

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 14 October 2012

No. T0750

Speaker: Mr. Jonathan Hughes

Actions speak louder than words: Marriage

Have you ever wasted time in arguing about which came first, “the chicken or the egg”? The older I get the less I can be bothered, but am glad for them both, particularly as part of a mixed grill, or Sunday lunch! This morning we continue our series entitled “Actions speak louder than words” by looking at the subject of marriage. We have already looked at the matter of obedience to the word of God, and also the importance of baptism, and what that says about our salvation. However, before we look at the subject I do want to spend just a little time establishing what the Bible says about why marriage is so important. To do this we must first be clear as to whether marriage is a human idea that God has picked up on to illustrate the sort of love that He has for us, or whether the relationship He has with us existed first, and marriage was therefore given to us to help us understand His love.

Recently we heard of some friends who have got engaged, which was really good news, as they seem to be just right for each other. They have known each other for about a year and a half, and so now all the plans for the wedding itself begin. But when we come to God and His love for us, the Bible shows us that things have been going on over a much grander timescale. Rather like Treebeard, the tree shepherd in JRR Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* who says that little folk are always in such a hurry to do things, God has had it in His mind to unite the Church with His Son from before the foundation of the world. Let us just consider three verses together:

“I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with loving kindness have I drawn you”, Jeremiah 31:3.

“Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love”, Ephesians 1:4.

“All who dwell on the earth will worship Him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world”, Revelation 13:8.

Now I don’t for one minute pretend to be able to understand the immensity of what these verses, and others besides, are saying. However, it is clear that before the creation that we read about in Genesis 1:1-2:7, before humanity was ever made, God had purposed that His Son should not be alone in glory, but that a redeemed people should belong to Him, won by His love. This could only be righteously possible by His atoning death on the cross. So when we come to the garden of Eden, in Genesis 2:18, and we hear God say, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make a helper comparable to him”, God is not thinking that what seems to have worked for man will do for Jesus, but rather, as part of His creation, it is only right that it follows the divine pattern. Because Jesus will not be alone in glory, so on earth, man should not be alone.

Does this really matter? I think it does, in that when we come to our own marriages, so far as the Bible is concerned, the primary purpose of marriage then is not for the production of children, or the mutual support and enjoyment of two individuals, though these things are valid aspects to marriage, but rather to display to the world what God’s love is like. God is not willing that any should perish (see 2 Peter 3:9), and is most keen that everyone should understand the nature of His love for us. One way that He does this is by lifestyle illustration. Christian marriage reflects, however imperfectly, the greatness of the love that God has for us. It should not be possible for anyone who has seen two Christians married together, to say that they do not understand the sort of love that God has for them, let alone question whether God really loves them. Just think about that for a moment or two, because until we understand what we are doing when we get married, we shall never be the sort of partner God wants us to be. The implications of saying “I do” could not be greater, and make the decorations for the church, or the colour for the bridesmaid’s dresses seem a little trivial. Having understood the wonderful love of God for me, unconditionally accepting me and giving me complete forgiveness, I am now to reflect that within my marriage. Though it is beyond the remit of today’s broadcast, it is one of the reasons why God hates divorce. His love for us is eternal and can never be broken, and for Christian marriage to end in divorce gives totally the wrong picture of the love of God.

Let us now read together from Ephesians 5:22-28 and see, in practice, how our marriages can reflect the higher purpose that they are meant to: “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Saviour of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved

the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself."

As we read Ephesians 5:22-28, let us not think that Paul is somehow setting himself up as a marriage guidance counsellor, but rather that God is showing us how He expects a marriage to work so that it reflects the relationship Christ has with the church.

Wives

Wives are told to submit to their own husbands. Not other people's husbands, or all men, but rather their own husbands. The word used for submission has the connotation of a military term, and refers to rank. I do not know of anyone that would seriously argue that the general in an army is better than an ordinary private, or a middle ranking colonel, other than maybe the general himself! The complaint of many about the first world war was that the British army was one of "lions led by lambs". No, the idea of rank does not really imply superiority of person, but of responsibility. God has made men and women equal within His sight, but within the realm of marriage He holds the man responsible for the actions of the family, and expects a woman not to try to outrank her husband. When a wife voluntarily takes this place, she is saying that the church is subject to Christ (Ephesians 5:24). We can quite easily see that before God, Christ has the responsibility to care for the church and provide for it, in a way that is fitting and honouring to God. The church has the responsibility to accept that what Christ provides is that which is right and the best for her.

Now I am quite aware that in today's western society this does not fit easily with modern ideas. However, two things should be pointed out.

1. **The Word of God trumps all other ideas.**

If the Bible says that we should do something then we have a responsibility to obey, whether we like it or not.

2. **The Devil is constantly trying to undermine the truth of God.**

By attempting to get partners in marriage to act outside of their roles, he is trying to distort the truth of the relationship between Christ and the church. We can also see the practical effects of this distortion in some of the social problems facing society today.

What Scripture teaches my wife to do is to accept a junior rank within our marriage. This does not mean she cannot express an opinion, or take a decision, but does mean that she accepts my authority. This is not because I am better than her - I am not. It does not mean I am wiser than her - frequently it is only her counsel that stops me making a bigger fool of myself than I already do! It is not because I deserve her submission through some personal character - far from it. However, in practice it does mean that, having discussed an issue together and come to a decision, she accepts that decision. It means that I take responsibility for that and will one day have to give an account before God for all that we have done together in our marriage.

Simply, God has instituted marriage so that, on earth, I stand in the position of godly responsibility, and my wife accepts that, for it is, **AS TO THE LORD**. There can be no better guide for a wife than to act as though she was personally married to Jesus here on earth. Such behaviour will be exactly what the Lord desires to witness to this world. Such a wife would truly be God honouring and have a worth far above that of rubies (Proverbs 31:10).

Husbands

But now we must come to the place of a husband within a marriage. Let us remind ourselves of what Paul said to the Ephesians, that we have read already: "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her..." (Ephesians 5:25) What striking simplicity, and yet how hard we make it! I have always been taught that God never asks us to do something that He does not equip us and empower us to do. So let us not give up before we start, by claiming that nobody can love like that!

We live in a world today where the spirit of the age is very much about self-fulfilment and self-discovery and self-expression. These things are the very opposite of what love is. The key characteristic of Christ's love for the church was that He gave Himself (Ephesians 5:25).

This then must be the first duty of every husband. We do not exist to have our wants and needs met; rather they are met by completely and unreservedly denying ourselves for the good of our wives. Was there ever a time when Jesus sent His disciples away with the words, "I just want some Me time"? Perhaps the only time I can think of when He was

truly on His own was during the middle of the night when He went up on a mountain to pray for them! Such sacrificial giving would certainly mark Christian husbands out.

And it was that He gave **Himself**. Chocolates, flowers and a nice holiday may all have their place as part of our giving, but it is ourselves that have to be primarily given. If my wife does not know that she has the whole of me - my attention, my affection etc., then I have failed as a husband to love her properly. I have always thought that those three little words are best spoken from my knees scrubbing the kitchen floor, or whilst pegging out the washing on a cold morning.

Historically, one of the great failings of the church has not been to insist on husbands loving their wives. When Victorian society, for example, allowed men to come home and sit in a chair whilst being waited on hand and foot, the church ought to have spoken out, at least by its actions, by insisting that husbands should be as active in the home as out of it. How often have we husbands cried "corban" (that is, "it is dedicated to the Lord", Mark 7:11), when our wives have just cried under the burden of chores or loneliness that we have imposed? It is not unreasonable, particularly in these days when both husband and wife may work outside of the home, but even when this is not so, for a husband to come home and take a full part in doing household chores, dishes, washing, gardening etc. only stopping when all is done.

It is our actions that say "I love you" and that is a message that ought to be shouted loud and clear every day. There is never a day that goes by when I question whether Jesus loves me. Sometimes I may not feel so, or I may question His dealings with me, but His love can never be called into question. So it ought to be with our wives. They have a right to go to sleep at night knowing that they are exclusively loved, and to wake up each morning knowing the same.

Love

It is of note, too, that Christ's love for the church has a purpose - the improvement of the church (Ephesians 5:27). As I love my wife, it ought to be with this sense that I want the very best for her. Not materially speaking, but spiritually. One day my wife must stand before the Lord, and have her life assessed. It is my responsibility to ensure that she can do so, to the greatest degree humanly possible, without shame. Do we encourage our wives to be active spiritually, fully committed to the work of the local church, busy in good works, in hospitality, in witnessing? If after years of marriage we can only complain that our wives are not the ladies we married, then we are only eloquently expressing our dismal failure to act as a Christian husband ought to. Husbands, love your wives in action!

I have spent some time this morning looking at the importance of both wives and husbands practically living in such a way that reflects well upon the love that Christ has for His church. To the world outside, looking at my marriage, they ought to get a good idea of what it means to belong to Christ. It is in the everyday small things of life, the actions and the words that our love and obedience ought to be expressed. I can only hang my head in shame at my own failures in this respect. It ought to be that non-believers are jealous of Christian marriages, and are drawn to want to become Christians themselves by the way a Christian home radiates the Divine pattern. We can sometimes become so absorbed by wondering about abstract issues that we overlook the practical everyday outworking of what the Bible teaches.

The Biblical Pattern for Marriage

However, I do want to spend some time now in considering the biblical pattern for marriage. Again, I go back to where we started this morning by restating that marriage exists primarily to give a practical example of the love that God has for the church. Any other aspects of marriage are of secondary importance.

If we go back to the very beginning of our Bibles, we will read in Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Human beings have been created in the image of God, and for the complete picture we need to look at both male and female as both have something to teach us about the character of God. Remove one and the picture is incomplete. As we move into Genesis 2, we find that God is concerned for the well being of Adam (Genesis 2:8-25), and in particular that it is not good that he is alone (Genesis 2:18). So He creates Eve. In Genesis 2:23 we read Adam's words: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Then follows God's own pronouncement: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24)

As a part of God's creatorial order His design was that one man and one woman be joined together for life. It requires one man and one woman for the full representation of God to be given, and it is for life, to the exclusion of all others, for the character of His love to be displayed. In Mark 10:1-9, Jesus reaffirms this creatorial order, showing that it had not changed with the passage of time, and if anything, reemphasising the permanence of this state with the words: "What God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mark 10:9). As we have read already this morning, Paul

confirms this position within Christianity in Ephesians 5:22-28, showing that though much has changed with the coming of Christianity, God's intention for marriage had not.

Now it should come as no surprise that, when we start to reject the authority of God's word in Genesis (see Genesis 3:1-7), then we start to reject the responsibilities therein laid down. And this is exactly what we find. Co-habiting, divorce, same sex union are now all seen as equally acceptable alternatives to what God has said is best. Now the world can do what it pleases, for as spiritually dead, they have no power to please God in any way. Much heat is currently generated about the issue of legalising same sex marriage. Time will sadly bear testimony to the fact that when a society turns its back on the divine blueprint, it is that society that is the poorer for it. Society will reap the fruit of its actions (see Galatians 6:7). It is sad that society today has so little regard for the better things that are to be found within Christianity. Perhaps this is because we Christians have so singularly failed to live this out.

However, when we come to the matter of Christian marriage, and very particularly about whether two Christians of the same sex can marry then the Bible is quite clear. This cannot be, nor can it ever be (see Romans 1:26-27). Two men joined together cannot give a full representation of God, for that which is peculiarly female in characteristic is missing. Two women joined together in marriage cannot give a full representation of God, as that which is peculiarly male is missing. Can God ever bless those who enter into such a union? Of course He can, for God will always have mercy on whomsoever He will have mercy (see Exodus 33:19, Romans 9:15). But we ought not to take His gracious blessing as a sign of His approval. Anything less than the union of one man and one woman for life is to live in disobedience to His desire and His word. At times this may call for the judgement of the church, exercised in the most loving and understanding of ways, but nevertheless exercised. That society has fallen away from what God wants from His creation is no excuse for His church to follow.

And how are we to respond to the challenges of today's society regarding the desire to legalise same sex marriage. I would strongly urge caution in entering into political debate. Little good is ever achieved for the cause of Christ and the spread of individual salvation. I would take us back instead to the overarching title for this series – **“Actions speak louder than words”!**

Let us resolve from today to show this world what it really means to be married. It is not some white dress, or piece of paper. If we really acted as the sort of wives and husbands that God desires in Ephesians 5:22-28, then surely many more right thinking people would want that. Humanity is looking for love, for love is eternal, and God has put eternity into our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11). It is up to us to show this world where that love can be found, as they try all sorts of wrong places to look. It can only be found in an individual relationship with Jesus Christ as Saviour. And the means by which God has chosen to demonstrate this to the world - marriage.

After 24 years of marriage I can truly say that after accepting Jesus as my Saviour, choosing Dawn as my wife was the best thing I have ever done. His blueprint acted upon, however failingly on my part, really works! And if living the “picture” of marriage is so good then I can't wait till the reality is accomplished.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.