

The Symbolism of Marriage (Hints of Heaven V)

Matthew 19: 1 – 6

¹ When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. ² Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. ³ Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” ⁴ “Haven't you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ ⁵ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

This is the fifth week in our sermon series called “Heaven on Earth/ Hints of Heaven”. In the midst of snow, holiday weekends, rain, ice, and a lot of cold weather, we’ve been following a progression of thought that goes something like this:

Heaven, (as the ultimate destination for believers) is best defined as ‘being with God’. In the presence of God, no more barriers. The Scriptures teach that it is a *physical place*, and is (at least) centered right here, in the ‘new earth’, i.e., in the recreated universe, in our resurrected bodies, where all the effects of sin, pain, rebellion, hurt, etc., have been healed. But more than anything, heaven is being with God. (That was week one.)

The second week, we started to examine what it means when we read that ‘Jesus came to earth announcing “the Kingdom of God / the Kingdom Heaven of is *here*.” Among us. As we’ve been seeing, Jesus came to bring about the beginning form of something which will be finished/ completed in heaven at the end of time. To use some old but good words: in the Kingdom of Heaven – on earth- we have a ‘foretaste’, or a ‘down-payment’, or the ‘first fruits’ of what one day will *fully* be ours.

We’ve been calling these things, these ‘down payments’, *hints of heaven* because they are instructive in giving us a clue as to what heaven will ultimately be like. So, for example, we saw that one of the first things that Jesus did when he came to earth, was that he healed people. He had compassion on them, he touched them, he cared for them. In Revelation 21, in the vision of the New Heaven and New Earth, at the end of time, we read of God himself walking among the people, drying every tear, healing every hurt.

So the healing ministry of Jesus - which is continued though the church, through prayer and ministries of compassion – is then, a hint of heaven. It’s a first taste of what’s coming. In Heaven

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healing will be complete; in the Kingdom of Heaven, for now, that healing *begins*. It's not complete, not all that will be, but a sign, a *hopeful* sign of what is to come.

Pastor HeyYoung then talked about Jesus' promise in Scripture that 'when two or three gather together in my name, I will be there' ... she connected that passage with Jesus giving 'the keys of the Kingdom' to Peter, based on his confession of Jesus as the Son of God. We saw then, that another hint of heaven is the liberating message of grace and freedom in Christ that we've been entrusted with as believers. We hold the keys to the Kingdom, i.e., we have the great privilege to be the providers of access into the very kingdom of heaven for others.

Last week I talked about how 'doing the will of God' is a hint of heaven, as well. In the Lord's prayer Jesus taught us to pray by asking that "God's kingdom would come, and God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We were created to function best when we are doing the will of God – when we learn what it means to love the Lord with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves, we will find that this is the key to our happiness, peace, and security in this world. This is what we've been created *for*.

And we can say that this is a preview of heaven – heaven being a place of perfect joy and love that never ends, as God's will is done *perfectly*. So when we do God's will on this earth, it is a preview of heaven, a hint of heaven.

So, hopefully you are tracking along with us, and understanding the bigger picture of where we're trying to go. Lord willing, you are getting something out of this. (And by the way, all the previous messages are available on our website in audio and text formats, so, you can take advantage of that if you'd like.)

This weekend we're looking at yet another hint of heaven, one that is very powerful, and emotional – the institution of marriage. Now, I certainly realized when I put together this series weeks ago, (and you can tell this by a line that I put in the description for this week) that I'm speaking this weekend to a congregation that includes unmarried persons, previously married persons (who have experience the death of a spouse), divorced people, people who have been

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divorced and remarried (some of you by me), quite a few people who are engaged to be married (and may fit in one of the other categories as well) and probably some other sorts that just didn't occur to me.

On our poster, and bulletin inserts, I wrote, "*you don't have to be married to 'get this'*". So, if you're not, thanks for coming! I'm hoping that in speaking about something that is a rather prominent theme in the Scripture that we will all end up today feeling a little more secure in our relationship with Christ, and we will all benefit through looking at the illustration of marriage, and learn a little more about the unending, amazing love of God for each of us in Christ, whether or not we happen to be married ourselves, or whether our experience of marriage has been all it could/ should have been.

Let's start by coming into this whole topic 'via the back door', and talk about something that you are probably wondering if I will bring up, and how we're going to handle this – divorce.

There's a passage of Scripture found in **Malachi 2:15-17**

¹⁵ *Has not the LORD made the two of you one? You belong to him in body and spirit. And why has he made you one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth.* ¹⁶ *"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate it when people clothe themselves with injustice," says the LORD Almighty. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful.*

We all understand right from the start that the ideal for any marriage is that it would last.

I bought a car six years ago. And I've been really excited because this month is our last car payment! So, I was a little bummed when I noticed stuff happening... little things, you know? The pad on my clutch pedal fell off last week... the back right turn signal bulb burned out... the display on my CD/Radio a few weeks ago started flashing (makes me crazy!)... the brake fluid level was low for the first time ever... and I'm thinking – what is this saying? How much longer is this thing going to last? Three days after the last payment?

Now, even though we hope our cars last a really long time, we all know going in, that they won't. But no one enters a marriage relationship expecting that in 'this many years' planned obsolescence will kick in, and we'll have to start shopping for another partner. We make

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promises to each other that are based on permanence, “Until death shall part us”. Yet we all know that in real life it doesn’t always work out that way. The list of reasons are long, and we’re not going to go there now, its not what this message is about.

But here’s my point: I have rarely, if *ever* talked to someone who has been divorced who enjoyed the experience. No one says, ‘I just can’t wait until I get to do that again!’ It is painful, and traumatic; one of the reasons we offer Divorce Care and DC4K, is because this is such a difficult life experience for us, we need help to recover.

And to say that it is not God’s will for us, is not to imply that divorce is some sort of ‘unpardonable sin’. I think that pastors who refuse to re-marry divorced persons are misinterpreting Scripture. But I think that there is another reason why the Scriptures are so strong in their affirmation of the marriage bond; there is a reason why Jesus tightened up the Jewish Laws on Divorce – (more than *just* for the protection of women, which was certainly a big part of that in the day)... there is a reason beyond the obvious conclusion that is it painful and traumatic for us that God says ‘I hate divorce’.

And that reason is really is what I’d like for you to consider with me today... God hates divorce because the institution of marriage itself is meant to be a living parable of the relationship between us (the Church) and God himself in Jesus Christ.

Take a look with me, if you would, at Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, chapter 5. If you don’t have your own Bible, you might want to pick up a pew Bible, and if you’re not familiar with them, it’s page 1227. Now, you may know that the headings, and chapter titles – in fact, even the verse numbers, and chapter divisions, are additions to the early manuscripts. They were added by editors. The chapter and verse divisions came pretty early, the titles vary with whoever is the publisher of the translation that you use, they’re all relatively recent.

Most of the times they get it right, sometimes not. One of the places where, I believe, the editors consistently miss the mark in their ‘outlines’ and have caused a lot of misunderstanding, is right

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here in Ephesians 5. Most publishers begin a new section at verse 22, and name it (as our Pew Bibles do) something like “Wives and Husbands”.

And what is the first thing you read?

Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord. If happen to be reading a KJV, you will notice that the word ‘submit’ is in italics. I’ve heard people teach (all men for some reason) that this is because God wanted to emphasize it. Make sure the wives didn’t miss it! And there has been a lot of misplaced authority and ‘power plays’ in marriages because of this.

Actually, the word is in italics because it was added by the translators. In the Greek it literally says, ‘wives to your husbands as to the Lord.’ The word ‘submit’ is added because it comes from the context, which in this case, is the previous verse. So verse 21 then, is really – and very obviously – the beginning, the heading, for *this whole next section*. A section of teaching that is not only about wives, but is also about husbands, and parents and children, masters and slaves – i.e., all of the members of the society of the day.

And what does verse 21 say? It says, ²¹ *Submit to **one another** out of reverence for Christ.* Then, ‘wives, to your husbands as to the Lord’. It describes what that means with a few lines. Then we look at verse 25 and on, which begins, “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...” Remember the context is *mutual submission*. Paul gives some practical on what it means for each part of society to submit to one another.

Now Paul doesn’t have too much to say about how this is to be worked out for wives, because this was written in a male dominated society in which women had virtually no status at all. Women all knew already how to submit to a husband – it was their way of life. Nothing new there.

But these instructions to husbands – this was new! And *our* instructions, on how to ‘submit to our wives’ is: *love them as Christ loved the church*. Now, how did Christ love the church?

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He gave his life for the church. He *died* for her. He emptied himself of his pre-incarnation glory (Philippians 2). For the church. He washed her feet. He became a servant for our benefit. Paul says, husbands, this is how you should love your wife.

Now, we're reading this passage in this "Hints of heaven" series because of what Paul ends with. And in a couple of words we get a very clear picture of why God hates divorce, why marriage is so sacred. Verse 32: "*This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.*

What's that mean?

It means that the marriage bond was meant to be an illustration on this earth of the awesome intimacy between Christ and the Church. Simple logic makes this clear: when that bond is broken, the illustration is marred. God does not want to see this happen, because God wants us to know in any way we can, what it is like to be loved by *him*. And God's love for us, God's commitment to us, God's acceptance of us in Christ is *never ending*.

It makes sense then, that God says, 'I hate divorce'.. because divorce messes up one of the most powerful, intimate witnesses of God's love for us that we have on this earth. Divorce can be forgiven... we can heal, we can move on, thank God for that. But think about the illustration of marriage – ideal marriage – as an illustration of the relationship between Christ and the church.

This is a theme that not just found here in Ephesians. Jesus referred to himself frequently as 'the bridegroom'¹ In some parables about the end times, Jesus used imagery of a great Banquet that was familiar to the Jews, but in most of his stories, he makes it a 'Wedding Banquet'.

In Revelation 19:6ff, one of the great texts of the Halleluiah Chorus from Handel's Messiah, we read the great heavenly announcement:

⁶ *Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. ⁷ Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. ⁸ Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's people.) ⁹ Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!' " And he added, "These are the true words of God."*

¹ Luke 5:34

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The Lamb is Christ. The Bride of Christ is the church – *us!* The image of marriage is a powerful theme in Scripture of our connection with Christ Jesus. Heaven itself is referred to as the Wedding Banquet, when then final – and permanent – union is about to begin.

What is this telling us?

Again, we don't have to be married to get this: even a 'bad' experience of marriage can help us understand this. Whatever is/ was lacking in a marriage that makes one call it 'bad', we can know – God's love for us is not like *that*. Has a spouse been unfaithful? Jesus will never be unfaithful to us. Has a spouse abandoned you? Has he/ she stopped communicating with you? Lost interest in you... stopped loving you? God says, 'I will never do that'.

(Romans 8:38 - 39) ...neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In Ephesians 5 when we read about the instructions of husbands to wives, and how it says, "This is a great mystery, but I'm talking about Christ and the church" we catch a glimpse of the awesome intimacy of a relationship with God in Christ – a relationship in which we are loved, and cared for... in which our needs become God's priority... in which all things are worked together for our good... a relationship of forgiveness, grace, compassion, mercy and never-ending fidelity.

That is what is available for all of us.

You may or may not be experiencing the illustration to its fullest degree in your life today. And if you are married, I pray that in your consideration of this today, that you will understand better how sacred and significant that relationship is, and do everything you can to love your partner with the love of Christ.

If you are not married, or frankly, experiencing a less than perfect marriage... you can try to allow the Holy Spirit to show you that even in your pain, your hope can be lifted up, knowing that as the Bride of Christ, we anticipate something much greater to come. And knowing too, that much of that promised intimacy *is already here*. It is a hint of heaven. Heaven on earth.