

A Refresher on Marriage

A Refresher on the Family

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We're at a point where this week and next week I'm going to just take some time to do a little refresher on the family. Since we started our church, we haven't had an opportunity to address these kinds of issues and Mother's Day is a fine time to address matters related to the family, and not just those in nuclear families but those that are single, those that are widowed, those that are divorced. I think that everything that we say here you're going to find instruction and comfort and encouragement from as we look at what the Bible says about the family, and today we're going to take a refresher on marriage as we come to the Bible today.

Our church has quite a cross-section, really. We have many singles, we have newly married couples, and we have couples that have been married for decades. I won't say where Nancy and I fit in on that little spectrum there but you can probably guess by seeing the ages of our own children. We have troubled marriages in our walls, and we have great marriages. We have some widows, and some have tasted the bitter fruit of divorce during the course of life, some have remarried. And beyond that, we are all obviously products of the way that our parents approached marriage, whether they honored that institution or whether they rejected it. We're all affected by this institution of marriage to say nothing of the cultural clash that's going on in our days about whether people of the same sex should be able to marry, so to speak, as well. So this is just a very timely opportunity for us to come to God's word and see what it has to say.

Marriage has affected us, some for good and some for bad, and we realize that, and I believe that we'll all benefit from considering what God has said about marriage in his word and so we're going to take a look at God's plan for marriage here this morning. I don't intend to cover every point that could be said on marriage, and I don't really intend to talk so much necessarily about communication issues in marriage which are all very important, but what I want to do is I want to bring us all back to the foot of the word of God, as it were, and see what God says about marriage. As we see his plan for marriage, we will understand as the Spirit helps us how we should be responding in the relationships that we find ourselves in.

Let me start with a definition of marriage. Marriage is that God-ordained institution in which a man and woman covenant with one another to live as husband and wife in an

exclusive, monogamous relationship for the remainder of their earthly lives together. I'll say that one more time; that's a mouthful, I know, but every word here really is important. Marriage is that God-ordained institution. Marriage belongs to God. That's why we don't have the freedom to redefine it in our day and age. It's the height of arrogance for men to try to do that as if it belongs to men and not to God. Marriage is that God-ordained institution in which a man and a woman covenant with one another to live as husband and wife in an exclusive, monogamous relationship for the remainder of their earthly lives together. Marriage is an open-ended vow that, "I'm going to be with you until death do us part." Those words are rightly part of a marriage vow ceremony.

From that definition, I want to give you four major points about God's plan for marriage and we're going to look at several Scriptures here together today, kind of surveying what some of the key Scriptures of Scripture say but, first of all, we want to say this, our first point for this morning is that marriage is a permanent union. Marriage is a permanent union. God's ideal, God's plan for marriage was that it would be a permanent relationship not subject to being severed, and to start there and to kind of flesh that out, I want you to turn to the book of Genesis 2 to a familiar passage. Genesis 2. Marriage is a permanent union and therefore must be treated seriously. Marriage is a permanent union, Genesis 2, beginning in verse 15, let's say. We'll start with a little bit more context than perhaps it's normally approached with.

You remember that God had created Adam and placed him in the garden and given him responsibilities and here in verse 15, "the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it." Just as a side note, you see there that work is not part of the curse; work was a good thing before even the fall. God gave Adam into the garden to cultivate it and to keep it. He went on in verse 16, "The LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.'"

Now look at verse 18 here, "Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.'" God created us as personal relational beings and he saw Adam alone in the garden and said, "This is not good. I need to act. I need to intervene. I need to do something here. I know what I'll do, I'll make a helper for him that is suitable for him."

So we see in verses 19 and 20 that various animals were paraded before Adam. He named them all in verse 20, but at the end of verse 20, "for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. So" verse 21, "the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man.'" Verse 24, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed."

One of the things that we need to see right from the start, beloved, is that in contrast to the shallow, superficial, temporary nature of marriage in our present day culture, we see the preeminence that God gave to it; it was almost a crowning mark of creation itself occupying a cornerstone place in creation and at the start of the word of God. Part of the trouble that we're experiencing with marriage in our culture today is the fact that it has been reduced to something sentimental and emotional between people and we've lost sight of the creative ordinance that it is from the hand of God; that this occupies a place of preeminent importance in God's design for his creation. We have lost sight of the Godward vertical focus that is in marriage and that God had a plan in marriage that he intended this institution to represent. We've got to stop looking at it from purely a human perspective and realize that the design of God, the imprint of God, was on this from the very beginning.

As we turn to the Gospel of Matthew, let me invite you to turn to Matthew 19, we see our Lord Jesus Christ making this same emphasis. Matthew 19. These things all kind of build to a cumulative impact here. Matthew 19:3, "Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?'" You see, they had reached the same point that we have, marriage treated lightly. "Is it lawful to divorce for any reason at all?" So by the time of Christ 2,000 years ago, it was obvious that they had lost sight of the exalted place that marriage held in creation.

Jesus answered them in verse 4 and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." In the garden of Eden, God declared that the two would become one flesh. The idea from the beginning, continuing on to this day by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, is that marriage would be a permanent union not subject to termination.

Now, we understand that the Bible makes provision for divorce. We're not addressing that here this morning, but the design of God, the intention of God, is for marriage to be a permanent union. That's our starting point and there will be a lot of application to draw from that a little bit later on, but as we sit next to our spouses for all of you except me, I guess, my wife is down here, we can't do it quite the same way on Sunday morning, we sit next to our spouses and we realize that we're next to somebody permanently. We're next to them as long as we live. That is the approach, that is the one flesh permanent union idea that God had and established marriage to be.

As we look around and we see the proliferation of family law attorneys and no-fault divorce and just the proliferation of divorce cases that are filed day-by-day, week-by-week, month-by-month, we have to realize and feel a collective sense of recognition and sadness that what is going on about us is a violation of what God's intent was. And what I mean by that, what I want us to see is I want us to think about this from God's perspective. I want us to think about it from the way that God views it and to realize that what we have become very comfortable with, what we've become very accustomed to in our society, is really very badly contrary to what the Lord had established marriage to be.

We just have to realize that the fact that we're accustomed to it does not make it good. The fact that we are accustomed to it does not make it something that we should view with a sense of approval because marriage was intended to be a permanent union. What God has joined together, let no man separate. That's the idea of God's plan for marriage, first of all.

Now, secondly, marriage is an exclusive union. Marriage is an exclusive union. Permanent monogamy was the standard. One man with one woman until death separated them, and that's what underlies the commandment in Exodus 20, one of the Ten Commandments, "You shall not commit adultery." This is the authoritative law of God, "You shall not commit adultery." Woven into the Ten Commandments was this protection, this shield, this negative command to protect marriage from the invasive forces of betrayal, of disloyalty, of infidelity. "You shall not commit adultery." This is designed to protect the creation ordinance of marriage.

Now, what's more and whereas we continue to follow through in Scripture, what's more and where some of the convicting sense of considering marriages comes, is that Jesus made it clear that when God forbade adultery that he was looking for more than external purity in marriage. He was calling us to an internal heart purity as well, in fact, I want you to see this not only from the words of Jesus, but I want you to see it from the Ten Commandments.

Turn to Exodus 20. I hadn't planned to do this as I stepped in this morning but that's part of the joy of preaching is you sometimes say things that you hadn't planned and sometimes those are the more important things that get said. Exodus 20, where we find the Ten Commandments first given to Moses, and with Exodus 20 in front of you there, see in verse 12, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you." Then verse 13, "You shall not murder." Verse 14, "You shall not commit adultery." Now, it is evident that from the very beginning God intended that to be more than simply the external physical act; that God was addressing our hearts in this as well.

Look at verse 17 where it reads, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant." You see, even from the beginning, even from the first disclosure of the Ten Commandments, God said, "You shall not commit adultery in the physical external sense, but you shall not even covet to do it in your own heart, in the privacy of your own heart." Beloved, do you see, therefore, how exclusive the marriage relationship is meant to be? How exclusive God has designed that and wired it to be? It's not just a physical exclusivity that God calls us to, he's calling us to a mental, emotional, relational purity as well; that there is not even to be a desire to step out of that marriage relationship in any way, shape or form.

Jesus reemphasized this in Matthew 5. Turn over to Matthew 5 with me. Matthew 5:27, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." So from God's perspective, from the way that God designed marriage, there

was supposed to be such a complete exclusivity between husband and wife that there wouldn't even be the desire to step outside that; that there wouldn't even be the wandering eye that would violate the permanent exclusivity of that relationship. Your spouse is meant to be the exclusive object of your deepest human affections. That's the standard. That's how high and how lofty marriage is. That's how sacred it is, sacred in the sense of set apart. Sacred in the sense of unique, the unique affections of your heart when you enter into a marriage relationship. You did not only pledge to your spouse your physical purity, you pledged to your spouse your emotional exclusivity as well.

And what does that mean for us in our modern, sin-plagued society? That means that pornography is a violation of the marital relationship. It means that premarital intimacy is terribly sinful because that is designed for the marriage relationship alone. It means that all other manners of sexual expression outside of the marriage relationship are sinful and an assault on marriage. As men and women pursue their fleshly lusts outside of the marriage relationship, they are storming the citadel of what God established to be unique, holy, and precious. What we see when we walk through a supermarket counter is all an assault on that.

For the longest time, I would look at that, see that open display of sensuality there right on the supermarket right next to the chocolate bars where all the kids are going to see it, and you think, "Who buys this stuff? How could they put this out?" Well, do you know what? Someone's buying it otherwise they wouldn't make it. The fact that this is so readily available, so shamelessly promoted, so shamelessly out in front, means that there is just an insatiable appetite for it. The fact that they make it shows that there's a demand for it and it's a recognition of the fact that our hearts have strayed so far from what the God of the Bible intended. All of it an assault on the permanent exclusivity of what God intended marriage to be.

So we need to realize that this is more than just something tempting us personally into sin. We need to see it more globally. We need to think more broadly and realize what a crime against God all of that is, and I'm going to play a tangent card. I haven't played a tangent card for months here but I am going to play one here because there are things that have been on my mind a lot. I'm in the process of preparing to teach a series of messages on the Bible and homosexuality; I'm going to teach those in Singapore next month and I'd appreciate your prayers as I do that, five messages. So my mind has really been engaged on these kinds of issues for a few weeks now.

One of the things we need to take into account, that we need to think about collectively as the Christian church in the broadest sense of that term is that the battle over homosexuality, we have forfeited the ground upon which that battle could have been won a very long time ago when professing Christians in the evangelical church abandoned any serious commitment or any serious teaching about marriage and just made it a matter of getting along with your spouse and kind of communication issues and all of that, and we lost sight of the unique exalted place and the crucial place that it had in the design of God. And when professing evangelicals gave easy acceptance to divorce, and gave easy acceptance to all manner of sexual expression and really didn't make a big stand on it,

when that happened and found its way into the church over the past 40 or 50 years with the sexual revolution in the 60s, when that happened and when evangelicals became comfortable with divorce in the midst of the church itself, we set the stage to lose the battle on marriage when it came to homosexual marriage because we'd already sacrificed the institution and now it's just, as one writer put it, now we're stepping up to object to homosexual marriage just because it brings a yuck factor to it, but the stage for losing this battle was set many, many years ago when evangelicals stopped taking marriage seriously, stopped taking it with the exclusive sense that God intended it to have.

So while all of this homosexual stuff that's going on in our culture and, you know, more and more states approving it and all of that is going on, what we have to realize as believers in Christ, those who want to be faithful to the Scriptures, what we have to realize is that the problem hasn't been purely external, the problem has been internal within the church as well with a shallow view of marriage that did not give it the proper place and elevation in the design of God. Only as we start to understand that, can we understand how we ever got into this mess in the first place.

So what I'm saying is this, I'm speaking to all of us here, I'm speaking with a tender heart but sometimes a tender heart has to speak the truth in love: is that we can't look at the problem of homosexual marriage, and it is a problem, and it is wrong, and it is sinful, but for us within the walls of the church, we can't look at that as simply a matter that is external to us and view that self-righteously and condemn it without first examining our own selves and saying, "But what about my own view of marriage? What about the way I have thought about marriage? What about the way I've treated my wife?" What about the desires maybe that some of you have allowed to cultivate and flourish in your heart that would be inconsistent with God's design for a permanent exclusive union even if you haven't acted upon them? What about that? Only when first look at ourselves and examine ourselves and come to a point of repentance and humbling ourselves before the Lord can we really start to speak with some measure of authority about the whole other issues that are involved.

You see, part of my desire for you as Christians is for us to avoid, and I include myself in this, it's for us to avoid the knee-jerk, self-righteous judgments that occur when we see things going on around us and being quick to condemn the things that are there. Look, those things need condemnation but we have to, as Christ reminded us, you know, we've got to take the log out of our own eye first before we talk about the specks that are in other people's eyes, and if we've tolerated sinful desires in our hearts, if we've accommodated sinful relationships in our lives, then repentance for us starts in the mirror before we worry about what's going on out there. You don't want to be a hypocrite, do you? I don't. I mean, I'm guilty of hypocrisy, sure, but I don't want that. I don't tolerate it and I know you don't want to either. That's why you come to a place like this to hear God's word taught. You want to be sincere, I get that. I just want to help you see and help you walk through the fact that the way that you and I think about marriage is going to begin to frame the way we view the other things that are going on around us, and we need to be as sincere, as devoted, as urgent, about our own personal holiness as we do for the

holiness, so to speak, of culture around us that in some ways doesn't, you know, that we're not direct participants in.

All I'm saying is: let's be serious about our own holiness as we think about these issues, right? That's not an unbiblical overly harsh statement to make, is it? Let's just be serious about our own holiness and do you know what? If we're serious about our own holiness, if you and I are serious about being faithful to our spouse, being both internally and externally committed and devoted in exclusivity to our spouse, do you know what? The other stuff will take care of itself in time, but we have to start with our own heart. We have to examine ourselves. We have to look in the mirror and say, "How has my life contributed to the view of marriage?" Well, that was a long tangent card, but that's alright. Marriage is a permanent exclusive union.

Now, thirdly, marriage is also an intimate union. An intimate union, and I appreciate the forthrightness of the Scriptures on this point. Marriage is easily the deepest human relationship. You can't avoid that when you're living with the same person under the same roof over a period of extended time with an open-ended commitment to one another. Of course it's going to be personally, relationally intimate. And the marriage bed is designed to express that intimacy. Follow me here. What we've just seen in the exclusivity nature of the union says that this intimacy, this physical intimacy is not to be shared outside the bounds of marriage, but Scripture makes it clear that within the bounds of marriage, it must be shared together.

It must be shared with each other, and I want you to see this from 1 Corinthians 7. I don't know if it's difficult or easy to hear a message like this on marriage. I'll tell you, it's not the easiest message to give because I realize how intensely personal it is as we talk about these things. You know, I understand that as we go through these things, that things in your life are echoing and bouncing off your mind and you're evaluating your life and it's very personal and God's word is touching us right where we live. Well, you know, and so I want to treat that gently and tenderly and with respect but, beloved, don't you want that from God's word, I mean? Not necessarily from me, but a true Christian wants God's word to purify him. A true Christian wants God's word to have a cleansing effect on him because a true Christian desires holiness; a true Christian desires righteousness. And so when God's word shines a flashlight and says, "Oh, there's dust in that corner that needs to be cleaned up," we say, "Okay, let me get a broom. Let me get a dustpan. I'll sweep this up and I'll carry it out. I'll carry the dirt out, Lord, just so that my life could be a purer, clearer, better reflection of the Lord who gave his life to save me." And, look, God's word goes right to the most intimate part of our lives and addresses us with the marriage bed.

1 Corinthians 7:3. One of the good things about preaching is that you can address these things without it being too directly personal because so many people are listening and the Spirit of God can sort it out in your own heart and life on these things. What we're saying is that marriage is an intimate union; the marriage bed must not be shared outside of marriage but it must be shared with each other. 1 Corinthians 7:3, "The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not

have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does." Clear references to the marriage bed, right? Verse 5, "Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer." He gives a little, you see, Paul went on tangents himself here. He goes off on a little tangent about an agreement that would be a small exception to what he's saying here. He says, "Stop depriving one another, for a time, for prayer, by agreement, okay, but then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." You see, God commands us to share that intimacy with our spouses. It's part of the design of marriage. It's intended to be an intimate union and so while it's not to be shared outside of marriage, it is fully intended to be shared inside the marriage bed. That intimacy should not be used as a weapon of punishment. It should not be used as a weapon of pay-back for something else that went on. You've got to leave that stuff outside of the marriage bed and gladly, joyfully share that intimacy with one another. That's the design of God on marriage. Over in Hebrews 13 it said marriage is to be held in honor among all, Hebrews 13:4. "Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge." So God intended marriage to be an expression of the deepest of intimacy. It's an intimate union that expresses the relational unity that is expressed in the idea of two becoming one flesh. It's an intimate union by God's design, commanded to be shared with one another.

Now, with all of that, recognizing the vulnerability that that sometimes represents for people, you know, you've got a spouse that's hurt you, I get that but, fourthly, and what makes all of this work in the design of God is this fourth point: marriage is to be a loving union. Marriage is a loving union. Turn over to Ephesians 5. Marriage is a loving union. Ephesians 5. Marriage actually pictures the love that Christ has for his church and I know that you're familiar with this passage. Ephesians 5. But just as human marriage is meant to be permanent and exclusive and intimate, so also the relationship between Christ in a spiritual way is permanent, exclusive and intimate. We are in full union with our Lord Jesus Christ and we're in a union with him that is dominated by his love.

Ephesians 5:25, speaking to husbands says, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church." And so as he's explaining marriage, he's explaining the relationship between Christ and the church and there is this interconnection between the two that makes them perfect illustrations of one another. Christ self-sacrificed his own life for the sake of his church. His love nourishes and cherishes us even to this moment. Even as we're here under the teaching of his word, Christ is loving us, nourishing us, cherishing us, keeping us, preserving us all the way to the culmination of our salvation in heaven. What loving, total, thorough care he shows for us. Paul says, "The way that Christ deals with the church is the way that husbands are to love their wives. It's a picture. So God designed marriage to be permanent, to be

exclusive, to be intimate, to be an expression of sacrifice and love one to another. That's a refresher on marriage. That's what marriage is supposed to be like.

Now, what does this mean for you? I want to take some extended time here to work out the application of this and I want to talk to everybody in the room with my category, anyway. Let's talk about this to single people first of all. Talk to single people, some of you are happy in your singleness, some of you are a tad impatient. That's alright, but to you I would say let God's plan for marriage shape the kind of spouse that you seek. You see, if you approach marriage with this high exalted view of what God intended it to be and realized that this is the biblical standard, don't let impatience compromise your standards. Don't let the passage of a calendar, the turn of a calendar somehow diminish the level of conviction and commitment that you bring to honor this institution of marriage with the way that you approach the possibility of marriage. Charles Spurgeon said this, speaking about the idea of a Christian marrying a non-Christian. He said in his unique pastoral way, he said, "It can never add to the comfort of any Christian man or woman to be unequally yoked together with an unbeliever. You are far better to remain in the cold of your unmarried life than to warm your hands at the fire of an unhallowed marriage."

I have an unmarried friend, not here, back in my former life in California, who delighted in saying this, he says, "It is better to want something you don't have than to have something you don't want." Once you're married into a permanent union, you can't change that, and so it's better to let marriage pass you by, if that were the case, than to have a rotten marriage; to have the sadness and the heartache that that brings. And with that, just speaking as a pastor, first of all, let me say that I know many of you singles are waiting patiently and you're committed to an elevated view of marriage, and you're not going to sacrifice your pursuit just for the sake of a calendar that has turned once again. I appreciate that about you. I realize you're swimming against the tide on that, not only in what culture and family expects from you, but even sometimes what your own desires would push you to do. Good for you. God is going to honor your commitment to wait for a godly Christian spouse. No question about it. Good for you and this church fully supports you in that without qualification. You will never hear this pastor speaking jokingly about how you should hurry up and get married. Sometimes that not within your control. Sometimes you don't have the opportunity. Sometimes you've had to sort through relationships and realize, "Do you know what? This guy is not fit to marry. This girl was never right." And you cut off the relationship at the cost of heartache. Good for you. Good for you. You're paying a price for being a godly Christian. I commend you for it.

On the other side of that, let me just say that if you're here as a professing Christian, you should not be pursuing an unbeliever. You shouldn't be dating unbelievers, someone who lacks the conviction to fulfill God's plan for marriage. How could we do that? How could we on the one hand say, "I love Christ supremely. I recognize the high exalted place that this has in his order and I realize that our marriage is supposed to be a reflection of the love between Christ and the church." How can you take that intellectual understanding of marriage and say, "Okay, I'm going to pursue this with an unbeliever"? That doesn't add up. You see, this starts to reflect on your own convictions. It's a reflection of what you

really love in your own life. Someone who lacks the conviction, someone who is not a Christian, cannot possibly fulfill God's plan for marriage with you and if you find yourself trapped in a relationship like that, let this message be your opportunity to step out of it. Wait for a godly mate. God knows that you're single. Prove your trust in Christ by waiting for a spouse who shares your commitment to Christ and is committed to biblical marriage. Wait. Just be patient and let God prove his faithfulness to you. That's for single people. This is exactly where a biblical understanding leads singles to think.

Now, let me address young marrieds, those of you that have been married in the past 50 years, let's say, or maybe five or less. We have several young marrieds at Truth Community Fellowship and I'm glad you're here. Your vows are still reasonably fresh on your mind. Let me just encourage you with this. You must approach marriage with this mindset, you must approach marriage in such a way that divorce will never be an option for you. This is how you must think about your marriage, that you won't even entertain the thought for a moment. That you won't even give the soil of your heart room to receive that seed. Never let anything shake you from that conviction, that no matter what happens, that you're not going to initiate the thought and say, "Well, maybe it's time for us to end our marriage." You won't do that because you're already grounded in the understanding that marriage is a permanent union established by God and you won't accept that thought for where you're at right now. You don't even entertain the thought.

And let me say this, and this has helped me counsel people and think through things over the years: you carry that mindset of divorce is never an option, you do that for the sake of your spouse, to be sure, you know, and that's just part of the commitment that you give to your spouse is that you think that way about your marriage but, beloved, what I want you to think about is this, is that your commitment to think that way about your marriage transcends your spouse. This is the way that you think about marriage as part of your greater devotion to Christ and your greater commitment to be obedient to Christ in your life. You realize that this level of commitment, this exclusivity, is God's call on your life, and that his call on your life is for you to be faithful to that spouse no matter what. And so you carry on, you hold that unshakable conviction as a first order of your life that, "This is what I do for Christ who gave me this spouse for better or for worse."

So you carry out that conviction for the sake of Christ and, secondarily, for your spouse, and when a serious problem comes up, you don't even consider divorce. You don't even think about it. It doesn't even cross your mind because you understand in the depths of your heart that your commitment to Christ means that your marriage must be permanent, exclusive, intimate and loving, and sometimes you're going to live out that commitment in the midst of a somewhat hostile environment. Sometimes your spouse is going to make it hard on you to carry that out but, beloved young marrieds, understand that your commitment to your marriage transcends the way that your spouse interacts with you on a day-to-day basis because you've come back to Scripture. You've said, "This is what God wants, God wants me to obey him. I want to obey him because I love him, because Christ gave his life to save me from my sins. I love him. I want to do whatever he wants. Whatever he asks, I'll do. So marriage is part of that and so I'm just going to continue on and be faithful and trust the Lord through this." And what that approach means is that

when the problems inevitably come up, you look for the solution that will take you through the problem rather than out of the problem. Yeah, I understand, we're conditioned to run away from problems, to run away from pain. For the Christian who embraces and submits to God's plan for marriage, the pain is secondary to the greater commitment to honor Christ in the way that he ordained marriage to be.

So if you're here, young married, middle married, whatever that means, in the midst of some hard times in your relationship, not right now, not necessarily even literally, but you need to have this discussion with each other as two Christians going through some hard times in your marriage, tension, all that: you need to look at each other and say to each other, "You know, we might as well solve this problem because we're not going anywhere anyway. We're not going anywhere. We've ruled out divorce as an option. So we can't solve it that way and this is too painful to keep living this way. Why don't we just solve this thing? Why don't we find a way to work through this because it's not worth living in this sorrow?"

Someone, I can't remember where I read this, I have a number of marriage books on my shelves, most of them not all that helpful, but that's all right, but one book said something that just came back to my mind that's very helpful. You need to think about marriage, you need to think about your marriage like this: there's you in the marriage and there is your spouse in the marriage, there is the two of you but you need to realize and understand that there is a sense in which your marriage is something that you're both working to protect, there is a third entity in the midst of you and it's your marriage, it's your relationship. So sometimes you subordinate your interests, sometimes you forgive when you'd rather not, sometimes you make the sacrifice, sometimes you make the first words of approach not because that's what you would initially want to do but you do it for the sake of this third thing called your marriage, the third thing of your relationship. You realize that there's something that transcends the two of you individually and you both bring to the relationship the desire to preserve, protect and help and cure that third entity, that marriage relationship. When you start to think about marriage like that, you're really starting to move in the right direction. You stop thinking about it purely on terms of what you want and say, "Well, what's best for our marriage.?" that starts to change the dynamic of it.

So that's for the young marrieds. Let me address the long marrieds here or the old marrieds, if you want to contrast young with old. Let's just say this, that your marriage is a barometer of your spiritual life. Look over at 1 Peter 3, we need to look at this passage, being just ahead of 2 Peter in your English Bible. 1 Peter 3:1, "In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives." So this submission that we have toward Christ is reflected in the wives being submissive to their own husbands and sometimes holding their tongue. My wife has been great about that over the years and I'm grateful for it as a result.

Look at verse 7 as he addresses the husbands here, "You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a

woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that," here's the point, talking about your marriage being a barometer of your spiritual health, "so that your prayers will not be hindered." A Christian who has brought problems into his marriage, before he reads his next theology book, he needs to make things right with his wife. Theological depth, biblical knowledge is not a substitute for being a godly spouse in your marriage.

And to you long marrieds, I ask: over the course of your life has your spouse known marriage as permanent, exclusive, intimate and loving? Has your spouse known that? You see, I'm not asking whether you've known marriage that way, I'm asking whether your spouse has. God is more concerned in terms of your walk with him what you're bringing to the marriage rather than what you're getting out of it. Many of you are a great testimony in your marriage and I'm grateful for that. A few of you maybe need to be ashamed of yourselves, huh? Well, let's take this opportunity to reorient, to repent, and to be the spouses that God has called us to be.

Let me address one final group here, the widowed and the divorced, those who are alone after marriage. The house gets quiet, I understand that. And for you I just encourage you to remember Psalm 146:9, "The LORD protects the strangers; He supports the fatherless and the widow, But He thwarts the way of the wicked." God supports the widow in a unique way. You are the special object of the affection and attention of God, so much so that he points you out repeatedly in Scripture, and you can draw near to your Father even though your mate is no longer with you. God's design for marriage transcends marriage, really, when you think about it. When we really put it all together, marriage is a reflection of other things. It's a reflection of the love of Christ for his church. It's a reflection of the fidelity of God to his people. It's a reflection of the care of God for man in general. "It's not good for man to be alone, I'll act, I'll intervene to correct that so that he has companionship." All of this is reflecting the loving, gracious character of God.

Regardless of your marital status, pulling everybody into this final point of consideration here, when you think about the totality of what the Bible says about marriage, we're faced with questions like this, "Are you a person of relational fidelity? Are you loyal in your relationships? Are you a person of sacrificial love? Do you bring those traits to your most intimate relationships? Do your physical eyes and your heart desires set themselves on righteousness or on sin?" All of these things transcend marriage.

So as we've been refreshed on the idea of what God has in marriage, we're brought back to the most fundamental point of them all. We all feel the weight of conviction on these things to one degree or another. It brings us all back to the fact that, humbles us and brings us back to the reality that, "I'm a sinner in need of grace." And how grateful we are that our Lord not only provided for companionship in the garden, he provided for forgiveness at the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Where you have fallen short, where you have felt conviction in this time together around God's word, don't run from that. Listen, the start of spiritual growth is when you stop running from conviction, stop explaining it away, stop saying that doesn't really apply to me, stop running from that and come back instead and say, "Lord, your word hit the mark. I've fallen short here. I need to repent. I

need your forgiveness." Your closest relationships, your marital relationship, is inevitably going to expose your flaws, your spiritual shortcomings.

Well, let's close on a gracious word: Christ came to redeem us; forgiveness and cleansing are available. Proverbs 28:13 says, "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion."

Bow with me in prayer.

Father, as your word has sifted through us, we have felt the arrows of conviction plunge into our hearts. We've seen the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself up for us that our sins might be forgiven. Lord, I pray for the marriages that are represented in this room. I don't really know whose are good and whose a bad and whose are in between but, Father, I know that men and women who love Christ come here with varying degrees of joy and mixed and tinged with sorrow over their marriage relationship. I pray, Father, that you would bring grace to them and strengthen them in that. I pray that where their transgressions have contributed to the problem, that they would confess and forsake those transgressions before you, and that you would pour out your compassion, and that this would be a time that would refresh a stale marriage and bring it back to the design that you had for it.

Father, I pray for those young people, those in their 20s and 30s who are newly married, fresh into their relationship, perhaps parenting young children. Father, they haven't always received from those who went before them the best example of what marriage should be like. I pray that you would give them an added measure of grace so that they would chart their own course of godliness in their marriage that would rise up to bless generations to follow, including their own children.

Father, for the widows, the divorced that are in our midst, have mercy on them, Father. The nights get long and lonely. Father, I pray that somehow your Spirit would compensate for the absence of that spouse and give them a deeper joy and peace than they have ever known before, just as a measure of your mercy as the one who supports the fatherless and the widow.

And Father, I pray for our singles. All of these things impact the trajectory of their lives. I pray that you would, first of all, make them godly. Work out righteousness in their lives that they might become the kind of person who would be a godly spouse. Father, I pray that you would give them patience as they wait. And Father, I pray that you would raise up for them godly mates who share a conviction and a desire to honor this institution of marriage. It's going to get more difficult most likely, Lord, to do this, to live out this kind of godliness as you designed it in the Bible as the world increasingly turns its back on it but, Father, your grace is more than abundant, it's more than sufficient for us to live out godly lives in the midst of a sinful world. In fact, it's one of the ways that we'll distinguish ourselves as those who truly belong to you.

I pray for each one here, Father, that our lives would contribute to the honoring of the institution of marriage as you designed it, and that you would sanctify and protect and help and lead and guide us as we do. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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