

Alive and Well
Issues to Consider Before Getting Married

About eight years ago I performed a wedding here at Faith. That was in late December. The couple soon moved away from Manhattan. The next several months I became aware that their marriage was strained. Things went from bad to worse; their divorce was finalized the following October. Their marriage lasted less than 10 months. When I heard about their divorce I called and talked with each of them. Independently they each told me, "I had a gut feeling we shouldn't have gotten married."

That couple's experience has influenced how I do premarital counseling with engaged couples. Now, during the first session when the couple tells me about their relationship and why they want to be married, I tell them the story I just told you and say, "During your engagement, if you have a gut feeling that something is wrong in your relationship, don't ignore it. I'm not saying you should break up; but I am saying, 'Don't ignore it. Deal with it before you get married.'"

One couple listened to my little talk during their first premarital session without much response. Two days later she broke off the engagement - permanently. She had felt trapped and bullied in the relationship; she needed permission to say, "This relationship is not healthy; it would be a disaster to get married." As you might imagine, the guy was not very happy with me. He wrote me a nasty email. I told him, "Dude, you're making my point. . ."

We are in the midst of a series on relationships we've entitled "Alive and Well." Today we are going to discuss issues to consider ***before*** getting married. Last week Brian taught on "How to Stay Close" once you are married. If you weren't here last Sunday I'd encourage you to listen or watch the podcast of that message on our web site. But today we are going to back up and talk about some of the issues to consider before getting married. If you enter into marriage without a common vision for your life together, you will likely be blindsided like the couple I described earlier.

I realize that many of you listening to this message are already married. Some of you already embody much of what I'll be sharing; others of us might be struggling in these things. Either way, please hear this message as an encouragement to seek God in relation to your marriage.

A Christian marriage puts on display the love relationship between Christ and the Church. (Genesis 2:18-25, Ephesians 5:31-32). This concept will be challenging (and powerful) only if we understand the nature of the relationship between Christ and the Church. Ephesians 5 records Paul's most extensive teaching about marriage. At the end of that passage he quotes from the creation narrative in Genesis 2. So let's consider Genesis 2 briefly before looking at Ephesians 5. Brian referenced this passage last week also.

We'll pick up the narrative in Genesis 2:18. Adam alone had been created.

18 Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." 19 Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him.

In the Bible, a "helper" isn't an assistant you get to do the things you don't **want** to do. In the Scriptures a helper is someone who does for you what you **cannot** do for yourself. This become clear in passages such as Psalm 54:4 in which David declares, "God is my helper; the Lord is the sustainer of my soul." You only need a helper if you have deficiencies. Adam has no suitable helper, no one who could satisfy his aloneness and who could address his deficiencies.

21 So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. 22 The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and 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, Because she was taken out of Man." 24 For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.

Since his wife is God's provision for his deficiencies, that man shall leave his parents and form a new union with his wife. They were to become "one flesh." As Brian mentioned last week, "being joined to his wife" can be translated "cleaving" or "holding fast" to his wife; the idea is that you form a new bond and stick together until you are parted by death. Note Moses' final comment:

25 And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

They had no shame even though they were unclothed; they had no reason to feel inadequate and no reason to hide. Chapter 3 explains how Adam and Eve sinned and immediately experienced shame, realized they were naked, and covered themselves up.

When we come to Ephesians 5, Paul writes about the way that husbands and wives are supposed to think about each other and relate to each other. Throughout this passage he likens marriage to the relationship between Christ and the Church. We'll come back to Paul's comments to wives, but let's first consider Paul's instructions to husbands where he quotes Genesis 2:24. Let's begin in verse 25:

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, 26 so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.

If a husband doesn't experience the fierce, sacrificial love of Jesus, he cannot love his wife as Christ loves the church. A Christian man needs to understand firsthand that Jesus is zealous to make him holy and clean, glorious, unstained, unwrinkled, and blameless. In verses 28 through 30 Paul teases out the application for husbands.

28 So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; 29 for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, 30 because we are members of His body.

We don't dismiss a broken leg or a cut finger as if it's nothing. Last week I got a splinter under my fingernail; life stopped until I got it removed. Generally speaking we instinctively nourish and cherish our own bodies. Christ has that same attitude toward the church "because we are members of His body." Jesus loves, nourishes, and cherishes every single member of the body of Christ. He is so identified with the church that it's accurate to say that He "loves His own body as Himself." That's worth pondering. This fierce, refining, limitless love of Jesus becomes the example husbands are to follow. In verse 31 Paul quotes Genesis 2:24.

31 For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.

Here is the reason a Christian man gets married. A Christian man doesn't get married because he is "in love" or because he wants sexual fulfillment (although that's a byproduct of a healthy marriage). He gets married so that he might imitate Christ and love his wife sacrificially, pouring out his life on her behalf so that she might be everything God has designed her to be. He wants the gospel to be on full display in his marriage. Look at verse 32:

32 This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.

You might be thinking, "Wait a minute, Paul. I thought you were talking about husbands and wives." Paul is talking about husbands and wives, but ultimately he is speaking with reference to Christ and the church. A human marriage is a visible display of the marriage between Christ and the church. A human marriage is a shadow of the reality that the church is the bride of Christ. An earthly marriage will one day give way to the heavenly marriage supper of the Lamb. The marriage covenant (which is temporal) needs to be seen in light of the new covenant in Christ's blood (which is eternal).

33 Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband.

I would tell anyone getting married that if you want to have a Christian marriage, this has to be your vision. Your vision for marriage is to put on display the love relationship between Christ and the church. You must have a vision for a Christ-centered life and a Christ-centered marriage. You won't live this out perfectly, but this has to be your vision if you want to pursue a Christian marriage.

Implications of this vision for marriage. This vision for marriage has many implications for those of you who are considering marriage. I've got six points, so we're going to move at warp speed. These points are a good reminder for those of us who are already married.

Your marriage will be the most intense expression of your discipleship. Since marriage is a covenant in which "the two become one flesh," marriage will be the most intense expression of your discipleship. If you get married, your marriage should be the primary place where the gospel is on full display. People should be able to look at your marriage and conclude, "So that's how Jesus loves the church." Husbands and wives need to "let the word of Christ richly dwell within them" (Colossians 3:16) to the point that they have the mind of Christ toward each other. Husbands and wives need to keep in step with the Spirit to the point that they display toward each other "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

If you want a Christian marriage, you need to marry someone who is actively following Jesus (not merely someone who is religious or who goes to church or who is a "good person"). And you need to do the same. I'm not saying that people w/o Christ have no virtues; and I'm not saying that lukewarm Christians have no virtues. I'm saying that you can only put Christ on full display in your marriage if you are experiencing Him and walking with Him.

The second implication flows logically from the first.

Since discipleship requires discipline and effort marriage requires discipline and effort. Discipleship requires discipline and effort: we are told to "discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness" (1 Timothy 4) and to "deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow Jesus" (Matthew 16). Since marriage is the most intense expression of our discipleship, it too will require discipline and effort.

Don't go into marriage thinking that if you have a "good marriage" it will always be easy and intuitive. Rather, you should go into marriage prepared to discipline yourself and prepared to exert effort. This means, of course, that when you get married you already need to be in the habit of disciplining yourself and seeking God in strenuous ways.

When you get married, you really have no idea what types of hardships and challenges you will face. You have no idea what will be required of you. When you take your wedding vows you are committing yourself to be faithful to the other "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until we are parted by death." You will make a rather comprehensive commitment that will require discipline and effort.

If you don't want to deal with another person's sin, don't get married. Get a dog. Dogs have bad habits, but they aren't sinful. People are sinful. If you get married, you are marrying someone so sinful that Another had to die in his/her place. There is no place to hide in marriage; your sin will surface sooner or later (probably sooner). For example, your pride and selfishness will be magnified in marriage; your spouses pride and

selfishness will be magnified in marriage. If you don't want to deal with pride, don't get married.

Your role is to participate with God in your husband/wife's sanctification, helping him/her become like Christ. Inevitably, this participation will involve helping your spouse deal with his/her sin. This requires incredible humility on the part of both persons. As always, Christ is our example. When He encounters our sin, He doesn't get outraged and say, "I am giving you one more chance. . ." Rather, He woos us back to Himself and forgives and restores. It's not that there aren't boundaries in marriage and consequences for our sin. But at the core, your spouse needs to know, "My husband/wife is **for me** and wants to see me get past my sin."

You cannot experience the beauty and power of Ephesians 5 unless you take seriously the rest of Ephesians. In other words, you can cherry-pick Paul's teaching on husbands and wives without understanding the larger context of Ephesians. The rest of Ephesians explains your identify in Christ, what is now true of you in Christ, how to live in the body of Christ, how to put on the full armor of God, etc. You won't understand how to live in your marriage unless you understand the larger context of your life with God.

For example, before Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord in Ephesians 5:22ff, he tells the entire church, "Submit to one another in the fear of Christ" in Ephesians 5:21. Mutual submission in the body of Christ in the body of Christ is the training ground for submission in marriage. When you submit to another person, you are basically saying, "I am willing to receive through you anything God wants give me." Every believer, long before getting married, should be experienced in mutual submission in the body of Christ. In that way you know the challenges **and** the joys of submitting to another person.

*Engagement is a time to establish **habits of obedience** that you can cultivate throughout your marriage.* Sometimes couples mistakenly think, "I know my fiancé is sometimes angry and demanding and critical, but engagement is a stressful time in our lives. Maybe things will get better once we're married." That is a red flag you shouldn't ignore. Generally speaking, negative habits and patters of disobedience follow you into marriage; they often get worse instead of better. It's much better to establish habits of obedience that you can cultivate and deepen throughout your marriage.

One such area involves your sexuality. As you may know, here at Faith we have a set of guidelines that our elders have adopted for those who want one of our pastors to perform their wedding. These guidelines reflect the Scriptures and our collective wisdom concerning marriage. As we say, we're more interested in the marriage than the wedding. One of the guidelines involves "Moral Expectations" and reads:

God has designed sex to be a beautiful expression of unity and pleasure among married couples. As an expression of commitment to God's design, couples will agree to abstain until they are married.

This guideline reflects our understanding of Scripture, that it's God's design to wait until marriage. We want couples to establish a pattern of sexual obedience **before** they are married so that they don't enter marriage with the guilt and confusion that accompanies sexual sin.

We realize that we completely out of step with our culture on this; the popular thinking is that living together helps you get to know each other and find out if you're compatible. But the research and our observation suggests that living together before marriage doesn't prepare you for marriage; if anything being sexually active creates an emotional bond that can mask other issues that need to be addressed. We've never had a couple tell us that they wished they hadn't waited, but we've had lots of couples tell us that they regret not waiting. It is wise to establish patterns of obedience during engagement.

I realize that this message has been mostly a warning not to enter into marriage w/o counting the cost. But I want to end with some gospel (good news).

Good News: the new covenant in Christ's blood supplies everything you will need to thrive in marriage. When you trust in Jesus alone, you enter into the "new covenant in Christ's blood." In this covenant, God promises amazing things (Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36):

- to remove your sins as far as east is from the west; Jesus' death and resurrection frees you from the guilt and power of sin.
- to write His word on your heart; the teachings of Scripture aren't external regulations that burden you down and that you secretly resent; no, as you dwell on Scripture God's word becomes embedded in your heart - you have an internal longing to live out the teachings of Jesus.
- to give you **the** Holy Spirit - the Spirit who hovered over the surface of the deep at creation, the Spirit who empowered the prophets of old, the Spirit who descended upon Jesus at His baptism, the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead - that Spirit dwells within you.
- God promises, "I will be your God and you will be my people."

These new covenant promises are staggering, life-changing, promises.

As you experience God as defined in the new covenant, you will progressively become the type of people who can thrive in a relationship as intense and intimate as a marriage. Therefore, the best thing you can do is enter into a relationship with God through Jesus and then walk with him as if your life and well-being depends on it. . . because it does.