



LOVE, GRACE AND MARRIAGE

SERIES: FOUNDATION STONES

Genesis 2:18–25

7th Message

John Hanneman

August 16, 2015

Love, Grace, and Marriage

Today I want to talk about marriage. And as I approach this topic I do so with fear and trembling because I am no expert. When Liz had “forever” engraved on my wedding ring and put it on my finger over 40 years ago, neither one of us had any idea of what we were getting into. Some days we still shake our heads and wonder.

We did not put marriage on the summer schedule because of recent court decisions regarding same-sex marriage. Rather the motivation arose out of a concern for marriage. Marriage is under attack in many ways. Marriage needs to be upheld. Marriages need encouragement and that is what I hope the Lord will do today.

In talking about marriage I realize that many of you may not be married for a variety of reasons. I want you to know that I am aware of that and don't want you to feel isolated or in a different category. I want you realize that many of the things I will say apply to you as well as you live in various relationships. Marriage is just one of the many relationships we have. It is just that marriage is a more intensified arena to work out our life in Christ.

The State of Marriage Today

What is the state of marriage in our world today? Marriage is in a steady decline. In his book, *The Meaning of Marriage*, Tim Keller, writing in 2011, gives some statistics regarding the current state of marriage:

The divorce rate is nearly twice the rate it was in 1960. In 1970, 89 percent of all births were to married parents, but today only 60 percent are. Most tellingly, over 72 percent of American adults were married in 1960, but only 50 percent were in 2008.¹

Christians are not exempt from this downward trend. Sadly the church reflects the culture.

In our world today married people face greater financial pressures, especially here in the Bay Area. This often requires both husbands and wives to make significant money, even when they start having children. Many of you younger people know this pressure. There was financial pressure when Liz and I got married in 1974 but things now seem to be intensified.

Today, young people must deal with confusion regarding sexual identity and same-sex marriage. We might be torn between what the Bible says and our loyalty to friends or family members. As Christians we can't ignore this or think it will go away. This is the way in which the world is heading. As Christians we need clear thinking and need to accept the fact that the world will operate differently from what we might desire.

People seem to be more cautious and more afraid of getting married. Growing up in a working class family I had no fear of responsibility. But today many shrink back at the prospect of commitment and responsibility. People bury emotions, resist attachments and say, “I don't want to be responsible for another person.” This can be due to personal experience, background, or a friend's experience. More and more young

people grow up in broken or unhealthy home environments and have a negative outlook on marriage.

The current trend is for people to marry older. Historically people used to get married at a much earlier age and still do in most parts of the world. But today people are waiting until they get settled, buy a house, and become financially secure. This has something to do with increased age of maturity in the U.S., especially the American male.

Finally there is the focus on self-fulfillment. People are trying to find the ideal person, someone who will be low maintenance and independent. The focus for many is on individual fulfillment and gratification. Tim Keller writes:

Marriage used to be a public institution for the common good, and now it is a private arrangement for the satisfaction of the individuals. Marriage used to be about us, but now it is about me.²

My observation is that more and more young married couples seem to be struggling in their marriages. Maybe the struggles have always been there, but today they are more visible. And this breaks my heart. Yet despite all these trends and all the obstacles people still want to get married. Most people have this desire. In general people do not want to live alone but rather want a companion for life.

The Bible and Marriage

What does the Bible say about marriage? When you think about it, it really doesn't say as much as we might expect even though the creation of man and woman and the joining of the two appears very early in the biblical record. Most of what it says is general rather than specific. God doesn't give us a rulebook on marriage, which is true for most things in life. But what do we know?

We know that marriage is part of God's good creation and is to be received as his gift. God made male and female, he created the institution of marriage. It is holy and sacred.

We know that marriage is affected by the results of sin, “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16 ESV). The fall of mankind introduced tension between husbands and wives and this is reflected between men and women in general. There is the struggle for dominance, control, and power. There is distrust and fear of vulnerability.

We know that marriage is not the ultimate goal in life. In the new heavens and new earth there will be no marriage as Jesus indicated:

The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. (Luke 20:34–35 ESV).

One day the church will be the beloved bride of our husband, the Lord Jesus. The shadow will give way to the reality. There will be a great wedding banquet with the finest wines and God will swallow up death forever (Is. 25:6–8). This tells us that marriage points to something greater that is to come.

We know that God is not excited about divorce and that is an understatement. God is for marriage. Jesus makes allowance for divorce in the case of adultery but that is not his first choice. It seems there is more to be gained by staying in a marriage than by ejecting and searching for someone else who will meet all of our criteria. Now if you have suffered through a divorce I want to assure you that God is a healing and redeeming God.

We know that in three New Testament letters (Eph. 5, Col. 3, 1 Peter 3) there is the mention of headship and submission by Paul and Peter as they share how men and women are to relate in marriage. This is a thorny issue, an area of great debate in the church. I am not going to talk about this today. Bernard and Sharon talked on this topic three summers ago in our Colossian series and you can find their messages on our website. But what I will say is that many people seek to define hard and fast rules for marriage based on headship and submission and that can be dangerous. If specific guidelines for submission and headship were helpful, marriages in the church would be much more healthy.

But perhaps the most important thing that the Bible says about marriage is that it is a covenant not a business transaction. Marriage is a microcosm, a picture, a window, a metaphor of two other relationships we find in the Bible—the relationship between God and Israel in the Old Testament and Christ and the church in the New Testament.

In the Old Testament God declares that he is a husband to his people Israel. We see this in Hosea, chapter 2:

And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD.” (Hos 2:19–20 ESV).

Our call to worship this morning from Psalm 25 reflects these same characteristics of God to his people: mercy, steadfast love, faithfulness, etc.

And then in the New Testament marriage is used to reflect the relationship between Christ and the church:

“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. (Eph. 5:31–32 ESV).

Paul says that the relationship between Christ and the church as well as the relationship between a husband and wife is a great mystery, and indeed it is.

Both old and new testaments cast God/Christ as a husband who relates to his people through covenant. Covenant means that marriage is not based on performance or conditions. It means a pledge or vow to be faithful through all seasons of life, not just in the present but also in the future. This is what gives security to marriage. There are no exchanges or returns. Covenant means commitment, sacrifice, surrender, and dying to self-interest.

Wendell Berry sheds light on the importance of community to marriage:

They say their vows to the community as much as to one another, and the community gathers around them to hear and to wish them well, on their behalf and its own. It gathers around them because it understands how necessary, how joyful, and how fearful this joining is.³

The point I want to make is that the Bible doesn't give us a rulebook. What makes marriage work is the broader implications of the gospel. Every marriage is unique and in every marriage husbands and wives function based on their specific talents, gifting, and personalities. Every couple must discover their own rhythm rather than looking to rules or

conforming to a one-size-fits-all solution, applying the greater amount of material on relationships in general to their marriage. Neither Liz nor I could enforce our rhythms on each other but rather we had to learn the unique rhythm for our lives, to learn how to dance together.

The Reality of Marriage

But marriage is not easy. Life is hard, singleness is hard, marriage is hard, and old age is hard. Every season of life has its obstacles.

I have some dear friends that I married almost thirty years ago. Lynn and Jeff have maintained a graph of their ups and downs over the years. On the vertical axis is happy and sad and on the horizontal axis is the year. When they met their lives were totally in sync. They were happy at the same time and sad at the same time. However, when they got married everything changed. When one was up the other was down and vice versa. Their emotional states fluctuated over the years and seldom were they in sync. Lynn and Jeff asked Liz and I years ago when marriage starts to get good. We told them after about 20 years. Why is marriage so hard?

The reality is that marriage exposes many things about yourself and your spouse. It exposes all of our flaws, weaknesses, and selfishness; the unseen inner person. It reveals how self-centered we are. Our self-interest is magnified by our wounds and hurts received from parents, family members, and past relationships. Marriage can reveal fear, pride, inflexibility, harshness, undisciplined, unreliability, disorganized, perfectionism, impatience, irritability, independence, and problems with money. These things were hidden during courtship. We can hide a lot of things from people but we can't hide in marriage. Marriage is like a mirror that reveals who we really are.

Our natural reaction to this is that we want our spouse to change but we don't see the need for us to change. We often think that our spouse's selfishness is more serious than our own. We do not want to give up our own selfish interests and plans for happiness.

The reality is that we don't know the person we marry very well. We fall in love. Sometimes we fall in love with the idea of love. As Tim Keller says in this book, *The Meaning of Marriage*, we marry a stranger. When we realize this we often think that we married the wrong person and there is someone out there who is the right person.

Duke university ethics professor Stanley Hauerwas says,

The assumption is that there is someone just right for us to marry and that if we look closely enough we will find the right person...It fails to appreciate the fact that we always marry the wrong person... we are not the same person after we have entered it (marriage)... the primary problem is learning how to love and care for the stranger to whom you find yourself married.⁴

How many of you have thought that you had married the wrong person? The reality is that we do marry a stranger and marriage involves a lifetime of learning about both ourselves and the stranger we married. The joy and adventure of marriage is discovery and exploration.

The reality is that somewhere along the line we realize the person we marry doesn't meet all of our expectations and marriage won't fulfill us. Again we think we might have married the wrong person and that there is someone out there who can meet all of needs. What we fail to realize is that no one can meet our expectations or fulfill us fully. Our desire for God is always greater than what we receive from other people, even our spouse. William Butler Yeats wrote a poem I learned long ago that ends with this stanza:

I heard an old religious man
But yesternight declare
That he had found a text to prove
That only God my dear,

Could love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair.⁵

The reality of marriage is that you will hurt each other. You will cause each other pain. This usually isn't intentional but it will happen as we try to satisfy our self-interests or seek to change one another. We express frustrations, demonstrate anger, and use hurtful words.

The reality is that love in marriage does not come as naturally as when you first met. When we first meet someone it is so easy. We want to be with this person constantly. We talk on the phone late into the evening. We buy little presents frequently. But when we get married the feelings ebb and flow. Again, we might think we married the wrong person. Marriage does include deep emotions, but the relationship cannot be based on these feelings.

Finally, the reality is that marriage challenges us to make decisions that we don't want to make. Will we accept this person with all of their flaws? Are we all in or are we holding back our love and service? Will we forgive the hurt that our spouse has caused? Will we give up our expectations and look to God to fulfill our deepest longings? Will we surrender ourselves to what is rather than what is not? All of these questions have great significance for our marriage. But they also have significance for our spiritual life because our answers can soften and attune our hearts for all of our relationships. If you are single you still have to ask yourself these questions.

What question is God asking you right now? What is he asking you to surrender in your marriage or in another relationship? After over forty years of marriage I can tell you that the questions don't stop coming.

The Goals of Marriage

So with all these difficulties, what should we strive and hope for in our marriages? If marriage will not completely fulfill us, if we will experience some hurt, and if we won't always feel in love then what is our goal?

The goal of marriage is not social status, financial security, personal fulfillment or great sex. Marriage is not the end—it is the means for something greater. Let me suggest three goals we find in the Scriptures.

The first goal is oneness, union, and intimacy. The Bible is very clear that when two people marry they are to leave and cleave and become one flesh. Separated during creation, man and woman are now united. Two people are “intermingled, scrambled, and fused”⁶ Oneness is not easy or quick but in the long run it “decenters the self . . . leads you out of your natural state of self-love”⁷ David Brooks writes: “

A successful marriage is a fifty-year conversation getting ever closer to that melding of mind and heart. Love expresses itself in shared smiles and shared tears and ends with the statement, ‘Love you? I am you’⁸

The reason why oneness is so important is because of what I said earlier about covenant and what it means. The covenant of marriage is to typify and resemble the relationship between God and his people. And the goal of both relationships is the same—union and intimacy that grows deeper with time. Therefore there is a spiritual component to marriage that points us to God. We become more spiritually aware.

Again David Brooks writes: “Love provides a glimpse of some realm beyond the edge of what we know . . . it enlarges the heart . . . Love is like a plow that opens up hard ground and allows things to grow”⁹

Marriage ennobles, transforms, and opens up the greater realities of our relationship with God. Marriage is a window through which we can see and understand God more clearly.

When I think of oneness with Liz I think of a moment during the reception of my first daughter's wedding. As the first song began to play Liz and I were on opposite ends of the room. We looked at each other at the same time and smiled, knowing exactly what each other was feeling because of our shared life.

Now even if we are not married we can still experience oneness with God and oneness in Christian community and look forward to the day of our marriage to Christ. That might not be that comforting, but we have to remember that marriage is not the ultimate goal.

The second goal is spiritual friendship. Married couples not only live face to face as lovers but also side by side as friends, helping each other grow in Christ. Marriage is to be a supportive relationship where we can help each other grow to spiritual maturity. When we see things about ourselves and our spouse that marriage reveals we seek to help each other grow spiritually rather than change each other. Rather than fleeing, withdrawing, fighting, thinking there is someone better, we are committed not just to growing old together but growing in Christ together.

The temptation is to marry based on attraction, good looks, charismatic personality, or being overwhelmed with someone loving us. But we would be wise to marry someone with whom we are good friends. Friendship will yield the fruit of encouraging spiritual growth. Of course we have other spiritually encouraging friends as well.

Marriage is a commitment to a shared life in Christ. Couples share burdens and struggles and help each other through them. Every couple has a unique history. Hopefully you can reach the point in your marriage, usually not at the outset, where you can encourage one another, point each other to Christ, and pray for one another continually. A husband and wife being conformed to Christ and living out the life of Jesus will have a healthy marriage.

Liz told me yesterday that she has been praying for me every night. When I asked her what she meant, she said that she was praying that God would help her have more love for me so that she could be kinder, more understanding, and patient. She also said that praying was changing her. In other words our relationship has prompted the desire for spiritual growth.

Finally marriage sends off an aroma to the world. As couples emulate Christ and the church in their marriage they reflect God's grace and love to a world that is hostile to Jesus and Christianity. As couples grow in oneness others can see the beauty of how we relate to our spouse. People want to know us better and spend time with us. They don't see perfection but yielding to one another, dealing with issues in healthy ways, and offering forgiveness freely.

When Peter and Paul write about headship and submission they are concerned, at least partly, for the gospel. They wanted to maintain the cultural norms of the day, as was the case with slavery, because the attempt to change the social norms of the household codes would cast a disparaging perception on the gospel. Thus the exhortation for wives to submit maintained the status quo. The exhortation for slaves to obey their masters maintained the status quo. Neither Peter nor Paul was seeking to assert our freedom in Christ in order to change society at this point in history. However, the exhortation for husbands to love their wives like Christ and to live with their wives in an understanding way as a weaker vessel were absolutely revolutionary for the day. The most important thing for these apostles was the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What if the most important thing about your marriage (and your life in general) is to be a witness for Jesus? What if the most important thing in your life was to reflect God's love, mercy, and compassion to the world? How would that change your marriage? How would that

change your life? These questions give me pause because I realize that our marriage is a high calling to represent Jesus to the world.

These goals are not achieved quickly. These are the long-term things we work for. Many people expect instant success and happiness but marriage is a marathon, not a sprint. And like our life in Christ, marriage is a long obedience in the same direction.

The Power of Truth and Grace

How can we realize these goals? There are many helpful things we can do—attend workshops, get counseling, learn more about communication and conflict resolution. And we should do these things. But these things alone will not suffice. What we need to employ is the power of truth and grace in our marriage. This is true for any relationship. This is what characterized Jesus as we read in John’s gospel: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14 ESV).

Truth is powerful. Living in truth means honesty, openness, vulnerability, listening, and acceptance. Living in the truth of reality, aligning ourselves with God’s greater purposes.

“Love depends on the willingness of each person to be vulnerable and it deepens that vulnerability. It works because each person exposes their nakedness and the other rushes to meet it. ‘You will be loved the day when you will be able to show your weakness without the person using it to assert his strength,’ the Italian novelist Cesar Pavese wrote.”¹⁰

David Benner writes:

Genuine intimacy comes only when that stranger is welcomed and embraced in his or her uniqueness and difference from us. Deep friendship involves befriending not just what the other person has in common with us but the important ways in which she or he is and will always be different from us. It means cherishing the otherness of the other, welcoming and honoring the stranger in the friend or intimate.¹¹

Benner is not talking about marriage here but all of our relationships, marriage simply being one of them. We embrace the other person as one created in the image of God. As Martin Buber says we are to have “I-Thou” relationships not “I-it” relationships. We welcome and cherish the strangers in our life. Living in truth will set us free from managing, controlling, manipulating, and putting others in boxes and categories.

And then grace. We need to know the power of grace in our marriages. As the old adage goes, love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage. My message title is Love, Grace, and Marriage. We need grace in the middle, miles and miles of grace.

What is grace? Grace is unmerited, unearned, undeserved favor. Grace is what we receive from God through Christ, his unmerited and undeserved favor. We do not earn a relationship with God. But as we sang this morning, God’s love ran red on the cross and our sins washed white. God keeps covenant with his people and has been faithful to do what he said he would do from the beginning of time. And if our marriages are to reflect the relationship of Christ and the church it is imperative that we receive grace from God so that we can offer it to our spouse. And sometimes the hardest person to give grace to is the person we are married to.

When I think of grace I think of forgiveness, forbearance, kindness, loyal love, faithfulness, compassion, all the qualities that God demonstrates in his covenant with us. And now we are to show this same grace to our spouse. Grace means that we don’t keep a balance sheet. There is no balance sheet in heaven. God doesn’t keep a list of our assets and liabilities. As we sang this morning, Christ is enough. On the asset side of the column is only Christ and the liability side of the ledger is blank. And grace expands with use. The more we give, the greater our capacity to give because it is so delightful to pour out on others what we have received from God. As Shakespeare wrote in *Romeo and Juliet*: “The more I give to thee/The more I have, for both are infinite. Liz said something else to me the other day. She told me I was kind to her. I couldn’t believe my ears because I didn’t start out kind. I started out anything but kind. But if by God’s grace I have some hint of kindness it means that I am growing to be more like Jesus somehow. Somehow my natural man is being transformed. What Liz said was such an encouragement to continue to be kind because in her comments I realized that grace has a great impact not just in marriage but also with everybody.

At the end of my marriage ceremony, after a couple have shared their vows and been pronounced husband and wife, I give them this exhortation:

I wish I could promise you that the vows you have spoken will be easy to keep, but I can’t. I wish I could promise you a smooth, problem-free life, but I can’t. I wish I could promise you that you will never have conflict, but I can’t. I wish I could promise you that you won’t hurt each other or cause each other pain, but I can’t. I wish I could promise you that you will always feel the love for each other that you feel today, but I can’t. But this is what I can promise you: that God’s grace is sufficient.

My encouragement today is simply to live in grace in your marriage. Grace today, grace tomorrow, grace the next day. The grace we receive from God can overflow so that we can bless others and no one benefits more than our spouse. No one has more power to encourage and affirm your spouse than you do. And nothing has more power or a greater impact than grace.

1. Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, (Riverhead Books, 2011), 22.
2. Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 29.
3. Wendell Berry, “Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community: Eight Essays” cited August 2015. Online: <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/141043-sex-economy-freedom-and-community-eight-essays>
4. Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 38.
5. W.B Yeats, *For Anne Gregory, Chief Modern Poets of Britain and America*, (The Macmillan Company, London, 1970), 136-I.
6. David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, (Random House, New York, 2015), 171.
7. David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, 171.
8. David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, 171.
9. David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, 173.
10. David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, 170.
11. David Benner, *Soulful Spirituality*, (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2011), 123.