

Imitating Christ in Marriage

by Stewart Ruch

The sermon explores the significance of imitating Christ in marriage and the challenges couples face in reflecting God's love through their union.

Duration: 32:40

Scripture: Ephesians 5:1, Ephesians 5:22

Topics: "Marriage"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker addresses the idea of avoiding marriage as Christians. They argue that the essence of Christianity is rooted in God's love for the world, which is best understood through the metaphor of marriage. The speaker acknowledges that marriage is incredibly hard, as evidenced by the high divorce rate, but emphasizes the importance of not shattering the biblical foundation of marriage. They also highlight the mystery and complexity of marriage, stating that it cannot be easily defined or understood through clear descriptors or lists.

Transcript

The Atlantic Monthly is a journal that's made here in the States, and it tends to be one of those magazines, one of those journals where sort of the American conversation goes on, where things discussed of national import occur. And there was an article in The Atlantic Monthly just a year ago that I think captured one of the American conversations going on right now. This is the title of the article.

Let's call the whole thing off. Subtitle, the author is ending her marriage. Isn't it time you did the same? This is a serious journal.

This was not meant to be inflammatory or incendiary. This was meant as an authentic question being asked to the American people. Let's call the whole thing off.

The author is ending her marriage. Isn't it time you did the same? Sandra Lowe, the writer of the article, a writer, an artist, an actress, started with this sentence. Sadly, and to my horror, I am divorcing.

And she says this, I am a 47-year-old woman whose commitment to monogamy at the end came unglued. And in a bracing and I think very brave article, one in which I certainly do not agree with everything said, but where I was brought to a place of respect for her honesty about the state of her own marriage and her questions around the state of American marriage in general, she chronicles the demise of her 20-year

marriage. And then she goes into the lives of her close friends and speaks about marriages that she thought were excellent marriages.

And as she began to talk about the demise of her marriage, they then began in more hushed tones to talk about the demise of their marriage. And she found to her horror that not only was her marriage unraveling, but the marriages all around her were as well. And she begins to anecdotally and then statistically pile on information upon information like one large dry log upon another for a kind of massive bonfire.

And when she begins to ask very seriously, should we just get real and put the institution of marriage, at least the institution of marriage as an ideal for everyone upon this bonfire and just let it burn? She says, really, it's so hard. Is this truly an ideal that people can live? And she concludes very succinctly, avoid marriage. This isn't just one one-off person throwing out her ideas, albeit in an articulate manner.

I think she's captured the questions that many of us ask. I mean, did you hear the disciples in Matthew 19? Did you hear them say, Lord, if this is the way it is, if this is so hard, should anyone marry? I think Sandra has tapped into a question that disciples themselves asked of our Lord when he walked upon this earth. And I think it's a question that we in the church should have the courage to face into and say, let's listen to the national conversation.

Let's listen to the conversation of the disciples who are saying, is this not too hard? How do we as Christians respond? Where do we even start? Not just to this article, but to the whole idea. Let's start here. Let's start by saying, when the conclusion is made, honestly, let's avoid marriage.

Let's start by saying very clearly, no. No. No, we can't go there.

No, as Christians, we can't embrace what is a very understandable conclusion. Why? Why say no? The very essence of Christianity, the very essence of biblical teaching and religion, the very heart of our faith is that God has so loved the world. The very essence of our faith is that God has sent Jesus Christ, that he might love the world, give up his life for the life of the world.

And the best way to understand that is as if he is marrying the people of God. The heart of our faith is captured in this phrase from the book of Exodus, but it's true everywhere. God said this, I will be your God and you will be my people.

And Israel, to whom he said it, understood that that was a kind of marital vow. And they actually talked about God's relationship with humanity as a marriage. That was how they found the best way to describe it.

We have to say no to avoid marriage, not because some are not called to marriage, but those who are called to singlehood, to celibacy in the Christian framework, don't do so to avoid marriage. They do so to embrace the Lord and the ministry of the kingdom of God. But we say no to avoid marriage because if we don't, then we lose our mirror that reflects the reality of all things.

Here's how marriage works. The reality of all things, the foundation of all things is that God so loves the world, that Jesus so loves the church, and marriage is like a mirror that reflects that reality back to us. When you look at a mirror in the morning, you go, oh, sometimes to perhaps your amusement and discouragement, oh, that's what I look like.

And marriage reflects, oh, that's what God looks like. That's what God's love for the world looks like. And when you shatter that mirror, you will begin to forget who God is.

When you shatter the mirror of the power and the glory of marriage and all of her biblical foundation, society will begin to forget who God is and what he's like and how he loves. But we can say yes to some of Sandra and Miss Lowe's ideas as well. We can say yes with the apostles that marriage is incredibly hard.

We don't need to flinch from that. We're all aware of the statistic. It's spoken everywhere, and some would argue with the statistic that's overused and simplified, that half of marriages that begin in America end in divorce.

So how we frame that is important, but it's still an important reality, one that we've all heard. Here's my question, though. Of those half that make it, how are they doing? I think that's a more interesting question, and Rutgers University did a study on that, and they came back and said a minority, 38% of the marriages that make it, say they are happy.

Okay, so maybe marriage is hard. Here's the driving question. What kind of hard will you choose? There's an unhealthy hard.

There's an unhealthy, indeed, I would say within a biblical context, an unholy kind of hardness to marriage. The unhealthy hard is the Miss Lowe experience in her marriage, and what she chronicles in the marriages of others. It's the unhealthy hard of a constant relationship of power-sharing, wherein this relationship that's supposed to be intimate, it's actually the relationship of two independent agents who have come together for financial and sexual help, often.

It's a kind of agreed-upon contract whereby I'll get personally fulfilled, and you'll get personally fulfilled, and if it works out at the end of the day, maybe we'll both end up personally fulfilled. It's a kind of unhealthy hard where you're trying to do absolutely everything in life for your personal fulfillment, and yet hoping that along the way that person that you happen to be living with is also getting there, so that you're both somehow mutually happy, but statistics and much more than that, just the reality of life, if we look around, would tell us that's not working, and that's hard, by the way. That's a really hard way to live.

As a matter of fact, trying to live in a power-sharing agreement and personal fulfillment together, and kind of mutual independence, you can't last, and most don't. So what's the other hard? Well, there is a holy hardness. There's a kind of healthy hardness, and that is the marriage that says, if I'm going to live, and it's going to be hard, it's going to be hard because I'm living to imitate God.

It's going to be hard because I'm living to sacrifice my life for the sake of my wife, or for the sake of my husband, that he or she might become more like Jesus, and in the process, I too will become more like Jesus. We will somehow be, albeit a flawed and somewhat disguised mirror, we will be some kind of a mirror that reflects the love of God for this world. That's hard, but that's a hardness that moves you forward.

That's a hardness that eventually brings incredible hope, not a hardness that brings complete exhaustion, fatigue, and fear. That's why our Anglican prayer service for marriage has this most important sentence in it. In the blessing of the marriage, the priest says over the couple, Jesus has made the way of life to be the way of the cross.

So, what is this way of marriage? Let's look at Ephesians chapter 5 together. If you didn't hear last week's sermon, it's going to be helpful to hear it because it does set up a lot of what we're talking about this morning that I can't go into now, but our main premise last week is that marriage is intended to help you imitate God, as is celibacy. That's next week.

Ephesians 5.1. Therefore, be imitators of God as beloved children. It is most important that before we dive into Ephesians 5.22-33 and try to figure out headship and submission and what it means that the wife is the body and the husband is the head and how all these things work out, so often we go right there and we pass right over Ephesians 5.1, which is the comprehensive teaching for this whole chapter, which is husband and wife, man and woman are both called to be imitators of God. Both are called into a journey of learning how to love in sacrificial Christ-like ways.

This is the essential context for marriage. If you take this away, you'll just Christianize the power sharing. You'll just Christianize and Christian language to what is already a kind of worldly reality of what power does the husband get in, what power or in many teachings, frankly, lack of power does the wife get, and then how does that all work out, and that becomes extremely confusing and it misses Paul's driver.

Be imitators of God. Both learn how to love as Christ loved. Marriage, and this is most important and so simple, is about Jesus first.

Paul makes that very clear, not only in the beginning but also at the end. Verse 32, look at that with me. This mystery is profound, speaking of marriage, the mirror that reflects the truth of God's love, and I'm saying it refers to Christ and the church.

Often we get mixed up and begin thinking, oh, Christ and the church sort of looks like marriage, because marriage is such a lived experience for us. I mean, every one of us have had some experience either directly or indirectly with marriage, but it's the reverse. It's about Christ and the church, of which marriage stems from it.

Jesus always first, always being imitated by man and woman. The way of marriage is a profound mystery. Verse 32, mystery does not mean that a fog comes in and you just go, I don't know, I'm lost.

Mystery is a revelation. Mystery is a displaying. Mystery is a showing forth of what's real.

Mystery is that which takes something which is profoundly spiritual, profoundly rich in its reality, the love of God, and mystery reveals that. It teaches us that marriage is a profound mystery because it reflects to us the love of God. It's an attempt, mystery, to capture something profound.

In this case, the profound mystery is a collaborative imitation of Christ. Marriage is a profound, collaborative imitation of Christ, whereas she imitates Christ and I imitate Christ. We actually become mutually interdependent, and I give the gift of love to her, my wife.

She gives the gift of love to me, her husband, that she might in doing so imitate Christ and that I might be empowered to imitate Christ. It's mutual, interconnected, interdependent at its roots. Now while this profound mystery is not a fog, it is still a mystery.

It is still that which is attempting to capture something very profound, something which we cannot get our minds around. And this is what's so interesting. Lots of you are like this perhaps.

I've been staring at this passage for at least seriously two decades. It was preached at my wedding. Perhaps it was preached at yours.

Perhaps I preached it at yours. But you know, you can read it over and over again, but you won't get away from the profound mystery. As a matter of fact, if you try to wrestle down the profound mystery and make it say uncle, it won't.

If you thought it said uncle, you weren't listening closely. You can't wrestle this passage down and walk away with very clear descriptors. Okay, now for me as a wife, this is exactly what I'm supposed to do as I submit to my husband.

And now for me as a husband, this is exactly what I'm supposed to do as I love my wife, as Christ loved the church. You're not going to get that. You're not going to get that.

And Paul who wrote this, by the way, he lists things other places. He gives us all kinds of lists. He actually likes lists.

No lists here. No lists here. No list that says this is exactly what a man is, exactly what a woman is.

Now, man and woman, they are distinct. That's very clear. And they're both called to ways that are the same way under Christ and yet have distinctions to them.

That's clear. But what those are exactly is not clear. And so as tempting as it is to try and give you all those, I don't have a lot for you on that.

I have what God's given you. Husbands love your wives. Wives respect your husbands.

There is a way of the husband. As Christ loved the church, verse 25 is the key phrase there. It means at least that I give up my wife, my life.

I give up my life that my wife might become more like Jesus. I give up my life. I sacrifice my time.

I sacrifice my energies that she might flourish as the church flourishes upon the life of Christ. I know at the very least from verse 29 that my ministry of being a husband is a ministry of nourishing and cherishing. The wife of an imitative husband has great potential for flourishing.

The wife of an imitative husband, albeit flawed and consistently confessing imitative husband will have some fears answered. Every wife's wondering, will I be cherished? Will I be able to grow as I submit? And the imitative husband answers that. Yes.

The way of the wife we read is that way of submitting to your own husbands as to the Lord. However, let each one of you, verse 33, love his wife as himself and let the wife see that she respects her husband. As the church submits to Christ, the wife submits to the husband.

The heart of submission we know, and I've done a lot more on this in a teaching called Why Womanhood Matters, and also Why Manhood Matters, but the heart is the heart of responsiveness to the glory and the actions of love. It's a kind of receiving, but in a giving way, not at all passive, but an embracing of the gift that's been given in the love of Christ first and foremost, and the love of husband. This receiving is the receiving of love and then responding to that love with love, giving, receiving in a giving way.

When submission is reduced to a kind of way in which decisions are made and that alone, we have moved away from the profound mystery. I will never forget a young married couple saying to me, oh, our marriage is going so well, literally said, wherever he wants to put the fingers on the wall, I just do it because that's what he wants. Reduced to that type of decision making, the profound mystery, no.

The ministry of the husband, the ministry of the wife has more to do with living out in a full-blown posture, the life of love. The husband of an imitative wife, a wife who receives his love and responds with love, that husband has great potential for flourishing. And yet we lose our way, don't we? We lose the way of Christ.

We lose the way of husbandly love and wifely love. We lose it regularly. We lose it consistently.

We lose it so often that we are tempted to say with Miss Lowe and the disciples, is this not too hard? Here are these four ways that we lose our way and the way the Lord calls back to his way. The first way we lose our way is through a kind of false imitation. And what I mean by that is what we now call cohabitation, a cohabitation living together.

It sometimes is done simply out of rebellion. I just snubbed my nose at the institution of marriage. It didn't help my life very much.

Look at my parents. I'm not going to marry. I'm going to live together.

It can also be a matter of convenience. We know the numbers for cohabitation are going up as the numbers in our economy go down. Why pay two rents? Why pay two mortgages? Well, you can pay one.

It was a convenience. But often, cohabitation has to do really for the serious-minded, and let's be really honest in the conversation here. For many Christians, cohabitation has to do with preparation.

I need to prepare myself for marriage by living with someone first. Doesn't that make sense? If it made sense, why is it that 50% of those who cohabit have a higher percentage for divorce than those who do not? If it was so preparatory and so many are doing it, wouldn't we see that overall number of divorce actually going down, not up? Wouldn't we see traction from this? But of course, the reality is cohabitation in no way simulates the sacred theater of marriage. If marriage is not primarily about am I compatible, especially sexually and emotionally, thereby I'll live with someone first, but if marriage is less about that compatibility, compatibility is important, but more about the imitation of Christ, and more about perseverance, and more about sacrificial love, and more about realizing, oh my word, now I'm in a place of panic in my marriage, what will happen, and what will I do, and I can't leave, I can't avoid, I can't get out, and that's where marriage really begins.

Then cohabitation gives you no help whatsoever. As a matter of fact, it becomes a kind of lie that somehow we've done well sexually and emotionally in our living together, so now we'll do well in our marriage. It's exactly the opposite of what culture says it is.

It's a lie. It's a very tempting lie. And then here's what happens after you marry, if you cohabit, if you live with somebody.

Maybe it was somebody that you live with, and then you married them, or maybe you cohabited with somebody else, and then you married someone else. Doesn't it haunt you? Don't you look back, and sometimes think, oh, that was so much fun living together, and now there's so many more responsibilities, and so many more pressures, and what I have now, what I had then, oh, I just think about what it used to

be all the time. That can be true if the both of you cohabitated, now you're married, you can go, wow, we had so much fun back then, it was so exciting, there was so much going on, and now it's just dull, or if it was somebody else, you're always thinking about that other man or that other woman, and wishing that somehow your marriage had the spark and the excitement, but here's the deal, what you were doing there was recreational.

What you were doing there has nothing to do with living into the imitation of Christ. They are two absolutely different worlds, and many of you probably need to be freed from that world if you lived in it. You need to be freed spiritually.

You need to be freed from always thinking, I wish my life was like that, that was a lie, and now that lie is still feeding and poisoning your current marriage, and you can get free from that. You can be cleansed of that memory. You can begin to realize, wow, I lived a lie, and now that I'm living in marriage, this is the reality.

False imitation, it's one way we lose our way. Second, idolatry. When we put marriage and children first.

Now, if you've listened to me for a while, I hope you're a little surprised to hear me saying this, because you know that I'm generally pathologically enthusiastic about marriage and children, and I am, but I actually think it's very, very easy to swing too far. I actually think that there's a biblical value and virtue to the fact that in Ephesians 5.1 and 5.32, it's about Jesus first. Oh yes, so often it does dovetail.

There's a way in which we love our wife and we love our children, and in that way, we are also loving the Lord. That's true, but isn't it also true that we begin to realize with our wife or our husband and our children that we actually want to sort of idolize this, and we want to sort of freeze this. We want to make sure that nothing ever happens to our wife and our children or our husband and our children.

Of course, a healthy inclination, but it can go from the inclination to obsession, and so all of a sudden, all we can ever think about is the fact that what happens? Will I ever have a life if something happens to my wife or my husband or my children? Gregory of Nyssa, early church father, captured this. He has an essay called On Virginitly, which is ironically about marriage, but in it he says, here's virginitly. Virginitly can be the celibate or the married that lives for Jesus first.

That's spiritual virginitly. He says there's fleshly marriage and there's spiritual marriage. He said, here's how the fleshly marriage works.

It spends two pages. Just if you read it and you're married and you have kids, it just kills you. It just slaughters you.

He just says things like, oh, and by the way, don't you spend all of your time wondering if you'll come home and something has happened to your child. Yes, I do. Don't you spend all of your time wondering, will my wife be okay? What if a disease comes upon her? Yes, I do, and don't you find yourself actually spending almost all of your emotional energy worrying about that? Yes, I do.

He says, beware. Beware of making an idol out of your wife or your husband or your kids. I think my generation is very vulnerable to this, 40-somethings, 30-somethings, right? I mean, we would kind of say somewhat tongue-in-cheek, my parents didn't seem to struggle with making too much of an idol out of me.

Go out and play, whatever. Come back in. Be, go, be independent, autonomy.

And so we've said, that hurt. I've had to do a lot of work on that, so I'm going to flip that. And the same way that I didn't feel like I got all that I needed, I'm going to make sure my kids get even more than they needed.

I'm going to bloat them up with love. I think we're vulnerable. Here's the definition of fleshly marriage or fleshly work with our children, one that isn't truly putting Christ first.

Here's a quote from Father John Barrett, he's written on this, a priest, the delusion that one can find a certain permanence, security, and even immortality in and with others. A delusion that we can find a certain permanence, security, even immortality in and with others. Celibates too, by the way, can idolize marriage.

Put it before the Lord. Third way we lose our way. This is a really hard one.

But if marriage is all about imitating Christ, and it's all about interdependency, it's all about a kind of mutual collaboration, it's the two sides of the scissors going back and forth. What happens when one side of the scissor comes off? In other words, what happens when one spouse decides not to walk the way of the cross, either as a Christian who just doesn't want to engage or as an unbeliever? You're a believer married to an unbeliever. What happens there? If this is true about marriage being an imitation of God, and this is true about this being this profoundly collaborative thing, what happens when there's no collaboration with the very definition of marriage is collaboration? There's no one to collaborate with.

What happens there? What does one do? A few thoughts on a very complicated subject. Just a few thoughts, but I can't teach on this and not mention this reality. First is that you must understand if you are the spouse who desires to live in imitation of Christ, you must work on your union with Christ.

You cannot make your spouse love Jesus. You cannot manipulate your spouse into knowing Jesus more deeply. There is nothing you can do but intercede fast and pray for your spouse, but there's nothing that you can say, nothing, no circumstances that you can somehow arrange, right? No men's retreat, you could hopefully get a mom, this treat is great, right? And then he'll come back completely changed.

Maybe he will, maybe he won't. You cannot manipulate husbands or wives into loving Jesus. They must choose.

So that means you must choose and you must follow Jesus with all of your heart, work on your union with Christ. That's how you imitate Christ in a marriage where the other partner does not want to imitate or won't or can't at some level. Number two, you must wake up to the fact that this is life.

You have to stop thinking that, oh, I wish my life was somehow out there. If I just had a different spouse, I could have an imitative marriage. Don't think that way.

It's a deception. This is your life and this is what life is about. It's about sacrificing and learning to live for Jesus.

There are many, many, many Christians around you who are making the same decisions, celibates and marrieds. Don't think that your life is out there and somehow you'll finally get there again. No, this is your life.

This is where God has put you and you can love Christ here. Let me be very, very clear about that. There's a different and there's a caveat that there's an abuse going on in the marriage.

If there's a verbal abuse, a physical abuse, a kind of spiritual abuse occurring, then you need to bring it to the authorities of the church and invite us in, that we might walk with you carefully. We want to be clear about that. You also have to realize that as you work on your union with Christ, you must walk in Christ first.

You have to realize you have to make a decision you should never have to make. In the same way that there is a mother who dishonors her daughter and yet the daughter is called to honor the mother and the commandments given to us, she must understand she must choose Christ first and in doing so, she honors her mother. In the same way, you must realize that you honor your husband, you honor your wife by following Jesus first, but you're having to make a decision that no one should ever have to make.

Okay, finally, the final way that we lose our way. What if you seem to have a seeming incapacity to love? What if you hear all this and you hear about sacrifice, you hear about giving up your life and you hear and you believe it and you go, I just haven't got it. I believe the Bible and I want to live it, but I haven't got it.

I have an incapacity to do that. I can't get there. Frankly, I just didn't receive enough to give enough and I just want to say that the church is the perfect place for you.

If you're coming out of divorce and that's been the reality for you or you're in a marriage and you're struggling, that's a reality for you. The church is the perfect place because it is here where the foundation of our very being is Christ's love for the church. You are living in the greater reality of marriage.

This is where the healing occurs right here. This is where union in your soul can occur. There's the great concern that one cannot give because one has not received the love first and as my dear friend Deacon Keith says, you can give more than you've received in Jesus.

You are not the sum of your failures and weaknesses that I quoted last week, nor are you the sum of the failures and weaknesses of those who have gone before you. You are the sum of the Father's love for you. You can give more than you received by knowing God's word, by taking God's sacraments, by entering into that wonderful healing order within the church that's currently called Christian psychology, where there are Christian therapists who understand the makings of the mind and the heart and work closely with the church for the healing and ultimately to the laying on of hands to people praying the love of the Father in you.

Is it hard? Yes. Is it too hard? No. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.

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