

LV. Timeless Truth for Timely Topics in Biblical Perspective

What Does the Bible Say?

“Who Should I Marry?”

Ephesians 5:22–33

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In this study we'll be in Ephesians 5 and before we look at the text I want to set it up for us. In this past year we've gone through a series of dealing with what the Bible says about certain topics like death, hell, heaven, the new heavens, the new earth, the millennium, the coming of Christ etc. We dealt with many issues and before we get to the series 'what is God's church for the ages' I want to deal with a few more issues. In this new series I have a conviction that God's Word clearly teaches what Christ's church is and this weighs heavily upon me for hardly a week goes by that I don't get a brochure inviting me to a conference that is going to reinvent the church. When I read the Bible I don't see Jesus saying 'pray for church architects' but I do see Him saying to pray for workers. Jesus seems to be the Architect who has it pretty well designed so we need to know His design for the church and then contextualize it into our age.

So why should I take on the topic of 'who should I marry'? Here are a few reasons why I think this is important to deal with. The first reason is that we now live in a cultural landscape that is confusing, challenging, somewhat frightening, mythological and one of somewhat fabrication that cannot stand the test of time. Five hundred years ago in October 1517 Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses and that was revolutionary. There was not only a revival in the church but there was a reformation from the church into society that transformed the landscape of nations and still does to this day to some degree. This reformation is how you would see life in a Biblically framed, God-centered world and life view that began to permeate the church and also the world and how it would frame itself. Our founding fathers were greatly affected by this reformation world and life view of this notion of church, state and the family and how they are interdependent but not hierarchical. It showed the importance of accountability, how men and women are fallen and the role of government.

A number of these spilled over into society and one of those was the ordering of life with those foundational institutions of society that God had put in place, such as Sabbath and work, work and rest, the sanctity and dignity of work, personal responsibility. These aren't simply things that are embraced by Christians in the context of the church but they are things that Christians promoted in the public square with public theology because we love our neighbors to put in place those things that are of public benefit for human flourishing. One of the most foundational institutions of all is the family and the foundation of the family is marriage.

Europe back in the 1500 had been populated for hundreds of years with barbarian pagan tribes and when Christianity came there was not only the winning of men and women to Christ but as they were being disciplined to think Christianly they began to arrange their lives for Christ. That began to penetrate the culture itself so that pagan sexuality began to be seen as evil and not an option. Pagan definitions of marriage and family began to be seen as evil and destructive and not optional. So the whole world and life view began to be propagated throughout these nations and tribes became nations because of common cultural values that were built on creation mandates. The most foundational one of all was marriage and family.

We live in an amazing moment of life in which, probably the premiere nation out of western culture that has been blessed by that world and life view is now intentionally, consciously deconstructing that world and life view in order to return to a pagan world and life view, where there is family and marital chaos. Men and women have now said they don't want a world and life view from a sovereign God who created us but they want a world and life view from the sovereign self where they will do what is right in their own eyes. They want to define marriage, family and sexuality the way they want to define it. The only problem is that when you go against God's moral law, the Ten Commandments, or God's creation law, such as marriage, work, sexuality within marriage, it will eventually break you.

So as we move forward in this society of cosmic treason against God's law, God's creation law the result will be chaos, death, broken bodies, broken lives, broken hearts, broken families and that is the confusion that is established and already upon us in our society today. This is even to the point where we would deny the notion that God has made man in His image, male and female. Gender is not a social construct imposed by the powerful but it is a recognition of the design of God as to how He made us in His image with the distinct blessing that are male and female made complimentary to each other. It requires both to properly image God. In the creation order God only said one time that something was not good and that was it was not good for the man to be alone because there is not the proper imaging of God and not the ability to bear the image of God and rule over His creation without male and female. Then God built the institution of marriage as the foundational relationship of male and female and the foundational relationship to establish and nurture the coming generation as they would be fruitful and multiply. We as a society are saying 'no' to this.

I have a ten minute daily radio program called "Today in Perspective" and there is no shortage of material to address in this with what is going on in our society today. When we talk marriage today it can be two consenting adults and that will not stand long in the sovereign self because why two? Why not more than two and on what basis do you limit it to two? Why is consent necessary? Why adult? Legally all of these are being challenged even as I speak. Then in marriage because it's a fabrication marriage you cannot reproduce so now we have the amazing objectifying of women as surrogate women are being owned to bear children in such situations to provide the children for those marriages. Therefore women simply become 'rent a womb.' The problem in that situation the woman by God's call develops a relationship with the one they are carrying. Now we have lawsuits that make no sense whatsoever. We live in a landscape that is littered with confusion as the sovereign-self world and life view leads to despair and disintegration in the marriage and family where we have a social, cultural landscape that is chaotic, one of despair and one that is frightening. I'm not sure I want to even step into this culture. It becomes an intimidating culture.

So we have marital disintegration and family disintegration, so who should I marry? What does the Bible say even more fundamentally about family and to answer that what does it say about marriage? So with the self-absorbed domination of a sovereign-self world and life view we now have moved to relativism and that is a belief that there are no ethics. There is only a morality of a nation and whatever the morality is becomes the ethic. How many times do we hear on the television that 'the survey says people are doing this...'? So we change the law to accommodate that. In a Biblical world and life view you don't determine the ethic from the morality but it is the ethic that frames the morality. The ethic is what you ought to do and the morality is then what you do.

Let me put it in philosophical terms for a moment. Morality is 'is-ness' and ethics are 'ought-ness.' I will speak to you in this study from 'ought-ness' and then give some very practical suggestions about 'is-ness.' How should we live in light of these 'ought-ness,' these ethical laws that God has built in creation? Also, how should we pursue and embrace marriage in light of that? Now there is this embrace of moral relativism and now ethical absolutes are dismissed.

For instance, when you enter into a classroom in a secular university and you say 'I believe that sex is to be between a man and a woman which has been the historic position and it's to be within marriage' that is not seen as a debate about creation law but that is seen as the declaration of someone who has been empowered to impose your preference upon society, instead of one who is embracing God's law for society. You are declared as imposing your will but in reality you are affirming God's will in creation. These are ethical absolutes about life, marriage, sex and family and if you don't embrace those it leads to death. If you do embrace them then it can lead to human flourishing.

Another reason I need to address this matter of who one should marry in the context of the church is because of the prevalence of normalization of sexual immorality, not only in the culture but now in the church. One might be thinking if I have gone back to think about my choice of marriage and I certainly have. I am thankful for it every single day of my life. What motivated me to be married? Where did sex come into this? Did I get married for sex? Absolutely but not only sex, for I was drawn to my wife and I knew our intimacy was found nowhere but within the bounds of marriage and there would be no intimacy without marriage. Today we have allowed the world to conform us so that men take liberties and insistence upon women and we have no right of calling upon a women to allow us without the covenant of a marriage commitment that her body become our playground.

Then women who would say before the Lord, 'There have been many things You have given me and I want to make sure that what You have given me is placed where it is supposed to be placed, within the bounds of marriage' so what does that mean to a man? It means there is a Savior so that when we sin we're not crumpled up and thrown aside. When we sin our Savior forgives. He can not only forgive us but make where we have faltered His strengths in our life and that's what He is able to do.

I want to walk through some basic principles and some suggested practices but the bigger issue for all of us is whether we know this Savior who takes sinners and makes us right with Him. From the hymn *Fairest Lord Jesus* it says, 'Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer, Who makes the woeful heart to sing' again. We who are broken from our sins with that woeful heart, instead of continuing to cover them up we can confess to Him and He will give us a heart that now sings because of His grace and mercy. That is what He grants to us.

Let's begin to build this life. He is always there to help when you falter but now you can build your life not only with the forgiveness of sins but He will break sin's power in your life. So, you can now begin to have clarity in your life which includes clarity about marriage, family and sexuality. We are able to embrace those Biblical principles that God uses for life and love. In doing this we are then about to move.

Another reason I'm dealing with this topic in this study is because both inside and outside of the church we have sought identity in appetite gratification so that many are afraid of marriage and rightly so because those whom they look to they see them with lifestyle addictions that are controlling them. Instead of Christ being their life, sex, drink, drugs, prestige or power are their life and that's because things that God has made for rightful use have become idols and therefore

they become paralyzing and lifestyle breaking addictions. It is no wonder that someone would not want to get into a relationship with someone who is addicted and controlled by those things.

Another reason why this needs to be addressed is the witness of a Christian world and life view through the salt and light of Christianity is no longer predominate in our culture. The salt has lost its saltiness. The light has lost its clarity and because of that not only have God's people made wrong decisions but we are not penetrating the world as salt and light with common grace virtues that restrain sin in society out of our love to our neighbor. So let's take this on by looking at this definitive text on marriage in Ephesians 5.

Ephesians 5:22–33 says [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.”* (quote from Genesis 2:24) [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.*

Here our Lord gives us a foundational understanding of marriage and then He gives us clarity about our relationships in marriage. In so doing He also speaks to the matter of sexuality concerning marriage. So let's start with marriage itself. He gives us an understanding of marriage by quoting Genesis 2:24. Adam is brought from the dust of the ground and Eve is from Adam's side and then God makes marriage. God actually officiates the first marriage by saying 'for this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one.' Therefore marriage is a miracle – one plus one equals one. Even at East Carolina University that would not have passed the math test when I was there but that is God's Biblical framework for marriage – oneness.

How do you get one plus one equals one? This comes from the hand of God which allows the man and his wife to leave and cleave. If you don't leave you have one plus one equals six and that's not any fun at all. If you don't cleave then you have one plus one equals two. It is one plus one equals one. I know what we mean but that and when I do marriages that is why I never talk about a partnership because that is not what I think the Bible is teaching. Nor do I try to console parents by telling them they are not losing a son but gaining a daughter or vice versa because that's not true. Your son or your daughter are leaving. They have been hooked into your family physically, spiritually, psychologically, culturally and have been embedded. They now leave to cleave to the other and then together as one they re-establish their relationship with you in a new relationship as one together.

So it is not two families coming together but it is a new family that has started that then re-connects and what once was immediate family now becomes extended family out of that relationship that is established. Unfortunately that is where we run into trouble that is a whole other series of sermons that I'm not going to do but many don't leave and that's why they can't

cleave. If you don't leave you haven't established a 50/50 partnership. What fun is that for you win half the time and lose half the time?

The relationship that is being described here is a man one hundred percent committed to his wife and a woman one hundred percent committed to her husband and both are committed to each other with that unreserved commitment as they consider the other. Love your wife. Care for your wife. Lead your wife. How far do you have to go in this? You go like Jesus did. He died for His bride. It's a hundred percent commitment. How far does a bride have to go in respecting her husband? You are to go as far as Christ's bride was called to go, one hundred percent committed to our great Husband who has given Himself for us. That call is what we are trying to communicate to a culture for this puts marriages in place that by God's grace can put families in place. Even if it is not by redeeming grace then by God's common grace such families can be understood. So we have one man, one woman for one life, leaving and cleaving, establishing a marriage from which they are now in place to raise the next generation.

What happens with death and divorces? That is where the church of Jesus Christ steps in to do its ministry. Just because we have broken marriages and broken families in a broken world we don't redefine marriage or family but the church does step in. We can't substitute for a spouse but we can step in, in the name of Christ and minister, be available, love one another and develop those relationships in the Lord and beyond as we step into the culture. We are to go into the neighborhoods and communities that are broken and ask God to give us wisdom as to how grace and mercy might be brought into those situations. We don't take what is happening in the culture and redefine marriage and family but we maintain God's definition and then minister with God's kindness and grace within the culture.

So what is a marriage? It is a covenantal, heterosexual, monogamous, conjugal relationship. There are covenant promises made to one another in a marriage and those promises are for life. For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife. It is a man and woman that cleave together. It is between one man and one woman. In this marriage relationship the man and woman become one flesh and God has made you biologically, sexually and in every way so that marriage is a reality. It is a reality that can be achieved by the grace of God in a conjugal relationship which begins, renews and furthers the marriage. What do I mean by that?

When does a marriage begin? It begins when a man and a woman become one flesh. So as a minister of the Gospel I do a number of wedding ceremonies and I always end with this statement, 'upon the consummation of this union before God I pronounce you man and wife.' What was done in the marriage ceremony? We didn't make a man and wife but we established the covenant of marriage. Now that night is a marriage bed and not a bed of adultery. Let the marriage bed be held in honor among all (Hebrews 13:4). Fornicators and adulterers God will judge. So that has been established as a marriage bed from the leaving, cleaving, giving, the boundaries, the framework, the promises, the declarations and now God signs and seals the covenant in the marriage bed.

The sexual relationship not only initiates the marriage but it renews the marriage. In I Corinthians 7:1-5 says [1] *Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."* [2] *But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.* [3] *The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.* [4] *For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.* [5] *Do not deprive one*

another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

God is telling us here that we have a reciprocal relationship together in the marriage bed. Think of it this way. The sign and seal of marriage is the marriage bed. We have two signs and seals of our covenant relationship with God – baptism and the Lord's Supper. One initiates our relationship and the other refreshes and renews our relationship. So God's sign and seal in marriage is the same. The marriage bed initiates the relationship sexually – the man and the woman as one. Then the marriage relationship is refreshed in the marriage bed as we do not defraud one another as we come together not to take but to give. When it says your body belongs to your spouse and vice versa He is saying from a Christian world and life view that we're to give and not take. If you enter into the marriage bed to take then somebody gets used. If you come to give then both are ministered to, refreshed and renewed. Paul even calls it this mystery of one in Christ. It is also there to recreate sexually in the marriage bed for refreshment and renewal and then it is there to procreate by which God blesses the marriage in which you are able to be fruitful and multiply.

Biblical sexuality is very simple. Sex is a gift from God within the boundaries of marriage. The marriage bed is honorable, a blessing. Sexuality outside of marriage eventually will become a curse and that which brings detrimental effects whether its sexually transmitted diseases, broken relations, sex with no commitment or transparency but simply the use of one another for a time being.

People challenge me on this by saying 'what if we're committed anyway and we know we're going to get married' then I say get married, set up the covenant relationship and go through the right process to accomplish that. From someone who has been in the ministry for over 40 plus years I would say if you can rationalize sex premarital you will rationalize sex extramarital. If the covenant of marriage is not a boundary leading up to sexual relationships it won't be one after the marriage for there will be sufficient rationalizations. The boundaries of marriage have been set by God for us and we believe that's the framework through which our greatest blessing will come. Biblical sexuality is in the context of marriage.

What about Christian marriage or Biblical marriage? A Christian marriage is in the Lord. That means a Christian marriage is between two believers. You can't have a marriage in the Lord unless you're in the Lord. It doesn't have to do with getting married in a church or that you had a preacher to officiate it. It's a good place to have one and establish one but it doesn't make a Christian marriage. A Christian marriage is fundamentally between two people who have said they know they are sinners who are helpless and hopeless, apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross who loved me and gave Himself up for me, we have surrendered to Him and now by God's grace I have been drawn to this person who is also surrendered to Christ in order for us together to become one in serving Christ. This is a marriage that is 'in the Lord' as Paul would say, a Christian marriage.

So who should I marry as a Christian? Number one, you marry another Christian. You don't do evangelistic marriage. Now has God saved a person after a saved person has married them? Yes and God is gracious to us in many ways but don't tempt the Lord. I remember a time I was in New York at a conference and I was out to dinner with a pastor and a lady who was kind of a patron in the church. This lady had paid all the bills for this conference, we had lunch at her restaurant and she also owned a couple of hotels. She was this older lady but wonderfully attractive, thoughtful, kind, witty and conversational. I probably said something I never should

have said but I asked her 'Are you married?' and she said 'no.' I said 'have you ever been married?' and she said 'no.' I said 'have you ever thought about being married?' and she said 'oh a bunch of times.' I said 'has anyone wanted to marry you?' and she said 'absolutely and believe me sonny, I've had more than one.' I said 'I'm going to ask you one more question, why have you never married?' She said 'Either they weren't believers or they weren't where they needed to be as a believer. I figured as much as I don't like being single and wanting to be married and wouldn't want to be married and want to be single. So I'm going to wait for God's timing. In the meantime I'm putting my trust in the Lord and living for Him. He is supplying all of my needs as He has promised me.'

So while we recognize the God-gift of marriage and God's providential call to singleness for a period of time, one does not embrace singleness as rebellion against God but one does in terms of looking to the Lord in terms of marriage, is that we would ask God to give us the patience and persistence to marry in the Lord with a Christian, but that's not all. If I'm a woman I'm looking for a Christian man who can and desires to love me sacrificially and lead me as a servant. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church sacrificially. Wash your wife with the water of the Word to present her. Nourish her and cherish her. God, bring into my life a man desirous and capable. It's not enough that he is a Christian but I'm grateful for that. The second step is will he love me sacrificially and lead me as a servant? Will he take the towel to wash my feet from the grime of life? Will he care for me? God, that is who I'm looking for and only You can provide such men.

The man is looking for a wife who desires to be his completer. So the man is looking for a wife that he not only desires to love and lead but one who desires to complete him. She is the helper completer. Think about Adam. Eve does not come from Adam's head for she is not over him and she is not from his feet for she is not under him. She comes from his side to come alongside of him. She bears the name of the Holy Spirit, that helper, completer, as the image bearer of God. She doesn't want to conquer him or be conquered. She is not in competition with him but she is a completer for him. They both are looking for the one that will complete each other. There is a desire by God's grace that they begin to look into each other's life, know each other and take the time to do that.

So when it comes to who should you marry, I'm a strong believer in appropriately lengthy courtships and very short engagements. I say that because I know what the Bible says. Number one it takes some time to know who I'm going to marry. I know God can show someone in an instant for that was me but that's an exception because I needed someone exceptional. It was pretty obvious if I lost this then I was the dumbest human being that ever walked the face of the earth. I did one smart thing in my life and by God's grace we had a three month courtship and a three month engagement. And I'm grateful for that but by in large it takes time to know each other and know who you are to marry. Where are we spiritually and where do we come from culturally? How do we communicate together? Who are we?

One of the things I didn't know when I married my wife is that she was an introvert and I was an extrovert. We would be taking trips and after a while I would say 'honey this is an absolutely wonderful conversation that I am having with myself, would you like to enter in at any point in time?' Then I took a test out of the pastoral counseling center where I found out that she was an introvert and I was an extrovert and why she looked at me the way she did at times and why I was looking at her the way I was at times. Extroverts get energy from being with people and introverts get drained when they're with people. Introverts get energy when they are by themselves and extroverts get bored silly when they are by themselves but they both need that

time. I am out with people all day running with the octane tank on high and I come home and start draining out. My wife has been at home doing this and that and when I get home life is just getting started for her and she's ready to go out that night. I'm ready to slow but then we go out and I start getting energy and she starts getting drained.

The other thing I learned is that extroverts process information externally and introverts process information internally so what I thought was non-communication was her processing and she thought what I was doing was pretty superficial. So introverts have to learn to be patient with extroverts. Extroverts talk out loud to process things but if you'll be quiet long enough it will get better so just let them keep talking. When an introvert talks it will not get better for it's already been processed so you have to respond right then. It's a done deal. Those are things you can learn in the context of courtship and how each other processes life. It's worth doing.

Another thing you need to do is to hear from your family. There have been two exceptions in my life but I don't marry people where the parents don't bless the marriage. The family they are leaving is giving and that there is a desire to make this commitment in and for Christ. So it's important to have that family blessing and affirmation from spiritual leaders. There is a reason the elders do not let the pastors of this staff marry people without them going through pre-marital counseling. This is so they can get insights from spiritual leaders who love them and give them counsel. You need to go to some trusted brothers and sisters who can share some thoughts with you as well.

So why short engagements? Once you commit to each other you want to give yourself to each other. So the window of engagement needs to be short to flee temptation and in order to be faithful to the marriage bed. This way you enter into the relationship before the Lord and into each other's lives. For those who are married I would ask that you make yourself available to these young people who are single as they would look to you to ask you questions and want to spend time with you. Some of these singles are a long way from their fathers and mothers. Some of them come from broken homes. Some of them come from disappointments. Perhaps you may want to think about shepherding or lay counseling just to sharpen your skills to help people through issues like this.

Finally ask God to allow us in a broken world with all of our frailties and inadequacies but with God's great grace to develop marriages out of the body of Christ that present the stability of God's grace and God's Word to a society that is floundering. So that they can see a people who with humbleness but confidence in the Lord show a still more excellent way and that way is in Christ and for Christ. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. I thank You for the Lord Jesus our Redeemer, our Savior and the One who has established His glorious grace from the cross and is risen so that we might live being framed and formed from Your Word in our personal lives, our marriages and in our walk with You, for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.