

Rich Lusk

To recap the sermon:

1. Marriage is a picture, not the reality. Marriage is based on “this is that” relationship. It was instituted and designed to symbolize Christ’s union with the church. The purpose of marriage is to provide a creaturely replica and re-enactment of the gospel story. When the reality comes in the resurrection (the church’s full oneness with her husband, Christ), the type of human of marriage will be fulfilled and will fall away.

2. Marriage, like Christ’s relationship to the church, is a *covenantal promise*. It is not based on feelings (though affectionate and romantic feelings are wonderful and *should* be there), but on a commitment of each spouse to give himself or herself to the other in love. The covenant supports marital love, rather than the other way around. As a structured relationship, all roles, responsibilities, and privileges within marriage derive from the covenant. Every covenant has attendant blessings and curses, based on one’s loyalty or disloyalty to the relationship.

3. Marriage is difficult. “Consumerist” marriages, entered into for the sake of romance, or self-fulfillment, are doomed to be “nasty, brutish, and short” (to allude to Thomas Hobbes). Consumerist marriages deny the centrality of the cross in marriage; ironically, as a result, they end up dying. Marriage not only illustrates the gospel, but marriage needs the gospel, in order to survive and thrive.

4. Therefore, married couples must have a purpose that transcends the institution of marriage itself. Married people and single people must both subordinate their marital status and situation to the kingdom of God. Marriage is not only a face-to-face relationship, in which husbands and wives transform one another by their mutual love for one another, but also a side-to-side relationship, in which their love flows out into the world to bring transformation to others. We need “missional marriages” that aim at something more than just keeping one another happy. Marriage needs to empower each spouse for service in the kingdom (e.g., raising covenant children, showing hospitality, pursuing excellence in the workplace, caring for the poor, befriending the friendless, etc.).

Now to fill in some gaps from the sermon.

As I said in the sermon, romance within marriage is wonderful. There should be attraction, affection, etc. But in any marriage, feelings and attraction will ebb and flow. The marriage relationship cannot be *based on* emotions. That’s why I emphasized that love is not *merely* a feeling, but an action, a decision, a commitment. Marital love, biblically defined, is covenantal love. It is promissory love. It is a commitment to act in a certain way towards your spouse, even when you don’t feel like it. Indeed, sometimes we have to love our spouses in spite of

feelings *to the contrary!* Because of the closeness and vulnerability of the marital covenant, your spouse can and should be your best friend. But that same closeness and vulnerability has the potential to make your spouse your greatest enemy. Your spouse can hurt you and cause you pain in a greater way than anyone else.

If the feelings aren't there, we act in love towards one another anyway, with the hope and expectation that the feelings will follow.

This is important to note: outward actions can actually shape inward feelings. This seems counter-intuitive to modern people (shaped as we are by the likes of Descartes and Rousseau), but it is a biblical verity. Throughout Scripture, we find that not only do inward attitudes take shape in bodily gestures and actions, but bodily motions can inform and stir the inward person.

For example, you should come to worship whether or not you feel like passionately praising God. If you throw yourself into the actions of worship even when the feelings aren't there, you may find that the feelings of devotion actually get ignited and revived along the way.

It's the same with prayer. We often have to pray as a matter of discipline/routine/habit. To be sure, we should *want* to pray, and prayer *should* be the spontaneous language of the soul. But even if we don't want to pray, we should do it anyway. This is not hypocrisy (because you are not pretending to be something you aren't – you are not lying, which is always at the heart of hypocrisy). Rather, it is faithfulness! Confess your lack of feeling, dive into prayer, and see what happens. Quite often the feelings will arise after the action is underway.

And so it is in marriage. In those dry-spells, if you continue to act towards your spouse in a kind and loving fashion, you will find the feelings eventually re-kindled. Romance comes and goes, but love should be constant. C. S. Lewis captures this dynamic well in the chapter on "Charity" in *Mere Christianity*:

But love, in the Christian sense, does not mean an emotion. It is a state not of the feelings but of the will; that state of the will which we have naturally about ourselves, and must learn to have about other people.

I pointed out in the chapter on Forgiveness that our love for ourselves does not mean that we like ourselves. It means that we wish our own good. In the same way Christian Love (or Charity) for our neighbours is quite a different thing from liking or affection. We "like" or are "fond of" some people, and not of others. It is important to understand that this natural "liking" is neither a sin nor a virtue, any more than your likes and dislikes in food are a sin or a virtue. It is just a fact. But, of course, what we do about it is either sinful or virtuous.

Natural liking or affection for people makes it easier to be "charitable" towards them. It is, therefore, normally a duty to encourage our affections-to "like" people as much as we can (just as it is often our

duty to encourage our liking for exercise or wholesome food)-not because this liking is itself the virtue of charity, but because it is a help to it. On the other hand, it is also necessary to keep a very sharp look-out for fear our liking for some one person makes us uncharitable, or even unfair, to someone else. There are even cases where our liking conflicts with our charity towards the person we like. For example, a doting mother may be tempted by natural affection to "spoil" her child; that is, to gratify her own affectionate impulses at the expense of the child's real happiness later on.

But though natural likings should normally be encouraged, it would be quite wrong to think that the way to become charitable is to sit trying to manufacture affectionate feelings. Some people are "cold" by temperament; that may be a misfortune for them, but it is no more a sin than having a bad digestion is a sin; and it does not cut them out from the chance, or excuse them from the duty, of learning charity. The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste time bothering whether you "love" your neighbour; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less...

Consequently, though Christian charity sounds a very cold thing to people whose heads are full of sentimentality, and though it is quite distinct from affection, yet it leads to affection. The difference between a Christian and a worldly man is not that the worldly man has only affections or "likings" and the Christian has only "charity." The worldly man treats certain people kindly because he "likes" them: the Christian, trying to treat every one kindly, finds himself liking more and more people as he goes on-including people he could not even have imagined himself liking at the beginning.

This same spiritual law works terribly in the opposite direction. The Germans, perhaps, at first ill-treated the Jews because they hated them: afterwards they hated them much more because they had ill-treated them. The more cruel you are, the more you will hate; and the more you hate, the more cruel you will become-and so on in a vicious circle for ever.

Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of. An apparently trivial indulgence in lust or anger today is the loss of a ridge or railway line or bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible.

Some writers use the word charity to describe not only Christian love between human beings, but also God's love for man and man's love for God. About the second of these two, people are often worried. They are

told they ought to love God. They cannot find any such feeling in themselves. What are they to do? The answer is the same as before. Act as if you did. Do not sit trying to manufacture feelings. Ask yourself, "If I were sure that I loved God, what would I do?" When you have found the answer, go and do it.

On the whole, God's love for us is a much safer subject to think about than our love for Him. Nobody can always have devout feelings: and even if we could, feelings are not what God principally cares about. Christian Love, either toward God or towards man, is an affair of the will. If we are trying to do His will we are obeying the commandment, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God." He will give us feelings of love if He pleases. We cannot create them for ourselves, and we must not demand them as a right. But the great thing to remember is that, though our feelings come and go, His love for us does not. It is not wearied by our sins, or our indifference; and, therefore, it is quite relentless in its determination that we shall be cured of those sins, at whatever cost to us, at whatever cost to Him.

The application of this principle to marriage should be obvious.

In another place, Lewis defined love this way: "Love is not affectionate feeling, but a steady wish for the loved person's ultimate good as far as it can be obtained." This is the kind of love that makes marriage work. If a wife finds that her heart has grown cold towards her husband, she should *pretend* (for lack of a better term) that she still feels warm affection and respect towards him – because she knows this is her covenantal duty. As she continues to love him in spite of her coldness, she will find [a] her husband opening up to her and becoming more and more the man she wants him to be, so that she loves him into greater Christ-likeness; and [b] her own feelings towards him will be strengthened, refreshed, and rekindled, until her heart is no longer cold.

One of my underlying reasons for situating marriage within God's larger mission to the world has grown out of something I've noticed over the years. It seems that so many Christian marriage seminars and books aim solely at helping the couple get more personal satisfaction out of marriage. It ends up rather narcissistic. The point of marriage is reduced to self-fulfillment. Even Christian couples can fall into the marriage-as-commodity, or marriage-as-means-of-fulfillment, view.

No one is against finding happiness and satisfaction in marriage. *But that's not the chief end of marriage.* The chief end of marriage is God's glory and the advance of his kingdom through gospel re-enactment. So my reason for somewhat marginalizing the place of self-fulfillment in marriage is not because I have a *low* view of the marriage covenant but because I have a much *higher* view. Romance can only be redeemed within the context of a covenantal understanding of marriage.

In pre-modern times, many marriages were contracted for business/familial reasons. Your spouse was chosen (often by your parents) to protect or enhance the family name, increase the family estate, etc. The kingdom-building function of marriage was often obscured and family interests were made central. But modern marriages, dominated by the heresy of "romantic love," end up making the same mistake, albeit in a different way. Today, we marry because we "like" the other person and figure they can keep us happy. Marriage is subordinated to the individual's quest for fulfillment. But if we do not aim any higher, our marriages will not hit the target God intended.

"Kingdom marriages" are marriages that are shaped by the cross, not by the quest for self-fulfillment. If marriage is about symbolizing Christ and the church, then the cross must be the heart and center of marriage. But in God's way of doing things, the cross is always followed by the resurrection. In marriage, as in the rest of life, you have to lose your life to find it. You have to be buried in order to grow and bear fruit.

Alexander Schmemmann's book *For the Life of the World* (chap. 5) asks the right question: "[H]ow is marriage related to the Kingdom which is to come? How is it related to the cross, the death and resurrection of Christ?" Schmemmann says, "Even to raise these questions seems impossible within the whole 'modern' approach to marriage." He points to the number of "manuals on marital happiness," among other things, as proof. He argues that we must not "visualize marriage as the concern alone of those who are being married." Instead, we must see what each particular marriage means for the church and the cosmos. Marriage has a purpose that goes beyond the family; indeed, apart from the restorative grace of the kingdom, the family itself can become "a demonic distortion of love" (Mt. 10:36).

Schmemmann goes on to point out that while, on the one hand, marriage serves as a window through which we can learn about Christ's love for the church, the flip side of the analogy is more important. "[B]ut on the other hand, marital love has its roots, its depth, and its real fulfillment in the *great mystery of Christ and his church*." While marriage is a this-worldly, pre-eschatological institution, it symbolizes, and thus in some way participates in, the realities of the world to come. Marriage is designed to be revelatory of the mystery that stands at the heart of the universe.

There is no such thing as a merely "natural marriage" from a Christian point of view. Every marriage is intended to be a supernatural relationship in which Christ and the church are shown forth. Thus, Schmemmann ties marriage and family life into the kingdom in its present form: "Each family is indeed a kingdom, a little church...Behind each window there is a little world going on...This is what marriage crowns and expresses: that here is the beginning of a small kingdom which *can* be something like the true kingdom." In this way, a husband and wife, so long as they are together in love, proclaim and picture God's kingdom, and thus are a kind of king and queen to one another. They make their little familial kingdom a symbol and agent of the kingdom of God.

Schmemmann points out that our popular “icon” of marriage – the youthful, newly wed couple – is flawed in certain respects. He suggests a different paradigm: “But once, in the light and warmth of an autumn afternoon, this writer saw on the bench of a public square, in a poor Parisian suburb, an old and poor couple. They were sitting hand in hand, in silence, enjoying the pale light, the last warmth of the season. In silence: all words had been said, all passion exhausted, all storms at peace. The whole life was behind – yet all of it was now *present*, in this silent unity of hands. Present – and ready for eternity, ripe for joy. This remains to me the vision of marriage, of its heavenly beauty.”

Finally, Schmemmann views marriage as a kind of martyrdom. Marriage as God designed is a cruciform pattern of life. This is the real heart of “kingdom marriage”: “A marriage which does not constantly crucify its own selfishness and self-sufficiency, which does not ‘die to itself’ that it may point beyond itself, is not a Christian marriage. The real sin of marriage today is not adultery or lack of ‘adjustment’ or ‘mental cruelty.’ It is the idolization of the family itself, the refusal to understand marriage as directed towards the Kingdom of God...It is not the lack of respect for the family, it is the idolization of the family that breaks the modern family so easily, making divorce its almost natural shadow. It is the identification of marriage with happiness and the refusal to accept the cross in it. In a Christian marriage, in fact, three are married; and the united loyalty of the two toward the third, who is God, keeps the two in an active unity with each other as well as with God. Yet it is the presence of God which is the death of marriage as something only ‘natural.’ It is the cross of Christ that brings the self-sufficiency of nature to its end. But ‘by the cross joy (and not ‘happiness’!) entered the whole world.’ Its presence is thus the real joy of marriage.” Thus, marriage is “not always joyful, but always capable of being referred to and filled with joy.”

Schmemmann is right: Marriage cannot be a self-enclosed circle. It must serve God’s mission. It must take the shape of the cross. Otherwise it becomes an idol – and idol that is all too easily crushed by its inability to deliver on its promises. Marriage only attains the fullness of joy when the union of the man and the woman is taken up into the life, ministry, and mission of God’s kingdom.

In the sermon, I went to some lengths to describe the difficulties that attend marriage. I pulled in quotes from Chesterton, Luther, and Hauerwas. I had several others I could have chosen to make the same point. No one who has been married for any length of time will tell you it’s easy, and if they do they are lying. Even the best of marriages have their ups and downs.

As hard as marriage is, is there any key to resolving conflicts within marriage? I’ll talk more fully about this later on in a sermon, but since I talked about the struggles inherent in every marriage, I should go ahead and say something this week (rather than leave you hanging!).

A couple of the keys were already given in the sermon. We have to view our spouses not simply as they are in the present, but in terms of who God has destined them to become. God promises to make our spouses part of the radiant and perfect bride of Christ at the last day. We have to look at them in light of that promised end – and we have to love them in a way that helps move them towards that goal. We “love others into their futures,” as I said in the sermon. Christ-like love is powerfully transformative.

At the same time, we have to remember that this is our destiny as well – God is going to make us without blemish or spot as well. Part of the way God is sanctifying you is through your marriage, especially its hardships. He is showing you your own sin in the way you handle your spouse’s failures. Your spouse doesn’t *make* you sin; rather your spouse *exposes* the sin that was already latent in your heart. You have to see each failing on the part of your spouse as an opportunity to forgive, to practice long-suffering patience, and to love sacrificially. You have to view your marriage as a “school of sanctification,” in which God is shaving the rough edges off of your personality, smoothing out the wrinkles in your character, and washing away spots in the way you relate to others.

Most marital fights prove to be over very small matters that get blown out of proportion. One of the beautiful things about a healthy marriage is that after a while, neither spouse can even remember what most of their fights have been about. They forgive each other and forget all about it. It is crucial that couples keep ‘short accounts’ with one another. Resolve conflicts quickly. Do not let the sun go down on your anger, as Paul says in Ephesians 4. Seek forgiveness and grant forgiveness as quickly as possible. Even in the midst of your fights, try to curb your tongue, control your anger, and interpret your spouse’s words in the best possible manner. The less damage you do in the heat of the moment, the less repair work you’ll have to do later on. Make up as soon as possible, and express reconciliation to one another in a tangible way. Don’t hold grudges or let bitterness take root.

Jenny and I have also found a measure of encouragement in the Patty Griffin song, “Long Ride Home.” The song tells the story of a widow going to her husband’s funeral, and then taking the “long ride home” all alone after she says her last good-bye to her spouse of forty years.

At the beginning of the song, the hearse and graveside are described:

Long black limousine
Shiniest car I've ever seen
The back seat is nice and clean
She rides as quiet as a dream
Someone dug a hole six long feet in the ground
I said goodbye to you and I threw my roses down
Ain't nothing left at all in the end of being proud
With me riding in this car, and you flying through the clouds

The new widow then begins to reflect on the life she and her husband shared, going back to their wedding day:

One day I took your tiny hand
Put your finger in the wedding band
Your daddy gave a piece of land
We laid ourselves the best of plans

Then come the really key lines, as far as marital fights are concerned. These are the lines Jenny and I have found helpful (emphasis added):

*Forty years go by with someone laying in your bed
Forty years of things you say you wish you'd never said
How hard would it have been to say some kinder words instead
I wonder as I stare up at the sky turning red*

I've had some time to think about you
And watch the sun sink like a stone
I've had some time to think about you
On the long ride home

Unless you and your spouse somehow die at the exact same time, one of the two of you is going to have to make that "long ride home." You will bury your life partner. What regrets will you have that day? What words will wish you could take back? What insults will you wish you had never spoken? Won't you wish that you had said some kinder words instead? How petty will all those squabbles and arguments seem when you drive home all alone?

Headlights staring at the driveway
The house is dark as it can be
I go inside and all is silent
It seems as empty as the inside of me

I've had some time to think about you
And watch the sun sink like a stone
I've had some time to think about you
On the long, on the long
Oh the long, on the long
On the long ride home

If married couple would remember to look at every dispute in light of the whole of their life together, they could better put their arguments in perspective.

I closed the sermon with a couple of examples of marriages that succeeded in not only picturing the kingdom, but in advancing the kingdom. I pointed to Jonathan and Sarah Edwards and to Benjamin and Anne Warfield.

I told the story of how George Whitefield's view of marriage was transformed by getting to know the Edwards. Previously, Whitefield had thought of marriage in primarily negative terms. He assumed that marriages would hinder his ministry rather than enhance it. He feared that marriage would compromise his spirituality. He said at one point that he feared that a wife would intrude into the intimacy of his relationship with Christ! But when he saw how Jonathan and Sarah actually encouraged one another, as well as others, to greater godliness, he changed his tune and started praying for a wife. The love of Jonathan and Sarah touched and transformed others; their marriage was not a self-enclosed circle, but a conduit through which others could be connected to God's love.

I thought about using another example of a marriage that impacted others – Johnny and June Cash. I was hesitant to use the Cashes because in many ways their marriage was *not* a model. In many ways, they failed to attain the level of marital and Christian maturity we would hope for our own marriages. Plus, the popularized versions of their love story (e.g., the movie "Walk the Line") don't necessarily give the full picture and the sermon didn't provide me with time to clear away various myths and misconceptions.

Back during the season of Lent I was listening to a good bit of Cash (now you know why those sermons were so depressing!) and reading a little bit about him. One thing I read interviewed a number of people who knew Johnny and June as a couple. Two things were evident to these observers. First, the Cashes' love for each other grew, rather than diminished, over the years. They were more in love in their 60s and 70s than they had been earlier in life. Their mutual love matured, even if blemishes remained. Second, their love empowered them to do things they could not have done apart from one another. Their love provided a strength that enabled them to fulfill their vocations.

Tom Petty said of the two of them: "John so depended on June and he so bounced everything off June. It was just such a deep love that it was great to see how the two of them were such a team, really involved in everything together, including the music." Another observer said, "[I]t's hard to separate the existence of the two of them. He was kind of 'The Man in Black,' and she was this entirely different light and it was wonderful the way they fit together."

Perhaps you've seen other marriages that displayed this kind of oneness that in turn inspired and encouraged others. When marriage really comes into its own – when it really becomes all God desires and designed it to be – it not only brings joy to the couple, but it spreads love, truth, and mercy in the world.

If you want all this put to music, maybe Cash's "As Long as the Grass Shall Grow" is best.

[These quotations about the Cashes are from the book *Cash: Unearthed*. I noticed that Rob Bell also used the Cash marriage as an example in his quirky but interesting book *Sex God*.]

A few more resources to note:

Alexander Schmemmann's outstanding book *For the Life of the World* has a very insightful chapter on marriage (as the quotations above show). This work must be read with some care, as it is written from a robust Eastern Orthodox perspective. Nevertheless, Schmemmann has a beautiful and deep grasp of the meaning and purpose of marriage.

John Piper's book *Desiring God* has a fine chapter on marriage. Piper applies his "Christian hedonism" paradigm to marriage. He says we absolutely must pursue joy in marriage – but the way to find joy is to seek your own joy in the joy of your spouse.

Peter Leithart's essay, "When Marriage Is Dying," is quite good:
<http://www.touchstonemag.com/docs/issues/14.10docs/14-10pg20.html>.
Leithart builds off of the insights of Schmemmann – marriage as an institution is dying because we have forgotten that marriage is all about death.

This article by Craig Dunham in the PCA's online news magazine is very interesting: "A Church that's Too Embarrassed to Talk about Sex,"
http://sites.silaspartners.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID323422%7CCHID664014%7CCIID2065104,00.html. I did not read it before I preached my sermon on lust a couple weeks ago, but it certainly gives you some of the rationale for why I preached that sermon the way I did.