

The Church Is the Bride of Christ

Ephesians 5:22-33

Sunday, November 23, 2014

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 5:22–33 (NIV84)

²² *Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*

²⁵ *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church— ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.*

I. Introduction

What is the story of the Bible? If you were asked that question, what would you say? I can sum up the story in six words: Kill the dragon, get the girl. Of course, the story of the Bible is a bit more complicated than that, but at the heart of the Bible is a rescue mission and a love story. It’s a story of a man pursuing a woman. It’s a story of a husband rescuing his wife.

The last few weeks I’ve been talking about the identity of the church, and today I’ll talk about how the church is the bride of Christ. It’s a fitting metaphor, because marriage is central to the Bible. In fact, the Bible begins and ends with a marriage. Today, I’ll trace the theme of marriage through the Bible. I won’t deal with every aspect of marriage, but I’ll look at how the theme of marriage describes the relationship with God and his people. And then, at the end, I’ll talk about how that should affect our lives and the life of this church.

II. God Creates Marriage . . .

As I said, the Bible begins with a marriage. We find that in Genesis 2, the second chapter of the whole Bible. God has just created the first man. But God knew the man needed someone else. This is what we read in Genesis 2:18-24:

¹⁸ The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

¹⁹ Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.

²⁰ So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ²¹ So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

²³ The man said,

“This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken out of man.”¹

²⁴ For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

This is the first marriage ceremony. God made Eve out of Adam, for Adam. And Adam breaks out into a love poem, which is what verse 23 is. Verse 24 indicates that this is the norm for all marriage. This is God’s definition of marriage. It’s the same definition of marriage that Jesus affirms (Matt. 19:3-6; Mark 10:6-9). In fact, in Matthew 19, Jesus says that God, the Creator, authored these words in Genesis.² So, Jesus affirms that this passage is God’s Word, and it is the one true definition of marriage.

While that is how God created marriage, I want you to think about this: God could have created humans so they didn’t need marriage. He could have created them to all be single, without sexual reproduction. God could have made humans to reproduce in different ways. But God *chose* to create humans to come together in marriage, and to become one flesh. Now why is that?

III. But Marriage Is about Something More.

Today’s Scripture reading tells us what the purpose of marriage is. In Ephesians, Paul tells us some amazing truths. He tells that God chose certain people to be Christians before he

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture passages are taken from the New International Version (1984).

² Matthew 19:4-5 reads, “‘Haven’t you read,’ he replied, ‘that at the beginning *the Creator* “made them male and female,”⁵ and *said*, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”?’” (emphasis added).

created the world (Eph. 1:3-14). He tells us that God took Jews and Gentiles and made them into one new man, the church, the body of Christ (Eph. 2:14-18). He tells us that God displays his own wisdom to supernatural powers through the church (Eph. 3:10-11). And now he says that God made marriage to point to the relationship between God and his people.

In the passage we just heard read, Paul says that husbands are the head of their wives, just as Christ is the head of the church. Then, after saying that husbands should love their wives as Christ love the church, he quotes Genesis 2:24: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Eph. 5:31). And then, in Ephesians 5:32, we read this: “³²This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.” Genesis 2:24 is about Christ and the church! How can that be?

I think what Paul is saying is that God created marriage to point to a greater relationship than one between two humans. Human marriage points to the marriage between God and his people. It’s a strange thought, one that causes us to stop and think. You see, a marriage is a covenant relationship, one that’s binding. It’s not a contract that can be torn up or bought out. It’s far deeper than that. And marriage is exclusive. This exclusive, covenant relationship is one that God has with his people. He will not share us with false gods, or idols. Marriage is a sign that points us to God. Just as it is not good for man to be alone, it is not good for us to be apart from God. We were made by God, for God. Just as a man shall leave his father and mother to become one with his wife, Jesus left his Father to become one with his bride, the church.

This idea actually runs throughout all of Scripture.

IV. God Chooses and Pursues His Bride.

In the Old Testament, God chose Abraham and his descendants, Israel, to be his people. He makes that clear in Deuteronomy 7:7-8:

⁷The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

God chose his people not because they were lovely, but simply because he loved them. Some theologians have compared the covenant making ceremony on Mount Sinai, in Exodus 19-24, to

a wedding ceremony. It was then that God made Israel into a nation, and into his bride. We find this idea confirmed in the new covenant passage in Jeremiah 31:

³¹ “The time is coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD (Jer. 31:31-32).

God was their husband, but they broke the covenant he made with them. If you know the history of Israel in the Old Testament, you know that they were faithless. Instead of worshiping only the one true God, they often worshiped idols as well. Throughout the prophets, this idol worship is likened to prostitution. We might call it spiritual adultery. The Israelites were cheating on their husband, God. They didn’t honor the exclusive covenant made with him.³

What’s amazing is that God continues to pursue his wayward bride. This is pictured most clearly in Hosea. God commanded Hosea, a prophet, to “take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD” (Hos. 1:2). So Hosea obeyed and he married Gomer, who apparently was not faithful to him. They had three children. We’re not even sure if Hosea was the father of all of them. Then Gomer is likened to Israel. Just as she cheated on Hosea, Israel cheated on God. Therefore, God was going to punish Israel, but he also promised he would be gracious and he would win her back. He said,

- ¹⁴ “Therefore I am now going to allure her;
I will lead her into the desert
and speak tenderly to her.
- ¹⁵ There I will give her back her vineyards,
and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
There she will sing as in the days of her youth,
as in the day she came up out of Egypt.
- ¹⁶ “In that day,” declares the LORD,
“you will call me ‘my husband’;
you will no longer call me ‘my master.’ . . .
- ¹⁹ I will betroth you to me forever;
I will betroth you in righteousness and justice,
in love and compassion.

³ This can be seen most explicitly in Ezekiel 16 and 23, two powerful chapters that depict God’s finding and marrying” Israel, and her faithlessness.

²⁰ I will betroth you in faithfulness,
and you will acknowledge the LORD. . . .

I will show my love to the one I called ‘Not my loved one.’
I will say to those called ‘Not my people,’ ‘You are my people’;
and they will say, ‘You are my God.’ ” (Hos. 2:14-16, 19-20, 23)

I should add that four weeks ago, we read this in 1 Peter 2:10: “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” This is clearly an allusion to Hosea. God is now fulfilling his promise in the church.

Isaiah prophesied of the day when God would come and “marry his people.” Isaiah 61:10 says:

I delight greatly in the LORD;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

And Isaiah 62:5 says:

As a young man marries a maiden,
so will your sons marry you;
as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you.

God promised he would come, clothe his bride in salvation and righteousness, and marry her.

V. The Bridegroom Comes for His Bride.

The New Testament begins with the news that the bridegroom has come for his bride. This is told in many different ways. John the Baptist made it clear that he himself was not the Christ, the Messiah, the one who was supposed to come for his bride. He said, “²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:29-30).

Jesus made it clear that he saw himself as the bridegroom. In Matthew 9, John’s own disciples asked Jesus why he and his disciples didn’t fast, like John and the disciples. Jesus said to them, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast” (Matt. 9:15).

Jesus came to win back his bride. He made that clear. But in order to make her a bride suitable for a King, Jesus had to do something. He had to make her clean and clothe her in “garments of salvation” (Isa. 61:10), as Isaiah said.

VI. The Bride Must Be Cleansed and Clothed for the Groom.

Jesus taught two parables that relate to marriage. One is found in Matthew 22. He tells the story of a king who throws a banquet to honor the wedding of his son. He sends his servants out with invitations to come to the feast, but the ones he invited don't come. So, he goes and invites more, but they still don't come. They mistreat and even kill the king's servants. So the king destroys those he invited, the ones who didn't come. And then he told his servants to invite anyone they could find. This is the rest of the story:

¹⁰ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. ¹¹ “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ¹² ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless. ¹³ “Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴ “For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

Jesus tells this story to show that the faithless Israelites, the ones who rejected and even killed God's prophets, don't belong at the feast. But God invites others, Gentiles. Still, the only people who can remain at the feast are the ones who have been properly clothed. They are the ones God has chosen. They are the ones who have been clothed in Jesus' righteousness, who have been credited with his moral perfection. They are the ones who have been made clean by him.

That's another thing we see in the Ephesians 5 passage that was read today. Paul writes, “²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” Jesus had to wash the church. In one sense, he did that by dying for her sins. That is what is meant when we sing of being washed in Jesus' blood. His blood, which represents his life, was given on the cross to pay for our sin. Christians are now considered “clean” because their sin has been paid for in full. And Jesus doesn't just stop there. Through the Holy Spirit at work in us, he continues to wash us, to make us clean, so that we can be “without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” And he does that through the word—the

Bible. The reason why the Bible must be at the center of our ministries as a church is because that is the tool Jesus uses to make us holy. When we read the Bible, we get to know God better. We become convicted of our sin. And we know how to live as his people. All of this helps us become holy, to become a beautiful bride ready to meet her husband.

VII. We Must Be Ready.

Though Jesus makes us fit to be his bride, we must also do our part to be ready. From what I can tell, we must do this by believing rightly and living rightly. In other words, we need to have pure doctrine and pure lives. Surely, we must also have pure hearts, but both doctrine and lifestyle are highlighted. Last week, I read from a passage in 2 Corinthians 11. Let's read the first four verses:

¹ I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing that. ² I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. ³ But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. ⁴ For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.

Paul wants the Corinthians—and us—to be presented to Jesus as pure, as virgins. But he's afraid this won't happen, because they—and we—might be seduced by false teaching, just as Eve was seduced by Satan. Paul doesn't mean you have to literally be a virgin to be a Christian, of course. But he's using that metaphor of marriage. We are to be exclusively God's. We are to be pure. One theologian I read this week, Ray Ortlund, claims that "Sinners reunited with the Saviour by a new covenant find their lost virginity re-created."⁴ In other words, our purity is restored. But we must work on staying clean, by believing rightly. God will not share his glory with other gods. We must believe in the true Jesus. Our God is a jealous God, one who demands an exclusive relationship.

We must also have pure lives. Jesus' second parable about a marriage is found in Matthew 25:1-13. It involves ten virgins, who go out to meet the bridegroom. Five were prepared to wait for a time, and five were not. The five who were unprepared were not there to meet the

⁴ Raymond C. Ortlund, *Whoredom: God's Unfaithful Wife in Biblical Theology*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 152.

bridegroom. Therefore, they were shut out of the wedding banquet. Jesus point: “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour” (v. 13). Keeping watch seems to involve obedience, doing what Jesus has commanded us to do.

There’s another passage, 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, that ties together several themes we’ve discussed, including the body of Christ, the temple, marriage, and idolatry. Paul’s point is that since we are united to Christ in a spiritual marriage, since we are the temple in which the Holy Spirit resides, we shouldn’t be involved with sexual immorality. Idolatry is usually tied to improper use of sex or money. Again, we must be careful not to make anything an idol, since this is spiritual adultery.

VIII. The Bridegroom Will Come to Get His Bride.

The final thing we should know from the Bible’s big story about marriage is that Jesus will one day return for his bride. When Jesus returns, there will be a wedding feast of epic proportions. This is what we read in Revelation 19:6-9:

⁶Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

“Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

⁷Let us rejoice and be glad
and give him glory!

For the wedding of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready.

⁸Fine linen, bright and clean,
was given her to wear.”

(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)

⁹Then the angel said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’ ” And he added, “These are the true words of God.”

When Jesus returns, there our wedding to him will be complete. And notice what it says: “his bride has made herself ready.” That means we must do our part to be ready. But here’s the good news: the “fine linen, bright and clean,” which we are told “stands for the righteous acts of the saints,” “was given her to wear.” That’s an example of the passive voice called the “divine passive.” It means that God is the one who gave his bride the fine linen to wear. Without God’s activity and power, we would be lost. We couldn’t act righteously. We would never seek after

God, put our faith in him, and live for him if he didn't empower us to do all of those things through the activity of the Holy Spirit. But that doesn't mean we sit back and do nothing. God makes us righteous, but we should try to live righteously for him.

In the end, Jesus will return to meet his bride. The heavenly city of the New Jerusalem—which is another way of saying all the host of saints—will be “prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” That's the beautiful vision we read of in Revelation 21:1-4:

¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

IX. Application

So, what does this mean for our lives?

One, if you are a Christian, know that God has chosen you, pursued you, cleaned up, and is in the process of making you beautiful. You are precious in his sight.

Two, this means that the church must pursue pure doctrine and pure living. We want to know God rightly and live for him rightly. That means keeping out false doctrine, and pursuing right doctrine. (“Doctrine” just means “teaching.”) If you love someone, you want to know the truth about that person. So, since we love God, we should want to teach the truth about him. We should also desire to obey him, from the heart. If Jesus is our husband, we should love him and submit to his leadership.

Three, if you are married, your marriage should be a reflection of Jesus and his people. Your marriage should point people to Christ. We can do that by following what Paul says in Ephesians 5 about wives submitting to their husbands and husbands sacrificially loving their wives.⁵ Husbands and wives need to forgive each other, which is difficult because there can be

⁵ G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 883-83, writes, “When problems arise in the marriage relationship, husbands and wives need to remember that there is an ultimate redemptive-historical purpose for marriage that transcends their own human relationship. As husbands unconditionally love their wives and as wives respond to this love in a faithful manner, they are actors on a redemptive-historical stage performing a play before the on-looking audience of the world. As husbands and wives perform their roles on this stage in the way God has designed, their roles are an object lesson to the watching world that Christ has left his Father to love and become one with his bride, and that

do so much day-to-day conflict and tension in a marriage. We should also remember that marriage is meant to help sanctify each other. Husbands and wives should help the other become more holy, by pointing out each other's sin and helping each other grow in faith and love. Remember, your marriage is more about your comfort and desires: it's about Jesus and the church. Let's let our marriages reflect that reality.

Also, I have to add this: we must be careful not to redefine marriage. I say "we," here, because marriage has been under the process of redefinition for quite some time. First, it was the no-fault divorce. We have certainly seen a lot of divorce in the church. This is against God's design for marriage, which is a covenant that can only be broken by death. But now, people want to redefine marriage from a one-man, one-woman union to a two-men or two-women union. I think there are a number of important arguments against this redefinition of marriage, but here's one that comes directly from what we are talking about. God designed marriage to be hetero. In other words, he made marriage to be a union of two people who are different. ("Hetero" is a prefix that means "other.") In human marriage, we see people of two different sexes coming together. In the divine marriage, we see God and man coming together—not God and God, or man and man. Marriage is not "homo"—which means "same." It is "hetero" by design.

Finally, each individual here must be ready to meet the bridegroom. I already said the church must be pure. But do you know Jesus? Have you put your trust in him? Do you have some evidence that you are being cleansed through his Word? Are you being clothed in garments of salvation, which will appear as righteous deeds? Do you have some evidence in your life that you have become part of the bride of Christ? If not, turn to Jesus today. Just pray to God that he would forgive you for your sins. Tell him you want to be made clean. Tell him you want to be part of the wedding feast at the end of time.

The church is the bride of Christ. Let's live like it.

Let us pray . . .

those who respond in faith can become part of this corporate bride. . . . When conflict enters the marriage relationship and division begins to occur, both partners need to remember that they have covenanted with each other before God to love each other, to remain loyal to that covenant, to continue to become one and, hence, to maintain the peace of the new creation of which they are a part."