

SERMON SERIES

Sermon Series: Marriage God's Way

5-week series on biblical marriage -- covenant theology, Ephesians 5, communication and conflict, and marriage as a parable of the Gospel. Full outlines, preacher's notes, discussion questions.

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Equipping pastors and leaders to serve with excellence, integrity, and lasting Kingdom impact.

Marriage God's Way -- Series Overview

Marriage is simultaneously one of the most intimate human experiences and one of the most publicly contested institutions in contemporary culture. The church's opportunity -- and responsibility -- is to offer the culture not just a defense of traditional marriage, but a genuinely better vision of what marriage is and what it is for. This five-week series does not primarily engage the culture war about marriage. It presents a theological vision of marriage so beautiful, so demanding, and so Gospel-saturated that its own attractiveness makes the case.

The series moves through five theological dimensions of biblical marriage: creation (God's original design), covenant (the nature of the commitment), Ephesians 5 (mutual submission and servant love), communication and conflict (the practical craft of living together), and the Gospel (marriage as the primary earthly parable of Christ's love for the church). Each week builds on the previous, creating a cumulative theological and pastoral formation in marriage.

Week 1: In the Beginning -- God's Design for Marriage

Text: Genesis 2:18-25

The creation narrative's account of the first marriage is the theological foundation for everything the New Testament says about marriage. Several features of this text are essential: First, the "not good" -- God's first negative assessment of the creation was not sin or suffering but aloneness. Solitude is not humanity's natural state; relationship is. Second, the "helper" (ezer) -- a word used in the Old Testament primarily of God himself (Psalm 121:2), not of an inferior assistant. The woman as helper is not a subordination text but a participation text. Third, the "leaving and cleaving" -- the disruption of the primary family bond and the creation of a new primary bond. Marriage creates a new unit with its own primacy. Fourth, the "one flesh" -- a phrase that Jesus himself quotes in Matthew 19:5 as the definitive description of marital union. Not primarily sexual (though it includes sexuality), but a comprehensive organic unity that cannot be dissolved without violence.

Sermon Key Points

1. Marriage was God's idea before it was humanity's institution. The contemporary debates about marriage are not primarily political but theological: Who defines marriage? God or the culture? The pastor who grounds the congregation in Genesis 2 is giving them the resources to navigate contemporary debates from a theological rather than merely cultural position.
2. The complementarity described in Genesis 2 is not primarily about role differentiation -- it is about the profound human need for a companion who is genuinely "other." The one flesh union is only possible because of genuine difference. Two identical people cannot become one flesh in the same way that two same-shaped puzzle pieces cannot fit together.
3. The nakedness and no shame (Genesis 2:25) describes not just a pre-fall physical state but a relational ideal: the complete vulnerability and transparency between two people who have nothing to hide from each other. Every marriage exists on a continuum between this ideal and its opposite -- the fig-leaf existence of carefully managed self-presentation.

Week 2: Covenant, Not Contract

Text: Malachi 2:13-16; Matthew 19:3-9

The most important single word in the theology of Christian marriage is covenant. Not contract. A contract is a conditional exchange between parties who retain their individual sovereignty and who are bound only by the specific terms agreed upon. A covenant is an unconditional commitment in which the parties give themselves entirely to the other and are bound by the relationship itself, not just its terms. The difference matters enormously in practice: when a contract becomes inconvenient or burdensome, the rational response is renegotiation or exit. When a covenant becomes inconvenient or burdensome, the covenant-keeper stays.

Malachi's accusation against the men of Israel who had divorced their wives is framed in covenantal terms: "She is your companion and your wife by covenant" (Malachi 2:14). The word "companion" (challeqet) suggests intimate partnership rather than mere legal connection. And Jesus's response to the Pharisees' question about divorce in Matthew 19 anchors his answer not in Mosaic law but in creation: "from the beginning it was not so" (Matthew 19:8). The permanent, unconditional covenant of marriage is not a cultural construction -- it is a creation ordinance that reflects the character of the God who makes and keeps covenants.

Week 3: The Ephesians 5 Marriage

Text: Ephesians 5:21-33

Ephesians 5:21-33 is simultaneously the most beautiful and the most contested passage on marriage in the New Testament. The context is crucial: the entire section begins with verse 21 -- "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." The mutual submission of all believers to one another is the foundation from which the specific instructions to wives and husbands flow. The instructions are not a hierarchy of authority and subordination but a differentiation of how mutual submission expresses itself for each partner.

The husband is called to love his wife "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). This is the most demanding instruction in the entire passage. Christ's love for the church was servant love, sacrificial love, love that goes to the cross for the beloved. The husband who is waiting for his wife to fulfill her role before he fulfills his has fundamentally misunderstood the text. His love is to be unconditional and self-giving regardless of the wife's response -- because that is how Christ loves. The wife's honored response to this kind of love is the appropriate recognition of leadership, not coerced submission to domination.

Week 4: Communication and Conflict

Text: Proverbs 15:1; James 1:19-20; Ephesians 4:29-32

(continued)

The research of John Gottman at the University of Washington identified four communication patterns that, when present with regularity, predict divorce with over 90% accuracy: criticism (attacking the person's character rather than addressing a specific behavior), contempt (communicating disgust or superiority toward the partner), defensiveness (responding to a concern with counter-accusation rather than receptive listening), and stonewalling (withdrawing emotional availability from the conversation). He called these the "Four Horsemen." What is striking is how precisely the biblical wisdom literature addresses each of them. "A soft answer turns away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1) directly addresses the criticism/contempt pattern. "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (James 1:19) addresses the defensive and stonewalling patterns. "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you... be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another" (Ephesians 4:31-32) addresses the relational toxins that destroy marital trust.

Week 5: The Mirror of Marriage -- Reflecting the Gospel

Text: Ephesians 5:31-32; Revelation 19:7-9

The final movement of this series connects the theology of marriage to the eschatological vision of Scripture: the marriage supper of the Lamb. Revelation 19 describes the ultimate consummation of all history as a wedding feast -- the union of Christ and his bride, the church. Every Christian marriage is a parable of this ultimate reality. When a husband and wife love each other sacrificially, forgive each other extravagantly, and remain faithful through difficulty, they are enacting in miniature the story of God's love for his people. Their marriage is not merely a personal relationship -- it is a public proclamation of the Gospel.

This has profound implications for how couples understand their marital struggles. When the fight is hard and the forgiveness costs something, they are not merely managing a domestic difficulty -- they are practicing the Gospel. They are enacting in their kitchen and bedroom the same grace that Christ extended at Calvary. And when they choose to love again after hurt, to stay when leaving would be easier, to forgive what seems unforgivable, they are telling the world something true about a God who does exactly that.

Small Group Discussion Questions

1. Which week's teaching most challenged or encouraged you, and why? What specific aspect of the biblical vision of marriage are you most drawn to -- and which do you find most difficult?
2. What is the difference between the covenant and contract understandings of marriage in practice? Where have you seen that difference play out in real relationships?
3. What is one specific communication pattern you want to change in your marriage (or in how you approach future relationships)? What would that change require of you?

The congregation does not need a better argument about marriage in the culture wars. It needs a better vision of marriage -- one so beautiful and so costly and so saturated with the Gospel that its own goodness makes the case. Give them that vision. And live it yourself.

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