

***Service: Marriage Isn't About You***

January-February Sermon Series

Kenwood Baptist Church

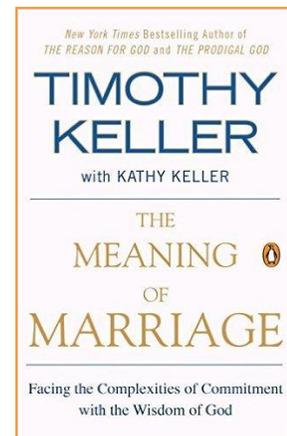
Pastor David Palmer

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**TEXT: Ephesians 5:15-33**



This Sunday we begin our new sermon series on *The Meaning of Marriage* by looking at the topic of *SERVICE: Marriage Isn't About You*. Our key Scripture text throughout these next six weeks together will be Ephesians 5. In this text we learn that marriage is a profound mystery. Some of you are thinking, "Wow, that was in the Bible all along. No wonder I don't understand this." Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, said one of the things he didn't understand was the love between a man and a woman, so we can take comfort, there's room to grow. In this passage, we discover that the gospel shapes our most important relationships, and we discover that in Christ we are called to a very radical, new way of life that is made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit. The power of the Holy Spirit in us uproots our innate self-centeredness. A biblical view of marriage will also help us understand our single years, and it will encourage all of us to allow the gospel into every relationship God gives us. We are going to be pursuing this study together with a book written by Tim and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*. They actually co-authored the book; they read each word of this book aloud to each other, so it's a joint project. We want to encourage you to get this book. There is also a DVD that goes with it, a set of sermons. I really want to encourage you just to dive into this. You know, the body of Christ is filled with people that God has given tremendous insight and wisdom to, and I want to acknowledge my own debt to Tim and Kathy



on this. Tim is a very godly man, and God has given him tremendous insight on this topic, and I love that this work is written with his wife. Tim was a pastor, after he graduated from Gordon-Conwell Seminary, in a rural congregation in Virginia, and then in 1989 moved to New York City where he founded a church in the heart of Manhattan, something that people said would be impossible. It was a no-frills church that basically preached and taught the Bible. People said



there was no way that would work in New York City. Well, actually, it did. It is one of the largest churches in the city, and it is a Scripture-based, no-frills approach to ministry. God has used him and Kathy to reach hundreds of

thousands of people. His book, *The Reason for God*, has sold 1 million copies and has been translated into 15 languages. So it's worth the investment. These sermons, or this topic which was a set of sermons that became the book that we are reading together, highlight the importance of marriage and share rich insights from Scripture.

The topic of marriage and why we need to think about it together as a congregation can be demonstrated by the fact that the leading marriage indicators in our society reveal a steady decline in marriages. Marriage is out for many people. The divorce rate is steadily growing. I grew up in a divorced home, and then an again-divorced home, but in 1960, the divorce rate in the United States was 25%. In 1980, it was 40%, and today the divorce rate is over 50%. More than half of marriages will fail, so we need instruction on this topic. One of the most obvious reactions to that statistic is humility. In 1960, 72% of American adults were married, and today, fewer than 50%. In 1970, 89% of children were born to married couples, and today only 60%. On the one hand, people are afraid of marriage, and they are increasingly unable or refuse to commit. Cohabitation is on the rise, and many people approach the marriage relationship as a kind of trial or test period despite the fact that there is a substantial body of evidence that those who live together before they are married are twice as likely to be divorced. On the other hand, people bring unrealistic expectations into marriage. They too easily give up as the search for a perfect soulmate who will “accept me just the way I am and change me not” comes crashing to the ground of reality of living with a person who needs radical change and is anything but perfect, no matter what those surveys said in advance.

We turn together to this foundational passage in Ephesians. It is going to guide us over these next six weeks. Paul, in Ephesians 5, is writing to a church in a major metropolitan area. The city of Ephesus is the fourth-largest city in the Roman world. It is an urban environment, a flourishing church. It is a city that we might call secular, or he would have called pagan, but he

begins this crucial passage by reminding us that we need instruction, that there is an unwise way to live. Ephesians 5:15 and these opening few verses set out contrasting pairs for us. He begins by saying:

*“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise,”*

Do you believe that there is an unwise vision of life? You pick it up. You don't need to go to school to acquire it. There is a way of living that you can be taught indirectly that's just unwise, and Paul knows this. If you're going to learn to live wisely, it's going to require careful attention. It's not something that's intuitive or that you pick up. It requires time, attention, and effort to do anything well. I remember when I was in seminary, one of our friends, his name was John, got married about the same time that we did. He was he was proud; he was confident in his abilities; and he considered himself a Scrabble master. He used to revel in enticing people to play Scrabble with him and then humiliating them as he tripled their points. My mom came to visit us, and my mom is like a 'black belt' in Scrabble. She came in, and I saw that John was doing his thing of enticing people to play Scrabble. I told him, “You know what, I've got to help Christine. Maybe you should just play with my mom.” I remember him just reaching for the Kleenex box as my mom circled him around the board. He was reduced in scale over time. He asked me later, “How does she know how to do that.” I said, “She's put a lot of energy and investment in mastering all the one and two-letter words in the English language.” If that's true in Scrabble, how much more is it true that learning to live wisely requires investment? Paul knows this, so he says in Ephesians 5:16:

*“...making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.”*

I love how he just adds that in. If you think our days are evil, nothing is new. The days are evil, and if you don't do anything about it, you will just pick up evil, unwise visions for your life, and so you have got to make the best use of your time. The word he uses literally is to *redeem it* or to *buy it back*. You'll squander it if you're not careful. I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, because every hand would go up if you would concede with me that you have wasted some of the time that God has given you. We are masters at wasting our time. Marriage, and the meaning of it, is worth our investment. Wouldn't it be awesome if we all just said: “You know, there's a game tomorrow, but I'm not even going to watch it because I'm going to read together with my spouse the first two chapters of this book by Keller”? We need to learn wisdom.

In Ephesians 5:17, Paul gives another contrast when he says:

*“Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”*

There is great hope in this verse because Paul is saying that foolishness need not be permanent. You don't have to stay a fool. The word he uses here is that you don't have to *remain*

*uninformed*. We can learn. One of the most striking statistics that Tim and Kathy give in the book is that two thirds of married people who say they are unhappy within five years say that they are happy. In other words, you've got to go through, at times, rough patches. There are things to learn, and if you bail out at that moment, then you'll just have to repeat that pattern.

The final contrast is in Ephesians 5:18, and this is determinative for our text. Paul says:

*“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.”*

We are tempted to fill ourselves up with substances to mask the issues within. Alcohol is one that in particular gives false promises. We turn to it to feel better or feel relaxed, when in fact alcohol is a depressant and makes us feel worse. When Paul says not to get drunk with wine, the word he uses for debauchery literally means *unhealthiness*. It's a way of living that is destructive. It's the same term that Jesus uses in Luke 15 to describe the wild life of the prodigal son. It was unhealthy, destructive. So, there is an unwise way of living; there is a foolish way of living; there is a way of living that seeks to self-medicate with a variety of things, and instead we are told to live with wisdom, to understand God's will, and be filled with the Spirit. The filling of the Spirit then overflows into newness of life in three large ways. These are all participles in the original; they flow out of this filling up with the Spirit.

The first change that will happen when you're filled with the Spirit is that there is a speech pattern change. Look at Ephesians 5:19. Our speech changes when we are filled with the Spirit. We start:

*“...addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,”*

Our speech pattern changes. We burst into song; we quote Scripture. Secondly, the disposition of our heart changes when we are filled with the Spirit. Ephesians 5:20 says that a result of being filled with the Spirit is:

*“giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Don't you like to be around people who are just constantly thanking God? I love to be around that, and it's a byproduct of being filled with the Spirit that you thank God always and for everything.

The third change that happens to us when we're filled with the Spirit is that we submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, and this is a change to the way in which we relate to each other. The filling of the Spirit changes our speech, it changes the disposition of our heart, and it changes the way we relate to one another: We submit to one another; we yield our will to

pursue your good; we subject ourselves to one another; we place one another's interest above our own. In Philippians 2, Paul says bluntly that Christians should in humility consider others better than themselves because Christ humbled Himself and became a servant and met our needs even at the cost of His own life, now we are like servants—but to one another. I know what you're thinking, because I live in the same society and in the same contemporary moment that you do. If we would be honest, we would say that this is actually a distasteful image to us: Serve one another? Consider the needs of the other more important than my own? This strikes a note of terror into the heart of anyone who has a US passport. Your needs are more important than mine. In other words, the title of the sermon *Marriage* isn't about you.

Paul then is going to apply this principle of the Christian life to marriage, and it's to help us understand the design and purpose of it. Tim Keller writes:

“This ability to deny your own rights, to serve and put the good of the whole over your own, is not instinctive; indeed, it's unnatural, but it is the very foundation of marriage” (*The Meaning of Marriage*, 59).

So, something unnatural, something not instinctive is crucial for a marriage to succeed. Tim and Kathy go on to say:

“If two spouses *each* say, ‘I’m going to treat my self-centeredness as the main problem in the marriage,’ you have the prospect of a truly great marriage” (*The Meaning of Marriage*, 64).

That's a scary thing, isn't it? “You know what's wrong with this relationship? What's really wrong with this relationship is the depth of my self-centeredness, and I am going to have to go after it!” When is the last time your spouse said that to you? When is the last time you said that to your spouse? The main problem in this relationship is my self-centeredness, and the more time we get together, the more children we have, the more financial responsibilities at stake, the more I discover that my tendency—woven deep in the fabric of my being—is to pursue my interest at your expense, to preserve what I need, to let you know what I need, to communicate that you need to change, because you're not producing the things that are meeting my needs, as I understand it, that's what we talk about. That is why for many of us we don't have the prospect of a truly great marriage, because as we get to start that conversation again, we need to change it to say: “You know, the real problem in this relationship is my self-centeredness.” How can such a vision possibly be lived out? It's scary, risky. Some of us here this morning who are not yet married are saying, “See, that's why I don't want to get married. I like my self-centeredness.”

How can you live such a vision out? Paul applies it, first to wives and then to husbands. The paragraph for husbands is larger, and I can only assume that means that men need a little bit more instruction. In Ephesians 5:22, he applies this verb of submitting to one another first to

wives. In the original text, the verb is not repeated; it is assumed that wives express this relationship, this posture of the heart to put the other above ourselves, first to their own husbands. It is very important to notice, and the ESV brings this out, that it is to your own husbands. This is not a generic statement about how all women relate to all men. Paul is very clear that he is speaking to the marriage relationship. Wives, submit yourself to your husband. It focuses this posture: subordinate your interests to his; honor him above yourself; and the crucial line is *as to the Lord*. The question is: "How can we possibly live this way?" What Paul will do is he will take the relationship of a wife to her husband and a husband to his wife and they will be modeled on the relationship of Christ, as Dawn said in her testimony. That is the really important phrase. Some of us choke at the word *submit*, and it's not even in the text, so let me relieve you. It's assumed that were all submitting to one another, as in Ephesians 5:21. What you should really choke on is "*as to the Lord*." That's the real powerful phrase. Ephesians 5:23 says:

*"For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, His body, and is Himself its Savior."*

There it is again: "*as Christ*." Ephesians 5:24 says:

*"Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands."*

So, we have this image of relating to the husband as to Christ. That assumes a relationship with Christ to begin with. The picture is that wives relate to their husbands as they do to Christ, that women are to be, as Kathy Keller says, a strong helper. They are to seek his interest, support his cause. They are also allowed to play the Jesus role in the relationship, because they get to portray and reflect Jesus' own sacrificial service and submission to the Father's will. Jesus' sacrificial service brings us into deep union with Him and He with us, and that's the key to understanding marriage and living it.

Paul turns his attention to husbands Ephesians 5:25. In the paragraph for husbands, the same category emerges—that husbands are to relate to their wives in such a way that reflects and models and presents their relationship with Christ in the marriage:

*"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her,"*

Husbands model a sacrificial love. The vision of leadership or authority in a marriage is the vision that Christ gives. What does it mean to be a leader? It means to sacrificially give your life for the people around you. That's a powerful, transforming vision—love that's revealed in a sacrificial, saving death. He gave Himself up. John 3:16 says that *God gave His one and only Son*. Romans 8:32 says that *God did not spare, didn't hold back, His one and only Son but gave Him up*. This sacrificial, saving death of Christ is the manifestation of the love of God. It has powerful

effects, transformative effects.

There are several purposes or results of this sacrificial love:

1) Ephesians 5:26 says that the sacrificial, saving death of Christ has as its purpose that He might sanctify her, making her holy, changing her. Marriage actually is God's design to change us, but it's a change for the good, "*cleansing her by the washing of water with the Word.*" It's a love that does not leave us unchanged but is powerful enough to change us.

2) Another purpose in Ephesians 5:27 is that He might "*present the church to Himself in splendor, clothed with splendor without spot or wrinkle or any blemish, that she might be holy.*" The love of the husband is a love that says, "I will die for you." Sometimes we are scandalized. We will talk about this in more detail in two weeks, but submitting to one another really means to prefer the other above ourselves. We see that in the way that wives are called to do this, and we see that in the way that husbands are called to do this. It is very profound, but the love of the husband is a love that says, "I will die for you." It's a love that says, "I will prepare you for that great banquet," and ultimately, "I will relate to you and seek your good that you might be presented on that day clothed with splendor." The reason why marriage is so powerful is that it points to something eternal, though it itself is not. It points to something. Many of us are thinking right now, "I can't possibly live this way." Some of you are thinking, "I could never find someone like that with whom to share my life, so I'm not going to get married." Others are thinking, "I could never change the way that I see my spouse in the way you are describing. It sounds too risky, and it is risky, isn't it, because one person has to start doing that and say, "You know, I am going to seek your interest above my own." It becomes contagious and transformative. Some of us are thinking: "This whole thing sounds way too risky. I might lose my independence, I might lose myself." In fact, what you're saying is: "It just might kill me." But, you see, this is where the bond of the covenant of marriage has the power to reveal our self-centeredness more vividly, most vividly.

We will talk next Sunday about how and why marriage is a covenant and why that is so important. Most people get married when they feel an attraction to the other person. You think he or she is wonderful, but a year or two later, sometimes a month or two later, three things happen. First, you begin to find out in marriage just how selfish this wonderful person is. Second, you discover that the wonderful person has been going through a similar experience, and he or she begins to tell you how selfish you are. Third, though you acknowledge it in part, you conclude that your spouse's selfishness is more problematic than yours. This is very true, especially when we bring a woundedness into marriage. This is particularly true if we have imbibed the modern secular vision that my self-realization is the goal and that I married you really so that you will help me to become who I am, and if you're not doing that, then maybe I

need to find someone else. It's only the people that have a deep grasp of the gospel who can admit that their selfishness is the problem. The key quote for me from the book this morning is from the opening chapters, from page 44. (If you're not following Kenwood on Facebook or Twitter, I want to invite you to do that because we are going to be sending out key quotes from the book over the next six weeks, and if you're like me, you need multiple attestations to reorient) Keller says:

“The reason that marriage is so painful and yet wonderful is because it is a reflection of the gospel: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, . . .”

Do you believe that? You are, and I am, charged with the responsibility to speak the truth. You are all in worse shape, including me, than we dared believe. Right? Some of you are nodding; some of you are like, “I don’t know.” Stay married and it will become clear. But, the quote continues:

“ . . .yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope” (*The Meaning of Marriage*, 44).

We are indeed more sinful and flawed than we ever dared believe and yet we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope. This is the only kind of relationship that will really transform us. Love without truth is sentimentality. It supports and affirms us, but keeps us in denial about our flaws. Truth without love is harshness. It gives us information, but in such a way that we can't really hear it. God's saving love in Christ, however, is marked by both a radical truthfulness about who we are and yet also a radical, unconditional commitment to us. That's what we need. I remember first year of being married, and we had arguments at times. If anyone says that they never argue in their marriage, I think they are lying. I remember in that first year thinking: “I thought I was mature,” and the pressure and intensity of that relationship revealed: “No, you've got some room to grow, young man,” and I saw my flaws. I was more flawed than I dared believe, and yet, the astonishing thing was, I had a wife that loved me and was committed to me, knowing that. That's how the married life allows us to both experience and extend the gospel.

Paul's mind rushes to Genesis. In Ephesians 5:31, he quotes Genesis 2:24:

*“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”*

There is a profound unity, and Paul says that this mystery is profound; this relationship is profound. When I do premarital counseling, I give young couples one book that helps them to understand the nuts and bolts. They fill out the survey questions and take the inventories. Usually the man likes that better. Actually, it goes both ways, but some temperaments like to check the boxes and rack up the points and see how they're going to do. Then I give them

another book that's called, *Sacred Marriage*. I ask them to read that book after they are married year or so. That's a right-brain book that basically says to never lose a sense of awe and wonder that you get to be married to this person. This is a profound thing. There is room to grow in our understanding, and Paul says that this relationship is in some way analogous to Christ and the church.

I was finishing the sermon this week off-site at a coffee shop in our community. Sometimes when I am really concentrating hard, I like it to be quiet, but it was anything but quiet. People were talking, coming and going, and yet I felt in that moment that it was really important to be thinking about relationship. I was reading about these statistics and thinking about how the younger generations have different views of marriage, and my soul got filled up with the Word of God. I finished the sermon and felt I just had to talk to somebody. I went to get another cup of coffee, and there was a young guy, the barista. I had all this marriage data on my mind, and I thought it was so exciting. I saw he was married, so I said, "I see you are married. How long have you been married?" He was a young, very cool guy, neat hair, cool cut, modern tungsten ring. He said, "Well, we've been married for seven years." "Oh, that's great," I said. "Do you like being married? Do you recommend it?" He said, "Oh, yes. It's great!" I said, "What do you like about it?" He said, "You know, it's really an amazing thing. It is a profound reflection of Christ's love for the church." I said, "You know, it is!" I felt liberty in that moment to probe little deeper. A very neat young man, and he's been taught that, and he is living that. And, by the way, he is helping plant a church here in Blue Ash, just up the street, reaching the next generation.

Let me challenge us briefly to get the book, read it with your spouse if you're married. It's a profound book if you're single or if you're a widow or widower, and I encourage you not to restrict its implication. Listen to the sermons online or DVD. If you're super busy and you just have time to listen to only one, you can Google Tim Keller, Google Talk, Marriage, and he tries to explain the content of the book to the thought-leadership team at Google in an hour. That's a really fascinating talk. More personally, I want you to accept now, by faith if not yet by demonstrable reality, that your selfishness is the main problem. Assault, I mean assault it, take it captive like you're going after a fortified, medieval town rimmed with six chambered gates and soldiers brandishing weapons, deploy all the strategies you would if you had to take that city, hurl rocks against it, dig underneath its walls, pour boiling oil on it, shoot flaming arrows, but assault your selfishness in the power of the Spirit. I'm going to give you one very simple strategy to do that, and that's to ask your wife this question: "How can I serve you?" Begin to answer that question and ask it.

There is great joy and hope for us this morning. There is great joy and hope because, as Keller writes:

“The only way to avoid sacrificing your partner’s joy on the altar of your own need is to turn to the ultimate lover of your soul. He voluntarily sacrificed himself on the cross, taking what you deserved for your sins against God and others.

On the cross he was forsaken and experienced the lostness of hell, but he did it all for us.

Because of the loving sacrifice of the Son, you can know the heaven of the Father’s love through the work of the Spirit. And fortified with the love of God in your soul, you likewise can now give yourself in loving service to your spouse” (*The Meaning of Marriage*, 76).

That’s why there is hope.

It is so fitting for us this morning to turn to this table, to the broken body and shed blood of Christ, that Jesus, on the night in which He was betrayed told His disciples: *“This is My body broken for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.”* Earlier He said to them, *“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many.”* He took the cup and said: *“This this cup is the New Covenant in My blood which is poured out for you.”* Let’s prepare our hearts together in prayer.

Lord Jesus, we love You, and we magnify You. Lord, we need Your instruction on how to live. We need the gospel to uproot our innate self-centeredness. Lord, it's the broken body and shed blood of Christ that covers our self-centeredness and sin and uproots it. As we partake together, we partake with gratitude for what You have done and hope for what You are doing and will do in our lives. We praise You.

In Jesus’ Name, Amen.