

“THREE TO GET MARRIED”

Dr. John Allan Lavender
Gen. 2:18; Mt.19:5-6; Heb.13:4

I wish to seize upon several scriptures as the Biblical basis of our thinking on marriage. The first is found in the first book of the Old Testament, Gen. 2:18 --

“And God said, it is not good that man should be alone; I will make a helpmeet for him.”

The second is found in the first book of the New Testament, Mt.19:5-6 --

“And Jesus said, ‘For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave unto his wife; and they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.’”

The third verse is found near the end of this sacred volume, Heb. 13:4--

“And God said, marriage is honorable in all . . .”

These verses, snatched at random from the bible, are not the words of men. They are the word of God. And, as we listen to God’s word, it adds new meaning to the beautiful language of that ceremony familiar to us all --

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of *God*, to join this man and this woman in the bonds of holy matrimony . . .”

For, in the deepest, purest, truest sense, marriage is a sacred institution ordained and blessed and honored by *God*.

Oh, there are some to whom marriage is merely a contract, a purely secular relationship. Like the farm boy who sent the following advertisement to a matrimonial bureau --

“Farmer, age 38, wishes to meet young woman of same age. Object: Matrimony. Woman should own tractor. Please enclose photograph . . . of tractor!”

Well, there are some who would keep marriage on that earthly level, but, in the truest sense, marriage is not a secular relationship. It is a sacred relationship. It is not matrimony. It is holy matrimony. It is not an institution which was created by man. It is an institution which was created by God.

It is not a common contract. It is, in very truth, a most sacred expression of our Christian consecration. And, it is not to be regulated by the ordinances of men, but rather by the laws and commandments by God himself.

Is it any wonder then, that it is

“Not to be entered into unadvisedly, but reverently, discreetly, and in the fear of God.”

And yet, one of the perplexing problems facing us today is the loss of this awareness of the sacredness of marriage. For many, marriage has become little more than

“A two-dimensional study in frustration.”

Like the girl who said to her beau, “I’d like to share your troubles.” “But I don’t have any troubles,” he replied. She answered, “Oh, I don’t mean now, I mean after we get married!”

Well, for many, marriage has become that kind of purely horizontal relationship in which a man and a maiden are united together in a kind of armed truce. They have forgotten that it takes three to get married. A man. A maiden. And Almighty God. For when God is included in the making of a marriage, the whole relationship is lifted to a different level. It ceases to be a horizontal relationship and becomes a vertical relationship. A kind of triumphant triangle with God at the apex, and the man and the maiden on the two sides. Across the base are the differences which divide them, represented by a series of dashes.

But, do you see what can happen? The center of attention can change. In the horizontal model they are obsessed with each other. More often than not, their focus is on the differences which divide them. The result is constant conflict. In the vertical model, the center of their attention is

God. He becomes the main object on their thought and life. And, as they grow closer and closer to him, they inevitably grow closer and closer to one another. The differences which divide them become fewer and fewer. And, at last, they blend into that perfect oneness God ordained from the beginning.

But this cannot be achieved if we leave God out. Dr. Roy M. Pearson, Dean of Andover-Newton Theological Seminary, tells about a man in San Francisco who equipped his automobile with a magazine rack, motion picture camera, electric drill and airplane steering gear. But one day he was arrested by the police. He was driving without a license plate!

Dr. Pearson makes the astute observation that it seems, sometimes, we have made a similar mistake in our weddings.

“We have remembered the florist. We have remembered the caterer. The photographer. The decorator. The orchestra. And even Emily Post. But we have forgotten God. And, in Christian marriage, it is God who matters most of all.”

As the ancient scripture clearly states,

“Except the Lord build a house, they labor in vain that build it.”

I would suggest that it takes three to get married for, by including God in their relationship, a man and a maid receive --

A Clearer Definition of the Meaning of Marriage

It takes little more than half an hour to perform the wedding ceremony. It takes a matter of minutes to exchange the vows. But, it takes a lifetime to make a marriage. A lifetime of learning. A lifetime of loving. A lifetime of growing. A lifetime of giving. It means submitting to a new kind of arithmetic -- God’s arithmetic -- in which one plus one equals one.

It means learning the hard lesson of giving up your old independence in order to gain a new interdependence. It means taking two people with differing backgrounds, training and interests,

and blending them into one. And, as every man and woman will quickly testify, it is easier said than done. As a matter of fact, the really amazing thing about marriage is not that so many of them fail, but so many of them succeed.

As someone has observed,

“Here are two mature adults who decide to turn their backs on the lives they have known, and pledge their faith instead to things that are yet unknown.

Two thoughtful and honorable people who forsake their fathers and mothers, and set up a stranger in the place of first allegiance.

Two intelligent (sensitive) individuals who abandoned the polite distances of friendship and throw themselves into the incredible intimacies of a new home which they are establishing.

Two wholly separate personalities who resolve to no longer be two, but one.”

And the sheer wonder of it all is that, in face of overwhelming odds, the majority of them succeed!

For, by the grace of God, from the very moment he declared,

“It is not good that man should be alone,”

God has been bringing men and women together into a sweet, happy, harmonious and devoted relationship that endures in spite of all that hell can do to make it null and void.

But, let it be clear, that it is *God* who makes that kind of enduring relationship possible. To be sure, there are those who have succeeded in marriage with little thought of him. I think that fact alone attests to the sacredness of matrimony. A purely secular institution could not survive such stress and strain.

But I have a feeling, actually, it is more than that, it is a burning conviction based upon conversations with many troubled people, that those who leave God out of their homes never

really experience marriage at its deepest, finest or purest level.

Let me show you what I mean. Dr. Lewis Olson describes how, on his wedding night, after the ceremony was over and he and his young bride were alone at last, she turned and said, “Lewis, you understand I shall always want first place in your life.” Dr. Olson replied, “Florence, I am sorry, but you can’t have first place in my life. You’re too late. I gave first place to Christ a long time ago, but you can have second place.” His young bride enfolded herself in his arms and, with a depth of understanding beyond her years, she said, “That’s good enough for me! With Christ in first place, it makes my place all the more secure.”

Do you see it? With God at the apex of this triumphant triangle, there is a new clarity in the meaning of marriage. It is no longer John versus Mary. Or Mary versus John. It is John *and* Mary together with God against the world. It is no longer a matter of a husband dominating the situation or a wife “having her own way.” Instead, it is both of them doing the happy will of their common Lord. And, the more deeply and strongly they are tied to him, the more deeply and strongly they are tied to one another.

Ruth Graham, the wife of the famous evangelist, recognized the necessity of including God in marriage long before she met Billy. And, in a moment of radiant inspiration she penned this lovely poem --

“Dear God,” I prayed, all unafraid
As girls are wont to be.
“I do not want a handsome man,
But let him be like thee.

I do not need one big and strong
Nor one so very tall,
Nor need he be some genius,
Or wealthy, Lord, at all.

But let his face have character,
A ruggedness of soul,
And let his whole life show, dear God,
A singleness of goal.”

That's it! “A singleness of goal.” There are some who look upon marriage in a shallow, superficial way. They take the attitude that if it doesn't work out, “I can always get a divorce and try again.” But I say to you this morning, when a man and a maid include almighty God in their marriage, they cease to take so shallow and superficial a view of the sacred vows they have made. They are given a clearer definition of the meaning of their relationship. They learn to see it is ordained of *God*. Blessed of *God*. And, if they will allow it, controlled by *God*. And, as a result, though tensions come, though trials will press and troubles distress, they are only driven closer to him, and as a result, they are drawn closer to one another.

May I also suggest it takes three to get married, because, by including God in their relationship, a couple receives --

A Greater Sense of Stability in Marriage

Napoleon was right when he said,

“The future of France depends on its homes.”

And what was true of France is true of our nation. And yet, here in America, we have done everything but learn how to build enduring homes.

We know how to build massive missiles which can hurl through space at many thousands of miles per hour withstanding the heat and friction of incredible speed.

We know how to construct towering skyscrapers which will withstand the erosion of centuries, and constant shifting and settling of the earth.

We know how to erect great bridges that can reach out and expand vast raging rivers that once kept people apart. We know how to do all that. But, we do not know how to build enduring homes.

About two million young men and women march to the altar each year to exchange their vows, while another eight hundred thousand march to the divorce courts to nullify those vows. One reason for these staggering statistics is that the church has been derelict in its duty to make it indelibly clear, that only by putting Christ first, is there any real assurance a man and a maiden can build a happy and enduring home.

Every marriage will have its altar. If the partners in that marriage do not worship Christ, they will worship something else. Sometimes they worship one another. They make their husband or wife or possibly a child, the supreme object of their worship. Only to find, in one swift moment of disaster, the object of their worship has been swept away.

There are others who make the acquiring of a better house in a better neighborhood, the object of their worship. They strive and struggle and strain only to discover that when they have gained a better house in a better neighborhood, it is nothing more than an empty shell without the loyalty of enduring love.

There are others who do obeisance before the altar of stuff. They put enormous amounts of energy and time, and the money which that energy and time produces, into the amassing of mere trinkets. Television sets. New kitchens. Wall-to-wall carpet. Heaven only knows what else. But, as Norman Vincent Peale observes,

“We can only wonder if there might not be more joy, more peace, more stability in their homes if there were fewer built-in bars and more family altars. Fewer comic books and more Bibles on the center table. Fewer ‘debates’ and more blessing said at mealtimes.”

I am persuaded by the harsh, hard facts of experience (having talked to many troubled people) that the one ingredient missing in most crumbling or crushed marriages is a vital Christian faith. Sometimes it is through lack of possession. The people simply do not have a Christian faith. But, more often than not, it is through failure to use the Christian faith they do possess.

I try to have at least one extended conference with every couple I marry. But, if the occasion arises when I have only a few minutes to prepare them for this lifetime adventure, I always try to get across this one idea --

“The bride and groom who place Christ at the vortex of their home and who, on their wedding night kneel in prayer, side by side, holding hands, to audibly commit their union to his care and keeping, and then continue to *daily* renew that audible commitment, will have taken one huge step toward a happy and enduring union.”

I say this reverently, I hope discreetly, but certainly sympathetically -- I do not know nor do I know anyone else who knows of a single case of divorce where a couple knelt and prayed audibly *together* -- about their differences before taking them to a divorce court.

“The family that prays together stays together.”

For the closer they are to Christ, the closer they will be to each other. He is the Divine Adhesive which binds their hearts together in a union which nothing can destroy.

And then, may I point out that it takes three to get married, for, when a couple includes God in their relationship, they learn how to give --

A Purer Expression of Their Love Through Marriage

You see, God is the giver of every good and perfect gift. He has no grander gift to offer than himself. When we receive him, we receive love. For “God is love.” Now it is true that there are those who have found a form of love apart from him, but again, it is not love at its highest, sharpest, and most enduring level.

Someone has said that making love and getting married is like baking a pie. All you need is a lot of crust and a little applesauce.

Someone else has written a song,

“We will live on love and kisses,
Cupid, he will wash the dishes,
In the bungalow where
The red, red roses grow.”

But you see, it isn’t that simple! I have been married for fourteen years and cupid hasn’t done the dishes yet!

There is more to love than applesauce. There is more to making of a marriage than cupid and his darts. And the love which God imparts is not the love which expresses itself in self-gratification, but in self-abdication.

It looks at the other person through different eyes. The eyes of God. It sees him or her as God sees him or her. Such love is not blind. It does not see less. It sees more! More of the possibilities. And therefore, is willing to see less of the problems.

Many centuries ago Saint Paul wrote a magnificent description of such love. Here are some of the things he said --

“Love suffereth long and is kind.
Love is not easily provoked.
Love thinketh no evil.
Love beareth all things,
Believeth all things,
Hopeth all things,
Endureth all things.”

For, in a sentence which scintillates with shining simplicity, “Love never fails!”

I am not talking about the Hollywood concept of love. We have been so saturated with sentimentality we think that “falling in love” is something which just happens, like catching the measles.

Because we have kept love on that level, there are married folk who are willing to “throw in the sponge” just because what seemed to be an irresistible passion has slowly ebbed away. Or worse yet, they are ready to reject the sacred vows “till death do us part” because they have suddenly been attracted to a new acquaintance.

No! I am not talking about the Hollywood concept of love. The love of which I speak is the love of God. It emanates from him. It is sustained by him. And, like him, this love is eternal. It is a circle, like the wedding band you wear, without beginning and without end.

To be sure, such love makes us vulnerable. For, if we love as God loves, we will reach out beyond ourselves so we can be injured more easily and hurt more deeply. But, that’s part of the high adventure! And the person who has never eagerly, willingly and wholeheartedly given up *his* way, *his* wants, and *his* will in an overture of love for his *mate*, has never known the height and depth and length and breadth of marriage at its best.

With that in mind, may I read these words from Philippians as they are translated by J.B. Phillips--

“My prayer for you is that you may have still more love. A love that is full of knowledge and wise insight. I want you to be able always to recognize the highest and the best, and to live sincere and blameless lives unto the day of Jesus Christ. I want you to see your lives full of true goodness, produced by the power that Jesus Christ gives you to the praise and glory of God.”

Prayer –

Oh God, we thank thee for the gift of love, for it is an expression of thy very self. Help us to place thee at the helm of our hearts so that, by drawing closer to thee, we may draw closer to the

one we love.

We do not ask that our life together be always smooth,
always serene, always secure.

Instead, we pray that thou wilt give us

Enough tears to keep us tender.

Enough heartaches to keep us humble.

Enough conquests to keep us courageous.

Enough failures to keep us leaning hard upon thee.

And, when this life has passed, and thou dost call us home,
May we not find heaven strange and distant,
But rather may we find it warm and wonderful,
Because we have learned to live in a small part of it here on earth,
In that wee place, which through thee and thy goodness,
We call *home*. Amen.