

Relationships Real & Restored Pt. 4 - Marriage

Marriage: The beautiful mystery
Spence Shelton – October 9, 2016

Good morning! 12 years and 92 days ago I was this wide-eyed 21 year old confident in the decision I was about to make. I was completely over-the-moon in love with that girl from Whitsett, NC I mentioned last week and so on July 9 2004 we got married. Man I thought it was going to be so great! After all, the bible says marriage is great so.... This will be easy and fun. We'll fight sure but really we'll just get mad and then kiss and make up. We good. So we did. And 12 years later...Courtney will agree with me...marriage is great. But it is not easy. Today we are continuing our series on Relationships called Real & Restored and we are going to talk today about marriage. And I want you to know...that I know it's impossible to cover everything you need to know about marriage in a single sermon. My goal is to drive straight to the heart of it though. That's what we are doing in this series. We aren't really giving tips for a good relationship, we are showing you how the gospel fundamentally re-centers and repurposes our relationships. And that's what we are after in marriage today. We normally preach through books of the bible but felt the topics in this series were so important we put them

together to go through for a few weeks. If you are new, we've covered topics like friendship, singleness, dating, neighboring.

To talk through marriage this morning we are going to sit down in Ephesians 5. And in these few short verses we are going to uncover the great secret of marriage. And it won't be complicated. I promise. Nothing I say today should require a master's degree to understand. But that doesn't mean it will be easy to hear or easy to live by.

Whole 30 example – Very simple...seems easy...but very terrible to live out. Why? Because we've trained our bodies to crave things that are bad for us. We've developed habits that we've lived by FOR YEARS. And such habits are not easy to break. Like sugar. I love sugar. I miss sugar. I think sugar is just the best. Such a simple diet is so hard because it is breaking very old habits and retraining us to desire new things. And before you come up to us with your "you'll be so glad..." Just stop. I'm sure you are right but right now I'm just Hangry.

The secret to marriage is like that. It isn't hard or complicated. And when you live by it you actually will have a better and more fulfilling marriage. But here's the deal...many married couples have unhealthy marriage habits we've been practicing for years. So the idea of changing those habits to better ones will be a battle. You may leave here mad at me today but that's ok. I hope this is

both a reality check on your marriage as it is now, and a window into a vision for what it could be.

And listen, by NO MEANS, do I stand up here as one who has it figured out. I come as a traveler 12 years down the road with a patient, loving wife. She is my best friend. I love her deeply. And I have had more fights with her than anyone else in my life. I'd stand in front of a train for her. And sometimes she wants to push me into that train. I offer you, as best as I can, the profound message of God's word today on the holy, beautiful, sacred, wonderful relationship of marriage.

Hey one last caveat before we get into this: Because marriage is such a close relationship, we can wound one another very deeply. And some of you may be deeply wounded in here today. Maybe you are still together but man its hard right now. Maybe your marriage ended and you are still feeling pain from that. This is not trying to make you feel guilty or to relive that pain. This is holding up a picture of what marriage can be but ultimately what we'll see is that marriage is itself a picture of a love that cannot ever be taken away. Of a spouse that will never wound us. And as I talk about marriage, don't check out because of your present or past pain. Instead look at the more beautiful, more fulfilling love God is pointing you towards. Who knows maybe a sermon about marriage is where your healing could begin.

That by the way is a natural transition into the passage. We will be in Ephesians 5. Verses 21-32. We are going to start at the end, then go to the beginning, then work our way to the middle. The reason is Paul gives his main point at the end and I want you to keep it in mind as we go through.

And maybe as homage to those of you familiar with good ole Baptist preachers, I'm going to break this text down into three sections and I want to alliterate my point in those three sections. Those of you who grew up in church know what I'm talking about? A good sermon isn't a good sermon unless all the points start with the same letter & have the same number of syllables. So, for your sermon listening pleasure today we are going to look at the purpose, the posture, and the practice of marriage. Oh yes. I'm gonna get out my handkerchief halfway through this one.

[32] This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church

The "mystery" – The mystery he's talking about is marriage. Isn't that encouraging for you? That even the great apostle Paul just can't find words to explain marriage! It's a mystery. And not just any mystery, a profound mystery. Like...really hard to understand. Let me show you more about what he's describing as a mystery. It's in the previous verse. Verse 31

[31] "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

He's quoting Genesis 2 right here. The "mystery" goes back to the very beginning of mankind. God in his divine majestic sovereign mind decided to make a man. And that man was alone. All the other creatures God made had a companion. But not man. So God put man into a deep sleep and then created something... From his own rib...a woman. A companion for man. She's a human. She's of the same substance just like a man. She has the same inherent value. God says he created both of them, male and female, in his image. They are the same...but not really right?

Cats & Dogs – Marriage illustration my pastor told me that I love to pass on to couples at their weddings.

Men and Women are different! And God says these two very different creatures are to be joined together. This is very literal. Genesis 2 says they shall become one flesh. And Paul quotes that here. The mystery is that the two very different creatures are by God's design, going to become one new creation when they come together. The marriage union will be so close its like one person where there before were 2. You become one financially, socially, physically, and eventually you grow old and buy matching jump suits. You become one.

And then Paul shows you the purpose of this profound union. So tightly woven together. He says...

[32] This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church

Christ and the Church. Look closely because you are seeing the most important thing you have to see about marriage today

The purpose of marriage is to put on display the relationship Christ has with the Church. God designed these two creatures to come together knowing that this would be perhaps his most powerful message to our world of his love for us. That's the purpose of marriage. To act like a signpost that redirects the sight of our spouse first, and everyone else second, to God's great love for us found in the gospel!

Gary Thomas opens his well-known book *Sacred Marriage* with these words:

What if God designed marriage more to make us holy than to make us happy?

What if the purpose of marriage is not financial stability or companionship or social standing...what if the purpose of marriage is to press into your daily life up close and personal the great love of God for you seen in the gospel!

The primary purpose of marriage is to encounter, be changed by, & give away the love of God given to us in the gospel.

Have you ever made this connection? That the primary purpose of your marriage is to put the gospel on display

through how you love and care for your spouse? Truth is, Most of us haven't thought about the purpose of our marriage at all. We've thought about our timeline...the whens & the ifs. When will we have kids IF we have them. When will we buy a house IF we will. But what about the WHY of your marriage? The Why of marriage will set the direction for the Ifs and the Whens!

And listen this is life giving. I hope you hear a weightiness to this responsibility. Your role in marriage...it is to help your spouse experience the love of Christ. By being with you, they will grow closer to Jesus.

Single People – This means again you better think about whom you are dating. Could you marry him or her? Because you will be so influential on each other. In every arena. One study from university of Michigan back in the 80s actually coined the term “convergence of appearance” to say they scientifically determined that couples do indeed begin to LOOK like each other after years and years of marriage.¹ And they actually said there was a direct correlation between how much you look alike and how happy you are.

¹ 'Convergence in the Physical Appearance of Spouses' R. B. Zajonc, 2 Pamela K. Adelman, Sheila T. Murphy, and Paula M. Niedenthal
University of Michigan
https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/45361/11031_2004_Article_BF00992848.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

They talked about how you start to pick up facial expressions, mannerisms, speech, and yes-even clothing. So I thought this was a perfect excuse to tell Courtney we are getting those matching jumpsuits one day. It's a sign of happiness!

Listen though it isn't just physical appearance. It's everything. And when it comes to your spiritual life its no different. I've watched men on fire for Jesus settle into a safe, boring, risk-averse walk with God after marrying a woman who just didn't care about really following Christ. Now at the same time, ya'll vie watched guys come alive and become incredible leaders in their homes and churches and then I look and see a wife who is running hard after Christ and he's catching that.

Men and women, husbands and wives, we gotta start looking at our spouse through the eyes of Christ and say...God wants to draw this person closer to himself. God wants this person to grow into his image. And he or she is imperfect right now for sure. And God has placed me here to give this person the love of Christ he has given to me and help them become the person God is calling them to be.

Illustration – Block of Marble – Statue of David. Michelangelo. He had a huge block of marble. But when he looked at it, he saw David. He just had to remove the marble off of David. This is how God sees you and your spouse.

A friend of mine does an annual marriage retreat where he & his wife evaluate their marriage. Re-commit to the WHYs and set some goals based on the WHY. Courtney and I have done it a few times and its incredible and I commend it to you.

Early on Courtney and I decided we wanted our marriage to be marked by radical generosity. Why? Because of the generosity we'd received in the gospel. AND because we had a couple of older friends who helped us through some difficult times. That's stayed with us to today. And when our marriage fulfills the purpose it is designed for we have great joy! Some of you have never looked at your marriage this way. Its purpose was to make you happy & secure. There is so much more!

In fact, that's so good I'm issuing a mandatory date night decree. Can I do that? Probably not. But if I could. Go out on a date and the big question is: what is the purpose of our marriage? See if you can agree on a mission statement that captures the 'displaying God's love for us' idea from Paul here in your own words.

Second: The Posture of Marriage

Ok that's the purpose, that's the destination. Becoming more like Christ and building your spouse into the image of Christ, and together declaring the gospel to a watching world. That is a weighty task, especially for people who are sinners like you and me. Now let's look at the posture we

must with our spouse if we are going to have any hope of pulling that off.

[21] Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Right here Paul is connecting the general character of the Christian community to the most intimate of human relationships: marriage. See Ephesians is first half doctrine second half practice. And especially chapter 5 is filled with how doctrine applies to the way you interact with other people. And when it comes to how you interact with other believers Paul makes unity with others in the body a really big deal. So he says sing to one another, encourage one another, give thanks for one another and then in verse 21 submit to one another. This word literally means line up under, as soldiers might do in placing themselves under a general. It's the soldier submitting his personal agenda, even submitting his very life, to the purpose of the whole unit. The unit before the individual. That's the only way the military can work.

And there is good reason to invoke a military idea here. There is an enemy who is always looking to destroy relationships and to break down the things God deems as good. Satan does not want the church to succeed nor does he want your marriage to succeed. And Paul's remedy, his protection against disunity...is humility. ²

² Ferguson, Sinclair B. *Let's Study Ephesians*. (Carlisle, PA: Good News Publishers, 2001)146.

Out of reverence for Christ... Philippians 2.3-8 says this even better. [3] Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. [4] Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. [5] Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [8] And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Christ humbled himself for us. So we look at that, we abide in that, and then we look at our brother or sister in Christ...As it relates to today we look at our spouse and in gratitude for the cross, in a desire to not give Satan a foothold, in a desire to worship God with our whole lives we look at our spouse and ask the simplest question:

The Posture of Marriage is a question: How Can I Serve You?

That's a question that can revolutionize a marriage. That is an others first question.

Ok so Paul takes this idea of serving one another. Of considering the other before self, and applies it first and most extensively to marriage.

I promise you church. If a husband and a wife both make this the sincere question from your heart: how can I serve you...it will bring joy & peace & fulfillment to your marriage.

And I have to say this and I know it's not easy to hear. This kind of self-less love is not conditional on how your spouse loves you. When you said your marriage vows they didn't read "I promise to love you, cherish you IF you promise to do the same for me." "You didn't get up in front of family and friends and say "I vow to love you for the rest of my life OR until you mess up on one of yours." You didn't say that. You know why? Because those are the terms of a contract. And marriage is not a contract, it's a covenant.

A contract lays out an agreement on the exchange of goods & services. I agree to pay you \$30 to Zappos, they agree to ship me some less than stellar basketball shoes. If they don't send me the shoes, I demand my money back. Because they've broken their agreed upon terms. That's a contract.

And because we are all consumers who live in a contract filled world, it's easy for us to drift into marriage operating like it's a contract. We'd never say it is, but our hearts start to function like it. And so when we aren't happy, when he or she breaks a promise, we may start to look at our options. How can I get out of this contract? I'm not making light of your reasons by the way. It's just the wrong way of thinking of it.

Remember marriage is to picture Jesus' love for us. When Jesus came down to die for us, he didn't create a new contract between us and God. No Luke 22:20 says his blood poured out on the cross would create a "new covenant" between us and God. And covenants are one-way streets. A covenant says that NO MATTER what you do, I'm going to do _____. God said to his people No matter how much you rebel against me, I'm going to be your God. Even when you run from me, I still love you. Even when you betray me, I still love you. You are still my bride & I'm not going anywhere. ³ That's the gospel you are called to live out in your marriage. And that's NOT EASY! I promise I'm not suggesting it is.

"how can I serve you?" is different than "how can I serve you as long as you are meeting my needs too?" But I promise there is far more joy in a covenant based marriage than a contract one. And the only way you will ever experience that joy is if your heart & mind are not dependent on your spouse for your deepest joy. Because they will let you down. They will. But Christ never will. He can't. And when your feet are anchored in Christ's love,

³ God makes multiple covenants with his people in the Old Testament. In this teaching I am holding that all of these covenants have an underlying one-way commitment to his people that he proves time and again to stick with them even when they rebel against him. For the sake of time and focus I did not do a survey of those covenants here.

then you can give love to your spouse even when they don't reciprocate. Easier said than done but it must begin with devotion to Christ.

Operate like God is a contract God not a covenant God – Do your fair share he will do his. Get mad when he doesn't hold up his end b/c you've been a good person. Relating to him all wrong. You are the one who has broken the agreement. You sinned against a perfect God. Be thankful he's not a contract God or you would have no hope. But he's a covenant God. Eph 2 says while you were still sinners...Christ died for you. Loved you. Came for you. And you cannot DO anything to get that love. The WORK has been done for you. Your job is to believe it. And that's hard because you want control. God doesn't work that way.

I know that was a bit of a trail but it gets to such a big point. Husbands and wives when you are out on that date consider asking the question: What can I do to serve you? Or even better ask yourself "how can I serve her today?" And spend 5 minutes thinking up some answers. For me, it's resulted in very practical things. Told you, we are in young family stage so my answer to this question is often...help Courtney get uninterrupted sleep. Nothing makes my wife more attracted to me than when I say hey baby..."I'm gonna take all the kids so you can get a nap." That is romance! And I promise you start to think serving the other first, and the sparks will follow.

Ok, let's keep moving.

So let's take our lens of the gospel, place it on our eyes like Paul has done when he was writing, and now read what Paul has to say about the **practice of marriage**. What it functionally looks like for us to make each other more into the likeness of Jesus. Here we go⁴:

[22] Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.
[23] 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.
[24] Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.[25]
Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, [26] that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, [27] 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. [28] In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. [29] For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, [30] because we are members of his body.

⁴ I received so much good help and mentoring on this from my pastor & mentor J.D. Greear. For this section I've specifically borrowed some material from his sermon in the "Ephesians: Mystery & Clarity" series where he taught this passage and covered gender roles in marriage. But beyond that one sermon I learned so much from him in theology & practice of a gospel centered marriage & am indebted to him for it.

Ok this just went deep. Into the practice of marriage Paul goes back to that truth you remember from earlier that we are created differently. Each is created differently to reveal a complementary aspect of the image of God, and when the 2 come together in marriage you get a fuller picture of the image of God than you do when 1 is alone.

Remember how I talked about dating last week as a dance? Well that dance doesn't stop in dating. Marriage is very much a dance. It's a dance where the man leads and the woman follows.

Look at verse 23. It says the husband is the head of the wife just like Christ is the head of the church. Which means the husband is to lead her like God leads his people. In leading her she gets to experience what God's leadership is like and the man gets to experience what it is like to love and lead like God. What does this leadership look like? The creation account from Genesis gives 4 ways the man is to lead. And remember Paul is just pulling out of that account and filtering it through the lens of the gospel

In provision – before God gives Adam a wife, he puts Adam to work. He has a calling, a purpose, a job. A sense of direction. Ladies he cannot hold down a job, if he's a bad student with no work ethic, drop him. He is to be a provider.

Spiritually – See by creating Eve second, Eve is brought into a relationship Adam already had with God. And it is Adam's

role to introduce her to God and how to walk with him. The commands about eating from the tree were already in place and he had to introduce those to her. In fact in verse 26 you see Paul say it is the man's job to sanctify her. Basically husband your job is to help her live faultless before God.

I look at my marriage and I realize my role is to help guide my wife towards a deeper walk with God and that raises the bar big time for my own spiritual life. Will I be a man that walks with God? That digs into the word, speaks life with my words, and commits to deep union with God in prayer? Because my wife's relationship with God is at stake there. What kind of tone will I set for our family? I got married thinking this meant lead a 2-person bible study. Nope. Never really worked for us. But cultivating an atmosphere that expects and celebrates a closeness to God...that's my responsibility.

In romance:

The 1st human words recorded in the Bible were that of the man composing a love poem about his wife... He says, (Gen 2:26) "This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh..." You say, "That doesn't sound that romantic." First time he'd ever seen his wife, & she's naked, so cut him some slack. He didn't have time to come up with several revisions of that poem... But in Hebrew it is poetry, a song. A love song.

Women, he is supposed to take the lead in relationships. This is true in dating and even truer in marriage men. Romance her. Woo her. Plan a date night to a place with no

sports on TV where you can talk about this stuff. Write here a poem! Even if it is terrible you'll still stir her heart for how you took time to think about her. Don't tell me you don't have time. You make time for what matters, you know that.

In sacrifice:

Here in Ephesians you see he is to love her like Christ loves the church... which is not in any way a domineering, "let me control you and use you" kind of leadership, but the kind of leadership that puts her needs above your own... that kind of leadership that comes not to be served but to serve... like Jesus; who wore a crown, but it was made of thorns. Husband, here's what you should hear... Your wife learns about God from you... and you are supposed to learn to be like God as you love and lead her.

Ok and what role does the woman play? Here comes. 3 times in the first 3 verses but most clearly in verse 24. Her role is to play the role of the church... to **submit**. Here's what that means:

It means in some fashion she surrenders her ambitions to his.

See how vs. 23 says the man is the head? She ceases to be the head of her own life. That means she ceases to build her own kingdom and yields herself to building her husband's and her family's kingdom. Just like the church builds God's kingdom. That is Courtney. Courtney got a great degree and had a great career ahead of her and she yielded that

kingdom to live for mine and for our family's kingdom. Again kingdom is a metaphor for ambition.

Listen, the Bible is not at all against women having careers. But it is against those who do so at the expense of their families. And I'm sorry if that sounds harsh or offensive to you. But the word of God is the word of God. I didn't write it.

It also means she surrenders her will to his.

Many of you are like, "Well, I'd submit if he'd grow up... My husband is such an idiot... last time I went to my sister's for the weekend he almost sold our house for some magic beans. I can't submit to that..."

2 thoughts:

(1) If you only submit to your husband when you agree with him, that's not submission; it's agreement. Submission implies you don't agree and that you think he's making a wrong decision yet you follow him in it.

(2) The reason you don't have a husband who will take leadership is because you've always done it. You say, "Pastor, but if I don't, no one will." Let there be a leadership vacuum created. **When that mantle of leadership falls on his shoulders, sometimes the weight of that changes him!**

Many women have husbands who remain passive because they've always stepped in and taken leadership. I'm not saying his passivity is your fault, that's on him. But I am saying you are enabling his problem.

You might say, "I've got the hard part." Husband called to love like Christ. You have to submit, but he has to die. (*Men, for us...* Not to dominate, I lead like Christ... I want to lead her in such a sacrificial way that submitting to me is a delight for her and not a burden. I want her submission to me to be like her submission to the temptation for chocolate. Give in, let go... this is most enjoyable submission... I want to lead my wife in a way that independence from me is a burden)

Here's the point: Men and women were created differently to reveal complementary aspects of the image of God... It's not that men are superior, or that women are superior, they are equal... it's just that the roles we play are different so we can more accurately see and learn about God... and when you tear down that distinction, as our culture has done in so many ways, you remove something very important God intended to use to teach us about Himself.

In the practice of marriage: The husband leads his wife and the wife follows her husband. Both in the spirit of mutual submission we see from verse 21.

Listen I will close with this. We are talking a lot about helping our spouse become that statue of David. Of growing into the likeness of Jesus. Yet so often they are so imperfect and we get wounded by them. We are going to talk about forgiveness more in a couple of weeks but listen, You help your spouse become holy not by punishing them for their sin, or paying them back, but by giving them radical grace.

That's the grace of Jesus in vv 25-27. He didn't seek revenge on me, he didn't yell at me, he didn't give me the silent treatment. He poured out radical grace on me when I sinned against him.

I'm not saying this is easy. I'm not saying you should lay down like a doormat and just accept it when your spouse sins against you. But I'm saying is that when you address their sin, you do so out of love for them to see them restored to God and to you, not out of revenge. And that is an entirely different practice all together.

The point of marriage is to show you God's great love for you. How deep and unwavering it is. How much love he has for you. It's to point you to the gospel. The gospel is the picture behind the picture of marriage.

Where God pursued his bride...you. And said he would never leave you or forsake you. That he will forgive you, and he will love you forever. He offers you a deeper more fulfilling relationship than you could possibly imagine. And it's yours. Just accept it and come to him.