

⁴ Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

Introduction

We talked some last time about the shift from the lofty heights of Zion in chapter 12 of Hebrews to a hodgepodge of practical exhortations in chapter 13. The first exhortation is to brotherly love with two concrete examples: you manifest love and cultivate it by showing hospitality to strangers and pity to sufferers. Hospitality, mercy, and love are marks of genuineness since brotherly and sisterly love is the hallmark of true Christianity.

Now, in our text for this morning (Heb. 13.4), the author gives "Perspective on Marriage." There is no disconnection from the rest of the book here because this is an important matter of the Christian race over the pathway of holiness and it has its roots in the high priestly work of Christ. Thus, if you have forgiveness of your sins by His running ahead of you in sacrifice, then you will put forth strenuous effort to run the race He has set before you. This effort will include specifics about marriage. So let us consider the twofold exhortation in which we have these two specifics: how to view marriage and how to protect it.

1A. How to view marriage

In 13.4a, we have these helpful and ultimately encouraging words: **Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled.** The author encourages attitude and action, outlook and conduct. The attitude reflects how we are to view marriage and the action specifies how we are to sanctify and protect it.

There are a number of considerations in the context that show that this verse does not give a statement of fact (as the KJV has it: **Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled**). Instead, it is an exhortation (as the ESV has it: **Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled**). You should notice that the KJV has the word "is" in italics indicating that there is no verb in the sentence; the verb has to be supplied by the translator from the Greek to the English. The KJV translators interpret the writer to be expressing direct approval of marriage and particularly of sex within marriage: "marriage *is* honorable and sex *is* undefiled." Part of why they translate with a statement is that they had a high view of marriage in a social context where a low view prevailed.

Of course, marriage and sex are honorable and holy; that is clear throughout Scripture. But there are a number of reasons to supply the imperative language of command to get this translation and a different meaning: "hold marriage in a place of honor, keep the marriage bed pure." 1) First, the entire chapter is a series of exhortations that run right through our text (v. 1, let brotherly love continue; v. 4, keep marriage honorable and pure; v. 5, keep your life free from love of money; v. 7, remember your leaders, and so forth. Because it is part of this series, we should understand that our text (v. 4) is an exhortation too. 2) Second, the connection of 13.4a with 13.4b shows that 4a is an exhortation because 4b is a warning. It is difficult to make sense of a statement of fact being reinforced by a warning, while it makes perfect sense to back up an exhortation in this manner since duty carries with it accountability.

Thus, a Christian view of marriage is on the table here. You are to have some godly clarity in your thought-life and mental outlook regarding the institution of marriage. You are to view it, per the word **honor** here, as something valuable, costly, precious, and of great worth. You are to value marriage in a way analogous to how you value gold, silver, and precious stones (1 Cor. 3.12). You are to value it like you value a precious harvest in tough times (Ja. 5.7), and like you value the precious blood of Christ (1 Pet. 1.19). Marriage has a richness that we can only capture by including the designation precious.

Marriage is a holy estate, of great worth, valuable, and precious. That is how all are to think of it; hence, the words "among all" at the end of the first injunction: **Let marriage be held in**

honor among all. There are people who devalue marriage by claiming that true spirituality is best served by avoiding it. They imagine a taint of carnality that allegedly goes with the temporal demands and sexual pleasures of marriage. It is truly a misguided view that demands celibacy for ministry. That view goes directly against this text and the whole of Scripture on this subject. The imposition of celibacy as a requirement for ministry is fundamentally flawed, perverse, and devilish according to Paul (1 Tim. 4.1-3; he calls it a doctrine of demons).

For me as a teenager trying to understand my sexuality, the discovery of this text was such a blessing. I learned from it of God's pattern for marriage and His approval of sex within marriage. I needed to understand that the Lord fully encourages and blesses the marital union. This is the good of sex within marriage; it is God's creation and because He gave it and values it, so should we. We need this message in all the confusion of our fallen world that tramples on marriage with either false piety or degrading promiscuity. We need a healthy and clear view of marriage, one in which we hold it up high with honor and respect. Since outlook yields conduct, we come next to the action required.

2A. How to protect marriage

We can render 14.4b like this: keep the marriage bed clean. It is to be clean not dirty, pure not defiled: keep the marriage bed pure.

The duty extends beyond how we are to view marriage to the action required to preserve its purity. The duty to protect marriage, to guard it, and uphold it as a holy estate or sacred institution is action-oriented. Notably, the action concerns both married and unmarried people.

Let's work our way through this call to action, to holy action by considering two ways that the biblical writer applies the obligation against the Day of Judgment.

1) He applies the duty euphemistically (by example)

A euphemism is the use of a mild, agreeable, or indirect term or expression in the place of one that is potentially offensive, harsh, or blunt. A person can be euphemistic with the intent to deceive others or conceal something hard to hear in plain speech. The Nazis called the murder of Jews the Final Solution. We are euphemistic when we say, so and so "passed" or "passed on" in place of the more direct "he died," or when we use "lady of the night" for prostitute. Euphemisms have a good place in our language, especially in the display of good manners, decorum, and kindness (vs. coarse speech). By this kind of speech, love avoids being rude (1 Cor. 13.5). This tool of speech may conceal bad things, but it is also a method of protecting something good, maintaining respect, and keeping things private that are deeply personal. Such is the case with the central physical side of marriage. It is private and personal. It is not for public display. It is not a spectator sport for the public arena. Instead, it is a participation "sport" for the private, exclusive, personal, and precious enjoyment of husband and wife.

Accordingly, our author presents this perspective on marriage in the protective language of euphemism by referring to a bed, the marriage bed. The word he uses here is loaded with meaning. Your bed is the literal place where you sleep. Christ gave a parable in which a man speaks of his children asleep in bed (Lk. 11.7). As a euphemism, it speaks of marital intimacy by reference to the place where spousal intimacy typically occurs. In the plural, the word translated bed refers to an array of promiscuous behaviors (Rom. 13.13). Idiomatically, the term designates conception, the result to which marital intimacy may lead. This is the case with regard to Rebekah, the wife of Isaac: **And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac** (Rom. 9.10). So, the author may be euphemistic but he is not ambiguous.

The very use of euphemism for the intimacy of the marital union indicates a holy regard for marriage. That is an important step in protecting marriage. Part of the value that we place on the estate of holy matrimony is the high regard that we give to the pleasures and delights of spousal intimacy *in our speech*. Only the Lord knows the full degree to which fallen man has degraded the marriage bond by speaking of it in a raw, undignified, and light way in violation of the third (degrading God's works) and ninth (violating truth and covenant) commandments. The

marriage bed is honorable, dignified, holy, valuable, and precious. The exhortation to hold marriage up in a high place of honor means that you combine absolute clarity of thought with firmly guarded speech. You do that because the spousal intimacy the marriage bed represents euphemistically is rich with sacredness, divine approval, and heavenly commendation. Finally, you do so because of the straightforward fact that God will judge the violations of His Law. He is the one before whom you will give an accounting; He is the one in whose eyes all things are naked and exposed (Heb. 4.13).

2) He applies the duty broadly (by contrast)

The warning part of the text fills out what it means to protect marriage by keeping the marriage bed pure: **let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.** Clearly, both married and unmarried persons have the duty to protect marriage by purity with regard to the sacred and special intimacy that belongs within marriage.

On one hand, unmarried persons guard marriage, uphold its honor, and promote its sacredness by practicing sexual purity before God as the giver of human sexuality and as judge of those who pervert it. Thus, the two words "sexually immoral" translate the single word, "fornicator." It would appear that the choice of words by the translators has the design of softening the harsher language of fornication, though "sexually immoral" is direct and to the point. Fornication refers to all sexual actions outside the boundary lines of the marital bond of husband and wife. It violates God's design for mankind, created male and female for mutual pleasure and the multiplication of the human family. Thus, marriage has a place of honor and importance from the very beginning of the world for on the sixth day, God created His image bearer, male and female. Immediately, upon creating them, He commanded and commended marriage, the marriage bed, and all the delights of the two becoming one flesh: ²⁷ **So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.** ²⁸ **And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 1.27-28)... the LORD God ... made ... a woman and brought her to the man.** ²³ **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."** ²⁴ **Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.** ²⁵ **And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed (Gen. 2.22-25).**

The honor that God gave to marriage in all its fullness and richness is degraded when single people indulge themselves sexually. Although they may be consenting adults who do not force others sexually like rapists do, although they may indulge themselves voyeuristically, either alone on the internet or with a crowd at a bar, they defile the marriage bed. The soft euphemism of the marriage bed gives a strong message that sex belongs rightly and wonderfully within the marriage of husband and wife.

On the other hand, married persons must also be vigilant in conduct that protects marriage. They too are to promote its sacredness by practicing sexual purity before God as the giver of human sexuality and as judge of those who pervert it. They are in view reflexively in the warning to the adulterous (Heb. 13.4b) that God will personally judge. In this part of the equation, the honor that God gave to marriage in all its fullness and richness is degraded when a married person indulges sexually in some way apart from his or her spouse. Again, it may be alone by sinning with the eye in lust that commits heart and thought adultery according to Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 5.27-28). Obviously, and sadly, adulterous persons sin against marriage in a direct and painfully degrading way because at least one of the parties involved is married. The exclusivity of the vow of marriage is ripped to shreds. The sin is as much against truth and promise as it is against love and affection.

Accordingly, those who live their lives under the altar of the precious blood of Christ and who have a race to run on the path of holiness, have the great responsibility, whether married or unmarried, to hold marriage up high with honor and to protect the marriage bed from anything that defiles it.

A Christian view of marriage and of the restriction of human sexual experience to the marital union of husband and wife is not prudish. It is anything but prudish. There is nothing here that suggests that sex is in some way dirty and shameful. It is a matter of order and design for the multiplication of the human family in the context of rich pleasure and deep affection.

Conclusion

We must think clearly about marriage. In light of the priestly work of Christ, right thinking honors Him as it honors marriage. This is part of the race to run in holiness because Jesus suffered in His death to give us forgiveness of our sins and freedom from the bondage of our sins, including bondage to sexual sins.

Thus the right view of marriage is that it is holy unto the Lord, clean wholesome, rich and delightful...unless we step out of bounds. So, guard the boundaries.

1) First, husbands and wives. Husbands you uphold the honor of marriage when you conduct yourself as a loving spiritual leader; wives you uphold the honor of marriage when you conduct yourself as a loving spiritual helper; lovingly wise leadership on the part of husbands and lovingly wise submission on the part of wives (1 Pet. 3.1-8) raise a high banner above marriage and put a strong hedge of protection around it. A good marriage promotes knowledge of the gospel.

2) Second, all of you (1 Pet. 3.8). There is a core here that spills over from the marital family to the Christian family, from the faithful home to the household of faith. The key is in God's design that members of the human family grow in their person to person knowledge of one another in conjunction with their growth in the knowledge of God. Since the fall, this means that strangeness and estrangement due to sin must be overcome. This affects the fundamental relationship of husband and wife and all the relationships of brothers and sisters in the redeemed human family, the church. Remember, the strangeness is due to sin and must be overcome.

Scripture states that the very physical bond of marriage is an act of knowing. For example, when it states, Adam knew his wife and she conceived (Gen.4.1), it is using euphemistic language that speaks of the intimacy of husband and wife. Marriage and the fullness of marital affection is therefore the private, interpersonal, and precious symbol of the knowledge triangle of husband, wife, and their Creator. It is a symbol of the covenant they have with one another and that each has with God to live with one another before the Lord in the knowledge of God by which they grow in their knowledge of one another. In this growth, they taste "Paradise Lost" in the fall; in this growth they experience "Paradise Regained" by the work of Christ our elder Brother and great high priest. Thus, if you oppose learning, you oppose marriage; if you promote learning, you promote marriage because marriage is an institution of knowledge.

These things spill over to the core of being a Christian family: the key is the removal of strangeness between us, the removal of the estrangement due to the fall into sin. Hence, there is overlap between brotherly love, hospitality, and marriage (13.1-4). Marriage symbolizes the fundamental privilege of knowing God better and better as human beings made in His image, fallen from that image, and being restored in that image through Jesus Christ the risen Lord.

May the Lord enable you to see marriage in this way for if you do so, you will all, married and unmarried alike, have a right view of marriage (honorable) and you will carry yourselves in a way that promotes and protects the sanctity of marriage, that promotes the mutual knowledge of God between husband and wife and between all the brothers and sisters in the household of faith by love in fellowship of one-anothering discipleship.

May we fall down before the majesty of our God, the Creator of the heavens, the earth, and man His image bearer, both male and female. May the Holy Spirit teach us all how to uphold the high honor of marriage, to protect the sweet delights of marital intimacy, and to lay hold of the fundamental symbol of marriage; may our risen Lord grant us all growth in the knowledge of God and thereby growth in knowing one another, not as estranged aliens, but as brothers and sisters in the family of the redeemed; to the glory of the triune God, amen.