

Introduction

Two years ago along with my wife and daughter, I went down to Louisville, KY to officiate at the wedding of my son Philip and his wife, Ellie. That day was filled with great joy and celebration. It took me back in mind to the days when Melissa and I, just married, were anticipating having children. We began praying consistently for two things for our children before they were even conceived. We prayed for their salvation. And we prayed for their future mate.

The most important aspect of anyone's life is whether they are in right standing with God, whether they have eternal life. And number two, if they marry, it is who they marry. So once Philip Layne turned from sin and trusted Jesus Christ to save him from his sins, our prayers for him were significantly focused on his future bride. So two years ago was a kind of culmination. In hindsight we could see how his life was moving forward all those years to that very important moment in his life.

Well, here we are in the month of December, moving ever closer to the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. And in our sermons this month we are highlighting that for which Christ was born. As the Christmas carol repeats, "Christ was born for this." And so far we have looked at the fact that Christ was born to live and that Christ was born to die. This morning I want you to see Christmas from a little bit different perspective. As sure as Christ was born to live and to die, he was also born to marry. The trajectory of his life through his ministry, his death, and his resurrection culminates in his marriage. His marriage is still future, but a part of that for which he was born is to be united to his bride. This fact is highlighted in several passages in the Bible, but the one I want to focus on this morning is Ephesians 5:22-33.

[Read Text and Pray]

This text written by the Apostle Paul is intriguing. Tightly woven together here are two portraits. On the one hand we observe the ideal portrait of a

married couple. We observe instructions regarding how the husband and the wife are to relate to one another in marriage. And on the other hand we observe a portrait of Jesus and the church. The two portraits illustrate each other. The portrait of the relationship between Christ and the Church is God's model for how husbands and wives in earthly marriages are to relate to one another. At the same time the portrait of the earthly husband-wife relationship depicts what Paul calls a profound mystery. As the husband and wife are joined together and become one flesh, they provide a living presentation to the world of the consummate union of all unions, the marital union of Jesus Christ and his church. It is a union for which she was chosen and a union for which he was born. I want us to take a look at both of these portraits this morning.

We will start with . . .

I. The Portrait of the Earthly Marriage

The strokes with which Paul paints the portrait of earthly marriage are the directives he gives to wives and husbands. He first addresses wives and then moves to husbands.

A. The word to wives is (gasp!) submit. It is a respectful submission that Paul is talking about. There at the end of the chapter in verse 33 he says, "Let the wife see to it that she respects her husband." And here in verse 22, the model for how she submits to her husband is as she submits to the Lord.

I am well aware that some of you may be struggling to breathe right now. "Did you just say the "S" word? Submit? But surely you don't agree. Do you?" Here is the place where if you join the chorus of contemporary culture, you become completely appalled and pronounce the Apostle Paul to be a misogynist and the Bible to be completely outdated.

But I will not join that chorus, and I will not stoop to a low opinion of the Bible. Submit is what it says. Respect is what it commands. God's blueprint for marriage involves one who is head and another who is helper. And it is not a portrait of oppression and domination. When the husband is who this text says he should be, the submission of which this text speaks is a glad surrender. It does not mean losing one's identity but finding that

identity in the context of a pair of people uniquely fitted for one another. The pair does not strive against one another in selfish ambition. It is not her vs. him. Rather there is a mutual striving together for the unity God brought them together to be. She works to be respectful. She works to submit to and flourish under his leadership.

B. Meanwhile the word to husbands should actually be no less appalling than the idea of respectful submission. It is the word love. Husbands, love your wives. No less than four times in the short span of this passage Paul commands and exhorts husbands to love their wives.

Why do I say it should be no less appalling than to submit? It is because of the kind of love Paul is talking about. You see, people in our time hear the word "love" and they think it is a feeling. It is how you feel when you are getting something you want. Basically it is selfishness. I love what makes me happy as long as it makes me happy. I treasure what makes me feel good. The world thinks what Paul is telling husbands to do is be glad they have subservient wives. But that could not be further from what Paul is talking about here.

1. Who is the model for how husbands are supposed to love? It is Jesus Christ. "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church."

2. What does love like this do? It gives. In fact it gives up itself. Jesus' love for the church led him to give himself up for the church.

3. For what purpose does it give itself? For the purpose of doing good for the one it loves. The good Jesus does for the church is that he saves her; sets her apart; he washes her; he presents her in absolute beauty without spot or wrinkle; he nourishes and cherishes her; and he becomes one with her.

Paul is talking about a love that is not first interested in itself. Its chief interest is in doing good to another. This love is the opposite of what most people bring to their marriages in our culture. And if they really understood what love is, they would be just as aghast at love as they are with submission.

The problem with most marriages in today's world is selfishness. Selfishness is what causes people to be outraged at the idea of respectful submission. And selfishness is what stands between people and real love. Our lives revolve around ourselves, and as soon as we stop getting what we got into the marriage to get, we want out or we give up and decide that we will just have to get what we want somewhere else.

That is not the portrait Paul is painting here. One thing seems wrong because we miss the rest of the portrait. Paul's, indeed God's, portrait of marriage is of two self-less people living in the interest of each other. In the biblical portrait of marriage, you do not go into marriage to get. Rather you go into marriage to give. And when you go into it that way, you get far and away more than you ever would have otherwise.

C. So Jo and Danny, having talked with you about these things and having been assured that this is the way you are looking to your marriage, I have high, high hopes for you. I have high hopes for your joy, for your witness, and for the good God is going to do through you. I have high hopes for the portrait your marriage will painting before the world to point them to the yet consummate marriage of Jesus and his church.

But the model here is not just for Danny and Jo. It is for all of us who are married and who will be married. I am sure that there are marriages of every condition in this room this morning. Some happy and fulfilled, some sad and empty, some full of life and some on life support, some beautiful examples of serving and some grotesque examples of selfishness.

Listen. God does not give out marriage guidelines for misery but for joy and beauty. When he prescribes what marriage should be, it is for our joy and his glory. Follow him and his way.

II. The Portrait of the Heavenly Marriage

A. In verse 32, Paul calls this heavenly marriage a profound mystery. We tend to understand the word mystery as something that is hard to figure out. That is not the usual sense of the word in the Bible. Instead it refers to something that was hidden but has now been uncovered or revealed. It has now been made clear that earthly human marriage actually points to a

greater more wonderful marriage. The one-flesh unity of earthly marriage reveals to us the nature of the relationship of Jesus Christ with his people. And it is profound. It is great. It is wonderful! And Christ was born for this.

B. If we had time I would open up the Bible to Genesis and start showing you how two becoming one runs all the way from creation to consummation, from the first to the last page of the Bible. Instead I am going to show you from this passage how this profound marriage of Jesus is tied to his birth and his purpose for coming. So earlier this morning we read from Matthew 1 how the angel commanded Joseph to name his son Jesus. The reason was given. "For he shall save his people from their sins." Christ was born to save his people from their sin. He was born to remove the hostility that exists between God and those he will save by suffering for that hostility in their place. Now if you will look with me at verse 23, we will see Paul's explanation for why wives are to submit to their husbands as to the Lord. It is because the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the church. And here is what I want you especially to see. "He is himself its Savior."

Joseph was told, you shall call his name Jesus for he shall save his people from their sins. Who are his people? Who are the people he saves? That body of people is one unit called the church. The word means assembly. The church is the name of the group of people Jesus saves. This church is to Jesus what a wife is to her earthly husband. The two will become one flesh. The mystery is profound. It refers to the Christ and the church.

Jesus Christ was born to save his people. His people constitute his church. How does he save her? Look at verse 25. "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her in order to set her apart from sin and present her as a beautiful bride to himself." It was through his death that she has been beautified. It is through the selfless sacrifice of himself that her sins, which were as scarlet red, have become white as snow. It is through his work that the wrinkles and spots and blemishes of her sins have been removed. God made him who knew no sin to be sin so that in him she might become the righteousness of God.

C. I have to take you now to the book of Revelation. The last book of the Bible points us to the consummation of the ages. In chapter 19 heaven is abuzz! It is abuzz because God has brought judgment on the earth. But it is also abuzz because a wedding is about to take place. Are you excited about this wedding today? Man, I am. I am excited for Danny and Jo. I am happy for them and happy to see them being joined together both in step with Jesus. But our excitement is nothing compared to that in heaven when the wedding of the ages comes about. Listen.

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,

Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage supper of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure."

Then two chapters over in Revelation 21 we get another glimpse of the Bride.

Then came one of the seven angels . . . and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, like a most rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal.

The bride of the Lamb is a city of people redeemed by his blood, saved because he laid down his life, justified because his righteousness is substituted for her sin. She is now being made ready for him. The New Heavens and New Earth are the eternal honeymoon for the Groom Jesus and his Bride the Church.

D. I have an important couple of facts for you.

1. You need this relationship with Christ. Everyone needs this connection to Jesus. God is holy and pure and righteous. But we have stained our lives and our hearts with rebellion against him. All we have to do is look at

the law of God. It requires the worship of the one true God and him alone. It forbids false views of God. It forbids lying, hate, adultery, stealing, even desiring what belongs to others. Study God's commandments carefully and you will see that you as well as everyone else has sinned and falls short of the glory of God. Those sins stain your garments before a God whose standard is perfection and complete purity. Those sins have made a separation between you and God. Those sins require divine justice. The wages of sin is death.

You need forgiveness. You need cleansing. You need what only Jesus can provide. The free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ. To receive that gift all you have to do is take it. It's like the water of a fountain. Do you want it? Come and drink! You take the gift of eternal life by turning from sin and simply trusting in Jesus. "If anyone wishes to come after me," said Jesus, "let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." "What must I do to be saved," said the jailer to Paul, and Paul said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved." So see, this is the relationship everyone needs. Everyone without it will perish eternally under the just judgment of God.

2. The marriage relationship between Christ and his bride is exclusive. Coming to Jesus means forsaking all others. He is the only savior there is. He said of himself, "I am the Way the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father but through me." Listen, you cannot be accept with God in any way other than trusting in Christ alone. Peter preached about Jesus in Acts 4 saying: there is salvation in no one else for there is no other name that as been given among men by which we must be saved.

Conclusion

I close with this. Weddings are the culmination of a developing relationship. Typically in our culture it goes like this. A man and a woman meet. They get to know each other. They begin enjoying each other and they begin thinking how great it would be not to have to say good-bye and leave one another for the night. Attraction develops into longing and enjoyment. Hopefully they begin to think, not just I'd like to be with this person for the rest of my life, but I would like to spend my life serving this person. But for there to be a wedding, there must be a day of proposal. He says to her

"will you marry me?" Sometimes the guys are so slow that she says it. But someone has to propose and the other has to say yes. The wedding day is a day of pledge. Forsaking all others, will you take him? Forsaking all others, will you take her?

Responding to the greatest wedding invitation ever is sorta like that. Jesus says, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened and I will give you rest." If you look to the end of the book of Revelation, the Bride herself calls out with the Spirit saying, "Come! . . . Let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price."

Will you come? Will you come to Jesus? Will you trust him? Will deny yourself and take up your cross and follow him? Do not refuse the most gracious invitation ever given. Turn to Christ. Believe in Him. Become a part of his bride. Don't miss the greatest wedding ever. Christ was born for this.