

The Gift of Marriage: Biblical Foundations

Session 1

THE GIFT OF MARRIAGE: BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

by

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INTRODUCTION

It has been said: "Marriage is that institution where those who are outside want to get in, while those on the inside want to get out!" It is also the oldest social institution in the history of mankind, as old as mankind itself. The first mention of Man in the Bible immediately implies marriage; "male and female He created them." Human society actually needs Marriage. It is ironic that we do not seem to know what to do with something so vital to human survival.

I suppose that any mention of marriage these days brings mixed sentiments. There are many young people who are not contemplating marriage for themselves; it is not their desired goal. Other young people want to marry but on their own terms, in their own time. What is becoming apparent is that marriage is no longer about self-giving, but more and more what 'I' want! The same attitude is seen in decisions about starting a family; why, when and whether it is necessary to have children? Technology is pitching in to offer more options, some good and some very questionable.

Besides, there is a paucity of good role models of healthy marriages for young people. To some, marriage looks more like a curse than a blessing.

The Church needs to speak to marriages today. Fortunately we are seeing a new era when the Church is more and more open to discussing Marriage and issues of sexuality among young people. It is important to redeem marriage and place it where it belongs; it is God's gift in creation and Jesus affirmed this in the New Covenant.

God the Trinity is a Relational God. This means that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, who is Three Persons, is simultaneously relationally ONE God. So God creates man and woman "in our image" (Gen 1.26). We are allowed into the divine conversation as the Trinity contemplated the creation of Man and Woman. It is undeniable that at creation God the Trinity was present and the work of creation can be said to be co-equally the work of God the Father, of God the Son and of God the Holy Spirit.

It is important then to recognize this dimension of our 'God-image'. Indeed when this creation is elaborated further (Genesis 2.18-25), it is indisputable that God's plan was to give

man a partner who would relate with him intimately, a companion. Thus Adam's first words about the woman show a relationship with her that God intended.

THE MARRIAGE GOD MADE

The first chapter of Genesis is introduced with the words: "In the beginning ..." (Genesis 1.1). These words apply to all creation because they tell us what God made from the beginning. Thus "in the beginning" God also said, "Let US make ..." (Genesis 1.26-28, 31; 2.18-25). This entire text answers WHY God made marriage as much as how He intended the marriage between man and woman to be. The story of beginnings is also the story of God's mandate for marriage.

Secondly, the Bible says that, once humankind had been created, "everything ... was very good" (Gen 1.31); and that includes the institution of marriage. As one African Christian Leader, Dr. Phineas Dube, often says, "Life is lived forward, but it is understood backwards." Marriage "was very good," along with the rest of creation. It only takes a look at the faces of the two being married at a wedding to realize that it was meant to be good, very good! The problem is that we are tempted to interpret marriage through our corrupted lenses, and our profligate experiences. The first "not good" (Gen 2.18) is why God created marriage; it was the need to "make him a helper fit for him," one with whom humanity would be "very good." God's Church should then very emphatically say (notwithstanding the Fall), that marriage between a man and woman is "very good."

Renowned Counseling Psychologist, Gary Collins cites the research of Prof. Robert Coombs of the UCLA's School of Medicine ("Family Shock", pp 101) in which Prof Coombs shows that there is overwhelming evidence of higher stress and other difficulties among the unmarried than for their married peers. These included more cases of alcoholism, suicide rates, mental health, life expectancy, and others! It certainly means that marriage was never meant for our ill health. In fact the same study shows that divorcees fare no better; they rank alongside the unmarried.

Thirdly, the woman created is not "Out of the Ground" but rather "From the Rib" (Gen 2.19-22). This connotes two things: first, that what is created is of the same nature as man. Therefore she is of equal worth to man and not a lesser being. This is important to counter the 'feminist' distortion regarding the full humanness and equal worth of the woman to the man. The feminist position has often defined a functional equal-ness; that as long as woman is not able to 'do' certain functions, to hold certain offices, then she is not accorded equal status. It is my contention that the equality of woman to man is a given in creation, and not in what she can or cannot do.

On the other hand, NO animal is a helper fit for man. This point need not detain us save to mention that in today's decadence, it will not be long before bestiality is given a church

platform. Such is the corruption in our world today that the Church needs to be explicit in all things godly.

Man is 'completed' (Gen 2.23) in the woman. There is implicit in this the 'otherness' – what is created is not the same as the man – “male and female He created them” (Gen 1.27). It could have read, “male/female he created them.” In fact what is created completes man precisely because she is different from man.

THE PILLARS OF MARRIAGE

Genesis 2.24 is probably the most important Bible verse on the subject of marriage – it sets forth for us the Blueprint for Marriage. It is repeated in Matthew 19.5 (or Mark 10.7) and Ephesians 5.31. Its force is comparable to becoming a Christian. When two people are married there is a life they leave, and must leave, and there is a new relationship they enter which, compared to all other human relationships there is no equal. If this does not happen the marriage must of necessity be a sick or dysfunctional marriage.

Let us then try to briefly expound on God's blueprint in this verse. This may be summarized in four important observations which we may call Pillars of Marriage:

- “A Man shall Leave.” This is not the same as forsaking to become an isolated couple without family support. It is not a change of geographical location either, but a radical change in the relationship with the Parents (this should be read to mean all other human relationships) so much so that this marriage relationship becomes the Priority human relationship for the two. It is normally symbolized in a public event (called a wedding) which proclaims the 'leaving', and a legal instrument is issued to that effect. There can be no marriage without leaving.
- The two “shall Cleave”. Cleaving is predicated on Leaving. It gives joy, continuity and permanence to the marital bond. Cleaving is more than mere feelings or the physical (animal) instincts. It must be cultivated through healthy and consistent Communication. Many marriages stumble on clogged communication channels. Actually trust (and therefore cleavage) increases with openness. Marriage needs Commitment/faithfulness to one another. Cleaving does not 'fall in' and 'out of Love' – it is what some have called 'stick-ability'! It is the friendship factor; when the two cultivate an intimate, personal and exclusive unity.
- The two “shall become One Flesh.” This is the physical relationship private to the two people. The 'One Flesh' is in turn predicated on the Cleaving; the couple's sexual needs are met according to the quality of relationship they have. Otherwise it may be likened to prostitution or tantamount to rape. This provision recognizes that sex is in the original plan of God – God intended it to be a blessing for the two. He purposed it to be enjoyed in the confines of their privacy for recreation, for childbearing and that it would be guarded by the marriage commitment. Sexual intimacy between husband and wife is not a hindrance to

spiritual life. In fact it should work toward a deeper spiritual bond for the two as they share in this most intimate of all human relationships.

• 'Full Stop'. It is not insignificant that this outline of marriage ends with a Full Stop, to signify completion of that which is defined. Marriage is complete if the first three pillars obtain. A marriage should not even be conditioned on children. A childless marriage is valid and complete. To say this is NOT to demean the place and value of children (or relatives or others) in the social context of marriage. Marriage, and therefore family, is foundational to human society. Children, as members of the family, are the next best thing that can happen to a marriage; and the Church needs to recapture this insight. There are many today for whom the end, or goal, of marriage is the two in the marriage. The present selfish aversion toward children is not God's plan. There are also others who wrongly make their marriage contingent on wealth. Now, wealth is certainly not necessary to marriage. When two people (each) leave, cleave and are joined in the one flesh, they are irrevocably married.

It is noteworthy that Genesis 2.24 is repeated twice after the Fall (cf. Matthew 19.5; Mark 10.7, 8; Ephesians 5.31). As for all created order, the Fall distorts marriage too (Genesis 3); there is introduced shame between the two (v7), guilt (v8), fear (v10) and recriminations against each other (v12). Both relationships, between God and Man on the one hand, and between man and woman on the other are impaired at all levels (cf. Romans 1.21-32). The repetition of Genesis 2.24 after the Fall implies the following:

- a) There is No Change to God's design. What God intended for marriage at creation is still in force.
- b) The Blueprint for Marriage is for ALL time. The order of creation outlined above has not changed.
- c) Jesus further reinforces God's mandate in the words, "Let no man separate" (Matthew 19.3-12). Thus divorce was never in God's purpose. We will say more on this later.
- d) We may fairly conclude that Polygamy is equally a deviation from God's plan. Suffice it to say here that the Genesis account, read alongside Jesus' words in (c) above, anticipates a monogamous marital relationship.

MAN AND WOMAN ARE COMPLEMENTARY

When God had finished His creation, He evaluated His work (Genesis 1.31). When he said that it was "very good", He meant that it met all that He desired to make. It was not a draft copy to which He would return to produce a final copy! And so was also the creation of male and female in marriage. Not least of all this is the 'complementarity' between man and woman. They fit each other. To understand this we need to look at examples of how the two complement each other; no other creation shares in this 'complementarity', not even persons of the same gender. It must be MAN and WOMAN.

a) They are physiologically complementary; biologically made for each other. It is incomprehensible what two women must do to have a sexual relationship; and it is unnatural for two men to turn a physiological 'exit' into an entry - opening the door against its hinges will certainly destroy the system.

b) They are intellectually complementary. Where men and women have employed their intellectual energies rightly the women have in particular brought more humanness to the academic enterprise. For example, it has been observed that the women are less inclined to turn their intellectual achievements into status symbols of competition.

c) They are socially complementary. BOTH men and women bring out the beauty of human society in at least two ways. The women tend to be better 'relaters,' and we may not want to imagine a society of only men/women! Such a society would not only be ridiculous, but would clearly be inhuman! And so would a marriage of one gender!

d) They are emotionally complementary. They need each other for emotional health and stability. It has been observed that women are more likely to share feelings, whereas men are quite content to relate with thoughts! These are not false categorizations invented to keep women 'in their place' as some want us to think. It is better if we recognize them so that couples can complement each other for the benefit of their marriage.

e) They are spiritually complementary. They offer different aspects of relating with God. When a child grows up without a father's love, it may complicate his/her ability to relate to God as a Father. Similarly the tenderness of the mother will do much to typify and demonstrate the tenderness of God to a child. The Bible presents God in both figures. Jesus tells us to pray to, "our Father in heaven" who loves us, knows us and is more than willing to supply our needs (Matthew 6.8, 9; Luke 11.13; 18.1-8). Our God is also likened to the tender and loving care of a mother (Psalm 131.2; Isaiah 49.15; 66.13).

Thus there is neither 'obliteration' of the other, nor 'absorption' into the other. Rather the two, man and woman, complement each other to become the "very good" that God intended and which pleased Him. God's plan from the beginning was Man and Woman, so that in marriage they may fully complement each other. That was "very good".

JESUS AND MARRIAGE

Jesus affirmed, honoured and commended Marriage. In fact, his every allusion to marriage not only reaffirms it but actually strengthens it. Although He is clear that marriage is a created institution for this world (Luke 20.27ff), He is also emphatic that it is an honourable institution to be respected by all (Matthew 19.6; Luke 16.18).

First of all, God the Son took on human form in a marriage context (Matthew 1:18-25). We know that children should be born in this same context so that they can be brought up in the love and fear of God.

The first public sign of the Incarnate God was at a wedding to which He had been invited (John 2:1-11). Jesus not only attended it, but He actually supplied what they needed to celebrate the wedding of this anonymous couple. His attendance at this function lends credence to His endorsement of marriage, and His blessing of the same.

Jesus affirms the sanctity of the Marriage union (Mark 10:1-12). He refers us to the beginning when God made marriage between man and woman – “God made them male and female.” By this He means that what God made then is still in force. Marriage between male and female is not an aberration from God’s will; He purposed it. He could not have been clearer.

Moreover God’s will for marriage is for a relationship “till death do us part.” There was no divorce “in the beginning;” divorce is an accommodation to human hardness of heart. Jesus’ statement should be read in the context of the Pharisees’ question: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” Clearly they (especially his disciples) understood Him to mean that divorce was wrong. Jesus was saying that divorce is not God’s purpose – present tense! The hard question to ask is: “Are we accommodating human hardness of heart to a point that hardness of heart is considered the norm, while brokenness and a heart of flesh are the exception?” His statement is strong enough to caution against trial marriages and contractual marriages. It is an indictment on this generation when divorce and remarriage have become so common place (Mark 10:10-12; Luke 16:18). The Church needs to prepare intending couples for a permanent union. We have been given power to unite and not to tear apart!

Furthermore, Jesus also gives place to Celibacy in Kingdom life (Matt 19:10-12). This should be read in the same light as Matthew 5:27-30; that is, if parts of our bodies are hindering our progress into the Kingdom of God, we are better off without them. Therefore if marriage stands between us and the Kingdom, we should choose the Kingdom and set marriage aside! What Jesus is saying does not nullify the importance of marriage; rather it places it in perspective vis-à-vis the kingdom of God. Celibacy, then, is enjoined for some. It is given by God as a gift to the Church, a special blessing, but not so as to supplant the place of marriage (Mark 10:1-11, Mat 19:1-12, 1 Corinthians 7:1-16).

The very next encounter in the gospels, after these passages on marriage, is with children. Jesus blesses the children in the passages immediately following the teaching on marriage. This is no accidental chronological arrangement; Children are God’s good gift in marriage (Psalm 127:3-5). It is not only right but also fitting that when two people marry child bearing is expected of them. As said earlier, children are not a hindrance to marital bliss but (rightly understood) should bring more joy to a marriage.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion then, marriage is called a mystery (Ephesians 5.32). It is NOT ultimately about 'I' and my pleasure, or what I perceive to be 'me'. It is and should reflect the holy relationship between Christ and the Church. Marriage points beyond itself to the utmost relationship in the Trinity and to the higher good, which is communion with God. This was a new teaching then; its challenge is equally true for many cultures today. 'Self-pleasure' has become the reason why we do what we do. We marry because we want to be happy. Whereas this is a legitimate desire, it will lead to frustration if pleasure is considered as the supreme end, or purpose, for a marriage.

Questions for Discussion

- Discuss the reasons why God created Male and Female. How do the Two in marriage complement each other?
- What are the challenges that the Church is facing in your context in accepting God's Design? How is the Church handling it?
- Marriage and Family: how are the two related? What is the Biblical attitude to the place of children in a family?
- How do you see the Biblical model of marriage impaired in your cultural context? What should be our response?

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