

A Primer on Marriage

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Today, I want to do a brief series or start a brief series, I should say, on the topic of marriage and courtship. This has been planned for a very long time, I say, and I mention that, I mention the long-term planning because there has been a providential uptick in people who are approaching me and approaching the elders for help on relationships that they are involved in, many different conversations and text exchanges that I've had over the past few days and weeks. It's very encouraging to me to see such a visible and obvious intersection of planning and providence that this is exactly the right time for us to be considering this topic both in marriage and in courtship. One quick word, quick aside. I'm only using the word courtship to describe a relationship that is possibly going to lead to marriage. I'm not meaning anything more than it by that. I know that people have all kinds of rules and ideas about how courtship ought to be done. None of that has a place in the pulpit here today. I'm just using it as a shorthand reference to a relationship that might lead to marriage.

So many people have been asking me for help on their relationships as they start to enter into a possible courtship setting and, of course, there's always issues with marriage and things like that that come along with the blessed privilege of pastoral ministry, so I'm very very convinced that this is the right time to be able to address this. God has providentially appointed my plans and the needs of the congregation to meet starting today and I think that's really cool, and I'm excited about it and we will trust Christ to bring long-term fruit from it all.

Now as we look out on, you know, the life of Truth Community Church and look out on the people that are here that God has graciously brought, we have many singles in our congregation and I want you to know that I love each one of you and I'm grateful to God for you. We have many newly married couples in our congregation, married within the past 2-3 years, five years is still pretty newly married, and I want you to know that I love each one of you and I'm just so glad that God has brought you to our church. We have others that have been married for decades and I love you too. The elders are grateful that you are here. We have some that are widowed and some that are divorced and have tasted the bitter fruit of those sorrows in life. We have troubled marriages within our church. We have some great marriages within our church. There's just a whole kaleidoscope of different situations that are before us, and so the beauty of preaching God's word is that you can just preach the truth, just show what Scripture says about things and then you trust the Holy Spirit to take that single truth and to apply it to the hearts and needs of each

one that comes, and so this message is going to have a far different application for the young man who's around 20 or 25, than it will for the widow who is in her 70s or 80s but God is going to use this single element and this single unit of truth to minister to our hearts today and I'm really grateful for that.

Now marriage has shaped all of us. The institution of marriage has shaped and affected each one of us regardless of whether you've ever been married or not; regardless if you're too young to contemplate marriage or not, marriage has shaped all of us, some for good and some for bad. We are products of the way our parents approached marriage if nothing else, or the way that they disregarded marriage and violated God's plan for marriage, and so we're all shaped by it in one way or another and we'll talk more about that in the days to come. Here is one thing that I want to say to people that are, you know, predominantly conservative and predominantly have perhaps come from some kind of Christian background in life, regardless of, you know, I'm speaking very broadly regardless of the theology that, you know, you grew up with. This is a very very important point for everyone to understand, what I am about to say. You cannot and you should not presuppose that everything that you knew growing up was actually biblical and right when it comes to marriage. The mere fact that you grew up in a professing Christian home does not mean that everything that you came to understand was actually biblical or actually required. You know, there are some conservative homes that have, you know, notebooks full of rules about what you were supposed to do in this or that situation, and all of those things, or many of them if not most of them, go far beyond what the Bible actually requires, and so we need to not presuppose that the things that we learned growing up are necessarily contained in Scripture and required for a good and healthy marriage. That's very very important.

Now also important here is this, is that corporately speaking and individually speaking, I can't emphasize enough how important this is to us. We need as a church, we need to have a biblical mind about the institution of marriage. We need to have a biblical understanding so that we can help our children develop the right convictions because those convictions are going to have a long-term trajectory-shaping effect on their lives, and also when people come to you for counsel and say, "Can you help me think through this," you need to be responding in a biblical way and to take those concerns seriously and earnestly, earnestly enough that you want to know what Scripture says so that you're giving them God's word and not simply what you grew up with, not simply what you did as a young person as you entered into marriage, not simply do what your parents did.

I want to say something about that. You know, I've heard so often people resistant to change who just say, "Look, that's not the way I grew up. That's not what I was taught and so I'm not open to discussing this." Well, you know, that's not the way Christians think. You see, that's like trying to give Monopoly money to pay for your groceries at Kroger's, saying there is no effect, there is no authenticity to that kind of currency. If we are going to be a biblical congregation and be biblical Christians, we have to think biblically and be receptive to the fact that just maybe Scripture is trying to change us, to change our thinking, to sanctify us, to make us more like Christ and to think more biblically than we did in the past. I'd like to think that even in my own life, my thinking

on marriage over the past 35 years has matured in ways that I never expected when Nancy and I joined hands on July 16, 1988. We just have to be able to let go of that inertia and what it really is, it's spiritual laziness, that says, "You know, I know what I think, I know what I grew up with and nothing else matters." That's not true and that's not godly to think that way. We need to be open to the instruction of Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives to conform us to what God wants marriage to be.

So today's message I've titled "A Primer on Marriage." If you're taking notes, you can just call it a primer on marriage. We're going to go to several different passages and I'm going to break this into two sections, the first section talking about God's plan for marriage just in a very general way, and then secondly trying to apply some of these things to those different categories of people that I mentioned earlier. And so there is something for everyone here, even for singles who have no desire for marriage, there's something here for you as well.

So let's look, first of all, at God's plan for marriage. That's point 1, and then we're going to have four subpoints under that heading for your edification, I trust. Now let me just say this. I do not intend to cover every important point on marriage in this series, certainly not today. There's a lot of biblical teaching in Proverbs and in Ephesians and Colossians and other places that we're just going to touch lightly on, if not at all. So, you know, I just want to set expectations reasonable here but let's define marriage to start with. Let's define what marriage is and this aspect of discussing marriage has become much more critical in the past six years since the United States Supreme Court accepting homosexual marriage, they can't legitimize it, they don't have that authority to do that, but that which made it legal and imposed it upon all 50 states in the country. It's important for us to define marriage because right understanding of the institution is slowly receding in the darkness before our very eyes, and so it's important for us to come and define it and to defend it.

So what is marriage? We could say this, I'll speak this slowly and I'll speak it a couple of times. Marriage is that God-ordained institution in which a biological man and a biological woman covenant with one another to live as husband and wife. Marriage is that God-ordained institution in which a biological man and a biological 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 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. One man, one woman for the rest of life, understanding that this is an institution that God himself created and established, and so it does not belong to men to monkey with it as we have done over the past several years. It is not for man to define it differently, to define it in terms of same-sex couples or, you know, as will one day be inevitable, multiple people in the relationship. That's coming and is already here. My friends, you and I must understand what Scripture says about these matters. It is a God-ordained institution which means that it is entitled to the utmost reverence and respect. It should not be treated lightly, casually or trifled against. It is with one man and one woman alone and it is for all of life.

So I'm going to break this down and kind of expand on that definition with four different principles, four different aspects of it and take you to Scripture to show why we say what we say here. So the first aspect of God's plan for marriage is this: marriage is a permanent union, permanent as far as earthly life is concerned. God's standard from the start before the fall of man was that marriage would be a permanent and exclusive relationship. Permanent, lasting throughout all of life. Exclusive, giving yourself to no one else.

So look at Genesis, the first book in the Bible, Genesis 2, and I'm just going to go through these Scripture texts too quickly, I'm sure, for my own satisfaction but just to give everything in an overview sense, we need to read the Scriptures without much comment here this morning. Genesis 2, beginning in verse 18. God had created Adam and put him in the garden. The animals had been named. The animals were there but there was a problem. As perfect as creation was and very good it says at the end of Genesis 1, there was something missing that God himself recognized and called attention to. In verse 18,

18 ... the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him."

Then down in verse 21, God, identifying the need, brought the answer to the need himself and so what did he do? Verse 21,

21 So 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. 22 The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. 23 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."

Now look at this in verse 24,

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. 25 And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

God in that episode establishing marriage. Man, woman brought together and to be together for the rest of their earthly lives.

You say, "Where do you see that in the matter about the rest of their earthly lives?" Well, look at Matthew 19 where our Lord gives comment on these things. Matthew 19:3. As you're turning there let me say this, to some impatient minds, this kind of background might seem unnecessary. "Just tell me how to live a better life. Tell me how to have a better marriage. Tell me how to get over my problems with my spouse." That's really bad thinking. It's really superficial thinking that is only considering things about the present application for what it means today. The reason that we get into problems as we deal with marriage is that we haven't dealt seriously with the biblical theology that undergirds it.

When you understand the foundation, when you stand on the foundation, then you are in a position to approach marriage in a proper way. Without that basis, without the theological and philosophical underpinnings that we're talking about here today, it's hopeless because marriage is only driven then by your desires at the moment and that is not the permanent exclusive relationship that God intended it to be. We're dealing with things that transcend the day to day issues of marriage and saying, "What is this institution that I find myself in? What is this thing that God has created that I'm interested in with someone else one day?" We must know these things and know them clearly and know where to turn in Scripture to find them.

So Matthew 19, beginning in verse 3. If it sounds like I'm trying to change the way people think about this, you're starting to get the point. That's right, we're not just accepting, you know, a casual approach to these things. Matthew 19, beginning in verse 3.

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?" 4 And [Jesus] answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, 5 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 he quotes the passage that we just read from Genesis. Then he goes on to say,

6 "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."

The two become one flesh. What God has joined together, let no man separate. That has a lot of implications that we're going to address later in the message. Right now, we're just establishing the theological biblical basis of marriage. We see that it is a permanent union. Once a man and woman are joined together in marriage, the plan of God is that they would not separate. Now some other time, there are a couple of limited exceptions to that that we see in the New Testament, but first we have to grasp the primary emphasis of Scripture, this is a permanent relationship. No man is to put this asunder.

Now secondly, marriage is an exclusive union. It is a permanent union of man and woman, secondly, it is an exclusive union of man and woman. The standard for marriage is permanent monogamy, one man with one woman until death separated them. This is merely an outworking of the seventh commandment found in Exodus 20:14, "You shall not commit adultery." Once you are married, you shall not have sexual relationship with anyone else. You are committed exclusively to your spouse.

Now that's obvious enough as you read Scripture but it's important to remember that Jesus taught us that the law goes far further than the mere external application of it. Jesus taught us that God requires more than simply external purity in marriage. You're in

Matthew, I believe, turn back to Matthew 5. This exclusivity is more than simply a joining together of bodies. This is a matter of the heart as well and it is vital for us to understand the sanctity of marriage, the separate way that God has created it to stand apart from everything else in life. And so in Matthew 5:27, Jesus said,

27 "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY';

That's just quoting from Exodus 20:14. Jesus goes on to explain the spiritual implication of that command in a way that is very searching to every one of us. He goes on to say,

28 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.

Adultery, then, is more than the physical joining together that takes place outside of the bonds of marriage, it's a matter of what's going on inside your heart as well.

And we need to stop here and focus on this for just a moment and to get right down into the dirty trenches of life in order to uphold and vindicate the word of God and to help us see the far-reaching effects that marriage has and God's design has for our lives. And so, my friends, what does this mean in light of Matthew 5 and this exclusive union? What does it mean? Well, I speak gently knowing that many of you are trapped in different kinds of sins but I must speak clearly and without compromise the word of God. What this means is that pornography is a violation of God's institution of marriage whether you are using it before marriage, during marriage, or whatever. It's a violation of that intimacy and it's a violation of the institution. Premarital sex is a horrible violation of the marriage union because God designed the sexual union to be reserved exclusively within the bounds of marriage. And so those that engage in premarital intimacy are sinning greatly against God, and in many ways including the fact that it's a violation of the institution of marriage. Homosexuality is a violation, is a sin against God and the institution of marriage because marriage is one man and one woman. You can't put two same-sex people together and honor the institution of marriage. And transgenderism itself, all of these things, all of these things are an assault against marriage, God's design of humanity in male and female in a binary composition of the human race. There are not multiple genders, there are two as established and created by God, and all of these permutations and things that society is adding to the mix and publicly embracing, all of these things are a sinful assault against the institution of marriage. It must be clear in your mind. I have a special level of concern and compassion for those that are growing up in the world that it's now constituted because it is so easy to just accept and to imbibe by osmosis society's view of these things and say, "Well, homosexuals can get married. It's legal and so what's wrong with it?" And from that perspective, the Bible comes to be viewed with suspicion, or those who teach the Bible and uphold it become anachronistic bubs who do not stay up with the times when, in fact, the truth is just the reverse, it's the Bible that casts suspicion and conviction upon everything that society is doing in these realms in these days right before our very eyes. So the fact that the world is doing it does not do anything to violate

the truth of Scripture and to call it into suspicion. The word of God stands and it stands forever and the word of God judges these things and condemns them as sinful.

So pornography, premarital intimacy, homosexuality, transgenderism, all of these things are sinful assaults on marriage and I say these things clearly and I say them with compassion, what I'm about to say is that men, women alike, you need to take responsibility for the way that you've sinned against God in these different areas; even if it's just in the private thoughts of your own heart, lusting in your heart is sinful in the eyes of God and to the extent that you've acted on these other things, you need to take responsibility for it as some of you have done, and not take refuge in a social acceptance of sin. You look to God's standard and say, "This is God's standard. That's what I'm accountable to. God have mercy on me because I've fallen so short." But not to excuse your sin or to define it as something that is righteous.

Now just a brief aside here. Out in the lobby there are a few of my CD albums on homosexuality and transgenderism that are available for you to take for free. We would love for those to be gone before we close the church today. I realize CDs are not exactly what most people use but you can take them anyway, if only to see the names of the messages to know where to find them so you can download them to your phone, and then you can just toss them. It's fine, you know, those things are, you know, you don't need to feel any compunction about that. We just want the material in your hands. All of those things play into what we're talking about here this morning.

So marriage is God's institution. It's between a man and a woman. It's permanent and it is exclusive. And so you can see just to emphasize this last point, that a wandering heart is a violation of marriage even if you never act on it; even if you never flirt with a member of the opposite sex as a married person, you're still violating it if you're wandering around in that in your heart. And ladies, I'm not aware of this taking place in our congregation but let me say that, you know, a fascination with romance novels is just the same, a violation of the exclusivity, looking for satisfaction and romantic fulfillment in those kinds of novels, it's contrary to the design of God for marriage. You're not to be fantasizing about someone else's relationship, you're to be living in the midst of yours and giving yourself exclusively to your spouse, a body, soul and spirit.

Now that leads us to our third point which we've already kind of laid the groundwork for: marriage is an intimate union. It is an intimate union. I never cease to be amazed at the intimacy of marriage, how well a spouse comes to know you, and just the presence there both in my own marriage and in the, you know, what I observe in ministry. I take this as an axiom that doesn't need to be proven, marriage is easily the deepest human relationship on earth. It is easily the deepest human relationship, the most intimate relationship in earth. You're with this person, you know, over the course of years, over the course of decades. You're with them, you know, that you're with them in sickness and in health, and poverty and in riches and all of that. And God designed, we'll be delicate here, God designed the sexual union to be an expression of that intimacy, the physical intimacy being an expression of the spiritual intimacy of two becoming one.

Now this sexual union is not, as we've seen, it is not to be shared outside of marriage, before marriage or within marriage. It's not to be shared with anyone else. But Scripture in its great practicality tells us that it must be shared within marriage. Look at 1 Corinthians 7 in the clarity and yet the delicacy of Scripture, we see this taught very clearly. 1 Corinthians 7. The issue that's at hand here is the issue of touching a woman, chapter 7, verse 1. In biblical language, that's a euphemism for the sexual union and what Paul says about this, what the Bible says about it is that when it comes to the sexual union,

3 The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. 4 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.

There is a mutual obligation, a mutual duty between husband and wife in marriage to be available and to lovingly, happily fulfill the sexual union with your spouse.

Now there are those ascetics, there are those who think the body is evil, and that was some of the influence that was at play here at the church of Corinth, that said the sexual union is bad. Flesh is bad, you know, physical things are bad. Only the spirit things are good. That's not true. So Paul goes on and says in verse 5,

5 Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

So the teaching of Scripture is that within marriage there is a mutual availability here that as you enter into marriage, you are giving your body to your mate as well as your person, you could say, as well as your heart.

Now to kind of apply this, let me just give you some insight into the way that I do premarital counseling. I've done a fair amount of premarital counseling over the years and I've come to this point that the couples always think is unnecessary, let's say, as we talk about this. I press this point onto young couples in premarital counseling and those where I have officiated their weddings, they will affirm this to you. I ask them and I ask them repeatedly, "Are you willing to give your body to your mate? Are you willing to give your body to this person without reserve? Do you look forward to that? Are you eager for that?" And why do I do that, why does that seem, you know, that might seem a little personal? Well, look, in light of this Scripture, it behooves us to deal with this on the front end before you enter into marriage because if you are not physically attracted, in our culture where you choose your own spouse, we're not talking about cultures where marriage is arranged, that's a whole different issue. I don't counsel over there so I'm not worried about that right here. What I want young people to understand is that it would be a fraud for you to proceed with marriage if deep in your heart you're not attracted to your spouse and the thought of intimacy is not appealing to you with that particular person. It would be a fraud to get married under those pretenses because the potential for guilt and

shame and frustration is great. Marriage is so intimate and so exclusive that you're not going to be able to hide the fact that you don't find that other person appealing, that you don't really want that, and the hurt that that imposes on the spouse who thought you wanted it is just incalculable and unthinkable for a Christian to impose on another person like that. And so, yes, I press on that question. I ask it three or four or five or six different ways to impress upon them this point that your body becomes that of your spouse and you need to embrace that and to want that.

I remember a time back in another church, in another place, not anyone that you would know, I remember observing a couple who was in a very serious relationship, I can't remember if they were engaged yet or not, but I was sitting a couple rows behind them in church and I was watching the way that they were acting and the way that they were interacting with each other. And the girl, bless her heart, I knew her, the girl as she was talking to her fiancé, boyfriend, whatever, you know, if he's sitting here, she's kind of leaning away from him when she's talking to him, and I thought that's not right. You know, if you love somebody and you're really interested in them, you're taking every excuse you can to get close. You're wanting to lean into them, not lean away from them. And as I recall, it's been many many years, we had a discussion about that and eventually the relationship broke up. There was a sincerity in her heart that wanted to embrace this Christian man who was a godly young man, but she was not physically attracted to him and she was just trying to make it work despite that. Well, if you're having to talk yourself into it, you need to step back and try to talk yourself out of it. Instead of just saying I should feel right about this, just be honest about whether you do or not.

As I've said to our young people in the past, "Should physical attraction be a consideration when I am considering someone to get married to?" And my answer to that, I say, you know, I have a technical Greek term for what you need to realize here, and the Greek term is duh. Are you kidding me? You're going to spend the rest of your life, you're going to spend the next 50 years with someone that you're not actually attracted to? What's that going to be like on your honeymoon? What's that going to be like as you're getting dressed day by day? You can't ignore that in our culture where you get to choose your own spouse. You need to be realistic and you need to be realistic about the way that God ordained marriage to be. He ordained it to be permanent, to be exclusive, and to be intimate, and if the intimacy somehow repulses you, you need to be fair to the other person, cut it off and say, "Look, I'm sorry but this isn't going to work. I thought, you know, I thought I could change but I can't and I'm sorry, and I'm not willing to hurt you over the course of your life." That's the only righteous thing to do. Anything else is false pretenses and no one should be standing in front of a pastor in the presence of God vowing to give themselves to each other when they're not sincere about it in their hearts.

So that's our perspective on premarital counseling. There are some, and why I emphasize this is that there are some and there's a plausible, certain plausible aspect to it, there are some who will say, "Look, if you're both Christians then you can sort it all out." Well, I get the sense of that but why walk into sorrow and why inflict sorrow on someone else when you know in advance that that's what you're going to do? This is just a matter of integrity in making your vows and contemplating marriage.

Now fourthly, we've said it's a permanent, exclusive, intimate union, fourth and finally, marriage is a loving union. Marriage is a loving union. Marriage is designed to picture the love that Christ has for his own. Look at Ephesians 5, a very familiar passage. My pattern is to go to this passage every time I conduct a wedding, in part because it's so fundamental for the couple, and also in part to help establish a mindset within our church body that this is what we think about marriage. So the repetition, again, becomes the key to learning.

So in verse 22, Paul said,

22 Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.

Dealing with the issue of marriage being a loving union, we come to verse 25

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, 26 so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 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. 28 So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; 29 for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church,

Our great Savior, our Lord Jesus, providing in his redemption of his people a picture of what marriage is to be like, in love, that is, in seeking the best of the object of his eternal affection, in love, meaning he sacrificed himself for the sake of his people, in love, he reached out and ministered to them even while we were unworthy, while we were enemies, yet Christ died for us, that kind of sacrifice and concern for the best interests of the mate, this is the picture that Scripture gives of what the marriage relationship is to be like. And you men, it falls upon us to establish that in the pattern of our home. God holds the man responsible to set this pattern in the way that it ought to go.

So, just remembered this, in addition to the CD albums out there, there are also CDs which have three of my messages from this passage, Ephesians 5, that are on the table for you to pick up and take away, where all of these things are explained in greater detail.

So what can we say as we come to the end of this first section? God made marriage permanent. He made it exclusive. He made it intimate. He made it loving. And he uses marriage as an illustration of the redemptive love of Christ. This is a high and lofty and exalted institution. It's a blessing to share in it. Scripture and Peter calls it the grace of life. But we should see that because it is so high and exalted, we need to treat it with respect and reverence, and that it does not belong to man to change the institution to fit it according to his own lusts.

So what does this mean for all of you? That's point 2: what does this mean for you? Well, I'm going to go back and address those groups that I said, mentioned at the start, I'm going to go back there because that's what I want to do right now. What does this mean for you? We'll kind of work through things chronologically. Let's talk to our single people first and I'll have more to say in the next couple of weeks about courtship, but this is what I want to say and help you think through marriage as it applies to you, okay? Some of you are perfectly happy to be single and that's fine. You do not have to be married if you don't want to be married. It would be better for you not to be married if you really do not want to be married. Scripture talks sometimes God gifts people to be single. On the other end, some of you are impatient, really want to get married and the truth of the matter is that you would take the first warm body that would say yes to you and enter headlong into marriage just in order to be able to be married. Well, let me say this, let God's plan for marriage shape the kind of spouse that you seek. When it comes to considering a future spouse, you need to be looking at the pattern of life that a person has led. You need to look at the pattern of life that they have had with their prior relationships and count that into the way that you view things. Don't let your impatience cause you to compromise biblical standards. My friends, and I speak as a pastor who loves you and cares about you and I only want your good in what I'm saying here, I am just trying to help and protect you. Do not let your impatience compromise biblical standards. Do not let a sudden bout of infatuation cause you to rush into this sacred institution without proper forethought ahead of time.

Charles Spurgeon said this, 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 a confirmed bachelor friend who has said many times, "It is better to want something that you don't have than to have something you don't want." There's a lot of wisdom in that, isn't there?

There's so much at stake and so I plead with you not to sin against God and pursue a serious relationship with an unbeliever. That cannot end well. That cannot end well. You know, there are people that we love that are dealing with the consequences of rejecting this very counsel. It's so important to be willing to receive counsel when you're pursuing a relationship, to hear outside voices. Let others speak into your relationship. Let them have a perspective. Let them give you perspective on it. It's not that they've become a veto of your relationship, but you need to let other people, you need to let your family, if they are Christians, or let your elders speak in and give you a sense of perspective, counsel, loving encouragement. It would be foolish to exclude that. It would be foolish to exclude that and just stick your fingers in your ears and move forward without any kind of loving perspective given to you. So beware of those who pressure you even through well-meaning intention, "You're still not married? How old are you now?" Those kinds of things. The Lord knows you're single. You can prove your trust in him by waiting for a godly spouse to come. Now I'll have more on courtship next week so I'll leave that there.

Let me speak to our young marrieds whom I love. Your vows are fresh. Your mindset in light of God's institution of marriage, permanent, exclusive, intimate, loving, your

mindset has to be this, that you will hold your spouse in such a way that divorce is never an option even in your thinking even if you never speak the word itself. It can never be an option for you in a Christian marriage. Now again, there are a couple of biblical exceptions to this. If someone abandons you, that's different. If someone violates the marriage covenant with an adulterous relationship, that's something different, we've addressed that in the past. But assuming the basic considerations of biblical marriage, you for yourself in your mind, you have to approach it, "Divorce is never an option for me." And when problems come up as they inevitably do, as events overtake your life and place a great strain on your marriage relationship, you can't even think about divorce in light of the way that God holds it in his word. And don't let anything shake you from that conviction. If you've been at odds with one another, if you've been, you know, if you've been arguing with one another, you just need to stop and step back from it, take a deep breath literally, take a deep breath and look at each other with sympathy and a smile on your face that says, "Do you know what? We might as well solve this because we're not going anywhere, so why continue the argument. Let's get through this rather than looking for an unbiblical escape. Let's solve this, sweetheart. We're not going anywhere and this is a miserable way to live so let's solve this and move forward." And the elders are available to help you if you need help on something like that. It's part of our ministry. But you look for a solution that takes you through the problem, not one that takes you out of the problem.

Now thirdly, singles, young marrieds, let's talk to the long marrieds for just a moment. The long marrieds of which I count myself in that category, 33 years this year. Wow, time goes by fast. And let me just, in light of that, let me just say this so that you understand the spirit in which I am speaking to you. You know, Scripture says we all stumble in many ways and I'm certainly no exception to that in my own marriage relationship, stumbled in the way that I've dealt with Nancy, the way that I've interacted with her, you know, over the course of time. It's not been all that God would have had it to be and so I speak to you as a fellow sinner who is in need of grace myself. I speak as one who has received a forgiving spouse which is a great gift from God, and it's from that perspective of being conscious of my own sin and failures over the course of a long marriage that I speak what I'm about to say to you now. I think it's important for you to understand that. How you treat your spouse is ultimately a barometer of your own spiritual life, and theology, a love for theology and sound doctrine is not a substitute for a righteous marriage. "Well, at least I'm strong in the word even though my marriage is a mess." That doesn't work. That doesn't compute biblically.

So the question is has your spouse – watch this – has your spouse known marriage as something that's permanent and exclusive and intimate and loving? Has your spouse known that? This is really hard to get through people's heads, it's impossible without the help of the Holy Spirit. You see, you're going to answer to God for what you gave into marriage, not what you got out of it. We follow God's pattern in Ephesians 5 in marriage, we follow that first and foremost because it's a vertical responsibility, it's a vertical response to the God who has saved us, and so your responsibility is independent of how your spouse responds to you, which I know is easy to lose sight of in the midst of difficulty, but your response is driven first of all by understanding this is what God

requires from you. You're going to stand before God and give an account for what you did in marriage and you're going to stand there alone, and you're not going to be able to say, "Well, Lord, this woman that You gave to me," as one biblical man said, Adam, "this woman that You gave me caused me to stumble." That's not going anywhere.

And so it sobers us and helped us to take it seriously. Marriage in light of the fact that two sinners come together, marriage becomes a long-term opportunity for you to exercise the Christian virtues of patience and forgiveness with your spouse. That's another way to define marriage, totally inadequate, but marriage is a long-term sanctifying opportunity for you to exercise the virtues of patience and forgiveness with your spouse. Look, I get it, your spouse, you know, things can be hard and your spouse can be unreasonable. Ask Nancy, she'll tell you. I'm serious. She wouldn't tell you that on her own. And if you see in your context of marriage, you realize that you yourself have also stumbled, beloved, remember the point of the gospel. Ask Christ for mercy. Ask him for cleansing. Ask him for the help of his Holy Spirit in those areas where you have failed. In Christ, the past does not dictate the future but you can't just sweep it all under a rug and act like, "I don't need to change because, after all, this is the way my dad was." I don't want to hear that. I don't want to talk that way. That's the wrong way to think. You know, my dad was a profane ungodly man, that doesn't justify me being like him. The standard is Scripture and it's love for Christ that makes us search these things out and be willing to confess our sins and to change.

Now finally, a message to those of you that are widowed or divorced. Just a brief word. I understand that the house is quiet and the bed is cold, and that this is not what you signed up for on your wedding day, especially if you're divorced and you've been divorced against your wishes. I can't tell you how much the sympathy of God is upon you in that situation, how much the care of God is available for you to respond to. Psalm 146:3 says the Lord protects the strangers, he supports the fatherless and the widow. God has mercy on you in your troubled marriage. God looks with sympathy upon you in your isolation. The very pain of the isolation becomes a basis upon which Christ invites you to come to him and receive that rest that he promises for those who are weary and are heavy laden. God's mercy is immense and you can draw near to your heavenly Father even though your mate is absent.

So my dear friends, marriage, the institution of marriage is a reflection of God's love toward his people, of Christ's love toward his people. God will bless you as you treat marriage with reverence, with the respect that it deserves, which means loving your spouse, being patient with your spouse and forgiving your spouse. These things are of utmost importance and we'll consider them more in a couple of weeks but first we need a gracious word as we close. You know, we've covered a lot of stuff here in these past 60 minutes. We need a word of grace as we close. Let me just remind you of Christ. He said, "I came to seek and to save that which was lost." He shed his blood so that our many sins could be forgiven and cleansed and not be a barrier to moving forward in life. In love, Christ came to redeem you from your sins, even your sins against his institution and pattern for marriage. Isn't that a great thing to realize, that for some of you who have made a colossal mess of your life, to realize that the blood of Christ was shed for all of

that, that you might be cleansed, forgiven by God and restored to a clear conscience. What a blessing. Proverbs 28:13 says, "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, But he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion."

Let's pray together.

Father, how much Your word has put its finger on the very nerve of our existence in these things. Lord, if we could only remind You, not that You need reminding, You appointed marriage because You Yourself said it's not good for a man to be alone, and so You provided marriage to deal with the otherwise suffocating isolation of life. We, the human race, has fractured Your plan but, Lord, You can restore many things by Your grace and so I pray for our single people, God, I pray that You would give them wisdom and patience as they wait on You. I pray for our young marrieds and I thank You for them and I pray that You would bless them in the days to come, that 35 years from now their marriage would be a testimony of Your grace upon their lives. For those in established marriages, married for a long time, God, give grace. As we get older, it's harder to change, Lord. Deal with us in Your patience and Your forgiving mercy in Christ. And Father, for our widows, our widowers, those that are here divorced or perhaps in a marriage where their spouse is threatening divorce, God, You know the turmoil of heart that that can create. We pray for a special measure of Your grace and mercy that would help them, sustain them and encourage them, that while the spouse may be drawing away, Lord, that they would find You drawing nearer to them as they draw nearer to You. We trust You for your faithfulness. We thank You for the wisdom of Your word. We ask You to help us live it out as we leave this place. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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