

Before You Say “I Do”

2nd in series of “*Built to Last: Christian Marriages that Endure*”

Genesis 2:18-24

01 17 2010 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

An ancient **Greek myth** sought to explain the attraction between the sexes. Once upon a time humans were androgynous creatures that combined the characteristics of both genders. A male half faced one direction and a female half the other. They were joined together at the backbone.

Problems naturally arose when each half wanted to go its own way. So the one creature split into two persons: man and woman. Commenting upon the myth, the Greek philosopher, Plato, wrote: “*An individual is only half a person and spends his life looking for his missing half.*” (On Marriage)

I. The New Norm

Marriage IS the perceived **norm** in our society. Most expect to grow up, get married, and have children. The “normal” family has 1 father, 1 mother, 2.3 children, and 3 pets. Generations grew up with TV role models like Ozzie & Harriet Nelson, Lucy & Ricky Ricardo, Rob & Laura Petrie, Cliff & Claire Huxtable, and Homer & Marge Simpson! Tellingly, I couldn’t think of an exemplary couple from the 1990s or 2000s!

But follow the logical progression of this thought process. If marriage is NORMAL, then singleness must be . . . ABNORMAL! Like the Greek myth, singles are assumed to be incomplete souls in search of their other half. The only cure to their relational disease is saying “*I do!*” So well meaning family and friends play the match making game. They know JUST the right person for the perfect blind date!

In this scene from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, we see how singles are sometimes stigmatized by others:

Over the past decades, however, times have changed. **Census** figures indicate that the “normal” family is not so normal anymore. Married couples with children at home are now a *minority* in our nation. Statistics also reveal that people are marrying progressively later in life. United States’ census numbers show the median age of first marriages for men is now 28 years old (27.7). For women, it is 26. (2007 US Census figures)

Despite the changing demographics of our society, a subtle bias against singles still remains. People tend to think of singleness as a temporary phase rather than a legitimate status. However, many believers make the valid choice to remain single or not to remarry. It is important to recognize that **single Christians** are NOT second class citizens in God’s kingdom.

To the best of our knowledge, Jesus was single. Paul was also single; and while he described the joys of marriage, Paul also discussed the advantages of singlehood. (see 1 Corinthians 7:32-35) Paul wrote that single Christians can be wholly “*concerned about the Lord’s affairs*” and “*live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.*”

Marriage is not a prerequisite for purpose and fulfillment in life. Singles possess a wholeness and integrity of their own. These persons are not waiting for a “missing half” to make them whole. Remember the scene in *Jerry Maguire* when Tom Cruise tells Renee Zellweger, “*You complete me!*” PTTTTTTHHHHH! If you’re expecting someone else to “complete you,” then you will be sorely disappointed.

II. Before You Say “I Do”

Having said all of this, however, most people who *want* to get married typically do. Over nine out of ten Americans will eventually marry someone. Prince Charming slips the glass slipper on Cinderella’s foot. The handsome prince awakens Snow White with a kiss. The Beast is transformed by Beauty’s love. And at least in *Disney World*, they all live happily ever after.

Last week we saw how **marriage** is a part of God’s plan. Genesis 1-2 reveals that we are individuals created for relationship. In Mark 10: 6-8, Jesus said: “*But at the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be unified to his wife, and the two will be one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate.*”

Marriage is an essential part of the divine plan. It is also one of the most important, life-transforming decisions that we will ever make. However, couples often enter into marriage with little thought or preparation. In fact, many people spend more time researching the purchase of a new car or a flat-screen TV than they do in preparing for dating and marriage.

In order to obtain a **marriage license** in Georgia, the Probate Court only requires two valid forms of ID and \$65 in cash. There is no waiting period; and as of July 1, 2003, no blood test. In our state, teenagers earning their first driver’s license go through more training and testing than a couple getting married!

Neil Warren, a pastoral counselor with twenty-five years of experience, has worked with thousands of couples. He observed: “*Selection of your spouse has more to do with the quality of marriage than everything you do after you get married.*”

Today’s sermon is entitled “**Before You Say ‘I Do.’**” Christian marriages that endure begin BEFORE a couple stands at the altar. The sermon is primarily directed to those who are single . . . or single again; but married couples are welcome to eavesdrop.

III. Premarital Principles

I’ve been married for almost 24 years now. While I believe it is important to “date your mate,” it’s been over two decades since I’ve experienced the single, dating scene. So I decided to do some research. Is there such a thing as “Christian” dating? What can people do BEFORE saying “*I do*” that will make a difference in marriage?

The most interesting information came from some **interviews with children** about courtship and marriage. The questions included:

- *Q:* “What do most people do on a date?”

- A: “Have fun. People use dates to get to know each other. Even boys have something to say if you listen long enough.” (Lynette, age 8)
- A: “On the first date, they tell each other lies and that usually gets them interested enough to go on a second date.” (Martin, age 10)
- Q: “*How do people in love behave?*”
- A: “When a person gets kissed for the first time, they faint and don’t wake up for at least one hour!” (Wendy, age 8) Wendy has mighty high expectations—I’m in prayer for her future husband!
- Q: “*What are some sure-fire ways to make someone fall in love with you?*”
- A: “Shake your hips and hope for the best!” (Camille, age 9) I’m praying for Camille, too!

Single Christians encompass a wide variety of people, including those who are unmarried, divorced, and widowed. The various ages and stages of life present different opportunities and challenges for singles.

Frankly, the Bible has little to say about dating and premarital preparation. The Scriptures span hundreds of years and a variety of cultural settings. In some times and places, arranged marriages between two families were quite common. Certainly couples did not “date” in a contemporary sense. Even today the rules are constantly changing.

However, there are three important principles evident in the New Testament for single Christians. These spiritual guidelines include **sexual morality, faith matters, and Christian character**.

A. Sexual Morality

Regardless of our marital status, God calls his people to the highest standards of **sexual purity** and morality. Last week we explored how love, marriage, and human sexuality are God’s idea— good gifts given to humanity by our Creator. Like every gift, however, they must be used both in the proper way and setting.

Physical desire is one of the most powerful drives of the human condition. Life is a constant struggle to determine whether we will control our desires or our desires will control us. Our passions make wonderful servants but terrible masters.

The world constantly tempts us to settle for something less than God’s best. Our culture cheapens the gift of human sexuality into some THING pandered on every street corner. Sex sells—and there are plenty of buyers. What once took place on seamy side streets is now brought into our homes courtesy of satellite or cable TV and the Internet.

Scripture says that human sexuality finds its fullest and most genuine expression in a marital relationship between husband and wife. This is God’s divine plan for his people. Premarital and extramarital relationships cheapen a gift that is beyond all price.

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church sets the standards and expectations for ordained ministers. In regard to sexual purity, clergy are expected to be “*celibate in singleness and faithful in marriage.*” I’m not sure why the church chose to only include pastors in this mandate! This is the Biblical standard for all Christians.

1 Corinthians 6: 19: “*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.*” Our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Paul recalls the imagery of the Jerusalem Temple and the belief that God

dwelt in the Holy of Holies. In the same way, our lives contain God's presence. We are to use our bodies to glorify God.

B. Faith Matters

Secondly, the New Testament recognizes that marriage is much more than a civil institution—it is a **spiritual union**. God both sanctions and sanctifies Christian marriage. The Genesis account describes how a husband and wife become one flesh. In order for the two to become one, they must share a common faith.

A variety of Internet sites offer a contemporary version of match-making. Each claims to match couples based upon **compatibility**. These companies have discovered an important principle—compatibility is a critical key to long-term relationships. Neil Warren wrote that every similarity a couple shares is like money in the bank; and every difference they possess is like a debt owed.

For Christians, THE primary consideration for dating, engagement, and marriage is SPIRITUAL COMPATIBILITY. The first question should be: “Is he a man of God? Is she a woman of God?”

The apostle Paul reminds us that faith matters in marriage. In 2 Corinthians 6: 14, he advised the church: “*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.*” We dare not become involved in a spiritual mismatch. The best case scenario is that you cannot share what you prize most in life with the person you love most in life. The worst case scenario is that you will have to choose between your spouse and faith. So we are called to marry within our Christian faith.

C. Christian Character

The third piece of premarital advice from the Bible is to seek someone with a Godly character. I'm not naïve—what most often attracts us initially to another person is his or her physical appearance. There's nothing wrong with that—God designed the two sexes to appeal to one another.

In his book on dating relationships, Gary Chapman wrote about “*The Principle of Beauty*.” He said that the person you marry had better be good looking—at least to you! This doesn't mean the other person is Mr. Universe or Miss America. It does mean there has to be something about the TOTAL PERSON that excites in you a strong sense of attraction. If you are planning on promising “*until death do us part*,” then there better be something more than blond hair, blue eyes, dimples, giggles, face, and figure.

Looks can only carry a relationship so far. Too many people fall in love with a smile and end up marrying the whole person!

Proverbs 31: 30 is an essential verse for Godly love and marriage: “*Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.*” And to reword the verse: “*Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a man who fears the Lord is to be praised.*” Do not settle for anything else. If you do, then you've sold yourself short of what God intended in his perfect will for your life.

IV. Other Considerations

I want to be clear that I'm now leaving Scriptural principles and ranging a bit father afield. The following topics are not necessarily addressed in the Bible, but I believe they are worth considering before you say "I do."

People LOVE to give advice about love. However, a lot of advice about dating and marriage is contradictory. Here's the tricky part: both sides of the contradiction often contain some truth. For example:

- 1) Date a lot of different people. Like jobs, it is important to know what you like and don't like in a possible mate. It's dating—relax and have fun!

BUT

Date your mate. Be careful who you date because you never know who you might fall in love with! Physical attraction and emotional infatuation can easily be mistaken for true love. Consider carefully whether this is someone who is worth an investment of your time and emotions.

Get to know them and determine whether you share the same core values. In 2000, Susan Piver published a book entitled The Hard Questions: 100 Essential Questions to Ask Before you Say "I Do." Know what your partner thinks about the important issues of life.

As an aside, watch how they treat their parents or children. You will find vital clues about how they will treat you in a marriage. If you have children still at home, remember that they are your first priority. What sort of parent would this person be?

- 2) You marry the other person "as is." Don't marry a project! It is a classic mistake to marry someone you plan to "fix" in your spare time. Whatever annoying habits, attitudes, and tendencies the person has, you better plan on living with them for the rest of your life. Like a stone in a shoe, such things become harder to ignore over time.

Keep your eyes wide open—especially for red flags waving in the wind. If you find yourself saying, "But other than that, s/he is a great person," pay close attention to whatever THAT is. It's a bit like a Ford Theater usher asking Mary Todd Lincoln after Abraham Lincoln's assassination, "But other than THAT, how was the play Mrs. Lincoln?"

BUT

Recognize that you both will change. Couples who celebrate their tenth, twenty-fifth, or fiftieth wedding anniversaries are not the same persons as the bride and groom who stood before the altar. Couples either learn to grow together or they grow apart.

- 3) You marry an individual. It is good to like the rest of the family, but hopefully you are not going to be living with them! You are forming your own family together.

BUT

You really do marry the family. Each spouse brings with them issues and dynamics from their "*families of origin.*" Our attitudes about every aspect of life, relationships, and marriage are formed in our childhood homes.

- 4) Look for what you want and don't compromise. Set the highest standards for the person you want to spend the rest of your life with. Fish where the right kind of fish are

located. An important question to consider is not only WHAT you are looking for in a mate but also WHERE are you looking?

BUT

No human is perfect. If you think someone is, then you just haven't got to know him or her well enough yet! And here's a newsflash: we're not perfect, either! Why would we expect anyone else to be?

Conclusion

In other relationship advice from children, the following conversations took place:

- Q: *"How do you decide who the right person to marry is?"*
- A: Find somebody that likes the same stuff. Like, if you like sports, she should like it that you like sports. (Alan, age 10)
- Q: *"When is the right age to marry?"*
- A: "Twenty-three because you know the person forever by then. (Camille, age 10)
- A; "Never!" (Freddie, age 6)
- Q: *"Is it better to be single or married?"*
- A: It's better for girls to be single but not for boys! (Anita, age 9)

We are all unique individuals at particular moments in our spiritual pilgrimages. Some here have been called by God into marriage. Others serve God as singles. In all of our relationships, we are called to glorify the Lord. For those who contemplate marriage, the best time to start making preparations is long before you say "*I do.*"