

“Marriage Fundamentals”
Genesis 2:18-25
November 9, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

We’re beginning today a brief five week series of sermons on the topic of marriage. I want to begin with a story that illustrates to me the problem we have when sinners marry one another. Of course, that encompasses every single marriage since all the available candidates for bride and groom are sinners. The story I want to start with happened right here in this room this past summer. I was out of town on vacation and received two voice mails from Sue Ann Oaks, our wedding coordinator. There was a wedding scheduled here the coming weekend, and in her first voice mail she said that the couple wanted permission to have their dog in the wedding service, and she was seeking my advice on how to respond to such a request. The second voice mail said that the issue was resolved and that I could ignore the first voice mail. I didn’t hear what happened until I returned home. At the time, we left such decisions up to the Officiating Minister, and this one allowed the dog’s participation. The plan was to have a four-year old ring-bearer lead the dog down the aisle just prior to the bridal march to the front. When the doors were opened, the dog was surprised by the music and all the people and refused to cooperate with this plan. The four-year old boy was completely unable to impose his will upon the beast, and so the two of them just stopped at the head of the aisle. Some family member then decided that the best way to rescue this situation was to unleash the dog and allow the boy to walk down the aisle by himself, while letting the dog roam wherever he wanted. It was not a good decision. For the next thirty minutes or so, the dog walked around the room, sat down for a time at the front and silently dominated the entire wedding service. A service that is supposed to be centered on God and his gift of marriage became centered instead on a dog.

That story becomes to me a metaphor of what happens in our marriages. We enter into marriage expecting much joy and satisfaction from the relationship, only to have a silent intruder come in and hijack the marriage from what we want it to be and what God designed it to be. That silent intruder is our sin, which roams throughout the marriage uncontrolled. As we undertake this study of marriage, we must do so with a plan for how we are going to deal with that intruder. Left unchecked, he will dominate and destroy this most precious gift of marriage. Thankfully, there is a remedy for this problem in the gospel of Christ, and throughout our study, we will continually refer back to that remedy.

Our remedy begins today with an examination of the fundamentals of marriage as expressed in this first marriage. Fundamentals are important. Think of them like buttoning the first button on your shirt when you get dressed. We’ve all had that experience where we use the wrong button hole at the bottom of the shirt, but don’t realize our mistake until we get to the top of the shirt and see that

we are misaligned. The only way to remedy that is to unbutton all the way down and start over again. We're going to look this morning at these fundamental principles of marriage in order to get our marriages properly aligned. I want us to do so by studying three words that are used in this passage. All three express critical truths about marriage.

Before looking at these three words, let me say something about the relevance of this material for the single people among us. It has relevance in at least two ways. First, not all who are now single will stay that way, and a study of biblical marriage will help prepare you for marriage in a couple of ways. It will help you select a marriage partner by letting you know what God requires in this area, and it will help you prepare for such a marriage yourself. A study of marriage also has relevance for singles who will never marry because we all have married people we love. And since marriage is such a significant part of the lives of those you love, you will love them better by knowing what the Bible says about this. Our next two sermons will look at what a single man, the Apostle Paul, taught about marriage. You don't have to be married to minister to married people. So let's look now at these marriage fundamentals as we study our three important words.

I. Helper

The very first words in the Bible on the topic of marriage come from the mouth of God. **“It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him”** (2:18). God's assessment that something in his creation is not good is striking after his many favorable assessments in chapter 1. Like a highly skilled craftsman stepping back to admire his work, we read several times in chapter 1 that **“God saw that it was good.”** For the first time now God sees something he has made and says that it is not good. God will not let this less than good situation persist, and he sets about to correct it by making a wife for Adam. It is certainly significant that the first word used in the Bible for the marital partner is this word “helper.” He doesn't use the word “lover” or “companion” or any number of other appropriate words. The wife was created to be a helper to her husband.

It is important that we understand what this word means. All the commentators agree that our English translation is a bit weak. When we hear the word “helper” we think of an assistant, someone to be ordered around by the one in charge. That's not the idea here. The Hebrew word, *ezer*, is used 19 times in the Old Testament, and sixteen of those times it is used of God as our helper. One of its common uses, especially in the Psalms, is of God's help in a military context. That has led David Clyde Jones to suggest the stronger word “rescuer.” The woman was created to rescue her husband. That begs an important question. “From what was the woman designed to rescue her husband?” I see in the text indications of two areas where the wife rescues her husband: from loneliness and from himself.

Let's look at the first of these rescues under this point, and the second one with the next point. It is clear that one of God's designs concerning marriage is that it is to deliver from loneliness. The text is put together in such a way to highlight this feature. Notice how verse 19 seems at first to be a changing of the subject from marriage to the naming of the animals. But the end of verse 21 makes a connection between the animal naming and marriage when it adds that among all these animals **"there was not found a helper fit for him."** God is working to prepare Adam to appreciate the gift of a wife. Adam needs to realize what God already knows, that it is not good for him to be alone. So he brings all the animals before him, a process that must have taken quite some time, in order for Adam to realize that none of them are suitable. But when God creates a wife, Adam immediately recognizes her suitability to him, which leads to the first human poetry. **"This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh"** (v. 23).

Let's pause for an application before moving to our next point. God has designed marriage for the mutual help of one another. The church has long seen mutual help as one of the three purposes of marriage, the other two being procreation and purity. So the help goes not just from the wife to the husband, but in the other direction as well. If you are married, God has come to your aid in the form of the husband or wife he has given you. One of the ways sin roams through our marriages, just like that dog roamed through the wedding this summer, is by convincing us that the spouse God has given us is our enemy instead of our helper. When you stop believing that your spouse is your helper, one of two things will happen. You will merely tolerate the other person in a condescending way, or your attitude may grow into a more active hatred. But if you believe that God has given you a rescuer in your spouse, you will cherish him or her. And if you think that if I only knew your spouse better I would not suggest that they are a helper of any type, then you need another helper. You need the one who says that he is **"an ever-present help"** (Psalm 46:1). Ask him to give you the eyes to see how your spouse is designed by him to be your rescuer.

II. Fit

God says of this helper he designed that she is **"fit for him."** Other translations say "suitable." In the Hebrew it's a phrase that reads literally "like opposite him" in the sense of matching him. The idea is that they are designed to fit together like one piece of a puzzle fits its matching piece. They are different, but different in a complementary way. These differences do include the different gender roles of a marriage. We're going to look at that next week when we explore this idea of complementary gender roles rather than a pure egalitarianism. Let's talk about another type of difference here, the differences that exist in varying degrees between any two people who come together to form a deep relationship. There are differences in personality, in background, in abilities and preferences. God is the author of these differences, and they exist to one degree or another in all marriages. God knows what we need in a spouse, and he has made our spouse, because of these differences, uniquely suited to be our helper.

Let me give an example from my own marriage. I can summarize our differences by saying that I am two-dimensional and Wendy is three-dimensional. I see things very concretely while she sees them artistically and with depth. One of the tensions this difference caused early in our marriage concerned the different standards we had for keeping our checkbook. I have always thought it appropriate to be very precise and concrete in that area, while Wendy just doesn't prefer such precision for herself. I discovered right after we got married that she had never balanced her checkbook. She would just take her monthly bank statement and write in her checkbook ledger whatever balance the bank indicated as her ending balance, and then leave a cushion of a hundred dollars or so as added insurance against bouncing checks. I must concede that her system worked well for her, since she never bounced any checks, but it would have driven me crazy. So from the very beginning of our marriage, I took over the money management duties. But it didn't take long for our differences to surface. I can remember sitting in our apartment once trying to balance our checkbook and being frustrated with Wendy's artistic and creative way of entering the information for the checks she had written. After encountering another inaccuracy in one of her entries, I can remember flinging a pencil across the room in frustration. Do you know what? Over the twenty-eight years of our marriage, she still doesn't prefer precision, and I still do. But we have learned to value these differences. She loves me and tries very hard to get things right when making entries in her checkbook register. I don't know if she's more successful than she was 28 years ago, but I can see that she is trying. And I know that I have changed. I don't throw pencils across the room any more. I have learned not to be so bothered about this, though it still bugs me just a little. What has helped me put this in proper perspective is the simple realization of how much my life has been enriched by the ways in which my wife is different from me. She has brought beauty into my life, not only in our house, but also in my relationships with others. She makes things fun, and any of you who know her have no trouble seeing how she brings fun into my life and into the lives of so many others. I am a better man for being married to her, and much of that is due to the areas where we are different.

Again, sin roams through our marriages turning these differences into negatives instead of positives. We feel threatened by the differences instead of welcoming them as an enriching part of marriage. We need God's help in this area too.

III. Hold Fast

The last word I want us to look at this morning is the word "hold fast" or "cleave" in some older translations. **"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife"** (v. 24). This word speaks of committed love. It could be translated literally, "and sticks to his wife." Marriage is when you decide to stick to someone. A Canaanite by the name of Shechem loved Dinah,

the daughter of Jacob. His love is described with this same word: **“his soul stuck to Dinah”** (Gen. 34:3). It’s a word that indicates both passion and commitment.

Such love requires a leaving, as when the man is told to leave his father and his mother. In such a family-centered culture as Old Testament Judaism, such leaving is no small thing. This doesn’t mean that when a person gets married he is to abandon his parents and pretend they don’t exist. The Bible calls us all the days of our lives to honor our parents, even after we ourselves get married. But this verse does mean that marriage requires a change in one’s core loyalty. I like what Mike Mason says about this: “Marriage is to human relations what monotheism is to theology. It is a decision to put all the eggs in one basket, to go for broke, to bet all of the marbles (*The Mystery of Marriage*, p. 81).

This leaving means more than having a different address than your parents after you get married. It is speaking of something deeper, the setting aside of all the loyalties of the past in order to establish one big new one. It means that a husband can no longer live to prove to his parents that he is successful, because that would require that his ultimate loyalty be to them instead of to his wife. It means that the wife cannot have children in order to gain her parents’ blessing for giving them grandchildren. It also means that friends cannot command our ultimate loyalty, because that loyalty lies properly with one’s spouse.

Again, sin roams around in this area of our marriages as well. Instead of giving ourselves completely and holding fast to another, we tend because of sin to let go and give up. We always let go on the inside before letting go on the outside in the form of divorce. That interior letting go occurs when we give up hope and start just going through the motions of a marriage. Again, we need God’s help if we are not to do this.

CONCLUSION:

Have you noticed a theme through these three points? The theme is that our big problem in marriage is our own sin. It is our sin that makes us want to view our spouse as an enemy instead of a helper, that makes us feel threatened by differences instead of built up and that makes us want to let go instead of hold fast. Sin does indeed roam through our marriages bringing destruction. In his book *When Sinners Say I Do*, Dave Harvey asks, “What if you abandoned the idea that the problems and weaknesses in your marriage are caused by a lack of information, dedication, or communication? What if you saw your problems as they truly are: caused by a war within your own heart?” (p. 29). The only hope for our marriages is that we begin to see that sin is our enemy and Jesus is our husband. He has come to help us and has loved us with such a deep commitment and passion that he has died in order to secure our forgiveness and healing. Our need is to trust him as our ever-present help.