

Part 1: Marriage

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There was once a King, who ruled a Kingdom. The King wanted to settle up the accounts of the servants in his court, and one servant was brought before the King who owed a debt which in modern day amounted to over 3 billion dollars. The servant who obviously had no ability to repay such an obscene amount of dollars was ordered to be thrown in prison until he would be able to make right his debt.

Knowing that he would never be able to release himself from this obligation the servant threw himself upon the King and begged for mercy. Having compassion on the man, the King forgave him his debt and let him free.

The servant then left the castle and encountered a fellow servant who owed the first man a sum of several thousand dollars. The servant who had just thrown himself at the feet of the King in mercy, now threw himself onto the second servant in rage, demanding the debt be paid and the man be put in prison until he could pay the last penny.

Some other servants saw this encounter and told the King, who then summoned the first servant and said, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all the debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn't you have mercy on our fellow servant as I had on you?" So the King had the first servant thrown into prison until the final debt was paid.

Some of you may have heard this story before because it is a parable which Jesus shares with his disciples in Matthew 18. In a few weeks we will return again to this story as it relates to forgiveness. But for the time being I want to stress the point of this story as to how it relates to our relationships.

The problem in this parable is that the first servant received mercy from the King, but that abundance of mercy failed to influence the way in which he treated those around him. The point Jesus is making, is that if we really understand the debt that was paid to cover our sins, we can't help but treat other people in a different way.

If we understand the weight and the redemption of the gospel, our interactions with others will always be different because we carry with us the wealth of God's salvation. This is exactly what we are looking at in this series called Gospel-Focused Relationships and Families.

Two weeks ago we looked at singleness, which we called basically a theology of you. Who are you first and foremost in your relationship to the King, and how does that relationship change the way you serve those around you.

Jesus as God's ideal man modeled for us the basic paradigm which is at the heart of this whole series and that is this: the sum of our lives is in how we glorify God and love those around us. God will hold you responsible for the way in which you loved others and glorified God.

The reason why we need to learn to look at the gospel is that it is only in the gospel do we see the glory of God, and it is only in the gospel where we see true love. We cannot love others without seeing the glory of God, and we can't glorify God if we are not also loving others.

Today we are going to build on the foundation of glorifying God and loving other by looking at God's purpose and design for marriage. And in order to do that we are going to answer three questions: "How do we consider marriage?" "How do we understand marriage biblically?" And lastly, "What is the experience marriage in our lives?" In answering these three questions we are going to find the focus of marriage and the pattern, or paradigm that focus brings to us.

In other words what we see in the gospel concerning marriage will shape our expectations and experiences inside of our own marriages.

So our first question to day is **How do we consider marriage?** This is an important question, and one which hopefully every single person in here today would consider.

Because if you remember last time we were in this series we saw the goal of Christianity is not progression through life's stages for the sake of progression. Jesus proved that you can be a single, unmarried individual with no children and still live a life which perfectly glorifies God and serves others.

In fact Christianity was one of the first religions which actually provided affirmation, purpose and value to those who are unmarried, widowed or divorced. The greatest problem we have in life is not that we are relationally isolated from other people. It's that our sin has isolated us from a relationship with God and because of that, we like the servant in the story face an eternity of punishment.

But Jesus solved that. In order to glorify God and serve others Jesus lived the perfect life we needed to, but died as a sinner in our place. Jesus paid our debt. That means when we stand before God we won't be able to boast in our adventures, our partners, our money or our kids, we will only have Jesus to boast in. Which means we don't need anything except Jesus and a life of joyful obedience to him.

Jesus gave us freedom to not need anything. Listen to how Paul speaks about this freedom in terms of Jesus' salvation and our relationships: **1 Corinthians 7:32-38**. Now if you are single in here, you probably found this passage immensely unhelpful. It sounds like Paul is the worst person to get relationship advice here. It's as if he's writing this letter, shaking a magic 8 ball and hoping you find it helpful: Yes, No, Maybe, Ask Again Later.

But Paul's counsel here is actually remarkably consistent and helpful when it comes to how we, who have no need because of Christ, should consider marriage. For Paul it comes down to verse **1 Cor. 7:35**. Paul is after the glory of God.

Remember last week we talked about gears of a bike. Marriage, singleness, being a widow or widower, being a parent, none of them are better than any other because all of them serve the purpose of glorifying God. Singleness in many ways is easier to glorify God says Paul because you don't have to be home for dinner. You have the freedom to focus on lots of different people in many different places.

Therefore Paul's counsel for those who want to consider marriage is: be ready to work harder to glorify God. In other words if you aren't focused on glorifying God and serving others, it's probably not wise to

be married. If you are concerned with the glory of God and loving others, go ahead and marry, says Paul. In other words for Paul, romance is not the primary motivation for marriage, the glory of God is.

This sounds like marriage is cold and sterile, but what we will actually see today is that it is only a relationship which glorifies God which knows and experiences true romance. How should you consider marriage? Through the lens God's glory. This may be unsettling right now, but consider the alternatives. If we seek to consider marriage through the lens of other things we will most likely be crushed.

Consider this quote from a secular book on relationships in our modern culture: **"Marriage was an economic institution in which you were given a partnership for life in terms of children and social status and succession and companionship. But now we want our partner to still give us all these things, but in addition I want you to be my best friend and my trusted confidant and my passionate lover to boot, and we live twice as long. So we come to one person, and we basically are asking them to give us what once an entire village used to provide: Give me belonging, give me identity, give me continuity, but give me transcendence and mystery and awe all in one. Give me comfort, give me edge. Give me novelty, give me familiarity. Give me predictability, give me surprise. And we think it's a given, and romance and lingerie are going to save us with that. Ideally, though, we're lucky, and we find our soul mate and enjoy that life-changing mother lode of happiness. But a soul mate is a very hard thing to find."**

And it's true. If our guide for marriage is simply sex and companionship then we are setting ourselves up for failure. If the primary motivation for marriage is simply sexual intimacy, then it will lead to endless consumption.

It won't satisfy us and we will always be disappointed. Consider this quote from C.S. Lewis: **You can get a large audience together for a strip-tease act-that is, to watch a girl undress on the stage. Now suppose you came to a country where you could fill a theatre by simply bringing a covered plate on to the stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let every one see, just before the lights went out, that it contained a mutton chop or a bit of bacon, would you not think that in that country something had gone wrong with the appetite for food? And would not anyone who had grown up in a different world think there was something equally strange about the state of the sex instinct among us? One critic said that if he found a country in which such striptease acts with food were popular, he would conclude that the people of that country were starving."**

In a world where sex is everywhere and no one is satisfied there comes a point where we need to fess up and realize the problem is not in its availability, but in our appetite. Sex as a focus will not serve you or your spouse well.

But neither will committed companionship. Which seems to be the more admirable option of the two. But if the goal is merely a companion to journey through life with then you will ultimately become disappointed in the flaws and imperfections of your spouse, and you will become bored with the consistency you once loved. In fact there is a new TV show out right now which casts the commitment of marriage as an ominous and empty eternity together. More admirable, but equally as empty.

Let this be a brake check for your thoughts on dating and marriage. The glory of God is not only a better litmus test for when it's best to think in terms of marriage as opposed to singleness, it's also what marriage was intended to portray. Marriage is about the glory of God. This is the second question: **How do we understand marriage biblically?**

Now if you remember it was Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 who sounded dower on marriage, but consider how the same Paul writes about the beauty of marriage in Ephesians chapter 5: **Ephesians 5:25-32**.

Paul in this text sings the beauty of marriage and he is not inconsistent with his earlier thoughts. Why? Because the center of each is the glory of God. Paul wants God to be glorified and wherever that happens the most clearly, then Paul is pro that. To make his point Paul uses Genesis chapter 2. In Genesis 2, the first man and the first woman are married by God himself as God presented Eve to Adam. And God said, "Therefore man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

Why is this important? Because right after Paul quotes that in Ephesians look at what he says: **Ephesians 5:31-32**. When God gave Adam and Eve away in marriage, he gave them away as a representation of the New Adam, Jesus Christ who would one day take his own bride, the Church.

If God did not intend to save people through Jesus, then marriage would not exist. But because God created and planned to redeem this world he gave us marriage as a constant reminder and visible proclamation of our union with Christ through salvation. That means that at its core, every marriage between a man and a woman, Christian or not, is a walking illustration of God's love for the church in Jesus Christ.

This means that on a superficial level, our marriages help explain the gospel. But on a substantive level, we need to understand the gospel to understand our marriages. If we don't understand how Jesus loved us in the gospel in order to make us his bride we will have a hard time understanding our own roles and brides and grooms.

At an ultimate level you can understand the gospel without understanding marriage, but you can't understand marriage without understanding the gospel. That's what Paul is saying this is the focus of marriage: **In marriage we look to Jesus and the Church because on the cross we see God's picture of marriage.**

So what does it mean to look to Jesus and the church and have that shape our marriages. Well let me give you just one example. How did Jesus love and save his church? Well he died for it. Why did he die for it? Because he loved it. Why did he love it?

That's a very important question to answer isn't it? Why did Jesus love the church? Why would he love us?

Well look with me at Deuteronomy 7 and I want you to notice why it is that God loves Israel: **Deuteronomy 7:6-9**. Did you pick that up here? Why did God love Israel? Because he chose to love them. He loved them because he loved them.

He set his love on them by choosing them because he was a faithful God. God himself was the condition upon which he chose to love his people. Where do we see God choosing and faithful love as the church? Look at **Ephesians 1:3-4**.

God chose to love us not unconditionally, but conditionally in Christ Jesus. It is unconditional in terms of us, we didn't deserve God's love. But it is conditional in that God saw our brokenness, but because he

had chosen to love us, he did the work himself to make us lovely through Jesus Christ. This is the steadfast love of God. The basis of God's love for us is himself and his commitment to us in Jesus Christ.

In our relationship with God this brings us vast confidence. If we don't see the basis of God's love as choosing to love us in Jesus we will be crushed by our performance. We cannot perform well enough to merit God's love, but Jesus did. And he has given that performance to us. God bridged the gap in Jesus and not only does God love us, but in Christ alone do we experience that love.

What does this mean for you in relationships? You don't wait to fall in love with someone as if by accident. You at some point must choose to love that person. Why must we choose? At its core, choosing love is the most enduring love because it depends on the commitment of the lover and not the performance of the beloved.

You will change. Your spouse will change. And if we enter into marriage upon the basis of our spouse's current personality traits and present affinity, what happens when those change. I loved dancing when I dated my wife, and now I don't. I don't like to dance. What if the whole construct of my wife's love for me was that I was her perfect dance partner? Well now that has been shattered.

But what if my wife chose to love me? Then she would say, it doesn't matter if you don't like dancing. I chose to love you. I will therefore continue to choose to love you because I didn't love you dependent upon something you provide me, I chose to love you because I wanted to give you my love.

We are able to love our spouses because a choosing love depends not on the unchangeability of our spouse or the infallibility of our heart, it depends on Jesus who modeled costly and committed love towards and imperfect people. For believers there will be days where change or lack of change make it impossible for us on our own to love our spouse. But that is where Jesus' love for us helps us. His love stands in the gap and lets us love our spouses steadfastly.

This is modeled by one of my favorite quotes to use at a wedding. It's from Dietrich Bonhoeffer and it he says this, "It is not your love that sustains your marriage, but your marriage that sustains your love." Jesus helps us love broken people because he modeled commitment which saved a broken people.

That's an example of what it means to focus on the gospel and let that shape our marriages. But in closing I want to answer one more question and that question is: **What is the experience of marriage?** In other words we see Jesus choosing the church, we see the glory of God at the center of all things, but what does this actually look like in the day to day experience of marriage.

Well here is the paradigm for what our experience in marriage should be like: **Marriages dynamically represents Christ and the church, for who modeled love more than Jesus did on the cross.**

It is one thing to affirm this statement, but is another thing to be committed to live it out. To model gospel love in our marriages is to commit to experiencing costly love.

What did it cost God to choose to love the church? His son. God is the greatest lover because he has the most costly love. Our sin demanded death, and he loved us by sending his son to die for us. Jesus therefore was the picture of costly love as he gave up everything to serve his bride the church.

Marriage at its core glorifies God by portraying the beauty of redemption, and individually marriage models the husband giving his life for his wife and the wife giving her life to her husband. Marriage is a costly love.

How do our marriages display this? Through the roles of husbands and wives and the part they play in God's plan. Broadly wives are called to submit to their husbands, and husbands are called to lead wives. My guess is that even that language is offensive to some of you. But I want us to see the biblical picture Paul puts forward here: **Ephesians 5:20-28**.

I want to speak to both the posture of submission for the wives and the posture of leadership of the husband because often times we lose the context of each of these.

First for the wives, the verse we often lead with when it comes to submission is Ephesians 5:22, "Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord." But what is interesting is that there is no verb for submission in that sentence. It is right grammatically for the translators to provide that word there, but its borrowing the context from verse 21 where it speaks to the whole church submitting to one another, and verse 24 where it says, "Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands."

I point out the absence of the verb in verse 22 not because wives are not called to submit, but because the context of that submission is important. Submission without context is an exposure which no one wants. If the call to our wives is submission for the sake of submission, it is right that you should be a little hesitant. But submission of the wife is not meant to stand alone.

It is in the context of submission to each other and the submission of the church to Christ. And in this we find a wonderful atmosphere of safety and security because Christ is at the center. You see the point of distinction inside of a marriage isn't that wives submit. Yes they are called to submit, but everyone is called to submit to each other and to Christ. This is not up for debate. We all submit to each other, we all submit to Christ as we are all part of the church. The point of distinction then is not in the submission of the wives, but in the leadership of the husband.

Wives you are called to submit to your husbands and your husbands are called to make much of Christ in their leadership. This means that in the same way Eve was given to help Adam glorify God, and how the church was meant to help Jesus' work be seen and felt in our world, so to your task is to help your husband make much of Jesus. You make much of Jesus, by helping your husband make much of Jesus. There is no greater way to be selfless than to help your husband follow Christ, and yet there is not greater way to experience the love of Christ than to love your husband to Christ.

This doesn't paint submission as a passive and thoughtless posture, but one which must be bathed in deep thoughts on the glory of God and costly love which seeks to fan the flames of worship in your home. This is where you uniquely glorify God and serve others.

Now husbands, your leadership is meant to make the wife's submission a safe and blessed place. As the church thrives under the hand of Christ, so too should your wife thrive spiritually under your love. That's because the submission of the wife is not to fan your comfort, it is to make much of Christ. Submission is not about superficially pleasing you, it is about cosmically glorifying Jesus.

Here is why looking at Paul's words in Ephesians are so important. He says husbands are to love and lead their wives as Christ loves and leads the church. Now there are a couple pictures the Bible gives of Christ and the church. There is one which depicts Christ as the long coming conquering King to whom all the nations gather to serve him. But that is not the picture Paul gives here.

Paul gives the picture of Christ not as conquering King, but as the suffering servant. Dying on a cross for the sake of his bride. Husbands, men, your leadership is leadership by death.

It is therefore impossible to love your spouse well, or to see your own selfish tendencies if you do not see the costly love of Jesus in the gospel.

No duty is too low or too below you. There is no act of service which is strictly "the wife's" duty. That is to say, "I'm the husband, my wife can do this." But was Jesus too high, too good, too important, to privileged to stoop to our level and serve us? Yes! But he did it anyway. He did it because he wanted to glorify God and love us. How much more should we who have never been divine, lay down our faux-divinity and take up the service of our spouses in the lowest of places?

This is why marriage glorifies God uniquely. Because husbands and wives in their marriage serve each other into worship by leadership and submission, and the church gets the benefit of seeing these God glorifying relationships happening and it inspires them to worship the true husband.

Church, where do you experience this relationship of love and glory? Two places: one by examining to costly and choosing love between men and women in your church. Married couples, your costly love is not only something which glorifies God, but is also something which encourages and stirs others in our church to worship. Do it well for the glory of God and the love of your brothers and sisters in Christ.

But to anyone who is not married here, you also experience this beautiful marriage as the bride of Christ. Jesus has given his life for you so that you may love, support, submit to and increase his glory in all places.

We need to correct our view of marriage by seeing our lives through the lens of the greater marriage. Through faith Jesus has wed himself to you, serve him well. Glorify him and be satisfied in him. Seek to make much of him, in in that you will find your greatest satisfaction.

We are called to glorify God and love others, and Jesus has equipped his church to do that.

