**Marriage Core Seminar**

Class#1: The Purpose, Power, and Paradox of Marriage

**Introduction**

Good morning and welcome to the marriage core seminar! I have two goals for our next thirteen weeks together:

First, to align our thinking about marriage with Scripture. As much as we may *think* we’ve corrected for our culture’s misunderstanding of marriage, our instincts are still wrong so much of the time. That could be because what you think of as “marriage” is more influenced by your own marriage than the Bible, or by your parents’ marriage than the Bible, or what you see on TV than the Bible. So our job is to listen carefully to Scripture and retrain our instincts and assumptions.

Second, to see the beauty of marriage. It’s beautiful as a reflection of the one who designed it. As you understand God’s design for marriage then, whether you’re married or single, you can marvel at the wisdom and perfection of God. So my hope is that you emerge from these classes not just with some “how to” tips on marriage but with a renewed sense of how amazing this God is who calls us his own.

Now, some of you aren’t married. Thanks for joining this class; it’s very much meant for you. How should you make use of our time together? A few thoughts:

1. Consider the marriages of your married friends. This class will help you love them better, understand them better, and pray for them better.
2. Consider your potential future marriage. I hope this time shapes how you think about dating, what you’re looking for in a spouse, and how you can prepare for marriage.
3. Consider the beauty of what God has designed. Remember, marriage is a temporary institution. In heaven, God will have something better than marriage for us. If the temporary placeholder is beautiful, imagine what God has for us in heaven!

And of course, some of you are married. Let me offer a few dos and don’ts for you in this class:

1. **Don’t** let the ideal discourage you. Especially if you’ve been married for a while, your experience will inevitably fall short of the Bible’s ideal. That’s disappointing—and it’s everyone’s experience—but it’s not outside of God’s control. So, while I hope that this class helps you get closer to that ideal, remember that the God who in his infinite wisdom designed the ideal of marriage also, in his infinite wisdom, decided to withhold some of it from you—and you can trust him with those limits. They are temporary, they are wise, and they are for your good.
2. **Don’t** use this class as leverage in arguments with your spouse. I do not want my name coming up in your fights! As in, “but Jamie said in the class that you should…”. Absolutely not!
3. **Do** use this class to examine *your* purposes for your marriage in light of *God’s* purpose for your marriage. That’ll be especially relevant in today’s class. Take the Scripture passages that we discuss and discuss them more at home as a couple.
4. **Do** use this class as a mirror to your own attitudes, instincts, assumptions, and struggles in marriage. I hope that the main person you have in mind throughout the class is not your spouse—and the things they do or don’t do—but you.

OK. That’s all for introduction to the course. Today, we’re going to be spending our time in Genesis 1 and 2 where God first gives us marriage, and we’ll look at God’s purpose for marriage. Which will lead us to understand how he intends to accomplish that purpose—the power of marriage. Which in turn will lead us to what I’m going to call the paradox of marriage, which will set up much of the rest of this course. And if you haven’t already, open up your Bible to Genesis chapter 1.

So first:

**The Purpose of Marriage.**

Twenty years and a few weeks ago, Joan Hwang and I stood across from each other in a church in Mountain View, California and called God himself as witness to some massive promises we made to each other “as long as we both shall live.” And then we were husband and wife. And twenty years in, my marriage is the best part of my life. A testimony to the goodness and mercy of God.

So why did we get married? Well, we wanted to stop shuttling back and forth between DC and San Francisco to see each other. And she was gorgeous, and already my best friend. And we wanted to have kids together and do ministry together and grow old together.

But there was a deeper purpose in our marriage that we fully comprehended at the time which—beyond kids and sex and friendship and ministry—has been the greatest reason for joy in our marriage. And it’s the purpose that we get right at the beginning of the Bible. Look with me at Genesis 1:26 where, having made everything else in the universe, God says, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

Then he does just that. Verse 27: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”

So a few things to note here.

* First, what you see here in verse 27 is our purpose statement as human beings. We are made according to God’s image. That’s why we exist. We don’t exist first and foremost because God needed what we could do for him. He didn’t need us to be fruitful and multiply (v. 28); he was filling the earth just fine by himself. He didn’t need us to exercise dominion (v. 28). He was ruling just fine by himself. No: he made us according to his image. He made us as his representatives, to point back to the wonder of who he is. That’s why he made us. Like mirrors, reflecting his glory. You might think about this “made according to his image” bit in two pieces: perceive and portray. Like a mirror takes in light and reflects it out. We perceive: Because we’re made in his likeness, we can understand who he is even from our own experience. We can discover the wonder of his creativity through our creativity. The delight of his mercy through our own mercy. And so forth. And we portray. By looking at who we are, someone should understand a shadow of the glory of who God is. Perceive and Portray. That’s our purpose.
* Second, when God made man, he made him male *and* female. This purpose of perceiving and portraying was for Adam and Eve *together*. And as we’ll see in Genesis 2, some of that was to happen through marriage. If you’re not married, you’re just as completely made in the image of God as your married friend. There’s nothing lacking just because you’re not married. We see that in Genesis 9:6. Yet there is a unique way in which a married couple can perceive and portray God, just as there’s a unique way in which someone can serve Christ when they’re not married.
* Third, God’s command in verse 28, to be fruitful and to exercise dominion, is his “blessing.” When God “blesses” in Genesis, be it the animals (1:22), the Sabbath (2:3), or Noah (9:1), he’s explaining how his purposes will be accomplished, and this is no exception. Purpose: made in God’s image. We then work that out in verse 28 through our love and our labor, through our relationships and our rule. Work, family…these things matter, not primarily because God needs us to do them (remember, he was highly productive all by himself) but because that’s how we reflect him as those made in his image.

It’s so easy to value a marriage based on what it produces. What it produces for myself—happiness and companionship. What it produces for others—children, stability, a foundation for ministry and community. And those things are *all true*. But the deeper purpose for marriage has God at its very heart. The deeper purpose for marriage is that it’s a key way in which we perceive the glory of who God is, and portray that glory to ourselves and others.

We see this as we continue on into Genesis 2, verse 18, where God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” From our modern, Western perspective it’s easy for us to read that to say that the problem was that Adam was lonely. That doesn’t do justice to the text. No, the problem was that Adam was *alone*. By himself, he couldn’t do all that God had commanded him to do, be fruitful, exercise dominion. By himself he couldn’t live out what it means to made in the image of God.

This is, in fact, what the apostle Paul picks up on in his famous teaching on marriage in Ephesians 5. As he describes a husband loving his wife as Christ loves the church, and the wife submitting to her husband as the church submits to Christ, he says in verse 32, “this mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”

It’s not that Paul stumbled upon marriage as a convenient analogy of Christ’s love for his bride, the church. No, Paul looks deep into the beginning of all things and sees there that marriage was built *to be* an analogy. In marriage we perceive in new ways the glories of God’s love for us. And we live it out, portraying the glory of who he is.

The problem is how theoretical and impractical this sounds. OK, Jamie. Yeah. I know that marriage is a picture of Christ and the church. That’s very nice at all. Now, can we get back to how I can have a happy marriage?

OK. I get that. One way we can make this more practical is by understanding who the audience is. That is, if marriage is a portrayal of Christ’s love for his church, who’s watching? A few people.

* First, you. This dramatic acting out of Christ’s love in marriage is intended first and foremost for you, the married person. You learn the joy of self-sacrificial love, which helps you understand the joy Christ has in loving you. In marriage, you walk in God’s footsteps like a little kid at the beach, jumping from one of his dad’s footprints to the next. And we discover through our own experience God’s delight in being God, as we imitate him.
* Second, your spouse. That follows pretty closely. If I lead my wife well, she will find it easier to follow Christ. If I love her well, she will better understand the love of Christ.
* Third, your kids. A marriage will profoundly shape the children’s deepest, most sincere theology, their base-level understanding of Jesus, for better or for worse.
* Fourth, to God, who delights in being discovered for how delightful he really is.
* And finally, those around you. They might not be able to articulate the labels “Christ” and “the church” but your marriage should look distinctive to them—because it is responding to, reflecting, the supernatural love of God. It is a portrayal of him.

If “happiness” or “companionship” or “children” or “ministry” are at the heart of your purpose statement for marriage, then God is not at the center of your marriage. He may be involved, and you may well be seeking to follow him in your marriage, but he is not the center. Instead, we must understand that marriage is about knowing God—perceiving who he is. And it’s about responding to the goodness we find in him—reflecting that goodness to ourselves and to the world as we portray him. That’s the source of all value in marriage, of its lasting beauty, and its greatest joy and satisfaction.

The closeness of marriage can make you wonderfully happy. But if happiness is your driving motivation for marriage, you will look at your spouse one day and deep down inside think, “is this it?” The ability to raise children together is one of the amazing privileges of marriage. But if that is your driving motivation then one day they’ll leave and you’ll think to yourself, “is this it?” There’s one line from my wedding sermon that I still remember (which gives me hope when I preach a wedding sermon). And that’s that you can only love your spouse well if you love God more than your spouse. The driving force behind your marriage should be to know God and respond to him.

* You need this perspective when you encounter your spouse’s sin—and your own. Especially when it’s not honeymoon sin but seven years in, “he’ll probably always struggle with this sin” kind of sin. His sin won’t make you happy. But through it you can still perceive truth about God and portray his response to our sin. And that’s what gives hope.
* You need this perspective when you need to forgive, and forgiveness is so unfair, it’d honestly be better just to walk away from the marriage. Instead, you forgive because that’s how you portray the forgiveness you’ve received in Christ.
* You need this perspective when you’re ten years in and you realize that this marriage will not be what you hoped for on your wedding day. It’s fine. It’s not great. As a pastor, I so want to tell you, “don’t worry—there’s hope! Just listen carefully to what we have to share in this class and things will be great.” But that’s not always true. Yet if we look at this deeper purpose for marriage—the joy that comes in from perceiving and portraying the goodness of God, I can say all those things and more. From *that* perspective, your experience of marriage *can* be great. Wildly successful. Even if it’s not what you envisioned on your wedding day.

This purpose statement for marriage means that marriage isn’t fundamentally about what it *produces*, like happiness and children, but what it *shows* about God—mainly to the two of you.

Let me give you two quick examples of how this changes the way a marriage operates.

Let’s say you’ve got a hard decision to make. If marriage were about accomplishment, success would be getting to the right answer. But you can do that in a way that gives your wife deep misgivings about trusting your leadership, which makes it harder for her to trust the God who put you in leadership. Instead, success is leading your wife through this difficult process in a way that helps her trust Christ. Your leadership portrays the good shepherd, and she perceives in a new way the delight she has in following him.

Or let’s say that you’re having an argument with your husband. You know how this goes. If you yell at him and let him have it, you’ll prolong the fight a little, but boy will it feel good to put him in his place, and it won’t be long before he forgives you and things are all lovey-dovey again. If marriage were about happiness, you might pursue that route, and it might even work out for you. But your treatment of your husband is your treatment of Christ, so you humble yourself and confess your sin rather than railing on his.[[1]](#footnote-1)

So then, there is a purpose for marriage that is deeper than happiness, deeper than children, deeper than ministry together. It is to perceive and portray the glory of the goodness of God.

*Any questions so far?*

If the purpose of marriage is to perceive and portray, how does that happen? That leads us to the next point on your handout:

**The Power of Marriage**

In Genesis 2:18, as we already read, God says he will make a helper “fit for” the man. So in verse 21 he creates Eve out of Adam.

Eve, then, is “fit for” Adam. More literally, she is “opposite him” or “corresponding to him.”

The purpose of a marriage is to perceive and to portray, but the man and the woman will not go about doing this in identical fashion because from the very beginning they were created to be different from each other. And the power of marriage is found in those differences.

It’s through those differences that we can have children, enjoy sex, have a kind of companionship that’s different in kind from any other friendship. It’s through those differences that we’ll learn about God and show who he is, as we saw in Ephesians 5.

These differences then, aren’t so much roles as they are orientation. Not something you turn on and off, like “OK, looks like we’re at an impasse. Time to turn on my husbandly leadership role.” But, as we’ll discuss next week, this is what defines the basic shape of your marriage.

So because Joan is Chinese and I’m not, I’m sometimes asked what it’s like having a cross-cultural marriage. Which is a good question with some good answers. But in the back of my mind when I’m having that conversation I’m always thinking, “the *real* cross-cultural aspect of this relationship isn’t Chinese vs. Western European Mix, it’s that she’s a girl and I’m a boy.” And those differences are the whole point! That’s the power of our marriage.

Yet early in marriage, every married person will at some point think something like, “if you would just approach this like I do, this would be so much easier.” Or “if you could just feel what I’m feeling, this would be so much easier.” Those statements are entirely true. And they entirely miss the point of marriage. So a new spouse will try to impose his or her way of doing things on the other and if they succeed, there will be peace. But a peace that comes from uniformity, not from unity. A peace that compromises the power of their marriage.

Very often, it’s the differences that first attracted you to this person. As they say, “opposites attract.” Yet very often it’s those same differences that threaten to drive you crazy, especially in the early days of marriage.

A key task in the first few years of marriage, then, is to learn to trust the differences. So your wife is so much more emotional than you are and you think “why can’t she just be rational for once” But one day you realize, genuinely, that you are far better off because of her emotionality. That’s the day the power flips on in your marriage.

Much of this class will look at how we grapple with these differences in marriage, from roles to communication to sex to children. These differences are key to every task God will give a married couple. And they are key to the deeper purpose underlying those tasks; they are key to perceiving and portraying the goodness of God.

Which brings us to our final point,

**The Paradox of Marriage**

Here’s what I mean. The whole point of marriage, Genesis 2:20, is that the man and the woman are different from each other. And yet, Genesis 2:24, “they shall become one flesh.” Different, yet one. That’s the paradox. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.”

What a beautiful picture here! Nothing between them, not even a piece of cloth! All the power of those differences, yet perfect unity… they are one.

This begins with leaving, verse 24 says.

That means your spouse comes before everything—your parents, your job, your friendships, your hobbies—everything. You are shifting allegiances so that your family of origin becomes secondary to your new spouse. That can be hard for both parent and child, especially parents who are controlling and demanding OR a child who has a good relationship with one or both parents OR a person is emotionally, spiritually, or financially still dependent on his or her parents.

Financial dependence on parents, emotional closeness to a mom or a dad, and reliance on them for advice *can* work in marriage, but they can also derail the leaving process and need to be examined carefully.

But beyond leaving, Genesis 2 instructs a new husband to “hold fast” to his wife, to be “one flesh” together. Certainly this refers to sex[[2]](#footnote-2). But when Jesus refers to this verse in Mark 10, he speaks more broadly. “The two shall become one” (Mk. 10:9).

* One implication of this is fidelity. God’s intent is that husband and wife stay together. In a fast-paced culture like D.C., we can make commitments and break them rather quickly. But marriage is a qualitatively different type of commitment—it’s a covenant; a permanent bond between two parties. For the single adult this makes the leap into marriage scary because of its permanent nature. For the married adult, this is foundational because it means your spouse is not going anywhere. So, no matter how hard things can get in marriage, your goal is straight-forward: Work it out!
* And a second implication of holding fast: In marriage, there is re-orientation of priorities to make the spouse primary. After you get married, your posture towards the rest of life needs to change. Marriage is not just one area of life to be balanced with others. Marriage is the context in which you live all of life. You approach work, church, friendships, family, etc. as a married man and woman. Take career as one example: It is not the same to say that you approach marriage as a lawyer, teacher, architect, or whatever you do. Married people are not to balance career with marriage, but to approach career as a married person.

This holding fast, this becoming one flesh is complicated though because the man and the woman are different from each other. But remember, that’s the whole point! Their differences are the power of the marriage. In those differences then, how can they experience life as one flesh? So that in oneness, those differences that might otherwise drive they crazy become the power of the marriage?

Three tools, which we’ll look at in the coming weeks. Roles, communication, sex. When used poorly, each of these will drive them apart, and marriage becomes one of the loneliest places on earth. Used well, and oneness amidst difference is a significant way in which they will experience and rejoice in the goodness of God.

*Any questions?*

**Conclusion**

So then, what is the purpose of marriage? Deeper than happiness, deeper than friendship, deeper than children, deeper than ministry is the purpose of marriage as a context to live out what it means to be made in God’s image. Perceiving the goodness of his glory; portraying the glory of his goodness. In marriage, though, we don’t do this in identical fashion because the power of a marriage is in how man and woman complement each other. And so the great task of at least the early days of marriage, the great paradox of marriage, is how to bridge from Genesis 2:20 to 2:24, to treasure the differences *and* be one flesh.

A marriage isn’t built at a steady pace, day by day. Instead, it’s normally built through a series of defining moments. A betrayal here, an honest confession there. The realization that he really *does* know me. A failed chance at forgiveness. The discovery that you’re not as exciting as you used to be, and she’s OK with that. A devastating loss. A health crisis. A mountaintop of shared joy. Having a child. Launching a child. Sometimes these moments come packed together; sometimes they’re months apart. But very often it’s how you respond to these moments of decision that makes your marriage, for better or for worse. And those responses will flow from what you want from your marriage. Do you want a bosom friend, a BFF? Do you want a happy family? Do you want the look of a happy family? Do you want security? Or, deeper and more fundamentally than any of that, do you want God?

Jesus’s words in Matthew 6:33 are so pertinent to our study of marriage. “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” Seek first his kingdom. That is the path to marriage as God intended it.

1. CUT: God’s commands are close kin to our idols. Think back to his commands to be fruitful and to exercise dominion in Genesis 1:28. Do you recognize our society’s idols in those? Here in DC especially, we worship our work. And in society at large, we worship our love. What’re some of the first questions you ask to understand someone new? What do you do? Do you have a family? Rule and relationships, labor and love. Those are God’s commands and they are also our idols. What were Israel’s idols? Baal, the god of good harvests (the command of dominion) and Ashtoreth, the goddess of fertility. We haven’t come far from idolatrous Israel, have we?

   A marriage can become a terrible idol. We use it to worship our own happiness. We use it to worship control, as we control our families. We use it to worship our children. We can even use it to worship the work of ministry. So we must keep in mind God’s primary purpose for our marriages: to perceive him, to portray him. The purpose is Genesis 1:27, the means is Genesis 1:28. Try to find your purpose in Genesis 1:28 like our world does—rule and relationships, labor and love—and it will collapse under its own weight. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. That’s how Paul uses the term in 1 Corinthians 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)