

Is Intimacy the Goal of Marriage?

Turn to Ephesians 5. Is intimacy the goal of marriage? As far as the Bible is concerned, the answer is “no.” God calls each spouse to show Christian love to their partner, and that is much closer to the goal of marriage. But relational intimacy and Christian love are not the same.

All of these marriage sermons are saying basically the same thing. What the Bible says about marriage and what our society says about marriage are not the same. The problem is that quite a few Christian writers and speakers have assumed that what society says about marriage is true, and have built on that; but what society says is not true.

To be more specific, our society has a sentimental view of marriage, by which I mean society views marriage as the happy romantic high point of closeness and emotional fulfillment. In different words, society understands marriage based on what it will give us, the happiness and fulfillment we assume will occur when we marry.

There is too much teaching among Christians that assumes this view to be true, and gives hints at how we can reach this high ideal. The ideal is wonderful, but it is not from God. And when our marriage is not the happy romantic high point of closeness and emotional fulfillment, we think we’ve failed, we think that something is wrong with the marriage.

Often the only thing wrong with that marriage is what the spouses thought would happen when they got married.

In the Bible, marriage is more like a calling. God calls a married man to take on the responsibility and the role of being a husband. God calls a married woman to take on the responsibility and role of being a wife.

The Bible does not give us promises about the wonders of marriage. The Bible gives husbands and wives instructions, which we’ll review in a minute. God does not give promises. Society gives sentimental promises about marriage, but God does not. God gives instructions to wives and husbands, and we obey God because we love him.

Scripture also celebrates romantic love, and erotic love. Those are good things, and often a part of marriage. But when God speaks to husbands and wives, he gives instructions, not promises.

Marriage love is Christian love

Let’s talk about what the Bible says. I know that I’ve covered this before here. But we’ve all heard the stuff that’s wrong many times, so it won’t hurt us to hear the other side more than one.

“It is not good for the man to be alone.” This is God talking to himself in the garden of Eden, in Genesis 2. He had made the man, and the man was working the ground. God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a suitable helper for him.”

The man needs a helper. Not a companion, or a partner, but a helper. The man has a job to do, and he cannot do it alone, at least not well. He needs a helper. Nothing says that the man was lonely. The man seems content; it is God who is not satisfied.

In Genesis 1, the previous chapter, God calls humans to be fruitful, to multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it. For that, Adam needs a helper. Later God took away a piece of the man’s side, and from that made the woman. Then the man wanted to be joined to the woman. But at this stage he’s fine.

Marriage often does give spouses companionship. That’s good, God is no enemy of that. But that is not the reason for marriage. Marriage is to get things done, things that can’t be done if we stay alone. It is a calling from God, not our *only* calling from God, not the *most important*, but one of the callings we have from God. It is a responsibility and a role.

And if we would understand marriage is above all a calling from God, God calling us to a responsibility and a role, to be a wife or to be a husband, we would be less disappointed when marriage was hard work.

God has called us to other things that are sometimes hard work, and we understand that. So let us take that attitude into marriage, too.

Now to Ephesians 5:22. Marriage love is Christian love. This is the call of God to wives and then to husbands.

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

That is clear enough. But submission is not unique to wives, it is already a part of Christian love. The previous verse, Eph 5:21, says this: *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.* That is God’s word to every believer, it is one of the marks of the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Every believer submits to one another, not because the other is better, but because each believer has reverence for Christ. As followers of Christ, every believer is already submitting to one other. Marriage love is Christian love.

In Php 2 the word to the whole church is this: *in humility, honour others above yourselves.* That is much like *submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

We honour others above ourselves, not because the other is more honourable, but because we follow Christ, and he calls us to live this way.

Jesus said to the 12, *whoever wants to be great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wants to be greatest will be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve.* We shall all be each other's servants and slaves. Submit to one another for Christ's sake.

Wives submitting to husbands is already firmly fixed as the Lord's call to all his followers, we all submit to each other and serve each other because that's how the Lord lived, and because that's how he commands us. Wives submitting to husbands is a well-established part of Christian love, how we all live with one another.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. Jesus was executed for his bride, that is how he gave himself up for her, so she could blossom and be her best. That is God's call to husbands.

To lose your life for your spouse is as sobering as it sounds. Is it unique to husbands? No. Earlier in the same chapter, Eph 5, we read this, aimed at all believers: *walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

We shall all love each other as Christ loved us and give himself up for us. It is the same call to every follower of Christ. In Christian love, husbands and wives were already called to love each other this way.

In John 15, Jesus tells his followers, *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

Jesus commands all of us to love each other as he loved us, and he takes it to the ultimate love: to lay down one's life for one's friends. This is Christian love. This call was already on wives and husbands, and all of us who follow Christ.

Is God's word to husbands, to give yourselves up for your wives, a unique call to husbands? No. That word to husbands is already a part of Christian love, firmly fixed in Christ's call to every man and woman who follows him.

When God speaks to wives and to husbands, he highlights particular parts of Christian love, to wives God makes a point of submission, and to husbands God makes a point of self-sacrificing love, because God calls married couples to show how Christ and the church treat each other.

But God is only picking these from a list of Christian behaviors that all believers should already be living; the whole list is his call to all his children. Christian love is the backbone of the marriage relationship.

Wives and husbands don't receive the same call as each other. There is no getting around that. But husbands, as followers of Christ, are not released from the call wives received; and wives, as followers of Christ, are not released from the call husbands received.

The second call to husbands in Ephesians 5 is this: *husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies, ... just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body*. God calls every husband, to love his wife as he loves his own body.

Is this unique to husbands? No. The second great command is *Love your neighbour as yourself*. "Love your wife as your own body" is not different than "love your neighbour as yourself." It is already God's call to every married and single believer.

Php 2: *Don't be looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others*. "Look to the interests of the others." Not much different than *love your wife as your own body*.

When our God speaks to married couples, he speaks only of Christian love. Marriage love is Christian love. It is Christian love that will hold marriage together. If marriage is a good place of warmth and affection, it is Christian love that will make it so.

Now, let's talk about intimacy: What is Intimacy?

When we want intimacy between spouses, what do we mean? I will try to define this. Intimacy means a detailed knowledge of another person. It means a feeling of closeness that grows as partners talk to each other regularly and honestly.

The husband shall share his private thoughts and feelings and desires with his wife, and he shall listen to her thoughts and feelings and desires, so that he can know and understand her fully. (If there was ever an impossible goal, that would be it.) And the wife will do the same in return.

And it is not hard to find Christians who teach that this kind of self-disclosure the high point of marriage. It comes from our society, and it is in the church.

(1) For Jesus, is intimacy the highest expression of love? No. Jesus thought the highest love was a person laying down their life for their friend. For Jesus, the highest love is not in marriage at all, it is in friendship; and this remarkable love is shown in willing self-sacrifice. Intimacy is not the highest expression of love.

(2) Intimacy as the goal of marriage comes from a broader starting point, that marriage is a special kind of human relationship that other relationships cannot match. Is this so? Does marriage offer a possibility for relationship and intimacy that other relationships do not offer?

I don't think so. John the Baptist, the kingdom announcer, was single and celibate; Jesus, the Kind of the kingdom, was single and celibate; and so also Paul, the number one proclaimer of the gospel. Jesus and Paul are the ones who teach us about love in the first place. And they lived it.

We don't know much about John. But both Jesus and Paul remarkably rich relationships with those they spent time with and loved.

Christian love is the highest form of love there is, it is the backbone of marriage love, and single believers are at no disadvantage in living out Christian love. We cannot afford to understand the marriage relationship in a way that sidelines unmarried believers.

Some in the church are married. Some were married, but not anymore, their spouse is gone. Some have same sex desires, like Wes Hill, and believe God calls them to live celibate. Some have not met the right person yet. Some who have not met the right person never will meet the right person.

And shall we say that God has arranged things so that the married people are the only ones who can experience the full potential for human relationships? Not a chance. We made that up, we got it from books and movies brought it into the church, but it does not come from our God.

(3) The highest expressions of Christian love don't appear in intimacy with those closest to us, but rather in how we treat those who are irritable and obnoxious.

Jesus said (Luke 6), *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,*²⁸ *bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.* That is the highest expression of Christian love.

V32 - *If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?* That is a married couple developing intimacy. That is loving those who love us. It does not sound like a high priority to the Lord, does it. No it does not. Let's read the whole paragraph.

³² *"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them.* ³³ *And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that...* ³⁵ *But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.* ³⁶ *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

That is the highest kind of Christian love, and it can be difficult to live that out in a marriage.

What about a marriage where there is often conflict? The husband and wife love the Lord, and they love each other. But their particular mix of temperaments does not produce lasting harmony and peace. They are more volatile, and they tend to rub each other the wrong way, so there is conflict.

But they are both determined to stay together, to be faithful to each other. And one way or another they get past the conflict, and for a while there is a steady warmth in the relationship. Until that other stuff happens again.

If marriage is the happy romantic high point of closeness and emotional fulfillment, then this marriage is not doing well. But that couple is doing what God calls for. Their commitment and faithfulness to the Lord and to each other honours God. He is glorified by a marriage like that.

It is more like the ongoing relationship between Christ and the church than peaceful marriages. It is quite possible that the marriage with more regular conflict actually shows more devotion to Christ than the peaceful marriages.

Summary: Marriage is a calling from God. Here's the starting point of marriage: God calls a husband to take on the responsibility and role of a husband, and God calls a wife to take on the responsibility and role of a wife. And a part of the calling is that the wives and husbands will show steadily show basic Christian love to each other. Let's start off right.

How much intimacy there will be in the marriage varies much, depending on the particular couple. There will not be a better way toward intimacy than to forget about intimacy, and devote ourselves to Christian love to our spouse.

Biblically, the highest expressions of human love, and the deepest human relationships, have nothing to do with whether or not the person is married. They have to do with loving one another as Jesus showed us and taught us. Amen.