



A VISION FOR MARRIAGE

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

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Genesis 2:24-25

Ninth Message

John Hanneman

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Most people begin thinking about marriage at an early age. We build expectations for our future partner and for marriage based on movies, plays, books, and family experiences. We fill our closets and our minds with love songs, hoping that our fantasy will come true. Then one day we fall head over heels in love. We feel overwhelmed when our feelings are reciprocated. Romance can be intoxicating and addictive. Before we realize what has happened, we find ourselves repeating vows at an altar. The marriage adventure has begun. We spend years anticipating this event, we think we know exactly what is in store for us, and then we spend years trying to figure out what we have done.

Unfortunately, marriage has become one of the great areas of struggle in our communities and in our own church. Many marriages are in a state of crisis. Young couples are having their hearts ripped apart by divorce. The young singles I work with are scared to death of marriage, having witnessed the pain of unhealthy relationships in their homes. Their hearts are fragile because they too have experienced the wrenching results of divorce.

How does a relationship so promising, so filled with anticipation, become confusing, destructive and painful? Perhaps we have had the wrong vision and the wrong goals for marriage. We need to correct our thinking and learn what God wants us to experience in marriage.

I want to set forth a biblical vision for marriage this morning. I do not claim to be an expert on this subject. Much of what I have learned has come through God's grace breaking down my stubborn and proud heart. I don't want to give you a set of rules or a fix-it primer. I want to give you God's vision for marriage from a familiar text in the book of Genesis. I believe this is the source text for marriage. It takes a lifetime to work out what is packed into these two verses from the second chapter of Genesis.

For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed (Gen. 2:24-25, NASB).

What is the goal of your marriage? What do you hope to accomplish and experience with your mate?

We don't think much about this question when we are contemplating marriage. Then we have stars in our

eyes. We are in love. We imagine that our relationship will be magic and we will be the one in a million couples who can say their union is total bliss.

We come to marriage with different hopes and dreams which we formulate into goals. We do this either consciously or unconsciously, and yet these things shape the way we live and relate. Your goal might be to have a happy life; to have a big home and a perfect family; to live comfortably and securely; to get something from someone else so that you don't have to feel loneliness, pain, rejection or sadness. Your goal might be to gratify your hormones and rid yourself of sexual frustration. Perhaps your goal is to change your spouse into the person you want him or her to be and remove all their imperfections, so they can be perfect, as you are! Maybe your goal is to get your spouse to love you the way you want to be loved.

Isn't it interesting that God doesn't mention any of these things in the Bible? Our text says that God created man and woman, and the goal he had in mind was that "the two shall become one flesh." God's purpose for marriage is that two people whose orientation to life is completely different, male and female, might experience oneness.

What do we mean by oneness? Ephesians 5 says that oneness is a divine mystery, something that can't be put in a formula. Oneness in marriage reflects the oneness that believers have with God. As such, oneness is a relationship of holy union and intimacy, "I in you and you in me," as Jesus put it. It is a shared life, a one-flesh relationship in which two souls and two hearts become inextricably bound together. It is as if the contents of two containers are poured into one and mixed together. You possess, you are possessed; you know and you are known.

So, according to Genesis, when two people marry they become one. More accurately stated, they begin the process of becoming one. They don't arrive at a final destination on the day they tie the knot. One season ends and another begins as they embark on a journey of love and discovery, joy and disappointment. They set out on a road that is not well marked, a path of many detours and dangers. It is not a journey for the faint of heart. When viewed correctly, marriage can be a great adventure. An incorrect view of it, however, will leave you feeling lost and confused, like out-of-towners. But this journey becomes the essence of what God wants to do with you. In the journey lies the destination.

To begin this journey towards oneness, two things are required, according to our text: leaving father and mother, and cleaving to one another. Leaving speaks of new loyalties and new priorities. No relationship, apart from your relationship with God, is more important. Wise children, when they marry, abandon their dependence on parents and learn to depend and trust in each other. Wise parents allow their children to go on to experience God's fullness in their marriage.

But that is easier said than done. Leaving can be a difficult process. Our attachments to our parents go very deep, affecting us long after we leave home, and even long after they pass away. Difficulties arise when parents try to control and manipulate their children after they are married. They are trying to get them to meet all their own selfish needs for love. Parents can actually rob the lives of their children to fulfill their own selfish desires.

Do you know that once you get married, actually when you become an adult, you have God's permission to disappoint your parents? Do you know that you are not responsible for their happiness? Some people are fortunate to have parents who let them go so that they can enjoy an adult, free relationship with them, but others have to face the task of achieving freedom from emotional control. They have to learn to stop trying to earn the love and acceptance they never received as children. Leaving home is an essential element of starting a new family unit and becoming one in marriage. It may be helpful do something drastic to disappoint your parents early on in your marriage to set the pattern for the years ahead. Then you can enjoy a much freer relationship with them. They will have learned that you cannot be depended upon to fulfill their every emotional need.

The second aspect of becoming one flesh is "cleaving" to one another. The word means "to adhere." The idea is to apply adhesive and become glued together. You are super-glued together! This is why divorce is so devastating. No matter how unhealthy the marriage, that state of oneness is still present. If you tear apart two people who have been bonded together, the break is never clean. Our hearts do not have perforated edges. The tear is uneven, and it leaves scars. We are deceived if we think that we can go back and be the same person we were before we were married.

Cleaving means that you must take great care to cultivate oneness. You allow yourself to open up emotionally so that you bond together at the deepest level. You carve out time to communicate, to share your lives, build history, and plan memories. You commit all of yourself and all of your heart to this relationship. You cannot coast along and expect everything to turn out right. If you do, you will grow apart. The world will work against you. Sin will work against you. Satan will work against you. You have to fight distractions and temptations. This relationship is so precious and so valuable you must guard it at all costs. Sometimes we

guard our diamonds and our cars with more care than we do our marriages. Maybe what we need is an alarm system for marriage that goes off when anyone tampers with it.

A great help to cultivating oneness is spending consistent time together. Years ago, my wife won a weekend trip to Monterey in a raffle. We already had two children and we had not yet set a pattern of getting away and spending time together. After spending that weekend away, we both decided we should do this twice a year, making it a regular part of our life together. I do the planning each time, months in advance, even the baby sitting, because something always seems to come up if we leave it too late. This is a good way of demonstrating how valuable we are to each other, and I commend it to you.

So you leave and you cleave and you become one flesh. This state of oneness is described in these words: "the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." Here we come to the heart of oneness, the very core of what God wants us to experience in marriage.

This state of being naked and unashamed indicates that Adam and Eve were completely exposed, vulnerable, transparent and open with one another. They hid nothing from each other. They could see each other for who they were, with all their limitations, weaknesses and imperfections, yet they had no shame, no guilt, no self-awareness, no fear of being completely seen and known, no fear of being rejected. The first couple experienced complete acceptance and freedom together. Oneness, then, is found in an intimate relationship where we experience love and acceptance with one who knows everything about us, and we communicate the same acceptance and love in return.

But there is a problem with experiencing this kind of oneness and intimacy. That problem is sin. Notice that this scene in Genesis 2 takes place before the fall. After the fall, the man and the woman hide from God and one another, covering themselves with fig leaves. They become self-aware and untrusting. They recognize their nakedness and they feel ashamed. The result of sin is that we become private people. We erect barriers around us because we don't want to let others see who we really are. We don't feel loved and accepted, so we try to be someone we are not in order to be approved. We put on an act to gain another's love and acceptance.

Another consequence of sin is that we dream up ways of relating, of trying to get love and acceptance. Our emotions betray us, deceive us and control us. We get hurt and we hurt in return. We hide our pain and become resentful. We try to control our circumstances. This becomes a crisis in marriage and a stumbling block to oneness. We wall off our hearts and settle for other goals that we think will take away the pain. We lose God's vision for what he wants for us.

What God wants is to get us back to the garden. His

desire is to redeem our lives and our marriages. Oneness does not come naturally, but this is how God wants us to grow in the marriage relationship. This is what he wants us to experience—the joy of becoming one flesh, in a relationship where we can experience freedom, acceptance and unselfish love.

In pre-marital counseling I have come to see that mutual acceptance is foundational to starting this journey toward oneness. I always ask the couples I counsel whether or not they accept one another just as they are. I ask them if they are holding back part of their heart out of a sense of fear or lack of trust. I ask them if they are trying to earn acceptance in any way. If they do not completely accept one another, I will not proceed with the wedding, because I know that their road to oneness is in great jeopardy. But if they can look each other in the eyes and say they accept one another and that they feel accepted in return, then I have a great confidence that they are on the road towards oneness.

Once we have God's vision for marriage a greater vision comes into focus. Marriage here on earth is a lens through which we can see and experience a heavenly, eternal reality. This is what we see promised in these verses from the book of Hosea. God is speaking to his people Israel:

**“And 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).

And in Revelation we see the fulfillment of this promise:

“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... ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb’” (Rev. 19:7, 9a).

God wants to relate to us as his people in the same way that he wants us to relate in marriage. Scripture says that the church is the bride of Christ. When the new heavens and earth appear, there will be a great wedding ceremony. The state of marriage here on earth parallels this marriage in heaven. God has designed marriage so that we can experience with our spouse what he wants to experience with us. In order to help us understand this invisible relationship, he gives us someone we can see, touch and feel so that we might more fully understand the wonder of intimacy with him.

Do you realize the goal of marriage and the goal of our spiritual life is the same? The goal is oneness and intimacy. This is why we can say that marriage is so important to God. Being married here on earth is not the ultimate reality. Marriage in heaven is. Marriage on earth is part of a world that is passing away, but marriage to God and oneness with him lasts for eternity.

But we have the same difficulty in our relationship with God as we do with our spouse. Oneness does not come naturally to us. Adam and Eve hid themselves from each other, and they hid from God. Our sin makes us feel guilty and ashamed and we try to hide from God. We do things to gain his love and acceptance, but we already have these in Jesus. The goal of our spiritual journey is oneness with God. We leave the world, we forsake our idols, and we cling to God so that we might become one with him.

And so marriage with a spouse and marriage with God become part of the same journey. One is temporary, the other is eternal. But they reflect back on each other. When you experience acceptance and love in a marriage, that begins to reflect back into your relationship with God. When you experience freedom and joy with God, that begins to reflect back into the way you relate to your spouse. It could well be said that marriage is God's workshop for intimacy.

So, practically speaking, what does all of this mean?

1. Marriage is a very special relationship.

God loves marriage. When we recognize the heavenly significance of marriage, our unions here on earth take on much greater meaning. We elevate marriage, and it becomes holy and sacred. We value it more and take it more seriously. We are willing to invest more time and energy and money into having a healthy marriage, not as an end unto itself, but as a means to an end. We don't want to miss out on what God has to teach us.

2. Marriage takes time.

It takes a long time to understand and cultivate oneness in marriage. When we first get married, we hold back part of our hearts, because we don't trust our spouse with all of our weaknesses and foibles. We need time to unravel the emotional disconnects we feel from our family background and from sin. We need time to finally give up what we are trying to get for ourselves. We need time to die to our own selfish desires. We need time to leave and to cleave. For me, the first twenty years of marriage were merely prep work for what was to come. Most people give up too soon. Everything starts with having the right vision of what God's wants us to experience.

3. Marriage deepens through all of our joys and struggles.

If we have the right goal in marriage, then everything that comes our way, every struggle, every pain, can become the means through which we grow in oneness and intimacy with our spouses. If the goal of our marriage is happiness, however, then we have eliminated all the things that can help lead us into a deeper relationship.

How do we grow in our relationship with God? By having a perfect life? No. We fail, we cry out, and we find that God is there with us, right in the midst of our

disappointment and pain. This is how we grow with God and how we grow in marriage. He uses everything in life to deepen our intimacy and oneness. When we can find acceptance and love where there has been hurt and pain, then we will experience the joy of oneness. This is why I say that the journey is everything. Actually, the journey is the destination. It is in the journey that we experience a growing oneness.

My wife and I have been married almost 24 years, by God's grace. We met in a whirlwind of romance, a very immature young couple. We have come through many struggles and a lot of painful personal and family issues. And we have been completely unsuccessful in trying to change each other! We are both very passionate. We hurt easily, but express ourselves quite differently. We have had our share of highs and lows. But God has used every single experience to bring us to a place where we can enjoy and accept one another. And he has used these things to demonstrate his love and his grace toward us. When I sit in the presence of God or in the presence of my wife, I experience the same joy and the same sense of oneness. To me, sharing deeply with my wife and praying feel exactly the same.

I want to conclude this morning by reading the words that I read at every wedding ceremony I perform:

Oneness is the goal of marriage. Have no other goal before you.

The goal of marriage is not to take away your loneliness, your sadness, your incompleteness. The goal is not successful circumstances or painless existence.

The goal is to experience a holy oneness with another and through this oneness experience the oneness of God, "I in you, you in me." This is not just physical oneness or emotional oneness. It is the oneness of your very souls. Bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh. It is a mystery, and we cannot understand it for many years.

The world tries so hard to gain this intimacy, but the love we see in the world is joyless, selfish, clinging. It is based on fear, the fear that I cannot live alone.

The blessing of knowing God is that we can love another and experience a oneness of freedom and joy and vulnerability. It is based on acceptance, not fear.

The glory of marriage is oneness. Oneness creates a new sacred place where we experience God.

What goals do you have for your marriage? Are you willing to accept God's vision for it? Are you willing to die to yourself so that you can find freedom, acceptance and love? God will help you do this if you let him. It is never too late to begin to function in our marriages the way God intended from the beginning.

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