

The Sustained Marriage: A Supreme Sustainer

INTRODUCTION

Before we start, there's a word that we all need today: I need it, and you need it. We live in a time when marriage is under carnal and spiritual attack, when love can easily grow cold, and hearts can quickly grow hard.

We need to ask for soft, pliable hearts. We need to ask the Lord to help us be people who are slow to be offended and quick to show forgiveness. Some might need to do what Jesus told the church in Ephesus to do when they left their first love: repent and do the first works.

If your marriage is amazing right now, then take this message as a good reminder of the things to keep doing. If your marriage is on the rocks, then trust in faith that Jesus might give you what you need to take the right steps forward.

I want to give you a brief introduction to my wife and me, but before I do that, I want us to imprint in our hearts and minds the theme of this weekend's conference. I don't do this a lot, but would you please repeat this after me:

QUOTE

“A healthy, fruitful marriage is not self-sustaining.”

APPLICATION

- ***Beautiful gardens require tending.***
- ***Long-lasting vehicles require maintenance.***
- ***Successful careers require prioritization, investment, and diligence.***
- ***A fruitful ministry requires commitment, sacrifice, and obedience.***

Yet, I can't count how many couples I've interacted with who seem to believe that their marriage is self-propelled or that the emotional love they experienced, in the beginning, will somehow be able to sustain them long-term. Many people end up losing a sense of vision, purpose and hope for what their marriage has the potential to be because they've put it on cruise control and can't figure out why it's become mundane, rote, and burdensome.

Add to the equation that marriage isn't SIMPLY about partnership, sexual intimacy, or friendship. Yes, it is about all of those things, but there is a far deeper spiritual reality at work within the union of a man and wife that makes the Christian marriage that much more important to fight for, invest in, and prioritize in our lives.

APPLICATION

Rodney Dangerfield said of his notoriously sorry marriage, ***“My wife and I eat apart, we take separate vacations. We never talk to each other, or even see each other. We’re doing everything we can to keep our marriage together!”*** Now that’s a barren marriage! Yet it grieves me to see marriages where that’s the couple’s strategy.

Rather than seek an intimate relationship - the goal is to stay out of each other’s way. God desires better for you and your spouse. He wants to visit your marriage and create a fruitfulness. If your marriage is in a state of desperation, don’t give up! In the darkest hours of World War 2, Winston Churchill told the battle-weary British people, “Wars are not won by evacuation.” Neither are good marriages.

One of the most common mistakes people make is quitting before right before a victory. It may feel that your marriage is nothing but one battle to the next, but for each battle you fight, and each small victory you win, you are actually growing one step closer to total victory.

INTRODUCTION

In July, Ashley and I will be celebrating 20 years of marriage. I can honestly say that much of my sanctification has happened through the mirror of my marriage. Our marriage is not your marriage, and our struggles and successes are not yours, but we are two humans, two sinners, whom Jesus put together in order to make us more like Him and reflect His image to those around us, and that gives us something in common with you.

- Truth be told, my marriage has been a holy mirror that has exposed roots of selfishness and self-righteousness in me that I've been shocked and embarrassed by. It's also been a venue to experience grace and transformation. God has used my wife and her godliness in my life to convict, challenge, inspire, and sometimes correct me to stay on the path of becoming more like Christ.

Ashley and I have always confessed that strictly from a worldly perspective, without Jesus, our differences would have probably driven us apart long ago. But with Jesus, our differences and struggles have and still are, created a greater depth in our lives and in our intimacy together.

- About 17 years ago, we were living in Georgia. We moved across the country 6 months after being married, discovering that she was pregnant half way through Texas on our drive out. We hit the ground running, and I jumped straight into full-time ministry. It was a rough first 8 years... but I'll talk more about some of that in a future session.
- In our first house, our kitchens had two counters that faced each other. When we got into a heated marital conversation, also known as a fight, we would each sit on a counter. I'm not sure why... perhaps it was the only way we could get above the 3 and 5-year-olds running around us.
- We have this memory of this moment when we were at odds, exasperated with each other, and from across the kitchen, my wife just looked at me and said, **"We're in this, and we are never getting out of this; we better determine that we are going to make this good."**
- **We have had to have MANY of those moments since, but slowly and surely, God has been incredibly faithful to keep us growing together through things that should have destroyed us.**

In 20 years of marriage, we've lived in 13 different houses, 3 different states, and 6 or 7 different cities.

- My wife came from a childhood of moving a lot, while I was raised pretty much in one place. She was hoping to find stability and roots by marrying me, and well, let's say that our life went a little differently than expected.
- In my younger years, I had a self-impression that I was kind, humble, and called to do something great. In reality, as a husband, I was selfish, often absent, and neglectful of my home and my wife's heart in the name of being a hero to the church.
- We will both confess that where we find ourselves today is a miracle of God that has only come through repentance, humility, forgiveness, effort, trust building, and change.

Here's what we have found: While the issues we all face as humans can be complex, humble submission to Christ and His Word has the power to change a destiny, a heart, and a marriage. That submission is daily.

APPLICATION

Marriage is divine and origin. In other words, it wasn't an invention of man in order to cure someone's loneliness, or satisfy one's sexual desires, or even to fill one's need for companionship or friendship. It is the one institution that God frequently refers back to and uses to describe his commitment to his people, his bride, and displays a relationship in which people are shaped and molded into God's divine image.

APPLICATION

The human condition has launched mankind on an endless search for fulfillment and completeness.

- Sin has created a gap in the human heart that constantly causes us to seek completion from people and things. We recognize that something is incomplete in us, and that, of course, is because we were created for a relationship with God, and that relationship has been severed.
- Seeking fulfillment, identity, or completeness apart from Christ is called "idolatry." When we seek our identity, self-worth, or value from something or someone other than Jesus, it is idolatry; nothing else can fill the space that only a restored relationship with God can.

SO, what does this concept have to do with marriage?

Often, our humanity turns the marriage relationship into a quest for personal fulfillment, into seeing how much I can get for myself out of another person. We idolize this person or an idea of what marriage will be, and want them to be our savior, the one who fulfills us, the one who completes us, and many times, we expect from our spouse that which only Jesus can do.

IMPORTANT: Now, before you think I might be suggesting that expectations in marriage is bad, please hear me out. It's right for us to expect husbands to sacrificially love, cherish, see, and understand their wives. We should expect wives to love, honor, respect, and submit to their husbands. But it's wrong for us to expect to find our identity, contentment, and spiritual life from anyone of anything other than Jesus.

ILLUSTRATION

EXAMPLE: John 4 – the woman at the well. She tried to fill her spiritual needs through marriages and human relationships.

Jesus knows that her soul is empty and that she has had five marriages and a live-in boyfriend in order to fill the void and thirst within her soul. Yet Jesus has the courage to tell her, "It's not a husband you need; it's a savior who has living water.

APPLICATION

What happens when a person idolizes their marriage or expects their spouse to be what only Jesus can be?

Instead of marriages full of **selfless service**, we find marriages full of **selfishness**. Instead of marriages being about **personal sacrifice**, we find marriages that are all about **personal satisfaction**. Instead of marriages built on **grace**, we find marriages built on **self-gratification**. Instead of marriages built on **commitment**, we find marriages built on **convenience**.

It reminds me of little Christy. She was playing on the floor with her dolls. At one point she staged a wedding. She picked up her teddy bear groom and said to the imaginary pastor, "Okay, you can read us our rights." Suddenly Christy shifted roles – from bride to

pastor. She said in a deep voice, “You have the right to remain silent, anything you say may be held against you, you have the right to have an attorney present. And you may kiss the bride.”

I believe God DID design marriage to be fulfilling and satisfying, but more importantly, marriage can only reach its fullest potential when it’s built on the picture of Jesus and His bride, the church.

This morning let’s look at two marriages that God was involved in.

- The first kicked off creation, the second kicked off the ministry of Jesus.
- At one, something sweet became bitter; at the other, something bitter became sweet.
- One was torn apart by sin, the other was brought to life by grace.

THE FIRST MARRIAGE

Genesis 2:20-25 – Back to the garden to the original marriage relationship:

In the beginning, before there was sin in the world, there was:

- **Adam**
- **Eve**
- **God**

There was no division in the fellowship of husband, wife, and God. We know from scripture that Adam and Eve walked with God in the cool of the morning in the garden of Eden. They knew His presence and their perfect fellowship with God created a perfect fellowship with each other. And this is what God always wanted for man and woman. To have perfect fellowship with Him and with each other without the complications of sin... but guess what? SIN happened. Let’s take a look at the dramatic shifts that took place in the marriage relationship as a result of sin.

1 Before sin, there was no shame

BIBLE PASSAGE

Genesis 2:25 (NKJV - New King James Version)

²⁵ And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

APPLICATION

Adam never had to answer the question, “Does this make me look fat?” Adam didn’t even know what fat was! There was no definition of FAT, or BEAUTIFUL.

- There was no one for Adam to compare Eve to. She was the most beautiful woman alive! It could honestly be said that Adam literally had eyes only for Eve!
- There was no reason for either of them to be ashamed. There was no deception, no moral failures, no hurtful words, and no unrealistic expectations; nothing was hidden. There was only contentment in one another and God.

Here's the point: Sexually, mentally, and relationally, Adam and Eve were enough for each other because they had perfect fellowship with God.

2 After Sin: Shame entered the marriage

BIBLE PASSAGE

Genesis 3:7-8 (NKJV - New King James Version)

⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.

⁸ And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

SHAME

Where there once was contentment and satisfaction, now there was embarrassment and disappointment.

The dictionary defines shame as, **“A painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior.”**

At first, nothing was hidden in the marriage relationship. After sin, the husband and wife were hiding from each other and from God. There was brokenness in the fellowship, union, and confidence within the marriage relationship because of the knowledge that they were now naked. The shame and consequences of their disobedience were now clear to them. As a result, they didn't want to be vulnerable and seen by each other or by God.

That same shame still carries into many marriages today.

Today we live in a world that has brought so much shame into the marriage relationship.

- There is sexual shame
- There is relational shame
- There is a sense now that "I am not enough."

Perhaps you've felt in your marriage, "I'm never enough. My body isn't enough, my personality isn't enough, my failures are too many..." Much of this is caused by the shame that has come because of sin. We are ashamed of ourselves and hide from God and one another, afraid of intimacy, afraid of connection, afraid of vulnerability.

We dwell in a pornography-laden, sexually perverted world.

- Men and women are bombarded with images of fake people on magazines, billboards, televisions, and computers.
- Some men go and indulge their lust in pornography and come back with an expectation of their wife that is unrealistic and unholy.

- Some women are wrapped up in fantasy novels and Instagram profiles of the men who are perfect in all the ways their husbands aren't.

A recent news article (not written from a Christian worldview) even exposed the growing awareness in the world about the dangers of this kind of exposure. It reads,

QUOTE

“Britain’s leading sex and relationship experts have revealed their fears that porn use damages relationships. 70 percent of men aged 18-34 admitting to using porn at least once a month and the use of it by both men and women is becoming more and more prevalent. But, at what cost?” Some of the experts cited said:

“Porn can affect men’s ability to form relationships with real women, rather than those on their laptop,” said Psychosexual therapist Carol Featherstone.

Psychosexual therapist Karen Lobb-Rossini says, “More and more young people (girls as well as boys) are learning about sex through porn, and it’s having a devastating effect on their perception of themselves and their bodies.”

JESUS BEARS OUR SHAME

On the cross, Jesus died the most shameful death one could imagine, but it wasn't his own shame that he was born; it was ours. He hung naked so we could be clothed with righteousness. He was spit on so that we could be accepted fully in the beloved.

- Shame can begin to be reversed when we look to Jesus as enough rather than looking to our spouse to be enough.
- Furthermore, when we begin to display grace and acceptance toward one another, that grace and acceptance begin to change us into more complete people.

You look at your spouse strictly from the perspective of, "They need to be enough for all of my expectations," and there will always be something lacking. But if we look at our spouse and say, "Because of Jesus, you are fully accepted, just as you are. Because of Jesus, I don't need to compare your body to any other body, your mind to any other mind, your

personality to any other personality... you are enough because Jesus had made you enough."

3 Before sin there was no blame

BIBLE PASSAGE

Genesis 2:23 (NKJV - New King James Version)

²³ And Adam said: "This is now bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man."

APPLICATION

Notice something very important. In the beginning, Adam took personal responsibility and pride in his wife.

He looked at Eve and saw her as part of himself.

- The word "Woman" comes from a combination of two Hebrew words:
 - **Ish – man**
 - **Sha – individual; person**
 - So literally, a woman means an individual that was taken out of a man.

When Adam looked at Eve, he didn't see a burden, a hindrance, a nag, or a hassle... no, he saw an individual who was from him, who was valuable to him, and who was part of him!

QUOTE

“Eve was not taken out of Adam’s head to top him, neither out of his feet to be trampled on by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected by him, and near his heart to be loved by him.”

Matthew Henry

ILLUSTRATION

EXAMPLE: The very first wedding ceremony I officiated. I was nervous and was trying to stay focused on my notes. I came to a section where I wrote, “God gave the woman to compliment the man,” and instead, it came out, “God gave the woman to complicate the man.”

APPLICATION

When men choose to see their wives as an extension of their own flesh and a mirror of their own leadership, they can't place blame on their wife, because it's always pointing back at them. When we see ourselves as one, husbands take responsibility for their leadership and how they are understanding, nurturing and cherishing their wife who is a part of them.

When wives see their husbands as someone they are a part of, they won't resent following his lead and submitting under his covering because they are an extension of him and know that they belong by his side.

4 After Sin: There was blame

BIBLE PASSAGE

Genesis 3:11-13 (NKJV - New King James Version)

¹¹ And He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?”

2:03



¹³ And the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

APPLICATION

Once something goes wrong and sin enters the picture, we find something out about human nature.

We love to push the responsibility for our personal failures on other people.

This shows up the most in marriage. WHY? In marriage, you are the most vulnerable. All of the failures and weaknesses that other people around you never see are seen by your spouse.

Therefore, our defenses go up more quickly. We so easily convince ourselves that we are without fault.

- Instead of someone telling us how nice, wonderful, beautiful, and gifted we are, we go to the person that knows us best and we sometimes hear that we aren't so wonderful. We become so convicted about the realities of ourselves as seen in the mirror of our spouse that instead of responding with humility and repentance, it's easier to blame it on them!

*The first time Adam looked at his wife it was “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”
Now it’s, “This woman YOU gave me God, it’s all her fault!”*

We have a way of minimizing our own failures. So if there are problems in our personal lives, in our marriage, in our home, it’s a lot easier to attribute the faults to the failures of our spouse.

- Yes, he or she might carry more blame in the situation. He or she might have been the one to cross the ultimate line.
- But I find it to be true, even in my own marriage, that while I’m busy criticizing a couple of failures of my wife, I am also busy ignoring twice as many failures of my own.

Jesus gave an analogy to those who would seek to be fault-finders in other people while ignoring their own sin.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Matthew 7:3-5 (NKJV - New King James Version)

³ And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?

⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye?

⁵ Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

5 Before Sin: No Pain

BIBLE PASSAGE

Genesis 2:15-16 (NKJV - New King James Version)

¹⁵ Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.

¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat;

APPLICATION

You've heard the phrase, "No pain, no gain..." Not for Adam and Eve! For them, there was no pain and they had endless gain.

Everything they could possibly desire was at their fingertips. God gave them everything they needed. Any work they did was a joy and pleasure. No one was sick, no one was hurt, no one was anxious or worried about what they would eat, where they would live, healthcare, rent, or broken relationships.

6 After Sin: Pain

BIBLE PASSAGE

Genesis 3:16-19 (NKJV - New King James Version)

¹⁶ To the woman He said: "I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children; Your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you."

¹⁷ Then to Adam He said, “Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it’: “Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life.

¹⁸ Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, And you shall eat the herb of the field.

¹⁹ In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.”

ILLUSTRATION

Once upon a time, a man married a nurse. Early in their marriage, she would make a fuss over his every ache and pain. His littlest boo-boo demanded her attention. But he knew the honeymoon was over the day he climbed up to fix the attic fan...As he lifted himself from the wooden ladder into the attic he scratched his forehead on a crossbeam... Crawling over the rafters splinters stuck in his hand... As he changed the fan belt he cut his forearm... Then on the way down the ladder, the last two rungs broke under his weight and he twisted his ankle... When the fellow limped into the kitchen, his wife took one look at him, and shouted, “Are those your good pants?” It was overwhelming evidence that the honeymoon was over... and the marriage had begun.

APPLICATION

Because of sin, there are now difficult expectations at home and at work. The husband and wife that were one in everything are now separated.

- Eve was painfully birthing and raising her children, and Adam was painfully laboring by the sweat of his brow to provide.

Some of you feel like your marriage is a curse sometimes... well, that’s actually not too far off base.

- After sin came in, maintaining unity between a husband and a wife became painful and difficult.
- Now the selfishness creeps in and we say, “If only my spouse could only understand that pain, challenges, and difficulties I go through.”

Is anyone here selfish, raise your hand... If you're not raising your hand, it's because you're thinking about yourself and how you would look, so you're being selfish right now.

Is there a war going on in your home? "Yes, and it's all his fault!" Look again!

BIBLE PASSAGE

James 4:1-3 (NKJV - New King James Version)

¹ Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?

² You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.

³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

BIBLE PASSAGE

John 2:1-10 (NKJV - New King James Version)

¹ On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there.

² Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding.

³ And when they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine."

⁴ Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come."

⁵ His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it."

⁶ Now there were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece.

⁷ Jesus said to them, “Fill the waterpots with water.” And they filled them up to the brim.

⁸ And He said to them, “Draw some out now, and take it to the master of the feast.” And they took it.

⁹ When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom.

¹⁰ And he said to him, “Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!”

APPLICATION

1. Jesus will work where Jesus is welcomed

- The best thing this couple did was invite Jesus to their wedding. Have you REALLY invited Jesus into your marriage? I’m not talking about going to church. I’m talking about letting Jesus call the shots.
 - Everywhere Jesus was welcome in the Bible, miracles happen. And yet there is great sorrow in the heart of God when he knocks on the door and we refuse to let Him in.
 - When we invite Jesus, we must intend to allow him to sit on the throne.
 - One of the simplest yet powerful analogies I’ve seen regarding a **healthy marriage is a triangle. When God is in the center and elevated to the highest place, the closer each individual gets to God, the closer they automatically get to each other.**]

2. Jesus will respond when we recognize

- The ancient Jewish wedding feast was 7 days long. If you were to run out of wine not even halfway into the celebration, you were in trouble with the guests.
 - In the same way, honeymoons only last so long. The sweet wine of those first years can slowly run out until one day you wake up and say, “Where did the wine go?!”
 - When the panic was on, Mary knew the answer. **We need to ask Jesus to intervene!**

- Self-denial doesn't work in marriage! Pretending like there is no problem when it's glaring and running around in front of your face only further destroys what hope of recovery is still there.
- Listen to the concerns of your spouse and watch for the warning signs. If your marriage is suffering, tomorrow is not the time to recognize and deal with it... the time is now. What might happen if you both decide to go home today, get honest about the areas where the wine is running out, and ask Jesus to come and perform a miracle in your marriage?

3. Jesus will bless when we obey

The same words that Mary told the servants are true for us: ***Whatever He says, do it!***

I'm not going to go into this in detail due to time constraints. But we will never see the fruit of God's work in our marriages if we refuse to obey the instructions that God gave us to start off with.

IMAGINE: being one of the servants. You are staking your reputation and your job on obeying Jesus. If you go to the master of the feast on hand him a glass of water, it's bad news for you!

Obeying Christ doesn't always make sense, and it's rarely easy, but once it is done, it brings sweet and pleasing results.

- Noah, go build a boat
- Moses, Put your staff in the sea
- People, Look at the snake on the pole
- Hit the rock and water will come out
- Peter, Come and take a step onto the water
- Go throw your nets on the other side
- Servants, fill up the pots with water

Apologize to your spouse. Take the day off work and get your wife some flowers. Pray together before hitting the pillow. Compliment your spouse. If all you have is some plain water, it's okay... put some water in the pots!

4. Jesus can save the best for last

Usually, the wedding host would bring out the best wine first so that after everyone had drunk enough to have their judgment compromised, they would bring out the cheap stuff, and no one would know the difference.

- The wine that Jesus produces is always better than the best that the world can produce.
- **WATER:** I scripture (Ephesians 5) represents the Word of God. You put God's Word in a pure vessel and you get amazing results.

In the end, the wine that Jesus made was significantly better than the best wine they had in the beginning.

In Christ, marriage can be supernaturally sweet! When you invite Christ and obey Christ, what you get in the end is even better than what you had in the beginning.