

# Redefining Marriage (Part 1)

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There was once a survey organized by a Japanese magazine that asked married couples this question; “if you were to describe marriage with one Chinese character (*kanji*), what will it be?” The most popular answer for couples in their 20s was the letter “bond.” The most popular character picked by couples in their 60s was the letter “forbearance.”

It makes us wonder, what it is that shifts the outlook on marriage from “bond” to “forbearance” in 40 years? Furthermore, what is the meaning of marriage in the first place?

When you do a search for google images for the word “marriage,” you mostly get pictures of a groom in a tux and a bride in a wedding gown. As a pastor, I have done many premarital counseling. Often times, it is easier for couples to discuss about their wedding ceremony and their plans for the honeymoon. However, not many couples ask me, “Pastor, what is the meaning of marriage?”

I don’t mean to spoil their excitement, but a wedding day or a honeymoon only lasts for a short time in the span of married life. The most important part of married life is how the couple will live out the rest of their ordinary days.

If the groom-to-be and the bride-to-be are not on the same page about what marriage is about, sooner or later, they will start to notice a rift between them. This rift may snowball into a big challenge one day. Brothers and sisters, how would you define marriage? Have you ever actually thought about it?

The first book of the Bible is the book of Genesis. It starts out like this, **“In the Beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”** God created the universe and the natural world over the next five days. And on the sixth day, God created a man and woman named Adam and Eve.

The Bible describes the relationship between this man and woman in the following way: **“That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. (Genesis 2:24-25)**

As you can see, the concept of marriage and a married couple are mentioned in the forefront of the Bible. The book of Genesis is 50-chapters long, and goes on to illustrate how this first couple created the first family, and how their family affairs unfolded. Last week, I highlighted the story of Noah and his family in my sermon.

The fact that a husband, a wife, and their family are mentioned in the very first book of the Bible, which contains 66 books, seems to foretell how foundational those ideas are for all human lives.

Our world is full of problems. People try to resolve those problems through reforming the constitution, reforming education, etc. However, maybe we need to pay closer attention to revising our idea of family, since family is the place that nurtures and shapes people the most before they enter the real world.

I am reminded of the words of Mother Teresa who said, “If you want to change the world, go home, and love your family.” And the origin of every family boils down to a man and a woman.

Keeping these things in mind, I would like to talk about two fundamental concepts about marriage from the Bible. Since this is such an important topic, I will continue on this topic next week as well.

Some of you may think that you have nothing to do with marriage. However, when the Bible talks about any topic, there is always a larger implication beyond the topic itself. Understanding those implications will lead us into grasping God’s unchanging truth towards humans.

So, let’s get started onto the first point. It is that marriage signifies the completion of the creation.

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If we want to understand anything at a deeper level, we need to look into its origins. So, let’s try to uncover the meaning of marriage by taking a look at how the first man and woman were created from the book of Genesis.

**Genesis 2:18** says, **The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”** It’s easy to gloss over those words. Adam was the first resident of the Garden of Eden. Eve was the first woman who was created for Adam.

The book of Genesis opens its curtains with a grandiose story of the creation of the heavens and the earth. In the first chapter, God is busy creating all the physical matters of the solar system, galaxies, and everything that the earth is composed of.

God begins with creating light, next comes water, fish, birds, then animals. I find it interesting that this order is similar to the order of our evolution theory. Genesis notes that each time God created different things, He saw what he had made, and called it “good.”

And at the very end of his work of creation, God saw everything that He had made, said it was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). That means that the world God had made was as good as it could get. The world was not just put together in a haphazard way, but with careful attention to detail and in a beautiful order by God.

We often experience being deeply moved by the beauty of nature. You may have felt touched by watching the sun set into the ocean or by spotting a wildflower on a roadside. It’s no surprise that we feel this way towards nature since those are snippets of God’s handiwork that He had called “very good.”

But, did you notice that there was only one thing that God had said was “not good” about the world He had created? What was it? It was the fact that the man is alone.

Adam was created by God to know Him and to live under His care. God entrusted Adam to take care of the plants and the animals He had created. However, Adam did not have a partner of equal value with whom to share life and the responsibilities and work given by God. Therefore, God gave Adam Eve to be his life partner.

We need to remember that the story of the man and the woman being joined in marriage and the story of the creation of the heavens and the earth are not separate entities. In fact, marriage was part of the order and beauty of the creation of the earth. In other words, the creation of the earth would not have been complete without the marriage of Adam and Eve. This is how central of a place marriage holds in the Bible.

And as long as there is order, there are rules that go along with it. Therefore, we can understand that marriage has significance, and also comes with certain rules.

As we understand the origin of marriage, and come to see it as an essential aspect for the order and function of this world, we can safely say that marriage must be understood as something much more than personal decisions of two individuals. Marriage becomes a sacred and precious undertaking. Marriage is no longer simply a transaction on a piece of paper.

Marriage involves not only the two people who are getting married, but also God-ordained framework within the created world. Through marriage, the husband and wife are to live out their mandate to glorify their creator God.

I should point out one thing here. By focusing on the topic of marriage, where does that leave people who are single or divorced?

Jesus spent his whole life as a single man. Jesus himself says in the gospel of **Matthew 19:12** “**For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have**

**been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”**

The apostle Paul also lived a single life, and mentions marriage and singleness in **1 Corinthians 7**. **“I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife— and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord’s affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.”**

Singleness is often compared as being better or worse than being married. However, the Bible does not make those kinds of judgment about which is better. The Bible says that those who are single are able to devote themselves to the Lord’s service, which is a very honorable thing. Therefore, what the Bible is saying is whether people are married or single, there are ways for them to serve God in different ways and capacities.

### **The Two Becoming One Flesh**

Let’s move on to the second topic on marriage. It’s about the two becoming one flesh. We will take a look at another important Biblical passage on marriage from **Genesis 2:24-25** **“That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.”**

In the Letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul refers to the Genesis passage and says that, **“This is a profound mystery.”** The Bible calls the first man and woman became one flesh. This is indeed a profound mystery.

When we look at **Genesis 2:21-22**, it says, **“So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.”**

The word for *rib* in Hebrew contains the meaning “the side.” As you can feel it in your body, we have rib bones on our right and left sides. God took one of those ribs out of Adam to create Eve. Eve was created from one side of Adam. The fact that Eve was united with Adam in marriage means that a part of Adam’s side that was taken had now returned to him. Therefore, they became one flesh again.

There is a list that ranks events in life that bring the highest stress level on us. We all live under some level of stress all the time, but do you know what kind of events cause us the

highest level on stress in our lives? It is being separated from our loved ones by death. Divorce is also ranked high up on the list. Those events require an enormous amount of emotional energy for those who are going through them as well as for healing and recovery. The reason why it is so is because there is so much pain in having something that was one be torn apart.

The phrase “become one flesh” has two connotations for the couple. Firstly, it’s the union on a mental and spiritual level for them. Secondly, it’s the physical union of a man and a woman. However, those two aspects cannot be separated from each other, and are part of the same package. Also, another way of looking at becoming one is to understand it as being glued together.

In Japan, there is a powerful superglue called *alonalfa*. It first came out when I was a child, and I was fascinated with it. I went around gluing many things together. One day, I accidentally got my fingers glued together. I had to use a paper knife to separate my fingers. I vividly remember crying as the skin had to be peeled off by the blade.

Why does death and divorce bring about so much pain in us? It’s because people who used to be one, united and glued, are now ripped apart. There is unimaginable pain in that. The Bible does not denounce divorce. There are many circumstances where it becomes permissible. However, there is always a lot of pain that is caused from divorce. Therefore, we must try to minimize taking that route.

Therefore, at the end of the wedding ceremony, after the vows are made and when the couple is about to walk about of the sanctuary, the minister officiating the wedding declares, “Now that so and so have given themselves to each other by solemn vows, with the joining of hands, and the giving and receiving of rings, I announce that they are husband and wife, in the name of God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Let those whom God has joined together, let no one put asunder. Amen.”

Christian-style weddings continue to be very popular in Japan. It is said that 60 percent of weddings taking place in Japan these days are performed in chapels. Many Japanese hotels have built a chapel to be used for weddings. It seems like many unlicensed ministers (somehow, Westerners seem to be on high demand for this role) officiate the ceremony. Maybe people are enthralled by the foreigners that officiate the wedding speaking “broken Japanese.”

It seems that the idea of having a Christian wedding, wearing a white dress and making vows in the chapel is received as a very romantic way to celebrate the special day. Unfortunately, it does not necessarily translate into couples starting to attend church services on Sundays.

On the wedding day, the couple is probably thinking more about their reception and their honeymoon instead of about God. They will enjoy their honeymoon for some time. But then comes the time to discover each other for who they really are through the daily routines. Going back to the first survey I mentioned today, as the years go by, the couple comes to the conclusion that marriage is best described as “forbearance.”

There is one more thing I need to mention about the concept of the two becoming one flesh. It’s the fact that the Bible calls the sexual intercourse between husband and wife as “knowing each other.” In other words, the correct way of understanding sexual intercourse would be to see it as an act of knowing your partner for life in a deeper sense.

Male and female bodies are very different in nature. Not just in their physiology, but also in the way they think. A while ago, a book titled, “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus” became very popular. The book explained how men and women are fundamentally different beings as if they come from different planets.

In married life, the couple embarks on a journey to discover how differently they think and act. It is indeed a “profound mystery” for the couple to come to truly understand each other. Sexual intercourse is the act of revealing all of yourself to the partner without any reservation.

And in the process of knowing each other, the couple comes to understand each other’s physical differences as well as the depth of each other’s hearts. The Bible assumes that the couple becomes one on the basis of deepening their relationship both physically and emotionally. There is no end to this life-long process of getting to know each other.

However, a very different notion about marriage is becoming the norm today. In our world today, couples often decide to, and are generally encouraged to, live together before marriage to “try it out” on the basis that will be more productive in the end. Now we can even try out marriage, just like trying things out when we go shopping.

I read an interesting blog written by Kiyoshi Mizutani, who leads an organization in Japan to protect lives of preborn babies. The blog mentioned the book “5 Love Languages” by Gary Chapman. This book sold over 3 million copies in the US and has been translated into 34 languages around the world. The book referred to a survey taken in the US. The survey found out that couples that had lived together before marriage had a higher divorce rate compared to couples that chose not to live together before marriage. This verifies that having a trial period does not actually help in real marriage.

Reflecting on this survey result, Chapman says, “You can’t have a trial run at marriage.” He goes on to say, “What lies at the core of the marital relationship is commitment. In other words, it’s about dedication and keeping the vow. Couples that live together before marriage lack this commitment, so when one side feels like leaving the relationship, there is an easy way out.”

Those are pointed words. If the essence of marriage was limited to cohabiting and having a sexual relationship, living together before marriage will certainly allow the couple to get to know each other to some degree to determine their compatibility.

However, there is a detrimental flaw to this kind of attitude. Since the actual essence of marriage is commitment, the approach to simply “try it out” for a period actually defeats the purpose.

Even if the couple appears to be married from the outside, if they have not made the commitment to each other yet, it will only be like pretend-play. As long as there is an understanding that you can walk out of it if you don’t like it, such practice does not amount to any preparation for marriage, nor as real trial period for marriage.

You probably get it by now that two people can deepen their relationship with each other from living together before marriage. However, the nature and the degree of “getting to know each other” are completely different from the Biblical definition of what marriage is actually about.

When you think about it, who is the one hoping to benefit from living together before marriage? The answer is “me”. Each person trying to figure out if the other person is compatible to him or her. Basically, it’s a self-centered way of approaching marriage.

We are starting to view our life partners as interior decorations that should serve us in making our lives more pleasant. We need to reexamine if the purpose for having a marriage partner is only to fulfill our daily and sexual needs.

When two people do not make a commitment to live out the rest of their lives together, that relationship remains very conditional. Just as food with past expiration dates gets thrown out or gets exchanged for a newer product, we are beginning to treat people in a similar manner. If someone is unable to provide what I want, we part ways and find a replacement.

Gary Chapman goes on to write that the increase in couples that cohabit before marriage is a social phenomenon that reflects the loneliness of modern people. They have grown up during a time of technological and industrial advancement, which has led people to have a consumerist mindset. People today live out of their instincts, impulses, and emotions, without making any lasting commitments.

Many people go through cycles of “falling in love, starting a relationship, becoming sexually intimate, then breaking up.” People may feel great pain and wounds from having had relationships where they lived together with someone but didn’t reach the point of getting married. Some women remain feeling bitter and resentful towards their partners even after marriage. Maybe deep down in their hearts, they still feel used by each other as trial products.

In the Bible, the book of Proverbs says this: “Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer— may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love.”

When this proverb says, “may your fountain be blessed,” it is talking about the wife. So, it is saying that love is not meant to be one-directional. Love always gives to each other. The Bible says that this giving of and to each other is not in relation to physical relationship, but also includes giving of all of who we are as a person.

Marriage is the transaction of a man and a woman committing themselves to become one before God. Of course, those two people will have to face many differences in their lives together. However, if they are committed to be there for each other, rather than to use each other for their needs, they will find the strength to overcome any problems and challenges that may arise in their marriage.

Brothers and sisters, today, we started to reexamine what marriage is about. We’ll stop here for now.

What are your thoughts? Maybe, it was the first time you heard anything like this. Some of you may think that what I shared this morning sounds too old-fashioned. I may have even offended some of you.

However, I am convinced that the One who loves us and wants the best for us will not hold back from speaking words that may seem too harsh to us. God loves you. God’s love never becomes outdated, nor His ways old-fashioned. God’s love is the most fundamental and powerful source that upholds and sustains our existence.

Wouldn’t you agree that when you look around our world today, it is filled with pain and brokenness? In such a world, the Bible is the one thing we can rely on to show us the Truth that we need to take heed and obey. If you agree with me, let’s go back to the origin of marriage and start over. I will continue on this theme next week.

Let’s pray.