

"The Sanctity of Marriage"

Ephesians 5:22-33

August 23, 2015

13th Sunday After Pentecost

Recently, there has been a lot of talk by Christians about “the sanctity of marriage.” There has also been a lot of anger and outrage at the Supreme Court’s decision to effectively legalize and legitimize same sex marriage throughout our country. Christians have complained that the existence of and societal approval for same sex marriage will damage the sanctity of marriage.

Non-Christians (and even some liberal Christians), of course, take issue with this claim. In addition to disagreeing with our stand on marriage, they look at the outrage over same sex marriage and the assertions we make about it and they level a very serious charge against Christians. They accuse us of being hypocrites. They may be right.

We may attempt to defend ourselves by saying we are not being hypocritical. We are only defining marriage the way the Bible defines it. But I don’t think that’s the problem. Many supporters of same sex marriage might concede that point. It’s our outrage over the perceived threat same sex marriage is to the sanctity of marriage while ignoring other behaviors which also might threaten the sanctity of marriage.

Let’s begin with the 6th Commandment: “You shall not commit adultery.” I don’t think many Christians would be supportive of adultery, but does it outrage you like same sex marriage does? Yet adultery threatens the sanctity of marriage perhaps more than anything else.

What about divorce? This is clearly against the will of God. When Jesus was asked about divorce, He said, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” Yet when laws were passed and court decisions rendered that established “no fault divorce”, thus making it easier to get a divorce, how many Christians were outraged, protested court decisions, or attempted to get the law changed back? Or do we see divorce as an acceptable option for when we are not happy in our marriage? Yet divorce not only threatens the sanctity of marriage. It destroys it.

The Bible tells us to flee sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:18) which, by definition, is sexual behavior outside of marriage. This includes premarital sex and cohabitation (more popularly known as “living together”). Sexual immorality threatens the sanctity of marriage by threatening the commitment which marriage is all about. Are we, as Christians, outraged by sexual immorality or do we now tolerate it or even acknowledge it as an acceptable life style?

The Bible even forbids lust as a threat to the sanctity of marriage. Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matt. 5:27-28) Lust is often what leads to acts of sexual immorality, adultery, or divorce. Talk about threatening the sanctity of marriage! Does that bother us as Christians? Are we outraged over lust-filled entertainment in television programs, movies, or on the internet? Or do we laugh it off and just enjoy the same entertainment as our non-believing friends?

Maybe the greatest threat to the sanctity of marriage is marriage itself. I say that only partially joking. Christians talk a lot about the importance of marriage but how do Christians act within marriage? How do you, Christian wives, act towards your husbands? How do we, Christian husbands, act toward our wives? Do we always treat our spouses as God would want us to? Or do we simply live for ourselves within the context of marriage?

Why are we so quick to accuse same sex marriage as being a threat to the sanctity of marriage while, at the same time, not being willing to see these other behaviors as being threats? I think it is easy to see. Same sex marriage is not a behavior that tempts us. That is “their” sin, not “ours”. It is always easy to condemn somebody else’s sin and blame it for the ills of our society.

However, some of those other behaviors hit too close to home for many Christians. Lust, sexual immorality, adultery, or divorce actually tempts us. Those are things we actually do. So we seek to justify, defend, or rationalize our behavior in these areas rather than repent of it. We get outraged and protest someone else’s sin while seeking to hide or deny our behavior as being sinful.

We blame other's behavior as a threat to the sanctity of marriage while denying that our behavior threatens it at all. Nonbelievers see this and accuse us of hypocrisy and rightly so.

To see what truly "de-sanctifies" marriage, we have to know what marriage is, Biblically speaking. Paul, in our text, (as well as Jesus in Matthew 19) quotes Genesis to define God's will regarding marriage: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." One man and one woman constitute a Biblical marriage.

Jesus adds, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." Marriage is a life long union. While one may debate why a divorce occurs, it is clear that divorce is never the will of God. When the Pharisees asked Jesus why then God allowed for divorce, He replied, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so." Divorce may be allowed by God but it is not condoned by Him.

In coming together in marriage as man and wife, they form a sexual union as part of that marital union. Experiencing that sexual union apart from the marital union before, during, or after marriage is called, in the Greek, *porneia* (from which we get the English word, pornography) and is strongly condemned in the Scriptures.

Finally, the Bible describes behavior within marriage, especially in our text for today. Wives are called to "submit to your own husbands as to the Lord. 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." Husbands are called to "love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." These are very strong words: wives submitting to husbands in everything as their head and husbands loving their wives to the point of giving up everything, even their own lives, for their welfare.

It soon becomes clear that same sex marriage is not the only thing that damages the sanctity of marriage. We all do in our behavior before marriage, during marriage, and often after marriage. It is impossible for sinful human beings to keep marriage holy (sanctified). It is Christ who sanctifies marriage and those involved in marriage, as well as those outside of marriage.

Christ is the one who perfectly and completely submitted Himself to the will of His Heavenly Father, left His throne and power on high, and assumed a human nature and all the weakness and humility that go with that for you and me. Even though this was a huge and difficult task and Jesus did pray to His Father in Gethsemane, asking if there was any other way that He might save us, He still said, "You will be done."

Christ is the one perfectly and completely loved each and every one of us, no matter what sin we have committed in or out of marriage or how often we have committed it. He loved us so much that He gave up His life for us as payment and sacrifice for all our sins. He has "cleansed [us] by the washing of water with the word" in our baptisms. No matter what dark sexual sin, no matter what marital infidelity, sexual or otherwise, no matter what sin of any kind, Christ has made us to be His bride with Him as our bridegroom. He sees us "in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing." In His eyes, we are "holy and without blemish."

Many people look at this text from Ephesians and see only harsh commands which are archaic and sexist. Nothing could be further from the truth. Here, our Lord is calling us to live out in our vocations what He has declared us to be: holy and without blemish.

That means, first of all, to live in the forgiving love of Christ by which we first became holy and without blemish in His sight. Having been *declared* to be holy and without blemish does not mean we always live that way. No matter how hurtful the sin (and they ARE hurtful in interpersonal relationships, especially marriage), every sin has been covered by the blood of Jesus Christ and washed away in Holy Baptism. Learning to ask for that forgiveness, receive that forgiveness, and give that forgiveness is key in living out our vocations.

Secondly, it means to live in the power of the Holy Spirit. Prior to our text (Ephesians 6:18), Paul encourages all of us to "be filled with the Spirit." He goes on to explain how that Spirit-filled life is lived out in worship, between husbands and wives, between children and parents, and between slaves and masters. The power of the Holy Spirit which was given to you in your Baptism, in your contact with the Word of God, and in your participation in the Lord's Supper enables you to convey

the Gospel, not only in what you believe and confess, but also in what you do and how you behave toward others.

This allows and enables wives to willingly submit to their husbands in all things, willingly subordinating their own desires to his, trusting him to care for her, just as the Church willingly submits to Christ, subordinating her desires to Christ's will with confidence that He will care for her. This also allows and enables husbands to sacrificially love their wives, willingly giving up everything, even their own lives for her in the way that Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her.

All of this is done, not for the sake of rules and Law, but for the sake of love and the display of the Gospel. To sum it up, I'd like to quote what one commentator, Thomas M. Winger, wrote. He said,

Ephesians 5 not only contains a most remarkable restoration of the original institution and purposes of marriage as a blessing to man and wife in this life, but it also transcends the earthly blessings by revealing the mystery of the Gospel hidden in every marriage, if husband and wife would have the eyes of faith to discern it. For, each day as the husband loves his wife in a thoroughly self-sacrificing way, he proclaims Jesus Christ to her and likewise to himself as he puts to death the old man and emerges in the image of Christ. And each day, as she submits to his love, as she entrusts herself to him, as she respects his headship, she learns ever more the nature of faith and sees the contours of Christ's redeeming sacrifice in the Christlike figure God has placed into her life. In this way marriage is for the Christian couple a very holy thing." (Winger, p. 653)

And that's how you keep the sanctify of marriage.

Amen