

Disciples – single and married

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a five-week series

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Genesis 2: excerpts from 18–25 (Common English Bible)

¹⁸Then the LORD God said, “It’s not good that the human is alone. I will make him a helper that is perfect for him.” . . .

²¹So the LORD God put the human into a deep and heavy sleep, and took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh over it. ²²With the rib taken from the human, the LORD God fashioned a woman and brought her to the human being. ²³The human said,

“This one finally is bone from my bones
and flesh from my flesh.

She will be called a woman
because from a man she was taken.”

²⁴This is the reason that a man leaves his father and mother and embraces his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵The two of them were naked, the man and his wife, but they weren’t embarrassed.

Hosea 2:19–20 (CEB) -- God speaks to his people whom he faithfully loves

¹⁹I will take you for my wife forever;

I will take you for my wife in
righteousness and in justice,
in devoted love, and in mercy.

²⁰I will take you for my wife

in faithfulness;
and you will know the LORD.

Ephesians 5:21-33 (from Eugene Petersons’ paraphrase The Message)

Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another.¹

Wives, understand and support your husbands in ways that show your support for Christ. The husband provides leadership to his wife the way Christ does to his church, not by domineering but by cherishing. So just as the church submits to Christ as he exercises such leadership, wives should likewise submit to their husbands.

Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church—a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ’s love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty. Everything he does and says is designed to bring the best out of her, dressing her in dazzling white silk, radiant with holiness. And that is how husbands ought to love their wives. They’re really doing themselves a favor—since they’re already “one” in marriage.

No one abuses his own body, does he? No, he feeds and pampers it. That’s how Christ treats us, the church, since we are part of his body. And this is why a man leaves father and mother and cherishes his wife. No longer two, they become “one flesh.” This is a huge mystery, and I don’t pretend to understand it all. What is clearest to me is the way Christ treats the church. And this provides a good picture of how each husband is to treat his wife, loving himself in loving her, and how each wife is to honor her husband.

Single. Married. Our discipleship is to undergird it all.

The apostle Peter took the path that nearly all Jewish men took – he was married. He was expected to be married and he was. One of the first miracles Jesus performs is to restore health to Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-31). I’m sure that got Peter in her good graces. Several decades later, Paul mentions Peter’s wife in a letter to the Christians in Corinth (1 Corinthians 9:5).

Paul, on the other hand, was single – setting him apart to some degree from other Jewish men. Though Paul knew he certainly had the right to be married like other apostles, he

¹This sentence is not specifically referring to husbands and wives. It bridges the previous section and the household code that begins with today’s passage. All Christians are to be courteously reverent to one another. In English translations, the Greek verb is rendered variously as “submit,” “be subject to,” and “be subordinate to.” Curiously, the next sentence lacks a verb in the Greek. Thus, the sentences could read something like this: “Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another; wives to husbands as to the Lord.” You can see the challenge that is posed to translators!

understood his singleness was a gift from God, as was the self-discipline it took for him to remain single, and, hence, celibate. For Paul, his singleness meant that he could devote 100% of himself to his ministry and he urged other believers to embrace singleness if they were able. There was much work to do for the kingdom of God. Still, then as now, most people were married and Paul wrote about marriage in his letters. He had much to say to married believers as well as those contemplating marriage and in all of it, you can hear the echoes of Jesus.

Jesus on marriage

Some Pharisees once came to Jesus asking him about the rules of divorce (Mark 10:1-12; Matthew 19:1-12). The Pharisees, like most of us, were inclined to turn their faith into a rules-making exercise. But Jesus would have none of it; endless lists of rules had led the Jews away from their covenant with God, not toward it. Instead, quoting from Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, Jesus pointed the Pharisees to the larger picture, to the creation and meaning of marriage. And so that is where we will begin.

God creates marriage

The opening chapters of Genesis are foundational to all that follows. In them we learn that God created everything and created humans in his image. We learn that he created the humans in two genders, male and female, so that each might not be alone, but have a partner. And we learn that God created them husband and wife, to be joined in sexual union, to be of one flesh, which will enable them to fulfill God's command that they "be fruitful and multiply," something that neither could do alone.

All this is before Jesus, before Moses, before Abraham, before the flood. Even Sin had not yet entered the picture. This is the Garden of Eden, a world in which all is right. This is the world into which Jesus draws the Pharisees.

The union of one man and one woman, which we call marriage, is part of God's created order. It is more than a convenience or a means of managing finances. It is more than an expression of love and commitment to another person. Marriage is God's gift to us.

Love and Marriage

In the New Testament, the best synonym for love is sacrifice. Love is self-giving, never self-seeking. We learn what love is from the cross.

The marriage of disciples then is not so much about the feelings of love, as wonderful as they may be, marriage is about the *practice* of love. We do not marry to meet our own needs nor to help us be fulfilled. Marriage is two partners, each seeking good for the other, each sacrificing for the other, each living out a deep and abiding covenant that endures the inevitable difficulties. This is God's hope for us.

Philip Yancey writes, "I went into marriage thinking love would hold us together. I learned instead that it required marriage to learn what love means . . . a unity sealed by God, which enables us to face economic pressures, relocation, illness, and the loss of family and friends, as well as the delights that attracted us to each other in the first place."

Marriage is God's grace at work. And it is God's gift to *all* people. It is important to see that marriage is not part of God's Law brought to the Israelites by Moses. Marriage is a gift bound up with the very creation of humanity. It is a gift even to those who do not know God. Marriage, this joining of male and female into one flesh, one family, is the vehicle for the procreation of humankind. It is yet one more way that the humans participate in God's creative enterprise.

Do we all get married? Of course not. Do we all stay married? Hardly. Jesus did not marry. As we saw, the apostle Paul understood his own singleness to be a gift from God, enabling Paul to devote all his energies to the service of Christ. Marriage does not complete us as persons, yet all of us have a stake in marriage. Our families marry. Our friends marry. Indeed, most of us get married. Yet, many of us do not take marriage nearly as seriously as God does. I know that for many years, I didn't.

A startling metaphor

About 750BC, the Israelites had turned away from God yet again, as they had so many times before. This time, God brought forward a prophet named Hosea, who would use startling language and word-pictures to describe the

relationship between God and his people. In a nutshell, by chasing after other gods, the people were committing adultery against the LORD God. The covenantal relationship between God and God's people is cast as a marriage. God is the spouse who is being cheated on. God is angry. God is hurt. The Hebrew in the book of Hosea is R-rated at times. Yet God does not abandon the covenant. Instead, God says, "And now, here's what I'm going to do: I'm going to start all over again. I'm taking her out to the wilderness where we had our first date, and I'll court her. I'll give her bouquets of roses. I'll turn Heartbreak Valley into Acres of Hope. She'll respond like she did as a young girl, those days when she was fresh out of Egypt." (Hosea 2:14-15, from *The Message* paraphrase).² Could there be a more strikingly personal image of the relationship between God and his people? Centuries later, the prophet Malachi would write, "So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth" (2:15b).

So, there are a few keys so far: (1) marriage is the union of a man and a woman, (2) marriage is a gift created and given by God, and (3) God uses our marriages as a metaphor for God's covenantal relationship with his people – with you and with me. Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that the church has always held marriage to be sacramental, covenantal, and bound up with our discipleship.

Marriage as an aspect of our discipleship

In the biblical view, marriage is a covenant between husband and wife and it is a covenant before God. The UMC affirms "the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman." As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to a way of life in which marriage is a covenantal commitment and a witness to others. The writer of Hebrews urged disciples to honor their marriage, mirroring God's faithfulness in their faithfulness to each other. The apostle Paul urged married disciples in Corinth to stay with unbelieving spouses so that the unbeliever might come to know Christ (1 Cor 7:12-16). Paul urged husbands to love their wives just as Christ loved the church and to love their wives just as they love themselves (Ephesians 5:25-33).

In a sermon for the wedding of two friends, Richard Hays, an ordained pastor and preeminent New Testament scholar, wrote:

"Thus, in making the covenant of marriage, you make a covenant to love one another as God has loved you – that means to love one another unconditionally, freely, sacrificially. In making the covenant of marriage, you promise to become servants of one another in love. In making the covenant of marriage, you form a union that reflects the love of God and stands as a sign of God's love in the world. Marriage is a sacrament in the true sense: it is both sign and vehicle of grace."³

Cherish is the word

We can see this perspective on marriage playing out in Paul's letters as he strives to draw believers away from the Greco-Roman world and into the kingdom of God.

In today's passage from Ephesians, Paul is nearly swept away with metaphor and image. This alone should tell us something about marriage. It is not easy to convey the nature of a healthy Christian marriage. Word-pictures and analogies are more helpful in this than analytical lists and observations. We use Peterson's paraphrase today because the freedom of a paraphrase allows Peterson to express artfully the incredible images painted by Paul in this passage.

Look at the verbs. What do they tell us about Paul's vision of a God-infused marriage? "Understand . . . support . . . cherish . . . submit . . . go all out . . . give . . . bring the best out . . . feed . . . pamper . . . love . . . honor." I'm no marriage counselor, but I'd be surprised if a professional could do much better with this than Paul. It is important for us to see that Paul is working outward from the biblical perspective on love. True love looks to the good of the beloved. True love is built upon a foundation of trust and faithfulness, from which one can

²This passage continues with today's Scripture passage on page 1, Hosea 2:16-20.

³From Hays' chapter, "Divorce and Remarriage," in his 1996 book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.

go all out. What Paul writes doesn't seem strange or odd to us, it seems right, the way a marriage should be. But remember, Paul is not writing from our time and culture. He is writing in the first-century, where his counsel to husbands would be seen as bizarre, wrong-headed and downright revolutionary. There can't be many wives today who would want to switch places with any first-century wife. Husbands might, but not wives.⁴

Sometimes in a marriage we are tempted to wonder how far we ought to go in pampering or supporting our spouse. If we go too far, don't we run the risk of being taken advantage of or otherwise being abused? But if our marriage is truly founded upon trust and faithfulness, then we can set aside such concerns. I am very blessed that I never have worry about pampering, loving, trusting, or supporting my wife too much. I need only be concerned that I cherish her as much as I am able. You see, I know that Patti will never take advantage of me or abuse the love I've entrusted to her. Indeed, trust is such a necessary underpinning to a strong marriage that the Bible devotes enormous attention to the importance of sexual fidelity, but more about that next week.

Paul's Troublesome Household Codes and That Word, "Submit"

Today's passage from Ephesians is from one of several household codes that we find in Paul's letters (Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:21-6:9; 1 Pet 2:11-3:12; 1 Tim 2:8-15; 5:1-2; 6:1-2; Titus 2:1-10; 3:1). Household codes were common in the ancient world. They outlined duties and responsibilities for the management of one's private affairs. What is most striking about Paul's codes is that for every instruction Paul gives the wife or the children, he's got four instructions for the husband. Why? Because the greatest challenges posed by the Christian life fell on the husband.

In the Greco-Roman world of Paul's day, the male head of household was all-powerful, the *paterfamilias*, the head of the family. According to Roman law, the *paterfamilias* even had the power to decide whether new-born infants should live or die. For Paul to tell the *paterfamilias* that he is to love and cherish his wife and family as Christ loved and cherished the church – well, I bet that went down hard. Sacrificial love would not have been the *modus operandi* of most Greco-Roman husbands. Actually doing as Paul instructs would require the *paterfamilias* to set aside willingly all the privileges and prerogatives accorded him by Roman law and social norms.

Still, for many of us, the word "submit" falls hard, conjuring up words like "subordinate" and "sub-par." How do we handle Paul's instructions written to a world so different from our own? What would Paul say to husbands and wives today?

Unquestionably, Paul lived and wrote within a patriarchal world that often saw women as inferior. Further, the Greek word that Paul uses clearly implies a hierarchy of authority. But if this is all we hear, we miss Paul's dramatic reshaping of marriage relationships among the believers.

In his ministry, Paul does not seek to overthrow the social structures that dominated the ancient world. Paul never advocates the end of slavery. Slavery was a "given" in the ancient world. Likewise, Paul can't conceive of a world in which wives do not defer to their husbands. *But*, Paul does challenge these new Christians' beliefs about the proper exercise of authority and the meaning of power. Indeed, we see this in the responsibilities he gave to women in his ministry, such as Phoebe and Priscilla.

For Paul, husbands are to take the lead in the marriage and in the household, but their model for what this means is Jesus Christ. And for Paul to speak of Christ is to speak of the cross, of Jesus' loving sacrifice for others. Yes, Paul writes, husbands are to take the lead but there is never room for arrogance, bullying, or abuse. They are to love their wives sacrificially and faithfully, just as Jesus loves his people. Paul carries on the Old Testament image of marriage as metaphor for God's relationship with his people.

In the end, as Jesus did when confronted by the Pharisees about divorce, Paul returns to the book of Genesis and the "mystery" of a man and a woman becoming one flesh. It is interesting that Paul doesn't pretend to understand it (a wise man!), but writes that what is clearest to him is that husbands are to treat their wives as Christ treats the church – with complete, self-abandoning, self-giving love. And wives are to honor and respect their husbands as they honor and respect Christ. An admittedly tall order for us all!

⁴If you'd like a clearer picture of the first-century Greco-Roman world, I urge you to pick up a copy of Sarah Ruden's book, *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*. Ruden is a classicist who knows that world better than most.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Marriage can be difficult. I know, I've been divorced. And it is tempting to focus on the difficulties in staying married or the challenges posed to marriage by our society's often cavalier attitude toward marriage and divorce. But perhaps the place to start is by asking ourselves what marriage is all about. How might we guide our children as they contemplate a serious relationship or living together or perhaps marriage? Whether you are a parent or not, imagine that your child came to you and said he or she was very committed to another person, wanted to live together, but simply didn't see the point of marriage. What would you say? What if your son or daughter were a believer? If not? Would their age matter? How?
2. As you read through this week's study, in what ways did the biblical understanding of marriage presented here differ from your own? from the secular world? How does being a disciple of Jesus change our perspective on marriage? In 2 Corinthians 6:14, Paul urges the Corinthian Christians to marry only other Christians. Why do you think he would say this? What do you think of this advice/instruction? What might Paul be saying to us about the marriage of a disciple? Is this advice you would give someone you love? If not, why not? Paul also instructs the Corinthian Christians that they are to stay married to spouses who are unbelievers. Why would Paul urge to them to stay in such a marriage if he also urges them to avoid marriage to an unbeliever?
3. How would you begin to reeducate Christians about the nature and meaning of love and of marriage? We expend much energy talking about divorce. What if we spent as much energy relearning marriage?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Proverbs 5 "Rejoice in the wife of your youth"</p>	<p>Tuesday, Proverbs 31:10-31 This comes from a section that contains advice from a mother! This is an ode to a capable wife.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Matthew 19:3-12 This is a parallel passage to Mark 10:2-12. Read it closely and see how they differ. Matthew probably had Mark in front of him as he wrote his own gospel.</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Corinthians 7 Warning! Parts of this chapter are easily misunderstood. Paul does not intend it as a list of universal rules. A good study Bible or commentary will help</p>
<p>Friday, Revelation 19:1-10 Heaven rejoices over the marriage of the Lamb (Christ) and his bride (the church).</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

