

November 18, 2007
 Isaiah 61:10-62:5 / Rev. 19:1-10 / Ephesians 5:21-33
 The Church (#8) – The Bride of Christ

It doesn't take long, for one perusing the Scriptures, to discover that there is an intricate connection between the marriage relationship of a husband and wife, and the relationship between Christ and believers, or Christ and His Church.

In fact, in the passage I just read from Ephesians 5, the church is not specifically called "The Bride of Christ " anywhere in the passage. Yet the whole passage is saturated with that imagery.

So much so that David Watson can say in relation to the Ephesians text: *"In Paul's great passage on Christian marriage, it is sometimes difficult to discern whether he is thinking primarily of a husband and wife, or Christ and His church."*

He's right! In verse 31 Paul says: *"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."*

And anyone following the text would merely assume he was speaking of the husband and wife. Yet, before we can draw that conclusion, Paul immediately interrupts the natural flow of our thoughts, and says: *"This is a profound mystery — but I'm talking about Christ and the church."*

Wow, could have fooled me! I was "tracking with him throughout the whole discussion," and I didn't have a clue he had switched from speaking of husbands and wives to speaking of Christ and the Church! In fact, had he not corrected my thinking in verse 32, I NEVER would have guessed he had switched from talking about the husband and wife becoming one in physical union, to Christ and His church becoming one in spiritual union!

Which simply proves the case in point: The imagery of the church as the Bride of Christ, and the marriage of our spirits to Him, was so primary in Paul's thinking that he could flow back and forth between the two almost subconsciously!

So, with that thought in mind, let's explore the parallelisms between the husband/wife relationship, and how it acts as a metaphor for the relationship between us and Christ — Christ as the Groom and us (all inclusive - both female and male – sorry guys!) as the Bride of Christ.

And before I begin I need to apologize to you people who are single. The other metaphors we've looked at could be easily understood and applied to all—young and old, married or single. But this one will be better understood by those who are married. Sorry about that, it's just the nature of the beast. Though I would hope that all might derive spiritual benefit from it.

Teresa of Avila, whom I've quoted often, remained single all her life, yet she reveled in this imagery of her being a part of Christ's Bride, and Christ as her Groom. Some have even suggested that her prayers to Jesus often had an almost romantic tone to them, or that she had so consecrated every part of herself to Christ that she even expressed her sexuality and femininity in a holy way in her relationship with Christ.

So let's consider the 5 most instrumental aspects of marriage and how they relate to the relationship between Christ and His Church. They are as follows:

- 1.) Love and Affection.
- 2.) Covenant and Promise.
- 3.) Intimacy and Intercourse.
- 4.) Submission, Respect and Devotion
- and 5.) Moral as well as Doctrinal Purity.

(Yes, I'm giving you a break this week! A FIVE point sermon, instead of a SEVEN point sermon, as we've had in the past two weeks!)

So **FIRST**, let's look at **LOVE** and **AFFECTION**. In Isaiah 54:5, the prophet tells the people of God, *"Your Maker is your husband — the Lord Almighty is His name — the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; He is called the God of all the earth. The Lord will call you back, as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit — a wife who married young only to be rejected says the Lord."*

It's a statement spoken in the context of the nation of Israel, who had made some very bad decisions (turning to sin, false god's and idolatry). And because of it, God, for a brief moment, turns His face away from them. **WHY?** Because he can't bear to look upon His bride committing adultery with "sin," "idols," and "other gods."

God's love for His Bride is so zealous, and so strong, that His response to her "chasing after other lovers" can best be equated with that of a husband coming home to find His wife in bed with another man. It cuts Him to the heart. So much so, that He cannot bear to look at His Bride "making love" to another man. So, He turns away, His love wounded and His response a mixture of hurt mixed with anger because of her infidelity and betrayal.

That's what the next verse says (54:7): *"For a brief moment I abandoned you... "[Why? Because of your sin!] But with a deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you, says the Lord your Redeemer."* (The One who redeems us from our sin.)

So we discover, she was deserted and abandoned because of her infidelity. Yet, we also discover God is a "husband" who just can't stop loving his wife even though she has been unfaithful to him. And thus, though he leaves her for a time, He returns a brief time later to take her back — not because she's faithful but because He loves her that much! His love for His Bride is that strong!

And that's what God wants us to know. Unbelievable as it is, we are His Bride. He loved us, and allured us, and spoke tenderly to us and betrothed Himself to us. He married us!

And LISTEN: He makes plain that neither His love nor His affection for us was conditioned or dependent upon our complete or unbroken fidelity or devotion! That's what this passage from Isaiah and the whole Book of Hosea teach us! He did not marry us because He knew we would be forever true and flawlessly faithful! He married us because He loved us! In fact, He married us in spite of the fact that He KNEW we HAD been unfaithful before the marriage, and WOULD drift into unfaithfulness AGAIN after the marriage ceremony (sometimes only being attracted to other lovers, and other times actually committing spiritual adultery with them). We would actually offer our bodies and hearts to other lovers, and give to them the affection and devotion we pledged and promised to Him when we married Him at the time of our conversion.

The familiar hymn puts it well: *"Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love."* That's a description of all of us on occasion.

You see, what God wants us to know is this: Even if or when we do drift toward or into unfaithfulness (and I dare say all of us have on occasion) — His love for us is so infinite and so strong, that although He DOES turn his face away from us for a moment when He finds us being unfaithful, He will COME to us again with compassion and kindness, and not only call us back, but take us back, if we will simply return to Him.

He will take us back even though He KNOWS we may stray again somewhere down the line — as was often the case with the people of God throughout the OT! They strayed and returned, and strayed and returned...and each time He took them back. They NEVER once stopped being the object of His covenant love and affection.

That's what God wants us to know. His Love for His Bride is uncanny! It's incomprehensible, says Paul, like nothing we've ever known or experienced! It boggles the mind! Which is why Paul can say in Eph. 3:18, *"I pray that you may have the power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love which surpasses knowledge (a love that surpasses our ability to comprehend the depth of its magnitude and life-transforming power!) – that you might be filled with all the fullness of God."*

You see, a divine type of glow / a holy aura / a deep inner sense of euphoria and unspeakable joy comes over the person who "grasps" to even the slightest degree, the depth of God's love for them.

Have you? Paul's prayer is that you might grasp (to some small degree) the magnitude and depth of God's love for you. **Have you?** Have you grasped what its like to be loved with the faithful and incomprehensible love of God? Not the fickle and conditional love of people, but the strong and deep and mind-blowing love of God.

It's there for you, you know. The well-known missionary Amy Carmichael, put it this way: *"There is no need to plead that the love of God fill our heart, as though He were unwilling to fill us. He is as willing as light is willing as light is willing to flood a room that is opened to its brightness; as willing as water is willing to flow into an emptied channel. Love is pressing round us on all sides like air. Cease to resist and instantly love takes possession."*

And we do have to stop resisting it. The love of God is so strong and intense it scares us, and so we run from it. It's not like a weak and sentimental love that splashes at your feet like ripples on the shore. It's like a tidal-wave that you see coming and you run from it, only to have it overtake you, and then find yourself drenched and refreshed by it after it has swallowed you up and you find yourself floating in the swell it left behind!

Then **SECONDLY**, marriage symbolizes our relationship to Jesus because they are both sealed and confirmed with a **COVENANT** or **PROMISES**. The second sentence in the service I use whenever I marry a couple goes like this: *"The bond and COVENANT OF MARRIAGE was established by God in creation... It signifies to us the union between Christ and His Church and Holy Scripture commends it to be honored among all people."*

Have you noticed that in any of the 4 weddings I've done here? Did you notice how it said that marriage was not just a relationship "sealed" by covenant promises and pledges, as if those

things were simply a small part of the wedding ceremony, or something separate from it, but that marriage itself is a covenant !

What's a "Covenant"? It's an agreement willingly entered into, and sealed by promises and pledges, whereby one person or party agrees to do certain things for a second person or party, and that second person or party agrees to do certain things for the first.

The most basic covenant in the whole Bible simply says this: ***"I will be your God and you shall be My people."***

It was a shortened way of saying: ***"I God have chosen you out of all the people's of the earth; I redeemed and saved you on the basis of nothing but sheer grace, and I hereby pledge Myself to be your God, to love, uphold, sustain and care for you, and in return, you my redeemed people, are to pledge yourselves to love Me, trusting My precepts and obeying the commands I give you for your own good."*** That is the essence of the covenant "God enters into" with every last one of the people He redeems from sin and death.

In fact, traditional wedding vows were based the covenant and promises God makes to His people when He Himself pledges, "to have us and hold us in His grasp" from the day of our conversion forward —"for better or for worse, whether we're rich or poor, spiritually sick or in spiritually well, to love and cherish us until He brings us into His presence at death!"

Some have even said that "the rite of Christian Baptism" is the Christian's "Wedding Ceremony." Because our baptism is the day we publicly pledge ourselves to Jesus "until death do us part." Christ has saved us and graced us, and showered gifts upon us.

We have fallen in love with Him, and having considered both the privileges and responsibilities of being joined to Him in a life of intimate fellowship and discipleship, we choose and pledge ourselves to be a part of His Bride, the Church — a union sealed in the rite of baptism.

It's in baptism that we publicly declare, "I have chosen to turn from my sin, and follow Him. I have given my heart and life to Him and want everyone to know that I love Him, am committed to serving Him and consecrate every part of me (body, mind, soul and strength) to be His and His alone."

HE has pledged to be faithful to me / provide for me / forgive all my sins / adopt me into His family / care for and nurture and train me / making me an heir of every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms / never leaving nor forsaking nor giving up on me, but bringing me safely home!

And in baptism, with all those witnesses present, WE IN RETURN pledge to love and cherish Him — to trust and obey and submit to His leading — believing His promises / pursuing His will for our lives / walking in godliness / communing with Him in prayer / loving His other children / and resting in His love and grace and care for us.

LISTEN: Marriages are sealed with a Covenant and Promises. Have you made that covenant? Or are you simply “living together still,” never having sealed your relationship in the spiritual wedding ceremony we call the rite of Christian Baptism?

THIRD, the metaphor of a Bride and a wedding ceremony speaks of JOY, INTIMACY and INTERCOURSE. In our passage from Ephesians Paul said, *“And a man shall leave His father and mother and be united to His wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a profound mystery, but I am speaking of Christ and the Church.”*

“The two becoming one,” in heart, body, soul and mind, is the essence of what marriage means according to the Bible. And Paul says, “That ultimately refers to the oneness between Christ and the Church — the marriage of our spirit with His Spirit.”

God chose the metaphor of marriage to describe the relationship between Him and the Church — because the whole concept of the bride and groom joining on their wedding day, speaks of love and devotion and affection and commitment / sharing and caring and intimacy and yes, even intercourse — the consummation of the marriage expressed by Bride and Groom becoming “one flesh”— one with each other physically.

In fact, I once watched a show where a Jewish rabbi was speaking of sexual intercourse in relation to the Genesis account, and he said this (I’ll paraphrase):

“In the beginning, man and woman were one. And out of that one, God made two—Adam and Eve. And the drive for sexual union is the insatiable drive for those who were separated, to achieve that sense of oneness that they once had, once again.”

(I believe there may be some truth to that.) And not only in the physical realms.

In the beginning God and man lived in peace and harmony. God breathed His Spirit into man. There was a spiritual oneness. There was fellowship and intimacy between them. But when the Fall occurred, that relationship was severed; God withdrew His Holy Spirit from man because of his sin, and man was separated from God — not a spatial separation but a relational separation.

There was no longer any intimacy or deep, blissful, enjoyable, spiritual intercourse.

And the whole purpose of Christ in His coming was to restore that severed and distanced relationship by satisfying the divine justice / and paying the penalty for all our sins / and removing the wrath and guilt and shame that caused that relational separation.

God made man to have affectionate communion with Him, and enjoy intimate fellowship with Him. We were made to experience constant, pleasurable, unbroken, spiritual intercourse with Him. And in Christ, that becomes possible again.

With sin and wrath and guilt and rejection removed through atonement, and with that sense of shame and condemnation taken out of the picture, God has made it possible for us to once again enjoy what John Eldridge has called "The Sacred Romance" — the restoration of intimate, loving, pleasurable times of spiritual intercourse with God. (Intimacy is like prayer, Intercourse is like worship).

Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones in his book entitled "Enjoying the Presence of God," says this: *"If you know anything of what it means to be in love, you know that you desire to be in the presence of the object of your love more than (anywhere else in) the whole world. "Love-sick" people are those who are unhappy because they are separated from the one they love. They have their money still, their books, their house, and their friends, but they are love-sick and unhappy because the loved one is not there. You can offer them the whole world, but it is useless, for they only want their loved one."*

And when it comes to God, he says: *"Multiply that by infinity!"* Once a man has been in the presence of God or seen something of God's glory, *'There is nothing which is of any value by contrast with this, and nothing that I may receive from the whole universe that is of any value compared with it.'*

"Thee to please, and Thee to know, constitute my bliss below; Thee to see, and Thee to love, Constitute my bliss above," wrote the author of the hymn "Rock of Ages." And in romantic poetry (taken by many to be a metaphor of the love relationship between Christ and his church) Solomon wrote in the Song of Songs: *"I am My Beloved's He is mine."*

Can you say you've experienced it? Have you entered into "The Love life of the Lord," as A.B. Simpson put it, or experienced "The Sacred Romance," as Eldridge put it?

Have you experienced love for Him that's so intense that it consumes your thoughts, captivates your heart, and satisfies your soul? Has the occasional sense of His absence caused you to be "love-sick"?

You see, that's what the image of Christ as Groom and us as Bride is meant to convey — that like a Bride on her wedding day, the Groom has our hearts. Desire for intimacy with Him consumes our soul. It conveys the truth that the consummate experience of life is blissful, euphoric, pleasurable times of spiritual intercourse with Him in prayer, or worship, or service, or meditation and study of His Word.

Then **FOURTH**, the language of us as the Bride of Christ suggests the need for our **SUBMISSION**, **RESPECT** and **DEVOTION**. This comes out in our passage from Eph. 5 where Paul says, *“Wives (and in the context that is us — we’re the Bride)... Wives submit to your husbands as 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.”*

It's a point he makes again in verse 33 where he summarizes the whole passage on husband / wife relations by concluding with these words: “However, each one of you (husbands) must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must wife must respect her husband.”

And in that way he shows us what “submission” in marriage (at least in the mind of the Apostle Paul) looks like. And according to him its not a forced submission like that of a dog or a slave to its master, or a soldier to its commander, but the respectful submission of a loved one (who knows they are valued and treasured and cherished by their lover), to the husband who “loves them as he loves himself, or as Christ loved the church and gave His life for her.”

A groom who loves his bride passionately, selflessly and sacrificially!

You see, no matter how one looks at it, you can't get around the fact that Christ desires our submission to His leading and His Headship over our lives — a leading and Headship that He exercises (always and only) with our highest good or our best interests in mind.

How do we know that? Because Paul makes it clear in verses 25-26 where he writes:

“Husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing of water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant Church without stain or wrinkle or any other imperfection, but holy and blameless.”

That's the goal of Christ's love for us. To make us radiant, joyful, glowing, spotlessly clean, holy, blameless, and untarnished people — sort of like the spotlessly white wedding gown a Bride wears on her wedding day!

And can I say as a sideline: I've known few (if any) wives, who refuse to "submit" to the leading of their husbands when they know they are loved and cherished and treasured by him, and that he is doing what he's doing and asking of her what he is asking, because he has her best interests in mind.

Most often, a wife's refusal to submit to her husbands leading usually comes because she doesn't believe he cherishes and values her, and she doesn't believe he has her best interests in mind. That's why so many women find it easier to submit to Christ's leading, than to that of her husband — because with Christ she KNOWS she is cherished and valued, and that He does have her best interests in mind !)

Then LAST, we come to MORAL as well as DOCTRINAL PURITY. The same verses I just used in the context of Submission can also be used to refer to MORAL PURITY: *"Christ gave Himself up for her make her holy, cleansing her by the washing of water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant Church without stain or wrinkle or any other imperfection, but holy and blameless."* That verse also conveys the idea of ridding one of MORAL imperfection. Making one MORALLY blameless. It refers to growth in holiness and godliness.

Yet David Watson's clarification needs to be stated here lest we fall into the dangers of what C. S. Lewis called "Mere Morality" (which is at best an aberration of the Gospel). *There is an enormous difference between "moralism" and "holiness."* Moralism is mere hard and cold and often self-righteous obedience to rules which usually alienates sinners. Holiness does not. True holiness attracts sinners!

Watson puts it this way:

"There should be nothing cold or hard about moral purity within the church. That was the error of the Pharisees. They were quick to judge and slow to forgive.... In contrast, Christ Himself was totally without sin, yet immensely attractive to sinners.... He drew to Himself such a mixed and notorious circle of friends that he was called by respectable people (and they meant it as a term of derision) 'the friend of sinners'.... In the same way the moral purity of the church must never become critical and censorious, upholding the status quo of bourgeois morality, condemning every departure from established conventions. There is nothing lovely and sympathetic about that. Instead, the church should be unashamedly a fellowship of sinners who have learned, or are at least learning to forgive and be forgiven."

All that as we seek to reflect Christ to an onlooking world — always seeking to avoid sin, but never seeking to judge or avoid sinners. As we mentioned last week in ABH, the person who is truly Christlike and godly, will like Jesus, attract sinners, rather than alienating them.

And in terms of **DOCTRINAL PURITY**, Paul writes this in II Corinthians 11:2-4:

“I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to Him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive... a gospel different from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.”

It’s not hard to see what Paul is doing. He’s using the imagery of them as the Bride of Christ and Christ as the “groom,” to suggest they have committed doctrinal adultery. People have come into the church at Corinth and preached a different Jesus, and a different gospel, and the Corinthians embraced both — a gospel of prosperity and egotistical pride and self-righteousness and legalism. And Paul says, “That should never be.”

You were married to Christ! You accepted His Gospel of grace, and selfless humility. You should not entertain or embrace “other lovers.” You should never give your heart to them.

That’s what it means to be the Bride of Christ. You are loved and cherished and treasured more than you will ever know. And His love for you, His Bride, is so strong, that even if you are unfaithful—He will take you back. Boggles the mind, doesn’t it?!

He has promised Himself to you, to be intimate with you. He wants times of close spiritual intercourse with you. And all He asks in return is that you love Him passionately as a bride does her groom on the day of their wedding, submit to His headship, respect Him and be pure — both morally and doctrinally.