

Marriage: Blessed to Be a Blessing

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For *The Stream's* Pastors' Corner

This is sample material a pastor or teacher might use to teach the material on marriage and sexuality published at *The Stream* in March, 2022, in a series that begins with "[The Very Alien Question of Marriage](#)."

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Introduction

I've got a curious question to bring up for you today. By the end, some of you will think it's a very hard question, or rather, it *leads to* a very hard question.

What makes the question a curious one is its history, as much as anything else. Because it's a question people could have asked from the beginning of time, and of course some people have done so, but from what I've read, not many, at least not in the last several hundred years. Now, obviously, there's a lot I haven't read in the last several hundred years. But that's my impression.

And it could have been such a common question, since it's about such a common life experience.

But then it heated up. I mean, really, really hot. For a while there it was just about the hottest question on the planet. And then ... poof. It disappeared again. So for a long time no one was asking it. Then everyone was asking it. Then no one was asking it.

That question is, "Why marriage? Why do we have marriage? What makes marriage special? What is marriage really for?"

I could be wrong, but my impression is, for the longest time, no one really wondered that. They just ... got married.

The Question of Marriage

But then about 15-20 years ago it all spun up in this frantic swirl, until the middle of 2015 when the Supreme Court decided it had the one true answer to the question we should have been asking for ages. And almost exactly the same time Bruce Jenner appeared on the cover of *Vogue* calling himself Caitlyn Jenner, and instantly we forgot about marriage and started asking other hard questions I don't dare time time to open up now.

Why marriage? We have a partial answer in Scripture, where in several ways and in several places it tells us that it serves to illustrate the relationship between Christ and the Church. That's true, but it doesn't explain the popularity of marriage where people don't know about that principle. And it seems to me there ought to be an answer that explains their attraction to it, even without knowing the theology.

So why marriage? I'm going to propose an answer today. In the process, though, I'm going to raise another question, which for some of you is going to be more challenging than the question I'm starting with. A lot more challenging, actually for some of you. Challenging enough that I can't start with it right off the bat. I'll have to work my way toward it gradually. We'll get there by the end.

Previewing the Message

And the route we're going to take getting there is going to be by following some of this history that I say makes this such a curious question. Why have people everywhere always practiced marriage, in one form or another? And then what made them suddenly question what it means?

We're going to walk a path of history here, then. It's going to include an interlude in the Scriptures, since we need the Bible to guide us on such paths. We're going to see how marriage expresses the character of God in ways you may never have thought of

before. It does so in ways that are true and universal, so it applies the same even where people don't actually know the character of God. You won't just learn about marriage in this message, but about God and about yourself, too, I hope.

But I'd probably better preview something for you before I start on that path, because some of you are thinking this is going to be a message about same-sex marriage, and whether that's right or wrong. It isn't. I have a message about that planned for sometime not too long from now, but you'll have to wait until then, because this one isn't it.

History

So let's go back in time. We could go back centuries, because the history I'm talking about goes back centuries.

But hey, history is scary when you start talking about it that way! I don't mean to do that to you. We don't need to go back that far. I mean for some of you it'll feel like deep dark-ages sort of history, but it actually starts around the time I was born.

Or, like I said, deep, dark-ages sort of history.

Marriage, B.C.

In those days, as Jesus said about the days of Noah, people married and were given in marriage, and they just did it.

Individually they had their reasons for it. Families arranged their marriages, perhaps, in order to secure some financial or political good, or for the sake of their standing in the community. In our day it's about romantic love. If you ask me why I asked Sara to marry me, it's because I couldn't stand the thought of not being together with her.

So that's why we got married, but that's not the same as the question I'm raising here. Why is there marriage in the first place?

Marriage happens different ways, but they all have certain things in common.

All Marriages ...

Lots of things, actually. It's about lifetime commitment. It's about companionship and partnership. It's about shared responsibilities and well-defined rights and privileges with respect to those responsibilities. Different cultures have different views on how those rights and privileges should be divided, but marriage has always included at least a clear understanding of that division.

And besides that, there was one more thing that was *always* involved in marriage.

And here I almost have to laugh, because on one level it's so obvious no one could miss it for a moment, while on another level we've found a way to forget it almost

completely, like it's ancient history or something. Ancient, as in even older than me! It's about nature. Biology. It's about what married people do.

Had Children (Or Expected to, At Least)

They share physical intimacy, and they have children.

Today you can ask whether children will be part of your marriage, in fact, couples ask it routinely. For most of history, though? That question just didn't come up. It couldn't.

Because marriage means enjoying each other, right? And you get enjoying each other enough, and before long you've got children. It's just biology. And love. And relationship. And nothing's going to stop it, except:

1. You have a physical/medical issue you most likely didn't know about when you got married, or
2. You find some way to prevent having children, or
3. You don't enjoy each other.

The very great majority of couples through history have gone into marriage expecting to enjoy each other. Very few couples through history, taken as a whole have had the means to prevent having children after they'd been enjoying each other in that way.

So couples who got married had each other's beauty and handsomeness in their eyes, but they always — always — had a family in the back of their minds, too.

That Changed When ...

But that's ancient history, isn't it? It's BC, before contraception, obviously. Humans have had contraceptive methods since almost forever, but they weren't all that safe, and they weren't all that reliable. The thing that changed the world was the Pill.

Do they still call it that? Of course I'm talking about the pill that prevent pregnancy. The first one was developed in the late 1950s. I'm older than that. It wasn't legal for use in America until the Supreme Court approved it for married couples in 1965. Unmarried women were granted legal right to use it nationwide for the first time in 1972.

Before that, if you got married, you got married with children in the plan. Probably lots of them. I grew up on a block where there were three families with five children. Five children today makes you kind of strange; then it was absolutely normal and common.

Pastors please note: As you read this you may wonder where it's heading. I can assure you that nothing in this message will suggest that contraception is essentially sinful. My doctrine is not Roman Catholic.

In your sermon prep you may decide you want to emphasize the distinction between that which is essentially sinful and that which can be good or bad; it's not essentially sinful, though it gives opportunity for sin.. Jesus was certainly using hyperbole when he said to pluck out the eye that is causing you to sin, but the point remains that a person's eye can be used for good or for bad. Almost everything could be used for either good or for bad. Water is essential for life, but a person can drown in it, too.

There are many, many ways to misuse contraception, as you know. I have steered clear of the obvious here, premarital and extramarital sex, only because it's already well known, and because it's not the topic of the message. In this message I bring up common potential misuse of contraception, which I've labeled (below) "just you 'n' me, babe," marriage.

A Biblical Look at the Blessing of Marriage

Now here's the great thing about that form of marriage. In a sense it was almost automatically biblical, in ways it just isn't any longer. I don't mean people were always faithful or treated their spouses or children well. That's not what I mean by automatically biblical. I'm just talking about how it automatically meets a biblical standard that goes, way, way, way beyond just marriage. It's a standard you might not even have thought about in connection with marriage.

And here is where we're going to take that interlude I mentioned in our walk through history.

We've already agreed on the easy, obvious stuff: That marriage is about lifetime commitment, companionship, friendship, physical intimacy, and sharing in a lot of legal and financial rights and responsibilities. That's the easy part.

We have to put all this in a much deeper, more eternal context, if we're going to understand it correctly. We need to understand marriage in light of one of God's most enduring, ancient, lasting, forever principles.

It's the principle we call "blessed to be a blessing." Maybe you've never heard this principle before. Maybe you've never heard it in connection with marriage. But this principle is so tied to God's eternal character, and his eternal plan for usnnnnnnnn, we dare not overlook it any longer.

Genesis 12:1-3

I first learned of it while studying world missions, through a course some of you have probably heard of, called Perspectives on the World Christian Movement. In that course I learned how God called Abram in Genesis 12:1-3, and gave him a huge promise of a huge blessing with a huge geopolitical scope. God told Abram that he would be the father of a massive nation (later on he says his descendants will be as uncountable as the grains of sand on the seashore). But he doesn't just leave Abram with a blessing to hoard for himself. God says, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

That was the Bible's first clear statement of the principle I'm talking about: "Blessed to be a blessing." After I learned that principle I started noticing it everywhere. When God gives us a blessing, he gives it so that we can give to others out of it.

That was the first statement. The clearest one might be the one in 2 Corinthians 9:6-12. Let's open that up and look at it.

2 Cor. 9:6-12

Paul is writing to the Corinthian church about plans to share their finances with other Christians in great need. But his principles cover much more than just that one

specific situation. Let's look at it, and then in a moment we'll come back to the marriage question, and what this tells us about it.

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

So we're talking about financial resources here; one of the blessings we all like to find. It goes on to say,

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

God promises *grace* and *sufficiency*. We could have a long talk about how God fulfills that promise differently for different people in different circumstances. But the point is at least this: For those who can acknowledge they've received that grace and sufficiency, the idea is to become a cheerful *giver*. Who "abounds in every good work. Who passes the blessing along; who doesn't just keep it all just to enjoy it for themselves.

Look especially at verse 11:

You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.

The Blessing God Makes of Marriage

I could illustrate this from all over Scripture, but I don't think I need to. You know it already, if you think about it. We all know that God is a God of love, of giving; not a God of holding it all for himself, of hoarding, but a God who shares freely. This is in the character of God. Freely, yet of course wisely.

Now, this is such a deep principle in human life under God, it has to have some strong connection with something as important as marriage. Which it does. "What is marriage for?" It goes like this:

If marriage is a blessing, God intends us to share that blessing with others — wisely

Let me just suggest that it is not wise to share your spouse with others. Very, very, not wise.

So from that I conclude that God must have another way for us to pass that blessing along, a way to make marriage naturally flow into that kind of extended, expanded, sharing, giving love. And he does. He allows and expects us to share the blessing of our marriage both to our children, and through our children.

The Core Principle That Makes Marriage What It Is

You see, God has many purposes for marriage, but one of them is for the couple to learn to love greater than the love they have for each other; to give more than they can give each other; to pass along a blessing of love and life and a future, much greater than any two people can do in any other way: Through children.

I said earlier that Genesis 12:3 was the first clear statement of the principle, “blessed to become a blessing.” That’s true, but there’s a strong hint of it appearing much, much earlier, in Genesis 1:27-28

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.”

God blessed them as a couple, and he gave them a job flowing out of that blessing — a job and a role that come down to generating a future for the human race, and making the earth a good place to be.

So the blessing of marriage is meant to flow even beyond our own homes.

Again, marriage has many purposes. The companionship, the partnership, the friendship, of course also the sexual enjoyment; all these are part of the reason marriage exists. God said in Genesis 2 that it was not good for the man to be alone, and in marriage God built the blessing that allows us not to be alone. Even if you’re single you benefit from that blessing: You may feel alone in one sense, but imagine being alone like Adam was!

So this is all part of the goodness of marriage, but the goodness was never meant to be confined within the couple. Marriage is a blessing meant to be passed along, and far and away, way above all other ways to pass it along, it is through children. No other human friendship, partnership, companion relationship, can do that the way marriage can. It’s what makes marriage uniquely marriage.

Where It Went Wrong

But something’s happened, hasn’t it. Today, if you ask people what marriage is for, *everyone* will rattle off the list that starts with enjoying each other and ends with sharing everything together. *Some* people, but only some, will say it’s for having a family.

So do you see what’s changed? The blessing God intended to flow out of marriage used to do exactly that: It flowed out of marriage. It took serious effort, or an unfortunate and abnormal physical situation, to prevent it.

It was inherent, it was part of it, it was unavoidable, it was unthinkable not to think about it. Now, though, for many, that part of marriage has become an afterthought.

How many couples today go through this conversation as they think about getting married? “Should we have children?” “Oh, I don’t know, maybe, maybe not.” Or, “Let’s decide that later.”

It’s so common, so normal, it doesn’t even feel strange. Go back to 1950 — or any time in human history before that — and it would have seemed like a very strange conversation indeed.

“What If I Don’t Think Marriage Is Such a Blessing After All?”

And some of you are sitting there asking, “Blessing? You call marriage a blessing? Do you have any idea how bad my parents’ marriage was? Or how bad mine is going? Or how bad it went, before we finally ended it?”

We live in a broken world, don’t we? So that’s a very, very important question. A hard one for many, and a painful one. It’s too important to overlook but it’s also too important to try to fit it into this message, when I’m trying to do something else at the same time. So I’m saving that question for next time. I will come to it. For those of you asking that question, then, I’m just going to ask you to do me the favor of being gracious and patient with me while I plan to treat that aspect of marriage with the seriousness it deserves. Just not this time.

Others of you are asking a different question, something like this one:

“So the world has changed. Maybe it’s better now. What’s so bad about it? Who needs kids anyway? They cost a lot. The planet is using too much energy, it’s polluted, and maybe we’ve got more than enough people on earth already.”

But I’m going to have to go with God’s word on this. The principle holds. Blessed to be a blessing.

Others of you are wondering whether this has been one big ploy to sneak in a political message against same-sex marriage. That’s not what this is about. I’m not talking about a *same-sex marriage problem*, it’s a *marriage problem*. It’s a marriage problem that *includes* the same-sex marriage issue, but it’s so very much bigger than that.

Marriage didn’t start changing in the 2015 when same-sex couples started getting married. No, it was a full generation ahead of that. The same generation those couples grew up in, or even their parents’ generation.

The older, family-oriented view of marriage continued, but another one came up alongside it to compete with it. It’s not like you have one or you have the other, and nothing in between. These are two ends of continuum. But before 50 or so years ago, there really wasn’t any such continuum, it was just “marriage and family.”

The Advent of “Just You’n’Me, Babe” Marriage

Now, though on the other end of the continuum, we have Sonny and Cher singing, “I’ve got you, babe.” That was 1965. (Their [official music video](#) is a sad sight: They’re singing to the audience, not to each other. Their marriage didn’t last long.)

“A Dog Named Boo”

The band Lobo sang of “You and me and a dog named Boo.” The lyrics included, “You and me and a dog named Boo. Travelin’ and a livin’ off the land. You and me and a dog named Boo. How I love bein’ a free man.” I’ve got news for you: “a dog named Boo” isn’t what God had in mind for letting the blessing flow freely, widely, to a degree fitting the blessing that marriage is meant to be.

Self-Focus vs. Other-Oriented

I’ve got a name for this. God has a name for it. My name for it is, “Just you’n’me, babe” relationship. God’s name for it is self-focus. Self-focus. Getting what you want out of life. What you want is what counts.

There’s blessed-to-be-a-blessing marriage, and there’s “just you’n’me babe” relationships, which don’t have to be marriages at all. They might be “significant other” relationships or “living together,” or “hooking up,” or just having a night’s fling.

All of that stands in stark, deep, uncrossable contrast with the kind of blessed-to-be-a-blessing marriage God intends for the people he loves. Because marriage is a blessing. It’s *supposed to be* a blessing, anyway. I can tell you from seeing my parents’ marriage that it can be the most incredible thing you ever saw. They passed that incredibleness along to us kids.

I can tell you from my marriage to Sara that it can be completely unbelievably great. Not always easy, not always smooth, but great. I wouldn’t trade her for all the money in the universe.

“Gentle on My Mind”

Even worse, we’ve got Glen Campbell singing “Gentle on My Mind” back in 1968. Now, as far as I know Campbell’s life and career, he was as fine a gentleman as there was. But listen to the lyric.

And it’s knowin’ I’m not shackled by forgotten words and bonds
And the ink stains that have dried upon some lines
That keeps you in the back roads by the rivers of my memory
And keeps you ever gentle on my mind ...

Though the wheat fields and the coastlines
And the junkyards and the highways come between us

And some other woman's cryin' to her mother
'Cause she turned and I was gone

I still might run in silence, tears of joy might stain my face
And the summer sun might burn me till I'm blind
But not to where I cannot see you walkin' on the back roads
By the rivers flowin' gentle on my mind

He (whoever this represents) doesn't want to be bound by some dry ink stains on a marriage license. He wants to be free. He wants what he wants. And he can get it.

Applying the Principle

Now, obviously I'm setting up two extremes against each other. No marriage is perfectly giving. Obviously. No one is perfectly selfish. Well, not many, and I'm sure no one here.

A New Question for Some

But we've got two opposite kinds of marriage in the world now. And I'm willing to bet I've blown some of your minds with this. You've asked each other if you want kids, or just maybe one or two of them. Or maybe it's your friends who've asked your opinion about it. Maybe you're the potential grandparents, wondering what to advise your married children.

And you've never thought about children in the way I hope I've started you thinking about it now. You're sitting there feeling maybe a bit uncomfortable. I've just got done telling you that there are questions about that question; that there's even maybe a problem with raising that question.

And it never occurred to you that there might be a problem with the question. It never crossed your mind that there was a *history* behind the question.

Encouragement: You've Got History

Let me end by giving you some encouragement. There's a reason I walked down this history with you: It's because I know you yourself have a history.

You're not asking that question because you're selfish, you're asking it because you've grown up in the 20th and 21st centuries. Every one of us is a product of our times.

And look what the times have done to you, and to all of us. That question, the question, "Should we have children, and how many?" used to be such an easy question, it wasn't even a question at all. Now it is a question, and it's a hard question.

Don't Rush the Hard Question, But Don't Drop It, Either

So here's my advice to you, if you're asking that question: Treat it for what it is. It's a hard question. It's a hard question, but you're stuck with it, if you're a man and woman either married or in another kind of relationship.

I could almost say I want to apologize for making it harder for you, because I've just given you information that's likely to make it harder than you thought it was before.

I could *almost* say it, but no, I'm not going to apologize. I think you'll make it through the question just fine. You'll dig in to your own study of God's word. You'll look into your personal situations. You'll examine your conscience. You'll do it now with a clearer picture, I think, of what God wants us to do with every blessing, and you'll make the good decision.

For the Rest of Us

As for the rest of us not asking that question, my prayer is that this will do something else for you. It will help you understand what your own marriage is really for. The ideal to aim for, anyway, even though we know it's not always possible. And look, this is a universal principle. It isn't only about kids! If you're not married, you can seek to follow it. If you're married with kids already, you can seek to follow it with them.

I've been talking about marriage, but I've been talking about more than that. I've been sharing from God's heart about a life of gratefulness for the blessing God has given us, and passing those blessings along. May God bless you; may you be His blessing to others.

Amen.

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Tom lives near Dayton, Ohio with his wife, Sara. He's been saying they're the proud grandparents of two grand-dogs, a grand-cat and a grand-bunny by way of their two

married children; but now they're the truly proud grandparents of one incredible grandson, born the last day of 2020, making it a much better year after all, and just in time.

He has a B.Mus. in Music Education with a specialty in performance from Michigan State University and an M.S. in Organizational Psychology from the University of Central Florida. When he's not writing he loves drinking coffee, canoeing, walking in the woods, and playing his trombones.