

Becoming Who We Are – The Book of Ephesians

The Mystery of Marriage

Ephesians 5:31-33

Mark Vroegop

Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband (Eph.5:31-33).

My favorite moment in a wedding is the entrance of the bride. You know the scene, don’t you? After mom remembers to stand, the entire congregation joins her, and they turn to watch the bride walk down the aisle toward the groom. I love this when I’m sitting in the audience, and I especially love it when I’m officiating a wedding because I can see the joy in the bride, and I can hear the emotion of the groom as I’m standing next to him. It’s beautiful.

But I have a second-most favorite moment. It’s not my sermon! After the bride and groom have exchanged their vows and put on their rings, I say, “By the power invested in me, it’s my honor to pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride.” But that’s still not the moment. It’s next.

I love saying, “Family and friends, it’s my honor to introduce to you, for the first time, Mr. Adam and Mrs. Eve Smith.” The crowd breaks out in applause as the bride and groom leave the sanctuary to a peppy song and maybe some celebratory dance moves. It’s awesome! I’m sure you can see it in your mind.

Why do I love this moment? I think it’s because the announcement represents a special, other-worldly moment. Just think about what transpires. Two image-bearers (a man and a woman) stand before their family and friends to affirm the marriage covenant and make promises to one another. The words they say create something new, something serious, something spiritual. Everything about their lives from that moment forward changes. Sexual activity, which would have been sinful before, is now allowed and encouraged. Their lives are now united in a beautiful and powerful way.

They don’t leave their manhood, womanhood, or image-bearing qualities behind. But there’s a new covenantal, spiritual, and physical connection between them. It’s glorious. And it’s important to recognize how important this moment is.

When the Bible talks about marriage, it uses other-worldly language: “hold fast,” “two shall be come one,” and “mystery.” Ephesians 5:31-33 (our text this morning) is probably the signature passage that highlights this powerful and mysterious reality. Here’s how Eugene Peterson translates part of the

passage: “And this is why a man leaves father and mother and cherishes his wife. No longer two, they become ‘one flesh.’ This is a huge mystery, and I don’t pretend to understand it all” (Eph. 5:31-32a, The Message).

Christian identity applies to every arena of life. Paul’s aim in the book of Ephesians is to help Christians become who we really are. And we’ve learned how gospel identity connects to our morality (5:1-14), wise living (5:15-21), the role of wives (5:22-24), and the role of husbands (5:25-31). Last week we looked at the command for husbands to love their wives in two ways (1) as Christ loved the church and (2) as they love themselves.

We spent more time on the first point (as Christ loved the church) last week. This week we bring to a close the section in Ephesians 5 on marriage, and I want to unpack the other-worldly nature of marriage.

Christian identity supports biblical marriage.

I’d like to unpack this text by exploring three themes: (1) oneness, (2) mystery, and (3) priorities.

1) Oneness

Becoming Who We Are is not only the series title, but it also captures the central message of the book of Ephesians. This statement and the content of Ephesians are meant to help Christians understand who they are in Christ. It means that Christians are real people, men and women, young and old, different backgrounds, and different ethnicities with a spiritual identity that transforms every part of who we are.

To be “in Christ” means that a Christian is still the same person, but that you’ve also been blessed with “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3). It means that “in him we have obtained an inheritance having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11). It means that “in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:13).

Christian identity means that while you are the same person, there’s a significant and powerful connection to Jesus. Eugene Peterson says:

“Ephesians provides us with an understanding of...the hidden foundations and structural elements that provide grounding and form to the people {of God}, whoever they are, and the place where it is...We read Ephesians as the revelation of all the operations of the triune God that are foundational beneath what is visible among us...”¹

Christian identity means that there’s something else going on within you. You are still you, but you are not the same.

The same is true of marriage. The difference is that there’s something that happens to a man and woman in a biblical marriage. They are still the same people. They don’t sacrifice their individual

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 17,

qualities of being an image-bearer or being a man or a woman. But their covenanted commitment makes them one. A new, powerful identity is formed.

Remember that in the previous verses Paul commanded husbands to love their wives “as their own bodies.” And he said that because “He who loves his wife loves himself.” I suggested last week that Paul was emphasizing this to make a point about oneness. Husbands are to love their wives because of this unity.

The word “therefore” leads off verse 31. What follows is the citation of the most historical and foundational text on marriage in the Bible – Genesis 2:24. In other words, Paul returns to the most basic passage when it comes to marriage. He’s appealing to God’s design.

This is an important point. The Bible tells us that God designed marriage between a man and woman to be this covenantal relationship from which a new home and new life is created. Out of this oneness and unity, another image-bearer is created. And part of God’s design is that this oneness would become an earthly way that human beings would image God himself.

Oneness in marriage is not something to try to achieve—like a goal. It’s what marriage is. This is God’s design.

Now, this is probably a good place to remind you about our present cultural climate. In previous sermons, I called it post-modern therapeutic culture. It looks away from absolute truth outside of ourselves, elevates individualism, and treats feelings as ultimate: “If I feel something, it must be true.” Well, you can see how this plays right into the modern understanding of marriage. If the ultimate standard is me and who I love, then marriage is just the legalization of what I believe is already true. That’s how our society has embraced legalized same-sex marriage. And yet this is simply following what Paul talks about in Romans 1:25: “...they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator.”

I wonder how many people today do not believe that God has the right to say, “You can’t be in love with him or her.”

Marriage is not just about love; it’s about God’s design for the created world. It’s about a covenant between a man and woman, before God, as they unite together to establish a new home and fill the earth with children.

You can see this in verse 31 with the statement: “...a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife.” The idea is that marriage involves a fundamental change in family relationships. There’s leaving the “home” for the creation of a new home. It’s God’s plan for multiplication and how the command in Genesis 1:28 was to be fulfilled: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”

A key part of this oneness is “holding fast” to one’s wife. The Greek word means to be joined, bound, or glued together. It carries the idea of being united to another person in every respect—relationally, emotionally, and physically. Paul reiterates this concept with the phrase “shall become one flesh,” which is a specific reference to sexuality.

Tim Keller helps us understand the connection between “one flesh” and sexuality:

“To call marriage one flesh, then, means that sex is understood as both a sign of that personal, legal union and a means to accomplish it. The Bible says don't unite with someone physically unless you are also willing to unite with the person emotionally, personally, socially, economically, and legally. Don't become physically naked and vulnerable to the other person without becoming vulnerable in every other way, because you have given up your freedom and bound yourself in marriage. Then, once you have given yourself in marriage sex is a way of maintaining and deepening that union as the years go by.”²

Oneness and sexuality are connected. And that's why sexual activity outside of the boundary of covenantal marriage is wrong. It creates a merely physical oneness, and God always intended for marriage to be more than that.

This unity and oneness are worth fighting for. Sadly, there are times when couples give up, and they end their marriage in divorce. At other times, the unrepentant sinful behavior of one spouse creates the need for protection for the other, and a biblical divorce is pursued. What's heart-breaking and devastating is the breaking of the oneness principle.

One of the ways that the witness of the church is maintained is by strong and healthy marriages. We could spend a lot of time talking about how difficult our culture is, how concerning same-sex marriage is, how rampant promiscuity is, and how many Christian marriages end in divorce. I'd like to suggest that another strategy is to be sure that Christian marriage is honored, protected, and valued.

The gospel is seen clearly when this oneness is lived out, and we see this very clearly in the next word: mystery.

2) Mystery

The second concept that Paul highlights is the “mystery” of the connection between Christ's love for the church and specifically the husband's love for his wife. He switches from talking about marriage and unity to talking about the church. It's an intentional shift, but it's not a change of subject.

Paul connects marriage to Christ and the church on purpose. We'll see him return back to the specifics about marriage in verse 33. But for now, Paul highlights Christ and the church as an illustration of the principles regarding marriage.

There's something special about this connection between marriage and Jesus's love for the church.

Now, Paul uses the word “mystery” here, and you might be inclined to think that it means something entirely unknown. In our culture, a mystery is unknown and needs to be solved. But in Ephesians, Paul

² Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 256.

uses this word to describe things that are known at one level, but which have profound implications in much deeper ways.

Listen to how he uses the word in Ephesians 3 in reference to the Gentiles:

When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Eph. 3:4-6).

Paul is saying that marriage is far more meaningful than just a wedding or vows. He points to Christ and the church as the ultimate reality. Maybe you could think of marriage on earth like the shape of a shadow. It's real, but the source is not marriage but Christ and the church. Oneness in marriage points to a spiritual oneness that belongs to Christ and the church.

In marriage, a husband and wife "never lose their distinct identities and yet are joined together so that their individual identities are never without reference to the other."³ And Paul says that this is the same thing when it comes to our union with Christ from a spiritual standpoint. We remain ourselves, but there's a fundamental change in our connection to Jesus.

A biblical, Christ-honoring marriage where a husband and wife selflessly love one another is a beautiful platform for the gospel. It makes our spiritual union with Christ evident and clear. Marriage, when working according to biblical principles, has a mysterious, other-worldly element to it. It's designed to be unusual in the world.

That's why marriage is worth every and any effort that we put forward. This means being sure that marriage is pursued for the right reasons. It means embracing the biblical posture of husbands and wives and sacrificing our innate, selfish desires. It means communicating, growing, and adapting as the circumstances of life change. It means making time for one another, prioritizing your relationship, and guarding the boundaries of your marriage.

The goal, you see, is not just your happiness and "getting along," as wonderful and glorious as that is. The goal is a beautiful display of the love between Christ and the church. Biblical marriage in an increasingly secular age should make people wonder "How does that work?" It's mysterious.

3) Priorities

As Paul wraps up this chapter with the material about marriage, he concludes with two summary statements for husbands and wives. These represent the priority for both of them.

³ Constantine R. Campbell, [*The Letter to the Ephesians*](#), ed. D. A. Carson, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023), 262.

However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband (Eph. 5:33).

Husbands are to love their wives through the oneness that we've talked about throughout this message and in the previous one. They are to love their wives in an unusual way—something that's counter-cultural. Their wives are to be treated with dignity, affection, tenderness, and constant care.

Wives are to respect their husbands. This means understanding and encouraging a husband in his leadership of the marriage and the home. It means valuing what marriage points to and working toward that model even with a husband's imperfections and failings. It means keeping the bigger picture in mind as you honor Christ in your marriage. Husbands and wives need to embrace their God-given priorities of love and respect.

Applications

For three weeks we've focused on Ephesians 5:22-33, and we've learned about the roles of wives and husbands and the beauty of marriage. Let me offer three final thoughts or exhortations:

1. Biblical marriage requires spiritually renewed hearts.

Perhaps these messages have allowed you to realize that your greatest need is a saving relationship with Jesus. Maybe you realize that you need help at a deeper, cosmic level. Come to Jesus today. Or maybe, if you are a Christian, you're realizing the direct connection between where you are at spiritually and the status of your marriage. Pursue spiritual renewal for the sake of your marriage.

2. Biblical marriage is countercultural.

Working on this material has reminded me about the opportunity that is before us to highlight something powerful to our society and culture. Let me encourage you to make marriage something that begs the question: "What's different about the two of you?"

3. Biblical marriage is worth prioritizing.

If marriage is that important, then it seems we should be regularly thinking about the status of marriages. We should encourage making marriage a priority and intentionally growing in this most important relationship. Last week I gave our men an assignment: to ask your wife how you are doing with your leadership. Here's another assignment, for the two of you: find time in the next month to do something special, fun, and enjoyable together. Invest in your marriage. Prioritize your marriage.

Why? Because "biblical marriage is a huge mystery, and I don't pretend to understand it all. What is clearest to me is the way Christ treats the church."

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