

Staying Married Is Not About Staying in Love, Part 2

by John Piper

Marriage is a display of God's covenant love and covenant keeping is the foundation of marriage.

Duration: 42:55

Scripture: Genesis 2:25, Genesis 3:7, Genesis 3:21, 1 Timothy 2:9, 1 Peter 3:5

Topics: "Covenant Marriage", "Holy Spirit"

Description

This sermon delves into the significance of marriage as a reflection of God's covenant love, emphasizing the need for covenant-keeping and the role of the Holy Spirit in understanding the glory of marriage. It explores the biblical foundation of marriage, the impact of sin on relationships, and the restoration through God's mercy and the promise of future glory. The sermon highlights the importance of clothing as a witness to our fallen state and God's redemptive plan through Jesus Christ, ultimately pointing to marriage as a display of the gospel.

Transcript

Father, judging by my mail and conversations, many, many marriages are fragile. That's not news to me, nor to anyone. But they are precious in your sight.

Those of believers and unbelievers are precious. God, I pray that the effect of last week and this week and whatever weeks you lead forward in would be powerful in the transformation and preservation of marriage. I ask that you would help me, that there would be an anointing upon this Word so that it would have an effect way beyond anything I could do or dream for the glory of Christ, which is why marriage exists.

So Father, come and give us ears to hear, hearts to embrace, and me a mouth to speak truth in humility. Guard me from error. Keep me faithful to your Word.

And do a mighty work, I pray in Jesus' name, Amen. Marriage is more wonderful than anybody on earth knows. And in order to see it, you have to see it through the revelation of God in the Bible.

And in order to cherish it when you see it, you have to have the help of the Holy Spirit enabling you to behold and embrace the glory of God in it. The reason I say that the Holy Spirit is so necessary for seeing the glory of marriage is because marriage, according to the Bible, is woven into the fabric of the Gospel.

And the Bible says that to the natural man the Gospel is foolishness.

Therefore, marriage, deriving its meaning from the Gospel, is foolishness to the natural man. For example, Richard Dawkins, getting a lot of press these days, atheist, wrote in Time Magazine last August, I have provided cogent arguments against a supernatural intelligent designer, but it does seem to me to be a worthy idea. Refutable, but nevertheless grand and big enough to be worthy of respect.

I don't see the Olympian gods or Jesus coming down and dying on the cross as worthy of that grandeur. They strike me as parochial. That is quintessential natural man.

So neither Richard Dawkins nor anybody in this room, without the Holy Spirit, can see and savor the glory of marriage, woven into the fabric of Christ crucified for sinners. Marriage does not have its divine meaning except in connection with the new covenant blood-bought by Jesus Christ as He purchases His bride to be displayed in marriage. Last week I said that the most fundamental thing that you can say about marriage is that it is the doing of God, and that the most ultimate thing you can say about marriage is that it is the display of God.

And the reason we said it was the display of God is because God in Christ is revealing His covenant love as He sends His Son to purchase a bride for Him, and then He designs marriage from the beginning to be a reflection and an echo of that. Therefore marriage has its deepest, most significant, most ultimate meaning as the display of covenant-keeping love. Jesus Christ dying for His bride, the bride cleaving to her husband, Jesus.

That's the meaning of marriage most deeply. So I concluded, staying married is not about staying in love, it's about covenant-keeping. And I am deeply thankful for what God did with that message.

Thirty-one years now, we've been married. I entered it understanding covenant, but the past few years have felt pressure to look for an elusive satisfaction instead. Your Word is very encouraging to me to do what is right and to keep my hand to the plow.

Germany, your last sermon about Genesis 2, 18-25, confirmed me not to separate temporarily from my spouse. We said that one of the perfectly legitimate responses of an aggrieved spouse to a spouse who says, I have fallen in love with another person. One of the legitimate responses of the church and of the spouse grieved is, So what? This is about covenant-keeping.

I had a man walk up to me last week, and with the most quizzical look on his face said, You mean God might want me to be unhappy? I said, number one, God wants you to be faithful. And then in faithfulness, measures of happiness that you never dreamed Gethsemane-like will be found. Now, to help us go deeper into what covenant-keeping looks like, we're going to finish the text.

And I'll tell you ahead of time, those worshipping downtown Sunday morning and South Campus as well as here, I've changed my whole plan for the spring. The elders said, let's do a series on regeneration, and let's do a series on marriage, singleness, family, sex, a little cluster of ideas. Because I asked them what they thought about those and several other ideas.

And my mind was, I will build a foundation with the doctrine of regeneration, and then we will do this. Well, I'll turn it around. So this has just become a series.

I have at least four sermons in my mind after this one. So if you don't like marriage talk, then go somewhere else for a while, because we're here and I'm just filled with things I want to say. So we're staying with the text.

Verse 25 of chapter 2 in Genesis. I have it written wrong in my notes here. A man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

Now, what's the point of that? I want to consider two possibilities, and then I'm going to vote for the second one. Two possible reasons why a man and a woman might be naked and not ashamed. The first is they got perfect bodies, which is true.

Of course they're not ashamed, goodness gracious. There's not a flaw, not a single flaw in these two people. So they have zero fear that the other person is going to spot any flaw and point it out, or roll their eyes, or cluck their tongue, or walk away, or say something demeaning.

It's not going to happen. They're perfect. And so there's no shame, because there's nothing to be ashamed of.

Is that the point? I don't think so. It's true. I just don't think it's the point for three reasons.

Number one, no matter how beautiful or handsome you are, it takes more than that to feel safe and free from any shaming. You not only have to be that way, but that other person has to be morally upright and gracious, because you know well that no matter how good you are, no matter how beautiful you are, a shaming kind of person, a blaming kind of person will kick you verbally. They will get at you another way.

It's not enough for you to present yourself flawlessly. That will not make you free from being shamed. And you all know it.

If you've had any experience in life. So, even though they're both perfect here, I doubt that he's drawing attention to the perfection of their bodies. Second reason, Genesis 2, 24-25 are intended to provide foundational wisdom for marriage after this fall.

We know that because Jesus quotes this verse. It's the foundational verse in the New Testament for talking about marriage. So, in God's mind, as he gives verse 24 and 25, he has Jesus in mind, and he has all the use that will be made of it after the fall.

So, if it only had a meaning relevant to perfect bodies, it wouldn't be much use to us later. Don't think that's what's going on here. Third reason, verse 24 creates the relationship where verse 25 can happen.

That's the flow of the verses. Verse 24, man shall leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife and become one flesh, which creates the situation of security where naked and not ashamed can happen. It flows out of this covenant keeping.

I'm cleaving to you. I'm one flesh with you. I am in this with you forever.

There is the place where it can happen, naked and not ashamed. That's the point, I think. So, here's possibility number one.

All that was to say no to option number one. The reason it says naked and not ashamed is because they're flawless and have nothing to be ashamed of. And I'm saying that's not the point.

It's true. It's just not the point because the point has to do with how it flows out of covenant keeping, leaving, cleaving, one flesh. You're mine.

I'm yours. We're one. Now that leads to verse 25.

And so, the point here, I think, is not that freedom from shame in marriage flows where each can present the other flawless or as good as we can do, but rather it flows from the nature of covenant love. This is the point of marriage. On the one hand, you can say, I'm perfect and have nothing to be ashamed of.

And on the other, you say, I'm imperfect, but I have no fear of being disapproved by my wife or spouse. In the first case, you would say, we're shame-free because we're perfect. In the other, you would say, I'm free from shame based on the gracious nature of the covenant love that flows in this family.

In the one case, you would say, we're free from shame because we're flawless. And in the other case, you would say, there's no shame because covenant love covers a multitude of sins. A multitude of flaws.

Now, I know that Genesis 2.25 is before the fall. And nothing bad had happened for them to overlook. They didn't have to overlook anything in verse 25 because they hadn't sinned.

God made everything good and said it was very good, and so I assume their bodies were gorgeous. And so, I'm not saying that this overlooking is happening here. I'm saying, God, this is last week's sermon, God planned for verse 24 to be about Jesus and His cross.

Leaving His Father. Cleaving to His bride. Becoming one spirit with her at the cost of His life.

That's what verse 24 is pointing toward. And marriage is an emblem of that, a parable of that, a drama of that, a display of that. That's the meaning of marriage.

And therefore, I'm saying that naked and not ashamed gets its deepest grounding from the nature of covenant love. Which we learn to be, I pass over sin. And that's how you stay married.

Next week, Lord willing, I intend to take with all my might the doctrine of justification and show you how it saves marriages. I don't count sin. That's covenant love.

And it creates, yes it can, and we'll talk about when it does and when it doesn't. It creates a place where it can happen again, naked and not ashamed. Not because we're flawless.

It's because covenant love can really happen. Jesus' bride is filthy. He laid down His life for her.

She backslides continually. She's like you in your relation to Jesus. And He comes after her again and again and again.

Justification by faith alone creates a vertical peace with God. And then justification by faith alone at the horizontal level can create an amazing naked and not ashamed. An imperfect husband, an imperfect wife, full of flaws, naked and not ashamed.

It's a miracle. Marriage is a miracle. The world doesn't understand marriage.

They don't have a clue what marriage is about. It's about Christ. It's about covenant love.

It's about the display of the glory of God in redeeming a bride. That's what marriage is. So that's where we're going next week.

But first, we've got to finish figuring out naked and not ashamed. They got clothed in two stages. Hmm, that's three about that.

What does that mean for us? Set it up. Genesis 217, of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat. For on the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die.

I take the knowledge of good and evil to be a phrase that represents a declaration of independence from God. So, when they eat of this tree, they are declaring, God is no longer my Lord. God doesn't decide what's right and wrong for me.

I decide good and evil for me. That's what the knowledge of good and evil means. I eat this, and now I'm the decider of good and evil, not God.

So let's read verses 5 and 6 of chapter 3, where the worst thing that's ever happened for the human race happened. The tempter says, for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God. That's a wicked half-truth.

You will be like God, knowing good and evil. You're not supposed to be like God, deciding what's good and evil. You're supposed to humble yourself and let God decide what's good and evil.

But it sounded so convincing. Be like God, what could be wrong with that? So, when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. And the first immediate effect of this rebellion, this breaking of the covenant with God, is verse 7. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked.

And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. What does that mean? The first effect of declaring independence from God is self-consciousness about our bodies. You wonder where eating disorders come from.

It's not simple, it's profound. I commend your reflection. Now there's shame, evidently.

It doesn't say shame, it just says, whoa, we're naked, we've got to cover ourselves here. Why? Well, there's zero reason in this text to think they suddenly became ugly. Suddenly they're ugly.

Ooh, we're ugly now. We were beautiful, now we're ugly. That's not in the text at all.

There was no... Beauty wasn't to focus in 2.25. Ugliness is not to focus in 3.7. That's not what's going on here. Like, oh, we've got to cover ourselves. We got ugly when we fell.

So what's the deal? They're covering themselves here because the foundation of covenant-keeping love in marriage collapsed. And sweet, all-trusting security of marriage disappeared forever. The wording is careful.

Sweet, all-trusting disappeared. You don't have a marriage like that. It's gone.

Why was it gone? Why was marriage the way God set it up with this tremendous, sweet, all-trusting security where naked and not ashamed was unquestioned? Why did it disappear immediately? Reason? Covenant-keeping with God is the foundation of covenant-keeping with spouse. And the covenant with God broke. And this covenant was immediately corrupted.

The foundation of covenant-keeping between a man and a woman is the unbroken covenant between God and man. And what is that covenant? God governing us for our good and us enjoying that and relying on Him for it, now we know, through Jesus Christ. God governing us for our good and we enjoying Him in that and relying on Him for it through the mediation of His Son's death and resurrection, Jesus Christ.

That's the covenant that God intends for us to have. And when it breaks, marriage is broke. So they experienced immediately the corruption of their covenant-keeping love with each other.

It began to be corrupted. And it happened in two ways. See if we can unpack these two as we move towards the close.

Two ways that it broke. And we experience them today the same. This is not ancient history.

This is our experience as well. And both of them relate to shame. In the first way, the one viewing my nakedness is no longer trustworthy.

So I'm afraid that I will be shamed. That's the first way. The second way, I myself, I myself am no longer at peace with God because I've sinned.

Whether I'm Adam or Eve, I've sinned here and I feel guilty. I feel defiled. I feel unworthy.

And that is reflected in how I feel about my body. So you've got two things that are going on here. The one that's watching me is no longer reliable.

And I myself feel unworthy. And when you put those two things together, you've got a mega breakdown in a relationship where naked and not ashamed can't be happening. There's going to be plenty of shame and plenty of criticism here.

Let's take these one at a time. Just want to make sure you see how this works because we've all experienced this. We're fallen.

We're in Adam. We're fallen. We inherit this.

This is who we are until Christ renovates our hearts and begins to rebuild a place in our hearts and in our relationship where naked and not ashamed can happen again. In the first case, I am self-conscious about my body and I feel vulnerable to shame because Eve has chosen to be independent from God. That is, she has made herself central in the place of God.

And therefore, she's a selfish person. And you can't trust a selfish person. From that day forward, she's going to put herself first and others last, like me.

She's no longer a servant. She wants to be served. She's not safe.

I feel vulnerable around her because she's very likely to put me down. She can use her words really well to put herself up and put me down. So suddenly my nakedness is precarious.

And I don't trust her anymore to love me with the pure covenant-keeping love that she once did just a few hours ago. That's the first and one source of what happened in verse 7. Suddenly, aware of themselves as naked and covering themselves. Why? Not first because something's happened in here, but because out there she's selfish.

And a selfish person in the bedroom is dangerous. The other reason it happened is because Adam himself, let's take Adam, I could switch it around, Adam himself sinned. He broke covenant with God.

If she's rebellious and selfish, he's the same. I'm not just worried about what she's going to do. I feel defiled.

I feel guilty. I feel unworthy. I deserve to be shamed.

It's true. Before the fall, what is and what ought to be were the same. After the fall, they're broken.

I no longer am what I ought to be, so there's this disjunction in my life. I'm broken. I'm fractured.

And now my body doesn't stand for what I really am. That clean, pure, innocent, open me isn't clean, pure, innocent, and open anymore. I'm a sinner.

This nakedness doesn't feel at home to me anymore. It's not what I am. I need some help.

I need to be clothed. I need to have my image fixed up here because I'm a sinner. And I need protection from that woman.

She's going to start looking at me different. She's going to put herself up by putting me down. This is the worst situation you can imagine.

And it's where we all live apart from Christ. Both of these sources of shame. I can't trust her.

She's selfish. I deserve to be shamed anyway because I failed. Both of them come from being a breaker of the covenant with God.

God's covenant with us is the foundation of our covenant keeping with each other. Eve is no longer reliable to cherish me. She's become selfish because she broke the covenant.

I'm no longer worthy of being admired anyway because I'm a sinner because I broke covenant with God and they're both desperately in trouble. So what do they do? They clothe themselves best they can. Fig leaves.

Verse 7, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. The last thing said about this is in verse 21. Let's get that in and then we can put it all together.

Verse 21 of chapter 3, the Lord God made for Adam and his wife garments of skins and clothed them. So what are we to make of this? Adam and Eve make an effort to clothe themselves with leaves. That's a sinful coping.

They just sin, they're going to cover. They're just broken with God. We know this is sinful because they're on their way away from God.

They're trying to hide. Hide from God. They not only lost relationship, they lost their head.

Hide from God? That's stupid. But they're trying. Sinful people try all kinds of stupid things.

So we know that they're on a flight from God and the first manifestation of the flight is, We cover ourselves here. We've got to improve the situation because we just messed up big time and their first way of improving it is clothing. Best they could do anyway.

They're trying to solve the gap between what they are and what they're supposed to be and they've so broken it. This effort on their part was, from their standpoint, the origin of hypocrisy. It was the first attempted and totally unsuccessful snow job toward God.

So what in the world is God doing to improve on it? I mean, if their attempt to fix it is clothing, and thus clothing is part and parcel of hypocrisy and concealment, what's God doing stepping up and saying, I can do better than leaves. I'll give you skins. What's that? Is He aiding and abetting their hypocrisy? Affirming their pretense and their posturing, their flight from reality? Is He saying, yes, yes, that's a good thing to do.

Clothing conceals the reality, let's do that. I don't think so. So what's He doing? The way I would put it is, He's doing something that can be expressed negatively and He's doing something that can be expressed positively.

Let me just state each of those and we'll be done. Negatively. There's a chasm here between what you are, Adam and Eve, and what you ought to be.

Covering yourself with clothing is a right response. But not to conceal the truth, but confess the truth. There's the difference.

They wanted to use clothing to try to conceal, like running behind a tree to hide from God, they're going to conceal. And God says, no, no, no, clothing is the right response here, because you have lost your innocence. But what clothing confesses now is the gap between what you were and what you ought to be.

Clothing is a declaration, I am not what I ought to be. I have lost my original glory. And clothing doesn't conceal that, it confesses that.

Here's a practical implication of that. Public nudity today is not a return to innocence. It's rebellion against moral reality.

God ordains clothing to witness to the glory that we lost. And to take them off in public is added rebellion. Let me take the application just a tad further.

I think there's going to be a sermon on clothing somewhere down the line. You can just see it, because I've got all kinds of texts here, like 1 Timothy 2.9 and 1 Peter 3.5. The Bible cares about clothing, and what they say, what they mean, what they have to do with God. So here's a second application.

These are like little foretastes of a month out maybe. Those who keep their clothing on, and thus don't rebel in that way, but begin to use clothing for the very opposite of what they're meant to do, namely witness to a lost glory, and begin to use them for power moves, and getting people to look at you, and like you more, are rebelling in the other direction. Here's a rule of thumb.

Clothing does not exist. It should not be worn in order to attract attention to what it covers. Instead, positively, clothing is meant to attract attention to what is exposed.

Hands that serve each other. If you're in a warm climate, feet that take the gospel to where it needs to go. And in all climates, faces that are radiant with the glory of God that you've seen in the gospel.

If you don't dress to draw attention to your face, your hands, and your feet, I know all you women like to draw attention to your feet because you wear red nails. But I wonder... I keep getting ahead of myself here. That's the negative thing.

The positive. We've already crossed over into the positive for clothing. The positive meaning of clothing is that God had in mind not just to witness with clothing to a lost glory, but to witness to the fact that He's going to fix it someday.

He's going to overcome the chasm someday that exists between what we ought to be and what we are. Clothing means that. It's not only a witness or a confession to our failure.

It's a testimony to our future glory. God rejected their own self-clothing. And then He clothed them in mercy.

We know that mercy is flowing here because in 315 the serpent is going to be hammered. And so He moves on down to 321 and He clothes them with skins way better. They had no idea how to make clothing.

And He makes them clothing. Mercy is flowing here. Mercy that says, one day you will find yourself in relationships where naked and not ashamed makes sense again.

One day you will find yourself in relationships with Me as your God in which you don't need to be ashamed anymore because of what My Son does. I won't ever make you feel ashamed. For all your sin, I will pass over and I will clothe you with My righteousness and I will clothe you with My glory and you will shine like the stars in heaven and like the sun on a blazing day.

That's what clothing means. Which is why you keep it simple lest it take the place of His glory. So our clothing is a witness to our failure and our future glory.

They testify to the chasm between what we are and what we ought to be and they testify to God's merciful intention to bridge the chasm through Jesus Christ and His death. And that perhaps is why blood had to be shed to make the clothing when the animals were killed. He is going to solve the problem of fear and pride and selfishness and shame between a man and a woman with His new blood-bought covenant.

Marriage is meant to be a display of the covenant and the gospel. Therefore, what we are going to look at next time, God willing, is how a husband and a wife embody the new covenant, embody the gospel, embody justification by faith and so create a new, safe, sacred place where it can be said again naked and not ashamed. Marriage is about the gospel.

If you don't know the gospel, if you don't live in the gospel, you have not tapped in to the fullness of the resources that God has for your marriage. There's so much to say. Gracious Father, I ask again that marriages would be saved.

Covenant-keeping would rise. And then, wonder of wonders, against all expectation, like Sarah having a baby at 90 or Mary having a baby without knowing a man or like the Red Sea splitting or like the sun stopping in the sky, affections are born again in the safe place of the covenant. I ask for those miracles,

Lord, in this room and around the world because I want the gospel to shine off of our marriages for the glory of Christ.

In His name we pray.

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