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John Hanneman

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# THE COUNTRY OF MARRIAGE

As we come to the subject of marriage this morning, I am conscious of the fact that we have single as well as married people present among us. I work with singles and I love them. But marriage is under an all-out attack. Therefore, whether one is a Christian or not, it is good for us to talk about this subject from time to time. My hope is that we might encourage your marriage and help you see it in the light of biblical truth. My added hope is that if you are single, you might have a better grasp of marriage before you ever say “I do.”

I plan on speaking biblically this morning, but I will not be expounding a particular text as we usually do. (There are a number of expositional studies on familiar texts given by our pastors on our website.) Today I want to speak from my heart. I am not the world’s authority on marriage, nor do I have the perfect marriage. Most of what I have learned about marriage has come through hard lessons, repeated failure, and a job that allows me the joy and heartache of watching many couples meet and either break up or get married. There are many things I still do not know or understand about marriage. The older I get, the more I appreciate Buechner’s thought that “Life should be wondered at, not understood, as if I thought there was a choice.”<sup>1</sup> This certainly applies to marriage.

I want to talk about the “country of marriage,” a phrase I borrowed from a book of poems by Wendell Berry. This is a land or place that we enter with another person. It is filled with mystery and wonder, struggles and obstacles. I want to share some thoughts to help us navigate, abide, work, and live in the country of marriage so that we might cultivate and grow healthy relationships. I have five principles to share.

## I. Marriage is based on a commitment to a covenant

When you get married you make a vow: for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health; to love one another through thick and thin, not just when the sky is blue and there is clear sailing. Marriage is a covenant relationship, one that is centered on a promise – a promise to abide by your vow despite the circumstances. In the country of marriage there are no returns or exchange policies. God loves marriage and hates the alternatives.

Commitment goes way beyond the initial feelings of “falling in love.” Infatuation usually gets the ball rolling, although the Bible doesn’t say anything about infatuation. Falling in love is an exciting and wonderful season as long as things don’t get out of control. A fire that rages out of control creates damage, and a fire that burns too fast usually goes out quickly.

Infatuation doesn’t last. Those delightful feelings that capture our hearts cannot be sustained throughout the life of a marriage. How many of you thought that those initial feelings would last? How many of you have had them last? C.S. Lewis said infatuation is God’s way of “tricking you” into marriage. If we knew what we were getting into, we would probably have had second thoughts.

But within the commitment of marriage and faithfulness to your vow, infatuation deepens into true love, a love that is patient and kind, a love that “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor 13:7). Commitment doesn’t flow out of emotionally based love. True love, biblical love, flows out of commitment. As my dad used to say, “you never really know how to love until after you get married.”

In many ways this parallels our relationship with Jesus. When we come to know the Lord, life is fresh and exciting. We sense his constant presence and miraculous intervention in our lives. But as we begin to grow in Christ, this honeymoon phase deepens and we learn to walk with the Lord and serve him without those feelings being always present.

I don’t mean to say that you will never have romantic feelings throughout your marriage. There are times of wonderful and delightful emotions both with our spouse and with the Lord. We enjoy and savor those times as long as they last, but marriage is not founded on those feelings.

The parents of both my wife Liz and I did not have very healthy marriages. Neither of us ever witnessed a healthy way to resolve conflict, good, honest communication, or proper affection. But they stayed married. They were committed, probably because of their Midwestern upbringing. When Liz and I met we had a whirlwind romance, but when we got married, we had a rough go of things. But we were committed. That was the model we had grown up with, which sadly is not the case much anymore. But I can say now after 34 years that I am glad we didn’t bail out before we got to the good stuff.

## II. Both Scriptures and wisdom would have us expect and/or anticipate struggles, tension, and adjustments when we get married

We all love the movie genre of romantic comedy, the feel good stories that portray that falling in love and living happily ever after is what we should expect. But that is not reality. The movies that grip our hearts are usually the more intense dramas that tell life like it is, not how we want it to be.

Why should we expect adjustments and difficulties?

First, there is a little verse in Genesis that describes the tension between husbands and wives as a consequence of the fall: “... your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (3:16). We can understand this word “desire” better from how it is used in chapter 4: “And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it” (4:7).

The idea behind “desire” is control. There is a battle for control between mankind and sin and there is a battle for control in marriage. The woman will seek to control her husband, but God declares that headship will remain with the man despite his horrible failure in

listening to the voice of his wife and passively allowing the serpent to lead this first couple down the primrose path to sin. The bottom line in this text is that there will be frustration in marriage, a frustration that results from sin entering into the world.

Other difficulties soon surface.

The difference in personalities: The amazing thing is that opposites attract, despite what eHarmony says. You don't marry someone who has the same personality. This is a good thing, but it can be frustrating if you don't accept it. Your basic personality does not change much over the years. In fact, I am finding as I grow older that my tendencies become more extreme. You can't suddenly change a morning person to a night person, an introvert to an extrovert, or an artist into an engineer.

The difference between men and women: No matter what anyone says, men and women are different. I didn't realize the extent of this difference until I got married. Sometimes my wife says or does something that makes no logical sense to me. Of course she has the same reaction to me at times. I try to understand her. For instance, if such and such happens, she will react in a certain way or want me to act in a certain way. Just when I think I have it figured out, I find that this only applies on Tuesday!

All the time I hear from couples who are dating that they are just alike, they see everything in the same way, etc. I just nod my head and inwardly chuckle, not wishing to burst their bubble. Then after the wedding I hear, "I didn't realize we were so different."

The problems from your family of origin: No two married people grow up in the same house. You enter into marriage with a completely different set of family dynamics. You celebrate holidays and birthdays differently. Vacations and extended family times have a different focus. Sometimes there is pain or unresolved emotions from your family and you carry this into marriage. Sometimes you aren't even aware of that pain until you get older.

The fact that you are both sinners: You get married and you wake up with a sinner, not a perfect person. It is easy for you to see that your partner is a sinner, but the truth is that you are too. You find out that you are incredibly selfish, that you have anger, that you get hurt easily, that you have a lot of fear.

All this is to ask, why should we expect perpetual bliss? We should expect growing pains along the way, and we shouldn't overly occupy ourselves by thinking that something is wrong.

I am not trying to make you depressed. This is reality. This is part of what marriage is about. Marriage and intimacy expose things that you could previously hide or be unaware of. Your spouse is like a mirror to make you aware of your sin, your fears, your insecurities, the hurt you carry because you never experienced the love of your father or mother. All this is intended for good so that God can work in deeper ways to transform your heart and sanctify your life. The danger comes when you play God and try to change and sanctify your spouse. The encouragement is to take care of yourself and your own heart and trust God for your spouse.

### III. Marriage points to the greater reality of our relationship with God

This is the great truth that gets our eyes off the struggles and difficulties, to see marriage as a window to a heavenly reality. Understanding our relationship with God is key to understanding the relationship between a husband and his wife. In the Bible, God is

pictured as a husband to his people. We see this in the Old Testament when God speaks through Hosea to his people Israel: "I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, In lovingkindness and in compassion, And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the LORD" (Hosea 2:19-20).

God is a husband and a lover. He relates to his wife, his people, in righteousness and justice. In other words, as a husband God acts rightly according to his covenant word and brings order and rule in the way he has designed mankind to live. But God also acts with loyal love and compassion, and in faithfulness. The result is that when God acts according to his character as a husband, his wife knows him intimately.

We see this same idea in the New Testament. Paul describes the relationship between Christ and the church as a metaphor for marriage: "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church" (Eph 5:22-23). "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church" (5:25).

Here we see that the husband is to become Jesus to his wife and that the wife is to relate to her husband as she would to the Lord.

The dynamics and nature of marriage are parallel to our relationship with God. This is what makes marriage holy and sacred. Perhaps this is why Jesus' first miracle took place at a wedding that he "adorned and beautified with his presence." This is what elevates marriage out of the malaise of human failure and disappointment into delight and wonder and awe. If Michelangelo could have portrayed this great truth of marriage in art, we would be speechless with amazement.

Both relationships are covenant relationships. The goal of both is the same: to experience union and intimacy, to know the Lord, to become one flesh. In both relationships it is the husband, whether God or man, who sets the tone and allows his bride to experience intimacy. In our relationship with God, God uses everything that happens to us so that we might grow closer to him and trust him more; and usually that occurs through our struggles and trials. The same thing is true for marriage. If we have the right mindset, then everything that happens, even our struggles, can be used for greater intimacy and trust.

God gives us another person in marriage so that we might better understand the kind of relationship that he wants with us. Marriage is a window to a greater vision, a classroom to teach us greater things. Marriage is not the end, but a means to something beyond. These two relationships reflect upon one another to help us to know God and how he wants us to live with him. In the end we all will become the bride of Christ, whether single or married, and there will be a great wedding feast in heaven, as the book of Revelation promises: "Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready" (Rev 19:7).

### IV. The key qualities for a healthy marriage are derived from the character of God and his relationship with us.

If God is a husband to his people, then it makes sense for us to learn how to relate in marriage from the character he exemplifies. The most important way to have a healthy marriage is not to have a list of rules to guarantee success. Coming up with hard and fast rules

for headship and submission is a slippery slope. The most important means to a healthy marriage is through acting in accordance with how God relates to us as a husband, as Hosea points out: righteousness and justice, loyal love and compassion and faithfulness. From this idea I offer four key qualities to help us love in a biblical sense, to relate as God designed in the country of marriage.

### Consistent rightness

Do the right thing according to your covenant promise, despite the actions of your mate. This is what God does. Even when we act inappropriately, God does the right thing to promote covenant, community, and well being. This is what we must strive to do. We do the right thing, even when we don't feel like it. And when we fail, we go to the Lord and do the right thing. We continue to act independent of our spouse in response to God. This is what keeps marriage from being a tit-for-tat affair. This is what keeps us from keeping score.

### Unconditional acceptance

We are accepted by God the Father through the blood of Jesus. This is the foundation of our relationship with him. This acceptance is not based on performance, but on grace. Doing good or doing bad does not change the way God thinks about us. We enter into his presence with confidence because of what Christ did for us. We are no longer under law.

Therefore, because we are in Christ we are to accept one another. This is a key ingredient for marriage. Shakespeare said, "Love is not love/Which alters when it alternation finds" (Sonnet 116). Biblical love is not conditional on performance or behavior. When we offer acceptance we let go of manipulation, control, and competition and grant our spouses the freedom to be the persons God created them to be. When we experience acceptance we don't dwell in the guilt of failure, the taint of unworthiness, or the compulsion that we should have done better. If we don't believe in our heart that God accepts us, then we will perform Christian service to gain approval and love. If we don't believe in our heart that our spouse accepts us, then we will perform to gain approval and love.

Acceptance is the foundation to a marriage. With this in place we can experience conflict and difficulties without the foundation of our relationship being shaken. But without acceptance, even the smallest argument can throw the relationship into the air. Whenever a spouse verbalizes things he or she does not accept in their partner prior to marriage, they are in for trouble.

### Sacrificial love

God's love was supremely demonstrated on the cross when Jesus died for us. God loves sacrificially. He laid down his own life to seek another's highest good. In the story of redemption, life comes out of death. Jesus told his disciples: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

As believers in Christ we are to follow his example, as Paul instructs in the book of Philippians: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found

in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (2:3-8).

When we die to self we seek another's highest good. We don't act out of selfishness. We become givers, not takers. A line from a Wendell Berry poem profoundly expresses this thought:

What I am learning to give you is my death  
to set you free of me, and me from myself  
into the dark and the new light.<sup>2</sup>

To love means to die. And yet we don't become less, we become more. "To give yourself away in love to somebody else – as a man and a woman give themselves away to each other at a wedding – is to become for the first time yourself fully. To live not just for yourself alone anymore but for another self to whom you swear to be true – plight your troth to, your truth to – is in a new way to come fully alive."<sup>3</sup>

### Unlimited forgiveness

Another Wendell Berry poem expresses our need for forgiveness:

To love is to suffer – did I  
know this when first  
I asked you for your love?  
I did not. And yet until  
I knew, I could not know what  
I asked, or gave. I gave  
a suffering that I took: yours  
and mine, mine when yours;  
and yours I have feared most.<sup>4</sup>

We give a suffering and take a suffering. We hurt and wound one another. We deal with this the same way we do in our relationship with God: we forgive the way God forgives us when we humble ourselves before him. This is how we pray: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt 6:12).

In premarital counseling, Eugene Peterson asks couples what they think is the most important thing in marriage. They usually start listing items but they never get it right. Then he tells them that forgiving each other is the most important thing.

We are selfish sinners, bent on trying to get life for ourselves, to maximize our pleasure, comfort, and enjoyment. In the process we inflict wounds on the one we want to love the most. Forgiveness is at the core of our relationship with God. Our sweetest and most holy times with the Lord are often when we drink from the cup and feel his love and forgiveness for our sin. My favorite service of the year is Good Friday, when I am reminded of the cross and I embrace my forgiveness.

Forgiveness leads us into greater intimacy with our Lord, and this is also true in marriage. This is what keeps us from holding onto resentments or grudges and heals the wounds that only serve to poison the future. We embrace one another through the blood of Christ and taste new resurrection. Couples who travel this journey often experience a greater depth of intimacy than couples who do all the right things.

These ways of relating are not easy. They are the work of a lifetime. Love is the work of love. We will fail over and over. But Jesus turns water into wedding wine and gives us his Spirit to encourage, strengthen, and empower us. If we depend on ourselves it is impossible. But God is our resource.

## V. Marriage can never be a substitute for God

No matter how good the marriage it will never be enough. No other person can be all that we want or desire. There is a place within us where only God can go.

When we feel lonely, when we are craving intimacy, when we feel rejected because our spouse isn't doing what we want, it does not mean that we married the wrong person, or even that we are missing out because we are single. It means that we are hungering and yearning for God and we need to go to him. This is why God said what he said after the fall. Our frustration in marriage was intended for good; it is meant to drive us to him. When men continue to struggle with pornography after they are married, it doesn't mean they don't love their wives or think they aren't beautiful; it means they need God. When a man knocks on the door of a brothel he is looking for God.

The lie is that there is someone out there whose love can solve your deep inner yearnings for intimacy. The truth is, only God can do that. This thought is reflected in a poem by William Butler Yeats:

For Anne Gregory

Never shall a young man,  
Thrown into despair  
By those great honey-coloured  
Ramparts at your ear,  
Love you for yourself alone  
And not your yellow hair.

But I can get a hair-dye  
And set such colour there,  
Brown, or black, or carrot,  
That young men in despair  
May love me for myself alone  
And not my yellow hair.

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.<sup>5</sup>

Human love will always be incomplete. But not so with God. All of our life is meant to unmask and unveil the deep longings which only God can satisfy. When we seek to make another person the sole object of our heart's desire, we worship an idol, a false god, a fantasy. God is a jealous lover. He will drive us to despair until we finally turn to his embrace.

The best thing you can do for your marriage is to pursue your relationship with God, to grow deeper and deeper in love with him, and experience his love for you. Being filled with the Father's love is what allows you the grace to die to self, to forgive, to accept, to love more purely.

The real mystery of marriage is not that husband and wife love each other so much that they can find God in each other's lives, but that God loves them so much that they can discover each other more and more as living reminders of God's presence. They are brought together, indeed, as two prayerful hands extended toward God and forming in this way a home for God in this world.<sup>6</sup>

1 Frederick Buechner, *The Yellow Leaves* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 121.

2 Wendell Berry, *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1998), 86.

3 Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 162.

4 Berry, *Selected Poems*, 164.

5 William Butler Yeats, *Chief Modern Poets of Britain and America* (Macmillan Company, Toronto: Editors Sanders, Nelson, Rosenthal, 1970), 1-136.

6 Henri Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 44-45.

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