

God's Design for Marriage
Nehemiah 13:23-29
March 23, 2014

Introduction – Springtime!

This is the first Sunday in Spring! Winters here are long and it is nice to finally arrive at this point. I know Old Man Winter may have a few more blows to give, but we've already felt a bit of the warmth and promise of spring – and it feels really good!

One of the most distressing chapters in the entire Bible begins, “It was in the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle...” (II Samuel 11:1). Anyone know the verse? It is the opening line of the story of David and Bathsheba. The way it turned out, he should have gone out to battle. There is something about the season of spring that seems to awaken thoughts of romance. If you are a young person or remember the days of your youth, you may recall how spring seemed to stimulate romantic desires.

How many stories and songs are written about the love between a man and a woman? Countless – to be sure! We even have a holiday – Valentine's Day (which, BTW, scares me half to death each year). In secular music, love is the single theme that dominates the song world. In the world of movies, we have the very popular romantic drama and romantic comedy genres. And even most action/adventure films have some element of romance in them. Otherwise, how would men get their wives to agree to watch them?

The saying, “love makes the world go round” refers to the love between a man and a woman. Apart from knowing you are a child of God, is there any greater joy than being in love? And is there any deeper despair than losing that love? I don't know how you are, but even after nearly 35 years of marriage, Barry Manilow's old song just about pegs it for me:

You know I can't smile without you
I can't smile without you
I can't laugh and I can't sing
I'm finding it hard to do anything

You see, I feel sad when you're sad
 I feel glad when you're glad
 If you only knew what I'm going through
 I just can't smile without you..

I know. Call me “co-dependent.” But it gets better and better each day for me. And if you’ve never been in love, isn’t that one of your deepest longings?

Why is that?

It is because we were designed by God to give ourselves to another in love. The love between a man and a woman touches the deepest part of our soul. Love is not a game. It is not to be toyed with. The Song of Solomon warns us: “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases” (Song 8:4). It can bring us our deepest fulfillment and it can tear our hearts apart. I’m not saying anything new here. Most of us know this from experience.

It should not surprise us, then, that God is uniquely concerned about marriage. It is as true today as it was true in biblical times. The final episode of the book of Nehemiah deals with the incidence of marriage between God’s people and those outside of the faith.

Text – Nehemiah 13: 23-29

Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah. I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God’s name and said: “You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves. Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women. Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?”

One of the sons of Joiada son of Eliashib the high priest was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite. And I drove him away from me.

Remember them, my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites.

Prayer

The Problem of Intermarriage With the Jews

The problem of intermarriage within the Jewish nation was not new. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Ezra and Nehemiah are one book. Like our passage today, the last chapter of Ezra also deals with intermarriage. Ezra was so deeply grieved by their intermarriage with other nations that he threw himself onto the ground weeping and making confession for the people before the Lord. In the end, Ezra pressed the people to separate from their foreign wives.

What's the big deal? Why was intermarriage for the Jews such a terrible sin? Moses' injunction to them in Deuteronomy made it very clear:

“When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.”

Deuteronomy 7:1-4

The sad and long history of Israel proved Moses' words to be true. The worst offender was the most powerful king Israel ever knew. The Scriptures tell us:

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning

which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, “You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods.” Solomon clung to these in love. He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and did not wholly follow the Lord, as David his father had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods.

I Kings 11:1-8

With such a history, we can understand why Ezra threw himself down and wept. We can appreciate why Nehemiah pulled their hair and cursed the people in their flagrant disobedience.

Today, the prohibition against racial intermarriage is no longer in effect. In Christ, the walls of racial separation have been taken down. The Apostle Paul tells us that there is no Jew or Gentile, but all who place their faith in Christ have been brought into the same spiritual family. The OT principle of prohibition against intermarriage, however, would apply in discouraging a believer from marrying an unbeliever. And many who have walked that path would testify to the heartache that it brings.

Why?

Why was God so adamant that his people not intermarry with idolaters? The answer lies within the nature of marriage. The two have become one.

God’s Design for Sex

To understand the nature of marriage, we need to reflect at the beginning – the stories in the first chapters of Genesis. In the beginning, God created. He didn’t create because he needed to do so. God has no needs. He created simply for his own pleasure and as an expression of his nature. God’s nature is one expressed in three persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Indeed, when God went to make man, the Scriptures say “Let us make man in our own image” (Genesis 1:26). Now within the Trinity – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – there is a sharing of life and eternal love. Between the three Persons of the Godhead, there is eternal giving to each other. You see that love beautifully expressed in Jesus’ life and especially in his prayer to the Father found in John 17. Out of this sharing of life and love, God profoundly created man in his own image. But at first, the man was alone. That’s not good. I mean, just imagine: the dirty dishes piling up, the laundry not getting done, fast food every night. But I’m getting ahead of myself...

There are many good reasons to get married. As I reflect back on my lonely years as a young man, I think the most compelling reason was that I wanted another person that I could give myself to. And that’s what Adam was missing. God, who by his triune nature, is eternally giving himself, had made man to do the same thing. And so, he made a “helper” for him – from his own rib – so that the man and woman might give themselves to each other. In establishing marriage as the foundation of human relationships, the Scriptures say, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24).

The passage continues, “...and they were naked and not ashamed.” In their first state, Adam and Eve had no reason to be timid or ashamed. No one was going to use or abuse the other. They knew, obviously, that they were made for each other – to give themselves to each other and to become one flesh – an obvious reference to God’s blessing on sex.

Do not miss the connection here. We are made in the image of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – three Persons sharing the same life of eternal self-giving love. We are made as man and woman – two distinct genders and two persons – designed to give themselves in self-giving love to each other and in so doing, become one flesh. Do not miss this profound truth and mystery! When a man and a woman come together in sexual union, it is the joining together of two souls. The two become one as a symbol of the oneness of three Persons in the Trinity. And as God created life – don’t miss this – the fruit of the sexual union between a man and woman can also be the conception of new life as well. I’ll put it as simply as I can:

The self-giving of sexual love within the covenant of marriage is a symbol of the nature of God.

The sexual union of a man and a woman within the covenant of marriage is the most profound image of God in humanity.

Broken Sex

The world tells us that sex is just a matter of biology. With contraception, it's a way to have fun without consequences. Those are the lies that Satan has been propagating since sin entered the world. Have you ever thought about it? As sex is the most profound image of God in us, Satan has twisted it to destroy people and serve his purposes. Virtually all of the ancient pagan religions involved sexual activity of some sort. It is also true of many modern pagan religions as well. Why is that? It is because sex goes to the core of who we are. When the ancient pagan religions used temple prostitutes in their worship, they touched the participant in the depths of his being. Solomon had 1,000 women in his palace for more than just political purposes. Let's not be naïve. And by the joining of his body with theirs, he also joined his soul to their pagan religions.

It is significant that after Adam and Eve rebelled against God and sinned that they recognized they were naked. They were ashamed. Their innocence was gone. The image of God in them was diminished. No longer would they give themselves completely in perfect love but they would begin to use each other. They saw the other not as another soul to which they could give themselves, but they saw the other's body as an object of their selfish desire. They needed fig leaves to protect themselves from the other.

And so this great gift of God became twisted. Sex became broken. It is not new, and the manifestations of broken sex are all around us. In our culture, sex is not for giving, but for our own gratification. Bodies are no longer the home for precious souls, but rather the objects of lustful desire. The greatest tragedy of our sexual obsession is the objectification of people. We have become less than human – we are dehumanized. O the depth of tragedy of people made to symbolize the nature of God being reduced to mere objects and toys. Think of the people caught

in the sex industry by choice or by being trafficked. Over and over again, their souls have been diminished by being joined with another. And those who are caught in the web of participation with promiscuity or pornography have diminished their souls in the same way. The veneer of our contemporary sexual carnival disguises a great unspeakable human tragedy. *Lord, have mercy!*

Whole Sex

We have unwittingly done this to ourselves. With the advent of contraception, we have bought the Devil's pitch that there is such a thing as "safe sex without consequences" outside of marriage. The Scriptures have warned us over and over again – Proverbs 5-7 are especially clear – that sex outside God's designs is a path to destruction. But we have laughed at God all the way to the gates of Hell.

Sex is not a toy. It is not an occasional fling to make us feel good. Sex is a precious gift of God that profoundly reflects our Maker, designed for the union of self-giving lovers within the covenant of marriage. No marriage is perfect, but there is a profound joining together of two souls as one. I see this all the time when I go to visit older folks in the hospital who are struggling with illness. If they are married, the spouse suffers as much – though in a different way- than the one who is sick. I always pray for both because the two have become one. Talk with most widows or widowers. The death of their spouse has deeply wounded their soul because the other half of their soul has been taken away.

Christians have been called prudes – killjoys – for our stance against sex outside of the marriage between a man and a woman. Too often, though, we've focused on "don'ts" of sex without giving a vision and understanding of the glory of sex, seen from a biblical perspective. My brother and I got into trouble when we were in elementary school because of some pictures we had drawn and hid under our beds. My mom found them and made us get on our knees and beg forgiveness from God. We didn't know what we were doing. At the time I don't think I even knew where babies came from. We were innocent, but normal boys. I grew up thinking sex was dirty and bad. No one ever explained to me God's perspective on sex until Diane and I started premarital counseling.

We need to do better. We need to give the world God's perspective on sex. Isn't it clear, from all that has been said in this message, why promiscuity, homosexuality, and any sex outside of God's design in marriage falls short of the glorious design he has implanted within men and women? God designed sex to be exclusively enjoyed only within the bond of the marriage covenant because it is the joining together of two souls that become one.

Invitation to Wholeness

I remember very clearly navigating the very difficult years of adolescence with my daughter. To our great discomfort, most of her friends did not share our Christian moral values. I watched as most of them gave away their virginity to a young man, only to be devastated when he broke up with the girl within days. It was a pattern that was repeated over and over again. More than one girl was suicidal, with at least one, as I recall, winding up in the hospital. Of course! They had given their soul to another and it was ripped out.

Too many people are wallowing in the pig-slop of sexual promiscuity thinking they are having a great time. All the while, God invites us to a banquet of love. The truth is, most of us are sexually broken as some level. It's part of the human condition, especially in our sex-obsessed culture. No one needs to wag a finger at another in self-righteous condemnation. We should all extend mercy because we all need mercy.

Sexual sin is perhaps the most damaging of all sins because it goes to the core of what it means to be human. Those who have engaged a long time in sexual sin have greatly wounded and diminished their humanity. But Jesus offers you healing. It doesn't matter how far you've gone or how jaded you've become; Jesus can make you new again. I am struck in the Gospels by how many sexually broken people Jesus encountered. There was the woman caught in adultery that Jesus spared from stoning. He gave her grace and forgiveness. He said simply, "go and sin no more." There was a prostitute who crashed a party at a Pharisee's house and washed Jesus' feet with her tears of repentance. Jesus told her that her faith had saved her. You see, with Jesus, there is mercy, forgiveness, and healing.

This morning, I've wanted to give you a redemptive vision of God's design for sex for you. If you are living outside of that design, your pathway leads only to heartache and destruction. Won't you come and be healed? God is not a prude or a kill-joy. He desires wholeness and true joy for you. With this vision of God's design for you, you will find healing and fullness of life. This morning, I urge you, by the mercies of God, to turn from your path of destruction to the path of life.