

Marriage: God's Showcase of Covenant-Keeping Grace

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (Colossians 2:13-15)

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. (Colossians 3:12-19)

What we have seen in the last two weeks is that the most foundational thing you can say about marriage is that it is the doing of God, and the most ultimate thing you can say about marriage is that it is for the display of God. These two points are made by Moses in Genesis 2. But they are made even more clearly by Jesus and Paul in the New Testament.

Jesus: Marriage Is the Doing of God

Jesus makes the point most clearly that marriage is the doing of God. Mark 10:6-9, "From the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female' [Genesis 1:27], 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh [Genesis 2:24]. So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.'" This is the clearest statement in the Bible that marriage is not a merely human doing. The words "God has joined together" means it is God's doing.

Paul: Marriage Is the Display of God

Paul makes the point most clearly that marriage is designed to be the display of God. In Ephesians 5:31-32, he quotes Genesis 2:24 and then tells us the mystery that it has always contained: "'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." In other words, the covenant involved in leaving mother and father and holding fast to a spouse, and becoming one flesh is a portrayal of the covenant between Christ and his church. Marriage exists most ultimately to display the covenant-keeping love between Christ and his church.

A Model of Christ and the Church

I asked Noël if there was anything she wanted me to say today. She said, "You cannot say too often that marriage is a model of Christ and the church." I think she is right and there are at least three reasons: (1) This lifts marriage out of the sordid sitcom images and gives it the magnificent meaning God meant it to have; (2) this gives marriage a solid basis in grace since Christ obtained and sustains his bride by grace alone; and (3) this shows that the husband's headship and the wife's submission are crucial

and crucified. That is, they are woven into the very meaning of marriage as a display of Christ and the church, but they are both defined by Christ's self-denying work on the cross so that their pride and slavishness are canceled.

We spent the first two messages on the first of these reasons: giving the foundation for marriage as a display of the covenant love of God. Marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman in which they promise to be faithful as husband and a faithful wife in a new one-flesh union as long as they both shall live. This covenant, sealed with solemn vows and sexual union, is designed to showcase the covenant-keeping grace of God.

A Solid Basis in Grace

That is today's title: "Marriage: God's Showcase of Covenant-Keeping Grace." So we are turning to the second reason I mentioned that Noël is right to say that you can't say too often that marriage is a model of Christ and the church: namely, that this gives to marriage a solid basis in grace since Christ obtained and sustains his bride by grace alone.

In other words, the main point today is that, since Christ's new covenant with this church is created by and sustained by blood-bought grace, therefore, human marriages are meant to showcase that new-covenant grace. And the way they showcase it is by resting in the experience of God's grace and bending it out from a vertical experience with God into a horizontal experience with their spouse. In other words, in marriage, you live hour by hour in glad dependence on God's forgiveness and justification and promised future grace, and you bend it out toward your spouse hour by hour — as an extension of God's forgiveness and justification and promised help. That's today's point.

The Centrality of Forgiving, Justifying Grace

I am aware that all Christians are supposed to do this in all their relationships (not just married Christians): live hour by hour by the forgiving, justifying, all-supplying grace of God, and then bend it out to all the others in your life. And Jesus says that all of our lives are a showcase of God's glory (Matthew 5:16). But marriage is designed to be a unique display of God's covenant grace because, unlike all other human relationships, the husband and wife are bound by covenant into the closest possible relationship for a lifetime. There are unique roles of headship and submission, but that is not my point today. That will come later. Today I consider husband and wife as Christians per se, not on the analogy of head and body. Before a man and woman can apply biblically and graciously the unique roles of headship and submission, they must discover what it means to build their lives on the vertical experience of forgiveness and justification and promised help and then bend it out horizontally to their spouse. So that's the focus today.

Or to put it in terms of last week's message: The key to being naked and not ashamed (Genesis 2:25), when, in fact, a husband and a wife do many things that they should be ashamed of, is the experience of God's vertical forgiving, justifying grace bent out horizontally to each other and displayed to the world.

The Coming Wrath of God

Briefly, let's see the foundation for this truth in Colossians. We will start with Colossians 3:6, "On account of these the wrath of God is coming." If you say, "The last thing I want to hear about in my troubled marriage is the wrath of God," you are like a frustrated fisherman on the western coast of Indonesia on December 26, 2004, saying, "The last thing I want to hear about in my troubled fishing business is a tsunami." A profound

understanding and fear of God's wrath are exactly what many marriages need because, without it, the gospel is diluted down to mere human relations and loses its biblical glory. And without it, you will be tempted to think that your wrath — your anger — against your spouse is simply too big to overcome because you have never really tasted what it is like to see infinitely greater wrath overcome by grace, namely, God's wrath against you.

The Removal of God's Wrath

So we begin with the wrath of God and its removal. Now go back with me to Colossians 2:13-14, "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him [Christ], having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."

Those last words are the most crucial. This — this record of debt that stood against us — God set aside, nailing it to the cross. When did that happen? Two thousand years ago. It did not happen inside of you, and it did not happen with any help from you. God did that for you and outside of you before you were ever born. This is the great objectivity of our salvation.

The Record of Debt Cancelled at the Cross

Make sure you see this most wonderful and astonishing of all truths: God took the record of all your sins that made you a debtor to wrath (sins are offenses against God that bring down his wrath), and instead of holding them up in front of your face and using them as the warrant to send you to hell, he put them in the palm of his Son's hand and drove a nail through them into the cross.

Whose sins were nailed to the cross? Whose sins were punished on the cross? Answer: My sins. And Noël's sins — my wife's sins and my sins — the sins of all who despair of saving themselves and trust in Christ alone.

Whose hands were nailed to the cross? Who was punished on the cross? Jesus was. There is a beautiful name for this. It's called substitution. God condemned my sin in Christ's flesh (Romans 8:3). Husbands, you cannot believe this too strongly. Wives, you cannot believe this too strongly.

Justification Goes Beyond Forgiveness

And if we reach back and draw in here all our understanding of justification from Romans we can say more. The justification goes beyond forgiveness. Not only are we forgiven because of Christ, but God also declares us righteous because of Christ. God requires two things of us: punishment for our sins and perfection in our lives. Our sins must be punished and our lives must be righteous. But we cannot bear our punishment (Psalm 49:7-8), and we cannot provide our righteousness. None is righteous; no, not one (Romans 3:10).

Therefore, God, out of His immeasurable love for us, provided his own Son to do both. Christ bears our punishment and Christ performs our righteousness. And when we receive Christ (John 1:12), all of his punishment and all of his righteousness is counted as ours (Romans 4:4-6; 5:19; 5:1; 8:1; 10:4; Philippians 3:8-9; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

Justification Bent Outward

This is the vertical reality that must be bent outward horizontally to our spouses if marriage is to display the covenant-making, covenant-keeping grace of God. We see this in Colossians 3:12-13, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven

you, so you also must forgive.”

“As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” — your spouse. As the Lord “bears with” you, so you should bear with your spouse. The Lord “bears with” you every day as you fall short of his will. Indeed, the distance between what Christ expects of you and what you achieve is infinitely greater than the distance between what you and expect of your spouse and what he achieves. Christ always forgives more and endures more than we do. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Bear with as he bears with you. This holds for whether you are married to a believer or an unbeliever. Let the measure of God’s grace to you in the cross of Christ be the measure of your grace to your spouse.

And if you are married to a believer, you can add this: As the Lord counts you righteous in Christ, though you are not in an actual behavior or attitude, so count your spouse righteous in Christ, though he is not — though she is not. In other words, Colossians 3 says, take the vertical grace of forgiveness and justification and bend them out horizontally to your spouse. This is what marriage is for, most ultimately — the display of Christ’s covenant-keeping grace.

The Need for Gospel-Rooted Wisdom

Now at this point, hundreds of complex situations emerge that cry for deep spiritual wisdom rooted in these gospel truths and long years of painful, faithful experience. In other words, there is no way I could apply this message to everyone’s particular needs. Besides preaching, we need the Holy Spirit, we need prayer, we need to meditate on the Word for ourselves, we need to read the insights of others, we need the counsel of wise friends who are seasoned with suffering, we need the church to support us when everything falls apart. So I have no illusions that I could say all that needs to be said to help you.

Living Vertically, Then Bending Outward

It may help to close by giving several reasons why I am stressing covenant-love as forgiveness and counting the other righteous. Don’t I believe in being delighted in the other person? Yes, I do. Both experience and the Bible push me there. To be sure, Jesus is married to his bride the church, and it is both possible and good to please the Lord (Colossians 1:10). And he certainly is infinitely worthy of our pleasure in him. This is the ideal in marriage: two people humbling themselves and seeking to change in godly ways that please our spouses and meet their physical and emotional needs or to please them in every good way. Yes. The relationship of Christ and the church includes all that.

But the reason I stress living vertically from the grace of God and then bending out horizontally in forgiveness and justification toward your spouse is

- (1) because there is going to be conflict based on sin and strangeness (and you won’t be able even to agree with each other about what is simply strange about each other and what is sin); and**
- (2) because the hard, rugged work of enduring and forgiving is what makes it possible for affections to flourish when they seem to have died; and**
- (3) because God gets glory when two very different and very imperfect people forge a life of faithfulness in the furnace of affliction by relying on Christ.**

In Christ, God Has Forgiven You — and Your Spouse

Now I will pick it up here next time and tell you about a discovery that Noël and I made. I predict that the sermon will come to be called “the compost pile sermon.”

Till then, husbands and wives, drive into your consciences these huge truths — greater than any problem in your marriage — that God “has forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” Believe this with all your heart and bend it toward your spouse.