

THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE - Part nine - Teaching #1364

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HOW WILL WE SAVE OUR MARRIAGES?

Luke 14:26-33 - "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. [27] Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. [28] For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? [29] Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, [30] saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' [31] Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? [32] And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. [33] So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

These words from Jesus lead into the first, and most foundational point I have in today's teaching to husbands and wives and their relationships to each other:

1) LOVE YOUR SPOUSE DEEPER BY LOVING GOD MORE

These words from our text tell more than we think. It is **dangerous** to **not** love God enough. We all know it's **wicked** not to love God enough. But that's not the point Jesus is making in these verses. It becomes so easy to think of devotion to God, and the **expression** of devotion to God, as an **obligation**. Expressing devotion to God takes commitment and sacrifice, especially in the **use of time** - Bible study, prayer, local church commitments, the giving of money, fasting, and such.

This makes it easy to think of showing our love to God as a religious **duty**. I **watch** and **see** these things consuming my disposable time. I see the **cost** of these things. That's why Jesus reminds me my practical expression of devotion to God is not about **competing** with other commitments, but **protecting** and **enhancing** them in a way that **can't** happen if I try to love them **supremely** and **directly** while giving less devotion to God.

This text appears to have nothing at all to do with **marriage**. But buried in the opening verse (26) is the word "**wife**." Only Jesus isn't talking about **loving** a wife, but **hating** her. So it would appear if we want some Biblical teaching on marriage we should look elsewhere.

Or is Jesus teaching something else? I think He is teaching that my relationships - my **earthly** relationships - will all be vulnerable unless God is loved and served supremely in comparison. Anything loved **more** than God is **unprotected**. Loving God supremely **protects** everything else. That's because it is in loving **God** supremely that we come to cherish His best **gifts** to us. A mother opens a gift from her child. It is a gift the child has labored over, perhaps created himself, and that is where the **value** of the gift lies. The mother certainly has many things **worth** more than the child's gift. But she will not tuck them away in a box of keep-sake treasures.

The house is burning to the ground. There isn't time to grab everything. What do people take? They take the things **loved ones** have given. The more we value the **giver** of the gift, the more precious the **gift** becomes as well. This is the grand principle Jesus polishes in these verses. God is the **giver** of all good things, **including** my wife. The more I love **Him**, the more I love **her**. If I try to love **her** in a way that **replaces** or **diminishes** Him I will end up not loving her as I ought. I say it again. It is **dangerous** to **not** love God as much as I should.

Notice carefully how Jesus highlights the danger:

Verses 28-31 - "For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? [29] Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, [30] saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' [31] Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?"

Notice the way Jesus links **completing structures** and **winning battles** with loving God supremely - "This man began to build and was not able to finish"(30). Only Jesus isn't talking about a contractor building a physical

structure. He's talking about completing what is central and important to my life. And He uses this illustration right in the context of my earthly **relationships**, specifically mentioning my **spouse (14:26)**. And He specifically says I can build my relationship with Father God in such a way that it's **left incomplete** in terms of all the Holy Spirit wanted to establish under the Lordship of Jesus. I didn't **follow-up** on the designed of a fully-orbed love for Christ.

Jesus isn't telling this story to help us build **buildings**. He's telling us how to build **lives** and **families** and **marriages** and **relationships**. I can't properly build this relationship just by working on it **directly**. It is in **loving God** that the tower of my marriage gets completed. It is in **loving God** that the enemies that war against my marriage are defeated.

These are very edgy words from Jesus. It's deep discipleship medicine that isn't easy to swallow, especially when it's most needed. There is a particular folly in the church of the new millennium. We Christians are feeling **crowded** in our schedules. It's harder for us to keep up than it was for our parents. We expect to **not** be inconvenienced by our religion. We can't afford to be because we don't **want** to neglect our **spouse** or our **children**. And our **children** seem to need more than they used to need. And our **educators** demand more time from parents than they used to demand. And we bring more work into **home offices** (a term that had virtually no meaning when I was a kid) because we can't get it all done anymore.

How will this all work? Well, it is **easier** to squeeze God out than anything else. This is what makes spiritual discipline so hard to maintain and so easy to neglect. God says virtually **nothing** when He's ignored. And here's the most important point in this teaching. It's **intentional** that He doesn't **force** Himself on us. This is how He **tests** our hearts. The church is the one volunteer organization that can do absolutely **nothing** if I cut back on time given to it. So I'll put more time into my marriage and family. Sunday shifts from **worship** day to **family** day.

And Jesus says, ***"That's the one approach that won't work. Find something else to do less of. You're going to end up with an unfinished tower or and an overpowering enemy. It's dangerous not to love God supremely. It's not just wicked. It's dangerous. There's nothing more vulnerable than a building half completed. Especially if it's a military tower."***

Of course, what Jesus is saying is there are things warring against your marriage that **marriage time**, by itself, is powerless to overcome. There are things warring against your family that **family time**, by itself, can't possibly stand against. It takes **God time** to protect these things. And **God time** is the one thing the church is cutting back on in the **budgets** of the congregation's schedule.

2) LOVE YOUR SPOUSE, NOT AS THE LOVE OF YOUR LIFE, BUT AS A GIFT FROM THE LOVE OF YOUR LIFE

Song of Solomon 1:1-2 - "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's. [2] She - Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine...."

Once love for spouse is Biblically framed and ordered, that is, once my love for my spouse is made **safe** from idolatry by loving God sacrificially and supremely, the Scriptures abound with instruction for loving my spouse as a **gift** from the **first** love of my life. In fact, there's a whole book of the Bible devoted to the manner in which love is expressed between a husband and wife.

For much of the church's history Christians didn't feel comfortable with the passionate, sexual nature of the Song of Solomon. It was frequently portrayed as a poetic allegory picturing the relationship between Christ and His church. The problem is there is not a book in the New Testament that treats the Song of Solomon in that way.

The plain fact is the Spirit of God devotes an entire book of the Bible to explicit married love. Not a verse. Not a chapter. Not even a couple of chapters. **"No," says God, "That's not enough."** And so we end up with a **whole book** of the Bible focusing on nothing but the expression of love between a husband and a wife.

And the whole emphasis of the book is the expression of love **for its own sake**. **Pregnancy** isn't even mentioned in the book. The idea of producing children isn't even hinted at. We all know how to make babies. Is that all this is about? What are we **supposed** to learn from a careful study of **eight chapters** of passionate prose and poetry? What is the Holy Spirit trying to teach? Let me suggest a couple of things:

a) **To deeply touch your spouse sexually you must first reach the heart and the mind.** This book - The

Song of Solomon - isn't a breezy, three-step, "how to" sex manual. Read it sometime. There are **eight chapters** of carefully chosen **words**. I want to emphasize that. The husband and the wife **say** these things to each other. And it is **carefully crafted, planned speech**.

True, most of it is so foreign to our time and culture we find it fairly dull and amusing. But in the eastern culture and day of its writing it was deeply erotic stuff. Much of the imagery **still** makes Christians blush. But the point isn't the writer's **words**, but his **example**. Love dies for lack of **creative expression**. Our age of "chat-rooms" and emails and Hallmark cards can quickly erase the **personal, passionate heart** from communication that is thoughtfully and deliberately our own.

Ask yourself this question. How much time do you take each day **planning** the right things to say to your spouse? You plan your business presentations because you want your words to have the proper impact. You plan your advertizing campaigns because you want to **"reach"** your audience. How much do you **think** about what you want to say to your deepest earthly love?

I know I've used this illustration before, but it seems so appropriate at this point. Not all that long ago I knew Reni had a lot of things on her mind. There were issues no one else would know about, and I knew she was feeling weighed down. One afternoon we talked. She had been working at the church and popped by my office to pick up her coat on the way home. I knew she was near tears.

After she left I felt I had failed her. I didn't feel I said anything that encouraged or lifted her heart. I emailed her a note, telling her how proud I always am of her, how she always excels at what she does. I told her how much I loved her. But I couldn't wrap it up the way I wanted. I typed and retyped the last paragraph of the note, over and over.

Finally, I told her something I wasn't sure she knew about me. I told her that right from the first time I ever preached, right up to this very day, whether I'm speaking here or somewhere else, the **first** thing I always do is look for her face in the crowd. I like to know where she's sitting. It makes me feel better about everything else I do in that service. I never feel I can do as well without seeing her face.

And that was nice, but it still didn't catch what I was feeling that afternoon. Finally I felt I knew what I was trying to say. I told her whenever I see her face in the crowd it's like everyone else is in black and white. Her face is always in color. And I wanted her to know that.

I'm not telling you this private story to make you all go "aaahhhh." There is a real teaching point here. I'm neither a poet nor a writer. That idea didn't come quickly or easily to me. But there's more to touching the heart of your partner than just yammering, **"Hang in there,"** or, **"Did ya do somethin' to your hair?"**

Read the Song of Solomon. There's something frequently missed. I know the book is full of pretty sexually explicit material. True enough. But there's something else that rarely gets talked about. Solomon's lovers touch each other's hearts long before they caress each other's bodies. No one can do this all the time. But at least with **some** consistency, say **meaningful** things to your spouse. Reach out to her or his heart with your words. Romance deepens, according to the Bible's instructions, as you touch the **heart** of your spouse along with the body.

I can't say this enough. Our whole culture numbs our hearts. Everything is **depersonalized**. This kind of careful, planned, loving conversation is a whole category of communication removed from the ordinary. These are words **removed** from kids, car pools, contracts, sports, and meetings. FaceBook and Twitter **destroy** deep expression and meaning. Little sound-bites and brittle pieces of sentences won't build **any** relationship, let alone the deepness required for marriage.

Your marriage badly needs deep, carefully composed words that keep romance **growing in intimacy**. Every marriage partner - probably especially women - needs something crafted to live in her mind and heart rather than **dimming in memory**.

Why work at this? Remember our first point. My wife is a gift from the love of my life. I am a **steward** of my relationship with her. My task with her, just as her's with me, is to **return** her to Christ one day after this life is over, a **better** Christian than when I married her. We polish each other's hearts in a world full of rust and decay. We get each other ready for heaven.

One day my marriage to Reni will end with the death of one or both of us. Our marriage will not exist in heaven. But the **reality to which it pointed** - the covenant love of Christ Jesus for His Bride - will exist for all eternity. In addition, the **character** we formed in each other's lives will last forever around the throne of God.

- b) **Keep learning about your spouse.** All true romance is **custom designed**. What we love, we learn about. This is true, first and foremost, about God. What we love we study and observe. We give concentrated attention to it. We make **more** time for, not **less**.

You can't love your spouse in a vacuum. Do you know her fears? Do you know what she's most worried about right now? Do you know what she'd really like you to do for her? How about her favorite author? Book? Perfume? Do you take the time to write down in your Blackberry that great idea for your next date?

Romance is what you **know** about your spouse, thoughtfully **applied** to your spouse's life. Dogs and cats don't need to do this. They just **mate**. We can all see how mere sexual proclivity, apart from the covenant of marriage always belittles the relationship. People made in God's image build marriage on a deeper level than cats and dogs.

- c) **Book time first for God, then for your spouse.** Marriage, as we studied earlier in this series, is God's earthly model of the relationship between Christ and His bride, the church. And what Christ gives us is **Himself**. That's the pattern for our marriages.

That means, as I'm going to come to in closing, that your relationship with your **spouse** is the earthly relationship most like your relationship with **God**. That's why, **usually**, making time for God is tied in with making time for your spouse. If you **don't** create time for God you **probably** have a hard time making meaningful time for your spouse.

Again, **time** is my emphasis here - not **gifts**. In our affluent culture there is such a tendency to substitute the **grand gift** or the **grand gesture** for the regular, systematic giving of oneself to one's spouse. That's primarily because they are easier to give in the long run and, even though more pricey in monetary value, cost less in terms of the giving of the self.

Make it one of the unbreakable commitments of your life to date your spouse once a week. It doesn't have to be long, and it doesn't have to be expensive. Don't allow yourself to think you don't have **time** to do this. There are **other** things you do every week. Do you go to the gym? Do you golf or play tennis? Do you set aside time for a staff meeting? Yes. There are things you do every week because you sense the **importance** of them. The only question to ask now is, **where does your spouse fit in to your priorities?**

Let me close this way. In so many ways your relationship with your spouse is **most** like your relationship with God. Though these relationships are the most important, neither one **forces** your attention. In that sense, it is much easier to ignore God than your boss. Your spouse may complain, but we fear only a cold shoulder for our neglect.

Your relationship with God and your relationship with your spouse don't use **external pressure** to force your attention. That's because they are relationships requiring your **heart**. They draw on something much deeper than a paycheck or a job description. God and your spouse **test** what you're all about when you aren't **forced**. And that's why they establish who you are - how **big** a person you are - like no other relationships on earth. Devote yourself to God and your spouse because when you do, you're not just building a **career** or a **fortune**. You're building **yourself**.