**GOSPEL FOUNDATIONS**

**THE ONE FLESH UNION**

**Genesis 2:24**

**INTRODUCTION**

Today we’re continuing our series on marriage by looking at one of the most important verses about marriage in the entire Bible. We already addressed this verse last Sunday, but it is so significant that we’re going to spend an entire sermon on this single verse.

This verse is so important that it is used by both Jesus and Paul as the foundation of their teaching on marriage. If you don’t understand this verse or how it applies, your marriage will be built on a foundation of sand. It may look good, and it may stand strong at the beginning, but it’s only a matter of time before it starts falling apart.

If we’re honest, all of us have to admit that there are weaknesses in our marriages. Some of us may even have to admit that there are cracks in the foundation. Perhaps there’s no foundation at all. All of us need help, because marriage isn’t just about living with another person. It’s about loving that person more personally and intimately than anyone else you will ever meet in this lifetime.

Our tendency when we realize that we need help is to rush to the “how”. “How do I improve my marriage? Just give me five key lessons to a happy marriage and I’ll go and do them.” The “how” is certainly important, but there are at least two other questions that are far more important.

There’s the “why” question, which seeks to understand why God gave us marriage in the first place. Why did God give us marriage? Was it to satisfy our needs? Was it so that we could live happily ever after? Or was it for something else?

And then there’s the “what” question. What is marriage? Is it supposed to be between a man and a woman or just two consenting adults? Is it meant to be exclusive or open?

These three questions – the “why”, the “what”, and the “how” – must all be addressed if we are to have healthy marriages. In his book *Married for God*, Christopher Ash writes,

“It is good to start with the *why* questions. If we get our aims clear, then we shall see *why* marriage has to be *what* it is, and we will be well placed to see *how* to build a strong marriage.”

Last Sunday, we began to address the “why” question by looking at Genesis 2. We saw that the reason why God created marriage wasn’t so that Adam could make Eve do everything he didn’t want to do. It wasn’t even so that Adam could have a companion and not be lonely. God created marriage so that as the man tended God’s creation, he could do so with a helper – taken from his side and standing by his side – one who would complement him perfectly as his most trusted advisor, his most faithful ally, and his most intimate companion.

As the Bible unfolds, it says a lot more about the “why”, especially in the New Testament, but before it does, it gives us the most definitive statement of the “what” in the entire Bible. This is the verse that every marriage must be built upon if it is to flourish and deepen rather than wither and die, and it’s the verse we’re going to look at today:

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” – Genesis 2:24

This verse tells us that if marriage can be distilled down to one thing, it is that it is a one flesh union. That’s what we’re going to examine today.

The title of this sermon is **The One Flesh Union.** We’ll have three points today:

1. The Nature of Marriage
2. The Source of Marriage
3. The Unity of Marriage

(1) **THE NATURE OF MARRIAGE**

One of the most controversial questions that our culture has asked in the last twenty years or so has been, “What is marriage?” Is it between one man and one woman, or can it be between two men, or two women? Can it be between two individuals who refuse to self-identify with a particular gender? Can it be between as many people as you want, so long as everyone is a voluntary participant?

The Bible’s answer is clear: God designed marriage to be between one man, and one woman. We see that in the language of verse 24 itself when it says “a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife”. Marriage involves a man leaving his parents and holding fast, not to another man, but to his wife. Not wives, but “his wife”. And that one woman is holding fast to the one man who’s leaving his parents for her. The language of the verse is plain in establishing that God designed marriage to be between one man, and one woman.

But that’s not the only place we see it. Notice that verse 24 begins with the word “Therefore”, which indicates that what this verse says is an implication of what came before it. And what was that? It was the creation of the first man, and the first woman in the context of the first marriage. God didn’t make two men. Nor did he create two women. He created a man and a woman, each created equal in God’s image, and each created to play distinct roles in marriage.

We see this in *how* God created the woman, and in *why* God created the woman. The how was that she was made out of his rib, and the why was that she was made to be his helper. She was created *from* him and *for* him to show that no one else could take her place as his marriage partner, and no one else could take his place as her marriage partner. She was made for him, and he was made so that she could be made from him, so that together, they could display the image of God greater beauty and clarity.

There’s a third way in which we see that God’s design for marriage has always been between one man, and one woman. It’s in the phrase “one flesh”. Being “one flesh” is more than just sexual union, but it’s certainly not less. It means comprehensively joining two distinct lives into one unified whole, and then experiencing and enjoying that unity in sexual intimacy.

In his book *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*, Ray Ortlund writes the following about this one flesh union:

“Two selfish me’s start learning to think like one unified us, building a new life together with one total everything: one story, one purpose, one reputation, one bed, one suffering, one budget, one family”. – Ray Ortlund

Becoming “one flesh” isn’t just about sex. It’s about unity. It’s about the joining of two distinct lives into one unified whole so that a husband and his wife can serve God with greater joy and effectiveness. Marriage isn’t just about sex. Rather, sex serves to depict and deepen the one flesh union that a husband and his wife have in marriage.

This is why husbands and wives don’t just become one flesh when they’re in bed together. They are one flesh all the time. They don’t continually become one. They have become one, and they are meant to enjoy the reality of that oneness through sexual intimacy.

This has a couple of very important implications. The first is that sex is reserved for marriage, and marriage alone. To have sex outside of marriage is to cheapen it, because it completely ignores the comprehensive one flesh union that sex is meant to depict. It’s stealing the benefits while ignoring the responsibilities. It’s reducing what’s meant to be the culmination of a life lived in unity to a mere physical act. It’s taking this precious gift that God has given to humanity and abusing it for our own selfish pleasure.

This happens every time you have sex outside of marriage. It happens every time you fantasize about sex with someone you’re not married to. You may think that you’re glorifying sex, but what’s really happening is that you’re cheapening it. You’re cheapening it by removing it from its full and proper context of marriage.

You may have heard that sex is like fire. It’s a powerful, life-giving force, but it needs to be harnessed within your home. If you keep it within the fireplace of marriage, it will bless you and fill your home with warmth and light. But if you take it out of the fireplace of marriage and let it run rampant and uncontrolled, it’ll burn your house down. Sex is reserved for marriage.

The second implication relates to “same sex marriage”. Advocates of same-sex marriage say that two men, or two women can enjoy the same one flesh union that a man and a woman can, but that’s just not true.

In their groundbreaking essay, “*What is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense*”, three legal philosophers help us understand why. They mount a secular argument for a traditional definition of marriage. They say that marriage has always been distinct from other relationships not because of the emotional intensity between two people, but because of the *comprehensive union* between two people that is aimed at common goals: they join their work and material goods for their common livelihood, their join their minds towards the accomplishing of common goals, and *they join* *their bodies towards the bearing and raising of children*.

This last point is key. It’s what makes the one flesh union only possible between a man and a woman. Only a man and a woman can experience an organic union that actually fits with our biology. We don’t become one flesh with one another by holding hands, or by sticking our fingers in each other’s mouths, because becoming one flesh isn’t just a matter of sticking random body parts together. It’s a matter of coming together in an organic union that fits how God designed our bodies.

The “why” question helps us answer the “what” question. The Bible tells us that one of the “whys” of marriage is that it enables us to obey the command to be fruitful and multiply. He didn’t just want Adam and Eve to tend the garden. He wanted them to fill the earth with little gardeners as well. That is why marriage must be between a man and a woman. Anything else would fall short.

(2) **THE SOURCE OF MARRIAGE**

But how does a marriage come into being? What is its source? In the West, we say it’s simply the choice of two consenting individuals. In parts of the East, they say it’s the choice of those individuals’ parents. But the Bible has a different view, which leads to our second point: The Source of Marriage.

In Matthew 19, Jesus is responding to a question the Pharisees ask him about marriage and divorce. In order to do that, he brings them back to Genesis 2:24. He says,

“Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. *What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate*.” – Matthew 19:4-6

Jesus is revealing what’s really going on in Genesis 2:24. He reveals that the source of every marriage is God. If you’re a Christian, you know that’s true on an institutional level because you believe that God created marriage, but Jesus doesn’t stop there. He says that God created *your* marriage. Your marriage isn’t an accident. It wasn’t just the product of two people making a choice (thought it certainly involved that). It was the product of God making the choice to join the two of you together.

God is at work every time a man leaves his father and mother and holds fast to his wife. God is at work turning a man and a woman into one flesh. He did that when he brought the first woman to the first man in the first marriage, and he continues to do that every time a man and a woman get married.

Your marriage belongs to God, because God is the one who made it. He made it for his glory. He made it for your good. He made it so that you could have the perfect complement to your unique personality and gifts as you work in God’s garden.

That doesn’t mean that your marriage is going to be perfect. Perhaps in a perfect world it could have been perfect, but we do not live in a perfect world. We live in a broken world that is stained by sin. Sin is around us, and sin is within us. Sin drives a wedge within the one flesh union and turns the “one unified us” back into “two selfish me’s”. It tears apart what God has joined together.

This is why divorce is so common. The latest statistics peg the divorce rate in Canada to be about 38%. More than one in three marriages end in divorce. Divorce is becoming more and more common, but that doesn’t mean that it’s easy. It’s never easy, because no one plans to get divorced. No one likes to admit that their marriage has failed. Divorce is a painful process for everyone.

Jesus wants to spare us from that pain in Matthew 19, and he does that by reminding us that marriage doesn’t belong to us. We don’t have the right to do what we want with it or to separate what God has joined together.

The only situation in which he allows divorce is the case of sexual immorality. That’s how significant sex is. It’s not everything there is to marriage, but it is a crucial part of the one flesh union. It is so crucial that when one member of a marriage commits adultery, the other is permitted – not required, but permitted – to pursue divorce, because the one flesh union has been severed through sexual infidelity. Paul adds the category of abandonment in 1 Corinthians 7 as a ground for divorce, but apart from these two grounds, the Bible gives no other legitimate reason to pursue divorce.

And so, do not separate what God has joined together. This applies not only to husbands and wives within their own marriage, but to anyone who does anything that undermines the marriages of other people. If you require your employees to prioritize work over family, you’re separating what God has joined together. If you’re seducing someone who’s married, you’re separating what God has joined together. If you’re counseling your married child in such a way that you’re pulling them away from their spouse, you’re separating what God has joined together.

And the warning for those who separate what God has joined together is that you are at risk of God’s judgment. That’s implicit in Matthew 19, but we see it in Hebrews 13:4 as well:

“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”

God’s judgment doesn’t have to be the end of the story (and I’ll say more about that later on), but it certainly could be, because you have torn apart what God has joined together, and that is a very serious thing in the eyes of God.

(3) **THE UNITY OF MARRIAGE**

But before we get there, let’s look at our final point: The Unity of Marriage.

There are few things that are more important to marriage than unity, because you can’t function as one flesh if you’re not united. Two parts of a body can only pull in opposite directions for so long before it’s torn apart. If you are to function as one flesh, you must pull in the same direction, and that means moving forward with unity.

Genesis 2:24 highlights the importance of marital unity in its opening words. We need to remember that this verse was written in a culture where adult, married children were expected to join the expanded household of the man’s parents. They were to fall under the authority and direction of the paternal patriarch who would lead his family, including his married children.

In a culture like that, the unity between father and son was paramount. The father led, the son followed, and the son’s family followed him.

But Genesis 2:24 creates a different priority. It says that “a man shall *leave* his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” Marriage takes a man’s fundamental allegiance from his parents and shifts it to his wife. The two of them become a new family unit that’s responsible for creating their own family culture and following God’s distinct call on them as a new household.

This is harder to implement than we realize, because there are subtle ways in which you can fail to “leave home”. In his book *The Meaning of Marriage*, Tim Keller insightfully writes,

“When you marry, you commit to becoming a new decision-making unit and to developing new patterns and ways of doing things. If you rigidly impose the patterns that you saw in your own family rather than working together with your spouse to create new ones that fit both of you, you haven’t ‘left home’ yet.” – Tim Keller

Leaving home means more than implementing the good things that you experienced in your parents’ home. It means figuring out what is good in your new home. Not everything good in your parents’ home will be good in your own, because you didn’t marry your parents.

Men, your wife is not your mother. She’s a different woman with a different personality and different strengths and weaknesses, and your goal is to understand her and lead her in a way that serves her.

This is why Peter puts such an emphasis on understanding your wife in 1 Peter 3:7. He writes,

“Likewise, husbands, live with your wife in an understanding way”.

You need to understand your wife. You need to study her and get to know her rather than assuming things about her. And as you do, you may come to realize that not everything that worked in your parents’ home will work in your new home with her.

Of course, this is true of women as well. Women can’t rigidly impose the patterns in their parental homes either. But I’m emphasizing the men here because that’s what the text emphasizes. While both the man and the woman leave their households to become one flesh, verse 24 emphasizes the man who must leave his father and mother, because he’s the head of the home. And as the head, he must be especially careful to not impose his parent’s standards on his new household.

Commenting on the man leaving his father and mother, Ray Ortlund writes,

“He does not ask her to move his way, to do all the adjusting toward him. But he takes the initiative to move toward his wife, enfolding her into his heart, bonding with her as with no other human being”. – Ray Ortlund

The Bible teaches that the husband is the head of the home, and as the head he leads. But a biblical head doesn’t dictate. He accommodates. He wraps the good and wise principles of his parents’ home around his wife rather than wrapping his wife around those principles, because his allegiance is to her, and not to his parents. He has left his parents’ home and held fast to his wife so that he and his wife could become one flesh.

Verse 24 uses the language of “holding fast” to one’s wife, a phrase that is translated in the KJV as “cleave”. The man “leaves” and “cleaves”. He leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife. The Hebrew literally means to “stick together”. It evokes the imagery of two pieces of metal being inseparably fused together. No other human relationship is described in those terms, not even one’s relationship with one’s parents. We must honour our parents beyond marriage, but we must not relate to them as if they’re the center of our lives anymore, because marriage shifts our allegiance from our parents to our spouse.

Herman Bavinck writes,

“A man separates from his parents, forsakes father and mother, and cleaves to his wife; but he never abandons his wife! Love for parents is surpassed in both intensity and extent by love for one’s wife.” – Herman Bavinck

This is why marriage is the ultimate metaphor for the relationship between Jesus and his church. The Bible uses many metaphors to describe the relationship between God and his people. We are his temple. We are his inheritance. We are his holy nation. We are his children. All of that is true. But the most significant metaphor is marriage.

That’s why the book of Revelation doesn’t talk about the end times and the consummation of God’s Kingdom as a family reunion. It talks about it as the wedding feast of the Lamb, where Christ is joined to his bride the church in everlasting union.

So when Paul quotes Genesis 2:24, he says:

“ ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”

Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of Genesis 2:24. He is the man who left his father’s house to hold fast to his wife the church, and he is the one who has joined us to himself so completely that we can be called “one flesh”. That’s why he calls the church his body. Believers across the world and across the generations have been joined to him in a profound and loving union that will never come to an end.

And in order to do that, Jesus didn’t just leave and cleave. He didn’t just win us over with poems and flowers. He won us with his death on the cross. He had to die for us before we could live in him, because our sin separated us from him just like it separates us from one another. It’s not just those who have separated what God has joined together who deserve God’s judgment. All of us deserve God’s judgment because all of us are spiritual adulterers. Some of us may have honoured earthly marriage, but none of us have honoured the heavenly marriage. We have all committed spiritual adultery by loving other things more than God.

That’s why Jesus came for us. Jesus didn’t leave his father’s house for a pure bride. He left to make a sin-stained bride pure by the shedding of his blood on the cross. He died so that he could bring us back to himself. As the old hymn goes,

“From heaven he came and sought her

To be his holy bride;

With his own blood he bought her,

And for her life he died.”

**CONCLUSION**

And so, whether you are married or divorced or single, whether you have honoured marriage, or whether you have dishonoured marriage, Jesus is calling you to himself today. He calls you to find refuge in him. He calls you to find forgiveness in him. He calls you to find the cleansing from your sin that you’ve been waiting so long to receive.

If Jesus has a soft spot in his heart for anyone, it’s for the sexually broken, because they’re often the ones who are most aware of their sin. There’s a reason why the prostitutes and adulterers flocked to him. He showed them compassion and offered them forgiveness when no one else would, and they loved him for it. If you’re covered in the shame of your sexual sin, you’re exactly the kind of person Jesus is looking for, because those who have been forgiven much, love much, and Jesus is looking for those who would love him more than anything else in this world.

And for those of us who are married, who are going through the day-in, day-out grind of trying to live out our one flesh union, let’s remember that we don’t just have an earthly pattern for marriage in Adam and Eve. We have a heavenly pattern for marriage in Christ and his church.

We don’t just live out Genesis 2:24 by looking at human marriages. We live out this verse by seeing Christ within it and ourselves as the ones he has lovingly brought to himself.

This is what it means to make the gospel the center of your marriage. The gospel doesn’t just give us a pattern to follow. It gives us a person who loves us so much that he laid down his life for us. The more you know his love, the more you will love your spouse, so that you can truly live out the one flesh union.