marriage, we are defining norm, expectation, design, and purpose.

Where should we as Christians look for a holy conversation about this holy reality? I would suggest we turn to Genesis 2. If all we had for our conversation about marriage was the first two chapters of Genesis, we would basically have all we need to understand that God is doing something of urgent and eternal importance in marriage, and that marriage concerns His original design in creation for His glory.

Now that last word is all-important here. Our conversation about marriage is going to center on the fact that marriage is one of God's central means of displaying His glory in this world. So when we talk about sex or gender or marriage or any of these related issues, the basic questions always are, "Where is God's glory? How will God's glory be demonstrated? How must we order our lives and rearrange our thinking so that our greatest concern is to see the glory of the one true and living God demonstrated in His creation for His good pleasure and as a witness to His greatness?"

We will begin in Genesis 2. It is an incredible passage. Most of you probably think you already know the story, and you probably do. But there is something here I think is often missed. Beginning at verse 18:

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him. So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (Genesis 2:18-25 ESV)

Here we have the historical narrative of the creation of woman and of the establishment of marriage, and it begins with God's sovereign declaration that it is not good for man to be alone. This was not Adam's self-realization. Adam did not come himself to the understanding that it was not good for himself to be alone. He did not know any better than being alone. It was God's sovereign authority and God's purpose in creation to declare that it was not good for Adam to be alone. Man's aloneness was by God's design; it anticipated His creation of woman.

But here is the interesting thing that is often missed. God declares that "it is not good that the man should be alone," (v. 18) and then He reveals his purpose as Creator: "I will make him a helper fit for him, a complement. I will complete the man in the helper I will create for him" (v. 19). In our imagination, we tend to move immediately to the creation of Eve. But that is not what happens in the text. Notice the next verse: "So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them." What in the world is going on here? All of a sudden we have zoology. We

have the story of Adam the animal-namer, and this seems disjunctive. What is going on here? Well, just ponder with me for a moment what Adam learned from naming the animals.

One of the crucial things here is the demonstration of Adam's authority in creation. The authority to name a thing is a huge power. It was of course a designated authority, a delegated authority, but it was authority all the same. Human beings therefore are not mere animals in the company of other animals. We are the bearers of God's own image, given responsibilities of dominion and stewardship. We are unique in creation.

But what do you think Adam learned from naming the animals? Well, he must have noticed there is a he and there is a she--a he-cat and a she-cat, a he-dog and a she-dog, even a he-eagle and a she-eagle. You see, Adam must have learned from this that although he had an authority over these animals, they had a completeness he did not have. We are just not reading that into the text; the verdict is explicit here in Genesis 2:20: "But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him." There was not found a complement for him. He saw every animal. He looked at the entire animal kingdom and found no fitting helper for him. He was not completed in any of them. It was only at that point that, in verse 21, the Bible says, "The Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into woman and brought her to the man."

How did Adam respond when he saw the woman God had created for him? He says, "At last." You see, through this whole lengthy, incredible process of naming the animals, Adam had come to the conclusion that it was not good for him to be alone. So he says, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This is me, this corresponds to me, this complements me. She is not me, but she is like me." This is not just a matter of "flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones." Adam sees a fellow image-bearer of God. He has found the one that God has created especially for him, the helper who completes him. The text concludes: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." And then the divine verdict: "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed."

This is one of the most powerful verses for our contemporary consideration. How in the world was it that Adam and Eve were naked and not ashamed? That is what we want, isn't it? Isn't that what we desire--to be before our Creator as naked and not ashamed? I want to promise you today that in the midst of a paganized world, in the midst of a confusing age, in the midst of so much corruption and confusion, we need to recover the fact that in the sanctity of Christian marriage, we come as close as we can get to being naked and not ashamed before our Creator. There is God's purpose.

Gender and marriage then are not incidental. They are vitally important. Gender is a part of God's original design. The difference between male and female is God's glory. Their sameness is God's glory. Their need for the other is God's glory. The satisfaction of the man in the woman is God's glory. The satisfaction of the woman in the man is God's glory. The satisfaction of God's people in the pleasures of marriage is God's glory. The reproduction of God's people, the gift of children, is God's glory. Living life together as husband and wife in sickness and in health, till death they do part, is God's glory. This whole one-flesh relationship--that is God's glory.

The importance of marriage is not confined to Genesis. The entire Bible shows that God's glory is displayed in the covenant of marriage. Through narratives, commandments, laws, proverbial words of wisdom, the Song of Solomon, and the teachings of Jesus, we see the importance of marriage in God's plan to declare His own glory. How do we pull all these things together? In 1 Corinthians 7, the apostle Paul by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit deals with marriage and helps us to understand these things. He begins in verse 1 of chapter 7:

Now concerning the matter about which you wrote: It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. I wish that all were as myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion. (1 Cor. 7:1-9)

Embedded in this text are precepts and principles meant for us in our own sexually confused day. I want to make a statement which I know you are likely, at least in your spirit, to want to reject. I want to suggest to you that there is no biblical category of enduring singleness as an aspiration. There is no biblical category of enduring singleness, except for the gift of celibacy for God's glory in gospel service. Now, this is counterintuitive because we live in a day where we cherish our ability to define our own existence and to choose our own lifestyle. We live in a day of confusion in which marriage has been so marginalized that it is now merely one option among others. In society and even in many churches, enduring singleness is seen as one more lifestyle option. And this is especially true of men, particularly the high number who conveniently self-rationalize that sex before marriage is biblically okay, often with the high-sounding cover that, of course, this is true only as long as it's in the context of a "loving relationship."

I believe the Scripture does not leave that option open to us, except in that extraordinary circumstance of God giving the gift of celibacy to certain individuals for His glory and for gospel service. Paul was very concerned about this. "I say this," he says in verse 6, "as a concession, not a command. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another." Celibacy is a gift, and marriage is a gift. You have to know which is yours.

To some of you, God will give a divine mission in life for the cause of His glory, for the furtherance of the gospel, for the health and the holiness of the church--the gift of celibacy, rather than the gift of marriage. That does not mean that you are any less a man, or any less a woman. It means that God, for His glory, for His church, is going to complete you in this life in a different way than He completes us in marriage.

But Paul gives a critical tripwire here having to do with self-control and passion. He writes in verse 9, "But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion." Let me be brutally honest. If you have been given the gift of celibacy, you will be able to say before your Creator and Lord, "I can gladly live out my days without the pleasures of sex, without the company of a spouse, and I can do so praising Your name, trusting you for my every provision. I am ready to be deployed in Your service to Your glory." If you can honestly say that, and if other members of the body of Christ who know you well are able to see that in you as well, then go and seize the mission the Lord would give you, and fulfill it to His glory. I believe, however, that celibacy is a rare gift. Most of you do not have it, and you know that because verses 8 and 9 apply directly to you. You are aflame with passion. You are living in expectation and anticipation, and that should be holy too. Just as the celibate need to trust God for every provision for their completion, so must you.

My concern is that the sin of sloth has invaded the Christian church on the issue of marriage, so that many young adults think of marriage as something I will get to eventually. One day I hope to be married, they think, but it will come after this and after that and after the other thing. In the meantime, they think that singleness comes with all kinds of pleasures and a freedom from responsibility. The single life has no diapers. It lacks responsibility that comes with marriage. It lacks accountability. For most of us as Christians, marriage is one of the most crucial issues of our accountability before God. It is one of the most crucial issues in our discipleship, and so we should first of all understand that our responsibility as a counter-cultural people, claimed by God's grace, purchased by Christ's blood, is not just to be men and women, whatever that means in this society, but to be husbands and wives and fathers and mothers. It means that you, in this generation, must understand that marriage is not a lifestyle option. Marriage is not something you should merely look forward to at some point in your life when you think that you are ready for it and you have made partner in the law firm. Marriage in Scripture is an expectation. Without the gift of celibacy, adulthood equals marriage. Obviously, that is not the definition honored in our society.

I want to speak about four functions of marriage. The first is partnership. This is directly revealed in 1 Corinthians 7:4: "For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does." That is incredible. The partnership between man and wife is so radical that we actually forfeit autonomy, which is difficult for us to comprehend today. We prize our autonomy, but marriage says, "You don't have any autonomy." In marriage, there is no more "I," but only "we." Marriage is a partnership.

The second function of marriage is protection. We all need more protection than we would like to admit that we need. One of the differences between men and women is that we need some fundamentally different kinds of protection. Now, I know chivalry is supposed to be dead, but not among God's people. Among God's people we understand that a man is to protect a woman--to protect her honor, her heart, her reputation, sometimes even her health and her safety as well. Guys, that is our God-given job. Just read the Bible. But there is also a very important protection a woman gives a man in marriage--the protection of his passions. Men, we need in humility to confess that we need a wife to protect our honor, our passions, our integrity. We need her there to remind us at every moment, "You belong to me before God. You owe me all of your sexual

passion. You owe me all of your sexual interests. God has given us to each other and you may not look outside this covenant of marriage where your passions might lead you. I am your protection.”

Procreation is the third function of marriage. You wouldn't know that from a secular conversation. We live in an age in which babies are considered the accidental bi-product of sexual passion. They are accidents. But there is in the Bible an unequivocal message that from the very beginning, God's purpose in our sexuality, in our gender, in the covenant of marriage, was that children be born and that His glory be demonstrated in the gift of children, the receiving of children, the blessing of children, and the raising of children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. God makes us who we are to be by shaping us and carving us and molding us and wounding us and healing us in the context of marriage and parenthood.

I love Martin Luther, for so many reasons. He was a very large man in every way. For one thing, Luther gives us a wonderful recovery of the domestic life. His love for Katie and Katie's love for Luther is absolutely magnificent. Luther loved the family. He loved all the chaos of the family. In the Luther household, the kids were running in and out. He was disciplining them, teaching them, enjoying them, putting them on his knee, holding them up before his friends. I love Luther also because he was a seminary president, and he had such wisdom in dealing with seminarians. When a young man would marry, Luther always gave him an exhortation. He would take the young man aside and tell him, “Understand this, my son, angels smile every time a mother changes a diaper, but angels laugh every time a father changes a diaper, and angels love to laugh!” “God is going to do something in you,” Luther would say, “and it isn't going to happen any other way than through the changing of diapers and the holding of hands and the process of being a father.”

Procreation is an essential part of marriage. The separation of passion and pleasure and all the other gifts of marriage from procreation is a foreign, unnatural thing that ought always to be called into question by the Word of God. I am not saying that a Christian couple may never use any methodology of birth control and timing--that is not my argument. But I want to make the point emphatically that the rise of the contraceptive mentality is a deadly thing to the glory of God. The assumption that children are an intrusion into our marriage and the sometimes byproduct of the act of sex is a deadly thing to the glory of God.

The fourth function of marriage is pleasure. We know this because we have read Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. We know this because we have read the narratives of the Scripture. We know this because we have read the Song of Solomon. We know this because God looked at His creation and declared that it was good. One of the reasons we hear so little about this from some quarters is because we as evangelicals have no theology of embodiment. We tend to be Gnostics of sorts, talking about ourselves as merely spiritual beings, with the body being just what we happen to live in. But understand that God made us in these bodies to His glory, and the bodies tell us many things. For one thing, a man's body says that he is to be united to a woman and a woman's body says that she is to be united to a man. Adam in the garden was man, but he really wasn't fully male until there was a female. Our bodies tell us something. Our drives tell us something. Do not despise what God has put within you. I speak both to women and to men, but particularly to guys. Do not despise the passion for sexual union that God has put within you. Do not slander

the goodness of God's creation. We were made for marriage. We are called to marriage, and all the unrest, the unsatisfaction, the anxiety, the disquietude in our souls is meant to drive us towards the satisfaction that God intends for us only in the covenant of marriage.

Scripture says that the sex drive is put in us by God, amazingly enough, to drive us to holiness in marriage, to drive us to throw ourselves upon the mercy of our Creator saying, "I cannot handle this," and to trust God's provision both for a spouse and for grace and mercy to arrive at that day when the covenant is made

I also want to speak about four enemies of marriage. The first is defilement. Hebrews 13:4 says, "The marriage bed is to be held in honor and undefiled." Defilement, most classically by adultery, is a huge problem because it violates that which God has declared to be holy--the covenant made before Him, the promise made by a husband to a wife and by a wife to a husband to "keep only unto you until death do we part." Adultery is an abomination in God's sight. It is an ugliness over which the people of God should be heartbroken, and the church in this generation is going to be judged, I submit to you, because we take such things lightly and we do not exhort each other to holiness in marriage. This is no small thing.

Fornication is also a defilement of marriage. It is not exactly the same thing as adultery. It is sex before marriage by unmarried partners. When the Bible says that Adam "knew" Eve, that is not a euphemism. I think that it is just about as explicit as it gets, because what happens in the act of sex is the transmission of a knowledge, a knowledge that should only be shared between a husband and a wife before God. When that knowledge is shared with another, it is an awful knowledge to have. Marriage is weakened, the marriage bed is defiled, and husband and wife arrive at the marriage bed with knowledge they should not have. Around too many marital beds are a host of others who are there in spirit: previous partners known, previous experiences shared. So what do you do if right now, you are one who has known fornication? Trust the grace and mercy of God, and know that it will be for you a painful prompt to holiness in marriage, a humbling reminder to claim the grace of the all-sufficient Savior for the forgiveness of your sins.

Divorce is the second enemy of marriage. God is explicit about divorce--He hates it. We must be the people for whom divorce is inconceivable. That the church has accommodated the divorce culture is evidence to the world that we are not serious about the gospel.

Divergence is the third enemy of marriage. The Wall Street Journal, in a review of the 1990s, talked about it as the decade beginning with the DINKS (double income, no kids) and ending with the DINS (double income, no sex) because husbands and wives are both professionals, both involved in life, both traveling, both having their own lives, their own autonomy. The cartoon accompanying the story was of a husband and a wife in bed, each with a laptop computer. Divergence is a deadly danger.

The last enemy of marriage is delay. Delay--this is where I get into trouble when I talk about this in churches, because people get angry. The average age for a first marriage of a white male in America, according to the 2000 census, is 27.5. Updated data indicates it is now over 28. For a white female, the average age for a first marriage is about 26.4. In the year 1900, the average boy reached sexual maturity at about age 15 and married generally by 20. The average girl reached

sexual maturity at about 14 and married somewhere between 18-20. Today we have a situation in which puberty and sexual maturity come at about age 13. Now, what have we done here? We have created this incredible span of time where sexual passion is ignited, but there is no holy means for it to be fulfilled.

I want to speak of one sin that I think besets this generation. It is the sin of delaying marriage as a lifestyle option. This is a problem shared by men and women, but it is primarily a problem for men. We have established a boy culture in which boys are not growing up into men. Guys, God has given us a responsibility to lead, to take responsibility as a man. Does that mean having a job? You bet it does. Does that mean being productive? You bet it does. It means also taking the initiative to find a godly wife, to marry her and be faithful to her in every way, and to grow up to be one who is known as “husband,” and by God’s grace eventually as “father.” Sometimes, men think they will put off being a husband and father until they can establish their professional identity. I would beg you to rethink all of that. What is the ultimate priority God has called us to? Is the crucible of our sanctification going to be our jobs? No, the Scripture is clear that God will sanctify us largely through our marriages.

The injury that comes by delay is multiple. The longer you wait to get married, the more habits and lifestyle patterns you will have that will be difficult to handle in marriage. The more you as an adult define yourselves as an “I,” the harder it will be to become a “we.” Of course God’s grace can build a wonderful marriage even when people marry well into adulthood. If you are in that situation right now, then be determined from this very moment to fulfill God’s purpose and calling in your life by finding that spouse. Find that woman God has for you, marry her, and say from henceforth and forevermore, “I am planting a stake in the ground, a line on the calendar, a mark in my life that from this point on we are going to seek in every way to reflect God’s glory in marriage.” And notice men, you bear the bigger burden here because you have the responsibility to be the initiator and a spiritual leader. You must assume leadership in taking premarital sex off the table. You must prepare yourself for the task by becoming a godly man worthy of a godly wife, a man who has already decided to enter into a lifetime commitment with the wife God is preparing for him, before even seeking her.

And if you are yet young, I want to exhort you to think of marriage not as something that is out there somewhere on the horizon, but as one of the nearest responsibilities you now face. You have got to be urgently seeking a spouse as much you would seek what God would have you to do vocationally, as much as you would seek what God would have you to do in terms of your mission for life. And yet, remember that your role in this seeking process is faithfulness. God is in charge of results and His timing or outcome for us may diverge from ours. God cares more about our heart’s desires than actual results. Prayer, patience and humility are the foundations of this process.

Get serious about this. Understand it as a matter of accountability. Understand that delay can equal disobedience. Seize the responsibility. Go for the maximum display of God’s glory. Do not be satisfied with anything less. Stay pure until marriage, trust God in all things, honor marriage in every respect, let the marriage bed be undefiled, and live out God’s passion as married couples. Show God’s glory in marriage.