

Sermon for Sunday, December 4, 2011
Dr. Dan Doriani
Love and Marriage
Proverbs 5:15-21, 12:4, 18:22, 19:13-14

Prov. 5:15 Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. 16 Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? 17 Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. 18 May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. 19 A loving doe, a graceful deer — may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love. 20 Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress? Why embrace the bosom of another man's wife?

Prov. 12:4 A wife of noble character is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones. 18:22 He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the LORD. 19:13 A foolish son is his father's ruin, and a quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping. 19:14 Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the LORD.

Eph. 5:32 This is a profound mystery — but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Marriage is on my mind. I recently officiated at four weddings in thirty days. Each bride is a family friend. Three recently graduated from college – age twenty-two and twenty-three. That's rare today and reminded me how things have changed in America in recent decades.

Today, over forty percent of all babies are born outside of marriage. The percentage is rising in every ethnic group and social group. The number of divorces has dropped a little, but between forty and fifty percent of all marriages end in divorce. Seventy-two percent of all adults were married in 1960; today about half are married. The number of people who never marry is rising steadily. Why? Many simply live together. Today, most couples cohabit before they marry. But how many live together and refuse to marry? They want something, but not marriage. A relationship, but not a commitment.

Why do they fear commitment? Many fear divorce. For some, the great trauma of their childhood came the day their parents announced, "We're getting a divorce." It was so painful, that they vowed: "I will never get a divorce. I will never put my children through that."¹ We want to protect ourselves and marriage seems risky. If we grow up in broken homes, we don't want to repeat it. The surest way to avoid divorce – never marry. Or, if divorced, not marry again.

That's a statistical approach. Another way to see this is through popular culture. While my friends at Central were preparing to marry, a popular reality TV show focused on a wedding. In it Kim Kardashian – I looked it up – got engaged to a handsome NBA forward named Kris Humphries. They married in August and divorced seventy-two days later: irreconcilable differences. We'd call them petty squabbles. He stepped on her toes and broke her pedicured toenails – twice. Big feet.

The great question: Why did millions of people watch the show? How did it make it to the nightly news? I asked my facebook friends. They said the beauty and wealth of the Kardashians are part of the draw. But the core is twofold. It's a mockery of marriage – who would want to defend this? And relief that however deranged my relationships are, some people are worse.

¹ Divorce Generation, Susan Thomas, Wall Street Journal 7/9/11.

Our culture has conflicting marriage ideals. We're children of God and children of culture. We can't point a finger and condemn culture. We're part of it. Its values and attitudes shape us. So our culture adopts – and we adopt– contradictory notions of marriage. These notions make it harder to find satisfaction in marriage.

First, we believe in redemption through the perfect romance. We seek the soul mate with whom I am perfectly compatible. When we're together, sparks fly and he or she accepts me just as I am. She will make me happy, he will fulfill me emotionally. So, if we do risk marriage, we want the perfect mate.

But wait, there is no perfect mate. Few women can match the images promoted by the media. Men are pudgy, bald, and sloppy. She likes Michael Jackson! He *doesn't* like Michael Jackson! He voted for a "loathsome politician." He mispronounced Christendom. We look someone over. This could be the one! How can we be sure? What if someone better is round the corner?

But there is no perfect mate. Luther called marriage a school of character. It teaches us to love women who toss their pig tails into our face as we sleep. We learn to love by caring for bawling infants and their infinite needs.

Marriage is hard. There are problems. The biggest problems are not communication, romance, inlaws, or money. No, the biggest problems are the husband and wife. Marriage is the union of two sinners. We always marry the wrong person. If we pause, we know we are the wrong person too.

People discover this pretty quickly – in three days, three months. Then many turn to a second concept of marriage. The contract, the negotiated arrangement. Here each party contributes and receives in roughly equal measure. Then they can craft a life that is functional, if not romantic. If passion cools – and passion always cools eventually – the couple is content if they can *achieve desirable goals*, goals that two people reach together. So, if they have happy children a nice house, a partner for parties, vacations, that's enough, right?

We say we hate the traditional marriage, where family seeks an advantageous match for a child. Parents look for a spouse from a respectable family, with prospects and connections that will strengthen the clan. The strong spouse is the goal, not the loving spouse. Now, if a marriage fails romantically, couples endure if they can fall back on a rather traditional concept – we marry for the benefits.

But neither of these is right. The romantic ideal is an illusion. The perfect romance will not bestow life because there is no perfect romance. The contractual marriage is dull, materialistic, selfish. And both concepts make it plausible to quit if things don't go our way – when romance cools and we don't feel in love any more. Or when the contract isn't getting *me* what I want.

Yet God created humans with a longing for companionship (marriage and friends). This world is a beautiful, difficult place. Forces give life and threaten death. We don't want to explore and navigate it alone. We want friends, family, a spouse for the journey. God also gave us drives that lead toward marriage - the desire for intimate love, children, for shared strength to do things no one person can do alone. These forces push us toward marriage, which Proverbs studies.

1. The Nature of Marriage (Proverbs 2:16-17)

The book of Proverbs is an open letter. Solomon wrote Proverbs for his son, but Israel and the world can read it. This letter to a man often warns about the temptress, the adulterous or wayward woman. We wonder: why all the warnings about wayward women? Why not wayward men? But the father will warn about tempting women much as mother will warn about men who seduce.

The first warning goes like this. Solomon urges his son to choose wisdom, personified as a woman, as a female companion, and to reject wild men and immoral women. A couplet in Proverbs 2 says wisdom will deliver Solomon's son: "From the adulteress, with her smooth [seductive] words. [She] forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God."

Similarly, Malachi 2 condemns men who arbitrarily divorce their wives because "she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant."

When we say marriage is a covenant, we break with the prevailing views of marriage in our culture: the perfect romance and the contractual arrangement. A covenant is a personal bond, a bond of love, a life-long relationship, sealed with vows that are taken in God's presence, with God as witness.

Weddings reflect this in the way they have two sets of vows. The first set is the "I do:" "Do you John, take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife? Will you love her, cherish her, as long as you both shall live." The bride and groom say "I do." To whom? Technically, they promise to each other and answer the pastor and do so before God and witnesses. The couple makes promises to God, to society, to each other.

Having spoken to God, then they make vows to each other: "I take you to be my lawful wedded husband and I do promise and covenant before God and these witnesses, to be your loving and faithful wife, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live."

Tim Keller's book, The Meaning of Marriage, rightly says that a covenant blends law and love. Covenants are intimate, personal and legal. They are based on feeling and affection, but also binding and unconditional.

Sixty years ago, Bertrand Russell said romance and passion can flourish only when it is free and spontaneous. "Duty kills love," he said. Love is spontaneous, not a response to oaths and promises. This view is common today. But the Bible says love comes to fullness when lovers enter a covenant relationship with each other. The relationship becomes "more intimate *because* it is legal. How so?

First, we see that a public, binding marriage vow is an act of love in itself. If someone says "I love you, but I don't want to marry you" they *may mean*, "I don't love you enough to curtail my freedom for you." The vow to live in covenant is a proof of love. The husband and wife give themselves now and always.

The vows make the relationship more personal, not less. When two people are dating or living together, they often feel that they have to prove their value daily. They want to impress each other. The chemistry, spark, has to be there, some fear, or the relationship will be over. So there is a whiff of consumerism – self-promotion, marketing and a suppressed question: Is this a good transaction?

If there is a little consumerism today, there is a great deal of contractual thinking: “I’ll stay in this as long as it works for me, as long as I’m getting roughly as much as I give.” If that’s love, it’s a weak, confused sort of love.

But in marriage, we can be honest, vulnerable within the safety of our vows. We can reveal ourselves, flaws and all - we all have many flaws. As Genesis says, we can be naked and unashamed – physically and emotionally.

"G. K. Chesterton pointed out that when we fall in love we have a natural inclination not just to express affection but to make promises." We say, "I will *always* love you".... Real love instinctively desires permanence. Solomon's great love song ends with this very thought (Song 8:6-7).

“Place me like a seal over your heart... for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away.”

Secular psychologists have shown this. One study questioned couples that were ready to divorce: "Do you have enough respect or memory of the love you had, that you're willing to try one more time?" If they said yes, seventy-five percent reported happiness and healing two years later.

The American Values, based at University of Chicago, studies unhappy marriages and found that sixty-four percent turned around if the couple simply stayed married. More amazing, seventy-eight recovered if the marriage was very unhappy. The conclusions show the value of covenant, commitment.

To quote: “Many currently happily married spouses have had extended periods of marital unhappiness, often for quite serious reasons, including alcoholism, infidelity, verbal abuse... neglect, depression, illness, and work reversals. Why did these marriages survive where other marriages did not? A marital endurance ethic plays a big role. Spouses said that their marriages got happier, not because they resolved problems but because they stubbornly outlasted them. With time... many sources of conflict and distress eased." That's covenant! Unhappy spouses were hardly different in age, education, from those who stay married.

Perhaps you've noticed that our work can give us insight into the Lord's ways, if we're attentive. In Matthew, a centurion, army officer, has unique insight into God's authority. A lawyer may see how justice and love meet in God's character. Physicians see God's design. Mothers understand God's sacrifice for his children. Salesmen may see that the gospel is a great deal and market it to friends. Yes?

This leads to marriage as bond and covenant again. Of the eight people in recent weddings, four met in arduous physical activity. One couple met at FBI boot camp. They've run marathons side by side. Another, competitive cycling. These are endurance sports, sports with no subs. You don't quit half way up the mountain, twenty-five miles from home, when the storm is tearing at you. This isn't darts. Mental toughness counts. These couple should be ready to endure – if they transfer the lessons from sports to marriage. But everyone has some chance to learn the value of perseverance and apply to marriage.

2. The Character of a Good (and bad) spouse (Proverbs 12:4, 18:22, 19:13-14)

Solomon surprises us with a series of sayings about a good or bad wife. He describes a noble or quarrelsome wife, not the good or bad husband because it's written by a man for a son. All sayings apply to husbands and wives.

See the contrast: "A wife of noble character is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones" (Prov 12:4). The proverb assumes the man is good; his good wife, visible to all, crowns him with honor in public. But a bad wife - unfaithful, contentious, incompetent – robs him of happiness and destroys his vitality from within.²

It's "Better to live on a corner of the roof ["in desert" (21:19)] than share a house with a quarrelsome wife" (21:9). The home should be a place of refuge in literal storms of rain, a place of peace in emotional storms. But a quarrelsome husband or wife makes life so miserable, you may prefer the roof.

Proverbs 19:13 says a foolish son undermines from within, a contentious wife drives you out. But who would marry a contentious spouse? No one aims for it. But Proverbs points out the limits of human wisdom and calculation. "Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the LORD" (19:14). Parents work hard to give their children an inheritance. There can follow a path toward prosperity so they can give an inheritance.

In that day, parents also tried to guide the selection of a good spouse. A good spouse is so important and "So much that is incalculable is at stake; one has to accept that she is a gift from Yahweh."³ So, "He who *finds* a wife finds that is good and receives favor from the LORD" (18:22). Who can arrange a good marriage – the Lord. Why does he say this?

Stanley Hauerwas wisely said: "We never know whom we marry; we just think we do. Even if we first marry the right person, [in] a while, he or she will change. Even if we don't plan to change, marriage itself will change us. Flaws, once so tiny, loom large. The crucible of this intimate relationship, where everything matters so much, reveals the fault lines of character.

So husband and wife change. Hauerwas says, "the primary problem is learning how to *love the stranger* to whom you find yourself married." That can lead to discouragement, despair, anger. We need motives to persevere lest love grow cold. I mention three helps.

First, the believer can draw on the love of Jesus. The Spirit who pours his love into our hearts. Second, the vows, our promise to be faithful, can strengthen us. Third, God gives the natural gift of affection and attraction to husband and wife.

3. Love or affection in marriage (Proverbs 5:2-6, 15-21)

Solomon's song describes romance well: "O daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you if you find my lover, what will you tell him? Tell him I am faint with love" (5:8). That's romantic love. The love that makes two people sit so close, the love that makes a bride blaze with light. It makes the couple joyful, even intoxicated with love. God gives that to men and women and blesses it. Proverbs 5:20 says, "May you ever be captivated by her love." Captivated is the normal word for drunk – drunk with love.

Proverbs 5 says don't listen to the adulteress; "her feet go down to death and ruin." Instead, channel and enjoy your natural affection and intimacy: "Drink water from your own cistern, running water from

² Waltke 1:521-2.

³ Von Rad, 101.

your own well... May your fountain be blessed... Rejoice in the wife of your youth." This is God's gift. Romantic passion for one person in all the world who is uniquely appealing and yours.

What keeps a couple faithful to their covenant when marriage gets hard – and all marriages get hard? First, this natural affection. Second, the vows themselves.

Lewis Smedes said, "My wife has lived with at least five different men since we were wed and each of the five has been me." We change so much, don't we? In little ways, day to day, but in grand unforeseeable ways as life works its will upon us. How can we love this new person? Vows, plus understanding the work of Jesus.

4. Jesus and marriage

As Paul finishes his longest teaching on marriage, he adds, "This is a profound mystery but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32). Yes, Jesus embodies the covenant love that is vital to marriage. God entered a covenant relationship with his bride, Israel. When she violated the covenant, like an unfaithful spouse, God stayed faithful. Jesus stayed faithful to us – and it shapes us. Smedes says some people expect their feelings to tell them how to live. But feelings flicker and fade.

But if feelings, so vital to marriage, change, what will sustain us? Not our achievements, not our dreams, but our vows. How can he and his wife love one another as they change? Because he can say and she can say, "I am the one who promised to be there with you." Promises keep us from wandering without direction amid the shifting vagaries of the heart.

I recall a day when Jesus' disciples fail him. He is headed for the cross, to die for their sins. When he tells them, they tell him he's nuts. They ask bad questions (there *is* such a thing). Later, they fail in a commission. He sighs and asks: "How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?"

We have these moments, even days, in marriage. Wives want to ask, "Who are you and what did you do with my husband?" The gospels are so honest about this moment. Jesus is exasperated. He asks, "How long shall I put up with you?"

And here is the answer: Till the end. Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (John 4:34). The climax of that work: his sacrifice in Jerusalem. And he determined to finish that, to keep the vows he made eternally, within the persons of the Godhead. He keeps promises he made to Israel. So Jesus went to Jerusalem, died on the cross and said, "It is finished, complete." He loved faithfully to the end. Jesus' endurance brings us life, if we believe in him. And he said, "Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself for us."

Yet, as much work as marriage demands, the Lord intends it for joy, too. Jesus inaugurated his ministry at a wedding. When the wine ran low, he turned 180 gallons of water into delicious wine. That pointed to a promise of restoration in the prophet Joel 3:18: "In that day the mountains will drip new wine."

Marriage is one of the joys of God's world. A good marriage is a sign that the restoration of life, despite sin, has begun. God wants us to live happily in this world, not to flee it. Marriage is a "yes" to God's earth, to the hope of living strong as we build a home, pursue a call, seek children and friends.

Yes vows constrain us, but they liberate too. They're like the weights that make athletes stronger. For love leads us to vows, but love will hide itself some days. Then it's not love that sustains marriage, but marriage sustains love. We learn that passion leads to marriage, but marriage can also rekindle passion. We may not jump at the electricity of holding hands, of the first kiss, but something remains.

So we savor the goodness of God's creation. We don't fear commitment – Jesus has shown how it is both hard and good. We don't look for the perfect spouse, we look for a companion with whom we can grow better together. We know that God means to bless us. We don't steal blessings from him. He designed us to live as husband and wife together. He planted the desire for relationships in us – whether married or single - and gives opportunities to satisfy those desires. We should take them as hungry, happy children take delicious meals from their mother.

Just as Jesus, fully God, became fully man, so we seek a marriage that is fully human and fully offered to God. We take spiritual life and bodily life in their riches and thank God for all of them. May the Lord grant us this, claimed by faith in the one who showed faithful covenant love.