

**HOW MUCH DOES IT MATTER IF CHRISTIANS LIVE TOGETHER
BEFORE MARRIAGE - Part three**

Sunday, January 22nd, 2023 - 10 a.m.

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**MAKE SURE THE MINISTER ISN'T CHEATING YOU OUT OF
SOMETHING PRECIOUS AT YOUR WEDDING CEREMONY**

“Dear Friends....We have come together in the sight of God and in the presence of these witnesses to join together Don and Reni in the bonds of holy matrimony according to the ordinance of God, the custom of the Christian Church, and the law of this land, and to pray on their behalf the blessing of God.”

“Marriage is an honorable and holy estate instituted by God, sanctioned and honored by Christ’s presence at the marriage in Cana of Galilee, and likened by the Apostle Paul to the mystical union which exists between Christ and His Church.”

“It was ordained of God as the foundation and bond of family life, for the mutual help and comfort of husband and wife, and for the welfare of the state.”

“Marriage is therefore not to be entered by anyone lightly or carelessly, but thoughtfully, reverently, and in the fear of God....”

We’ve been considering the faulty logic behind the astronomical rise in cohabiting relationships. Well over half of all marriages are now preceded by cohabitation. According to the cohabitation reasoning unsuitable future marriage partners are weeded out by what is called **“*natural de-selection.*”** Over time unreliable potential marriage partners are discovered and eliminated. Eventually Mr. or Mrs. Right will emerge and all will end happily ever-after.

And we've spent two weeks studying all the available evidence that this is not even close to the truth. Brad and Angelina don't live happily after as husband and wife just because they cohabited together for a decade. The authors of the *National Survey of Families and Households* conclude, ***"After reviewing all available studies the enhanced risk of marital disruption following cohabitation is beginning to take on the status of an absolute empirical generalization."*** In other words, the fact that cohabitation is harmful to future marriage is becoming an absolute - a general law - like the law of gravity.

And please take note of their final important, blunt sentence. ***"....no positive contribution of cohabitation to marriage has ever been found."*** Nothing good. Not ever. Zero evidence of good.

But the evidence shows none of these facts has diminished the rapid growth in cohabitation as an alternate to marriage. The change in our culture's attitude toward cohabitation is radical. Consider this. As recently as 1970 all 50 states in America had laws against a man and woman living together unmarried. That's right. It was against the law in every state to cohabit unmarried in my life-time. And there was no official voice raised at that time that these laws were unreasonable or unjust or discriminatory. This was the common moral ground of an entire nation.

Now this is all long-gone history. It would seem statistical evidence doesn't prevent moral decay. Our hearts, just at the Bible records, are, "**....deceitful above all things and desperately sick....**"(Jeremiah 17:9).

These are striking words. Our hearts are not just **deceitful**. They are "**deceitful above all things**." In other words, they are deceitful **first of all**. This is where the **wickedness** and **desperate sickness** come from. Deceit is the **root**. Wickedness is the **fruit**.

And the fallen heart's deceitfulness manifests itself primarily in one thing. The heart deludes the will into choices contrary to God's revealed will with the dream that, in **my** case, my moral choice will be better for me than God's command. And, while **others** may not escape the consequences of disobeying God, **I will**. Perhaps, in my case, I won't reap what I sow. This is a desperate sickness indeed.

I have three general umbrella principles with which I want to wrap up this part of our series. Next week I'll conclude, but with a different emphasis.

- 1) **ALL COHABITATION IS DESTRUCTIVE TO MARRIAGE**
BECAUSE IT REINFORCES THE LOW COMMITMENT ETHIC
THAT WILL BE BROUGHT INTO ANY FUTURE MARRIAGE

This principle is absolute. The reason there is such a thing as cohabitation in the first place is **marriage** requires something at least one of the cohabiting partners doesn't like. That's the only reason cohabitation exists. Cohabitation releases the couple from some aspect of marriage that is presently either feared or resented.

And what cohabitation gives that marriage doesn't is an easy out. Cohabitation is **based** on the easy out. There is no legal or religious process to go through. If the relationship is great, we continue. If it is unexplainably hard, we don't have to continue in struggle. It seems the best of both worlds is offered.

But there's a catch. The blessing turns into a curse. The option of the easy out doesn't just exist as a remote potential. It actually **weakens the relationship**. We've already seen the secular statistics. Cohabitors end their relationships **five times** more frequently than married couples.

There are only two ways to interpret this data. **First**, you can say cohabitors are just more unlucky in their relationships than marrieds. But after a while, as the same statistics continue to mount, this is about as logical as saying heavy smokers are just more unlucky with lung cancer.

The **second** way to interpret the vastly more frequent termination rate of cohabiting couples is to recognize there is **something in the relationship itself** that **tends** toward disintegration. And that something is the **low-commitment ethic that is in the very nature of cohabitation.**

And my point here is simply this. Cohabitation **trains future marriages in the same low-commitment ethic.** The easy out becomes the **operating system** of all future relationships.

2) **THE COVENANT OF MARRIAGE PROVIDES THE COMMITMENT MECHANISM TO PUSH BACK AGAINST THE EASY OUT REFLEX OF COHABITATION**

The idea I start with here is basic. Marriage grows love in a way cohabitation cannot. When there are no **“outs”** in the relationship the couple is forced to work things out they wouldn't work out if they had the easier option of cost-free quitting. And here's the surprising payoff for that hard work. When you work through things together you come to love each other more deeply. Deep love evaporates in the easy-out of cohabitation.

So, while couples may **feel** they marry each other because they **“fell in love”** the deeper truth is marriage is the place where love is forced to mature and grow up.

Love needs vows to grow. This point brings us back to the reading of the marriage vows at the beginning of this message. And the idea I want to drive home here is it matters the way the church states the marriage vows. This is not a matter of style. I realize ceremonies - ***all*** ceremonies - change with the passing of time. Terms fall into and out of use. And this is all fine. It's all fine as long as the ***meaning*** of what we're doing at the wedding isn't reduced or the seriousness of the vows isn't diminished.

This erosion of depth happens gradually and unintentionally. Churches always want to please brides and grooms. We don't want people unhappy with their wedding experience. And as tastes and styles have gradually become less formal and more geared to a breezy comfort than expressing the vows' deepest meaning and grip, small changes in expression arise.

This isn't the topic of this teaching, but let me just provide one "for-instance" to make my point. There's a world of difference between the minister standing at the beginning of the ceremony saying, "**Dear Friends....We have come together in the sight of God and in the presence of these witnesses to join together Don and Reni in the bonds of holy matrimony according to the ordinance of God, the custom of the Christian Church, and the law of this land, and to pray on their behalf the blessing of God.**"

Now that usually *isn't* said quite like that anymore. Usually, in trying to be more warm, current, and less formal, the minister will say something like - ***“Good afternoon everyone. Don and Reni are so glad you here with them to celebrate their special day?”***

Now my point isn't that there's anything wrong with warm and upbeat. These are totally fine in their place. My point is this. ***Is this just a style change?*** Or has something else happened unintentionally? Has something important been left out?

And I think it has. Something ***very*** important has been left out. And because it has been left out of the ceremony it's also become vacant and foreign in the church's corporate understanding of what exactly is happening in the church that lovely wedding afternoon.

Did you catch the change? In the second warm and contemporary greeting there are no ***witnesses***. Look again at the more formal version - ***“Dear Friends....We have come together in the sight of God and in the presence of these witnesses....”***

Who are these people - these people who have rearranged their summer Saturday - postponed cutting the lawn - put on their best clothes - cancelled a trip to the boat or cottage - missed a round of golf at the Country Club - and have been patiently waiting for thirty minutes in the church because the bride is late? ***Who are these people? And why are these people there?***

Note. In the contemporary greeting they're ***guests***. In the formal greeting they're ***witnesses***. The formal greeting recognizes and ***names*** this important distinction. ***Guests*** come to the ***reception***. ***Witnesses*** come to the ***wedding***.

But why does this matter? Why do we need ***witnesses*** at a wedding? Because they're getting married for ***better or for worse***. And things can get a lot worse. And when the worse comes one or both may change minds about staying married.

And if they do change their minds - if they come to resent the idea of staying together - there needs to arise a voice - perhaps a hundred voices or so - that will cry out - ***“Wait a minute! I was there? I took a bunch of my time at your request to come and listen to your ceremony. I was a witness to what you promised! I heard you vow to stay with your spouse until one of you was six feet under! I didn’t invite myself to your wedding. You asked me to come. Now don’t ask me to pretend I never heard you promise that.”***

I say it again. Make sure the minister isn’t robbing you of something important and precious at your wedding.

3) **A BIBLICAL REJECTION OF COHABITATION WILL NOT HAVE MORAL STRENGTH UNTIL COUPLES GRASP THE GOD-GIVEN MEANING OF SEXUAL INTERCOURSE**

The universal perception ***outside*** the church and the growing understanding ***inside*** the church is the meaning of sexual intercourse is the God-given means of the expression of ***love***. It is considered the moral high road that sexual activity isn’t just spread around like cats in the alley at night. You don’t give your body to someone in the act of sexual union until you’re sure this is the one you truly love.

This is the common understanding of every sit-com, movie, and romance novel in print. All sexual relationships that are expressions of love become romantic and beautiful. The Doctor Zhivago theme plays soothingly in the background.

This sounds so noble it is increasingly difficult for Christian people to grasp this isn't even close to what God says about sexual intercourse. It is a ground zero truth - an absolute basic point of Biblical revelation - that cohabitation is ***always*** going to be sinful because it cannot possibly be otherwise, even in a very loving cohabiting relationship. This is because sexual intercourse ***isn't*** the God-given sign of ***love***. It is the God-given sign of ***marriage***.

Unless this truth is rubbed deeply and repeatedly into our minds there will be nothing to hold back the natural inclinations of a generation that is statistically waiting longer and longer to get married - age 29 is now the average. It will take more than cold showers for brides and grooms to walk down the church aisle with their virginity. It will require a rich Biblically understanding of the meaning of sexual intercourse as it relates to the vows of marriage.

One more teaching next week.