

A Biblical Definition of Marriage (Eph 5.22-33)

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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. ³¹ “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. ^{6:1} Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), ³ “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” ⁴ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Introduction

In Eph 5.21, Paul summarizes how we fulfill the imperatives of our Christian journey by telling us to consider carefully how we walk with the Lord in wisdom by **submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ**. These words call us to mutual family submission that is central to being filled with the Spirit, to walking worthy of Christ, to upbuilding the church, and such submission is central to glorifying God. This clause functions in the passage as a linchpin that connects what comes before it with what comes after it. So, as we look ahead, **submitting to one another** applies to husbands, wives, children, slaves and masters (5.22-6.9). In other words, it is a principle that governs (underlies, seasons, tempers, and affects) all these relationships and forms a barrier that blocks any kind of overlording abuse by persons in authority. Before we dive into these relationships next week, it is vital in our ungodly culture that today we remind ourselves of the biblical definition of marriage as the larger context of our text. We will cover two points: supporting the biblical definition of marriage and applying it.

I. Support for the biblical definition of marriage

One way we gain perspective on marriage is in terms of the qualifications of an elder who (per 1 Tim 3.4-5): **must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive,** ⁵ **for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?** He has **his own household** and our text indicates that it reveals that marriage brings the husband into a place of authority over a household that includes a wife and children, along with slaves (or servants). How he conducts himself in the exercise of his authority is critical to his care for God's church, which is also a household, i.e., **the household of God** (1 Tim 3.15). The

theme of submission in Eph 5-6 is the other side of the coin of household authority, as Paul narrows his focus from the household of faith (Gal 6.10), the church, to the households of faith. Clearly, the apostle presupposes the biblical teaching on marriage in his treatment of the nuclear family in 5.22-6.4 (the family of husband, wife, and children). He shows this explicitly in his quote in Eph 5.31 of Genesis 2.24, the classic OT text on the origin of the marriage institution.

Therefore, our summary definition of marriage will draw mainly from Gen 2 with supporting points from Malachi, Proverbs, and the Gospel of Matthew. From these texts we learn that marriage is a union of a man and a woman that involves a covenant of companionship for life and for the glory of God. The actual union by creation is symbolized in the physical union that has the potential of producing a family of children. Given the widespread rejection of marriage and the deceit that surrounds God's institution in this present evil age, we should spend some time to ground a Christian view of marriage.

Let's outline the defining points in steps.

1. Step one: marriage is a union of a man and woman as one body

By creating woman from the man (and informing us of this fact), God teaches that *husband and wife are actually one body* (Gen 2.21-23): **So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into 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."** Being literally made from Adam's body shows that *they are in fact one flesh*. Hence, they can look at one another and each say, "that is my body, it's a part of me, I am a part of it." It is emphatic that Adam and Eve, husband and wife, are to live out the implications of the fact that they are one flesh and so they are to hold fast to one another as close companions (Gen 2.24): **Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.** God is showing us His design in no uncertain terms in 2.25 in the fact that **the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.** They are to cling together like glue in doing the will of God to realize the design of making them **male and female** (Gen 1.27) so that may obey the command to (1.28a) **be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth**, and to do that in the context of the cultural mandate (1.28b): to **subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.** Hence, their physical union symbolizes the fundamental unity of husband and wife, of a man and a woman, to carry out their work on earth by God's design. This fact underscores the radical nature of all forms of sexual immorality that violate this sacred bond (truly the bond is sacred).

2. Step two: marriage is a covenant of companionship

In light of these words from Genesis, it is no wonder that the prophet Malachi goes back to the creation account to put marriage in a covenant context (Mal 2:14): **she is your companion and your wife by covenant.** The prophet also states the actual, literal unity of the man and his wife (Mal 2.15): **did he not make them [Adam and Eve] one?** Proverbs 2:17 confirms the inference that the marriage covenant is mutual for here the wife **forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God.** The association of wife, companion, and covenant shows

that she makes covenant just as her husband makes covenant (cf. the parallel of "the wife of your youth" in Prov 5.18 with "wife of your youth" in Mal 2.14).

Also, the Lord God states (Gen 2.18) that it is **not good that the man should be alone** and that He therefore created **a helper fit for him**. The mutuality of the covenant confirms the fundamental point that each party in marriage commits to help the other. The distinctive role of the wife to be a helper in no way squelches husbands from helping their wives by availing themselves of opportunities to do so. Moreover, God's design that man not be alone means that each spouse (man as man and woman) commits to communication, conversation, and getting to know one another by sharing thoughts and experiences. In a word, the marriage vow is a commitment of the man and woman to protect each other from loneliness.

3. Step three: marriage is a covenant of companionship for life

In Mat 19.5-6a, Jesus comments on Genesis 2.24 (**Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. 6a: So they are no longer two but one flesh**). He tells us that 2.24 teaches that the marital commitment is for life because He says in Mat 19.6b: **What God has joined together, let not man separate**. Marriage is thus a covenant in which both parties make a vow that is exclusive of all others and that is to last "till death do us part."

4. Step four: marriage is a covenant of companionship for the glory of God

It is a covenant to be companions for life that includes the supreme goal of all things, to glorify God because both were made in God's image (Gen 1.26). For clarification, remember that glorifying God does not add anything to God. It is not that He created the world and us in order to improve or grow. He neither decreases nor increases in His attributes for He is immutably perfect, as we have emphasized many times over the years. This is sometimes called "the full bucket" problem (as expressed by C. Van Til). How can you add anything to a full bucket? You cannot add anything because by definition a bucket is full when nothing more can be added. God is full of glory, full to the brim. He has no need of anything outside of Himself. Thus, to glorify God means that we reflect His glory as image bearers. This is something that we do in word and deed. It is what our existence on this earth as male and female is all about. This ultimate goal puts a capstone on the definition of marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman for lifelong companionship to the glory of God. Paul expresses this great end of human existence in 1 Co 10.31: **So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God** and in Col 3.17 as he turns to discuss marriage: **And whatever you do [in whatever role you have in the household], in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him**. This brings us to application.

II. Applying the biblical view of marriage

We will make application by considering Leviticus 18 in the holiness code of the OT. Its relevance to NT sexual ethics comes out in 1 Co 5 where incest gets the most attention. Paul draws on the reference in Deut 22.21 regarding sexual immorality (**So you shall purge the evil from your midst**) that stands in close connection to the "cutting off" of the sexually immoral in Lev 18.29. It is clear in Leviticus that many forms of sexual immorality are also explicitly condemned

along with incest, such as adultery (Lev 18.20), homosexuality (Lev 18.22), and bestiality (Lev 18.22). Moreover, the sexual immorality in view in Paul's imperatives of disciplinary purging (1 Co 5.13) and dissociation (5.11) includes all sexual sins along with all other types of sin are in view representatively (compare the lists in 1 Co 6.9-11 and 1 Co 5.9-11; both lists are selective and representative). We cannot avoid the conclusion that the commands to purge and dissociate from any brother that is a sexually immoral person extend by implication to all the forms of sexual immorality that Paul denounces in Eph 5.3-14 (v. 3: **But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints**). Sexual violations of the marriage institution and sexual holiness include sins of speech (5.4, "coarse jesting" and thought, 5.5, covetousness).

For our purposes, it is important to note that marriage is the context within Leviticus 18 that governs how we are to understand all the sexual sins including the male-male sin prohibited most notably in the chapter. Otherwise, we would have no way to make sense of incest, adultery, and so forth that include husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, children, and near relatives mentioned in the text from beginning to end. There are two points of huge significance: 1) in Leviticus 18, sexual intimacy belongs exclusively to husband and wife, and 2) this exclusive sexual intimacy exists for the production of a family of brothers and sisters in a bond of love without sexual overtones. In particular, producing a family of brothers and sisters stands in radical contradiction to the forms of sexual immorality that render having children null and void (as in homosexuality, bestiality, and also on the list of sins in Lev 18, the sacrificing of children to Molech [18.21], a sin in many ways similar to the sinful practice of abortion. The categorical and unambiguous prohibitions of incest, adultery, and same-sex sex protect the family by separating it from sin for purity and holiness. These facts reinforce the requirement of a male and a female in the theology of marital unity given in Gen 1-2. As stated earlier, Gen 2.24 teaches that man and woman, the two, are actually one body by the creation of woman from the man's body. Wonderfully, this fact is symbolized in the joy of their sexual union (indicated in the reference their unashamed nakedness, Gen 2.25). Thus, the OT opens a door to Christian family love as a foretaste of heaven where love and joy abide without eroticism. We can show how this works by a discussing the fall, restoration, and consummation.

A. The Fall.

Since the fall, sexual immorality transgresses the boundaries established by the Lord for all the relationships of the human family. These relationships reach beyond the nuclear family (of husband, wife, children) to extended family, and to the Israelite nation as a family of brothers and sisters, to what some call the collateral family (including aunts, uncles, cousins). Summoned to holiness, fathers and mothers from different households are brothers and sisters in the national family of the OT church. Accordingly, virtuous family love is preserved when brothers and sisters do not cross the boundaries of the marriage covenant of fathers and mothers. So, every sexual sin is a violation of God's design for family love (adultery, same-sex sex, incest, and so forth).

In their journey the Promised Land, Lev 18 cautions the offspring of Abraham about the Canaanites in the land who radically transgressed the God appointed boundaries of marriage and family. Their sins ripened, rotted, became full (Gen 15.16, 400 years after Abraham), and defiled the very land that, expressed in powerful personification, was made sick to its stomach and will vomit them out for a cleansing of itself (Lev 18.24-25a): **Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these [sins listed in the chapter] the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean,** ²⁵ **and the land became unclean.** Thus the Lord speaks of the judgment on the Canaanites as past with the warning that the same judgment will come upon Israel if they practice the same sins (18.25b): **I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.** ²⁶ **But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you** ²⁷ **(for the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean),** ²⁸ **lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the [Canaanite] nation that was before you.** ²⁹ **For everyone who does any of these abominations, the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people.** ³⁰ **So keep my charge never to practice any of these abominable customs that were practiced before you, and never to make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God.** The vomiting land is figurative of God's judgment on the sins of that people and His judgment of all who follow in their steps, including old Israel. Therefore, all expressions of adultery, same-sex sex (however affectional and caring they may be), incest, and so forth, are violations of family love that reveal the fallenness of the human race and the need of the Savior, Jesus Christ, the risen Lord.

B. Restoration

Through restoration, the new Israel, the church is also to be a holy family, Peter says (1 Pet 1.15): **as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct** and (1.16): **since it is written [in Leviticus 19.2], You shall be holy, for I am holy and [written in Leviticus 20.7], be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.** That Peter roots this call to holiness in the holiness code of Leviticus regarding sexual matters (chapter 18-20) shows that Peter's call to the church includes the Levitical prohibitions of adultery (20.10), incest (20.11; applied by Paul to the church in 1 Cor 5), male-male sex (20.13), and zoophilia (20.15-16).¹ All these types of sexual sin are therefore not only sins against God's standard for marriage but also sins against God's standard for love in the human family generally and in the restored family of God, the church specifically.

Accordingly, the seemingly odd discussion by Paul of sexual immorality (Eph 5.3) that follows the call to **walk in love** (5.2) is not odd at all when you think on one hand, that he draws a contrast between self sacrificial love and its extreme opposite in self-indulgent sexual sin. And, on the other hand, it is not odd at this point in the letter because he goes on to develop the subject of marriage and family

¹ Notably, by faith, all brothers and sisters in God's new Israelite family, called to be a holy people (a holy nation, 1 Pet 2.9) are not to be conformed to the sexual sins that contradict holiness defined in Lev 18-20 as quoted by Peter in 1 Peter 1.16. Thus, being bound for perfect holiness that has no sexual elements, the church is called to holiness in all relationships that emerge from the blessing of sexual intimacy of husbands and wives. Godly love between women is exemplified in the love between Ruth and Naomi. Godly love between men ought to grow in this life toward the love shared, for example, between Jonathan and David (1 Sam 18.1-4), even though men may be too reserved, too proud, too emotionally fragile (fearing rejection) to develop close affectional bonds with other men.

that every form of sexual immorality directly contradicts. Furthermore, it is by the great love of God that we have been called out from living (Eph 2.3-5) **in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.** ⁴ **But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,** ⁵ **even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved.** Being made alive from being dead in sin begins the process of a holy walk that is the goal of our election in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph 1.4), i.e., that we should be holy and blameless before him. This means before Him in His presence growing in holiness in our day by day walk until we reach the consummation of our journey.

C. Consummation

In the consummation, heaven will be a place of virtuous family love without marriage. The church's sexual purity in all the relationships that emerge from marital intimacy is a foretaste, anticipation, and embodiment of the glory to come where marriage will have passed away in ultimate fulfillment (Mat 22.30: **For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven**). Then the goal set out in the six and one account of Genesis (1.1-2.3; 1.27-28) of an earth filled with a family of image bearers in eternal Sabbath rest will be fulfilled. Of course, it will come to fulfillment through redemption by Christ because of the fall. Therefore, if we cultivate brotherly and sisterly love that respects the boundaries of marriage of husband and wife, then we are doing something marvelous. We are anticipating (i.e., tasting ahead of time) the glory of heaven where there will be no marrying in a family of brothers and sisters. We thus have a goal for the present rooted in what is coming (as Edwards in *Charity*): “an inconceivably pure, sweet, and fervent love between the saints in glory” (202) because “heaven is a world of love” where “this glorious fountain forever flows forth in streams, yea, in rivers of love and delight, and these rivers swell, as it were, to an ocean of love, in which the souls of the ransomed may bathe with the sweetest enjoyment, and their hearts, as it were, be deluged with love!” (196).

Thus, the love that we cultivate now of brothers to brothers, sisters to sisters, and sisters to brothers is to be a wholesome deep affectional bond that is not driven by sex but driven by the will of God that defines the true love of marriage and family. By this love, we anticipate the love that abides in heaven. The eschatological/future perspective shows that, though a source of wonderful delight, sexuality is not ultimate; full humanness will be attained in glory without it. This outlook helps us maintain a balanced view of the great delight of marital intimacy for husband and wife by restraining exaggeration and preserving holiness. These insights help us walk worthy of Christ and put sin to death in our members by putting love, marriage, and marital intimacy into a rich biblical perspective.

Let us fall down before the majesty of God in awe at His works of creation; may the Holy Spirit deepen our resolve to live in humble and mutual submission in both the household of faith and in our households in wondering anticipation of the redeemed family of brothers and sisters who will dwell together in unity and love in our home in heaven; to the glory of the triune God in Christ's church now and forever, amen.