

The Biblical Definition of Marriage

As far as I know, never before in the history of our culture, or the world for that matter, has anyone needed to define marriage. The “normal” family made up of husband, wife, and a number of children, has in recent years begun to be viewed as simply one among several options. The Judeo-Christian view of marriage and the family with its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures is being challenged and often replaced with a set of values centered around human rights, self-fulfillment, and pragmatics (ie. what works). All of this is new. And we should all be concerned about this cultural crisis. For as the institution of marriage goes, so follows our civilization. Some examples: Divorce has become the norm compared to my grandparents’ generation. And the effects on children, in every way, emotionally, physically, financially, is taking its toll. And whether our culture admits it or not, sexual relations outside of marriage is not helpful, but very harmful. Teenage pregnancies and abortion are examples. While pleasurable in the short run, we see the effects psychologically and spiritually as insecurity and stress are on the rise. Homosexuality deprives children of same-sex partners of needed role models of father and mother, not to mention, it is impossible to procreate inside the relationship. Another example is gender-role confusion. All of these contribute to the erosion of the dignity of man, as God created us male and female. With these things in mind, I think it is important to spend some time on the topic of marriage from the teachings of the Bible. Today, I want to briefly define marriage, with 4 truths. Next week, I want to go a littler deeper and ask, “Why marriage?”

1. Marriage is a divine institution. God is the creator of marriage. This is what I mean by marriage as a DIVINE institution. We may also call marriage a creation ordinance. Look with me at Gen. 2:18-24. Right from the beginning marriage is established and explained. Let’s talk through these verses for a moment. V. 18: **“Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.”** Adam has absolutely no say in what God is doing. God had just created him and the rest of creation and then God speaks and tells him what He is about to do. He will make a “helper,” a companion, just like him.

Vv. 19-20: **“Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him.”** Out of all the animals, NONE were like him. By the way, here is another foundational truth. We are different from the animals in that we were created in God’s image. And this was apparent to Adam.

Look at v. 21: **“So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.”** I wonder the mind of God as thought about Adam’s response. I can only imagine the great excitement and emotion at this most beautiful gift. A woman! JUST LIKE HIM. Now, v. 22: **“Then the man said, “This AT LAST is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”** Then in v. 23 we see the foundation of marriage. **“Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”**

In this passage marriage is established by God. And it is explained, in a basic way. God is the author. He created it. He defines it. It flows from a all-wise, all-knowing, all-seeing omnipotent God. He does not make mistakes in the creation of marriage. Let me mention a few implications and applications.

Implication: Polygamy is not acceptable. Though we see this practiced throughout the OT, and even today, God did not bring Adam more than one wife. He brought him one. (We can give more explanation on this at another time.)

Implication: Marriage is between a man and a woman. This is why I do not use like to use the word “marriage” outside of a union between a man and a woman. This truth means that homosexuality is wrong. It is a sin.

Implication: Marriage is good. It is good for the man and the woman. It is good for the world. Men and women are very different. And it is good for a man to be married to a woman and vice versa. He made us so that we complement one another. And this truth runs very deep as we will see in the coming days.

Implication: Marriage is foundational to culture and society (we will see this more next week.) In other words, as an institution created from the beginning, it serves as the foundation for the way we build our lives and order our society.

Application: The more we understand these truths, the better our marriages will be. The more we understand these truths, the more equipped we are to teach our children, to engage others in culture.

Application: Our battle isn't ultimately against culture, but is against forces much deeper. ***“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”*** (Eph. 6:12).

2. Marriage is a covenant. The Bible is full of covenants. And they are very important. Why? Covenants show the way God enters a relationship with man. At the most basic level God come to Adam and says, “Obey me and live.” God says in essence, *“I am the Lord. Listen to me and be obedient and great blessings will come your way as you live before me.”* Later, covenants get more specific, including more details. God calls Abram and enters a covenant with him. This covenant defines the relationship. In it there are obligations, promises of blessing, as well as consequences for breaking the covenant. Covenants define and give parameters to our relationship with God.

Marriage is also a covenant. A man and a woman come together at the ceremony and covenant before God and all those witnessing. The obligations for marriage include lifelong faithfulness. The blessings God offers in this covenant is companionship, sexual relations, as well as children. In the context of marriage, I believe a man and a woman enter into a covenant with one another . . . AND with God which means that if one of them breaks their marriage covenant, they also break their covenant with God. This means a marriage covenant is both horizontal and vertical. Why do you think traditional weddings have both a set of questions, and then a set of vows?

Think about it. In the questions, the husband and the wife look at the preacher as he asks, “Will you love . . . Will you honor . . . In duty and service will you live with one another, cherish one another, etc. At this point, they don’t look at one another. They look to the one giving the questions. This is the vertical part. They are saying these things before God. Then, they turn to one another and they and something like, “ I take you to be my lawful husband/wife, to have and to hold . . . in plenty and in want, joy and sorry, etc. . . . til death do us part. This is the horizontal part.

This means marriage is NOT a contract! Let’s think for a moment about what how our society considers marriage. Though the shift has been taking place slowly for a long time, in these days, our culture sees marriage, not as God’s institution, but as something established by man and established for our needs. And the premise is simple. If culture defines marriage, God is taken out of the picture. This allows the institution of marriage to be changed to fit OUR needs. Instead of a DIVINE purpose, marriage becomes whatever works, whatever meets our needs. And when it doesn’t work anymore, just change it. When marriage doesn’t fit MY needs, my desires, etc. then it makes sense to anul it. Get someone else. Marriage, in this sense, is no more than a legal contract that can be broken. And if marriage is merely a contract with God out of the picture, other issues come into play. It no longer matters that God created them “male and female” and brought the first husband and wife together. This opens the door for two men or two women to be “married” (though I do not call this marriage, but instead a civil union).

But if marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman before GOD, to which we also enter a covenant, this changes EVERYTHING! If marriage is merely a contract, the focus is personal fulfillment. Duty or the purpose of marriage in the community is reduced to secondary importance. If we take God out of marriage, ANYTHING becomes permissible. And we don’t realize the importance of this truth for our system of justice. In past years, the basis of our justice system in the West and particularly America, has been the moral law of God and the basic institutions he has put into place since creation. This is why it was practically impossible to get a divorce for my grandparents’ generation, much less the idea that two people of the same sex could go to the courthouse or a church building and get married. Everyone defined marriage in the same way as a sanctified institution of God in the beginning. And one of its designs is to give ORDER to society. Let me finish this truth with some implications.

Implication: The consequences of breaking this covenant are severe. I’m not sure we realize how severe. But, we know what infidelity and divorce, etc. can do to ourselves and to our society. Let me give a biblical picture. Do you remember what God did with Abraham? (Abram at the time.) He sacrificed some animals and cut them into pieces, dividing them in half. And God caused a deep sleep to come over him and God, in a vision of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, passed between the animals. I believe this was a picture that God will not break his promise in his covenant with Abraham. He was saying, “*let this happen to ME, if I break this covenant*” (Gen. 15).

(This is such a beautiful picture. God never breaks his covenant; He never breaks his promise. Yet, we read about the Lord Jesus Christ: “*He who knew no sin, became sin for us . . .*” (2 Cor. 5:21). This is the gospel!)

Implication: Marriage is for life. Jesus affirms this truth in Matt. 19:6: **“What God has joined together let no man separate.”**

Implication: Adultery, or any unfaithfulness in marriage violates this covenant.

3. Marriage pictures deeper truths about God and his ways. The creation ordinance of marriage, the institution of marriage, serves to show deeper truths about God and his ways. (This will be our topic next week.) But for now, thinking about marriage as a covenantal relationship, I have 3 brief truths that teach us about our Great God and his great plan of redemption.

Truth: Marriage between a man and a woman pictures a loving relationship between God the Father and God the Son. From eternity God the Father and the God the Son have loved one another. The Trinity is a great mystery. However, I believe the Bible teaches this most foundational relationship. God did not put on love after He created and entered into a relationship with Adam and Eve. God IS love. And this love has been in existence for eternity. In John 17:24, Jesus says: **“Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”** Also, John 3:35: **“The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.”** And, John 5:20: **“For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.”**

Truth: Marriage pictures God’s relationship with his people. In the OT God is called Israel’s “husband.” In Isaiah 54:5 we read: **“For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name . . .”** In Jer. 31, Isaiah speaks of a new covenant, even as they broke the old covenant. He says, **“not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD”** (Jer. 31:32).

Truth: Finally, marriage pictures the great relationship of Christ and his church. Look with me at Ephesians 5:22-27: **“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”** What a beautiful truth! The great design of marriage is to picture, in the most beautiful way, the relationship of Christ and his church. Whether Christian or non-Christian, good or bad, marriage pictures the accomplishment of the gospel of Christ.

We will stop there for now (until next week). Marriage is God’s design. He created it. He defines it. Marriage is a covenant, both vertical and horizontal. Marriage is a picture of Christ and his church.

