

Marriage as Discipleship
Matthew 5, Mark 10, Galatians 5, Ephesians 5

Children, I want to talk to you for the first few minutes today. If you are a child of God, there is a choice you cannot escape very long. Will you live in God's ways when the people around you are not living in God's ways? That's the choice.

We in this church are persuaded that trusting in God and trusting in the Lord Jesus is the most important thing we can do. God and Jesus taught us ways to live that are different than the world around us. You hear about God's ways in your homes and in this church. When the people around you are doing what you know is wrong, will you follow them or will you follow the Lord Jesus? That's the question, that's the choice.

We all hope for you and pray for you that you will decide to live in God's ways. What anyone decides when we are all gathered here together is not the important thing. The test is this: when the people around you out there are doing what you know God does not want, what will you do?

What God really wants is not that you will change them, or even that you'll tell them that they are wrong. Those are okay, but what God really wants is that you will not join them. You will keep living in God's ways.

I grew up in a town that was not like Kleefeld. Very few in my home town went to church on Sunday. They were not followers of Christ, and never said they were. By at least age 7 or 8, probably earlier, I knew very well that God's people lived differently than the rest.

None of my friends were Christians, but they were friends and we had fun together. For me, that lasted until the beginning of Grade 9. Something happened to my friends in the summer between Grade 8 and Grade 9. By the time we were all in Grade 9, they were doing too many things that I knew God did not want.

So I pulled back from them. I was not a very good Christian myself, nothing special I can tell you for sure. But I knew that I wanted God, and I knew that meant I had to leave them alone. In Grades 1 to 12, I never had a close friend who was a Christian. In Grade 1 to 8 I had pagan friends and we enjoyed lots of boy things together. From Grade 9 to 12 I did not really have friends at all. After that I had good friends who followed the Lord, and that's still true.

That's my story. Everyone has a different story. But we all make the same choice: when the people around you are not living in God's ways, will you live in God's ways? We hope and pray that you will.

Now we'll go to the topic for today: marriage as discipleship. Please turn to Matthew 5.

The Beatitudes Are Marriage Essentials – Matthew 5:3

I will quickly run through the first seven beatitudes, and then the nine fruit of the Spirit. The beatitudes in Matthew 5 and the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 are saying much the same thing. Different words but the same way of living.

Here are the Lord's beatitudes. They are for all our relationships. All of them. Today, we're applying them specifically to marriage. Think about two spouses living with each other. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who are spiritual beggars. That's where it begins. (2) Blessed are those who mourn, who mourn their spiritual poverty, they are ready to repent. (3) blessed are the meek, the gentle. We'll skip the righteousness beatitude for now and go to: (5) blessed are the merciful, they are merciful and forgiving. (6) blessed are the pure in heart, those who aren't pretenders. (7) blessed are the peacemakers, those who pursue peace with their own enemies.

The fourth beatitude is "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," that is, the righteousness of the other beatitudes, blessed are the spiritually poor who hunger and thirst for beatitude righteousness, for they will be filled.

The beatitudes describe the core Christian virtues, the core of how Christ's followers carry themselves in the world, how we live in the world. I will read them again. Let's each think of how we treat our spouse. Many of you are not married, but these are just as much for you, how you treat the people you spend the most time with.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for this kind of righteousness.

The Fruit of the Spirit Are Marriage Essentials – Galatians 5:22

Now we'll go to the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. This is what the Holy Spirit produces in all relationships. Today we're applying these to the marriage relationship: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. [Read again, slowly] The first and the last are probably the most important. The first one is love. Love like our Lord's love, the shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep.

And the last is self-control. This is so important. You and I in our marriages are going to get angry, frustrated, hurt, and hurt again, irritated, and so on. We'll be furious with our spouses, and sometimes we'll have good reasons for this. We'll want to do something very unloving. The Spirit produces self-control. The Spirit says, "don't say it, don't say a word, don't do that, don't do a thing." If we could just manage love and self-control, we'd be a long way in the right direction.

Nothing in the Christian life is more important than what we've covered in the Lord's beatitudes and the Spirit's fruit. These virtues are the core of the disciplined life, and they are the ultimate marriage advice. Marriages don't get in trouble when both spouses live out these virtues. Our covenant of membership is built around these things.

People who have never prized or valued this way of living fall in love and get married. They have never hungered and thirsted for this kind of righteousness, they are deeply attracted to each other and get married. That's a recipe for trouble.

The Lord's beatitudes and the Spirit's fruit. Will we live in God's ways when our spouse does not? Sometimes our spouse will leave these behind. Count on it. Will you and I live in God's ways when our spouse does not? That is a critical marriage question.

Painful things happen in all close relationships, and they happen in marriages. And the offended spouse, the hurt one, can assume that this pain changes things, the pain means recess from the beatitudes and the Spirit's fruit. Now something else is more important, perhaps justice. It's not fair! But our pain does not change the Lord's call or the Spirit's leading. Love and self-control.

We still must have honest and difficult conversations. We must have the hard talks. The Lord's beatitudes and the Spirit's fruit tell us how to handle ourselves in these difficult conversations.

The Beatitudes in Action: Marriage in the Rest of Matthew 5

In the last part of Matthew 5, Jesus gives six examples of how the beatitudes will look in daily life. Two of the six are directly about marriage. That already tells us that how we live with our spouse is a part of following Jesus. But I'm going to read you some of the others. These apply to all relationships, but today we apply them to marriage. Think marriage right through this.

Beginning at 5:22 – *“Anyone who is angry with a brother or sister (or spouse) will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister (or spouse), ‘You idiot,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You worthless fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister (or spouse) has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”*

Beginning at 5:38, still thinking about marriage: *You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the pagans doing that? Be merciful, therefore, as your heavenly Father is merciful.”

All of this just fills out the beatitudes. These apply to all relationships, and they certainly include marriage.

Compare this to Cultural Marriage Values

Our society has put romantic love on a pedestal, and close by our society has put sexual expression on another pedestal. We value romantic love and sexual expression. And if we can achieve these two, we are told that they will give our lives meaning and fulfillment. Romantic love plus erotic love produces meaning and fulfillment. I am oversimplifying, only a little. There is lots of this around.

Every couple that’s been married for a while knows it does not work like that, but often they think that they are the only ones and they think they are failures. That’s why there are troubled marriage and divorces. It is not just the fault of the individual couple. Our society feeds us nonsense about marriage, and it puts pressure on couples to experience romantic and erotic love and to find meaning in their marriage. Our society sets up couples to be terribly disappointed. No wonder couples divorce.

Furthermore, some Christian marriage advice just uses Christianized methods to meet the world’s expectations. Watch out for that.

Marriage in Mark 8–10

Jesus made marriage a part of the disciplined life, of costly discipleship. We saw this in Matthew 5. In Mark 10 we find a longer section of the Lord’s teaching on marriage and divorce. Mark 8 to 10 are the chapters of Mark where Jesus takes the disciples away from the crowds and teaches them that he will be rejected, crucified, buried, and then rise the third day.

Along with this, Jesus tells them that if they want to follow him, *they* need to prepare to lay down their lives for him. *They* need to deny themselves and take up their cross, *they* need to get ready for execution, if they want to follow him.

And in the middle of Mark 8-10, we find this long teaching on marriage and divorce. For years, actually for decades, I read Mark and taught Mark but could not figure out how the long marriage section in Mark 10 fit into this part of Mark. The answer was simple and obvious, but I didn’t see it until someone else explained it to me this last winter.

Marriage is part of costly discipleship. Marriage is one of the ways we lay down our lives for Christ. At the end of that section in Mark 10, Jesus says this: “*Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*” In

Mark and in Matthew, Jesus makes marriage a part of *that, that* kind of imitating and following Jesus, that kind of denying ourselves. Paul and Peter taught us the same thing.

Marriage in Paul and Peter

In Ephesians 5, Paul’s opening line to families is “submit to one another out of reverence to Christ.” Submit out of reverence for Christ. Not because the person beside me has *any* right to my submission, but because Christ has *every* right to my submission. Because of Christ, we all act for the good of the other. ‘Wives, submit to your own husbands *as to the Lord,*’ is how he continues. Reverence for Christ, as to the Lord.

Husbands, says Paul, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. The picture of a husband loving his wife is a man nailed to the cross and dying there so his wife can flourish. Jesus said, whoever wants to come after me, let them deny their right to live, get ready to die, and follow me. Among other things, that is marriage love.

The problem is that we go into marriage filled with greedy expectations, all the wonderful things that this new life together will do for me. I’m exaggerating, but only a little. Who goes into marriage expecting that this will be another way to lay down my life for Christ? Not me.

Peter says the same thing. At the end of 1 Peter 2, Peter describes in detail the Lord’s godly and submissive suffering when he was being crucified. Peter tells us what Jesus did when his trial and suffering were unjust, not fair at all. “Jesus entrusted himself to the One who judges rightly.” That’s 1 Peter 2. In 1 Peter 3, he gives instructions to wives and husbands. Jesus is our model.

Far more than romantic love or erotic love, marriage depends on the spouses living out the basic Christian virtues with each other, the Lord’s beatitudes and the Spirit’s fruit. It depends on imitating Jesus who laid down his life for us, and called us to that for each other.

Here’s something else you should know:

God speaks to Spouses not Couples

The Lord never tells a couple to get along, he never tells a couple to have a better marriage. The Lord speaks to wives about how they treat their husbands, and he speaks to husbands about how they treat their wives. The Lord tells husbands, “I want you to be my kind of husband in how you treat your wife, and you will answer to me.” The Lord tells wives, “You be my kind of wife in how you treat your husband, and you will answer to me.”

It is entirely possible to be a godly and obedient spouse in a miserable marriage. You can be a godly obedient spouse and your marriage still end in divorce, because you cannot control your spouse. There is no guarantee that you being a godly spouse will improve your marriage.

We want to have strong and enjoyable marriages, and that's a good thing to want. But God never talks like that to a couple. He takes each spouse aside separately, and tells each one, "Do your best to honour my Son in how you live with your spouse." Folks, none of us are good at this. None of us. But the kingdom of God is a kingdom of forgiveness. God forgives us as we forgive each other. Will you follow the Lord when your spouse doesn't?

What About Romantic Love and Erotic Love in the Bible

Romantic love is from God, and it is a wonderful thing. Falling in love is wonderful. It is from God, and it is a picture of how God feels toward his people, and how Christ feels toward his Bride. Erotic love and sexual intimacy are also wonderful and from God. Song of Songs celebrates a woman and a man who are totally infatuated with each other, they are completely preoccupied with each other's bodies. They can't get enough of each other. This is all from God, who made us to be just like this. It's very good.

What do we think it will be like when we are finally with Christ, when Christ is finally free after the wedding banquet to love his Bride the way he wants to love her? We are too pious to imagine being with Christ in terms of ultimate sexual fulfillment. That's our problem. We *should* imagine being with Christ after the wedding feast as the supreme sexual fulfillment. Romantic love and erotic love at their best, here on earth, are appetizers of what is still to come.

But, people, romantic love and erotic love are not what make a godly marriage. Christ got his Bride by emptying himself, and becoming a slave. Christ got his Bride by humbling himself, and becoming obedient. He went to his death for his Bride, even cross death. That's the way he taught us to live in marriage, and that's how Paul and Peter taught us to live in marriage. Marriage is another place to be a disciple.

Conclusion

Some might say that this is an awfully stern view of marriage. Must I be so bleak? Yes I must. I have not overstated what Jesus and the apostles do with marriage. We are so reluctant to let go of our Walt Disney marriage ideology. Many marriages develop into a warm companionship and affectionate loyalty. That's perfect. But that only happens if both spouses actively pursue the Lord's beatitudes and the Spirit's fruit with each other.

There are enough difficult marriages, where both spouses are believers, and the *only* way those marriages stay together is if they take this kind of teaching to heart. This is marriage teaching for the hard times. There are enough hard times. Jesus and the apostles thought we needed a strong dose of this, and you know that we do. Amen.

PRAYER: God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, equip us all with everything good for doing your will, and work in us what pleases you. Work in us so that we will want to do what pleases you, and so that we will do it. Lead us in the right path for your name's sake. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and into Christ's perseverance. May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.