

Texts: Genesis 2:18-25; Mark 10:6-9; Song of Solomon 8:6-7

### Biblical Marriage

Recently I watched a movie depicting the life of Solomon, the third king of Israel. When one of his associates asked him why he was taking yet another wife, Solomon listed eight reasons to marry: to beget heirs, to avert war and bloodshed, to consolidate power, to consolidate land, to promote trade, to ensure peace with allies, to discomfort enemies, and for pleasure. Solomon had at least 700 wives and 300 concubines so he must have known what he was talking about.<sup>1</sup> Is your reason for getting married or wanting to get married on this list? What did he leave out?

The general theme this summer is relationships. Last week I talked about singleness. Today the topic is marriage. As was the case last week when I focused on singleness, there are many aspects of marriage that I won't address this morning. I also acknowledge that while it's possible to divide all people into two categories of legally married and unmarried, there are other ways to classify relationships. In a committed relationship, engaged, or living together would be just a few. Today I'll be talking about marriage as recognized by the state and by the church.

It's not unusual these days to hear people talking about biblical marriage. What they probably mean is one man and one woman being legally married for life. But is that what we find in the Bible? Let's look at some biblical examples of marriage.

First, a man with multiple wives (and maybe some concubines): I've already mentioned Solomon with his 700 wives and 300 concubines. Concubines were live-in mistresses with lower status than wives. Their children were not usually heirs, so they were safe outlets for sex without risking the line of succession. Esau had 3 wives; Jacob had 2; David had at least 7.

Second, a man, a woman, and her property: A woman could give her female slave to her husband in order to produce an heir. Examples are Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar; Jacob with Leah and Zilpah and Rachel and Bilhah. The slaves, Hagar, Zilpah, and Bilhah, had no choice in the matter, before or after giving birth. Hagar and her son Ishmael were pushed out of the household after Sarah gave birth to Isaac.

Next, a man and his brother's widow: This was called Levirate marriage. When a woman was widowed without a son, it became the responsibility of the brother-in-law or a close male relative to take her in and impregnate her.<sup>2</sup> If the resulting child was a son, he would be considered the heir of her late husband.

Similarly, a man purchases land and acquires a wife in the deal: This was an extension of Levirate marriage. When Boaz purchased Elimelech's land from Naomi, he also acquired Ruth as his wife.<sup>3</sup>

Another way to get a wife was for a male soldier to take home a female prisoner of war: Women could be taken as booty from successful campaigns and forced to become wives or concubines.<sup>4</sup>

And, if you couldn't capture enough wives ... A man goes to a party and kidnaps a wife: After the tribe of Benjamin waged war on the other tribes of Israel, the other tribes swore an oath not to give their daughters in marriage to the Benjaminites. When they had a change of heart, but couldn't go back on their oath, the Israelites devised a plan. During the yearly festival in Shiloh, they told the Benjaminites to go and hide in the vineyards. The instructions were to watch, and when the young women of Shiloh come out to participate in the dances, they were to dash out, grab a wife, and take her back home. Then if their

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings 11:3

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Genesis 38:1-11

<sup>3</sup> Ruth 4:1-13

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 21:11-14; Numbers 31:1-18

brothers or fathers complained, they could say, “Be generous. We weren’t able to capture enough brides for the men of Benjamin, so we needed more women. But none of you suffers the curse, since you didn’t give your daughters of your own free will!” So that is what the men of Benjamin did: they kidnapped wives for themselves from the dancers *at the festival* and took them back home, where they rebuilt their towns.<sup>5</sup>

There’s a whole book written about this one – a man holds a beauty contest: This is how Esther became the wife of King Ahasuerus.<sup>6</sup>

And, of course, we do have biblical examples of a man and a woman in partnership: In the Genesis 2 creation account, God created the first human and then realized that the human needed a companion, a perfectly suited partner. When none of the animals God created were able to fill this need for companionship, God created another human. And the man responded with delight: *At last, a suitable companion, a perfect partner. Bone from my bones. Flesh from my flesh. I will call this one “woman” as an eternal reminder that she was taken out of man.*<sup>7</sup>

Jesus quoted from both creation accounts when answering questions about divorce in Mark 10. Referencing the first account, he said: *But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’* Next he referenced the second account of creation: *‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’* Jesus used these creation accounts to illustrate that God’s original, perfect plan did not include divorce. *So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.*<sup>8</sup> These familiar words often used at weddings also emphasize the intimacy that a healthy marriage relationship provides.

For most Christians, for most people, in fact, none of the first seven conditions on this list of biblical marriages describe a good marital situation. Notice that all of these are found in the Old Testament stories, before the time of Jesus. What does the New Testament say about marriage?

The passage from Mark 10, also found in Matthew 19, is the most well-known of Jesus’ teachings about marriage. His first miracle, changing water into wine, took place at a wedding feast. We don’t know anything about the ceremony itself, but we do know the feast was very important and might go on for a week.<sup>9</sup> Jesus included statements about adultery and divorce in the Sermon on the Mount, urging his listeners to go beyond the letter of the law.<sup>10</sup> And then, when asked about a woman who had been widowed seven times, wondering which of the seven men would be her husband at the resurrection, Jesus replied that there would no marriage in heaven.<sup>11</sup>

In a series of instructions about mutual love, the writer of the book of Hebrews directed his readers to show hospitality to strangers, remember those in prison, refrain from love of money, be content with what they have, and *Hold marriage in high esteem, all of you, and keep the marriage bed pure because God will judge those who commit sexual sins.*<sup>12</sup>

But it’s the Apostle Paul most people turn to when looking for instructions concerning marriage. He wrote about the ordering of the household in his letters to the Ephesians and to the Colossians.<sup>13</sup> Two sentences from these writings tend to get emphasized. *Wives submit to your husbands. Husbands love*

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<sup>5</sup> Judges 21

<sup>6</sup> Esther 2

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 2:23, *The Voice*

<sup>8</sup> Mark 10:6-9, *New Revised Standard Version*; See also Matthew 19:1-9.

<sup>9</sup> John 2:1-11

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 5:27-32

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 22:23-30; Mark 12:18-25; Luke 20:27-36

<sup>12</sup> Hebrews 13:4, *The Voice*

<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 5:21-33; Colossians 3:18-19

*your wives*. These words are often used to create a hierarchy in the home, keeping women subordinate to men.

It's difficult for us to read these instructions with 1<sup>st</sup> century eyes instead of 21<sup>st</sup> century ones. We don't remember that the prevalent attitude then was similar to the depictions of marriage we find in the Old Testament, where women were regarded more as property than as people. Rarely could a marriage be considered consensual. In our current terminology, it wouldn't be unusual for sexual intimacy in these marriages to be considered rape.

Keeping in mind what the households were like in the Roman Empire in Paul's time, what Paul says here was actually revolutionary, not oppressive as we might tend to read it today. Paul wrote these instructions after calling the followers of Christ to live a life of love, just as Christ loved and sacrificed himself for them<sup>14</sup> and to let the whole message of Christ pervade and shape their lives.<sup>15</sup> Then, Paul addressed how to live this out in the household.<sup>16</sup>

What was revolutionary about Paul's instructions? It's revolutionary that Paul addressed the wives at all. And that he addressed them first, before the husbands. The women are addressed as persons, not property. They are moral persons with choices.

The fact that the husbands also received admonitions is revolutionary. There's a reciprocal nature to these teachings. Both parties have responsibilities.

The motivation for these behaviors was revolutionary. Paul doesn't appeal to reason, the natural order, or self-interest. Instead, these followers of Christ are to submit to each other and to love each other because of their relationship with the Lord Jesus, using the sacrificial love of Jesus as their example of how to love and relate to each other.

Last week we looked at Paul's responses to some questions concerning marriage that are recorded in chapter 7 of Paul's letter to the Corinthians. These could be summarized in five points.<sup>17</sup> Value the single and celibate life. Recognize the challenges of marriage. Affirm respectful and equal sexual intimacy in marriage. Consider the complex issues of divorce. Remember that serving God is the highest priority, more important than one's marital status.

What's most revolutionary here is Paul's affirmation of respectful and equal sexual intimacy in marriage. His strong statements about mutuality in marriage, especially in marital sex, go against the historical double standard assuming male dominance in sexual relations, the priority of the man's sexual desires, and greater constraints on female than on male sexual activity.<sup>18</sup>

Our Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective includes these statements about marriage.<sup>19</sup> (I'm not repeating the portions of Article 19 we looked at last Sunday.) *We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life. Christian marriage is a mutual relationship in Christ, a covenant made in the context of the church. According to Scripture, right sexual union takes place only within the marriage relationship. Marriage is meant for sexual intimacy, companionship, and the birth and nurture of children. The church is called to help couples strengthen their marriage relationship and to encourage reconciliation in times of conflict.*

Speaking of conflict, these statements in our confession of faith have generated the majority of conflict in our denomination over the last few decades. Concerning divorce and sexual intimacy, but especially, concerning same-sex relationships. I plan to talk about those more in subsequent sermons.

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<sup>14</sup> Ephesians 5:1-2; Colossians 3:18-19

<sup>15</sup> Colossians 3:12-17

<sup>16</sup> Ernest D. Martin, *Colossians Philemon, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, ed. Elmer A. Martens and Willard M. Swartley (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), p. 180-189.

<sup>17</sup> Dan Nighswander, *1 Corinthians: Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2017, p. 191.

<sup>18</sup> Nighswander, p. 172-175.

<sup>19</sup> <http://mennoniteusa.org/confession-of-faith/marriage/>

If Mennonite Church USA were to update the confession of faith, it's certain that article 19 would likely receive some major changes, and yet, at least three of the sentences do represent what I consider to be biblical marriage. I've already described some of the characteristics of marriage drawing on the creation accounts and the words of Jesus and Paul. Let's take a few minutes to think about what biblical marriage looks like today in comparison to the traditional marriages of a century ago and some of the forms it's evolved to in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

There have been many changes in the past 150 years including the industrial revolution, technological advances, the sexual revolution, and the increase in women's rights. In the past, people valued marriage as an institution in and of itself, one that provided stability, security, and the basic necessities of life. Today, people value marriage for companionship and fulfillment, romantic attraction, self-fulfillment, and gratification. The challenge today is to build a relationship that is mutual, reciprocal, and balanced, with equal regard for each spouse and mutual sacrifice for the good of the relationship.

Let's compare some of the features of three kinds of marriage.<sup>20</sup> I'll call them traditional (what marriages tended to be like 100 years ago, modern (what some marriages tend to be like today, and biblical (what marriage was created to be). For comparison sake, the descriptions of traditional and modern will be on the more extreme side of each kind. Also, we know that it would be unusual for any particular marriage to fit neatly into one of the categories.

In a traditional marriage, commitment is to the institution of marriage. Roles for men and women are predetermined. Authority and power are given to the man. The husband is the head of the home and the wife is expected to submit to his wishes. The husband can legislate without considering or consulting his wife. Sex is a right to pleasure for the man and a duty to be endured by the woman. There is little, if any, true intimacy. Although it wouldn't be quite this extreme, this description of traditional marriage would align fairly closely to what many Christians would consider biblical marriage.

In modern times, marriage is more of a contract between two people with the goal of self-fulfillment. Roles and tasks are assigned according to a social exchange formula. As long as spouses experience getting as much as they give they are satisfied. Each partner has authority over his or her personal life, each competing for their own benefit in the relationship. Communication is a series of declarations and demands made by both spouses. When conflicts arise, confrontation is the way to get one's needs expressed and met. Each individual's right to pleasure is the emphasis in sex, leading to a false intimacy.

Biblically, marriage is a covenant between partners. Roles are interchangeable and creative. There is mutual submissiveness and interdependence. Authority is relationship centered, empowering for both spouses. Conflicts are resolved through discussion, collaboration, and negotiation. Sex is for mutual pleasure, leading to true intimacy – emotional and psychological as well as physical.

All marriages are intricate, complex things, and the problems and solutions are as complicated as the people in the relationships.<sup>21</sup> God's intention for marriage is one in which each person is distinct and unique and yet inextricably intertwined and interdependent. God's intention is for each spouse to encounter their own uniqueness in relation to God and to each other.<sup>22</sup> Thanks be to God for this good creation!

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<sup>20</sup> Jack O. Balswick and Judith K. Balswick, *A Model for Marriage*, IVP Academic, 2006, p. 15-25.

<sup>21</sup> Joy Beth Smith, *Party of One: Truth, Longing, and the Subtle Art of Singleness*, Nelson Books, 2018, p. 151.

<sup>22</sup> Balswick, p. 32.