

Marriage

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[0 : 0 0] Would you please be seated? Well, it's lovely to be with you this morning. A great privilege to be able to bring God's Word to you.

Let's pray together, shall we? Father, we ask that you would teach us your truth, that we might walk in your ways.

And Father, please grant us undivided hearts that we might revere your name. And we ask this in the precious name of our Lord Jesus. Amen. I'd like to begin this morning by acknowledging that for some of you this is actually going to be a hard talk to listen to because the topic of marriage for you really is associated just with pain.

You might be a person who's single, who longs to be married, but that's not your experience. You may have faced the tragedy of losing your spouse, perhaps after decades of being married and being together.

You may have come from a broken marriage, or you might be parents who have a child who's been through a broken marriage and the sort of pain that's involved with that. Or you may be in a marriage that's not really working that well, and there's a lot of pain and there's a lot of hurt.

[1 : 1 7] And so just to talk about it touches those nerves. I just want to say to you, my goal this morning really is not to try and rub salt into wounds. My prayer is that our great and good God might have something to speak into your circumstance for good.

And some of what I'm going to say actually really applies to all of us, whether we're married or not. And that's really where I want to begin today. I want to place the whole topic of marriage in the context of Christian relationships more generally.

And if you turn to that second Bible reading, the one from Colossians chapter 3, page 1184, I think we actually see here that the way we are to relate as Christians is really determined by how God is related to us.

And you see there, verse 12, the first verse that was read to us before, Therefore as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, it says. Chosen, holy, dearly loved.

This is saying God has done an extraordinary work in your life. Chosen, God has picked you out for a special purpose.

[2 : 3 4] Made you holy despite all of your imperfections, despite all the muck, all the dirt in your life, the things you don't want anybody else to know about. Through Christ, he's washed you clean and you stand holy and perfect before him.

Dearly loved. No matter what anybody else thinks of you. No matter how anybody else treats you, he loves you.

He loves you so much, he gave up his own son in death so that you could be forgiven. And there is, of course, a word that describes God's attitude towards us in this way.

And doing this sort of remarkable work is in there. And that word is grace. Grace. His free, undeserved, lavished favour towards us.

And I want to say, if you're a Christian believer, God in his grace has changed you. He's made you a new person. You are changed. And now he calls upon us to live as changed people.

[3 : 36] Paul talks about it there as he goes on from verse 12 in Colossians 3. He talks about compassion and kindness and humility and other things like that. What's he really saying here?

He's saying, God's been gracious to you. Now you be gracious in your relationships with others. Someone hurt you? Don't pay them back.

No. Forgive them as God forgave you. Bear with one another. Don't fly off the handle at every little thing. Don't be a prickly person. It's saying. And then it says, let love be your favourite item of clothing.

What's the distinctive thing about your dress every day? What do people notice about you every day? Let it be the fact. You're a person who always looks to the needs of others around you.

This is the stuff of godly Christian relating. It all flows out of our new relationship with Christ. The challenge to relate to others as God has related to us. To follow the example of our Lord Jesus himself.

[4 : 44] Who looked not to his own interests but to the interests of others. I think all Christian relationships are really... They're meant to work like this, aren't they? But notice how profoundly significant, important and relevant this is to a marriage.

But there's a problem, right? The problem. This side of eternity... I don't know about you but I know about me. My loyalties are divided.

Part of me wants to serve Christ faithfully, wholeheartedly. Another part of me wants to think of me. Selfishness.

Right? Selfishness. This really gets in the way of marriages working well. I think the Christian author Larry Crabb, he's got quite a helpful angle on this.

He says the basic flaw in our character that ruins relationships is not just the fact that we're self-centred. It's the fact what he calls justified self-centredness.

[5 : 44] A selfishness that runs deep within us that feels entirely reasonable and acceptable. What do I mean? Well, we're pretty good at explaining away our sin, aren't we?

I had a really rotten childhood and therefore you've just got to put up with the fact that I, you know, I'm difficult to live with sometimes. Or, I've had a really hard day at work and that's why I lost my temper when I came home.

You know, perfectly reasonable. Or, this person's treated me so badly in the past I'm going to stop giving in the relationship. I'm just going to look after myself.

And when I turn the spotlight on myself, I know this is what I'm like. I know that I'm normally more overwhelmed with my own sense of hurt about what other people have done to me than I am about my own sense of selfishness.

And this problem has an awful lot to say in the context of marriage, doesn't it? Because marriage is a relationship of such intimacy, such vulnerability, that the potential to dish out hurt is enormous.

[6 : 57] And all of us who have been married, we know we've dished it out, we've received it back. That's the way we are. I just want to say, if we could actually get this stuff right, if we could actually display the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, be people of joy and peace and patience and self-control and goodness and faithfulness and love, I wouldn't need to say anything else, would I?

Our marriages would be wonderful. They'd be perfect. But as we struggle to be godly, while sin still clings to us, the Bible actually says some other things about marriage that I think help us.

So I'd like to turn now back to that passage from Genesis chapter 2, where we see the Bible's essential foundational teaching about marriage.

That's page 3 of your Bible. And I'm sure you're fairly familiar with the story, and we heard a good little description of it in that children's talk. Here's the world of paradise that God has made, right?

What did he say? He said, very good, except for one thing. It's like the master artist does this beautiful painting. He steps back, takes a look, and sees this one little spot over here isn't quite right.

[8 : 12] It was not good, we're told in verse 18, for the man to be alone. And the purpose of marriage, of maleness and femaleness, was to solve this problem of aloneness.

The man, he had other relationships, he had the animals, he even had God, but that wasn't enough. Now, here's the point. Most people think that the man being alone means his core problem was that he was lonely.

And that marriage is designed to deal with the problem of loneliness. Now, I think there's a truth to that, but I don't think it's the heart of the matter. Look at what verse 18 says. It says, It is not good for the man to be alone.

I will make a companion. No. Friend. No. Helper. Helper for him. Why does he need a helper?

I think the answer is back there in verse 15. The Lord God took the man, put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to take care of it. God had given the man a job to do.

[9 : 15] And the problem was, he couldn't do that job properly on his own. That's why he needed a helper. Now, we don't have really time to develop this idea, but I think if we really understand this, what it's trying to say to us is that God's chief purpose in marriage is to enable us to do his work in this world more effectively.

Now, let me tell you how I think our world works when it comes to marriage. We live in a very individualistic society. And many marriages function as another expression of that selfish individualism.

Except it's not just me, it's just the two of us looking after ourselves, looking after our interests, making sure that we're happy. Who cares about anybody else?

I think this is wrong. I think a selfish marriage is actually a destructive marriage. I think God has wired us to be people who look outside of ourselves.

And marriages that function this way, the way that God has designed, out of the strength of the relationships pours blessing to those around us. Okay.

[10 : 29] Notice also verse 24, very significant in this passage. That is why a man leaves his father and mother, is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Two key things to note here. One, your marriage is your primary commitment. Secondly, it's a permanent commitment. Let me just talk briefly about those two things. Primary commitment.

You leave your parents and you form a new family. Okay. What's this saying? It's saying parents, in-laws, nobody else is to call the shots in your relationship.

Your responsibility is to your spouse, not to your parents, not to your children. If you have adult married children, support them.

Don't interfere in their marriages. To the women in the room, I want to say this to you. Those of you who are mums, on Mother's Day, you are a wife above being a mother.

[11 : 32] The greatest gift you can give to your children is a strong marriage. It makes your children feel safe and secure and loved when they know you care more about dad than you care about them.

Okay. I'm not saying don't love them, but I'm saying that's one way to show you love them. Okay. Your primary commitment. Secondly, permanent commitment. Notice there, it says unite, or some versions say cling.

That means to get stuck together permanently, to get super glued together. And it says they become one flesh. That's not talking about losing your individuality and becoming clones of each other and forming some new sort of being.

No. What it's saying is it's talking about forming a new family. Now we talk about family members. This is my flesh and blood. The ancient Hebrews said this is my bone and my flesh.

That's the way they talked about becoming kin. About forming a new family. Now what's the significance of this? Well, the thing about family relationships is you're stuck with them.

[12 : 38] Right? Blood is thicker than water. They might bring you great joy. They might bring you pain. But you can't easily get rid of them. As we remember every time Christmas comes around, don't we?

Now Jesus actually makes a really big deal of this one flesh relationship. Why? Because breaking a marriage relationship is like brothers ceasing to be brothers.

That's why. This is a relationship that cannot be dismissed lightly. That ought to be characterized by commitment. To stay in a marriage and remain faithful is to be like God who is always faithful to his promises.

Now I just want to say something here. I know that some marriages don't work out. There is marriage breakdown within my own family. Okay? I know about it. I know about it. I know about it.

And God in his grace, he acknowledges our human weakness. But what I want to say this morning is let us not lighten this truth. Let us not downplay it.

[13 : 45] That when you enter into a marriage, you enter into a covenant, an intense promise of commitment. I want to urge you, keep that promise.

And breaking it is an absolute last resort. Notice also in this text, the very final verse, often overlooked. Verse 25. Adam and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame.

What picture does that conjure up in your mind? It's a beautiful picture. Here are two people, totally vulnerable, yet feeling totally safe.

This is the ideal that God wants for our marriages. Where you can open up your heart and say what's on your mind and what you feel.

And you feel safe and secure and loved and cared for simply for who you are. That's beautiful, isn't it? I know there's all sorts of unrealistic views about what love in marriage is like.

[14 : 52] You know, some of those ideas of romantic love where you feel warm and gushy all the time. And, you know, if you stop feeling that way, then you're not in love. Therefore, you go and find somebody else. That's completely ridiculous nonsense.

But here's what I want to say to you this morning. Love in a marriage is not cold, hard duty. It's this beautiful picture of openness and safety and joy and delight.

And just read the Song of Songs and you'll see more of it. And it's interesting. There's been some really good research, marriage research done in the last few decades. And it actually confirms this point.

It says, strong marriages are characterized by this sort of intimacy and connection. That's what it says. These couples, they're good friends. They know each other really well.

They relate with the warmth of friendship. They have conflict, of course, but they handle their conflict in very gentle, very positive ways. Do you know what the number one indicator of marriage breakdown is?

[15 : 53] I'll tell you. Emotional disconnection. When a couple no longer feels safe to open their heart. Where they just... Where they just...

That distance has crept in. And when they've stopped being friends with each other. Terrible thing. Not God's design at all. Okay.

So far I've said nothing about sex, have I? Well, it seems to me sex fits into this context. This broader context. It's relational. It builds relationship. You can't actually have good sex outside of strong, healthy relationship.

That's what I think. You can copulate. You can procreate. But the married women in the room know, and I hope the men in the room know, that good sex is much more than that.

God's actually designed it this way. The 24-hour foreplay of relationship. It's the way God has wired us. And while we're talking about sex, I just want to point out to you, we actually have a responsibility to our spouse in this particular area.

[17 : 00] Sometimes overlooked. Don't have time to look at the text, but have a look at 1 Corinthians chapter 7. It says there, we're told to have sex with our spouse.

Two reasons are given. One, because we actually owe them a debt. Our body belongs to our spouse. And secondly, because of immorality. And you may have different levels of sex drive.

And I know things change as you get older. Right? But note, here's the basic biblical principle. God-given responsibility to provide for our partner's sexual needs.

That's what we're called to do. There are extreme exceptions in cases of illness and disability and a history of abuse and old age and all the rest of it. But that's the basic biblical teaching.

Fully sexual marriage. But not with anyone else. Hebrews chapter 13 verse 4. Let's keep this promise.

[18 : 10] Those of us who are married. Sex outside marriage is a terribly destructive thing. I just want to mention one other thing here. I want to mention pornography.

Which is a great evil which is destroying marriages in our society. It is not a little bit of harmless fun. It is changing the wiring of people's brains.

It is damaging our young people. We need to pray and to work to protect our children and people from the damage this is going to do.

It's already doing the damage. I've seen it. It's getting worse. And if you're struggling in this area, I want to encourage you to bring the sin out of the darkness. To talk to a pastor or someone.

Everyone, get help. Because it is really, really damaging. Okay. I just want to say a few more specific words, particularly to husbands and wives.

[19 : 07] Let me speak to husbands first. I'm going to say more to them than I am going to say to the wives. Okay guys, here we go. We've got some problems. Ha ha, you knew that.

The wives all know that. Two thirds of marriage breakdowns now. It's the woman who leaves. Two thirds. And that number is going higher. What's going on?

Here's a little quote that sums it up. Women hope men will change after marriage, but they don't. Men hope women won't change after marriage, but they do.

And then they leave. Then they leave, unfortunately. I think we're pretty confused about our role nowadays. What do women want from us? Do they want a sensitive man or do they want a strong man?

Trouble is some sensitive men can be just wimps. Some strong men can be insensitive, macho pains, really. I reckon the Bible says we ought to be both.

[20 : 06] I think biblical manhood is strength with gentleness. I think it's about being tough and tender at the same time.

Okay? On the tough side. From my pastoral work over the years with couples struggling in their marriages, it's really clear women want strong husbands. Okay? Very interesting.

I've had a couple of significant illnesses over the last few decades. And when I used to get sick, my beloved would get very angry at me.

And I'd say, you know, why are you getting angry at me? I didn't intentionally get sick. I didn't go out of my way to get germs in my body. But we talked about this and worked out what was going on.

And she said, you know, basically what we worked out was, when I'm sick, I'm a typical male. I'm hopeless. And what happens? Then the buck stops with her instead of with me.

[21 : 05] And she just, even when I wasn't around all the time, the fact when I'm the backbone of the family, that's what she loved. And she felt safer when that was the case. Okay.

So here's what I want to say to you. Don't become another child to your wife, guys. Now, I might get into trouble for saying this, but I'm going to say it. Don't always play to your wife's agenda.

Be for her, but not always on her terms. It's the fact, be strong, I'm saying, be strong. It's the fact that we are not women that is actually so valuable to our wives.

On this point of being strong, again, we can't go there in detail, but I just want to point out something from Ephesians chapter 5, where it says there, what are husbands told to do in that chapter? Told, same word that's here in Colossians, they're told to love their wives three times, they're told.

In what way? Because Christ loved the church. This is our responsibility, men. Stand up. Give up your life sacrificially for your wife, like Christ did, to make her more holy and godly.

[22 : 18] Bring her good. True good. It's tough love, being that strong. It's very interesting in Ephesians chapter 5, the fact that the husband is head of his wife.

Do you know who that information is given to? Not to us husbands. It's given to our wives. We are never told, be the head. We are not told, lead our wives.

We are told, love our wives. Cherish her. Make her feel like she's precious and she's loved. And I think headship in our context, we just get too caught up in things like decision making.

I think what is absolutely clear, what our role really is, is taking the initiative in giving love to our wives and doing what's best for her. Okay, that's the tough side. What about the tender?

Well, back to Colossians 3 verse 19. You see it says there, if I can find it, yes, husbands love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Verbal as well as physical harshness, I think is on view here.

[23 : 24] Harsh criticism and speech laden with contempt is incredibly damaging to a relationship. It's actually a warning sign of a marriage in trouble. Being tender means meeting your wife where she is at.

1 Peter chapter 3 verse 7 says, live with your wife. It says, showing consideration to her, literally, according to knowledge. What can I say to you?

Do you understand what it's like to be a woman? That's a really hard thing, right? They are so complex. But what's it like, you know, in terms of the way a female body works and physiologically what goes on for them and monthly cycles and all that sort of, do you get that?

The scriptures urge us to understand that. Not only that, what it's like to be a woman, what about the unique woman you're married to? Do you understand that? What are her needs, her longings, her desires, her hopes, her dreams, her...

All of that stuff. Do you understand that? That sort of insight is what we're called to do. And I think one of the dangers for us as Christian men is to actually squash the individuality of our wives, to not let them be themselves.

[24 : 33] Our role is to help them flourish, enable their gifts and their abilities to really blossom. And strong marriages, they actually celebrate difference. They don't try and squash the other person into some role.

And that brings, I think, great richness and vitality into a marriage. So how do you actually come to this good knowledge of your wife? Well, it's going to take some time, it's going to take some effort.

It's one really important thing that you can do. They once conducted a survey, I read about this survey, they surveyed women to find out what's wrong with men.

Took a long time. Okay, took a long time. 84% of women said the biggest problem with men is they don't listen.

They don't listen. That's interesting, isn't it? Guys, don't try and fix every problem. Give her a big hug and say, oh, darling, that's terrible.

[25 : 35] Tell me all about it. And that's great. That's what she wants. Give them your time. Women love connect time. Okay, that's the husbands. Biblical terms, I think it's about strength and gentleness, tough and tender.

What about the women? Well, just very briefly, I just want to look at that verse, Colossians 3, verse 18. What does it say? Wives, submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord.

I don't think this is simply cultural. Okay? That's where I'm coming from. I think there is an order within the marriage relationship created by God. But let me tell you what I don't think it means before I tell you what I do think it means.

I don't think it means that women can't make decisions about how the family operates. It's not about decision making. I don't think it's about fitting into stereotype roles.

You know, barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen. If you read Proverbs chapter 31, you see there a portrait, beautiful portrait of a godly woman. And she is actively involved in family life, in business, in doing all sorts of stuff, and she's honoured by the community.

[26 : 43] And can I just say, if you're a younger mum with little ones, I think that portrait in Proverbs 31 is of a mature woman. Okay? A little bit further on in years.

And that's why she can do all of that stuff. So what is it? I think it's a preparedness to submit to your husband's leadership in the home. In our context, I think that means simply, don't be bossy.

Don't be a nag. And don't put your husband down. Respect him. Don't put your husband down. Don't put your husband down. Especially in public.

Around other people. Honour him. Be tender-hearted. Supportive of him. Even when he gets it wrong. Which he will. Won't he?

You know that. And if your husband is not a Christian, I want you to especially note 1 Peter chapter 3, first two verses. Wives, in the same way, submit yourselves to your own husband so that if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.

[28 : 00] There's no promises there, but the best chance of winning a husband to Christ is not by what you say, it's by what you do. Honour and serve him.

Make it a delight for him to be married to you because that sort of behaviour speaks volumes. Okay, time to stop. I want to stop with, conclude two words for you.

One, vigilance. And secondly, confidence. Okay, vigilance. What do I mean by this? Have you ever heard of the second law of thermodynamics? Thermodynamics. Must be one or two scientists in the room, I'm sure.

I know nothing about science, but I do know this. It's the principle that everything in the universe moves from order towards chaos. It's the teenager's bedroom principle. Okay?

That's what it's all about. I've got a thing that I call it the second law of theodynamics, of God dynamics. And that's this. You do not naturally drift into godly patterns of relating.

[29 : 05] It actually takes some work. Work. We have God's help, but it takes some work. And when it comes to marriage, do you know what? Grass isn't greener on the other side.

The grass is green where you water it. Invest in your marriage. Be vigilant. Secondly, confidence.

Never forget that we serve a powerful and very gracious God. And he's much more committed to the well-being of your marriage than you are.

And even a failed marriage, or even a less than what you want it to be marriage, can't separate us from his good purposes. And when you genuinely trust God, you'll have faith that your spouse is God's provision to you, even when they become old and grumpy.

Even when perhaps they start to lose their memory. You can still be there. You can still see that person as God's provision. And he is with you in this task of loving your spouse.

[30 : 13] by his spirit, he will help you to do it. Let me pray. Father, we thank you for the wonderful and precious gift of marriage, for the good that brings to us and to our society.

Father, we pray that you would do that work, that powerful work of grace in our hearts, through your Holy Spirit, to make us be people who heed your word, who look to the interests of others, whether we're married or not.

And Father, for those of us who are married, please help us to take up this challenge, to be people of grace and love in our dealings with each other. Please make our marriages healthy, strong, vibrant.

Not just for our good, but for the good of those around us. And above all, for the honour and the glory of your great and magnificent name. And we pray this through Christ our Lord.

Amen. Amen.