

Marriage No. 5

“Marriage as the Context of the Sexual Life”

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It will be some moments before we get there but you can turn to the Song of Songs for this evening’s consideration of the Word of God.

We have been dealing first with the theology of marriage. We have not yet considered the ethics of marriage: how we are to live and love in marriage. We are first considering the indicative: what marriage *is*. Only when we know what marriage *is* can we consider *how* marriage *is* to be practiced. So far we have said that marriage is 1) a creation ordinance (the divinely ordered family structure for the organization of human life); 2) a relationship of love (not strictly functional, but personally and emotionally fulfilling for human beings as God has made them); 3) a covenant (a relationship created when the parties to that covenant swear their loyalty to one another; a relationship that God himself has defined and to which God will hold the parties accountable); and so 4) a relationship that can be broken only by one of the partners committing a serious sin against God as well as against his or her spouse. Now, tonight, another article in this biblical theology of marriage. *Marriage is a sexual relationship.* Indeed, marriage is *the* sexual relationship; the only sexual relationship there is ever to be for human beings. I don’t intend this evening to talk about the sexual relationship *in* marriage, but marriage *as* a sexual relationship, as *the* sexual relationship.

We are back, in a way, to the most fundamental of truths about human beings: that God made them male and female. Sexual differentiation is the only “difference” between human beings that is explicitly part of the image of God! There are, of course, many differences between human beings. They differ in the languages they speak, in their height and weight, their appearance, their race, their age, their personality, their intelligence, their health, their habits, and so on. But there is no difference between them as fundamental or as consequential as gender. Even after a generation spent denying the importance of this difference, this is the difference that we notice first and that is the most significant to everyone. The difference between men and women is signaled by the clothing they wear, by their voice, by the shape of their bodies, and a thousand other things. And it is also the difference that matters most to us. Men and women relate to one another differently depending upon their gender. The phrase “opposite sex” tells us that the difference between men and women is acknowledged by everyone to be profound and consequential. Only on the internet can a man pretend to be a woman or *vice versa* and get away with it. [J. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 748]

Indeed, the difference between men and women is more profound than most of us realize and certainly more profound than our American culture now wants even to contemplate. Robert Farrar Capon once made this important point in this way.

"Suppose I wrote a book called *The Sexual Life of a Nun*. You know what people would think. They would be curious -- or shocked. They would expect to find either a big joke or a compilation of slightly prurient propaganda. How many would be able to see that, on the real meaning of the word *sexual*, it is a perfectly proper title? For a nun's life of course is utterly sexual. She thinks as a woman, prays as a woman, reacts as a woman and commits herself as a woman. No monk...ever embraced his life for her kind of reasons. He couldn't if he wanted to. Of course she omits, as an offering to God, one particular expression of her sexuality; but it is only one out of a hundred." [Bed and Board, 49]

So this difference is fundamental to human life in unending ways. But it is in marriage that this difference is fully realized and in marriage that the divine reason for the two sexes is fully exploited. Here the man and the woman are brought together in the most complete, fruitful, and happy way. The sexual relationship -- the most obvious way in which men and women complement one another -- finds its unique purpose here. And it is in the sexual union that the divinely intended companionship of husband and wife finds its most powerful instrument.

We said that marriage creates a family. But it does so only because of the sexual union of husband and wife. We said that marriage is a relationship of love, but it is so in the most profound sense because it includes the sexual or erotic dimension of love between a man and a woman. And we said that marriage was a covenant, a kind of sacred relationship enforced by obligations solemnly sworn by both parties. One of those obligations is loyalty. That is why adultery is universally condemned as a heinous crime in the Bible. It is equivalent to "covenant treason." [Frame, 750] This is why adultery is a big deal in every culture, even in our sexually permissive American culture.

But the Bible is more thorough-going than simply forbidding to those who are married a sexual liaison or relationship with someone other than one's spouse or commanding husbands and wives fully to enjoy sexual love. It goes further to say that the *only* permissible sexual relationship is that between a husband and a wife.

Now I realize that the expectation that only the married will have sex and that they only with one another is a dead letter in our society. We live in a culture that has mainstreamed promiscuity. On my homepage I am treated to a daily succession of articles on popular culture and a few weeks ago there was one listing a variety of things "we" no longer believe. The "we" obviously, though perhaps unthinkingly is a reference to "we Americans." Among the items we no longer believe according to that article is that sex before marriage is wrong. Everyone has got that message. In the movies it is taken as a matter of course that sex with various partners is commonplace and uncontroversial. James Bond is every man. Young people; you may not appreciate how revolutionary this is. No doubt fornication and adultery were always a part of American life. They have always been part of human life as the Bible makes clear. But they were

never as much a part and they were never accepted as normal, morally acceptable, and even healthy behaviors until your own lifetime or just before it. But now they are. *Playboy* was once hugely controversial in our society. No longer. Indeed, the Hefner empire struggles to survive in an age when pornography is everywhere.

America largely follows Europe in cultural developments and certainly did so in regard to sexual permissiveness. I remember when I was in Amsterdam on a sabbatical in 1984 I hired a divinity student to help me with my Dutch. Apropos something we were reading in a Dutch Puritan of the 17th century, we fell to talking about sexual ethics then and now. He was sure that waiting until marriage for sex was psychologically harmful. Here was a future Reformed church minister convinced that biblical sexual ethics were repressive and unhealthy. Only in a revolutionary age could a substantial segment of the population be persuaded that it is psychologically healthy to have multiple sexual partners and that the society will be better off with marriage in tatters because it is no longer needed for sexual experience and sexual fulfillment.

I am reminded of G.K. Chesterton's observation.

"They have invented a phrase, a phrase that is a black and white contradiction in two words -- 'free love' -- as if a lover ever has been, or ever could be free. It is the nature of love to bind itself, and the institution of marriage merely paid the average man the compliment of taking him at his word." ["A Defense of Rash Vows," *The Defendant* (1904) 23]

What the confinement of the sexual life to marriage did, of course, was to force sex to remain attached to love, to commitment, to loyalty, and to the higher purposes of life, not least family and children. We are finding out what sex produces when it is detached from such things and becomes merely the expression of or, if we wanted a more accurate word, the release of physical desire. There is perhaps no force on earth so powerful to destroy the soul as sex detached from love, from honor, and from commitment. It is, of course, as well destructive of the body, from venereal diseases to the physical exhaustion of countless American women now caring for children alone because the men who impregnated them have moved on to greener pastures. The importance of the sexual dimension being tightly contained within the other dimensions of personal union in marriage was C.S. Lewis' point in *Mere Christianity* [95-96]

"The Christian idea of marriage is based on Christ's words that a man and wife are to be regarded as a single organism...the male and the female, were made to be combined together in pairs, not simply on the sexual level, but totally combined. The monstrosity of sexual intercourse outside of marriage is that those who indulge in it are trying to isolate one kind of union (the sexual) from all the other kinds of union which were intended to go along with it."

Well, we are finding out as a people how well sex works when it is ripped out of its intended context: a relationship of loyalty, love, and higher purpose.

Much more worrying, however, is how evangelical adults, young adults especially, have grown accustomed to a promiscuous lifestyle. I'm sure you have read, as I have, the results of various surveys that purport to reveal the sexual commitments and behaviors of Christian single adults. The results can vary widely, of course, depending upon how an "evangelical" is defined. For example, two separate surveys reported this time last year in *Christianity Today* differed dramatically in their results. One reported that 21% of single and never-been married evangelicals between the ages of 18 and 29 had never had sex, meaning, of course, that 80% had, outside of marriage of course. The other reported that 56% of such single Christians had never had sex. That is a huge difference, 21% to 56%. In the latter case evangelicals were defined more carefully as people who attended church, believed Christian doctrines, read the Bible and so on. Of those more narrowly defined single evangelical Christians 56% said they had never had sex. But take *that* survey, the one with the highest incidence of sexual purity. It still reported that 25% had been sexually active in the past three months (fully a quarter of Christian single adults) and that 19% more had been sexually active in the past, but not in the previous three months. To be sure, no one can be sure of the accuracy of these surveys. Their numbers could be high or low. But a great deal of other evidence confirms that Christian single adults are, in fact, having sex in unprecedented numbers. As you can understand, Christian colleges don't trumpet the news, but they are worried about the large number of their students who are "sexually active," the term of art nowadays for what used to be called "promiscuous."

Let there be no doubt about this. The Bible condemns any and all sexual relations outside of marriage. In the Bible the only people who are supposed to be sexually active are husbands and wives. Adultery is condemned; so is prostitution; *but so is fornication*. The term translated "fornication" in the KJV is actually a general term for sexual immorality. It does not refer explicitly to sex between unmarried adults, which is our ordinary use of the term fornication. The same term is used, for example, by the Lord in Matthew 19 when he says that divorce is forbidden *except in cases of porneia*. In that case *porneia* would primarily refer to adultery. So the question is sometimes asked, "Does the Bible actually forbid pre-marital sex? Is it actually required that those who are not married and those who never marry have no sexual life in that erotic sense of the term?"

And the answer is: "Of course the Bible forbids fornication. Like it or not, sex is not for everyone." And, while the Bible never says in so many words, "You cannot have sex before you get married," it makes the point repeatedly and emphatically.

1. The Law of Moses required a man who had sex with a young woman -- not rape but seduction, voluntary sex -- was required to marry the young woman or, if her father

refused, to pay the bride-price as if he were marrying her. And, once married, he was forbidden ever to divorce her for any reason. [Exod. 22:16-17; Deut. 22:29]

2. The law placed a young woman who was found not to be a virgin before marriage in the same category as a prostitute. It assumed that she consented to pre-marital sex insofar as she failed to bring the matter to anyone's attention. [Deut. 22:13-21]
3. Everywhere in the Bible, in the OT and the NT, it is marriage that is offered as the only proper way to control and express sexual desires. [Prov. 5; 1 Cor. 7]
4. I could cite text after text, but when the Bible says "Flee from sexual immorality (or *porneia*), it means -- and has rarely been doubted to mean -- any and all sexual relations outside of marriage. [Frame, 764-765; J. S. and P. D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 158-159]
5. Hence the famous statement of Paul in 1 Cor. 6:18-20:

"Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, you were bought with the price. So glorify God in your body."

According to the Bible, the only God-glorifying sex is between a husband and wife! Now, no one said that it is easy to be chaste, to abstain from sex until and unless one is married. Here is C.S. Lewis. [*Mere Christianity*, 89]

"Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues. There is no getting away from it: the old Christian rule is, 'Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence.' Now this is so difficult and so contrary to our instincts, that obviously either Christianity is wrong or our sexual instinct, as it now is, has gone wrong. One or the other. Of course, being a Christian, I think it is the instinct which has gone wrong."

And I would say the modern world, the modern western world especially, seen as a laboratory of sexual experimentation, has pretty well proved that our instincts have gone badly wrong and are corrupting us in frightening ways. We may indeed, you and I, may live to discover what the world will be like when every man is Hugh Hefner and every woman is Miley Cyrus. But few will like that world and no one will admire such a world!

As I said, no one said that sexual purity outside of marriage was easy or was ever supposed to be easy. It is an interesting fact that the Bible does not condemn fornication as unsparingly as it does adultery. There is a death penalty for adultery but not for fornication. On the other hand, there is no question that the Bible condemns fornication in no uncertain terms. There is also no question that the Bible teaches us to take pains to avoid this sin and expects the entire community to help us all do so.

Let me finish then with an overview of the Song of Songs which is, as you may have heard me say, a study in a young couple's progress to marriage while maintaining their chastity along the way. Surely it is important that the Bible should include a book devoted to this very issue of sexual purity until marriage. Let me remind you how this is taught in the Song of Songs. I can, alas, give you only a sketch; we haven't time to fill in the details, but even a sketch will serve our purpose tonight. I realize that I have given some of you this same material not so long ago, but it is a brand new understanding of the Song, one we are not well familiar with, and one that is so useful and helpful that Christian young people especially, and Christian parents need to learn it and be able to teach the Song accordingly.

As you know, the longstanding interpretation of the Song as an allegory of God's love for his people or Christ's love for his church is now widely abandoned and for good reason.

1. First, if an allegory, the Song lacks a key to unlock its meaning. In the great allegories of literature, we always know what things mean. In *Pilgrim's Progress* Bunyan's meaning is perfectly clear. His hero is a man named Christian. He flees from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. He meets along the way characters named Mr. Worldly Wiseman, Mr. Legality, Talkative, Faithful, and so on. He finds himself imprisoned in Doubting Castle but escapes using a key called Promise, and so on. But there is nothing remotely like this in the Song of Songs and, as a result, there has never been developed a consistent interpretation of the book. Everyone has his own guess about what virtually every verse means. Take a famous example. In 1:13 we read, "My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh that lies between my breasts." As a figurative expression of a young woman's love and longing for her fellow, as an image of him lying upon her heart that is not hard to understand. But in an allegory of Christ's love for the church, what do the two breasts signify? Well some Jewish interpreters have said Moses and Aaron, others two Messiahs, still others Joshua and Eleazar. Christian interpreters are likewise all over the map: some have seen the young woman's breasts as a reference to the church from which we feed, others a reference to the Old and New Testaments, others as a reference to the two great commandments, or the blood and the water, or the outer and inner man, and so on. Hard as they tried to interpret the Song they managed to make nonsense of one of the most beautiful poems in the world! In the Song, allegory dies from a thousand cuts.
2. But the allegorical interpretation of the Song died as well because from the later 19th century onward archaeology had supplied sufficient body of comparative literature -- love poems from the ancient near eastern world -- from which literature virtually all of the questions about particular figures of speech were answered. We can read the Song now as a love poem and with understanding and appreciation because that is so obviously what it is and because we now know what its many figures of speech mean.

But still, after all of that advance in understanding, the poem remained hard to interpret because it didn't seem to go anywhere. Some scholars actually came to believe that it was simply a collection of disparate love poems that had nothing to do with one another. Others invented a story for the book, such as a competition between King Solomon and a simple shepherd for the young woman's love. But recent study has, I think, unlocked the poem and wonderfully so. The new understanding is built on the recent appreciation of the Bible's literary artistry and the careful study of the literary techniques used by biblical authors and other authors of ancient near eastern literature. That led to the discovery that the Song of Songs is a poem in chiastic form, an inverted parallelism, with the outer sections, that is those at the beginning and the end of the poem, a match for one another, then the two sections inside of those matching one another, and the sections inside of those matching one another, and so on, until the central pivot is reached, the part of the poem in the middle that has no matching section. The narrative of the flood, for example, is written this way and a number of the Psalms reflect such a structure. Chiasm was a particularly popular literary device in the ancient world and one of its uses was, in a day before tables of contents or italicized type, to lay special emphasis on the central theme. The poem or the prose worked forward and backward to that theme found in the middle of a piece of writing. So in the Song of Songs. It is a chiasmus with a central section, the only section in which the young woman is referred to as a bride. The poem moves from both the front and the back toward the middle, from the single life to marriage.

1. Take 1:5-7. What do we learn here? The girl is in love. But her brothers -- there is no mention of a father in the Song and that has led some to suppose that the poem originated in an actual family situation in which the father had died and her brothers were now responsible for their younger sister -- her brothers think she is not ready for marriage. In her distraction she needs an outlet, so they put her to work on the family farm tending the grape vines. That is why she is tan; she's outside all day. She is a literal keeper of the vineyard, but there is a vineyard she has not kept, namely the vineyard of her heart, her love for the young man that she is being prevented from consummating.
2. Now go back to chapter 8:8-12, the parallel section to the one in chapter 1. When you are reading the Song through in your reading the Bible through the year program, and you've read the Song to this point trying to figure out what in the world is going on, you come at last to this: "We have a little sister and she has no breasts. What shall we do for our sister on the day when she is spoken for?" And you say to yourself, if your experience is anything like mine, "What in the world does that have to do with anything?" In a chiasmus we would expect a section parallel to that in chapter 1 *and that is what we find*. You'll notice that the ESV editors (as the NIV editors) have identified the speakers in vv. 8-9 as "Friends." But they begin by speaking of *their sister*. These are not her friends; they are her brothers. The chiastic interpretation is so new that it is not yet reflected in the editorial divisions of the Song. And the brothers say that they are going to protect her until she is old enough for marriage. But she then speaks, saying that she is ready for marriage; her lover certainly thinks that she is. Then, once again, she speaks of two kinds

of vineyards, a literal one and a figurative one. Her vineyard, her heart, is hers to give to the one she loves. In other words, the situation at the beginning and the end of the poem is the same: a young woman who wants to marry the young man she has fallen in love with, but is prevented by her brothers who think that she is too young.

3. We haven't time to work out the entire outline. We go on inside both from the front and the back to a date; we would call it a date. And you go on still further to the next sections and find again that they are parallel. (By the way, forget the chapter divisions altogether. They are completely inept and have nothing to tell us about the divisions of the poem.) In a chiasmus you would expect to find that the section just before that central section and the section just after it are parallel to one another, and that is just what we find. The central section extends from 4:1 to 5:1. In 3:1 we read, "On my bed by night I sought him who my soul loves..." What follows is a dream. Similarly in 5:2 we read "I slept but my heart was awake." What follows is a dream. The central pivot is surrounded by dreams.
4. The central section, as I said is the only one in which the girl is identified as a bride. The time for the wedding has come. In 4:1 we read of her "eyes behind the veil." The veil accents the wedding scene. Hebrew girls did not ordinarily wear veils but they did for their engagements and their weddings. Remember that's how Jacob got snookered into marrying Leah instead of Rachel. And in v. 9 we read of her as "the bride." The fellow is captivated by her beauty as we read on from 4:9, but still on the brink of the wedding the couple is sexually chaste. In v. 12 he describes her as a "garden locked," a "spring locked," and a "fountain sealed." "Garden, spring, and fountain" are all familiar references to the woman as an object of a man's sexual desire, both from elsewhere in the Bible, Proverbs 5 for example, and in other ancient near eastern love poems. But notice that the garden, spring, and fountain are *locked*. She is as yet unavailable to him.
5. But finally in 4:16 and 5:1 we have a description of sexual love-making in the familiar terms of ancient near eastern love poetry. Indeed, these are the only two verses in the poem of which that can be said. There are other expressions throughout the poem of sexual *desire and longing*, but only here, on the wedding night, do we find sexual *fulfillment*. What is noteworthy and another proof of this understanding of the Song is that 4:16 and 5:1 *are the exact center of the poem*. There are 111 lines of poetry before 4:16 and 111 lines of poetry after 5:1.

There is much more that might be said, but that is enough to give the gist. The poem is about a young couple in love and longing for one another nevertheless making their way to the wedding night in sexual purity. Here is the Bible's most positive and beautiful statement to the effect that sex is for marriage and only for marriage. The young people are helped to avoid the disaster of pre-marital sex by those who love them and are, in that way, as it were escorted to the marriage bed so that they might have the joy of untainted love; a love that, as the father in Proverbs 5 puts it, is "never to be shared with strangers."

Perhaps you remember Robert Browning poem, *Summum Bonum*, from school days, or when you were courting, you fellows, and you knew you were never going to impress her with one of your own poems. (Roses are red, violets are blue; your folks think you're swell and I do too.)

All the breath and the bloom of the year
 In the bag of one bee
 All the wonder and wealth of the mine
 In the heart of one gem
 In the core of one pearl all the shade
 And the shine of the sea
 Breath and bloom, shade and shine, wonder, wealth,
 And how far above them
 Truth that's brighter than gem
 Trust that's purer than pearl,
 Brightest truth, purest trust in the universe
 All were for me
 In the kiss of one girl.

Ladies, what the Bible teaches you is that such very likely will not be the experience of someone who has kissed a lot of girls before he got to you! One thing that has kept our culture from descending still faster into the fetid swamp of unrestrained sexual behavior, of sex as selfishness rather than sex as love, is that women still expect men to be faithful to them once love has been declared or marriage entered into. Very few women, for example, are content with a husband, or, for that matter, even a boyfriend who entertains himself with pornography, precisely because it is so obviously a betrayal of the exclusive union real love is supposed to be. It is, as it ought to be, demeaning to a woman for her man to be sexually fascinated with other women. It is mental if not physical adultery and women know it. Men do too, of course, which is why pornography, like adultery *per se*, is almost always practiced in secret. It is the behavior of a man who knows that what he is doing is offensive to his wife and a betrayal of her love. But if women know that they should not have to share their husband, even their boyfriend, with another woman, even if on a screen, why on earth do they suppose it a different thing to share him with other real women before their relationship or their marriage began. Do they suppose that he will have forgotten all about what it was like to make love to other women or, contrarily, that she will have forgotten what it was like to make love to other men? Of course not! It is one of the causes of the gnawing anxiety that afflicts so many marriages today, as it is the cause of so much of the actual infidelity, which, after all, is nowadays usually only the continuation of a practice begun and practiced before the marriage: sex as sheer entertainment, sex as recreation, sex as the pleasing of oneself. If such is sex in this culture, no wonder its relationship to marriage has become so attenuated. Marital sex is, in its very nature, a different thing, a higher thing, a thing connected to everything else. Sex outside of marriage is a much lower thing, an isolated thing, a thing connected to almost nothing else.

The Bible is fully aware of the pleasures of sexual love and of its power. Even the Nazirite vow did not require abstinence from sex. There is no celibate priesthood in the Bible; that was a catastrophic error visited upon the church because of a radically false understanding of spirituality or godliness that came into the early church from its cultural environment, not from Holy Scripture itself. As Milton has it in *Paradise Lost*, the Roman Catholic tradition is guilty of

Defaming as impure what God declares
Pure, and commands to some, leaves free to all.

There is a lot of celebration of sexual love in the Bible and not only in the Song of Songs; but it is sexual *love* that is celebrated, not sexual pleasure in and of itself. What the Bible commands to us is sexual expression *as an instrument of genuine love, the kind of love that is exclusive, loyal, faithful, and part of a total union between a man and a woman*. For that reason it is confined to marriage and must be so confined. It does not limit the sexual life of men and women to confine it to marriage; it is only in this way that it can be set free to become all that it should. It is when sex is taken outside of marriage that it becomes small, sick, selfish, and deadly. The commandments of God may be difficult to keep, but they are not burdensome. They show us how to live a truly good and happy life. And the fact is, everyone knows this, no matter how pagan their lifestyle; everyone knows this, no matter the relentless propaganda; everyone knows this. “In the keeping of the commandments of God there is a great reward.” [Psalm 19:11]