

The Goal is Marriage
Genesis 2:21 – 24
Ephesians 5: 25 - 33
Multiple passages
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
February 14, 2016
Valentine's Day

A few housekeeping details. First, we are putting the "I am" series of studies from John's gospel on a brief hold. We have made a change in the schedule this week to take into account the timing that today is Valentine's Day. Valentine's Day is **not** part of the church calendar year. It is a cultural holiday marketed to promote the sale of greeting cards, chocolates and fine dining. Nonetheless, over the past few weeks I have sensed the prompting of the Holy Spirit to use today as an opportunity for us to revisit the place of marriage in our world as the Bible teaches us. So that is what we will do.

We begin with the affirmation to live the life God has assigned you to live.

Live the life God has assigned you to live – 1 Corinthians 7:17

¹⁷ Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.

In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul explores at length the place of marriage, engagement, singleness, sexual morality, sexual immorality, temptation, widowhood, sexual intimacy in marriage, selflessness, and more within the framework of Christian teaching. Near the middle of his instruction to the Corinthians, and us, Paul declares (verse 17): Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. We need to keep Paul's declaration in mind as we move through the rest of this message together. God assigns to each of us the life he intends us to live. There are no cookie cutter standards in the Christian faith. We are not all called to be the same. Live the life that the Lord has assigned to you. We do not all experience the same challenges in life. What you deal with is not what I deal with in life.

That said, Paul makes clear in this passage God has preferred ways for us as face the challenges of the life to which God calls us. I will be emphasizing marriage in this sermon. But we recognize that God calls some to singleness. Paul makes that clear. Whatever the status of the life God gives to us, we seek to live it according to the moral framework God has established in creation.

In contrast to what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7, we recognize that there is a strong anti-marriage in the world around us.

The anti-marriage message of the world around us

Over the past several years I have subscribed to the following magazines: Self, Vogue, Marie Claire, and Vanity Fair. In part I was curious to know what do these

magazines say, believe, and teach regarding marriage? These are leading magazines of the day. According to them, what is the place of marriage in our world today?

The surprising discovery was that in these magazines there is no place for marriage. These magazines offer articles on relationships between couples, sexual intimacy, dating apps, cultural expectations, hookups and pickups, love, non-traditional relationships, break ups and cultural realities. They offer articles on every conceivable type of relationship – except marriage. Marriage is not on their horizon. Marriage is not a cultural reality to be remembered, exalted or lifted up. Within their pages, it hardly exists at all.

This was not always the case in America. If you watch classic old movies, you will discern a very different attitude. I am thinking of movies such as Christmas in Connecticut; It Happened on 5th Avenue; Holiday Affair; Holiday Inn; I'll Be Seeing You; It's a Wonderful Life; or White Christmas. These movies offer a great variety in story, plot line, and dramatic tension. But they share one thing in common. In each of them, the goal is marriage. In each movie, we want the characters to find their way to the altar and be married. Sadly, as a culture today, we no longer lift up marriage as an ideal, as a central and important goal of life.

I have noticed the phenomenon that the length of the engagement period is growing longer. I meet couples who get engaged and plan the wedding for two or three years later. [Full disclosure: this was not so for me and Lois Ann. I asked Lois Ann to marry me in early February 1982 and we were married on May 8th! How is it that everything fell into place so quickly? Well, as the Bible puts it (Nehemiah 4:6): the people had a mind to work.] When I ask young folk why they are making such a long engagement period, they tell me: "I want to finish school." "We want to have enough money for the reception." "I need to get established in my job first." And, in addition to these factors, I know that many parents today do not encourage their sons or daughters to set marriage as a near term goal of life. Parents do not wish for their children to get married "too soon." They want them to get their degree, to get settled in their occupation, and to be establish somewhat financially. There is nothing wrong with any of these goals – except that we allow them to squeeze the goal of being married as part of the equation as to what constitutes honorable faithful adulthood.

We need a return to the biblical teaching. We need to remember that God has given us guidance as to how the family ideal is woven into the world as he has made it. We need to remember common grace and how God has ordered the world.

Common Grace and how God has ordered the world – Genesis 2:15 - 18

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." ¹⁸Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."

If you study logic, you will learn that there are different types of argument, different ways to make your case, to be persuasive and convincing. A powerful form of argument is to argue from creation. An argument from creation is an argument that establishes that this is the nature of things. This is the way things are. The argument is based upon the realities we find in the world. It is powerful and persuasive because we know that we must live in the world as it is, as we find it. This is why Genesis is such an important book in the Bible. It sets the ground. It tells us how God has created the world. It lifts up those things that are woven into creation by God's will and purpose.

Genesis 1 tells us that God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 2 begins to tell us about our place as humans, men and women made in God's image, within the created order. God forms Adam and places him in the Garden of Eden. In the verses that follow we see what this means for Adam. What are some of the realities we can discern that God establishes for Adam – and for us – from this passage?

Life in the Garden involved work: in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. It involved permission: You may surely eat of every tree of the garden. And prohibition: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat. As we work through Genesis 2 we find all the elements of life that make life full and meaningful: marriage, stewardship, occupation, creativity, arts, family, community, children, poetry, and more. Theologians call such things as these *common grace*. A common grace is that which God gives to the human community. It is grace given to all.

Common graces include: government, art, rain, family, pleasure, food, friendship, community, education, and so on. In Matthew 5:45 Jesus tells us, "For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." Common grace is what God gives indiscriminately to all humanity.

In contrast, a special grace is a spiritual blessing reserved for God's people. Special grace is reserved for those who enter into relationship with Jesus Christ and so receive the blessings that he bestows upon the elect. Examples of special grace include the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper; being filled with and guided by the Holy Spirit; being part of the Church; having the spiritual veil lifted so that you may read and comprehend the meaning of sacred scripture, and so on.

So the blessings God gives include the common graces and the special graces. The end of Genesis chapter 2 highlights what may be the most important common grace God gives: marriage. Marriage plays a key role the human community's pursuit of honorable adulthood.

Marriage plays a key role in the pursuit of honorable adulthood – Genesis 2:24

²⁴Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Genesis 2 tells us a great deal about the social and cultural realities for us as humans in the world that God has created. Genesis 2 also lifts one facet of God's social

ordering of the world above the rest: the place of marriage. Genesis 2:24 is the benediction on the chapter. Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. The “Therefore” is at the end of the chapter tells us that has preceded has been leading up to this conclusion. This is message and purpose behind chapter 2. Marriage is the outcome God desires. He has established the created order as described in chapter 2 and marriage is the key ingredient that holds things together.

Let us look briefly at this verse to see what it tells us about the place of marriage in God’s ordering of human society. First, we are told a man shall leave his father and his mother. A man leaves. Prior to marriage, the most important relationship in a man, or woman’s, life is with mom and dad. We are born into a family. Mom and dad sacrifice in order to raise their children through the challenges of childhood into adulthood. One of the consequences of adulthood for a man is marriage. He leaves his family of origin behind in order to be married to his wife. The commitment a man makes to his wife changes the nature of the commitment the man had had with his parents. Prior to marriage, the most important relationship in the young man’s life was his relationship to mom and dad. After marriage, that relationship is no longer the primary relationship. It still has great value and importance, but it now secondary. His relationship to his wife takes precedence.

Many newly married couples find that there comes a point after their first months of marriage where they experience a significant conflict with the husband’s parents. The parents are getting used to their new status as second in importance. And the husband is learning the importance of placing his wife first in his life. Something happens: a disagreement, a blow up. A few days later the new husband’s father calls him and says, *“You know, you really disappointed your mom in not giving in to her wishes.”* And if the new husband is wise, he will reply, *“Dad, I really love and respect you and mom. But in this question, my wife’s desires take first precedence. I respect you, I have learned much from you and mom, but I have left your household.”*

In this sense, setting up a home as husband and wife is setting up a new government. It is a small government: just the members of your household. But it is within the little government that is the home that we learn self-government. The self-government within the home prepares us to play our role, take our place, in the larger governments of community, town, state, nation and world. One sad consequence of the breakdown of the family in the contemporary world is the erosion of the disciplines of self-government. The modern world is moving from self-government to state government – the state promises to take care of you, rather than you taking responsibility for your own self-government. This, of course, is a job that the state is not really capable of doing well.

The first step in setting up this new little government is when the new husband leaves his father and his mother and holds fast to his wife. That phrase hold fast means several things. The husband chooses his wife over his parents. He holds fast. In doing so, he and his wife are now creating a new family, one distinctive from the respective

families that he and his wife have come from. Holding fast is a commitment over time. Marriage is for a lifetime. A husband is called to hold fast to his wife spiritually, emotionally, relationally, economically, and sexually. Holding fast is a commitment to a lifetime together as husband and wife. And, holding fast provides the foundation for the sexual intimacy of marriage.

The natural consequence of sexual intimacy is children. There is a “one flesh” sense to the act of sexual intimacy. And, our children are also a reflection of that “one flesh” reality. Mom and dad each contribute half of the genes that determine their children. It takes a lot of work to raise children into faithful, honorable adulthood. It is a team effort.

A brief review: we began by noting Paul’s call to “lead the life that the Lord has assigned to” you. We are all in different stations of life; and that is okay. That said, we need to be aware that the modern world is seeking to erase and deny the place and importance of marriage in life. We noted how, from Genesis 2, God has ordered and established the social realities of the world in a certain way. Our task is to learn to live in the world as God has established it. And, we noted that marriage plays a decisive role in God’s ordering of our social world. Marriage is essential to the pursuit of honorable adulthood.

We have seen how marriage is an important common grace: a blessing God gives to all people. But something interesting happens in the pages of the New Testament. The New Testament expands our understanding of the common graces God gives in marriage.

Some of the common grace blessings of marriage – Ephesians 5:25 - 27

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

As you know, living together is a very common phenomenon today. Many modern folk do not see much value in expecting emotional and social commitment prior to sexual intimacy. People’s hearts are hardened. They cannot see the spiritual value of marriage. How is marriage different from living together? Marriage creates a new spiritual reality. Living together is a pale shadow of the reality of marriage. Let me point to some of the ways in which this is so.

Marriage promotes spiritual maturity. Husband and wife leave mom and dad. They make binding promises to one another for a lifetime. When husband and wife move in together they then learn to live with their spouse. When an unmarried couple move in together there are no promises. There is no public declaration of love and commitment. The families are informed of the decision, but they are not part of a celebration ceremony such as a wedding. Marriage teaches faithfulness. In a wedding, the couple make lifelong promises to each other. Marriage teaches couples to take the

long view; when considering marriage, a couple naturally considers lifelong questions. The choice to live together presents a couple with a much shorter horizon. The choice to live together implicitly requires settling for less. The cohabitating couple does not begin the process of joining all facets of life together as one. Most cohabiting couples keep separate bank accounts. Couples that are engaged to be married ask important questions of each other: “Do you want to have children?” “How many?” “What will be our shared spiritual commitments?” Engaged couples ask lifetime oriented questions of each other that cohabitating couples tend to gloss over. Couples who live together enjoy the blessings of sexual intimacy while missing the blessings that accompany the spiritual commitments of marriage – the joining together of two lives, on all levels, into one.

In this passage from Ephesians Paul writes, Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Paul is saying that there is a sanctifying process that happens in marriage. Husbands are to sacrifice for their wives in a manner that reflects Christ’s love for his church. A husband seeks to serve his wife as Christ loved the church, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the book of Hebrews, we are called to spur one another on to greater righteousness. A primary place where that encouragement happens in the Christian life is in the godly relationship between husband and wife.

One last point to make this morning. Marriage is also a special grace for those in Christ.

Marriage is also a special grace for those in Christ – Ephesians 5:31 - 32

³¹ “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

It is very significant that the passage where we began, the conclusion of Genesis 2:24, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” is also quoted by the Lord Jesus Christ (on more than one occasion). In Matthew 19:4 – 5 Jesus reaffirms and expands the teaching of Genesis. ⁴ He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’ ⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” Note: the teaching we have looked at from Genesis, the argument from creation, is reaffirmed by the Lord Jesus himself.

But the New Testament emphasis of this text does not stop there. The Apostle Paul, writing about the place of marriage in Ephesians 5, also quotes Genesis 2:24: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” Paul adds to Genesis 2:24, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying

that it refers to Christ and the church.” We argued earlier that marriage is a common grace, a blessing God gives to all people. But in this verse, Paul tells us that marriage is also a special grace. Paul calls this understanding of marriage a *mystery*. A mystery is something that cannot be solved. A mystery manages always to present new things to us. People are mysteries. Your spouse is a mystery. Your children are mysteries. Paul is telling us that there is something in the dynamic of the relationship between a husband and wife in the marriage bond that is a mystery. God is at work in it. Christ is at work in it. If you are in Christ, then Christ is at work in your marriage in a special way. Jesus Christ is using your marriage as part of his upward call in your life. Your marriage is one pathway that Jesus Christ is using to draw you to himself.

Are you in Christ this day my friend? Do you see his hand at work in your life? Do you see how Christ is seeking to draw you to himself through the relationships you find meaningful – especially in your relationship to your husband, or in your relationship to your wife? Let Christ be at work in your life today. Turn to him. Believe in him. And be saved.

Say “Amen” Somebody!

Genesis 2:21 – 24

²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³ Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man.”

²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Ephesians 5:25 – 33

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.