

“Marry Me”

All You Need is Love: Pt.4

We’re doing a short series on love – because we started on Valentines weekend. But Christians believe that God is love. And so to understand *what* love is, we have to understand *who* God is. And so we’re looking every week at another one of the images that God gives us to describe who He is. We’ve said that most people - all of us to some degree - tend to have a one-dimensional view of God. We like to think of God as “this” rather than “that.” But the Bible says God is *as much* a friend as a king. He is *as much* a tender father as a judge. If you take *any one* of the images God gives us in the Bible and lift it up to the *exclusion* of the others - or even heavily *favor* it over the others - you come out with a one-dimensional God and therefore not a *real* God. Because *real* persons are complex. And you won’t have personal engagement.

Therefore, in a sense, we’re saying unless you understand God as *all* of these, you don’t really know who God is. So we’re looking at God as father *and* as friend *and* - today - as lover *and* next time as king. And today’s metaphor in some ways is the most astonishing of all of the claims. God comes and says He wants a *spousal* relationship with his people. He comes and says, “I want to be spouse and lover to the people I relate to.”

You find this theme over and over again in the Bible. Now, for this series, we’ve been sticking to some pretty lengthy passages from them Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. And we’re really going to push that to it’s limits today. Today’s passage of scripture is actually the longest chapter in all the prophetic books of the Bible – but unlike the new Batman movie I saw this weekend, I’m not going to subject you to *all* of it in one sitting! But I am going to read you some chunks. And I have to warn you – this is going to contain some shocking material. Some people like to bring their children to service with them instead of put them in the kids program – and I have no problem with that. I just need to warn you that – this is *adult* service – and sometimes the Bible addresses adult themes. And that’s never been more true than in Ezekiel chapter 16.

In fact, let me just read you a warning from one of the leading commentaries – generally regarded as a theologically conservative commentary series by the way - “No one presses the margins of literary propriety as severely as Ezekiel...[his vocabulary choices] present problems for the commentator, who must clarify the author’s intention, and even more so for the modern translator, who feels constrained to tone down the language in respect to sensitivities to the target readership. But the semipornographic style is a deliberate rhetorical device designed to produce a strong emotional response.” (Block, *NICNOT*, 466-467)

Some of you just got *real* interested! And rightfully so. In some ways, the metaphor of God as lover is the most astounding, most graphic, most gripping and, in some ways, the most wrenching of *all* of the pictures God gives us to tell us who He is. Ezekiel 16 is a love story – a drama – presented in three acts. But it ain't a Hallmark Channel love story! Like I said, I can't read it all to you, but I want to structure the sermon around these three acts and show God the smitten lover, then secondly, God the wounded lover, and then lastly, God the faithful lover. As smitten lover we see what God *wants* for us, as wounded lover we see God tell us what's *wrong* with us, and as faithful lover God shows us how He's *fixing* us.

First of all, The smitten lover, which we see in the first act. Let me read you our first chunk of the story. **Ezekiel 16:3–10**, *“This is what the Sovereign Lord says to Jerusalem: Your ancestry and birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. 4 On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean, nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloths.*

5 No one looked on you with pity or had compassion enough to do any of these things for you. Rather, you were thrown out into the open field, for on the day you were born you were despised. 6 Then I passed by and

saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, “Live!”

7 I made you grow like a plant of the field. You grew up and developed and became the most beautiful of jewels. Your breasts were formed and your hair grew, you who were naked and bare. 8 Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine.

9 I bathed you with water and washed the blood from you and put ointments on you. 10 I clothed you with an embroidered dress and put leather sandals on you. I dressed you in fine linen and covered you with costly garments.

The first thing that happens - when the curtain goes up, as it were - is...what? “On the day you were born your cord was not cut. You were not washed with water. Rather, you were thrown out.” Now what we have here is a newborn baby girl thrown out into the field to die of exposure. *Why?* Well this was not only common then, but it's common actually in numbers of places in the world now.

But for too many times and places in human history, the status of women was very low and daughters were a liability over sons. *Sons* could get into places of influence and power and help the family. Daughters weren't very profitable. We have a shocking archaeological find from around this time in Egypt that goes to explaining the culture behind this verse. They dug up a letter from an Alexandrian merchant to his pregnant wife when he was away from her on business.

It's just a mundane list of things. He's talking to her about "Don't forget this and that," and then suddenly, right in the middle of the letter, he says very casually - it's shocking because it's so mundane - "Oh yes, and don't forget, if it's a girl, throw it out." So this happened all the time. But *God* comes into the field, and sees her and says, "*Live.*" And He supports her.

Now, the first thing the listeners of this would have said was, "What an incredible act of grace. This isn't a very profitable thing. She's abandoned. It's a poor investment to raise her up and support her. She has no family you can get connected to now. She has no dowry." So the first thing a listener would look at is for God to come into the field and take an abandoned girl child and say "Live" and give her a place to live and support her and so on would be an *incredible* act of grace.

But here's the second shock. If this really happened and suddenly she was brought onto the estate, do you know what would have been said to her every day of her life, over and over and over again by the people of that time? They would have said, "You know, you're really lucky. You are a lucky young lady. You're worthless. No one wanted you. You should thank your lucky stars that your master brought you in and let you live as a servant."

But that's not what happens. See everybody would have said, "Wow, this is incredible that God would bring her in. She ought to thank her lucky stars." But what does it say in **verse 8**? See, he came back – years later, after she was grown – and "*I gave you my solemn oath and **entered into a covenant** with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and **you became mine.***" What is that?

Where do you make an oath and enter a covenant and say "I am yours and you are mine?" At a *wedding*. So it's not just that he came by and saved this baby and provided money for her to be raised in an orphanage or something. He came back when she had matured and *married* her – don't worry too much about the age difference, first of all, they wouldn't have back then and secondly...it's just a story. It's a parable.

And here is what the parable is showing us. Here is a picture of God saving this person by grace and then coming and saying three things. I'll put it this way. "I don't want you simply as a remote inferior; I want you as a life partner. I don't want you simply to give me dutiful, even grateful, service; I want your intimate love. I don't want you as a scullery maid; I want you as my bride."

Now, we are God's servants, because He is our King – we're going to look at that next week. But remember the whole point of this series – God is complex. There are multiple aspects to His loves and we dare not lift any over and above the others. There's always a tension. But, over and over, *God* says, "I'm not *satisfied* with relating to you as a king to his subjects; I want you as my *bride*, I want you as my *spouse*, I want you as my *lover*..." This is astounding! We talked about this last week. Isn't it amazing? We said we don't really know of any other religion that dares to talk about God as your friend, because friends open their minds to each other. Friends open their hearts to each other.

But lovers *give* their hearts to each other, and God *dares* to use this image. For example, the prophet Isaiah is addressing a barren woman and he tells her to sing, sing for joy and do not be afraid – a woman with no children in the ancient world, who would take care of her in her old age? – but the prophet says don't worry about that. Why? **Isaiah 54:5**, "*For your Maker is your husband— the Lord Almighty is his name.*"

Or **Isaiah 62:5**, very directly, "*As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.*" The builder of all the stars in the galaxy gets down on his knee and says, "Will you be my spouse?"

Now what does this mean? I don't know! But I'm not done, so I have to give it a shot. It means this is what God wants for us. He wants *this* kind of relationship with us. And this *is* an astounding thing. Let me just suggest three things that are unique about this relationship *over* a friend relationship, *over* a parent relationship, certainly *over* a king/subject relationship, that we wouldn't know about if God didn't have the *audacity* to use this lover image. But here they are.

First of all, God is calling us into an **exclusive relationship**. See, parents can have multiple children and friends can have multiple friends, but the Bible says - and *most* people agree by common sense it's a matter of sheer justice and a matter of emotional necessity - you can only have one spouse. And counselors will tell you that unless the marriage relationship is the *priority* relationship, unless your marriage comes before your work, unless your marriage even comes before your children, unless your marriage comes before everything else, your marriage is on its way into erosion. It's the primacy of marriage.

And therefore, the first thing God is saying to you here is this; “You must love me not as one thing among many. I must not be just one subject among many things in your life. I have to be the primary thing in your life. You must love me more than you love your family. You must love me more than you love your parents. You must love me more than you love your children. You must love me more than you love your human spouse. You must love me more than you love your job. I have to be the *supreme* thing in your life.” That’s the first thing God’s inviting us to.

Secondly, it’s a **comprehensive** relationship. You know, you can have a pretty good friendship, even a close friendship, and it not completely affect everything else in your life. But one of the things you learn almost the day after you get married... You wake up and you realize “I’m not an independent agent anymore. I can’t just wander off like I could when I was single. I have to report in from time to time.”

When God calls us into a spousal relationship, He is saying, “There is no part of your life that must not relate to me. Every single part of your life, every area of your life, has to be brought in line with me.” So the lover metaphor shows us – in a way that the other metaphors don’t - that God is inviting you into an exclusive relationship and a comprehensive relationship. But then thirdly, it’s a **delightful** relationship. To be delighted in a aesthetic kind of way.

What do I mean by that? You must mutually find each other beautiful. Those people who have been able to not only maintain a marriage over the decades but a *lover* marriage over the decades - in other words, people who after 20, 30, 40 years of marriage are not just still spouses but *lovers* - have learned something.

They know that because of our human frailty, in the very beginning, in order to develop that relationship, we needed the training wheels, the crutch, of youthful physical beauty. That person needed to *look* good. But one of the things you learn over the years is, that as time goes on, you start to be able to find the beauty of the person’s *heart*, the person’s *character*, yes, for lack of a better term, the person’s *soul*. It begins to delight you so much that when aging starts to take away that physical beauty, it does not diminish your view.

And therefore, what are we saying? This is something we all know. Spousal love depends on a mutual joy and delight in the *excellencies* of the other. It’s an *aesthetic* thing. You need to look, and you need to just *exalt* in the beauties and excellencies of the other person. This is *different* than any of the other relationships. It is very, very different. And you see it right here in the text.

In other words, in a marriage you both need to - not only say, but to absolutely get fuel in your tank - out of saying to one another, "You are the most beautiful of jewels." Do you see God saying that? He's not just stating the fact, "Oh, by the way, you're pretty good-looking." He is *enjoying*. And therefore, what does this mean to our relationship with God? Let me get at this.

If you know God as a father *only*, your prayer life will be filled with petition. "Give me, give me, give me, Dad." Because Dad has things I need. If your understanding of God goes a little bit beyond that to *friend*, your prayer life will go beyond petition to the relief of confession, of admitting your faults, admitting your weaknesses, just letting your hair down. We talked about that last week.

But if you ever get to the place where you come to hear the call, the invitation, into God as your lover, your prayer life - your *whole* life - will be shot through with adoration. It'll be the main engine of your life in *two* ways. Because you see, a love relationship, a spouse relationship, means there's *mutual* joy in the beauty of the other. As Jonathan Edwards said, religious people find God useful, but Christians find God beautiful for who He is in Himself.

That's the difference between being religious - just *using* God - and actually being in a love relationship with God. It means, on the one hand, your life is filled with praise and adoration. Not only your prayer life, but your *whole* life. But on the other hand, you're living out of the inner joy and ecstasy of knowing God's looking at *you* like this. When God says, "I am the groom and you are the bride," He dares to say, "I'm as ravished with you as that groom is when he sees the bride turn the corner and come down the aisle toward him."

See *religion* is, "Well, if I really try hard and if I really live a good life, *maybe* God will answer my prayers. If I go to church and avoid sin, *maybe* God will take me to heaven one day." That's *not* what this is! This is *relationship*. Mutual joy in the aesthetic beauty of the other. Mutual delight. Not only moved by *His* beauty, but knowing He's moved by *yours*. And therefore, to have this kind of relationship takes...what?

First, it takes a theology that makes it credible to believe God is ravished with our beauty. Do you know what I'm saying? I'm going to give it to you the rest of this sermon. You need the theology. Theology just means right thinking about God. You need to believe certain things that make it *credible*. It's nice to talk about, but a lot of the people in this room do not have a theology that makes it *possible* or credible to believe this.

You might be moved for a moment, but if you don't get a belief structure about your own nature and about God's nature and about the nature of the world, you'll walk out there and you'll never be able to get it back. You'll get a *feeling*, but you don't have a *theology* that makes it credible for you to believe day in and day out that God finds you ravishingly beautiful.

And secondly, you need to learn the existential skills of living in light of knowing you're God's delight. And that's what God wants for you, nothing less. He's the smitten lover. I dared to call God a smitten lover – but He did it first. Look at Him. He's saying, "You are the most beautiful of jewels." He's doing it on purpose. It's *voluntary* that God has given us His heart, but He *has*, and God says, "Now I want you to give me *yours*." So not only do we learn an amazing amount by what God *wants* for us in Act One as a smitten lover...

But secondly, The wounded lover. By looking at the second act and seeing God as the wounded lover, we learn all about what's really fundamentally *wrong* with us. Now what do we see in the second act? What happens after the wedding? It's a lot and I can't cover it all, but let me give it a shot. **Ezekiel 16:15–22**, "*But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his. 16 You took*

some of your garments to make gaudy high places, where you carried on your prostitution. Such things should not happen, nor should they ever occur.

17 You also took the fine jewelry I gave you, the jewelry made of my gold and silver, and you made for yourself male idols and engaged in prostitution with them. 18 And you took your embroidered clothes to put on them, and you offered my oil and incense before them. 19 Also the food I provided for you—the fine flour, olive oil and honey I gave you to eat—you offered as fragrant incense before them. That is what happened, declares the Sovereign Lord.

20 And you took your sons and daughters whom you bore to me and sacrificed them as food to the idols. Was your prostitution not enough? 21 You slaughtered my children and sacrificed them to the idols. 22 In all your detestable practices and your prostitution you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, kicking about in your blood.

I wish I had time to address all the details. But the main thing you see, first of all, in the second act is every gift the bride received - children, beauty itself, the jewelry, the garments, every single thing - she is now using to look gorgeous and to attract *other* lovers. She's giving these things God gave her to other lovers and other gods. And it just gets worse and worse.

There's an awful place a few verses later where it literally says, "you spread your legs for anyone who came by the town square." This is addiction. It's very graphic. But we're talking about sexual addiction. I read three different commentaries that all used the term "nymphomaniac tendencies" – that is *not* a normal Bible study day!

And like all addictions, it wrecks you in so many ways. Look at what this behavior results in. **Verses 39–40**, "*Then I will hand you over to your lovers, and they will tear down your mounds and destroy your lofty shrines. They will strip you of your clothes and take your fine jewelry and leave you naked and bare. 40 They will bring a mob against you, who will stone you and hack you to pieces with their swords.*"

This isn't vengefulness, by the way. This is what all addictions eventually do. You give yourself to them and they destroy you. God didn't *make* her lovers hack her to pieces. God doesn't punish you for being enslaved to cocaine, for example, the addiction itself is the punishment. God doesn't say, "You're a drunk so I'm going to make you get fired from your job as punishment." Sometimes we say, "Why would God do this to me?" God *didn't*. You being drunk made you lose your job. I think my favorite sign over at El Arroyo was the one that said, "Well, well, well...if it isn't the consequences of my own actions."

Now, this is a compelling story, but it's important to remember it's just a parable. This didn't actually happen. But let me tell you what *did* happen. Ezekiel is prophesying to people after Jerusalem has been sacked and after the people have been taken away. See the fact is, historically speaking - we're going to apply it to ourselves – but historically speaking, Israel mixed in the worship of God with the worship of the gods of other nations.

And what God is saying is, "You'll give yourself to those gods of other nations, but then those nations and those gods, in a sense, will show up." And they did. "They'll abuse you. They'll stone you. They'll hack you to pieces. They'll carry you off in slavery." And that's what happened. Now what is God saying here? What do we learn here?

Postmodern people have a lot of trouble with the idea of sin. We don't like the word. We don't like the concept. And yet we all know there is such a thing as evil. We know there are things that are *wrong* with us. We know there are things that are wrong with our society. And as a result, there are just tons of very scholarly books being written all the time now saying, "We have to find a way for society to get a grip on this. Where can we get a concept of sin and evil that's coherent to us?"

Postmodern people have trouble with the idea of an absolute moral law, because they've seen historically, whenever somebody holds up an absolute moral law as a standard for sin and righteousness, how often that has been used as a way of oppressing people or getting power for their particular group or class. The ones who are proclaiming "*the truth*" are usually trying to get on top. And so there's a fear of all that. Justifiably so.

Well, I'm not going to argue about that. Next week we're going to talk about God as King. We're going to talk about some of those questions. But I would like to suggest in this picture of God as a lover we have a *compelling* understanding, a *radical* new perspective, by the Bible on what sin is. The Bible gives us a definition of sin here that I think is actually very palatable for postmodern people. I'll put it to you three ways, and then I'll elaborate just a little bit.

What this is saying is sin is not so much doing bad things, but it's worshiping good but wrong things. Sin is not so much breaking God's rules; sin is breaking God's heart. Sin is not *only* a violation of the power of God and the majesty of God; it's a violation and an abuse of the *vulnerability* of God and the *openness* of God. And until you see sin as not primarily breaking God's rules as much as breaking God's heart, you don't get it. You don't understand sin. Look carefully.

First, with this perspective, what's the essence of sin according to this? Do you notice how it goes back and forth between the image of adultery and the image of idolatry? Why? Because it's saying they're the same thing. Or put it this way. *Every* human being needs to feel desirable at a soul level. "What will make me lovable? What will make me desirable? What will make people *want* me?" Every human being is after that. Every human being is looking for that.

What are you going to look to for that? And what this text is telling us is, *whatever* that thing is...Are you going to look to your financial success? Are you going to look at your talent? Are you going to look at a nice family? Are you going to look to social power or peer approval or academic success? What are you going to look to? Everybody looks to something. *Everybody* says, "If I have *that*, then I'll know I'm desirable. If I have achieved that, if I attained that, if I've received it, then I'll know I'm desirable."

This text is saying, that at the spiritual level, whatever you're looking to for that, you have gotten into bed with. See, sexual love is considerably more intense and obsessional than friend love or parent love. Right? What we're being told here is this; anything you look to besides God as your source of desirability - anything you look to as your real meaning in life, anything you look to to make you desirable that's more important than God - becomes your lover god, becomes an alternate god, and you become a love slave to it - you are fatally attracted to it.

Whoa! This imagery is raw. This image is amazing. And yet, what does that mean? It means this is a much more profound understanding of sin. Look, for example, at the rule, “Do not lie. Do not bear false witness.” If you break the rule, you’ve broken a rule, but *why* do you ever break the rule? Why do you ever lie? Think about the last time you did. It shouldn’t be *too* hard.

You lie because, at that minute, there is something you’re in bed with. There is either human approval or the need for a good job. There’s *something* more important to you than God. There’s something you *have* to have to feel desirable. And therefore, what this is telling us is the essence of sin is not breaking the rules; the essence of sin is always *spiritual adultery*.

That at the deepest level, there is a need you have spiritually that is actually analogous to the sexual need in the physical realm. There is a need to get in bed with someone. There is a need to say, “If I have you, then I’m attractive. Then I’m beautiful. Then I know I’m worth something.” And God says, “*Anything* more important than me in your life has become your lover god. You are a love slave to it. You are attracted to it.” Well, what’s wrong with that?

It’s an abusive relationship. Remember? The lovers show up and hack her to pieces. Now, it would be fairly easy to read this and say, “Oh, this is the old vengeful double standard. If a woman back in those days committed adultery they killed her.” No, don’t forget. Historically, what is God saying? God is saying, “If you worship any other god” - and the Israelites constantly did - “if you worship other gods of other nations, they will treat you poorly.” And they always did as a matter of historical record.

There are a lot of people in this room who so far think I’m exaggerating. You say, “Well I know it’s pretty important to me that I got into a really good school and I work hard for my grades. I know it’s important to me that my wife or my husband looks as good as he or she does. I know I want to earn a lot of money. I know these things are important to me, but wait a minute here. They’re not my *gods*. They’re not my *idols*.” Let me tell you, you won’t know until you *fail* them.

You won’t know that your physical beauty is an idol...until your looks start to go. But when they do you’ll start to get despondent. You’ll start to get anxious. Why? It’s because it’s your god showing up to hack you to pieces. Your god will say, “You’re ugly.” Or until you find out you’re just not getting ahead and there are a whole lot of other people your age who are moving up the ladder a lot faster, and the next thing you know, you’ll start to get despondent.

You'll start to get empty. You'll start to get really depressed even. And deep inside there's a voice saying, "You should be further ahead than you are right now." At the bottom of every anxiety attack – now, there *is* such a thing as chemical imbalance, I'm not so much talking in the physical as in the spiritual. But spiritual malaise do have physical manifestations - but at the bottom of all that despondency, at the bottom of all those things...Do you know what those things are? Those are your gods showing up to hack you to pieces, because they're not your true lovers.

Until you understand sin like this, until you understand sin is breaking not so much the *rules* of God but the *heart* of God, that sin is not so much doing bad things but worshiping and getting into bed with good but wrong things, you're going to be wondering, "Why is my life going the way it's going?" This explains it. This explains what's wrong with you. So not only do we learn here by seeing God as the smitten lover, what He *wants* for us. And seeing God as the wounded lover, what's *wrong* with us...

But lastly, in Act Three, we see God as the faithful lover. In this last part we see how what's wrong with us can be *fixed*. Now if you're a thoughtful listener – and you know, the great thing about Austin is an awful lot of you are very, very intelligent and thoughtful, and you listen carefully. Therefore, you keep me on my toes.

And those of you who are out there like that are thinking, "Where did God make himself vulnerable to us? I mean, this sounds really moving, but where did *that* happen?" Or if you go back to the first point, you might be thinking, "Um, if there *is* a creator God, we're just little insignificant dust specks here. How in the world could God ever be ravished with our beauty? How could that be possible?"

Well, the answer is right here. And as with most everything concerning the true, real, complex God, there's a degree of mystery to it. Looks at two verses. **Ezekiel 16:59**, "*This is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'I will deal with you as you deserve, because you have despised my oath by breaking the covenant.'*" Ah, that makes sense, quid pro quo; you stab my back, I'll stab yours.

But don't stop just yet; next verse, **v.60**, "*Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you.*" And right here we run head-long into *the* narrative tension that propels virtually *every* part of the Hebrew Scriptures. Do you know what the narrative tension is? Over and over and over again you see God, on the one hand, saying things that sound *unconditional* and, on the other hand, things that sound *conditional*.

What is “what you deserve”? If you break the covenant, what’s what you deserve? Common sense and the Bible tell you. If you reject, you’re *rejected*. If you *leave* the covenant, you’re *left*. Right? That’s common sense. And over and over God says, “If you turn from me, I will turn from you.” There are lots and lots of conditional statements. He says, “If you’re faithful to me, I’ll be faithful to you. If you turn from me, I’ll turn from you.” Because He’s a holy God and He’s a majestic God and He’s a just God.

But then *sometimes* God turns right around and says, “I’ll *never* leave you. I’ll never let you go.” And sometimes the two are so juxtaposed together – like here - you say, “How is this possible?” Well, the answer to how God can say both verse 59 and verse 60, both “I will rain down justice on what you’ve done” and at the same time “I will never let you go” is at the very end of the chapter. **V.63**, “*Then, when I make atonement for you...*”

By the way, this is a Hebrew word that you should be familiar with. It’s the word “*kippur*”. What is Yom Kippur. It’s “the Day of Atonement.” And that word “atonement” is a very helpful word to us in English under the circumstances in this context. What does atonement mean? Pull it apart. At-one-ment. How is God going to make us one? How is God going to make our cut-up pieces whole?

Only if you understand all the sweep of this incredible biblical theme of God as our spouse in the Bible can you understand what happened in John chapter 2, at that wedding feast at Cana, and only if you understand John 2, the wedding feast at Cana, can you understand everything God says here in all of these incredible passages in the Old Testament about spousal love. Let’s fast forward; What happened there?

Jesus first miracle took place at a wedding. He is at the reception with his family, and his mother, Mary, discovered that the couple had run out of wine – picked the wrong caterer, didn’t have enough money, something. And in those days that was a social disaster. No wine, no wedding. And like a good Jewish mother, Mary thinks, “My son can fix this.”

And so she says, “They’re out of wine, do something about it,” and Jesus looks at her and he kind of snaps at her. Interesting verse, **John 2:4**, “*“Woman, why do you involve me?” Jesus replied. ‘My hour has not yet come.’*” What? Well, for explanation, every place in the gospel of John where Jesus uses the word “hour” - or the narrator John uses the word “hour” - it means the hour of his *death*. So Mary has said, “Get them more wine for the wedding,” and Jesus says, “It’s not my time to die yet.” Is that baffling? Only if you don’t understand *this...*

Jesus Christ is looking at his mother and saying, “Mom...like almost every 30-year-old single person I know, when I’m at somebody’s wedding reception, I’m sitting around thinking about what *my* wedding is going to be like. But I know something other people don’t know. If someday *I’m* going to provide wine for *my* wedding, if someday I am going to have my bride fall into my arms, if I’m going to have this joyful day, I have to make atonement.”

“There’s a barrier between the Father and human beings who have sinned. If I’m going to raise the cup of festal joy at my wedding feast, I’m going to have to drink the cup of the divine wrath of God, the eternal justice of God. I’m going to have to go through *my hour*. The wine I’m going to have to provide if I’m ever going to have this spousal love with my bride, with my people, is the cup of my blood.”

And only if you understand that, does everything fall into place. Do you see that? Do you get that? *Where* does God make Himself vulnerable to us? You know spouses make themselves vulnerable. Spouses open their hearts. Spouses strip naked. On the cross Jesus was stripped naked. On the cross his heart literally burst for us.

Your other lovers won’t do this for you. They will use you up and then hack you to pieces once you’re no longer satisfactory to them. But this is a Lover who comes and is hacked to pieces *for* you. Other lovers – to use Ezekiel’s metaphor - come and strip you naked and bare. This Lover *was* stripped naked and bare. This Lover became ugly so we could be seen as beautiful. He took it all!

I don’t know about you, but unless you believe in Jesus dying on the cross in our place, all this stuff about beauty is just smoke. Let me be honest about it. When I read these passages in the Bible that talk about the glory of God and the radiance of God that’s kind of ethereal. It’s philosophical - head knowledge. But when I read about Jesus Christ dying on the cross, crushed, as our true Lover...

As Saint Paul said, “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and *gave* himself for her, that he could present her radiant and sparkling and beautiful.” When I see Jesus Christ doing that, then he looks beautiful to me. Then my *heart* starts to make me *feel*, “Wait a minute. I would like to please this One just for who he is.”

And *only* if you see him dying *for us*, in our place, only if you believe in something like what **2 Corinthians 5:21** says, which is, “*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” Our sins are put on him. His righteousness is transferred to us so we look beautiful in the sight of God. Our wedding dress. Listen, as a minister, I have the best seat in the house at a wedding. The family’s on the front row, the party are standing on the steps, but I am right dead center in front of everybody. The groom and I get the first view of the bride. And every bride I’ve ever seen in that moment – no matter what she looks like in reality - in a wedding dress she’s gorgeous.

And no matter what you’re like in reality, no matter what you’ve done - I don’t care whether you’ve been a hit man for the mob - if Jesus Christ died for you, if Jesus Christ has given his life for you, that means you’re clothed in his righteousness in the sight of God and God finds you as ravishing as the groom does when the bride turns the corner and comes down the aisle towards him.

How could that be? Only if there’s a Jesus. Only if he died. Only if he made *kippur*. Only if he made atonement. Do you believe that? If you do, let me quickly suggest a couple of things. This radicalizes everything to me. Can I just tell you what it does? That’s the theology – belief in the atonement – but

here’s how it works in your live. If you let this get from your head to your heart. If you start to live this way...

First, it puts marital failure in its place. Are there not people in this room who have had people walk out on them? Are there not people in this room who have experienced marital failure? How do you feel? You feel like, “There’s something wrong with *me*. I’m lacking, I’m not attractive,” maybe. Or maybe you don’t really say that to yourself, but underneath, real deep down, it’s still grates on you.

God understands marital failure. God has been *through* marital failure. In fact, if you don’t understand that, you don’t understand sin. If you’ve been through it, then you have to realize God understands, and maybe you even understand something about the heart of God the rest of us don’t. Sometimes, stuffy religion – to our shame – treats you as sort of second-class Christians. Don’t believe it. The truth may be that you have a leg up on the rest of us. It puts marital failure in its place.

Secondly, it puts gender in its place. I’m going to say this carefully because this is such a hot topic at the moment. But I’m not saying this because it contemporary, I’m saying this because it’s an eternal truth. The Bible calls *all* Christians “sons of God” - not just men but also women. And the Bible calls *all* Christians “brides of Christ” - not just women but also men. What does that mean?

We've already talked today about how little social standing women had in the ancient world. But that's what actually gives the biblical perspective it's subversive power. When you tell Christians in the cultural context where women didn't have power, "You're *all* sons of God," what is that saying? "Women, head up. Confidence. You may not all have inheritance rights, political rights, in the kingdoms of this earth, but you have it in the Kingdom of God."

On the other hand, when you tell all believers in a cultural situation where women were viewed as property – first of their dad and then of their husband – when you say, "Christ is the only groom, the rest of you are all brides," what is it saying? It's saying, "Men, know your place. Have some humility."

Listen, I do believe that the Bible presents some differences between the sexes. Not just physically, but we know there are neurological and emotional differences. It's not *just* cultural, it goes back to creation and fall. We could go there, but I'm not going there now. What I want to show you this morning is how the Bible is also against gender rigidity. Most cultures make hard and fast differences – mostly to protect patriarchy. Pink is for girls, blue is for boys. That's just culture.

The Bible does not do that. It puts gender in its proper place – like that's no more your *true* identity than your parental status or your marriage status is. It says to the macho guys, "You're a bride!" It says to the sort of damsel-in-distress women, "You're a son!" See, it relativizes gender. It puts gender in its place.

Thirdly, it puts sex in its place. One thing I did not do much of was show you how graphically sexual the Hebrew is, and not only that, if you read any modern translation of Ezekiel 16 it'll never show it to you either. If you want to see it you can ask me about it afterwards. I'll put a paper bag over my head and I'll tell you what some of the words mean. I was talking to the church admin this week and I said, "I can't even tell you what the Bible really says here or it'd be a hostile work environment!" If God is willing to use graphic sexual language in the way He looks at us, what He's saying is this.

On the one hand, sex in the biblical view has the loftiest possible conception. God is saying, "I put sex into your lives to give you just *some* idea of the incredible closure, incredible unity, incredible joy, incredible exuberance it's going to be to have oneness with me." Sex is a pointer to the glory that's to come. And yet, at the same time, it's also saying, "Don't make sex into an idol, because *nothing* on earth is ever really *completely* going to be able to satisfy that. And don't make marriage an idol."

Those of you who aren't married say, "Well how will I ever be a whole person?" The modern American church really lets down single people. I'm sorry that we treat you like you won't be complete until you're married. The New Testament doesn't do that. We rarely preach about it, but the New Testament puts a priority on remaining single actually.

Jesus wasn't married. Why? Because we were enough. And if you're not married, Jesus will be enough. Not only that, if you *are* married and you don't realize God is the ultimate Lover, the ultimate Spouse, the only One who will ever really give you what you need...you're going to kill the spouse you have trying to get out of him or her what only Jesus can give you. You'll squeeze them to death.

Lastly, it puts prayer in its place. Prayer! Let's move beyond father love to friend love. Let's move beyond friend love to spousal love. Of course you should ask for things in prayer – God is your Father after all. Of course you should seek advice and comfort in prayer – God is your Friend after all.

But don't forget the adoration! Don't settle for a marriage that's more like roommates than lovers. Are your prayers intimate? John Donne was a 17th century English poet and a pastor. He wrote prayers *and* love songs. And probably his most famous was both...

Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

John Donne wasn't afraid to say that *to God!* Don't you be afraid to say it or expect it or seek it.

Let us pray...