

The Power of Marriage

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. If you've just joined us, last week we kicked off this new series on what the Bible teaches about marriage. That's because marriage is a major theme that runs throughout the Bible.

As we saw last week, the Bible begins with God officiating the first marriage between Adam and Eve, the first two people, and it ends with the great marriage feast of the Lamb where it is the eternal coming together of Jesus and his church.

And so marriage, as I said last week, is connected to all of God's purposes for history. And that God invented marriage between a man and a woman to display those purposes in history, God's eternal salvation purposes.

And so our text throughout the whole term is Ephesians 21 to 33. It's the longest, most famous and most controversial passage in the Bible on marriage.

And so we're working through it bit by bit, unpacking it bit by bit. And the controversial parts draw our attention so much in such a way that we often miss the real meaning of the whole paragraph, and particularly the peak verses, the verses that put all of this instruction into their context, verses 31 and 32.

[1 : 34] For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery. But I'm talking about Christ and the church.

The profound mystery of marriage is when God invented marriage at the beginning of creation, he already had the saving work of Jesus Christ in mind.

God, in other words, he designed marriage between a man and a woman to be a picture, if you like, of that greater, more important reality.

And so the question is, how well do our marriages portray the magnificence of Jesus and the gospel and the great wedding feast of the Lamb?

In case you're still wondering about the answer to that question, not perfectly is the answer to that. Not perfectly. That's reality though, isn't it?

[2 : 36] The larger and more complex and more majestic an object is, the more difficult it is, almost impossible it is, to represent that thing very well.

For instance, no single photograph from my iPhone could possibly display the grandeur of the Great Barrier Reef. But the reason I take a photo of it is because when I'm there experiencing it, I'm moved by it.

There's a sense of awe associated with it. And so I take the photo because I want to recall that awe moment.

I want to remember the magnificence of it. And so Christian marriage, therefore, should seek to be clearer and clearer picture of the majesty of the gospel.

Because one of the purposes of marriage is, in fact, the transformation of a couple into the image of Christ. And we'll pick that up down in the coming weeks.

[3 : 43] But the main reason our display of the majesty of the gospel is so blurred is because all of us are broken by sin and we are profoundly self-centered.

And so self-centeredness is the main havoc-wreaking problem in marriage.

In fact, in all relationships, but in marriage and the ever-present enemy of every marriage. And so that's our topic today as we look at that.

So if you've got the St. Paul's app, got three points there for us today as we journey through just a couple of, really just one verse we're focusing on.

So the problem of self-centeredness. The main problem of all marriages and relationships generally is the radical self-centeredness of the human heart.

[4 : 54] C.S. Lewis wrote in Mere Christianity that self-centeredness, which is what he referred to in the particular chapter of the great sin as pride or conceit, self-conceit he referred to it as.

He says, That his self-centeredness by its very character means a person is blind to their own while being hypersensitive and offended and angered by that of others.

And the result is always a downward spiral into self-pity, into anger, despair, self-righteousness as the relationship gets eaten away to nothing.

Self-centeredness has been described as the cancer in the center of a marriage when it begins and it has to be dealt with from the start.

Now the classic text which you'll hear at many wedding ceremonies and which I've been asked to preach on a number of times is 1 Corinthians 13 verses 4 to 5.

[6 : 50] I remember going to, it's so famous in fact, that I went to a wedding, attended a wedding for a non-Christian couple who didn't want me to do the wedding.

An extended family didn't want me to do the wedding because they didn't want anything too religious. They've got a civil settlement out in the garden. The civil settlement in the service said, Just some advice for you.

I want to read to you a poem. Not sure where it comes from or the origin of it, but it's just beautiful words. Let me read them to you. Love is patient and kind.

It does not envy. It does not boast. It is not proud. It is not rude. It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs. And people, oh, you have beautiful words.

1 Corinthians 13 verses 4 and 5. What Paul does here, he shows that love is an action. It's not a sentiment. It's not sentimental.

[7 : 51] It's an action. Love is action that is the very opposite of self-seeking, of self-centeredness.

Love is pursuing one's own welfare before those of others.

Look at that, right? You know what I mean. Self-centeredness is easily seen through this list in impatience, in irritability.

A lack of graciousness and kindness in speech. Envious brooding on the better circumstances of other people and holding past injuries and hurts against others.

And so how easily do these traits appear in marriage? The ability to give yourself to another person for their good.

[8 : 59] The ability to serve another person's interest over your own. The ability to submit your own concerns for the good of someone else.

The ability to defer your desires to help another realize their desires is not instinctive, is it?

It seems there's nothing more unnatural, in fact, than selflessness and humility. When I was a new pastor, and Nat and I had been married just for a couple of years.

She's not here this morning, so you'll get my version of this. We've been married for a couple of years, and we were preaching a series in 1 Corinthians at the time in the church, and I got 1 Corinthians 13.

And so I'd been working on the sermon throughout the week, thinking about working really hard at And, you know, love is patient and kind, blah, blah, blah, blah. And on the Saturday, I was writing the sermon, and I just need a final illustration.

[10 : 22] I just need to finish it off. But I was confident I had it all wrapped up, right? The sermon, and so I had to communicate this really well, you know, to the church. And it was late in the afternoon, so I decided to take a break, and I was going to go and cut the grass While I thought over 1 Corinthians 13, love is patient, love is kind, how do I illustrate this, the final thing?

And I was almost over, finished cutting the grass, and Nat said to me, she's just ducking out to catch up with a friend. She'll be back in about an hour and a half.

Yeah, not a problem, no worries. Soon after that, Nat departed. I finished off cutting the grass, and I went to go inside, and the door was locked.

The entire house was locked. And, I mean, I couldn't believe it. I mean, why would you do that? Why? It made sense at all. Of course, that's the point. It doesn't make any sense. And while, you know, the unhelpful stuff was rising, 1 Corinthians 13, love is patient, love is kind, love keeps no record of wrong.

[11 : 46] Okay. Okay, so do a little bit more gardening. You know, I'll catch up a little bit more gardening. And while I think about 1 Corinthians 13 and put it into practice, so I did a little bit more gardening.

One and a half hours became two and a half hours. It was winter, and the sun went down, and I was now cold.

And, you know, what is patience in the end? What does it mean to be kind? Two and a half hours became three hours, and I decided that rather than sit here and stew in the darkness and shiver, I thought that I will get up and I will busy myself around the garden and continue thinking about 1 Corinthians 13, and I'll water the grass.

I mean, there's a soothing exercise. So I hooked up the hose, turn the tap on, boom, and the hose burst, and I was now covered in water.

So it's dark. It is cold. It's winter. I am now wet. But love is, what was it about love?

[13:07] What are the parameters about keeping no records of wrong here? You know, like, I was wet, I was freezing, I was shivering, and I was fuming.

Love is patient. Love is kind. Love keeps no, keeps mostly not records of wrong. Four hours later, it was totally dark, and then I heard the car arrive home, and then, by God, amazingly, my fuming went really calm.

I just, you know, I was so cold, and instead of taking the opportunity to whip around and jump straight into the shower, I decided it would, in fact, be more beneficial for me if I waited just a little bit longer.

I waited for four hours, and now there's an opportunity to milk this for all it's worth. Nat turned on the lights in the house.

I could hear her calling out, you know, where are you? It wasn't that big of a house, really. She searched the house. Eventually, she unlocked the back door, turned on the patio light, and here I was sitting in the darkness, out there in the freezing cold.

[14:34] And her first words to me were, why are you sitting out in the dark? It's a bit cold for that, isn't it?

Love is patient. Love is kind. And so I calmly, because I wanted to milk it, walked past her and said, think back to when you opened the door and how you needed to get out here.

Walked into the shower. When I came out of the shower, she said, I locked you out. Yes, you did. Now, the reason I was able to stay calm in that moment was not because of love, but it's because that opportunity provided me with everything I needed for my own benefit in some way or another. I was able to milk it, manipulate it. And that's often what happens in our relationships. In most cases, we marry a person because we really like them.

It doesn't take long, and you start to notice how self-centred they actually are. But it happens at exactly the same time, and they start to notice how self-centred you are.

[15:58] And then the third thing happens at exactly the same time is that you start to notice that their self-centredness is, in fact, far worse than yours.

It's inevitable. What do you do then in that moment? One thing that can happen is that you, which often happens, is that you form an emotional distance.

You put a self-protective layer around yourself, and the distance starts, grows between you and your spouse.

It's almost like, as a couple, you subconsciously sign a new covenant agreement.

If you don't talk about my issues, I won't raise your issues. And it's like, we're happy to coexist as North Korea and South Korea as long as we don't cross into the demilitarisation zone.

[17:07] And on the surface, we look like a happy couple, because we're together, for goodness sake. And we don't argue, because we've chosen not to over certain issues that really matter to us.

We have a comfortable stalemate, but the emotional connection is forced. You know, there's a photo. Get together as a couple of you.

It's like the anniversary celebration. There's a forced and an uncomfortableness. In his book, The Marriage Builder, the late Christian psychologist, Dr. Larry Crabb, put it like this.

So protective layers are designed to prevent the rejection from getting inside to where we feel the hurt. A variety of behaviours can function for us as protective layers.

An unwillingness to share deep feelings. Responding with anger when real feelings are hurt.

Changing the subject when the conversation begins to be threatening about my own sense of rejection, that is.

[18:17] Turning up, clamming up, sorry, turning off, clamming up, or other manoeuvres designed to avoid rejection or criticism. Keeping oneself so busy with work and social engagements and

entertainment and church activities, or endless chatter that no deep sharing is possible.

Of course, the alternative, which is what we're given here in Ephesians 5, verse 21, is seeing that my self-centredness is more profound. It is more serious and more important to deal with than my spouse's.

I will treat my self-centredness, as it's reported to me, as being the crucial thing to address, regardless of what the other person is doing.

Or even how they communicate it to me. You see, when two people do that together, there is a possibility of not just a marriage, but of a great marriage.

And when two people see that the main problem in their marriage is themselves, their own self-centredness, and they're working together through that, then it will be a great marriage.

[19 : 38] And so there's two possibilities. And the two possibilities are either of you see the self-centredness, or that is the two possibilities.

Either of you see the self-centredness in the other, or both of you see the self-centredness in yourself. The third possibility is that only one of you sees the self-centredness.

But the other doesn't. In other words, you can still have a great marriage, even if your working on your self-centredness is not reciprocated.

You see, in this scenario, if you're truly concerned about your self-centredness, and you're working on it, over time, it slowly, bit by bit, starts to soften your spouse.

It becomes easier for them to admit their faults and their flaws. Because you are not constantly bringing them up. And when you do bring them up, you aren't doing it in a way to crush them, to condemn them.

[21 : 05] So that brings me to our second point of confronting our own self-centredness. You see, the only way to deal with the relational cancer of it is to confront our own self-centredness, not the other person's self-centredness.

The introductory, Ephesians 5.21, this introductory statement for Paul's famous paragraph on marriage is submit to one another.

Now, in the English translations of this, verse 21 is normally not just its own sentence, but it's also a brand new paragraph.

It begins a brand new paragraph on marriage. But in the original language, in the Greek New Testament, verse 21 is, in fact, the last clause in a long previous sentence in which Paul describes the several, several marks of a person who is filled with the spirit of a Christian person.

And this last clause, verse 21, is the connector to the application of that in what follows in this section of marriage and parenting and in the work environment.

[22 : 32] It's the hinge, if you like, in connecting these two great paragraphs. And so, in other words, what he's saying here is the last mark of being a Christian and filled with God's spirit is, in fact, a loss of pride and surrendering of the self-will that leads a person to humbly serve the interests of others.

It is so unnatural that inevitably we will wonder what we get out of it if I'm putting the happiness of my spouse ahead of my own.

That's our natural reaction here. If I put their happiness ahead of mine, what do I get out of it?

And the biblical answer to that is happiness, is what you get out of it. Happiness through serving others instead of using them.

It is the joy that comes from giving joy. Now, that is a concept that, as I talked about last week, our modern culture, the me marriage, finds so foreign and so oppressive, dangerous even.

[24 : 04] And yet this is not just the Christian view of marriage. This is the Christian theology of relationships, all relationships. Because it is the very nature of ultimate reality.

You see, the Bible reveals God as triune. I talked about this last week. That is, he's three persons within one God. One God. Trinity of God, the Trinity.

Now, I'm reading other passages in the Bible about this. John 17 teaches that for all of eternity, before anything was made, each person of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, has glorified, has honoured, and has loved the other two members of the Trinity.

I used the word last week, perichoresis. It's the mutual indwelling. I exist for the other two. I exist for their glory, for their honouring, for their love.

That is ultimate reality from which everything material is being created from, for, from that.

[25 : 20] And the representation of that, the very nature of God, the very being of God, is other person-centredness. That's ultimate reality.

They served and loved one another for their joy. Forever. And so when Christ Jesus died on the cross for our sin, he was acting within the very nature of God.

Self-sacrifice is who he is. It's the very essence of God. And humanity was made in that image. We were created to worship and live for God's glory, to do what God has done amongst himself forever for his joy. And we were meant to do that, and also for others, not for our own.

And so whenever we put our happiness ahead of obedience to God, or we, in that moment, what we're doing is we are violating our very own nature, our very essence, and we become ultimately miserable.

[26 : 53] We work against our joy. You see, Jesus restates this principle when he says in Matthew 16, whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

He's saying if you seek happiness more than you seek me, you'll have neither. You'll have neither me nor happiness. If you seek to serve me more than you serve your happiness, you'll get both. You get me and your happiness. And Paul applies this principle to marriage. Seek to serve one another rather than to be happy, and you will find a new and a deeper happiness.

And it's possible to discover this profound mystery because marriage is instituted by God. It was established by God for whom self-giving love is the very essence of who he is, and therefore it reflects his nature, and particularly in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

So when we read the rest of Ephesians 5, everything that it says, where our heart goes, hang on a bit, let me just qualify that, and I can't wait that Steve does, all of it is put in the context of ultimate reality.

[28 : 37] All of it is put in the context of verse 21. It is only from this Holy Spirit-empowered, humble submission for the good of others that Paul then moves into relationships with wives and husbands, parents and kids, employer, employee, all of it.

Now we're going to unpack this in coming weeks, but in verses 22 to 24, Paul writes, the wife should submit to their husbands. Immediately in verse 25, he tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

He does the same at the end of the section in verse 33. And so verse 25 and verse 33, for husbands, if anything, is a stronger appeal to abandon self-interest than was in fact given to the wife.

You see, what we will discover is that each of these exaltations have a distinct shape about them. They're not identical tasks.

And yet each partner is called to sacrifice for the other in far-reaching ways because it's the very essence of who God is. Because the Father's not the Son and the Son's not the Spirit and the Spirit's not the Father or the Son and so on and so forth.

[30 : 08] And so whether we are a husband or a wife, we are not to live for ourselves, but we live for the other. This is the hardest and yet single most important function of being husband and wife in a marriage.

As I said last week, the Bible does not present marriage as a choice between personal fulfilment as per the new me-marriage version of our modern era on the one hand or sacrifice for the good of family and society.

On the other hand, as per traditional cultures, the biblical Christianity sees marriage as mutual fulfilment through mutual sacrifice. And it's different for both in the way that's played out.

And this principle flows into every Christian relationship. But to practise these principles inside a marriage is to practise them in such, in the most intense way possible.

If two spouses are spending a day together, the question of who gets each other's pleasure, so who gets to make the choice of pursuing their pleasure and who gives in in this moment happens all the time, which is probably why so many spouses don't want to spend too much time together.

[31 : 50] Who, you know, it's like the, you know, the view here is not, you know, I don't hear the old story of two Christians trying to, you know, force their way through one door and one says, after you.

No, no, no, after you. No, after you. No, no, after you. And so no one goes anywhere. I mean, you know, we're going to unpack this a little bit later. I mean, it doesn't work like that. But who gets to go through the door first?

There's three possibilities. You can offer to serve the other with joy. You can make the offer to serve them with coldness and resentment and hoping to manipulate it and use it later on down the track. or you can selfishly insist on your own way. That's what it comes down to. Only when both partners are regularly responding to one another in the first way, serving each other with joy, can a marriage thrive.

And yet, how hard that is. because each person needs to confront their own self-centeredness and stop making excuses for selfishness and deal with it regardless of what your spouse is doing.

[33 : 14] if two spouses each say, I'm going to treat my, and when I say treat it, I mean really feel it, really be aware of it, that my self-centeredness is in fact the main problem in this marriage.

You have the prospect of a truly great marriage. marriage. And even, can I say to you, if this is you right now, you're in a marriage relationship where you have failed in some kind of way and you're aware of your failure and your spouse is reminding you of your failure, can I say, work on your self-centeredness and the spouse who's constantly reminding the other of their failure, can I say to you, be more consciously aware of your own self-centeredness than your spouse's obvious self-centeredness.

So where do we get the power and the security and the confidence to take that step? This is my last point. Verse 21 again, Paul says, there's one last bit which I haven't mentioned in that verse, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

The word reverence there literally means fear. Submit to one another out of fear for Christ. Now the word fear, when we hear that, it says, ooh, hang on a bit, that doesn't sound very pleasant.

you know, because, you know, the idea is dread and fright and, you know, it's a horrible feeling. But in the Bible, it is, the word fear is much broader than that, much broader.

[35 : 19] In the Old Testament, the fear of the Lord is a very common statement and the Hebrew word in that context carries the idea of a respect, an awe, a wonder.

and in its strongest sense, the fear of the Lord in its strongest sense means that I am overwhelmed by something.

I'm not cowering, I'm overwhelmed by something. I'm controlled by something. And the fear of the Lord in the Old Testament is to be overwhelmed with wonder before the greatness of God and his love.

And so Exodus says, fear the Lord so you don't have to fear the Lord. What do you mean by that? It's be overwhelmed by his greatness and his majesty and his love and his covenant with you.

Be overwhelmed by that. Don't take that for granted because if you do take that for granted, you will at some point in the future be cowering in his presence. His, be overwhelmed by his bright holiness and magnificent love means that you find him fearfully beautiful, wonderful, awesome in the truest sense.

[36 : 55] You see, that's why the more we experience God's grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, the more we experience a sense of a trembling awe and wonder before the greatness of all that, who he is and what he's done for us in Christ.

The deeper you go into it, the greater the sense of majesty the gospel is. Romans 5, verses 6 to 8 tells us the cost of God's love for us.

When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. God demonstrates his own love for us in this.

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And so for the spouse, holding past hurts against their spouse, the way we deal with our self-centeredness is to realize before the majesty of God, I am worthy of death.

I'm an ungodly sinner. You see, one verse, and yet, one verse before this, we are told the Holy Spirit, the work of the Holy Spirit, is to pull the reality of God's love into our hearts in such a way that it fills up this hole that is in us.

[38 : 26] It's the thing that deals with the rejection that we feel, the hurts, the past hurts, the weariness, the protective layer that we put around our hearts, and it transforms us into the image of Jesus and gives us hope when life is difficult and marriage is hard.

God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who's given to us. You see, when we understand this, we can now see why Paul introduces the subject of marriage with a summons to love each other, to submit to each other out of fear of Christ.

because every single one of us come into these relationships driven by all kinds of fears and all kinds of desires and all kinds of needs.

And if we think, which is often the, we do, and particularly around the looking for the perfect partner in the new marriage movement, we come into marriage thinking that marriage is going to correct our broken hearts to fill up the disorder of our hearts.

Inevitably, we're using a spouse to meet my needs. We're not serving them at all. Only the love of God displayed in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ for our forgiveness being poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit can fill up our need for love and acceptance and approval.

[40 : 07] I become a whole person in Christ. I'm safe in him which allows me to cross the demilitarization zone towards my spouse and love them.

It's only Jesus who takes away that self-preservation protective layer from my heart. You see, that means that when how does that happen?

We need to be so immersed in his teaching in his example and his sacrifice that those things what Christ has done for me what who I am in him the gospel dominate my inner life capture my imagination and simply bubble out spontaneously when we are faced with some kind of challenge. You see, my problem all those years ago with 1 Corinthians 13 was I was looking to preach it not looking to apply it. Looking to preach it not apply it.

when we receive it means when we receive criticism as you would expect to as a flawed human being that criticism will never crush us because deep down inside of us we know that Jesus knows every single one of my flaws he knows every single one of my failings he knows every dark corner of my existence and my life he knows it right down to the depths of its darkness and its evil in a way that my spouse doesn't even know and yet he still went to the cross and died for me and he still loves me and he still accepted me completely there's my safety it also means that when we give criticism to our spouse we will do so with a gentleness and a patience because our whole inner world will be saturated with the sense of

[42 : 25] Jesus love and patience and gentleness with me I would be able to give the criticism with patience and kindness and love and mercy and tenderness because I'm not reliant upon my spouse to change to make me feel better now of course this doesn't mean that every time we're criticised our immediate response deep within our hearts is calmness and peace and Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so inevitably before the brain kicks in adrenaline does and the fight or the flight one kicks in as a response but deep down inside the person and work of Jesus will ultimately bring your strength strength we go there and he will lift us up and it takes years and years and years of reflection it requires disciplined prayer it requires the study of God's word because the Holy Spirit brings the word of God of the gospel into our hearts Bible study reading it takes innumerable conversations with friends and other Christians to gain a greater perspective on ourselves it takes dynamic congregational worship it takes all sorts of things but gradually bit by bit when we see ourselves more and more through the eyes of the gospel we also see others through the eyes of the gospel when the gospel the word of God dwells in our hearts richly as Colossians 3 says we find the power to serve we find the power to give and to take criticism well to not expect our spouse or our marriage to meet our needs and to heal up all of our hurts the love of God as displayed through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ for our forgiveness for our acceptance being poured constantly into the center of our hearts through the Holy Spirit through the word of God by the word of God is the power every marriage needs to flourish to finish to finish to finish!

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