

Marriage No. 10**“The Language of Love: No. 1”****April 27, 2014****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

To refresh our memories after being away from our subject for two weeks, we took seven Lord’s Day evenings to consider the Bible’s *theology* of marriage; to answer the question: what is marriage? More recently we have begun to consider the Bible’s *ethics* of marriage; what it teaches about the responsibilities of husbands and wives in marriage; how they are to live and love in their marriage. We have so far considered the Bible’s emphasis on the distinction of genders: that men must sanctify their masculinity and women their femininity for the sake of their marriage. Odd as this may seem, obvious as the distinction is, it is not a simple thing to define manhood or womanhood in distinction from the other. It is something so fundamental and yet so intuitively perceived that it virtually defies analysis. We can speak of many significant physical and psychological differences between men and women, even different intellectual differences, the Harvard faculty notwithstanding; we can speak of different ways of social interaction, different patterns of emotional response, and so on. But to collect all of this in a comprehensive definition of manhood or womanhood has proved impossible to this point and, of course, is no longer being seriously attempted, politically incorrect as the entire subject has become. Remember what Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said about obscenity: “I can’t define it but I know it when I see it.” Well so with masculinity and femininity. The whole world has an idea of what these things are.

The Bible never gives us in so many words a definition of either manhood or womanhood, but we said it seems to assume that if godliness and Christlikeness are truly sought, those two different orders of human life will express themselves obviously enough and in the most positive and life-giving ways. In a few places in the Bible we are told to “Play the man.” But ordinarily we are told to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord on the assumption that the manhood and womanhood will take care of themselves. That was our first lesson in the ethics of marriage. Then last time we considered the typical marital sins of husband and wife, how it is that men and women carry different sinful tendencies into married life, irresponsibility in the former, discontentment in the latter.

Now we come to what is, I think, the most important piece of biblical ethical instruction regarding life in marriage. It is so large and so important a subject that it will take us two Sunday evenings to cover; but it is altogether worthy of the extra attention. Once again we return to the closing verses of Genesis 2, beginning at v. 23.

I had always known that vv. 23-24 were the Bible’s theology of marriage in a nutshell. If we didn’t know that, we would learn it as soon as we noticed that the two most important passages on marriage in the New Testament, Matthew 19 and Ephesians 5, both cite this foundational text

and draw their lessons from it. Indeed it is not too much to say that virtually everything the Bible subsequently says about marriage is simply the elaboration of the principles revealed in Genesis 2:23-24.

What I didn't see until much later is that this passage also gives us *the Bible's ethics of marriage in a nutshell*. We not only have reference to the husband's love of his wife in the Hebrew verb translated here "hold fast," and the consideration of marriage as *the primary* relationship of one's heart and life in the "leaving of parents and holding fast to one's wife," but we have as well mention made of the *primary instrument* of married love in v. 23: namely *speech*!

Let me remind you where we are when we come to the end of Genesis chapter 2. In Genesis 1 we are given a comprehensive summary of the creation, each of the six days and the concluding seventh. But, of course, what we really need to know about is the sixth day, the day on which human beings entered the world, because it is the story of human life that will be told in the remainder of the Word of God. So we have chapter 2 which functions like an insert on a map. If you buy a map of the State of Washington, you will unfold it to find on one side the entire state drawn to scale. But, of course, as Washingtonians know, to the pride of western Washingtonians and to the despair of those in the east, most of the population of the state is crammed into a small section of the state, the thin north-south strip on the eastern shore of Puget Sound. There are many more communities, roads, points of interest, and so on per square mile in the Puget Sound area than in any other part of the state. All that detail could not be put into the map of the entire state drawn to scale. So many things would have to be drawn in, so many names printed that in the Puget Sound area of the map all the details would run together, the name of one town obliterating the name of another. So the mapmakers provide you instead with a blow-up or a panel, either on the reverse or in a corner, with the Puget Sound drawn to a larger scale so that more detail can be added. Well, in a similar way, the detail that is added to the map of human life that we are given in Genesis 1 is provided for us in a panel or a blow-up of the sixth day. That is Genesis 2. The detail is added that was omitted in the summary account of chapter 1: the planting of the garden, the placing of the man in the garden to work it, the command given to the man about the trees in the garden, the naming of the animals, the creation of the woman, and her being given to the man to create the first marriage. Man's calling as a worker in the world, his sovereignty over the rest of creation -- the creation mandate as we often refer to it -- sexual differentiation, and the institution of marriage: it is all here in Genesis 2.

To be sure, we are not given as much information as we would like to have. We have many questions about life before the entrance of sin. Did the animals kill and eat one another? Did human beings kill animals and eat meat? Did the leaves turn brown and fall in the autumn? Did Adam have a belly button? The Bible shows no interest in the satisfaction of our curiosity. It tells us what we need to know to understand our place and our calling in the world, nothing more.

In the same way we do not have a narrative of married life before the fall into sin. Much as we may wish we did, much as we would love to know how Adam and Eve lived and loved in that perfect world, we have only these few words in vv. 23 and 24. However, if we do not have a video, at least we have a snapshot of a perfect marriage. And what do we find in the frame? We see a husband with his mouth open, praising, celebrating, and appreciating his wife. *Indeed, the only piece of recorded human speech uttered in the time before the fall is a husband's poem in praise of a wife.* Lest we miss the importance of this, juxtapose 3:12 with 2:23. In 3:12 we have the next thing that comes out of a husband's mouth concerning his wife.

“The woman whom you gave to be with me, *she* gave me fruit of the tree and I ate.”

No poem here, no appreciation; bitter accusation instead. The celebration and appreciation has soured into blame, reproach, and cowardly buck-passing. That's what sin did to marital speech. Speech that lifted up the woman has become speech that tore her down. It is not too much to say that those two texts, lying cheek to jowl with one another at the very headwaters of the Bible, depict the story of human marriage in both its agony and its ecstasy.

But if we are going to explore speech as the primary instrument of married love, as this text suggests it is, we should first pause to consider the power of speech itself. We must not make the mistake of taking the obvious for granted. The account of the life of mankind in the Bible begins with God *speaking* to man and with man *understanding* and *responding to* what God says. The Bible begins the narrative of human life with man already possessing the capacity for language. The remainder of the Bible -- which is, after all, words, sentences, and paragraphs (i.e. language) -- is the story of man speaking and listening. All of the vast array of human language -- narrative, command, instruction, conversation, poetry -- makes its appearance in Holy Scripture.

But do you realize how fundamental language is to everything we know and experience human life to be? If you stop to think about it, *this* is the power that makes of our lives something so unique and so superior to that of any other creature. Human life as we know it is created by the power and practice of speech. We think. We are *homo sapiens*, thinking man, true enough. Animals have some rudimentary power of thought. Ours is far greater to be sure. But that doesn't make the difference in and of itself. What makes the difference is that we can reduce our thoughts, all of our thoughts, to words and speak them -- whether the thought is very simple (“I'm hungry”) or complicated ($E=mc^2$) -- speak the thought and that same thought or the impact of that thought occurs in another mind. Of what use would human thought be without the power to communicate it to others? We are so used to this power that we fail to recognize how extraordinary it actually is. It is to language that we owe education -- the transmission of learning from one generation to another -- and so the accumulation of knowledge. And so it is to language that we owe the formation of culture, the creation of technology, and every advance in human achievement. You cannot imagine a single step of human progress having been taken without the

power of communication by language. *And, supremely, it is to language that we owe our relationships.*

We have been made in the image of God and that makes us persons in relationship with others. But relationships require communication; indeed, they are as good or bad as the communication that passes between the persons. It is no surprise to us -- we take this so much for granted -- that God speaks to man at the headwaters of his life or that man speaks in reply to God. It is so in any and every personal relationship. More on that next time. So as we think about speech in marriage, as the instrument of married love, it is well for us to stop and realize how fundamental speech is and must be to everything in human life. Only when we appreciate the phenomenal significance of the power of speech will we fully appreciate what that power must mean for a marriage. Once we realize the extraordinary nature of human language it will be easier for us to come to terms with how significant the communication through language must be in marriage, the second most significant relationship of human life, next to that between man and God.

In anticipation of this evening series on marriage I've been reading of late two fascinating studies of language as a power unique to human beings. One is by Thomas Suddendorf, Professor of Psychology at the University of Queensland in Australia. It is entitled *The Gap: The Science of What Separates Us from Other Animals*. Suddendorf deals with other differences between animals and human beings, such as the power of imagination and the moral sense, but he gives careful attention to the human capacity for content-full communication through language. The other book by Stephen Anderson, Professor of Linguistics, Psychology, and Cognitive Science at Yale, bears the clever title, *Doctor Dolittle's Delusion: Animals and the Uniqueness of Human Language*. Both books are delightfully well written, full of fascinating information, and come to the same conclusion: viz. that human beings have built in to them an extraordinary capacity to communicate what is on their minds in ways that other human beings can understand. Both books have many fascinating things to say about human language, what makes it what it is. We begin with Prof. Suddendorf.

“To find out what might be unique about the human communication system, we need to have a closer look at what characterizes human language. The first thing to note is that we speak not one but over 6,000 different languages. Furthermore, some people do not speak but instead use sign languages to express the same wealth of information with gestures. Others can use touch to read Braille with their fingertips. Our faculty for language transcends different modalities.

“The most fundamental feature of language is that it allows us to exchange thought. In conversations we connect the private world of our minds to the minds of others as we share attitudes, beliefs, desires, knowledge, feelings, memories, and expectations.

“[Noam] Chomsky [the so-called father of modern linguistics, longtime professor at MIT] argued that humans are innately predisposed to develop language. Numerous lines of evidence support this claim. Children acquire language rules effortlessly and without explicit instruction. They are not predisposed to learn a particular language -- a Japanese infant brought up in an Italian household will become fluent in Italian and vice versa -- but are able to distill the rules that govern their linguistic environment. They can then apply these rules in entirely new contexts. [Suddendorf, 64-73]

So far Prof. Suddendorf. Human language is an utterly remarkable power. It is open-ended: thoughts can be developed and communicated in ever increasing complexity and new words invented to meet new demands. We can use the same words in innumerable ways; combine them in sentences to mean very different things. This is as natural to us as breathing. As thought becomes more complicated so the language, even the sentence, gets more complicated to communicate it. What is more, the faculty of speech, by which the sounds that make up spoken language are produced, is likewise utterly unique. Animals cannot make most of the sounds that occur in human languages. [Anderson, 310] Neither scholar denies the utterly remarkable forms of communication that can be found in the animal kingdom. With his so-called dance -- itself a virtual miracle of physical communication -- the honeybee conveys the size of a recently visited food source or nesting site, the distance from the hive, and roughly its quality. [Suddendorf, 81; Anderson, 64] The research by which this has been learned is itself an example of astonishing ingenuity.

Humpback whales have large brains and seem to sing, at least so it seems to us. They may even be able to learn songs from one another. “Are they talking about us behind our backs?” asks Prof. Suddendorf. “Disappointingly, the answer is ‘probably not.’ The possible information content of a humpback whale song is estimated to be low indeed -- just enough to say, ‘Hello, baby. Check me out.’ [81]

I am tempted to instruct, entertain, and amaze you by reproducing larger portions of the argument of these two books, but I must restrain myself. The thesis of both books is that language is unique to human beings. There is nothing else like it in the world; nothing really remotely like it in the world. But that actually is a controversial assertion nowadays. Let me make the point with a few paragraphs from *Dr Doolittle’s Delusion*.

“For much of human history, use of language has been cited as a characteristic that defines human beings and sets us apart from all other animals. Since the 1970s, though, the purported uniqueness of this capacity has come under attack. It seems fair to say that the current understanding in the popular press is that the conception of language as an ability limited to humans is not only outmoded but even a kind of prejudice that science has shown to be wrong -- along with many other supposed differences between humans and nonhumans.... Other animals, this opinion holds (specifically higher apes, such as

chimpanzees), can be taught a human language and can use it to communicate. And anyone who says otherwise is a rank species-ist.

“All of this takes for granted that, with proper training, some nonhuman primates (and perhaps other animals as well) can be provided with the gift of language, even if their species has not yet figured it out.

“Yet...a proper appreciation of animals’ cognitive capacities in this domain [of language] is threatened by a band of unsympathetic characters who are ‘intent on preserving language and reason for the exclusive use of humans.’ These are the so-called linguistics experts -- folks such as the present author. Intent on defending the exclusivity of our scientific turf, we comprise curmudgeons, romantics, and/or elitists who cling to human uniqueness with respect to language in the face of the apparent facts.

“Actually...linguists would be ‘delighted and intrigued to discover’ language in the relevant sense in the other primates -- or in cockroaches for that matter. When we look closely, however, (and experimenters have tried *awfully* hard), that is not what we find. It appears to be an empirical result, not merely an anthropocentric prejudice, that human language is *uniquely* human, just as many complex behaviors of other species are uniquely theirs.” [3-5] Again, summing up his findings in the conclusion of his book, Anderson writes:

“...much research on animal communication has been driven by a need to show that there is nothing uniquely human about human natural language.

“The structure of natural language is just another skill to be developed by general learning mechanisms and applied in accordance with the organism’s overall cognitive capacity, this theory goes. True, it is unlikely that these general mechanisms as they exist in, say, squirrels are up to the demands of learning to speak French, but in higher primates at the very least, language ought to be accessible in its fundamentals. The claim that language is possessed only by humans...is another example of a misplaced superiority complex on the part of human scientists and philosophers. [But says Professor Anderson,]

“An a priori argument due to Chomsky might give us pause here. He reasons that animals *could not* have the cognitive capacity to learn a language (in the sense of a human natural language), in that they never display this capacity in nature. To say that an animal *could* manifest an ability as evolutionarily advantageous as language, but simply has never done so, is as ridiculous as saying that somewhere an island exists on which birds are perfectly capable of flight, but have not yet thought to do so and need human instruction to induce them to fly.

“Although some (especially in the ape language research community) have rejected this argument out of hand, it seems persuasive to me, and what we have seen in this book so far is fully consistent with its premise. No animal has been shown to control, either naturally or under conditions of laboratory research, a system with the central properties of human language. We conclude that there is a simple reason for this: Language as we know it is a uniquely human capacity, determined by our biological nature, just as the ability to detect prey on the basis of radiated heat is a biological property of (some) snakes.” [306-307]

Both of these men, Anderson and Suddendorf, are committed to the theory of evolution, though they are sparing in their efforts to explain how such remarkable powers could have developed by accident. Chomsky himself, the father of modern linguistics, imagined that a significant mutation, perhaps a mere one hundred thousand years ago, a mere blink in biological history, resulted in a great leap forward, giving our ancestors the precious gift of open-ended language. Chomsky’s proposal was one of those scenarios that the late Harvard paleontologist, Stephen Jay Gould, ridiculed as a “just so story,” and it was rightly greeted with scorn by the biological evolutionary community. No single mutation, no hundred or a thousand mutations could produce such an unbelievably complex system as that of human language. Prof. Anderson is candid about how little any of this can be explained as a product of evolutionary change. [308-310] But, then, how did it develop? Chomsky proposed a virtual miracle precisely because he could not imagine any other explanation for the vast difference from all other animals that human language represents or for the relative suddenness of its appearance in the history of life. Anderson can only speak of guesses and proposed scenarios and the grand evolutionary “perhaps.” I confess to remaining baffled reading books like this that so many intelligent people face these impassable barriers and nevertheless find no difficulty in believing that time and chance somehow vaulted over them. There is a spiritual dimension to this phenomenon of faith in a theory so clearly incapable of explaining the breathtaking perfections of nature.

But leaving the origin of the language capacity aside -- for we know where it came from -- in respect of language there is indeed, as Suddendorf puts it, a gap, a huge gap, between human beings and the next closest primates, in fact a large number of such immense gaps. Anderson concludes his scintillating study with the famous quote from the Greek poet Archilochus. “The fox has many tricks, the hedgehog only one; one good one.” To which he adds, “And our trick is a really good one.” [324] Well human beings are hardly one trick ponies, but language is an utterly remarkable power, utterly mysterious and wonderful in its nature, and it is the foundation of everything we know human life to be. It is *the* great instrument of human life. So it should come as no surprise to any of us that it will be the sanctification of language that will in many respects represent the sanctification of our lives. And it will be the sanctification of language that will represent the sanctification of our relationships and so the sanctification of language that will represent the sanctification of our marriages.

We human beings are thinkers who have the astonishing capacity to communicate our thoughts to one another. We haven't time this evening to go further in developing the role of speech in the life of marriage -- and I say speech because in marriage, as in many human relationships, most of the communication is oral, not written; by the spoken word not by gesture or the written word -- we'll apply this fundamental truth about human life and human relationships next time.

But I leave you this evening with this. Although we tend to take it almost entirely for granted, one of the most amazing features of human life, of your life and of mine as God created it, is the power of communication, the power of language, by whatever method it is employed: the tongue, the pen, or the hand. Language is the life of any relationship. It is no surprise whatsoever, when you think about it, that God communicates to us through language -- his Holy *Word* -- and that we communicate to him through language -- what else is prayer, but as John Knox put it "earnest and familiar talking with God." Language is a very large part of our humanity.

And, if that is so as it is, then language must be an essential, a vital, a determinative feature of any marriage. Relationships are as the communication that passes back and forth within them. The words we speak, the choice we make as to which words to say, will have everything to do with what sort of marriage we have. Language is not the sole but it is *the* instrument of married love. We'll elaborate that truth next time. But you can begin already to work it out for yourself: to consider what it must mean *for you* that the snapshot of a perfect marriage given us in Genesis 2:23 shows us a man, it might have shown a woman but it shows a man, with his mouth open saying just the right things to and about his wife.