

SEX: The Act of Covenant Renewal

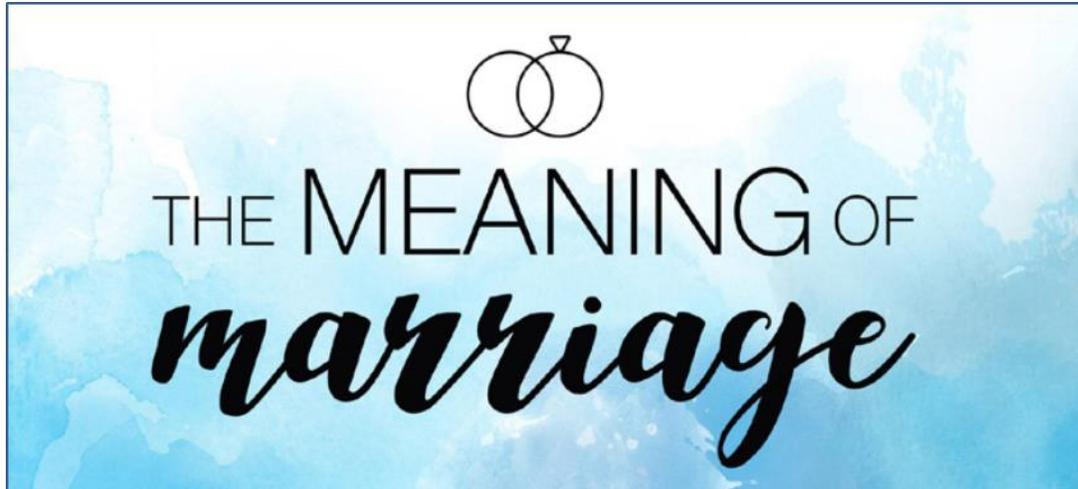
January-February Sermon Series

Kenwood Baptist Church

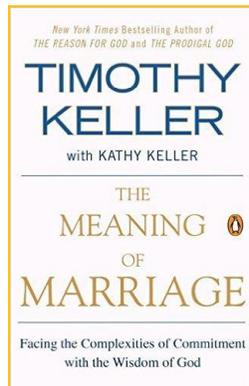
Pastor David Palmer

February 4, 2018

TEXT: Ephesians 5:15-33



We continue in our sermon series on *The Meaning of Marriage* based on this wonderful and glorious passage from God's Word. This morning, we turn our attention to *SEX: The Act of Covenant Renewal*, to sexual intimacy between a husband and a wife. As you know, throughout



this series we been pursuing the text in conversation with Tim and Kathy Keller's book: *The Meaning of Marriage*, and I just want to remind you that it's still a good time to read this book, if you're married or if you're single, in preparing for this tremendous vision and deep insight into what God's design is for us. Their intention was to give a realistic, yet glorious, vision of what marriage is and can be. We need this instruction because, as Paul tells us in the beginning of our passage, there is an unwise way to live. We pick this up from our culture, from within ourselves. In Ephesians 5:15, he says:

"Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise."

In Ephesians 5:17, he says:

"Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is."

In Ephesians 5:18, he says:

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

There are many misperceptions about sexual intimacy, and our passage addresses those. I want to bring a couple of them out into the open up front. The first is that many of us are taught that sex is an appetite, that it's an uncontrollable desire. This view of sexual intimacy goes something like this: Sex was once surrounded by taboos, but now we realize that sex is like eating or any other good and natural appetite. That means we should feel free to fulfill the appetite when we feel the need, and there is, by the way, then no reason in this view that we shouldn't sample a variety of cuisines and continuously look for new tastes and sensations. On this view of sexual intimacy as just an appetite, forbidding the satisfaction of a natural appetite, or limiting it in any way, is unhealthy and impossible. On the other end of the spectrum, some of us believe, or are taught, or pick up, that sex is dirty—that it is a necessary evil for the propagation of the human race and that if had God had thought about it more carefully, maybe He would have designed human beings to spawn or something like that. This is the opposite view, and many who claim the participation of faith traditions reflect this view. But it views sexual intimacy as a part of our lower or physical nature, distinguished from our higher, spiritual nature. In this view, sex is something dirty, a necessary evil. Others just think that sex is, on any view, certainly a topic to be avoided in church. You're thinking, "Boy, I'm uncomfortable." If you think you're uncomfortable, think about how I feel! But, in all seriousness, we need God's instruction on this.

There is a story told of Rabbi Meir, one of the leading sages near the time of the New Testament. I love this story:

"One night after a day of study and learning, he retired to his home. Later that night, he went to his bedroom with his wife. As they were about to become intimate with each other, he heard a strange sound. He looked under the bed and found one of his disciples lying there underneath it. Rabbi Meir asked him with incredulity: 'What are you doing there?' His disciple replied: 'This too is Torah and I must understand it.'"

I'm not commending that, but I am saying that the topic is important for us understand. So what do we discover when we look at God's Word? The first thing I want you to notice is that the Bible has a very positive view of the body and of sexual intimacy. In our passage this morning, there is an abundance of bodily imagery: the husband is the head; the church is the body of Christ; Christ loves the church and gives Himself for her. This is bodily action. Husbands are to love their wives as their own physical bodies. Paul says in Ephesians 5:29:

"For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it."

Then in Ephesians 5:31, he gives the quotation from Genesis:

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two

shall become one flesh.”

God is the creator of our bodies. He creates us distinctly as male and female, and our physical person, our maleness, our femaleness, is part of His good creation. It is God’s design to make us male and female. Adam bursts into poetry when he sees Eve and says in Genesis 2:23:

“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

There is a celebration of our physical person as part of God's creation. This was something Greek philosophy struggled to appreciate about Christian faith, and yet many of us take our cues from non-biblical traditions. The Bible views our physical person as something very good. Not only is our corporeality, our physical being, good in Scripture, but intimacy between a husband and wife is celebrated in Scripture. It is really celebrated and commended. Let’s look at the New Testament version. In 1 Corinthians 7:3, the apostle Paul says:

“The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.”

That's the ESV version. The Greek text literally says that the man *should give that which is owed or a sacred obligation*. Paul uses the word for something that God commends to us. You may not use the word *conjugal rights* very often. It’s outside of most of our active vocabulary. You may prefer the King James translation of this where it says that the husband should *render unto his wife due benevolence*. That's another possible way of expressing it. The New American Standard says to *fulfill his duty*. The NIV says to *fulfill his marital duty*. The Old Testament version is a little bit more concrete. It helps us see that God celebrates the intimacy between a husband and a wife. Proverbs 5:18 says:

“Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth,”

Proverbs 5:19 says:

“[She is] a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.”

This is imagery that's described for between a husband and a wife. The most explicit celebration of the union between a husband and wife in Scripture is in the Song of Songs. We sometimes call this the Song of Solomon. In Hebrew, it is called the *shir ha-shirim*: the Song of Songs. It's a love poem that’s written on the occasion of a wedding, and he goes back and forth between the husband and the wife. It is filled with imagery of celebrating the other. For example, in Song of Songs 4:1-7, the husband says:

“Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold, you are beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which

bear twins, and not one among them has lost its young.

(Isn't that great? All the teeth on the bottom have a corresponding pair.)

Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil.

Your neck is like the tower of David, built in rows of stone; on it hang a thousand shields, all of them shields of warriors.

Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that graze among the lilies. . . .

You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you."

It's a beautiful celebration on the moment of a wedding where the husband and wife celebrate this union, this exclusive privilege.

If sexual intimacy is celebrated in Scripture, why then is it confined exclusively to married couples? That's the question we have to ask. If this is such a good and wonderful thing and our bodies are good and made by God, then why does God restrict this intimacy exclusively inside the covenant commitment of marriage? The Christian sex ethic really can be summarized succinctly like this: that sex is for use within marriage between a man and woman. That's the Christian vision, and we have to ask ourselves why that is. I think we can give several reasons for this. God confines sexual activity inside marriage. The first reason is that **sexual intimacy involves our whole person**. One of the books that I recommend for couples about to be married is written by Dr. Ed Wheat, M.D. and his wife Gayle. He reflects on intimacy with these profound words:

"Some people have felt uncomfortable about sex because they somehow equate the sexual desire of men with the sexual drive of animals. They should remember that animals breed according to instinct with biological motivation. But man has intercourse as a whole person. Let us realize how the bodies of men and women are designed by God. Even in the sex act itself we are reminded that this is a relationship of persons, not just bodies, for it is no coincidence that man is the *only* creature of all of God's creation who relates sexually face-to-face" (*Intended for Pleasure*, 23).

This is why in the Christian vision of sexual intimacy it is a relationship of persons, and that's why intimacy is excluded as something you would pursue alone or with a stranger. Sexual intimacy involves our whole person, and that's why it is set within this exclusive frame.

The second reason why God confines sexual activity inside the marriage is that **sexual intimacy is powerful, and its most powerful meaning is to express our commitment**. That's why it is restricted. Sex affects our heart, our inward being, and sin, which is a disorder of the heart, has a big impact on sex. Our passions and desires get distorted. Sexual intimacy is to be a whole-life giving. The sinful heart wants to use it for selfish reasons, and therefore the Bible puts rules

around it to direct us to use it in the right way. Sexual intimacy is powerful as an expression of commitment, and that's why it is restricted.

The third reason why God confines sexual activity inside the marriage is that **the meaning of sexual intimacy in the Scripture is as a sign of this covenant relationship**. One of my mentors was Gordon Hugenberger, whom I have mentioned before and who was also a mentor for Pastor Dave Hansen, who served at Kenwood for number of years. He graduated from Gordon University, got a degree from Harvard in physics, and then went on to be a pastor. By his own admission, he is kind of a nerdy guy. He is a great preacher, and in our premarital counseling discussions, he looked at me and said, "You know, David, it took me five years to figure out how to make love to Jane." I thought, "Gordon, I can see it taking you five years to figure that out." I remember thinking in my hubris as a young man that there's no way that it is taking me five years to figure that out. But I learned what he meant. What he meant was what drove him into the subject of his PhD research. His PhD research was about marriage as a covenant, and what he meant was that the biblical vision of Genesis 2:24, that a man will leave his father and mother and hold fast or cling or cleave to his wife and they become one flesh, is that this is a covenant-making act. To join together as husband and wife, you take an oath or a vow, and every covenant in Scripture has words that go with it and a symbolic action that goes with it that ratifies or makes the covenant. He argues, in 31 rather technical pages, that intimacy is the action that goes with it—of ratifying the covenant relationship. All covenants have within them both an action that ratifies the covenant and an action that then renews the covenant. He argues in this 400-page book that intimacy says, "This is a covenant between you and me," and intimacy is a way of renewing that covenant.

Tim and Kathy Keller got their idea of this in the book from Gordon Hugenberger, and they say that to call marriage one flesh means that sex is understood as a sign of that personal, legal union and the means to accomplish it. The Bible says, and we need to hear this, "Don't unite with someone physically unless you are willing to unite with that person emotionally, personally, socially, economically, and legally." In other words, don't become physically vulnerable without becoming vulnerable in every other way because you've given up your freedom and found yourself bound to your spouse in marriage. That's the biblical view. The biblical view is that intimacy is a sign of that covenant relationship. It's powerful; it affects our whole person, and it is a way of expressing that commitment. It is not merely for procreation; it is not for recreation. It is a sign of this covenant bond. This very high view of marriage and of intimacy has great implications, and I want in the last portion of the sermon this morning to reflect on what this means for singles and what this means for married people.

Let's talk about singles first. Since sexual intimacy is a covenant sign, a self-giving of persons, it is not just an appetite, or a drive, or a mode self-expression. It is a sign of the covenant bond, so

that means that we as singles abstain from sexual intimacy apart from the covenant commitment. That is where we get the word abstinence. A Christian teaching of abstinence before marriage seems shocking today, but let me tell you, it seemed shocking in the first century, too. Sexual activity outside of marriage, before marriage, was just as prolific in the 1st century as the 21st. The sexual revolution in the United States was nothing. In a recent study conducted by Michigan State University, they looked at all the sexual activity depicted in media. That is, how is our sexual activity depicted in films, how is it discussed, how is it presented? The conclusion of the study was that 94% of the media depiction of sexual intimacy is between unmarried people, so the culture keeps saying, "This is where it's at. This is where it's happening." And yet, a massive study called *Sex in America*, done by two non-Christian sociologists that surveyed thousands of people, came to the conclusion in the end to say: "The media depiction of the hookup culture and the romantic fling is largely a myth." When we survey people, they come to the conclusion that, lo and behold, the people having the most regular, satisfying intimacy are married couples in a committed relationship. Would you believe it! The Christian teaching is that of abstinence. Though that may seem shocking, God's wisdom is sound.

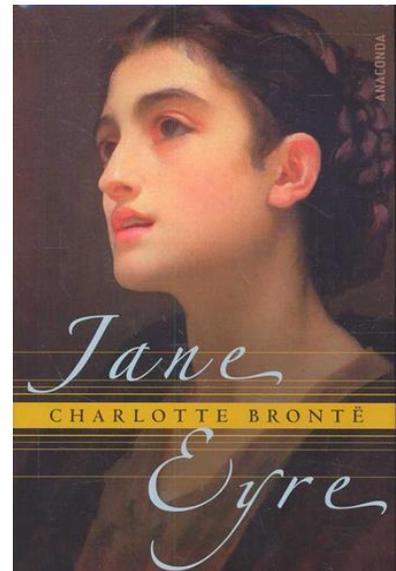
This means for singles, that **abstinence leaves room in your heart for the priority of Christ's spousal love to fill you**. Lydia's testimony last Sunday was so powerful, that as a single person, the top priority is not to be longing be married, but it is to leave room for the spousal love of Christ to fill your heart. Having Christ fill your heart before being married is one of the most life-giving things that can happen. It means for singles that you have got to participate in Christian community where we're not using the world standards as the basis for making choices of a future spouse. The world's standards are for men physical beauty; women often select wealth or ability to provide, as the top procure. Christians look for godliness, to be part of a Christian community where we are using God's vision for a future spouse and the community that doesn't hold up the family life as an idol. A Christian community is where we can also experience grace and forgiveness because most of us have experienced our own sinfulness in this area. But, let me tell you from God's Word that this is a place where when you ask for forgiveness, you receive it from Jesus Christ. His power to renew and remake us is unlimited, but you have to be part of that community. That also means, as a single person, that you have got to learn to plant your feet. What do I mean by that? It's a literary allusion, actually. To plant your feet means that if God is commending this to me as a single, I have got to take my stand here, to get my balance underneath me, because the culture will push at me, my own desires inside of me will knock me off balance. The Bible's view that we should abstain from intimacy apart from marriage is not because it has a low view of it; it's because it has a high view. Physical intimacy is designed to be part of making covenant and experiencing covenant renewal of a whole-life entrustment, of a self-giving. Intimacy makes us feel deeply connected to the

other person and bound to them with an ongoing obligation. That is the nature of covenant, but if you engage in intimacy without the legal, social, moral responsibility, then there's a profound disconnect that happens and it leads to jealousy, hurt feelings, and obsessiveness. Tim and Kathy wisely counsel:

“If you have sex outside of marriage, you will have to steel yourself against sex’s power to soften your heart toward another person and make you more trusting. Sex will lose its covenant-making power for you. Ironically, then sex outside of marriage eventually works backwards, making you *less* able to commit and trust another person.”

God's Word is trying to protect us. It is not trying to hold something good back from us. We have got to plant to our feet; we have got to resolve to obey God in advance, before the moments of temptation come. This is explored brilliantly by the novelist Charlotte Brontë in her novel, *Jane Eyre*. Tim and Kathy quote this is in their book. If you're familiar with the story of *Jane Eyre*, Jane has fallen in love with a certain Mr. Rochester, but she learns later that he is already married and that his mentally ill wife lives in an upper room in his estate. But, Mr. Rochester urges her to live with him as his mistress, and this touches off an inner storm in her heart. Jane says:

“While he spoke my very conscience and reason turned traitors against me, and charged me with a crime in resisting him. They spoke almost as loud as Feeling and clamoured wildly. ‘Oh comply!’ it said. ‘Think of his misery; think of his danger – look at his state when left alone; Sooth him, save him, love him; tell him you love him and will be his. Who will be injured by what you do?’”



This surge of inner conflict is resolved in this way. She says:

“I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad – as I am now.

“Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour; stringent are they; inviolate they shall be.

“If at my convenience I might break them, what would be their worth? They have a worth— so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane – quite insane: with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs. Preconceived opinions, foregone determinations, are all I have at this hour to stand by: there I plant my foot.”

She weathers the storm of inner conflict by a predetermined commitment to obey God, God's Word. Our feelings will come and go, and you will face temptations as a single person, as a married person. It's remarkable that in all of the film depictions of *Jane Eyre*, none of them show this inner dialogue, because the culture has no category for it. In films, Jane is depicted as resolving this conflict by saying, "I will respect myself," as though she looks within and decides to value her own self-esteem. In the book, she looks within and finds chaos, temptation, surging emotions, which she ignores, and then looks outside of herself to God's Word. If you obey God only when it seems reasonable or profitable, it is not obedience. Obedience means embracing God's authority over us. As a single person, that means letting Christ's spousal love fill your heart. Really seek that. When you long for intimacy, seek Christ. It means being in community with others who are pursuing that and where we can experience grace. It means planting our feet on God's Word and wisdom even when we face a surge of emotion.

What does this high view of intimacy mean for married people? It means, for married people as well, that you need the priority of Jesus' spousal love to fill your heart. If you don't seek Christ's love to fill you, then you will look to your spouse to meet a need that they cannot meet. You will make them into an idol, and they cannot provide. If you try to love your spouse only with your own limited resources of love, that well will run dry. But if you seek the spousal love of Christ, He will be an ever-flowing spring. There are two bodies of water in Israel. They are very, very different. There is the Sea of Galilee in the north and the Dead Sea in the south. The greatest difference between them is that one of them is life-giving and flourishing and the other can't support any life. The reason is that the Sea of Galilee is fed by springs on the north. The water comes through the sea and then flows out. The Dead Sea has only an inlet. The water comes in and it never goes out, and the toxicity of the sea just increases because it is never flowing out. It can't support life. If you have the love of Christ flowing in and then you're giving that out, then as married people, you can **enjoy intimacy as a giving rather than a getting**. Notice the verb in 1 Corinthians 7:3:

"The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband."

We switch these verbs to our great detriment when we speak of intimacy as "getting something." The Bible's vision is *give*: "Give to his wife: the wife to *give* to her husband." Paul goes on to say something that had never been said in the Greco-Roman world. He said in 1 Corinthians 7:4:

"For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does."

That was something people said. But then he said in the same verse:

"Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does."

No one had ever said that. The biblical views a mutuality of persons belonging to one another. In our intimate lives together, married couples need the priority of Christ's spousal love, and the Scripture commends intimacy with one another as something that is giving rather than a getting.

Married couples, should **keep investing in this part of your life together**. Even John and Jeanette, married as long as they have been and as wonderful as they are, discovered they weren't as wonderful as they thought they were. Marriage reveals that. Our intimate lives reveal weakness, sinfulness, and it is a place where wounds can come in. The Bible gives us a very high view of this. It is a sign and seal of our oneness with each other and with God, and we should not be surprised to discover that, at times, we find problems showing up in bed that, if it wasn't for intimacy, we would never have seen. Our intimate lives can expose guilt or fear or anger over past relationships. There can be growing mistrust, disrespect, unresolved issues. Tim and Kathy wisely counsel:

"Sex is such a great and sensitive thing that you will not be able to sweep these problems under the rug. Unless your marriage is in a good condition, sex doesn't work. So be very careful to look beneath the surface.

"A lack of 'sexual compatibility' might not really be a lack of lovemaking skill at all. It may be a sign of deeper problems in the relationship. It is often the case that, if those problems are addressed, the sexual intimacy improves."

Inevitably, one spouse desires intimacy more often than the other. Remember that sexual intimacy can be given as a gift. Take time and effort to learn what is pleasing to your spouse. Never give up working on this part of your life together.

The Bible has a very high and beautiful view of this. It is not something dysfunctional. It is an expression of the covenant commitment; it's mutual. Ephesians 5:21-22;28 says:

". . . submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord."

"In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies."

This important topic gives us a question. Besides reading the book and talking about together, throughout this series, we've given a question for many of the weeks. We first asked: "How can I serve you?" We asked later: "Would you tell me the truth about how I am really doing?" We asked, wives to their husbands: "How can I help and support you?" We challenged husbands to ask their wives: "How can I love and care for you?"

This morning, I want to ask that the married couples take the question seriously in their

intimate lives: "Can we renew our covenant together?" That may not seem like the most romantic line, but it really is, because it means that intimacy is a giving of oneself to the other, and it's affirming that total commitment in God's eyes. Back to the Song of Songs. Song of Songs 2:1-18 celebrates, and I want us to take this love imagery seriously. The husband begins. He says:

"I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys."

Then he looks at his bride and says:

"As a lily among brambles, so is my love among the young women."

The woman looks back to the man and says:

"As an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love."

The man says to his wife in this song:

"My beloved speaks and says to me: 'Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away, for behold, the winter is past; the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. . . . Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away. O my dove, . . . let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.'"

The woman replies:

"My beloved is mine, and I am his."

We wonder where Paul felt that mutuality of persons. I think it's right here: my beloved is mine and I am his. It is because of a high view of intimacy that the wisdom of God's Word places it exclusively within this diamond setting. It's a place that we need God's forgiveness often and renewal; it's a sign of the covenant between husband and wife; and in marriage itself it is a sign of the covenant between God and His people.

As we approach this table of communion, this coming together as one, I want to invite you to set your brokenness in this area at the feet of Christ and let Him wash you clean. All of us have experienced the fallen world in this area, directly or indirectly. Just say, "Lord Jesus, wash me clean and renew me." As we come partake, we come to our Lord Jesus who is the Bridegroom. We are the bride. As Jesus was about to lay down His life for us, He took bread in the presence of His disciples and said, "This is My body, broken for you." He lifted the cup in their presence and said, "This is the cup of the New Covenant in My blood which is given for you." Take a moment to confess your need for Christ's sacrifice, and then ask Him to fill your heart with His spousal love whether you are single, whether you are married, and let His love renew you on

the inside. We invite the deacons to come forward and join me in prayer.

Lord Jesus, we give You praise this morning that Your banner over us is love. Lord, we come to Your table needing forgiveness. We need the renewing presence of Your love, and we ask, Lord, that You would wash over us, that You would renew us on the inside, that we would feel the joy and safety and security of Your banner, that You have given us something good and set it in a precious context. We love You, and we need Your love in our lives more than ever.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.