

WEDDING BELLS

Genesis 2:19-24

¹⁹ Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ²¹ So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

²³ The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." ²⁴ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Ephesians 5:21-33 Instructions for Christian Households

²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

MESSAGE:

One time a member of my former congregation wanted to talk with me about his marriage. It wasn't that his marriage was in trouble, he said: he and his wife had been married for over twenty years and they were both committed to each other for life. *"OK, I said, then what's the problem?" "The problem," he said, "is that even though my wife and I love and respect each other, neither of us gets much joy out of our relationship. In fact, it seems like we irritate each other more than we please each other anymore. And we can't figure out how to make things better."*

Now judging from my experience as a pastor, there are a lot of married couples who feel the same way. Solid marriages between committed Christian couples can turn into joyless arrangements between what the Marriage Encounter folks call “married singles.” Odd though it sounds, people can actually end up disliking people they love. They’re tired of living WITH them but they’re scared to death of living WITHOUT them. The fact is, even under the best of circumstances, marriage can be a complicated business.

Yet marriage lies at the very heart of Scripture. The first thing God did after creating the first man and the first woman was to unite them in marriage. God said, *“It is not good for the man to be alone... For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife and the two will become one flesh.”* To which Jesus added: *“...what God has joined together, let man not separate.”* Not only did God make marriage the foundation of human society: he made it a model of the relationship between Himself and his people. In the *Old Testament*, God calls Israel His bride, and Himself her husband. He speaks to her in the tender and intimate words a man might use when he is courting his bride: *“...I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, and you became mine.”* In the *New Testament* Jesus calls Himself the Royal Bridegroom and the Church, His bride. Heaven is described as *“the wedding feast of the Lamb,”* when the relationship between the Son of God and His Bride, the Church, is finally consummated.

In short, marriage is the most important relationship in human life. Yet in wedded life we encounter serious challenges in living out our Christian lives in a fallen world. Loving someone unconditionally without giving thought to things like “fairness” or “payback” is a challenge. Learning how to forgive freely without keeping track of past offenses is a challenge. Remaining faithful to your spouse not only in your outward actions but in your heart when the entire world is inviting you to do otherwise is a challenge.

To add to these challenges, we have a powerful enemy who works day and night to destroy our marriages. The devil knows exactly where our marriages are vulnerable and he attacks them at that very spot. And he has three weapons in his arsenal which are particularly effective and which he uses against us continually.

The first of these is to sow doubts in our minds about our spouse’s good intentions. One of the ways he goes about this is to show us our spouse’s faults very clearly while blinding us to our own. I can’t think of a better example of Jesus’ analogy of looking for the speck of sawdust in our neighbor’s eye while ignoring the log in our own eye than in marriage. Did you ever notice how glaring your spouses’ sins seem compared to your own, which seem relatively trivial? Of course both parties feel this way, and the result is that when disagreements arise we turn them into *“I’m right and you’re wrong”* duels which are really all about *“I win and you lose!”* The desire to PREVAIL replaces the desire to *“submit to one another out of reverence for Christ”* and both parties end up losers. The seeds of doubt sown by our enemy grow into weeds that take over the whole garden.

Another one of the devil’s ploys is to tempt us into adulterating our marriages. Oh it may not be adultery of the body; it may only be adultery of the heart. It may not even be the desire to have physical relations with someone other than your spouse; it might take the form of continually comparing your spouse unfavorably to others of his or her gender. But adultery is adultery, as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: *“He who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”* Do you know what

the word “adultery” actually means? The dictionary defines it as “...*making something impure by adding inferior ingredients.*” Adulterating a marriage is taking a wonderful gift that God has given you and polluting it by mixing it up with inferior ingredients. Shakespeare called it “*the expense of spirit in a waste of shame.*” (*Sonnet 129*) Marriage can be a kind of spiritual school in which we can learn and grow and mature in our faith. Committing adultery is courting suspension—or expulsion. Divorce is dropping out. Staying “in school” may not be as much fun as other alternatives—at least in the short term. But, as C. S. Lewis once remarked, God isn’t so much interested in our having fun as He is in our growing up.

The third way the devil assaults our marriages is with lies. Lies like “It doesn’t say anywhere in the Bible that you **HAVE** to be married in order to have an intimate relationship.” Anybody who believes that hasn’t even taken the time to read the first two chapters of the Bible. Or, “It makes sense to live with each other before you get married in order to find out if you’re compatible. Then you can make an informed decision.” Uh huh. The rate of failure of those marriages is fifty percent higher than the national average. Then there’s, “If you stop loving one another it’s better to just get a divorce and find someone you **CAN** love.” Or, “If a couple can’t get along, it’s better for the children for them to split up than to stay together.” People use these excuses to pass off selfishness as if it were wisdom. The new lie is that we should expand the definition of marriage to include members of the same sex. There are a million lies that the devil uses to draw us away from one simple truth: God intended marriage to be a lifelong relationship between a man and a woman, so that neither would be alone and so that there would be children to inherit the earth.

Unfortunately, the doubts and temptations and lies the devil has sown have sprouted and grown to such a large extent that they have become the wisdom of our age. He’s been successful in destroying many marriages, and the social consequences of his success have been hellacious—which is exactly what he intended. Fatherless homes, and the social pathologies they spawn. Mutual distrust, unhappiness and abuse even in marriages that manage to stay together. Sexual dysfunction. Husbands and wives whose feelings have been so seared by each other that their relationship has become perpetual warfare. Of course not all marriages are badly damaged; many are stable and for the most part, pleasant. Some are outright joyous. But many are not, and if there is something wrong with a person’s marriage, not much else in their lives can be right.

What can we do to unleash God’s power in our marriages and defend them against the assaults of our enemy? There are, of course, many things that we can and should apply to them: honesty, attentiveness, empathy, mutual respect, care, love. And we do try to bring these attitudes and behaviors to bear, and they help a lot. But there are two things without which all of our efforts will be in vain, two things that are essential not only to a good marriage but to all of Christian life: *repentance* and *forgiveness*.

Repentance first, which is continuing to hate our sins and striving to turn away from them. If we don’t nurse hatred for our sins in our hearts, we can become indifferent to them or—worse—feel free to embrace them. To accomplish this we need to do two things. The first is to pray to the Holy Spirit to show us our sins in their full aspect. The second is to keep in touch with God’s Word, letting it speak to our hearts regarding sin’s nature and its destructiveness. Unless we stay in the Word and ask the Holy Spirit to show us our sins in all their ugliness, we tend to become indifferent to them because we don’t like being reminded of how sinful we really are. But as you become increasingly aware of

your own sins, you may be surprised at how much less offensive your spouse's sins seem. Remember, "*ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*"—not just our spouses!

The second thing is forgiveness: unconditional forgiveness, because if forgiveness is not unconditional, it's not forgiveness. A forgiving heart is a heart that says: However many times you wrong me, I will forgive you. Forgiveness has to be offered as a gift; it can't be tendered in trade with the expectation of a return on the investment. "I'll forgive you if you'll just show some gratitude." Or, "I'll forgive you this time, if you'll forgive me the next time I'm wrong." That isn't forgiving; it's bartering, and it won't do squat for your marriage OR your spiritual life. Conditional forgiveness, like conditional love, is an oxymoron, like "dry water."

Unconditional forgiveness is Joseph forgiving his brothers who tried to kill him and then sold him into slavery. Unconditional forgiveness is Hosea searching for his wife after she had left him to become a prostitute until he found her and brought her home and treated her with honor and respect. Forgiveness is something we either do in a big way, or we don't do at all. When Peter asked Jesus if he was required to forgive his brother up to seven times when he sinned against him, Jesus answered "*...not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*" The point, of course, is that if you actually committed yourself to forgiving your brother seventy-seven times, long before you reached that number forgiving would have become a way of life for you. Can you imagine what a blessing you would be to your spouse and family and neighbors if forgiveness was a way of life for you? If your instinctive response to someone when he sinned against you was not to rebuke him and nurse anger against him, but to forgive him and love him?

Repenting of our own sins and forgiving each other's are the two things that will make a marriage strong. It's not rocket science, but we can't do it on our own. The good news is that with God's help, we can.

Amen.