**Marriage Core Seminar**

Class#2: The Shape of Marriage

**I. Introduction**

Those of you who were here last week will remember that we talked about the purpose of marriage, the power of marriage, and the paradox of marriage. Could someone who was here briefly summarize what Jamie said was the *purpose* of marriage? [wait for answer (it’s a key way in which we perceive the glory of who God is, and portray that glory to ourselves and others.)] How about the *power* of marriage? [wait for answer (The power of marriage is found in the differences between man and woman we see in Genesis 2:18, a helper, a helper who is fit for him, or, as we talked about last week, “opposite him” or corresponding to him”)].

And then Jamie talked about the *paradox*  of marriage, that while a marriage’s power is in the differences between husband and wife, those differences are also what will drive you crazy. And so one great challenge of marriage is to live in Genesis 2:18, where differences between husband and wife are wonderfully complementary—*and* simultaneously in Genesis 2:24, where they are one flesh. We briefly talked about three key tools to help build this bridge: roles of husband and wife, communication, and sex.

We’ll tackle the first of these today: husband and wife will follow distinct paths in their pursuit of oneness amidst difference. That means we’ll be discussing a husband’s role to lead, to protect, and to provide—and a wife’s role to follow and to help.

**II. True Freedom**

This means that today we’ll be studying Biblical teaching that’s radically different from what our culture tells us. I believe in my heart of hearts that what God teaches is for our good. That is, not “have a good marriage subject to the pesky constraint of following God’s rules about men and women” (which is how even Bible-believing Christians sometimes feel). But as James 1:25 says, “the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be *blessed* in his doing.”

What God teaches about the roles of husband and wife in Genesis, Ephesians, and elsewhere, is part of this “law of liberty.” *Law* of *liberty*. It sounds like a contradiction, doesn’t it? A law (constraint), of liberty (freedom). It is a contradiction if you think about it in the worlds sense. This world wants freedom from constraints so that it can pursue whatever it wants, whatever it desires, whatever is pleasing to it. For marriage, the world says you should have the freedom to marry whomever you want, to stop being married if you want, to run your marriage any way you want, to pursue any dream you have and be married and never have any regret about any of those choices. This “Freedom” generally ends up as a form of slavery, where we’re in bondage to the insatiable desires and the demands of self-love.

On the other hand, God, through the loving sacrifice of his eternal son, gives us freedom to pursue what we were made for. A few verses come to mind here:

* Romans 6:18 – and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness
* John 8:34-36 – Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever, the son remains forever. So, if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

So, as Christians, Jesus has set us free from sin, free from slavery to our own sinful desires, and free to be sons of God!

So when James encourages us to “look into the perfect law, the law of liberty” he’s encouraging us to find in the law what God made us to be, and in that to find true freedom.

As we look at God’s teaching on marriage then, our attitude should be that of the Psalmist in all of Psalm 119, look at verse 68. “You are good and do good; teach me your statutes.” Not, “how can I do what I want and still toe the line with God’s rules.” But, “Lord, I trust that everything you say is good because *you* are good.”

This may in fact be the most important thing I’ll say today. God’s design is good. Not just correct but good. And so we should be eager to conform our lives to his design. Some Christians approach God’s design in marriage and try to squeeze his rules into their own goals, be those career goals or parenting goals or goals about personal control. But that’s not trusting God. Other Christians essentially see this as a contract. “Tell me the rules, I’ll follow them, and then God will give me a happy marriage.” But that doesn’t work either. We follow God’s path because we love and trust him, not because it gets us what we want. And beyond that, within God’s good design there is tremendous freedom and not all marriages will look the same. The first impulse is that of the libertine; the second is that of the legalist. Both see God’s design as a set of arbitrary rules rather than a reflection of his good and wise and perfect character. So let’s trust that God is good, his ways are good, and his commands are good.

Now, with all that said, let’s get into this good design.

**III. Different Orientations to the Task (Genesis 1-2)**

As we saw last week in Genesis 1:27, marriage is focused on the basic task and calling that is at the center of what it means to be human. That is, to perceive and portray the excellence of God as those made in his image. That means that men and women—equally made in God’s image—are equal in dignity and worth. There is no human being who is worth more than another, no matter their gender or authority.

Then we get to Genesis 2, which functions like a flashback in a film, retelling Genesis 1 with a greater focus on Adam and Eve. In Genesis 1, there was no difference between man and woman. But now, with the focus turned up, we find that a husband and wife will have different orientations to the task of Genesis 1. We see that in two phrases that we looked at briefly last week. First, in Genesis 2:18 and 2:20, the woman is created to be “a helper fit for him.” And second, Genesis 2:24, a man will leave his family of origin and “hold fast” to his wife. In these differences we find what I’ve described in the title to this class the basic “shape” of marriage. A useful summary of all this is that whereas he is oriented primarily to the task, she is oriented primarily to him.

So let’s take these differences in the order that Moses gives them in Genesis. So the first phrase:

**IV. Helper Fit for Him**

What does that mean? Well, it means that Eve was created to help Adam in the tasks God had given to him. First thing to note is that this is a term of dignity. The word that’s translated “helper” is most often used in the Hebrew Bible to describe *God* as the helper of Israel. This is strong and powerful language and a strong and powerful image. God as helper, same word!

Specifically, she’s a helper who is “fit for him.” Of the same essence (ruling out the animals God created) yet complementing him (ruling out Adam by himself).

What *doesn’t* this termmean?

* As I mentioned before, it is not a weak term. Being a helper involves strength, it involves intelligence, wisdom, it involves courage and compassion. Think of the role Priscilla *and* her husband played in instructing Apollos in Acts 18:26.
* It does not mean that the wife is inferior to the husband. Remember, they are *both* created in God’s image.
* It does not mean that she exists to serve her husband. We’ll get into this more in a bit. She exists to serve *God* by helping her husband in his service to God.

To help flesh out some of the implications of this term, let me make two observations.

* First, this is characteristic of Eve’s whole life, not just something she does every now and then. It’s her basic orientation. Sometimes we talk about the “roles” of husband and wife in marriage, which can be misleading because a role is something you do sometimes but not others. But being a suitable helper as a wife isn’t limited to a few big decisions in marriage; it’s an all-of-life, all-the-time calling. That is, *whatever* you do, you’re thinking “how is this part of being a suitable helper to my husband?” Raising kids, working a job if you have one, building friendships in your neighborhood—all of this falls under that big umbrella of helping him. The language Moses uses here is more of identity language than role language. That’s huge and humbling. Suitable helper is her *identity*. If you’re a married woman, you *are* a suitable helper. That’s why God brought you into marriage. And that means that when a woman gets married she makes a different set of adjustments than her husband does. He was oriented to the task God gave him before marriage, and he still is after marriage. But while she was oriented to that same task before marriage, now she’s oriented to *him*. Sometimes new couples feel this but they don’t have the language to describe it. The wife says, “I gave up more for this marriage than you did.” And the husband may counter, “Oh no you didn’t.” But in a sense, she’s right, and *this* is the dynamic she’s feeling. And so a wise husband will honor what she’s done and cherish her for it, even as a wise wife works through all that this involves.
* And second observation: this difference in orientation implies a difference in authority. The man is primarily oriented to the task and the woman is primarily oriented to the man. She follows him. So, when Paul develops this idea further in Ephesians 5:22, he writes, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” Let’s consider a few aspects of what this submission means. You’ll be helped if you flip to Ephesians 5 in your Bible.

1. First, this submission is only to *one* man. Submit to your *own* husband. It’s not women submitting to men; it’s a wife choosing to submit to *this* man when she marries him.
2. Second, as I said earlier, we must understand that these authority dynamics have nothing to do with any difference in value or worth between man and woman, husband and wife. The world, of course, tells us that this is a contradiction in terms, whether we’re in a society that aspires to be egalitarian or a society that tells women they’re inferior to men. Both are picking a fight with this profound truth in Genesis: there *is* an authority dynamic in marriage ***and*** husband and wife are equal in dignity and worth. More on that in two weeks.
3. Third, wives should submit to their husbands “as to the Lord.” Part of a person’s obedience to Christ is to submit to the earthly authorities he’s ordained, and for a wife one of those authorities is her husband. She submits to him because she trusts Jesus Christ. She knows that while her husband may mess up in his use of authority, Jesus never does. And Jesus has called her to follow this man, as imperfect as his leadership might be, with the rock solid promise that he will redeem even his failings for her good (Rom. 8:28).
4. Fourth, that same phrase “as to the Lord” implies that the wife’s first allegiance is to Jesus Christ, not her husband. That means that she may *not* submit to her husband in anything that violates Scripture’s commands. Not submitting to abuse for example, as we’ll discuss next week. A husband’s headship and authority is given by God, and it is legitimate only when exercised it in line with God’s commandments.
5. And fifth, Ephesians 5:24, she is to submit to her husband “in everything.” Once again, this is not a “sometimes” role but an all-of-life orientation.

It’s worth noting that *all* of this is rooted in Genesis 2, which describes how things existed before sin entered the world. This difference in orientation and authority are what should make up the shape of a marriage. In the New Testament, whenever questions about marriage in general come up, it’s Genesis 2 that we’re pointed back to (e.g. 1 Cor. 11). That means that what we read here is paradigmatic of *every* marriage in *every* time and culture. That’s not to say that sin doesn’t warp and abuse these differences in orientation and authority. But we *must* understand that this is God’s good design for marriage that leads to freedom.

In a moment, I’ll stop for questions, but let me point out a few applications before I do.

* For unmarried women:
  1. What would it take to prepare yourself to be ready for this role? Our culture encourages you to be fiercely independent rather than to orient yourself around a husband. Are you thinking about your job, your relationship with your parents, about the fact that if you get married you will undergo this re-orientation I’ve been talking about?
  2. And as you’re dating, you should be thinking, “is this guy worth it?” “Is what he’s doing with his life worth my orienting my life toward him?” By which I don’t mainly mean his career, but what he’s doing with his *life*. That means asking the question, “can I trust his leadership?” Does he give up his life for others? Or does his world revolve around himself? As we’ll see in a moment, a husband should use his authority to serve rather than be served. Are you seeing that in this man you’re considering as your husband?
* For married women:
  1. Biblical submission requires a lot from you. Living under the leadership of a man is a challenge. He’s not perfect. He’s going to mess up. So look to the Lord for strength and hope. And don’t go at this alone. Talk with other wives about this. And consider how the many strengths and virtues God has given to you are part of his calling to be a helper fit for your husband.
  2. Make it joy, not a burden, for your husband to lead you. Deliberately encourage your husband when he shows leadership in areas that are important to the Lord. That’s especially important for the newly married. Because it’s not just a husband’s sin that will make his leadership less-than-perfect. It’s also that he’s still getting to know his wife. In fact, in many ways it’s only through marriage that he’s finally getting to know *himself*—especially if he’s young. And all that will make his leading somewhat awkward, especially at first. It’s tempting to think, “shouldn’t you already know this about me?” Or, “if you really knew me, why on earth would you suggest *that*?” So a wife will do well to encourage her husband’s leadership, even when it’s like the awkward leadership of a boy at a junior high dance. He leads awkwardly because he doesn’t know you well, and he doesn’t know you well because you’ve only just gotten married. So encourage the good, and over time it will get better.
  3. Recognize that it will take several years for your marriage to fully take on this shape I’ve been describing, with these differences in orientation and authority. Yes, on day one you’ve promised to orient yourself toward him. But you both probably still have the same jobs, the same lack of children, the same friends, the same interests as before you were married. So in many ways, that change in orientation is still partly theoretical. But throw in some hard circumstances, and maybe a move, and especially some kids, and a few years in these differences between husband and wife are feeling *extremely* real. Jamie mentioned last week that an early task in marriage is to trust the differences you bring into marriage. Well, another task—that generally confronts you a few years in—is to trust the differences God’s created *within* your marriage. As a married woman your life seems unrecognizable compared to what it looked like before marriage, whereas so much of your husband’s pre-married life feels like it’s unchanged. So work with him to trust God in those differences. Talk with him about what changes he should embrace so he can love you through all the changes your marriage has brought to your life. And husbands: again, honor and cherish your wife in what she’s done for you.

**Any questions?**

**V. Hold Fast to His Wife**

Let’s turn then to that second phrase in Genesis 2 that distinguishes between husband and wife: “and [he will] hold fast to his wife.” God had given a job to the man in verse 15 of chapter 2: to work and keep the garden. That is, to provide and to protect. Now, we see that this protecting and providing isn’t just a general admonition applied to the created order in general, but especially for his wife. And again, Paul picks this up unique care for his wife in Ephesians 5. “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (v. 25). This isn’t to say that wives aren’t supposed to love their husbands, or hold fast to their husbands, or sacrifice for their husbands. But there is a different priority and power when a husband does this, specifically because of his authority in the marriage. So let’s see what Paul has to say as he double-clicks on what it means for a husband to hold fast to his wife.

*Husbands are to love their wives just as Christ loved the church.*

His leadership should be the same as Christ’s self-giving, sacrificial love which led him to the cross for his church. Now, in once sense this isn’t special. Jesus said that we should love one another “as I have loved you” (John 15:12). So many of the problems people face in marriage are simply a failure to obey these “one another” commands toward their spouse. But of course, in addition, there is a uniquely focused and exclusive way that this love should happen in marriage.

For some men, loving as Christ did will literally mean dying to save your wife. But for *all*, it will mean swallowing pride, actively building up your wife spiritually, even when you’re both exhausted, and *frequently* prioritizing her preferences and desires over your own. There will be some give and take on various issues as both of you seek to care for the other, but it is sin to play the headship card to simply get what you prefer. Remember that your role, fundamentally, is to give yourself up for your wife’s good.

Note that when Paul addresses the husband, he doesn’t say one word about headship or submission. It’s almost as if puts his hands over the husband’s ears when he talks to the wife about submission, and then he turns to *him* and says, “Now you . . . *love*.” Men, the main message of Ephesians 5 for you isn’t “my wife ought to submit to me,” but “love my wife, love like Christ.” That’s the charge Paul places on you. That’s what headship means.

And like Christ,

*A husband is to give of himself for his wife’s good*

Specifically, Christ gave himself up for the church, as verses 26-27 say, “to make her holy . . . and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish.” Just as the goal of Christ’s self-giving love was the good of his church, so the goal of the husband’s self-giving love should be the good of his wife. And just like the wife’s orientation is ever-present, so is this orientation toward her good. Think of leadership in business or government. I work in industry for a large Fortune 50 company, and, we read business and leadership books together, and good leaders are the ones who are casting vision, motivating, encouraging, coaching, mentoring, clearing away blockers so our people can run hard and happy in the right direction. The words “do it because I’m in charge” are definitely a sign of poor leadership in industry. How much more so in marriage, where your primary command from God is not “rule” but “love?”

When a husband loves his wife as he should, their marriage will be marked by an atmosphere of healthy growth and maturing. She will feel secure in her husband’s love, and she will thrive both spiritually and emotionally. But there’s more in these verses. In verses 28-31, Paul picks up Genesis 2’s “one flesh” concept and says that

*Husbands are to love their wives as they love themselves.*

Marriage takes two autonomous individuals and creates a living unity. They become one flesh. And so, Paul says, just as a man would care for himself, he should also care for his wife because they are no longer two but one. So, if your wife has toe fungus, you have foot fungus. If your wife had a bad day with the kids, you had a bad day with the kids. Empathy, care, and action are three words that come to mind. A man should give his wife the same attention and care he gives to himself.

And one final observation:

*A husband’s love proclaims or defames Christ’s love for us*

As you’ll recall from last week, this is a primary purpose of marriage. Marriage isn’t mainly about companionship or children but it’s to teach us about God and to serve as a response to who he is as we represent him. Perceive and proclaim, as Jamie said. So husbands: if you use your authority well you will equip your wife to trust God’s authority. Look closely at verse 22, yes your wife should submit to you because of her submission to Christ, **and** as you make following you a joy, you also *help* her submit to Christ. Every word you say, every action, every expression is saying something true or false about God. That’s astounding, convicting, and a great opportunity to grow your wife’s faith in God every second of every day.

And your wife isn’t the only one you’re teaching in how you act as a husband. *You’re* learning about God too. When you use your authority selflessly and sacrificially and you see her thrive as a result, you are experiencing a taste of the joy Christ had when he gave himself up for us.

For those who have been married for years, this is an important motivation to keep us from complacency in marriage. It’s so easy to say things like “our marriage has gone great, no major issues”, or “I know we’ve got problems in this marriage, but we’ve tried and I don’t think we’re going to make any progress, so I guess this is where we’re going to be.” Both of these mindsets can lead couples to settle for *extremely* flawed and God dis-honoring marriages, and increasing the chances they will look outside the marriage for the understanding, enjoyment, and friendship that glorifies God in marriage. But what does “settling” like that say about God’s love for us? A passion for His reputation is what keeps us motivated to work at a marriage over the long haul.

So with all of this instruction in Ephesians 5 in mind, let me make some application to the men in this room.

***Single men*** – (1) Don’t wait to practice this type of self-sacrifice until you are married. When you’re single, you can pretty much live entirely for yourself and still look like a godly man. But you know the difference. So use your relationships now as a platform to practice self-sacrificial living. (2) Look for a woman who willingly follows godly authority. One marker to look for in a future wife is someone who models a desire to follow godly authority. Look at the life of the women around you and ask: Do they desire to honor their parents? Do they willingly follow the elders in this church? For those of you who are already dating, does she respond well to your leadership?

***Husbands***—Note that Paul does not say the husband *ought to* be the head of the wife. He says he *is* the head of the wife, by the very nature of marriage. *A husband is in a position of inescapable leadership.* He cannot successfully refuse to lead. He may lead poorly, but he will lead. That’s one reason why I’ve called this class “the shape of marriage.” Not “the shape of marriage if you agree with what Scripture says.” But this is how marriage functions, like it or not. This is God’s design for all marriages. What this means is that the husband as head of the home is ultimately responsible for all problems, whether through good leadership, tyranny, or abdication. Of course that doesn’t mean that all problems are your fault. But before God, they are your responsibility, regardless of what is at fault.

***Any questions?***

**VI. Conclusion**

It’s these God-given differences, differences in orientation and differences in authority that with form the basic shape of your marriage. Even if someone doesn’t agree with what the Bible says in these areas, what they do with these differences will still shape the marriage. These differences can pull a marriage apart. But if a married couple can understand how God intended these differences, with a wife oriented toward helping and a husband oriented toward loving, they will learn over time how to run along these different paths toward the goal of being one flesh. And in that God is pleased.