

I. Intro

A. I've been thinking about relationships a lot lately.

1. This started last year when I was studying the future and I saw the data about the things that were changing. In 1960, 75% of all US adults were married. Today it is less than 50%. In the 1960s, the number people living together was negligible. Today, it's up 1,000 percent.¹

2. I am also thinking about relationships because we have a son getting married in less than a month. Being the father of the groom is not a big role. I do not even have to pay for much. But I am thinking a lot about it.

3. And I'm also thinking about relationships because of this series, which got me back in some biblical passages I'd not looked closely at in a while. And reading books and blogs and advice columns; holding focus groups and the like.

B. Let me remind you of my goal. It's to say the things that I do not hear being said. There are lots of resources about relationships out there. Advice about communication and in laws, understanding your love language, how to manage your finances, date nights. Good stuff. My goal has been to say things - to singles, married, single again, living together, parents, grandparents, whatever - that are not necessarily being said. I want to share biblical insights as they have come into focus in the life of a guy who's been married for over thirty years, and working as a pastor almost that long.

II. Last week:

A. I documented societal change.

B. I talked a bit about our marriage and kids - saying, we live in the real world. Life, marriage, parenting - all of that is hard. We've not done it perfectly.

C. I noted that both being single and being married are good, God-honoring and viable options.

D. And then I set seven starting principles in front of you:

1. We were made for relationships. Principally with God, but also with each other;

2. Sin messes things up, making relationships hard;

3. Relationships shape us. For good or ill, our friends and family are one of the most important spiritual influences we have;

4. Relationships between men and women can be uniquely complicated;

5. Conversations about marriage are often confusing because people use the word to marriage to mean different things. Meanwhile, marriage means something very specific to God.

6. Marriage today suffers from impossible expectations.

7. God's Ideas for relationships are often counter-intuitive, but they work.

E. This week I have two big ideas that I think can and should shape how you think and live.

III. Two caveats before I jump in.

- A. First, I was contacted by several women who have been in abusive relationships in the past, asking me to make it clear that abuse is never OK. I am glad to. It's not. Period.
1. I read the Ephesians 5 passage and then noted that we each get a chance to play the Jesus role.
 - a) Jesus was submissive to the will of the Father – though Jesus and the Father are equal, and Jesus had all the rights of the Father, he submitted. In an act of great strength, he submitted to the Father. Both husband and wife get called to that, especially the wife.
 - b) And then, Paul goes on to note that Jesus also plays the role of groom, in which he dies for the bride. We are both called to die to self, but this is particularly called out for the men.
 2. The challenge is, some people do not look past the statement that calls for us to submit to one another. And some women thinking it requires them to submit to abuse. No. No. No.
 3. One of the many reasons we advocate small groups – community, friends – is so that there are people who can speak into your life and say, “This is not right.” We need friends who know what is going on in our lives and who can help us make sense of difficult moments Who can say, “This is not right. This is not OK. Abuse is not OK.
- B. Second, I want to remind you of the need to trust God. He is for you.
1. God loves you. He created you in his image. He knew you before you were knit together in your mother's womb; you are called his child; he sent his son to die for you; you are an heir of his eternal promises. He has gifted you to be part of his expanding work in this world.
 2. God is for you. I am starting here because our view of God shapes us. We need to know that He is for us and we can trust Him. In Romans 8 Paul argues that God did not withhold things from us. He sent his only son. Think about that. What higher indication could he give. God is for you.
 3. I want you to get this because I want you to trust that God knows best and that He is for you so that you will trust his counsel. And I emphasize this because relationships are an area where people ignore advice to follow their heart into lots of trouble.
 4. Growing up I had a friend named Pat. He was my big, burly, wild, crazy, outdoor-loving, guns, fishing, get dirty and manly things friend. He was the guy who started shaving in 3rd grade. He was the guy who was always issuing dares – I dare you to jump off this bridge. He was the one who would say, “if we left right now we could be in Canada by 3 AM and you should make it back home by 7 in time to go to work. And then you could say you'd been to Canada.”
 5. Pat was totally out of control... until he met Lisa. We'd gone to different colleges. I heard Pat had a girlfriend. They stopped by when we were all home for Thanksgiving. And Pat and Lisa were dressed alike. They had on white overalls with matching shirts, shoes, scarves. It was cringe-worthy.

6. And we agreed to get together for breakfast a couple days later – and she showed up because they were never apart. And they were dressed alike again – completely different outfit. And this time I commented on it and Pat pointed out that they changed their shoelaces to match their outfits.

7. When I finally got Pat more than six inches away from her I tried to appeal to him, to say to him, someone has kidnapped your brain. In a few weeks you are going to realize what you have been doing and you are going to be embarrassed and perhaps mad at your friends who didn't say, "your brain has been kidnapped."

8. I used this as an illustration to say, infatuation – attraction, call it what you'd like, I am not calling it love, because it's not that. Emotions can lead us to do crazy things. We need a path to follow. The counsel of an all knowing Heavenly Father who wants the best for you is invaluable.

IV. OK, two big points today. The first is this – we need to focus on ourselves.

A. When it comes to relationships, we would do well to stop looking and start becoming. Right now, the big narrative is that the key to happiness lies in finding your soul mate. The person who perfectly complements you and who will make your life perpetual bliss.

1. I talk with singles who may not articulate it this way, but who appear to believe that what they need to do is find the one who will complete them.

2. And I talk with married people who express frustration that the person they are married to isn't everything they had hoped or thought they were, and are now thinking that they have married the wrong person.

B. On the one hand, I get this. The other person matters.² And finding someone to love changes your life a lot. But when we turn to the Bible to find out how to find the right person – or how to fix the person we are with – we don't get much help. What becomes clear is that we need to focus on ourselves. We are expected to become the kind of person the person we are looking for is looking for. Or, the kind of person we are married to can trust and love.

C. I remember sitting at the library at Trinity 30 years ago trying to figure out whether I had a green light to ask Sheri to marry me.

1. I wanted to marry her. My Dad had told me that if I had three working brain cells I'd already be engaged. I was driving twenty hours to Statesboro, Georgia every time I had the slightest opportunity. And it was obvious that that had to stop.

2. I was spending Sunday's fasting and praying. I was looking for a sign – any sign. And I remember looking through the Bible for input on how to find the right person. And when you do that you realize that the Bible is not very helpful. Adam and Eve didn't have a choice; Abraham sent a servant to go find a wife of Isaac; David and Solomon seem to be examples of how not to pick a spouse; Jesus and Paul are single. We get almost no information on Peter's wife.

D. And when we look at writings from the early church, we find more silence. There is no talk about how to figure out if you're compatible or how to find your soul-mate.³ What you find is counsel on becoming a better person. What you find is advice about serving and dying to self and putting the needs of the other person ahead of your own.

E. Now, I want to be careful here. Let me call a time out to repeat the Gospel. Christianity is not this I do. It is this He did. It is not me becoming good enough that God will love me. It is not about me being religious enough that I qualify for forgiveness or heaven and God will owe me.

1. This isn't about our being good enough. We are saved by grace through faith. It is not of ourselves. We do not earn God's favor. We cannot do things to make him love us more. We are not the heroes of this story.

2. However, we are expected to get better. We are expected to become more like Christ. We are instructed to yield our lives to the Holy Spirit, and when we do that should result in change – in growth.

3. And when we you look to God for counsel on finding your way forward, the advice is, focus on yourself. Work on becoming the kind of person the person you are looking for is looking for. Work on becoming the kind of person the person you are married to wants and needs to be married to.

F. Go to I Corinthians 13 and apply it to yourself. This is a passage that shows up in so many weddings that some people think Paul was writing this to his fiancé. Not true. But it is a great spot to go to see love described. I want to encourage you to read I Corinthians 13 as a job description. Let me read it.

1. Vs 4: Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

2. Let me stop there and ask, would it make a difference, do you think, if you marriage, if you were more patient? If you were kinder? Singles, hear this, married people didn't think they would need to be patient because they bought into a version of the soul mate thinking. And if you are perfectly matched you don't need to be patient because they will never frustrate you.

3. Do you think things might change in your life if you focused on this list? Make this your goal.

G. So, point number one: instead of trying to find the right person or changing your spouse into the right person, we are to focus on becoming the right person.

V. Number Two: We need a bigger view of marriage

A. Last week I noted that people use the word marriage to mean different things. And I also explained that God means something specific – something that should remind us of his love for us.

B. I then noted that we need to see marriage as a covenant arrangement not a contract. When we get married, we agree to terms a lawyer would advise us against. Marriage vows do not limit our liabilities and exposure. That is not marriage.

C. This week I want to argue along these same lines but from a slightly different angle. My point is: we often make marriage too small. It's a big deal. It's the most significant relationship a person can have outside of their relationship with God. And the idea of marriage in the Bible is big. Just think about this:

1. It appears in the very first chapters of Genesis, where God says, "It's not good that man should be alone."
2. And then a few pages later God says he is going to bless the world through the marriage of Abraham and Sarah.
3. And when we jump ahead to the New Testament we see that God uses marriage to describe the relationship between Christ and us.
4. And in the book of Revelation we are told that in heaven there will be a huge celebration – of the wedding of the Lamb of God. In fact, Holy Communion is not just pointing back to the Passover it is pointing ahead to that great banquet.

D. In all kinds of ways, we see that marriage is a bigger, broader idea or metaphor than we realize. And this is true is a very practical way as well.

E. Today, marriage has been changed from a mystical union – where two become one – to a semi-permanent, legal, sexual contract.⁴ And I want to suggest that this is not really marriage – at least not as God set it up.

F. The image I want to use is from a ropes course. One of the team challenges you may face is the two-wire challenge – where the only way you can do this is if you lean all in. And that is not our instinct today.

G. I want to argue that marriage is much bigger than we are making it right now. And that we are undermining it to our own demise in at least two ways:

VI. First, by moving sex outside of marriage

A. Please remember, God is not anti-sex. It's his idea. He's a big fan. Read the book. But he puts up guardrails because he knows that it's a fragile fire. Here are a few data points that might surprise you:

1. The people who report the most sex and the most sexual satisfaction are.... Married couples who were virgins on their wedding night.
2. The earlier sex is introduced into a relationship, the quicker that relationship breaks up.
3. In today's crazy sexually supercharged culture, people are having less sex than before.
4. Sex is like scotch tape. It has maximum sticking power if it's used once. The more you peel it up and use it another place, the less sticky it becomes.

B. I stopped being surprised by couples I talk to – young (which today is anything under fifty, but I mean really young – who have stopped sleeping together. That's not the plan.

1. Sex is an important, God-ordained part of marriage.
2. Paul instructs married couples to have sex. It's a command you think more people would have noticed.

C. The issue is, sex is more fragile than many realize.

VII. Number Two: We undermine marriage by Living Together.

A. I know, I know. I am sounding just like the old, prudish, religious nut case you thought I was.

B. And, when it comes to living together, it's not just that everyone is doing it. They are doing it because my generation and those older have made a mess of marriage. When I talk with couples living together what I typically hear is, we do not want to get married until we are sure that it's going to work.

1. Some say that marriage is just a slip of paper. It's not. The paper is just documentation of a commitment – which is what marriage is. And most people who deride the meaningless slip of paper are unwilling to buy a house without one. And for good reason, the paper helps. It's a bit like Ulysses tying himself to his mast because he knew he was going to lose his mind for a while and he doesn't want to wreck his ship.

C. But most who are living together today are doing so as a trial. So here is what I want to say. I get it and I applaud your desire to elevate marriage. But it doesn't work – and study after study shows this. As opposed to those living together, those who are married:

1. Married couples live longer, healthier and happier lives

2. They recover more quickly from illness

3. Have more satisfying sexual lives and earn more money

4. Furthermore, couples that live together are not only more likely to not get married as opposed to those who do not live together, they are more likely to divorce if they do. And this is true even when you control for all the economic and educational variables.⁵

D. But independent of that I want to say: marriage and living together are not close to the same thing.

1. You can live together, sleep together, buy a house together – that is still nothing like getting married, because marriage is based on a commitment. An unwillingness to make the commitment means it's something else. You cannot know what it's like to be fully committed unless you are fully committed.

2. And being fully committed is so much more intense and intimate. Some of you say, "the only difference is that you have papers filed with the state." No. Marriage is an incredible, unbelievable, counter-intuitive merger of love and law. It is designed to be more intense and binding and personal and emotional than a merely emotional commitment.

3. It's only when you are all in and there is no out that you stop performing, stop auditioning and are free to be who you really are.

4. And it's only in marriage that you have someone on record saying: I am committed to being loving, tender and faithful regardless of how I feel. I promise not to feel loving but to be loving.

5. Men and women, love is not feelings, it's a commitment. It's sacrificial commitment. You do not fall in love you commit to it. Love is saying, I will be there no matter what."

6. Many today base their love on their feelings – that is backwards. What marriage is is saying my actions are going to be based on my commitment – and I will trust that the feelings will follow.

7. We chose to get married based on our love, but after we get married, our love is based on our marriage, not the other way around.

8. And that is what living together is unwilling to say. And until you say that, you do not know what it's like to be in that.

E. Illustration of me after stroke.

VIII. Some of you are thinking, “OK, well, that’s not what I’ve done so far.

A. I didn’t wait. We didn’t wait. We are living together now. I’ve been divorced three times, whatever. Are there ways forward?” Yes. Yes. Yes.

B. It will be hard. There are always consequences of our actions. But yes, it’s always a good idea to own our mistakes, confess them and start doing the right thing.

C. God is for you. God is forgiving. There are not just second chances but third, fourth, fifth and five hundred chances. And I want to stress that especially for those of you who are married. To see the opportunity to be Christ and serve your spouse – it’s a way forward.

IX. Ok, well, I suspect I’ve given you plenty to think about and your small groups plenty to talk about.

¹ Twenty-five percent of women in their 20s are currently living with someone and over fifty percent of women in their 20s, 30s and 40s have. These changes, and others like them, are big. I ended up listing Changing Social, Sexual and Marital Dynamics as one of the four glaciers that will most significantly remake the world in the next five to ten years.

² Please, do not marry a project. Don’t think you are going to take some thing broken and fix them. That is not what I am talking about. You want a person who shares your faith – every faith will say so. You want a person who would be a good parent.

³ If we look closely, others are asking questions about this approach. In John Tierney’s classic humor article “Picky, Picky, Picky” he lists a bunch of reasons his single friends have given him about why they broke up with someone. “She mispronounced ‘Goethe.’” “How could I take him seriously after seeing The Road Less Traveled on his bookshelf? “He’s a partner, but it’s not a big firm. And he wears those short black socks. “She had dirty elbows.”

⁴ John Witty writes, “The older ideal of marriage as a permanent, contractual union, designed for the sake of mutual love, procreation and protection, is slowly but surely giving way to new reality, that marriage is a terminal sexual contract designed for the gratification of the individual parties.”

⁵ See, Andrea Palpant Dilley, “The Three Myths of Cohabitation,” *Christianity Today*, 3.31.17. The point is, many think that those living together are less educated or poorer, and when you control for this, living together is as viable and stable as marriage. In a study conducted in 30 countries this was shown to be false.