

A Christ Centered Marriage

Gospel Implications for Spouses

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Bible Text: Philippians 1:27; Ephesians 5:23-25

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John and Gretchen requested that their wedding ceremony include the ministry of the Word of God and it is my great joy to fulfill that desire now. I will direct my comments to John and Gretchen directly with the prayer that this brief message will be blessed by God to the hearts and souls of everyone who is gathered on this very happy occasion today.

I want to speak just from one verse of Scripture. It is not a verse found in one of the major texts of the Bible on the subject of marriage, but it is a verse that my own dear wife recently described as a beautiful description of Christian marriage. It is a verse found in Paul's letter to a group of first century Christians who lived in the city of Philippi. It is Philippians chapter one and verse 27. I will be reading from the English Standard Version of the Bible. Philippians 1:27 says this:

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.”¹

John and Gretchen, as you well know, the Bible has a lot to say about the subject of marriage. It shows us God's design, of God's purpose for marriage. In fact, the Bible reveals to us all the moral will of our Creator God with respect to every area of our lives, not just marriage. But the Bible is not given to us essentially as a how to manual for marriage. The Bible is not given to us to help us know how we may better ourselves, improve ourselves, to live lives where by we might commend ourselves to God and our good works to God. That is not the reason the Bible has been given to us so that we can earn God's favor and make it to heaven because of our own goodness.

That is one of the greatest and saddest and most tragic misunderstandings present in our world today that the Christian religion and that the Bible in particular is given so that men might simply improve themselves and make themselves good. It couldn't be further from the truth, actually. The central message of the Bible, the great theme of the Bible and the

¹ Philippians 1:27.

message of Christianity, the theme that runs all through the Scriptures from beginning to end is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

One person has described the message of the Bible in this way as I hope a way to summarize the message of Scripture. All of the Bible is about the majesty of God, the misery of man and the mercy to be found in the Lord Jesus Christ. The majesty of God in the beginning there was God, the eternally existent one who is glorious and holiness and majesty and beauty and goodness and love and mercy and grace. He is perfect in all his ways, righteous and just in all that he does. There is no blemish to be found in God, no sin to be found in him. He is a majestic God, the one true and living God, the Creator who has made each and every one of us, who has made John and Gretchen. The God of the Bible is a majestic and holy and pure and perfect God.

The misery of man. All that God made was very good. That was his assessment. When he looked on all that he had made, including man and woman, but man rebelled against his majestic and holy God. Man chose to sin, to turn away from God's will. And when sin entered the world through the first man Adam the Bible tells us that sin entered the world and death came into the world and sin and death have spread to all men and comes down to us today so that each and every one of us here this morning like our first father Adam are born in sin. And death is the great confirmation of that reality that we are all sinners who have rebelled against this majestic and holy God because death comes to us all.

But the good news is there is mercy. There is a majestic God. There is misery of man in sin, but there is mercy to be found in the Lord Jesus Christ, in his person and work. The good news is that this majestic and holy and just God is also a loving God, a gracious God, a merciful God who did something about man's pitiful condition. And he hasn't dealt with us according to our sins. He sent his only Son into the world to do what we couldn't do for ourselves. Jesus Christ entered this world and took on human flesh and fully obeyed the law of God in every point and perfectly obeyed the will of his Father. He satisfied the moral law of God in every way. That is something we could never do. And then he also did something we could never do. He atoned for the sins of man. When he died on the cross, Jesus became a substitutionary sacrifice. He stood in the place of sinners. He fully bore the wrath of God, the just wrath of God against sin. He bore that wrath in his own body on the tree. That is what Jesus was doing when he died. He wasn't merely providing an example of sacrificial living. He made a propitiatory sacrifice for sin. He took the penalty for our sins which we deserve in himself so that there is mercy available for those who will repent of their sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is the message of the Bible. That is the good news of the gospel. The gospel is not for good people. Christianity is not about good people who simply pull themselves up by their bootstraps and make themselves a little bit better by following a few simple rules. Jesus said he didn't come to call the righteous. He came to call sinners to repentance. And he didn't die on the cross to make reasonably good people a little bit better. He came to redeem helpless sinners who could not be right with God apart from him.

That is why it is good news. There is mercy to be found in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul loved the gospel of Jesus Christ. He lived for the gospel. In fact, he died for the gospel. And if you read Paul's epistles you will find that he could never talk about anything for every long without bringing it back to the gospel that I have just described to you. Paul would be writing to Christians in a certain place who weren't getting along very well and perhaps they asked him, "Paul, what should our relationships look like and how should we resolve some of our conflicts?" And Paul would say a few things and then he would bring it back to the gospel and he would say, "Well, brethren, in the end, you need to let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus who though he was God didn't consider equality with God something to be held on to at all costs, but he humbled himself and he became a man. And, in fact, he became a servant and he humbled himself so much that he became obedient, even to death, death on the cross. And those who have trusted in Christ should follow his example of humility, the example displayed for us in the gospel."

And Paul talks about the subject of giving, for example. Paul, how should we give out of the things that God has given to us? Well, he says, "Look at Jesus, who though he was rich, yet for sakes he became poor that we through his poverty might become rich."

When Paul talks about marriage what should our marriages look like? Well, he says, "Well, look at Jesus and look at his relationship with the Church. That is the pattern. That is the model that God has given us for marriage."

And when he speaks to men about what men are supposed to do in marriage he says, "Men, you need to love your wives as Christ loved the Church." And how did he demonstrate that love? He laid down his life for her that he might redeem her and purify her and sanctify her and ultimately to present the Church to himself a pure and chaste bride. Wives are to submit to their husbands as the Church does to Christ, happily, cheerfully to our benevolent head, our Lord Jesus Christ.

For Paul the gospel was the main thing in every issue and every area of life. He takes the flag of the gospel and he plants it right in the center where it belongs. It wasn't just the way to be made right with God. For those who believe it, the gospel is to be the center around which all of life revolves. The practical implications of the gospel are to permeate into every area of the believer's life and walk in this world. And that is really the main point of what I want to say to you today, John and Gretchen. Determine this day that above everything else by God's grace you will have a gospel centered marriage, that today by his grace you will plant the flag of the gospel in the center of your life together that you will make and keep the gospel the main thing.

Now we say amen to that. And we should. But let's talk a little bit about what that looks like. There is two things I want to say about this from the passage as it may be applied to marriage. What does a gospel centered marriage look like? And I will tell you it is easier to say amen to what I have said than to do what I am about to say.

Two things that I want to say to you, John and Gretchen. The first is this. Let the grace of the gospel characterize your relationship together. Paul says, "Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ."

When Paul uses this language, a life worthy of the gospel, what is he talking about? I just said earlier that none of us are worthy of salvation. None of us are worthy in ourselves and by our own good works to be justified in the sight of God and to have eternal life. So what does he mean? He is not speaking here of merit in the sight of God, not earning favor and forgiveness. Paul is speaking about living and conducting yourself and behaving in a manner consistent with the privileges and the blessings of the gospel. And more than that, Paul is saying, "Live in such a way that you display in yourselves the very grace that has been freely given to you in Jesus Christ. Live in a manner consistent with the grace and mercy shown to you so abundantly in Jesus."

Now Paul is applying this to all of life. Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel. If that is true, how much more should that be evident and manifested in the relationship of Christian marriage? So that is the first thing. Let the grace of the gospel characterize your relationship together.

John and Gretchen, you are both very bright and talented and gifted. You are both from wonderful families. You both enjoy many privileges and advantages. As a graduate of the University of North Carolina I would even admit, John, that it is pretty good that you have a PhD. From Duke University. I will admit that. And we praise God for what he has made you to be. We rejoice in his goodness to you.

But none of these things commend you to God. And none of these things comprise your essential identity before God. Fundamentally you are sinners saved by the grace of God through Jesus Christ. And inasmuch as you have trusted in him for your salvation, you are the recipients of grace mercy, unmerited favor, unconditional love. God has not dealt with you according to your sins.

So how should people who have received such grace and mercy relate to one another? Those who have received such grace should be quick to give such grace. Those who have been so loved should love much. Those who have been given such mercy should themselves be merciful. Those who are mindful that God is very patient with them should themselves be patient. And how true that should be in the dynamic of a Christian marriage.

What I am saying is this. Be ready, be quick to extend to one another the same kind of grace that God in Christ has shown you. The concept is simple. The practice is hard. It may be hard to imagine on this day and as it should be that conflict may arise, that some day an angry word may be spoken, that a sense of separation may be felt between you, an alienation. It will come. It is inevitable.

There is a book that was published recently about Christian marriage and I have not read it yet, but it has a great title. It is entitled *When Sinners Say, "I Do."* I love that title. It

tells you a lot about what Christian marriage is all about, two sinners brought together in marriage and that will characterize some of that relationship together in a fallen world. As sweet as it can be, as wonderful as it can be with God's grace and yet our remaining sins are with us.

John and Gretchen, you are marrying a fellow sinner. You will disappoint one another. You will hurt one another. You will fail one another. But you have received much grace and mercy from God. Extend it to one another and let your marriage magnify the grace of God and the gospel in the way that you relate to one another.

The second thing I want to say from our text is this. Let the cause of the gospel be your united purpose in marriage. What does a gospel centered marriage look like? Let the cause of the gospel be your united purpose in marriage. Listen to those words of Paul again. I want to hear of you and many of your brethren here want to hear of you in days to come that you stand firm in one spirit with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

One of the great mistakes we make as men and women living in God's world is to think that something other than God can truly make us happy. We fill our lives with countless substitutes vainly seeking what only God can supply. That is really man's great downfall, our common propensity to idolatry, to worship and to live for ourselves, for pleasure, for money, for the world and even for human relationships in the place of God, to put other things in the place reserved only for him. God will not share his glory with another. He made us for himself. He made us for his glory. One of the great paradoxes of life in this world is that we only truly begin to live when we die to self and live to God. We only find true peace and contentment and joy and happiness when we stop seeking those things in the world and in ourselves and we find them all in our creator God and in his Son the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our Lord says:

“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”²

And even in the best of Christian marriages we have a tendency to make marriage and to make our spouse an idol. We serve marriage as an end in itself. We look to our spouse to be what only God can be for us.

John and Gretchen, our lives are not an end in itself and our marriages are not ends in themselves. You will best serve the happiness and the stability and the strength and the health of your marriage if in marriage you serve a cause higher and greater than your marriage and each other. You must embrace today the truth that God is bringing you together not only for your personal happiness—and he is—but more than that, he is bringing you together because in his wisdom he knows that you can best serve his glory in the cause of the gospel together, better than you could as singles.

² Matthew 10:39.

You have your respective roles in marriage. You know that well, don't you? You are, after all, children of Ballston Lake Baptist Church. You have been well taught. But I want to emphasize another truth. And you have heard this, too. Today God is also making you a team, a unit that you might strive together. It doesn't mean war with one another. That you might strive side by side serving together the cause of the gospel. Let me just mention two implications of this. Seek first the kingdom of God in your marriage. Make the goal of your marriage always to be moving toward the expansion of the kingdom of Christ through the work of the gospel. Make that to be the purpose for everything that you do, for every decision that you make. Plant the gospel flag in the middle of your marriage. Plan and pray and work together with purpose to be used of God to advance his kingdom. That will be your greatest joy. It is your strongest unifying bond. It is a blessing to serve a cause higher than self.

John and Gretchen, don't buy the lie of serving the American dream. Don't serve the John and Gretchen dream. Serve the cause of the gospel together.

The second implication is this. See each other as fellow workers, fellow soldiers in a great spiritual battle.

I do read a lot of books. I just want you to know that. But there is another book I have never read that has another great title about Christian marriage. It is called *Intimate Allies*. I like that title. You must see one another as allies. Even in the midst of struggles, you are never adversaries. You are always side by side serving the glory and the cause of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a tragedy that so many marriages that are brought down by friendly fire.

Can you imagine our soldiers on the front lines turning on one another in the heat of the battle? That is what so often happens even at times in Christian marriages. It ought not to be. You will be on the front lines, but you must be side by side serving the best cause. You are to be one another's chief defender and ally and supporter and protector. You are to watch one another's backs. And you may see your conflicts in that way. That will be tremendously helpful to you. And so in conflict don't turn on one another, turn toward one another. Be for each other that you might better serve the greatest causes in the world, the glory of Christ.

John and Gretchen, from the first moments of your marriage together, put the gospel in the center. Let the grace of the gospel characterize your relationship with one another and let the cause of the gospel be your united purpose in marriage. All of us here today are for you. We will be praying for you, but more than that, far more significantly than that, the king of the universe is for you. The Lord Jesus Christ is for you. Trust him with all your heart. Seek him with heart, mind, soul and strength. Serve him and may he richly bless you in the days ahead.

Let's pray together, please.

Most holy and majestic and awesome God, we do bow humbly before you this day and honor you and praise you. You are our maker. You are our creator. We thank you that there is such a thing as the gospel. We thank you that you are a God who saves, a God of mercy and a God of grace. We thank you for sending your Son into the world to redeem sinners like us. We thank you that all those who will turn from their sins and cry out to you and call upon the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved. None will be turned away. We thank you that you have saved John and Gretchen and that you have united them in the gospel of your Son. We ask once more this day that you would give them grace to put the gospel in the center of all that they do, that you would richly bless them all the days that you have purposed to give them together. For your honor and glory we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.