

Marriage – the Gospel Parable

Introduction

We began this summer by seeking to understand what it means to be male or female. Next we looked at how God’s own relationship with his people sets the framework and parameters for Christian sexual ethics. Following this, we explored the Bible’s teaching on singleness and the road to marriage. Today, we look at the institution of marriage itself – marriage as “living promise.”

Resources Tim and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*
Shaunti and Jeff Feldhahn, *For Men Only* and *For Women Only*
Willard F. Harley, *His Needs, Her Needs: Building a Marriage That Lasts*

1. Marriage is a ‘type’ of the relationship between God and his people, Christ and the church:

- A ‘type’ is a theological term for Old Testament persons, events, and institutions that have God-given, built-in pointers to New Testament realities – especially to Jesus and his work.
- The way various elements of the OT point to Jesus is highlighted throughout the NT:
 - Paul calls Christ “our Passover lamb,” (1 Cor. 5:7).
 - The physical temple is called a “copy and shadow of the heavenly things,” (Heb. 8:5).
 - Paul explicitly teaches that marriage is itself a type – look how much he underlines this:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 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. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 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. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ **This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.** However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Eph. 5:22-33)

- What’s so interesting is that, while most OT types are fulfilled in Xp, marriage remains!
- Remembering this will help us in a number of ways:
 - It teaches us the *parameters* of marriage,
 - It reinforces to us the *limitations* of marriage,
 - It reminds us of the *glories* of marriage,
 - It will therefore help us to *enjoy marriage maximally without falling into idolatry!*

2. Because marriage is a picture of the *gospel*, our “prime directive” in marriage must not be not self-fulfillment, but self-denial and self-giving. This is a great error in modern views of marriage:

Older cultures taught their members to find meaning in duty, by embracing their assigned social roles and carrying them out faithfully. During the Enlightenment, things began to shift. The meaning of life came to be seen as the fruit of the freedom of the individual to choose the life that most fulfills him or her personally. Instead of finding meaning through self-denial, through giving up one’s freedoms, and binding oneself to the duties of marriage and family, marriage was redefined as finding emotional and sexual fulfillment and self-actualization.¹

¹ Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*, 28. (All page references taken from the 2011 hardcover edition.)

3. Because marriage is *only a picture* of the gospel, we must manage our expectations.

- On the one hand, marriage is a glorious help. Our *Confession of Faith* summarizes: “Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with legitimate issue, and of the Church with an holy seed; and for preventing of uncleanness.”²

Note the threefold goodness/helpfulness of marriage given to us by God:

- Personal companionship,
- An appropriate context for sexual intimacy,
- The opportunity for family.

But on the other hand, always remember that your marriage cannot be your Messiah:

- Marriage will *not* cure you of anger, discontentment, or even lust;
- A spouse or children cannot infallibly guide or ultimately fulfill you;
- Therefore, spouse and/or children must not take priority over your relationship with God.
- Warning: ignoring this will twist marriage *from a good thing into a god-thing (idolatry)*!

Modern people make the painfulness of marriage even greater than it has to be, because they crush it under the weight of their almost cosmically impossible expectations... At one time we expected marriage and family to provide love, support, and security. But for meaning in life, hope for the future, moral compass, and self-identity we looked to God and the afterlife. Today, however, our culture has taught us to believe that no one can be sure of those things, not even whether they exist. Therefore... we look to sex and romance to give us what we used to get from faith in God.³

4. Because marriage *involves sinners*, it affords us the opportunity to live out the gospel promises.

- Reality: Marriage exposes our self-centeredness unlike anything else you’ve previously experienced, and it is tempting to blame your spouse. This is what is really happening when people say, “The honeymoon is over.” They’ve realized they married a sinner – and vice-versa. Keller compares it to driving a mack truck over an old bridge: the flaws were there all along, but the new pressure of marriage reveals them unlike any previous experience!
- Risk: By its very nature, marriage brings us into regular, sustained contact with another sinner. Spouses are utterly exposed to one another – not just physically, but also emotionally and spiritually. I know her joys and sorrows, fears and insecurities – and she knows mine. This means that I can hurt her more deeply than anybody else – and she could do the same to me.
- Opportunity: Because marriage is a lifelong commitment, “a mutually binding promise of future love” (Keller, 87), we create a context of underlying *security* that enables true *humility*: we can abandon our pride and confess our sins to one another, knowing that we have *already* promised to extend grace to one another. Thus marriage is a living parable of the gospel.

5. Marriage is a parable of the gospel not just in its *practice*, but also in its *perspective*.

What if... you began your marriage understanding its purpose as a spiritual friendship for the journey to the new creation? What if you expected marriage to be about helping each other grow out of your sins and flaws into the new self God is creating?⁴

- Keller: distinguish between ‘dross’ (the impurities of sin which are temporary) and ‘gold’ (the soul that is being sanctified now, and will be glorified forever):

² *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 24.2.

³ Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*, 41.

⁴ Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*, 136.

If two people learn to make the distinction between the dross and the gold, it can be a great help. Instead of saying, "That's just the way he is, and I hate it," remember the part of him you hate isn't the real, permanent him... It will help a great deal to say, 'I hate it when he does that, but that is not truly him. That is not permanent.' It will help even more to work together to agree on what is the dross and what is the gold in each other so you can say, "This is the real you, this is the real me, this is what God wants us to be, and this is what has got to go. And we've got to work together against it."⁵

- In other words, take what we believe about our own sanctification (1 Cor. 15:49, 2 Cor. 3:18) and believe it about your spouse, "heirs with you of the grace of life," (1 Pet. 3:7).

Helpful Insights from Natural Revelation

Beyond the direct teaching of Scripture, practical research has learned much that is helpful. By its very nature, these things are generalizations – but they have proven true in the experience of many:

- Harley's research as a marriage counselor suggests that husbands and wives have the same ten basic emotion *needs*: admiration, affection, conversation, domestic support, family commitment, financial support, honesty and openness, physical attractiveness, recreational companionship, and sexual fulfillment.
- However, Harley's research also confirmed that men and women have very different emotional *priorities*: "Of the ten basic emotional needs, the five listed as most important by men were usually the five least important for women, and vice versa."⁶
- The research of Feldhahn suggests that the most fundamental need for married men is to feel *respected*: "three out of four men would rather feel unloved than disrespected or inadequate."⁷
- By contrast, the most fundamental need for married women is to feel *loved*: "Four out of five women acknowledged sometimes feeling insecure about their man's love and the relationship... As one woman explained, 'A lot of desperate feelings surface for me when I feel like my husband is displeased with me.'"⁸
- Further, husbands and wives think/process differently because God made our brains differently. Male brains are designed to focus deeply on a small number of things, while female brains are designed to make connections between many things all at once. Think of a computer desktop:
 - A man's brain is like a Windows desktop with only a few windows open at once. He works on each item in turn, preferring to process matters one at a time. He likes to focus on one thing at a time.
 - By contrast, Feldhahn's research showed that for many women, "their thought lives were like busy computers with multiple windows open and running all at once, unwanted pop-ups intruding all the time, and little ability to close out or ignore any of that mental or emotional activity until a more convenient time."⁹

Although these things may not be true of all marriages, they have been true of the present author's – and the respect/love paradigm seems consonant with Paul's concluding admonition (Eph. 5:33).

⁵ Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*, 143-144.

⁶ Harley, *His Needs, Her Needs: Building a Marriage That Lasts*. (Current page # unknown due to new edition.)

⁷ Feldhahn, *For Women Only*, 16. (Page # taken from Kindle edition, so may be approximate to print edition.)

⁸ Feldhahn, *For Men Only*, 21, 24. (See previous comment regarding page numbers.)

⁹ *Ibid.*, 42-47.