Marriage Core Seminar

Week 10

**Marriage and Children**

**Introduction**

It’s amazing how few books on marriage mention children. Yet having children is not only one of the primary purposes of marriage, it will change a marriage like almost nothing else. So that’s our topic this morning. We’ll start by briefly addressing the “if” question—if in marriage we should desire children. Then we’ll look at how children help to make a marriage. And finally, we’ll talk through the pressures that children place on a marriage at different stages in a family’s life.

**I. Marriage is for making worshippers**

Ed and his wife have been married for six months, and his wife just called to tell him she was pregnant. Part of him is delighted. Part of him is panicking. Will Sarah have to quit her job or can she keep working? Can they survive financially? What about the vacation to Europe they’ve been planning? He’s never served in children’s ministry and doesn’t know the first thing about kids. Does he have what it takes to be a good dad? One might think by the way he worries that he *fears* the burden children might be on his happy-go-lucky, care-free life.

What do you think? Are children a curse or a blessing? What priority does Scripture place on married couples having children?

According to Scripture, every marriage should be open to having children. To the point that in general, if someone *isn’t* open to children then they shouldn’t get married. For some, that’s no big deal. For others, being open to children is a real step of faith. But for all it should be part of deciding to get married.

We see this first of all in God’s purpose for marriage. Like we saw in week #1, it’s not so much in what marriage *produces*, be that companionship or sex or even kids, but in what it *portrays*, about God. *And* as we saw in Genesis 1:28, one of the main way a marriage will portray God is by making babies. “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.” Through fruitfulness, a marriage portrays God by generating new people made in his image. It portrays God to a mom and a dad as they take on God-reflecting roles to raise those kids, *seeing* new things about God in the process. And it portrays God as mom and dad *show* those kids what God is like, and the wonders of what he’s made. Portrayal is seeing and showing.

Not surprisingly then, God’s desire is for marriages to produce children. Malachi 2:15, “Did he not make them one?...And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.” God created marriage in part because he was seeking Godly offspring.

And this has implications for parenting. It means a key part of raising children is to teach them about God. As Moses says in Deuteronomy, “These words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (Deut. 6:6-7). In fact, in most times and places this is the *primary* way in which Christianity grows and spreads.

So then, an important reason for marriage is having kids, and an important reason for having kids is to produce worshipers of God.

By the way, this has real relevance for adoption, which we’ll talk about more next week. The goal of parenting isn’t to simply pass on our genetic makeup, which would make adoption plan B. No: adoption is a plan A because the goal of parenting is to pass on the gospel. Adoption isn’t for everyone. But adoption is a beautiful thing to consider and pray about, especially given how God has adopted *us* (Romans 8:23; Gal 3:23-25; Eph 1:5).

I hope that all this sheds light on that well-known verse in Psalm 127, that “children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward” (v. 3)—the verse so many bleary-eyed Christian parents have recited to themselves in bemused bewilderment as they try unsuccessfully to shush a screaming baby at two in the morning. Why are they a heritage, a reward, and a blessing? Not merely because they’re cute (though at 2am it certainly helps). They’re a heritage because they are one of the most powerful ways that any of us will fulfill God’s delightful purposes for us, to use our lives to show off the goodness and glory of God. Portraying the goodness of God *to* our kids, *from* our kids as we learn about God by being their parents, and *through* our kids to others. From the perspective of eternity, what in your life will have mattered? A big part of the answer to that question will be your children. Biological children, adopted children, even—like the apostle Paul saw—spiritual children who you’ve seen come to new birth in Christ and who you’ve discipled, raising them spiritually in Christ.

So if God gives you the opportunity to have children, don’t be stingy with that gift; Psalm 127:5 encourages a “quiver” of them. And don’t feel like you should wait until your career and financial goals are all lined up. There is *never* a good time to have kids, they will *always* be disruptive…and yet they are *always* a blessing, a reward, a heritage. A good gift we should desire and pursue.

So that’s my answer to our first question: marriage is for making worshippers. Trust in God means desiring what God has said is good.

*Birth control*

Of course, that leads to more questions. What about waiting a little while to have kids? What about spacing between kids? What about eventually stopping having kids? A few notes about birth control:

First, some forms of birth control are clearly wrong. Abortion, most certainly. Technologies like the IUD that prevent a child who has been conceived from proceeding any further. Scripture is clear that an individual never has the right to take a human life.

Second, there are many Christians, including in this church, who feel that *any* form of birth control is wrong, no matter what. Our elders as a whole are not persuaded on this from Scripture, though some individual elders are. So those who hold this conviction must be careful not to judge those who don’t. And those with freer consciences must not look down on those who do.

Third, though many forms of birth control aren’t alwayssinful doesn’t meant they’re *never* sinful. If I decide to say “not now” to something God calls a blessing, I need to ask myself some hard questions. Am I really believing that children are a gift from God? Is my motivation for saying “not now” one of stewardship—caring well for all God’s entrusted to me—or selfishness? Those questions are best addressed in conversation with wise and Godly people who know me well.

Any questions so far?

**II. How Children Grow a Marriage**

In Scripture, marriage normally results in children, and that’s not only good for the kids, it’s good for the marriage. To see that, let’s focus in on that purpose for marriage I mentioned earlier, from Genesis 1. *The purpose of marriage is to be a union that portrays the goodness of God*. And I’ll cut up that statement and examine the effect of kids on each piece.

1. Marriage is union. As Jesus said, the two become one. Well, kids fuse that union together. Did you ever play with perler beads when you were little? Photo on your handout. You take these little beads, place them over the pegs on the baseboard, and then iron it until the beads meld together. Well, for the union of marriage children are like the heat that melds those beads. Raising kids is a lifetime project that you undertake together, filling your marriage with shared relationships, shared goals, shared challenges, and shared memories (both sweet and painful). There really is nothing else that fuses a marriage union like building a family together.

2. Marriage is portrayal. That is, your marriage reveals who God is—to you, to your spouse, to those around you, even to God. As you bring children into your family, you learn so much about yourself—the good, the bad, and the ugly. And you learn so much about God, because you’re now playing a role that he *designed* to point to himself. And what an opportunity for sanctification! Marriage moves you from the sanctification staircase, where to some extent you move up at your own pace, to the sanctification escalator, where you’re now going to be made more holy whether you like it or not. And with kids, that escalator really takes off. For example, I don’t think of myself as an angry person. But goodness have I discovered anger in my heart as a dad! And so in a marriage with kids, my heart has been reshaped and refined to better reflect the kindness of Jesus.

3. Third, marriage is portrayal of the *goodness of God*. When kids join the family, you *see* God’s goodness in ways you never imagined, as a new piece of his creation is on display in this little person who’s captured your heart. And you get to *show* God’s goodness in ways you never imagined, introducing that little person to sunsets, good pizza, unconditional love, great food, the gospel, Jesus…so much goodness to show them!

So if marriage is to make us into better worshippers, kids can be a significant part of the program. If you’re married with kids, keep these three points in mind, especially when parenting doesn’t seem so glamorous. This is the big picture that you need to keep in view. And if you’re not married, or married without kids, keep these three in mind as you seek to encourage your friends who *do* have kids and as you consider what God may give you in the future. Children are a huge tool God uses to fuse the marriage union. Children are a significant way in which a married couple will portray God, as they both see God’s goodness for themselves and show it off to others.

*Any questions* before we move onto some of the challenges children pose to a marriage?

**III. How Children Change a Marriage**

Children put pressure on a marriage in different ways at different stages—and I fully recognize that many families will experience multiple stages at once. So when you’ve got little ones at home, you’re in a physically demanding time. It’s exhausting not just because you’re doing *absolutely* everythingfor your kids but also because of the sheer volume of decisions you need to make. “Is he crying because he’s over-tired or hungry? Should I be worried about that rash? Why can’t she get to sleep?” Sometimes success is simply making it to the end of the day. All that places one set of pressures on a marriage and makes energy a limiting factor.

Then your kids reach school age. Things often change quite a bit when your youngest leaves the preschool years behind. You’re able to connect as a couple in ways you haven’t for a while—and you *need* to connect in ways you haven’t for a while. You can enjoy the solidity that the baby and toddler years have built into your marriage. Your focus as a family is extending further out. You’re no longer just introducing your kids to the world; now *they’re* starting to introduce new aspects of the world to *you*.

And then there are the teen years, when you’re no longer building friendship with each other, but in new ways with your kids as well. These years can be an identity crisis for both kids and parents. They’re grappling with who they are; you’re squarely in mid-life now and grappling with what you’ve become. It would seem no accident that in God’s providence, the crises of adolescence and mid-life hit together. Which means this can be a time of spiritual struggle for both kids and parents as idols are exposed—something a married couple will need to engage in together. The teen years are a time of newfound freedom for a married couple; date nights no longer require carefully orchestrated babysitting plans. But you’re also pulled in a dozen different directions based on what your kids are up to. And it’s a time of reckoning as you see what kind of adults these kids are turning into. After all, this is the grandest endeavor you’ve undertaken as a married couple; what fruit are you seeing from that investment? That reckoning may well have a significant impact on your marriage in ways both good and bad.

So how does all this put pressure on a marriage? You’ll remember the three basic tools that God gives us to bridge from the differences between husband and wife implicit Genesis 2:20, to the union between husband and wife in Genesis 2:25. The differences that *could* be the power of your union will only drive you crazy unless you can also learn to be one flesh. These tools are (1) the roles of husband and wife, (2) communication, and (3) sex. So let’s consider how children adjust each of these at various stages of life with kids.

*Roles*

Let’s start those basic orientations we saw back in class #2—from Genesis 2, with the husband leading and providing, and the wife helping and nurturing.

Children accentuate those differences between husband and wife, in different ways at different stages.

* If the husband as leader and the wife as helper seemed somewhat theoretical before kids came along, they’re very real now—especially in the little years. Even biology has pushed you into different roles. A mom’s life in particular can often be quite different from what it used to be. “I used to stress about achieving world peace and now I stress about what kind of diapers to buy.” The fact that she’s oriented primarily inside the home as nurturer and he’s oriented primarily outside of the home as provider can make their lives feel very separate. That’s true whether or not she’s also working for pay. She’s doubling down on her homeward orientation; he’s doubling down on providing—and to both it can feel like this is terribly unfair. So how can a husband and wife navigate this new accentuation of their roles in the years of having little kids?
  + Husband: in short, he needs to encourage his helper. Encourage her by helping wherever he can—not merely physically but in making many of the decisions that can be so exhausting for her. Encourage her by not acting like another kid with a bunch of needs, but leading her. Encourage her by providing for her emotionally when the demands of motherhood take and take and take. We live in a society that does not value motherhood as it should, and he needs to push against that, seeing in her the beauty of expecting a child, and then after kids come, the beauty of giving herself for them. Jesus said “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). A husband needs to live and breathe that verse, both in his words and his example because that is her life: giving, giving, and giving.
  + Wife: her goal is to trust. Children *are* a blessing from the Lord, as we discussed earlier, despite the curse of Genesis 3 that she’s grappling with. And she can trust that despite all the massive changes in her life that children have brought, there is a joy in being faithful to God’s calling on her as a mom, as she serves not her husband or her children ultimately, but *Jesus*.

A pitfall to avoid in these years is bitterness. Things can be hard. You realize you’re not always on the same page regarding parenting. But you need to trust God with this person you’re co-parenting with, knowing that they are absolutely the marriage partner God intended for you.

* But as your kids get older, what it means for a husband to lead and a wife to help changes. As kids move toward and into the teen years and spiritual struggle is a more profound part of family life, his role as spiritual leader becomes especially prominent as pastor to his family. He’s trying to make sure he and his wife have time to connect with the kids at a deep level—which isn’t something that can be scheduled and planned. And increasingly, she’s pointing her kids to him, to their dad, to help them wrestle through the big things they’re thinking through. She’s teeing up and handing off conversations to him, helping him lead and pastor well like Deuteronomy 6 describes.

A key threat in these later years is that there’s so much to take care of, spiritual priorities get pushed aside. Between schooling and extracurriculars and friendships and conflict, discipling the hearts of these kids gets forgotten. And attending to that most important aspect of who they are will take careful attention by both husband and wife.

Let me highlight one theme that undergirds all of this, and that’s our temptation to define success and flourishing—for ourselves, our marriages, and our families—in terms of production rather than portrayal. Like we talked about in week 1, our constant temptation as human beings is to define significance in terms of Genesis 1:28 (being fruitful, exercising dominion) rather than Genesis 1:27 (portraying God as those made in his image). To whatever extent a husband and wife have fallen pray to that and evaluate success in terms of accomplishment, the advent of children in the family is going to expose that, sometime in painful yet corrective ways.

* For some couples, that will happen when kids first come on the scene. The “used to battle cancer, now battling poopy diapers” question I mentioned earlier. Children will seriously challenge any measure of success based on productivity. But if you define success in terms of portraying God—seeing and showing his goodness, kids are amazing!
* For other couples, this hits home more as the kids leave home. Maybe those kids aren’t as accomplished as you’d always dreamed they would be. Or the more Christianized version of that, “are your kids walking with the Lord now that they’re grown?” Which can feel like, “did you raise them right? Did your parenting accomplish anything?”

No matter when it hits home, children will expose the fact we are often focused too much on accomplishment—either the worldly kind or the Christianized kind—rather than portrayal. If your goal in life is one of accomplishment, be it spiritual fruitfulness or worldly ambition, then the differences in your roles that parenting pushes on will be frustrating and lead to conflict. On the other hand, if your goal for your marriage, and your parenting, is portrayal—seeing and showing the goodness of who God is—then those differences will be the source of great satisfaction and contentment.

So then, to summarize, children with accentuate the differences in role between husband and wife. He needs to encourage, she needs to trust, and they both need to remember that their primary calling under Christ is not one of accomplishment but worship: seeing and showing the goodness of God

With all that, are there *any questions* before we move on to communication?

*Communication*

The pressures on communication also change over time.

* One pressure point comes from how well your style of communication as a couple will fit with different stages of parenting. Some couples do well with dedicated, deliberate time to talk. Others have more of a constantly-running conversation, jumping from the mundane to the significant and back again. The “scheduled conversation” couple’s going to struggle in the early years when the only time you have to talk is the end of the day when you’re exhausted. But the “running conversation” couple’s going to struggle in the teen years, when your kids are dragging you all over town and you have less time together. Remember that regardless of your style and regardless of your stage of life, your goal in communication is union—to know, to be known, to build trust. That means that regardless of your style of stage of life, you will need to make enough space for communication so that you can know, be known, and build trust.
* Another pressure is the discovery that you don’t have the same values when it comes to raising kids. Just like many realize their first year of marriage that they have different values regarding money. And just like with money, it’s tempting to use moral language to describe what’s simply a difference in preference. As in, not simply, “wow—he parents differently from me” but “he is *wrong*.” That could be how much you value regular naptimes versus spontaneity in hospitality when the kids or young. Or how you weigh protecting them versus letting them spread their own wings once they’re teenagers.

What do the communication goals of knowing, being known and building trust mean for this pressure point? Well, the fact that you value different things is not bad at all. There’s no reason why you can’t pursue union despite disagreement. We do that by obeying Jesus’ command not to judge but to show grace. We do that by obeying Peter’s command—especially for husbands—to pursue understanding. You want to get to the point where you can articulate where you disagree on what you value, and you can each articulate the strengths and weaknesses of each of your values. So she’s the protective one the kids run to when they’re afraid, she’s the foundation of their life. But he’s the one who taught them how to climb the stairs, how to ride a bike, how to drive a car. If it was all protection, they’d never learn—and if it was all risk-taking, there’d be no safety. That understanding and appreciation of each of your values is critical if your communication about parenting is going to build trust-filled union.

OK then. We’ve talked about roles and communication. Now, how do kids change

*Intimacy*

And by intimacy I don’t just mean sex. I mean the emotional, sexual union that makes you feel you’re one and not two.

In the little years, one obstacle to intimacy is the physical intensity of parenting. You can begin to feel more like teammates than lovers. Little kids are making demands on her body, and sex feels like one more person in line. In some ways, this is an inescapable challenge of this stage of life. It can be helpful to have a regulardate night in these years, when you banish all talk of logistics—and maybe even problem-solving about the kids—so you can focus on your romantic friendship. Nothing new there, but it can take a fair bit of planning to pull off. Planning date nights doesn’t need to be the exclusive responsibility of the husband—but it’s normally good if it’s mainly his responsibility. Husbands: how can you communicate her beauty and desirability without simply coming across as one more demand on her body? Your goal in these years is to remain lovers who are increasingly attracted to each other because of the beauty you’re seeing in each other.

Then as your kids hit the school-age years, you have more freedom as a couple. Yet the temptation is to make do with the level of intimacy you put up with during the toddler years. Don’t do that. Focus in these years on re-building your romantic friendship. As we’ve been discussing through this class, aim for new levels of vulnerability, and to make that vulnerability safe. Enjoy the new solidity and trust that you’ve built by raising kids together. Date nights probably feel a little less like the few moments when you come up for air. But they’re no less important.

As kids enter the teen years, the goal of safe vulnerability takes on a new dimension: to begin to prepare your friendship for when the kids are gone. Kids give you something to talk about. Kids bring you together. But your marriage will, Lord willing, last long beyond having kids in the home. So we need to use some of the freedom of the teen years to continue building friendship. That’s the friendship of old age that we read of in the Song of Songs: “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for long is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grace. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord” (8:6). That strong, secure, powerful closeness is what we’re aiming for. So much more than the passion or youth. Love as strong as death.

**Conclusion**

So then, marriage is for making worshippers as through our union we see and show the goodness of God. That means that in marriage we should aspire for children