

THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE - Part seven - Teaching #1356

Sunday, March 21st, 2010, 6:00 p.m.

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ONCE WE GRASP THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE, WE'RE IN A PLACE TO UNDERSTAND THE DEEPEST MEANING OF SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Because most people don't consider the Biblical meaning of marriage, they rarely consider the meaning of sexual expression between male and female. Of course, we know the *mechanics* of sex. And we know it should be tied to love and mutual affection. But that doesn't even begin to grasp what the Bible says about the meaning and depth of this "**one flesh**" relationship. Because the meaning of **sex** is so deeply tied to the meaning of **marriage** this seemed to be a logical follow-up to last week's teaching.

Ezekiel 16:4-10 - "And as for your birth, on the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. [5] No eye pitied you, to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you, but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred, on the day that you were born. [6] "And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' [7] I made you flourish like a plant of the field. And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full adornment. Your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare. [8] "When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord God, and you became mine. [9] Then I bathed you with water and washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil. [10] I clothed you also with embroidered cloth and shod you with fine leather. I wrapped you in fine linen and covered you with silk."

Before we look at marriage and sexual relations we need to step back and take in the bigger picture. This strange text tells how the Christian life begins. God comes to you and to me, wallowing in blood and death, and in totally undeserved, shocking mercy, says "**Live!**" (6). True, God's love for us isn't a sexual love. It's not a romantic love. But, that being said, there is something of deep *passion* in God's love, such that we can't grasp it properly without the kind of picture that's painted in this passage. And that's really the point of this whole series of teachings.

Some passages of Scripture are *designed* to make us think of sexuality. The Bible doesn't blush at this. There are times, it seems, that we can't think rightly about certain theological truths unless we frame them with sexual understanding. These unabashedly open verses cover one thousand years of Israel's history. Then the story very suddenly turns ugly:

Ezekiel 16:13-16, 32-37 - "Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour and honey and oil. You grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. [14] And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendor that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord God. [15] "But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore because of your renown and lavished your whorings on any passerby; your beauty became his. [16] You took some of your garments and made for yourself colorful shrines, and on them played the whore. *The like has never been, nor ever shall be...*"

"[32].... Adulterous wife, who receives strangers instead of her husband! [33] Men give gifts to all prostitutes, but you gave your gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from every side with your whorings. [34] So you were different from other women in your whorings. No one solicited you to play the whore, and you gave payment, while no payment was given to you; therefore you were different. [35] "Therefore, O prostitute, hear the word of the Lord: [36] Thus says the Lord God, Because your lust was poured out and your nakedness uncovered in your whorings with your lovers, and with all your abominable idols, *and because of the blood of your children that you gave to them,* [37] therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you hated. I will gather them against you from every side and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness."

The sexual picture continues. As God's people turn from His life-giving grace the constant picture through the Bible orbits around words we don't like hearing in polite society anymore. See how the Holy Spirit throws these words like darts through these verses - "**adulterous**"(32), "**prostitute**"(33,35), and even more stinging and politically incorrect, "**whore**" and "**whorings**"(33,34,36).

By any reasonable measuring this should be the end of the story, but it isn't. God keeps His covenant. He hates divorce.

He won't finally forsake His people:

Ezekiel 16:59-60, 62-63 - "For thus says the Lord God: I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant, [60] yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant....

[62]....I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the Lord, [63] that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord God."

The husband will not only take the prostitute back, which would be amazing enough. He will pay for her sins. Has the whore incurred debts to her lovers? The husband will pay them. Such is his love for his adulterous wife. This is God's heart for His people, and only the marriage/sexual imagery is vivid enough to capture it. The ultimate picture of the divine Husband's love is captured in the last verse of this text. He will pay the prostitute's debt. In fact, ultimately He will pay, not with cash, but with His life - "...when I atone for all that you have done, declares the Lord God" (63).

Fast forward to the time of fulfillment of this staggering promise. It's in the text we began studying last week:

Ephesians 5:25-27, 31-33 - "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, [26] that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, [27] so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish....[31]....Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." [32] This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. [33] However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband."

This is the **fulfillment** of Ezekiel's vision. This is the Husband making **atonement** for the prostitute's sin - paying her foul debts. This is the Husband (Jesus) restoring the **marriage relationship** between God and His people. And remember the key point. **Each physical marriage is supposed to be a living picture of the divine Husband's love for His bride.** Each marriage ceremony that takes place in this church is to **model and represent** God's faithful covenant love for His bride, the church.

It saddens me greatly that Christian marriage ceremonies constantly miss the Biblical meaning of marriage. Almost universally, Christian couples opt for reading only Scripture passages that deal with **love** rather than the covenant of **marriage**. 1 Corinthians 13 contains wonderful truth, but none of it deals specifically with marriage. It deals with **discipleship**, but not specifically **marriage**. These words from Paul in Ephesians chapter 5 unlock what marriage is all about. And they **need** declaration, along with the other marriage passages in the Bible, at **every** truly Christian marriage ceremony.

We studied last week the way Paul throws a knuckle-ball into his instructions to husbands and wives about marriage. Look at it again: **Ephesians 5:31-33** - "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." [32] **This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.** [33] **However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband."**

But Paul **isn't** writing about Christ and the church, is he? Starting with **verse 22**, and right up to the end of the chapter, he's talking about **husbands and wives**. And then he says, "**Listen, what I'm really talking about here is Christ and the church.**" What's going on here?

Here's how it all comes together. The Bible **begins** and **ends** with marriages. Jesus refers to the creation of Adam and Eve and says it established the pattern - one man and one woman, forsaking all others in covenant commitment. Then, as history comes to a close we read of the **marriage supper of the Lamb** in the book of Revelation. In between those two marriage accounts the whole history of God's dealing with His covenant people - in both the Old and New Testaments - is referred to in terms of a **marriage** relationship.

But **before** God created a man or a woman, in fact, before He brought this universe into existence, He knew His people would be unfaithful. They would be **adulterous**. If they were to be won back at all, they would need redemption. **Before** anyone was joined to anyone in marriage or sexual union God already had in mind **how** you and I were going to be **redeemed**, or, to use the terminology from Ezekiel 16, how we, by God's grace, would be "**atoned**."

The key point here is God planned **redemption** first, and **then** planned marriage. Marriage was designed **second**

because it was to picture the ultimate reality, God's saving action in Christ Jesus:

Ephesians 1:3-4 - "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, [4] even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him...."

1 Peter 1:18-20 - "...knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, [19] but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. [20] He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for your sake...."

Let's all remember this point. **First** God planned our redemption in Christ. Then, **second**, He created us male and female and designed us for sexual and marital union. And there is a **reason** it's vital to remember this order if we're to properly treasure **either** redemption **or** marriage and sexuality as we should. Now it's time to pull all of these threads of truth together:

1) **REDEMPTION IS THE PRIMARY REALITY. SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE ARE THE SECONDARY SHADOWS GOD CREATES TO HELP US UNDERSTAND HIS WORK IN SENDING JESUS**

Let me try to say it again more simply. God created us **male and female**, as sexual beings, and then created the **institution of marriage** so we would have, **geared right into our deepest personal experience**, a deeper knowledge of **both** the **blessings** of covenant faithfulness to God, and the **pain** of unfaithfulness to God. This is true whether you are presently **married** or **single**. I'll come to that in just a minute.

Here's the question - **Why are we sexual beings instead of non-sexual beings?** God could have made us any way He wanted. He formed the **first** two people without sexual relations of any kind. He could have made billions of android creatures just as easily. So why **male and female**? And why **marriage**?

The answer to all these questions is the same. I know it's difficult, but if we weren't **sexual** beings (male and female) and knew absolutely nothing about **marriage** we would have no way of relating to what either **covenant faithfulness** or **unfaithfulness** was. If it weren't for the covenant of marriage and its expression in human sexuality we would have no understanding of **adultery**. That word would carry no meaning that we could relate to - **feel** - in our own hearts.

So God made us sexual beings so we could relate deeply to a whole range of Scriptural words and images about faithfulness and unfaithfulness and the **joys** and **pains** of each. As we observe the sexual relations of our own lives and those of the world around us, we were designed with the potential of knowing both the **joy of faithful intimacy** and the **brokenness of betrayal** to give us a knowledge of what being **redeemed** by God is all about and the importance of **faithfulness** to Him once redeemed.

Without our own created capacities for either **covenant sexual relationships**, or **committed purity before marriage**, we would have no means for truly understanding the Bible's words about being the **Bride of Christ**, or conversely, being **prostitutes and adulteresses to His love**. So put in its simplest form, **God created sexuality and marriage so we could fully understand His love and redemption and the importance of covenant faithfulness to Him**.

2) **GOD CREATED US SEXUAL BEINGS SO WE COULD HAVE A LIMITED PHYSICAL MODEL OF WHAT KNOWING HIM WAS ALL ABOUT**

Hosea 2:14-17, 19-20 - "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. [15] And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. [16] "And in that day, declares the Lord, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.' [17] For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more....[19]....And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. [20] I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord."

If you didn't know that this was God speaking to His covenant people you would think you were reading an

intimate, very private letter between two lovers. And, as I said in point number one, God **created** us sexual beings precisely so we could, by the means of our **human, physical relationships**, easily relate to this kind of picture of His work. He says He will “ **betroth** ” us to Him forever (engagement and marriage). And then He adds “**And you shall know the Lord.**”

God can only be known through **exclusive** covenant attachment. That’s why **knowing God** is framed in that rather ancient word, “ **betroth** .” Why this language of engagement and marriage when we’re talking about our relationship with God? It’s put in this way to make it virtually impossible for us to think **knowing** Him is nothing more than knowing certain **facts** about Him.

It makes it virtually impossible to think of **knowing God** as mere **acquaintance** or **mental awareness**, or **belief in His existence**. **Not in a million years would anyone read those words in Hosea and think that is what “knowing the Lord” is all about.**

God puts knowing Him in the language of the most **loving relationship we experience on this earth**. In fact, the stunning truth is, the reason God **created** the earthly relationship was so we could have at least a more engaging, though imperfect, understanding of what knowing Him was all about.

3) **THIS BIBLICAL LANGUAGE ALSO HELPS US UNDERSTAND WHAT THE DEPTH AND PAIN OF UNFAITHFULNESS TO GOD IS LIKE**

My wife has never been unfaithful to me. And I have never been unfaithful to her. We both were so blessed to **enter** marriage, and then to **experience** thirty-five years of marriage, knowing no other partner than each other. I pray that same blessing for all who are still single listening to my voice. Never be suckered into being **ashamed** of purity or faithfulness. **Cherish** these virtues like life itself.

But, having said that, my marriage covenant is still a powerful teaching reminder in my relationship with God. And, as I’ve been repeating all along, this is why God **created** marriage. Through the gift of marriage I have an inner sense that I could not otherwise have, of the **pain** that my wife’s unfaithfulness would bring to my heart. I would literally rather lose an arm than lose the faithfulness of my bride.

And God means for me to **remember** that. He means for me to **bring that point of understanding to my relationship with Him**. It’s not just a **friendship** that I have with God (“What a Friend We Have in Jesus”). It’s a **covenant**. And it’s not a cold, dry, lifeless covenant. It’s a **passionate** one. That’s what God designed to teach all of us through making us sexual beings, capable of deep covenant love.

I have one more crucially important point:

4) **JUST AS GOD MADE US SEXUAL PERSONS TO HELP US GRASP WHAT KNOWING HIM IN COVENANT FAITHFULNESS WAS LIKE, IT IS EQUALLY TRUE THAT KNOWING GOD FAITHFULLY PREVENTS US FROM MISUSING OUR SEXUALITY**

In other words, these two truths **work in both directions**. Just as God **created** sexuality and marriage to give us pictures of what knowing Him through redemption was like, it is **also** true that knowing God truly will **guard** our sexuality.

Is this true? Have I said too much - made the claim too big? Let me wrap up with some clear texts from the Scriptures that insist on this being true: **Romans 1:28** - “**Since they did not see fit to have God in knowledge, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper**” (Literal translation note in NASB).

If you do not soak your mind in the true knowledge of God you will pay the price for it in **disordered passions**. You will become a victim of vice. Paul expands on this idea in First Thessalonians: **1 Thessalonians 4:3-5** - “**For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; [4] that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, [5] not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.**”

According to Paul, why were these pagans slaves to their sexual passions? We all know that’s where this world is at. We all know the world is awash with sexual corruption and confusion. We all know people don’t seem to ever

be able to get enough - there's no satisfaction. We know Paul's right. He calls us to be different from a world which doesn't know how to **control the lusts of the body**. The Internet creaks under the weight of pornography. And it's a problem for **both** men and women. In fact 33% of all internet porn hits are made by women (statistics cited by the **Internet Filter Review, 2005**).

Paul tells us **why** this is so. People enslaved by these things, in Paul's exact words, are people "**who do not know God**." They may know **about** Him. They may **go to church**. They may have been raised in Christian homes. But they don't find their greatest joy in Christ. And because they don't, they get the biggest buzz they can get without God - sex. They sell their birth-right. They become slaves to deceitful desires that **empty** the life, rather than **fill** it.

Have a picture of the sun at the center of our solar system. It's 330,000 times the mass of the earth. And because it's so big and so glorious it holds little Pluto - 3.6 billion miles away, along with all the other planets and their moons in their proper place. Make knowing and loving God the center of your universe and the beauty and glory of both marriage and sexual fulfillment are protected.