

Honoring Marriage: a Discussion of Hebrews 13:4

“Let marriage be held in honor by all”- This verse is the very next practical application of Hebrews 13:1, “Let brotherly love continue.” This placement of Hebrews’ teaching on marriage should smack us right in the face with the covenantal gravity of marriage.

Our culture views marriage as a private contract between two individual people. Contracts exist to serve the interest of the two parties entering the contract and can be dissolved whenever one of the parties decides that the contract no longer serves his or her individual interests.

- **How has viewing marriage as a private contract distorted the ways that our society practices marriage?**

Read aloud Genesis 2:18-25. When Adam declares “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,” he is reciting the very first recorded vow of marriage.

- **Does this account of the covenant of marriage immediately challenge any of your own preconceived notions and biases about marriage?**

Many people in history have misused the account of Genesis 2 and 3 in two ways. Some have suggested that women are somehow less valuable than men because of the order in which they are created. Others have said that women are all temptresses who cause men to sin. Nothing could be further from the truth. Commentator Walter Brueggemann says that “Woman is the crowning event in the narrative (the creation of man) and the fulfillment of humanity.”¹ God created marriage for men and women to fulfill the need for community that is inherent to creatures made “in the image of God.” Keep in mind that the covenant of marriage precedes the fall of Adam and Eve. That is why they exist “naked and not ashamed” before God in marriage. Marriage was not created to counter sin. It was created as part of God’s original perfect plan for mankind.

- **How has our sinful world corrupted the beauty of Biblical masculinity and femininity in marriage?**

Biblical marriage is quite different from a private contract. Yes it is a commitment between a man and a woman, but we must not miss that Christian marriage is a covenant entered into in front of the witness of God and the community of believers (the church). Honoring marriage therefore becomes a matter of great concern for every person who covenants to be part of a local church. This does not mean that God intends for every person to be married or for every person to be single. Remember that Jesus himself was single, as was Paul (during at least

¹ *Walter Brueggeman, Interpretaton: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, 1 Genesis, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982, 51.*

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some of his ministry). But also remember that other apostles (namely Peter) were married and that both men and women, single and married, were engaged in important aspects of ministry in the New Testament church.

“and let the marriage bed be undefiled.”- This phrase very simply means that husbands and wives are to remain faithful to one another and their marriage vows by reserving all sexuality for the marriage relationship.² The writer of Hebrews is also countering a belief that was prevalent in the early church and exists even today that singleness and celibacy makes a person a better Christian than the Christian who is married and enjoying a sexual relationship with his or her spouse. The monastic movements held that if a person really wanted to take

their relationship with Christ to the next level they should never be married and go live free from the encumbrances of providing for a family.

Augustine lived a wildly promiscuous life of rebellion before he came to the faith in Christ that his mother, Monica, had taught him as a child. Because of his past sexual sin, Augustine had a difficult time reconciling a life of faith with sexual purity in marriage. He famously prayed as a young man in Confessions “Lord, please give me continence, but not just yet.” He eventually decided to take an oath of celibacy and never marry when he became a great pastor and theologian.

A millennium later, Martin Luther, the lawyer, began to fear that God was out to kill him. He mistakenly believed that becoming a monk in the order of Augustine would be one way to earn salvation and forestall his damnation. God used his time as a monk to get him to dig deep into the Scriptures and learn, like his predecessor Augustine, that salvation cannot be earned, but is the gift of God by grace and through faith alone. Luther agreed with Augustine on salvation, but disagreed on the necessity of living a monastic lifestyle. All of the monks in Martin Luther’s monastery came to agree with him about salvation and marriage. The nuns at a neighboring convent all came to agree as well. Legend has it that Martin arranged for all of his monk brothers to take wives from the nuns at the neighboring convent. Martin, being a servant-leader, decided that he would pick last and ended up marrying the least attractive of the bunch. History did not leave us any photographs of Katie Luther, so there is no way of knowing whether Martin married her for her looks. We do know from their letters, however, that Martin and Katie had a very real and very happy marriage that bore children, sustained Martin’s ministry through difficult times, and continues to serve as an ideal for Protestants to follow. All of your pastors at Venture should be thankful for Martin Luther paving the way for them to be married. The Christian life can be equally lived as a sexually pure celibate single person or as a sexually pure married person who enjoys a healthy sex life with your spouse.

² David Allen, Hebrews, The New American Commentary, ed. Ray Clendenen, Nashville: 2 Broadman and Holman, 2010, 609.

- **What role should the church play in helping us choose a spouse and discern the right time for marriage?**
- **Was sex created to be good or evil?**
- **How have wrong views about sex led to the defilement of marriage?**
- **How is the Gospel at the heart of marriage?**
- **How does freedom from the bondage of sin and legalism lead to joy and fruitfulness in marriage?**

“God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.” Just in case someone tries to use a loophole to justify sexual sin, the Bible declares that God judges all sexual sin. My sin is not worse than your sin and your sin is not worse than my sin. It’s all sin and will all be judged.

Our society’s view of sex is in many ways like the view of some of the cultures to whom the Bible was originally written. Many people who are abhorred by adultery take a very flippant attitude toward fornication (sex by people who are not married), or pornography (the greek word for sexual immorality is pornos, from which we derive the word pornography). In working with teenagers I have always been amazed and horrified by parents who wink or look the other direction while their sons and daughters wreck their lives by the sexual decisions they make. A sexually pure life is not practicing “safe sex” so that you don’t get pregnant or contract an STD. A sexually pure life is a life lived out of love for God and a reverent fear for the judgment he reserves for those who flippantly regard his plan for how we should live our lives.

- **In what ways can we observe God’s judgment of sexual immorality in our own lives?**
- **Is condoning or ignoring sexual immorality a loving position for Christians to take?**
- **How can we communicate both the severity of God’s judgment as well as the abundance of God’s grace to those of us who have made sinful sexual choices?**
- **What actions do we need to take as parents to teach our children God’s plan for sex?**