

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament
L. Applying Biblical Wisdom
34. Gender Relations and Marriage

In Part Two of this course we have been looking at some prominent themes of the Bible. Our understanding of these, naturally, is greatly informed by what Jesus and the apostles taught about them. However, these themes are already pretty well developed in the Scriptures of the Old Testament, the very Scriptures which Jesus and the apostles saw as foundational to understanding what God was doing in their day, and what he had in mind as the culmination of his redemptive plans.

Now, in our final lectures, we'll be looking at three practical areas of life in which the Scriptures of the Old Testament have much wisdom to offer: Gender Relations and Marriage, Parents and Children, and Generosity versus Materialism. These subjects generate great discussion and disagreement in our world. And many people have either lost sight of what the Bible says about them or don't care. But here are three areas in which the rubber hits the road, as the saying goes—and in which our ideas about what it means to love and serve God are particularly put to the test.

The matter of gender relations and marriage is in special turmoil today. And much of this has to do with our concept of where we came from and whether or not we're answerable to anyone. If, for example, you look from an evolutionary point of view at what seems to be the male instinct to lust after women, you might conclude that this has served to protect humans from extinction. And even if the human race no longer needs that instinct, because, as a species, we've more or less adopted monogamy, we can hardly blame men for what evolution has conditioned us to do.

If, on the other hand, you look at lust from the biblical point of view, you see that it has more to do with sin than with nature. For God created men to be fulfilled through their faithfulness to one woman for life. So, as I said, our view of where we came from and whether we're answerable to a Creator has a lot to say about gender relations and marriage.

However, the idea that gender is not fixed by anatomy, but fluid, or that there are no norms governing marriage, is difficult to make sense of in either concept of origins (evolutionism or Creation). For, with the higher animals and humans it always takes males and females to ensure the survival of the species. Nor is it only sexually that males and females are made for each other. There is complementarity in many other ways as well, despite the unwholesome (and unbiblical) notions about male-female relations that circulate in so many cultures around the world.

Two such notions are (1) that there is no difference between men and women and (2) that there is a difference and that one sex is better than the other. But as Peter Kreeft correctly asserts, these ideas (unisexism and male chauvinism) are the two most ridiculous errors about men and women. "The unisex feminist says that women and men are not different in value, and therefore not different in nature. The male chauvinist says that men and women are different in nature, and therefore also different in value." *World Magazine Interview, July 17, 2010*

The biblical truth, of course, is that men and women, while somewhat different in nature, are not different in value. And God designed us to work together and complement each other in fulfilling our God-given task as stewards of his Creation.

This is not to say that all differences are cut and dried or that roles do not overlap. Nor is it to say that people cannot fulfill their individual callings without being married and/or having children. Nevertheless, we ought to be clear that the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, were given to one another by God to become one with each other for a lifetime, and although sin generated problems in their relationship, that did not change God's design for gender relations and marriage.

The opening chapters of the Bible contain several implications for marriage. Adam and Eve were created for each other and given a shared mandate: to be fruitful and increase in number, filling the earth and taking care of, and developing it. The first part of that mandate—being fruitful and increasing in number—would have been impossible had not the first and model marriage been between a man and a woman.

And the second part of that mandate—taking care of the earth and its creatures and developing the potential of the Creation—was likewise meant to be their shared responsibility. That is, Eve was not given to be Adam's subordinate, his assistant, lower in the command hierarchy, but to be his partner—a helper suitable to him—and one who fully shared in the responsibility God had entrusted to them.

I want to mention three things that God expected from Adam and Eve, things they had to be good at if they were to fulfill their mandate from God, and things necessary for any good marriage: communication, cooperation, and commitment. Let's start with communication.

In marriage today, as in that first marriage, there needs to be good two-way communication, i.e. communication with God and with each other. Gen. 3 speaks of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day and looking for Adam and Eve. This particular occasion was not a happy one, but it seems clear that this was not the first time God expected to communicate with Adam and Eve. Rather, he was used to regular communication with them. In fact, of all the things Adam and Eve could do together as married people, the most important was walking and talking with God.

God had given them a big job to do: "Take care of my garden." Now, I'm pretty sure that Adam and Eve weren't stupid, but neither were they created super smart and knowing everything. They had to learn, sometimes by trial and error, and they ran into problems, and went regularly to God for help. They weren't ashamed to do that. Ch. 2:25 says, *Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.*

This tells us that Adam and Eve started off with absolutely nothing to conceal from God or from each other. There was good communication on both fronts. And by communication, I do not mean not simply passing information back and forth. Good communication is the conveying of information in an atmosphere of love and respect and trust. After all, God had put Adam and Eve together with the intention that they could build each other up and stimulate each other to become all that God intended them to be.

But sin changed all that. Then the first thing they did was cover themselves up and go into hiding. They obviously felt guilty and didn't want to face God. But communication in their marriage was also affected. They didn't communicate as openly and honestly as they had before. There may have had some puzzling moments with each other before this; after all, men and women have been wired somewhat differently from the start.

But that didn't become a problem until they fell out with God. Then they also started covering up in front of each other. And when God called them on their sin, they tried to pass the blame for what they had been responsible for.

The same sort of thing can happen too often today too, even in the best marriages. At the best of times husbands and wives communicate support and encouragement for each other in the performance of their mutual and God-given tasks. But such positive communication can break down or become negative and hurtful. And such failure of communication breeds misunderstandings, distrust, anger and competition. It's not long before neither spouse listens anymore. There's no real communication; if there is talk, it's in anger or frustration rather than in love. And all such talk actually makes things worse rather than better.

So, if husbands and wives want to have a good marriage, they will begin by making sure they keep the lines of loving communication open. Of course, there are more things than good communication that help to make a marriage "happily ever after" but good communication with God and each other is one ingredient of a happy and healthy marriage.

Another ingredient is that the exercise of authority in marriage needs to be cooperative rather than competitive.

Before Eve, there Adam was, in the best of all possible worlds. All around him were trees and flowers and animals. And Adam had God-given authority over it. Only trouble was, he was lonely. When he talked, there was no one who could understand, or to whom he could listen. He could train a dog to help manage the sheep, but no one who had his own intelligence, who could help him in his work. That's when God made woman; he created her as man's partner, someone suitable to work with him to manage God's world. Woman and man were essentially equal before God, with shared authority.

That is, they both knew that God was the authority and that they had to work together under him. Their equality didn't mean they looked the same or had exactly the same duties in the relationship. Perhaps one was better at something than the other. They weren't identical, but they were equal. In Eve, Adam found what he had not been able to find anywhere else, a partner in work and play. And when God brought her to the man, Adam recognized her as his partner. He said, *This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh*. Or in other words: *She is as dear and important to me as is my own life*. These were the first wedding vows. It was a good partnership, with cooperation instead of competition. Or if there was competition it was of the friendly and healthy variety.

That doesn't sound quite like the war between the sexes, does it? In our experience, women and men, wives and husbands often fight for power. Married people can make it miserable for each other by their attempts to assert authority over each other. Such power plays started after Adam and Eve had messed up their relationship with God by their disobedience. Then they started blaming each other. Adam said, *Her fault*. And Eve said, *The serpent's fault*.

And God described to Eve the way things would be from then on: "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." Vying for control, that's the result of sin. It's not the kind of partnership God had in mind for men and women. He still urges another way: the practice of mutual love and cooperation, rather than competition and control.

There's another ingredient for good marriage that we see in this first marriage ceremony; that is commitment, which takes seriously the permanence of marriage. That was God's intention from the beginning when He gave Eve to Adam as his companion and partner in managing God's world.

Jesus later made clear the permanence of the marriage commitment when he referred to God's hand in marriage (Mt 19:5). "What God has joined together, no people should pull apart." Because of the disorder and sin in our world, Jesus did allow for the possibility of marriage breakup, but the principle he maintained was that God's original intention should not be ignored. God expected Adam and Eve, and all who followed, to make their marriage work.

If that is to happen in today's world, you need two people to commit themselves to following through on what they promise in the ceremony. Commitment is not just an ability to live with pain and a dogged determination to stay together through hell or high water. It is rather a determination to do what it takes to make your marriage work as God intends it to work. It is a determination to be faithful, to be kind and loving under stress, to not take advantage of the other's weaknesses, and in cases of failure of any of these, to be forgiving. – in other words, a determination to do whatever you can to minimize the pain you, yourself cause in the marriage – all this as well as the determination to not give up in hard times.

A commitment to marriage is a commitment to keep the channels for communication open; it is a commitment to resist the temptation to hide yourself from each your partner. You keep talking things out, in open and honest and loving ways. When you fight, you fight fair. You keep in mind the power of words and actions to hurt and destroy. Saying things designed to hurt the other is certainly a form of communication, but it is nothing that can help to preserve marriage.

A marriage can never function properly where there is not a continual rededication to being lovingly open and honest with each other. Remember the biblical image: Adam and Eve naked in front of each other, with nothing to hide. Physically naked, yes, but much more than that. Emotionally naked. They didn't need defense mechanisms because they trusted that the other would not take advantage of their vulnerability.

I think a certain amount of unhealthy competition, or control games, are inevitable in a marriage between two sinful people. But commitment means, as soon as you recognize them, you reject them. That means that you neither seek to control your partner, nor submit yourself to unhealthy control by your spouse. But you work toward cooperation.

In marriage you're supposed to want the best for each other. You're supposed to want that bad enough so that you can forgive each other's mistakes, and lies, and selfishness, and keep starting over. Couples who do this together find that the loss of unrealistic expectations and the joint attention to working through problems is really the beginning of a relationship that is far more satisfying than any independence which was lost. You'll never get rid of all friction, but it's the things that people do to deal with it that tells the story on what the marriage will become.

Besides communication, cooperation and commitment, we should not leave this matter of gender relations and marriage without at least briefly considering the matter of sexual desire and its appropriate expression. Something of the sort of sexual relationship that God intends for married people is conveyed, among other places, in the Song of Songs.

Although some Christians from past centuries tried to diminish the graphic sexuality of this book by allegorizing it—because they thought that sex muddied the spiritual waters and prevented one from living a truly godly life—the Song of Songs should be read as a joyful celebration of the goodness of sexual love.

The impact of all its poems about love is to say that the physical is good; that sex is good; that love is good; and that we should celebrate it. Not that this book can be read as a sixties style invitation to free love. It cannot because it must be read in the context of the Old Testament and the Bible as a whole, which tell us that the appropriate place for the practice of sexual love is lifelong, heterosexual marriage. But, in this context, sexual desire is a wonderful gift of God to men and women.

The kind of love described in the Song of Songs is fiercely strong. Hence the refrain we hear throughout the book - "Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires." The trouble, you see, is that if love is not expressed in an appropriate relationship then it will break you. Perhaps this is why God insists in the Bible that sex belongs exclusively in marriage, after a public ceremony where two people vow to maintain a lifelong commitment to one another body and soul. To have sex without that commitment is to lie with our bodies. It's to say, "I am committed to you with my body but not with the rest of my life".

People who are sleeping with someone to whom they are not married need to ask, "What prevents me saying with the rest of my life what I say with my body?" True love won't tolerate a halfway commitment because love is as strong as death, its jealousy is as unyielding as the grave - something has to give.

If that's true then you'd expect to see a negative effect if we refuse to treat love as it deserves. And indeed, more than one survey tells us that couples who co-habit and then marry are twice as likely to divorce as couples who have not cohabited. Also those who cohabit are 50% more likely to be unfaithful than are married people. Love is as strong as death. It has the capability of destroying us if not structured properly.

Can you see the beauty of the Bible's view of sex? It refuses to be trapped in a repressed corner where sex is never for recreation or celebration. But, equally it refuses to be trapped in a liberal corner, which sees sex as pure recreation. Sex is to be celebrated but also respected.

That's the picture of it in the Song of Songs. It's a picture of what God intended from the beginning. Admittedly, this has been severely messed up by sin, but our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ is even now in the process of redeeming human sexuality along with the rest of his broken creation. And this means that, regardless of the powerful attraction and commitment between a man and a woman, that relationship won't ever be as good as it can be unless and until both come to life in Christ.

On the other hand, the mere fact of life in Christ—eternal life—is not enough by itself to make sure that the sexual relationship of two such people is just what God intends it to be. And I'd guess that more than a few married Christians would do well to try to rekindle the passion that is evident between the lovers in the Song of Songs. Wherever you're at, keep the Bible's message on gender relations and marriage in view so that you don't settle for less than God intends for you.