Marriage

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[0:00] Okay, we're gonna consider the theme of marriage tonight. Just to say a few things about way of introduction. So, I've been married for nine years. Some of you have been married for 20 years.

So, you trump me, don't you? Some of you have been married for 40 years, perhaps. But it's not really about that, is it? It's not about my or your experience.
It's not about our wisdom. It's not about the techniques we have mastered to be successful at marriage. We thank God for that. What we're considering tonight is what his word says about marriage, and actually what we're considering tonight is just a portion of his word.
So, I want to say as well that, you know, you can sometimes go to seminars, which will give you a very rounded and full view of the biblical picture of marriage. And we don't have, that's not our scope.
That's bigger than the scope that we have tonight. What I want to do tonight is, as I've said, take out some of the verses of what Proverbs says about marriage. Mostly. I will refer to the Ephesians passage also.
[1:05] But that's the scope, if you like, of the passage. I should also say as well that we talk about marriage in the context, as I prayed about, of the whole fellowship. And we're not all married.

The church and God value absolutely every member of the fellowship, whether married or not. And I've affirmed that just now. And it is for the church to consider everybody whether married or not. But I'm not going to speak specifically about singleness tonight, or about dealing with bereavement, or different aspects like that, because I want to focus on marriage and what Proverbs specifically says about marriage.
Okay. So in that context then, I just want us to pull out, like I said, a few of these verses. Now, just by way of introduction, further introduction, two views of marriage, if you like, polar opposites.
Okay. One is that marriage is about finding the one. And when you find the one, there's a moment of beautiful harmony which lasts all your life, which is never troubled.
[2:20] Fireworks go off, all is well. Okay. Here's another view of marriage. I was reading a theologian called Stanley Howarwas this weekend. So he said this slightly controversial thing.

And I'm not going to give you this sentence in the full context deliberately. I'm going to come back to this quote, and I'm going to give you the context later. But he says, you never marry the right person.
You never marry the right person. So do you agree with either of those? Could we sit somewhere in the middle? What does proverbs say about marriage? What can we take from this book?
This ancient book, you may be sitting there thinking, nothing. Why would I read proverbs to learn about my relationship right now? Well, I hope there's a lot we can take from proverbs.
Okay. What I'm going to do is I'm going to split this roughly in two sections. First section, three points, second section, three points. First sections, three points are more brief and they're bigger picture.
[3:21] I want to say first of all, under this first bigger picture, heading if you like, that simply marriage talks about the place, the Bible speaks about the place of marriage, and it affirms it.

We probably need to say that nowadays, okay? The Bible and proverbs affirms marriage. So the first verse that I want to refer to is proverbs 18 and verse 22.
He who finds a wife finds a good thing. Okay, just to declare that, that's what the Bible says. He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favour from the Lord. And in chapter 31, an excellent wife, who can find?

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So in other words, it's a good thing to have an excellent wife. Remember the context written with young, up and coming men in view, saying, guys, you want a wife?
Look for a good one. And it's a good thing that you do when you look for a wife. So the Bible affirms that. And we need to consider that as a church. We need to affirm that as a church.
[4:28] Again, not speaking specifically about singleness without excluding those who are single, who wish to be single, or who wish they weren't. But the Bible affirms and continues to affirm throughout all of its pages the centrality of marriage.

Now, it was interesting, last week I noticed, you may have not been here last week, often on a Sunday night we do what's called a spotlight. So we have a particular focus on something. And Derek last week did a focus on you guys, the congregation, because last week we were speaking about children, parenting.
And somebody mentioned anecdotally the fact that the marriage relationship is fundamental within the covenant community of the church.
Isn't that something that we can affirm and that we must remind ourselves of? That in all the different situations we find ourselves, marriage is at all times affirmed by God.
It's his invention, if you like. It's central in the church. And it's also, I was reading another book recently which spoke about the way in which nowadays people see themselves as individuals responsible to nobody, or only as part of a huge, kind of nebulous global culture.
[5:44] And the person was making the point that the medium-sized institutions, if you like, like the church and even at a smaller level, like the family, and so like marriages, have been discarded to a degree.

But we retain and we remain convinced of the centrality and the importance of marriages within the church, within the covenant community. So that's important in this book, isn't it, within Proverbs? Because if we think for a little bit longer what would Proverbs say about marriage, we also have to ask ourselves the question, what kind of marriages would Proverbs affirm?
Well, what kind of people would it affirm? Who are the people supposed to become that this book is talking about? And so we think about the individuals here, but we also think about the wider covenant community in which this book is set, God's people, and who they are to be, the faithful people of God.
And within that, the individual and the whole covenant community and the institution, these units, these marriages that support families, that support those who are bereaved, that support elderly, that support children, and that are a central core of the covenant community.
[7:03] So the place of marriage is affirmed. Secondly, provision. Let me go back to chapter 18, verse 22 again, the same verse. He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favour from the Lord.

There's a link there. It's a good thing, and ultimately, ultimately, it's something that the Lord is over this process. And another verse in this regard, 19 verse 14, houses and welfare inherited from fathers or not, but a prudent wife is from the Lord.
Now, I don't want to say a lot about this. What this is doing is putting, if you like, the search for, the consideration of marriage, the potential for you to become a married person within the scope of the sovereignty of God.
In other words, for a biblical person, a covenant community person, way back when this book was written, or for you and I nowadays, marriages isn't something we say, I'm going to think about this outside of the wisdom of God.
I'll decide based on my priorities, my feelings, whatever categories we have, this is a decision amongst all life decisions that come under the wisdom. So we don't separate parts of our character or our decision making.
[8:26] That's something we've thought about broadly, and it is included here also. The link to this, and this is the third of the briefer points I want to look at, we've thought about the place of marriage and the provision of marriage, but I also want to say the pragmatism that exists within the book of Proverbs.

So what we sometimes do, maybe a tendency of Christians is to say, here's something that I long for. I believe that God is over all of my life. So I will pray, and I will do nothing.
God will just bring this to me. Now God kind of times work in amazing ways in our lives, and bring circumstances in brilliant ways, and the timing is perfect, and sometimes it seems as if we've done

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nothing.
But Proverbs is full of wise instruction so that we can act in good ways. And we need to bear that in mind as well.
If you're looking for a wife or a husband, or if you have a wife or a husband, so that you don't allow yourself to creep into the way of thinking, oh, this wife or husband the Lord has given me, I don't like it anymore, and I'm going to do nothing about it except complain.
[9:45] We are always challenged as to how we are prepared to think and speak and act. And so, can I take you back to the first chapter?

That's why I wanted that reference there in chapter 1. Proverbs is about, amongst other things, to receive instruction in wise dealing. The book is infused with a sense of how then should I live? What kind of ways should I speak? What should be the principles upon which I step out and speak to somebody who I like? Okay.
So we need to be diligent, we need to be realistic. We need to act, don't we? Sometimes we're frozen with a sense of inertia, and we just wish God would make our decisions for us.
Ask somebody out on our behalf. We've got to act. How should we act? And we need to be realistic as well. The pragmatism also covers the realism that I think I want to bring in a little bit in the second half of the sermon.
[10:53] Marriage is wonderful and marriage is romantic, and we want to affirm that, but marriage can also be difficult. And do you know that there's something that we need to recognize just now?

Sometimes what we do is we think, well, the church has the right view of marriage. Out there in the world, everything's ruined. Everybody's marriages are a sham. Everybody has a terrible attitude towards marriage. What we need to do is be humble and recognize that marriages can be difficult in the church.
We also need to recognize that because of the good grace of God, there is much that is good in many people's marriages. And indeed, I read this just this week, an article in the HuffPost of all places.
Somebody was speaking about marriage, 12 things to think about. Marriage, secular commentator in the newspaper. I'm only going to read two. Number one, marriage is not for sissies, it's hard work. That's true, and it's good to recognize that. So in other words, we don't believe, and the Bible doesn't lead us to the point where we say, when I get married, all my troubles will leave me.
[12:00] Second thing the person said, marriage is not for the impatient. Some of the best stuff takes a while to develop. That's wise. That's a wise thing to say.

That's a wise thing to be aware of entering a marriage. So these things, these verses, and there are more, you can go into Proverbs and dig and read more of them.
But these overarching, if you like big picture, things are said by Proverbs, and affirmed in the Bible. Second half, if you like, of what I want to look at, is a bit more up close and personal.
And what I really want to get into just now is character. Because you know what Proverbs is about to a large degree? It's my and your character. As somebody who is called to know the wisdom of God and how that changes the way we actually live.
Okay, so that's what we're going to be looking at in the second half. So now I want to look at that verse that may have raised your eyebrows when we read it from chapter 11. Speaking about character, in other words, means that what we're not doing when we're approaching marriage is approaching it purely concerned with surface level things, visual things.
[13:12] And actually, let me say just now, Proverbs speaks about this a lot. Now, maybe can I just say this with particular reference to guys? Not just to guys, but to guys who can.

Can't we be so visually led? There is a lot of warning in the book of Proverbs about this kind of thing. So, like a gold ring and a pig snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.
Okay? In other words, don't just look at something and think, because that looks good, it will automatically be what I need for the rest of my life. There's a lot more underneath that, isn't there? There's a lot more to that, that verse. But that, just by way of introduction, maybe challenges what can be our immediate priority for marriage.
Is it appearance? Is that the primary thing that we consider? I was listening to a preacher, he gave an example, I think he was unearthing what exists within many people, for honest.
[14:16] We enter a room, maybe we're considering getting married, and we see eight people of the opposite sex, and we immediately rule out six. Because we think, I don't think it's based on

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appearance.

Okay? So, the danger of prioritizing appearances. But what should we look for? I read a guy in another newspaper, and he was very honest, he said this, during my years living alone, I always knew my own requirements in a woman were perfectly reasonable.
Novelist, astronaut, background in modeling. So. That's funny, but it's kind of not funny, is it? Because we recognize our own shallowness at times, and we need to be challenged by the honesty of the Bible. So, let me bring up a few verses just now that speak about, if you like, going a little bit closer, and touching on the character that we need to be considering.
Number one, verse, from chapter 25 verse 24. Now, the first heading, if you like, that I want to cover, as we look at this verse, is conflict.
[15:30] Conflict. It's better to live in the corner of a house top than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife. There are lots of verses like this. You can Google quarrelsome wife proverbs, and lots of stuff comes up.

Now, your teeth may be on edge right now. I'm very aware of that. You can think, and this may be confirming what you may have thought about the book of proverbs, as a suitable mechanism for advice for marriage.
You could think, this is just chauvinistic. This is just advice for guys, stereotyping women. Let me say that it's not, though.
Let me say that it's not, because I want to say, and I'll come around to this in just a minute, that this is about conflict, and how conflict is dealt with in a marriage. I also want to say that proverbs doesn't allow for men to read this and say, oh, great, this is just a list of what I should go for, and, you know, get a woman who satisfies everything and who's quiet.
That's just a horrible cultural stereotype, isn't it? Because in proverbs, if I can just read in proverbs chapter 20, verse 6, I don't think I got this up on the screen. Proverbs chapter 20 says this, many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, but a faithful man, who can find, to ask searching questions of men, and isn't the book full of the potential for young men to become older men who are fools?
[17:02] So much of proverbs is about that. Don't become a fool. In other words, you have the potential to become a fool and to make foolish choices. So this does not allow men to read this selectively and wrongly.

What is this about, though? This is about conflict. So in other words, it's about saying, be wise in what you look for. If all you do is look for physical beauty and care nothing for character, you're going to be in trouble.
Also, consider somebody who sees a disagreement as an opportunity for conflict, rather than an opportunity to resolve something and to be able to work together.
So I think the quarrelsonness that's being spoken of here is somebody who, frankly, gets up every day and who loves to have a bit of a fight. Be careful about that kind of person. It works both ways, of course, doesn't it? It works both ways.
So there is advice about conflict. Now, can I say as well, this does not just apply for those who are looking for a partner. Consider your own marriage relationship right now, if you're married, because it's equally the case that we can get into marriages and find quarrelsonness at the core of our relationship.
[18:21] How then do we react? What do we do with that? It can be the case, if we're not careful, that we allow ourselves to say, my partner is so irritating that I'm justified in finding fault in every single thing they do.

So we awake each morning prepared to quarrel, and we think we're justified in doing so. We're always called back to our own hearts.
We're always called back. And this is the kind of thing we could have a series of seminars on. There's a lot in this, isn't there? But it requires us to be thoughtful and to be prayerful and to be humble and to ask forgiveness many times, because we all can get to that place in our relationships, where we've pretty much decided that we're justified in giving up or in attacking the other.
So Tim Keller says he was giving advice in a sermon I read, and he says somebody asked him in a talk he was giving, well, what advice would you give for somebody who's thinking about getting married? And he came up with two, but one of them was, look for somebody who's really good at resolving conflict.

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So he doesn't just see any disagreement as an opportunity for a fight. Who's really good at peacefully bringing peace back into the marriage relationship? That's what we want, isn't it?
[19:42] To be peacemakers at that level. Okay, conflict. I want to talk briefly about delight. Stanley Howell was, I quoted him earlier, and remember he was the guy that I said, said you never marry the right person.

Okay, we're going to come back to him. But he's an interesting character. He's very in favour of arranged marriages, for example. So what is this? A kind of extreme pragmatism, utilitarianism almost?
Marriage is only functional. It serves a purpose within the covenant community. No more than that? Well, no. Again, we consider the, if you like, the breadth of Proverbs and all that it has to say, we read chapter 5.
So let's go to chapter 5 for a short while. Proverbs chapter 5 is set within the context of warnings to young men.
Moral warnings. It applies also, of course, to all of us, every single person. The tendency of our hearts can often be to wonder, and we can be very good at doing that.
[20:53] So Proverbs affirms delight within marriage. This is no utilitarianism that is being spoken of here. No kind of miserable stereotype of a Christian marriage that you're never to actually enjoy yourselves or have sex.

Quite the opposite. It says, drink water from your own cistern. In other words, stay home. Faithfulness is a fundamental aspect of what Proverbs speaks about, biblically.
And if I can then go down to verse 18, let your fountain be blessed and rejoice in the wife of your youth.
Speaks about sexual fulfillment, enjoyment, you know, read the song of Solomon. The Bible affirms and celebrates marriage and the delight, the physical intimacy and the enjoyment that exists and must be maintained, must be cared for.
And so this is, again, just something to highlight. And let me just say at this point also that it's within, and this is going to be spoken about, I believe, more next week.
[22:03] The theme is more to do with sex, sexual relationships. Within marriage is security in the sexual relationship. So the fear that exists in our culture, the insecurity and fear where all is possible and freedom exists, actually where you're constantly seeking to be affirmed by the other.

As opposed to within the marriage relationship where you have covenanted faithfulness with the person. And so then you develop all aspects of that relationship, one of which is this enjoyment of one another at all levels, including the sexual relationship.
So conflict, we spoke about that. We spoke about the importance of delight and love, absolutely. Love is affirmed in the Bible. So what we're not saying tonight is that, you know, this is all based on a kind of cold, calculating tick list.
It's perfectly possible to marry, to meet somebody and to fall in love. Great. But following on from the chapter 5 passage, let me speak finally about discipline.
I spoke about faithfulness. Discipline is huge in this book. Discipline. And again in chapter 5, it speaks about the fact that you should, as it were, remain at home.
[23:37] Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets, let them be for yourself alone and not for strangers. But then, you know, later on in that passage it says this, His ways are before the eyes of the Lord and He ponders all His paths.

The iniquities of the wicked ensnare Him and He's held fast. He dies for lack of discipline. It's incredible, the amount of times Proverbs speaks specifically about the kind of woman who will just ensnare the young man that it's being written to, and that the ultimate end of that diversion, if you like, is death.
It talks about going down to Shell, the place of ruin. Strongest of warnings to people to be faithful, to remain within that covenant promise relationship that they have given.
And so, you know, again within our context, our societal context, of possibilities are endless, open relationships. And I'm not going to say a lot about this tonight, but in many ways the redefinition of marriage.
This is a different line. This is the consistent biblical line, which is of faithfulness. Which mirrors the faithfulness of our God to us that is being emphasized in this.

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[25:00] Again, Keller says that when you marry somebody, you switch from a kind of relationship which is based on consumer-vendor relationship. What do you have to offer me? What can I give you?

And that's the thing which can be in flux, if you like, to when you get married, covenant relationship. You promise before the Lord faithfulness.
And so it speaks consistently about discipline. That's about character. That's about my integrity before the Lord. I need him. You need him in our ability to be able to do that.
And I'm going to come back to this just briefly. So these are, as I said, there are many more verses. These are some of the things I want to cover. This is what Proverbs says about marriage.
Two things in finishing, though. Two things just, if you like, to say about how we do this. And maybe something that speaks about how this is so different from. Distinct within the Christian view of marriage, just as we finish.
[26:08] And the first is to emphasize the fact that marriages for the Christian are not just about the individual or individualism. They're set within the wider covenant family framework.

It's a slightly different way of thinking. It's a very different way of thinking to the way in which many people today think. Maybe even you, even as a believer. Let me read a couple. I'm going to read a couple of quotes.
Destructive to marriage is the self-fulfillment ethic that assumes that marriage and the family are primarily institutions of personal fulfillment necessary for us to become whole and happy.
They are about personal, aren't they? Of course. You and me in our marriages are the ones getting married. So they are, of course, about the individual. But if we're individualistic, what we end up doing is saying, it's all about me and how I feel in the moment.
I'm no longer fulfilled. We may not be fulfilled, but we're not called to just up sticks, as it were.
[27:17] And so the person goes on to say this, for people to be married and have their marriage witnessed by the church, we need to know how that marriage is going to build up the holiness of the community. That's counterculture, isn't it?

How does the marriage come into and indeed build up the holiness of the covenant community? How do individual marriages contribute to God's people as a whole?
Just something to consider. So the marriage must take account of its place within the church. So if you're a married couple, do you consider that? How are we contributing to the covenant community of God?
And the covenant community must take account of marriages. And everybody else, all not in relationships, different stages of relationships, I said I'm not going to speak about that just now. But the church must care for the marriages, as the marriages must give to and contribute to the church. Okay, so that's first kind of practical application.
[28:19] Second one is this. And I want to come back to the quote I started with, don't ever order our whast again, never marry the right person. Okay, so let's put that in its context now. He says we often overlook a crucial aspect to marriage.

Fail to appreciate the fact we always marry the wrong person. Then he goes on and says this, we never know who we marry, we just think we do. Even if we first marry the right person, give it a while and he or she will change.
You should be able to say this about yourself, give it a while and I will change. It's a point, isn't it? We change our characters very complex, and we change in marriage as we enter into that dynamic. How difficult that can be. He finishes by saying, the primary challenge of marriage is learning how to love and care for the stranger to whom you find yourself married. Now, is that a bit strong? Perhaps it is. I'm not trying to say it. I'm not one to suggest for a minute that marriage relationships are doom. They can be difficult. Many are very happy.
[29:20] But we should be alive to the fact they can often be very difficult. What then? How do we say that we keep going?

How do we remain faithful? How do we uphold this covenant promise of which we speak when we feel like we have nothing left to give?
Tim Keller for the final time, very helpfully, I think, speaks about love philanthropy. Interesting phrase. What he means is this. Think of a philanthropist, somebody in Edinburgh, very wealthy. They give loads of money to charity. How can they do that? They can take millions and give it to this and that because they've got millions coming in this way.

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That's how they can do it, through their income or through whatever it is, inheritance. Because they have lots of wealth coming in, they have a surplus of wealth from which they can give. Philanthropy.
[30:16] And Keller says, and this applies to many different levels of the Christian life. We need a kind of a love philanthropy. What is it that is filling up our capacity to love, in this case, within the marriage context?

What is it? What is the source when we, when I, when you, are at the end of ourselves? It's what we learn in Ephesians, isn't it?
It's the gospel. It's the fact that we are to love because we are first loved. Let me read from Ephesians, chapter 5. I'm going to read verse 25.
Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.
So in other words, the Christian, married or not married, but in this case, particularly married, must have an ongoing, clear-sighted view of the deep, deep love of Jesus.
[31:18] Pour out, welling over for you. Be filled with that knowledge of his love so that when it is hard for you to love another, you have that resource welling up within you.

Again, I know there's a lot more to be said on this. This is something that it's good for us to talk about and to go on talking about supporting one another in this theme. But here is the source of our love always, his love for us.
And on that, I want to finish. Know his love for you. That's where the gospel comes in. And in this case, just right at the end of our study together. But it's foundational because it underpins all that we've been speaking about, about character.
Because he loved us, we are prepared then to love another. And we are prepared to love another within the context of another bigger institution, the church, which can be costly for us to give ourselves to, to keep caring for others outside the parameters, even of our own four walls at home, in his love, remembering always all that he has done for us.
There's more to be said. And we will, I hope, go on considering these things as a church and encouraging one another and praying for one another. But I'll leave it there just for now. Let me pray.
[32:49] Lord, in many different ways, we need your help and the clarity that you can give us when we look at your word. Help us tonight and encourage us.

We pray, Lord, that you would be our sufficiency and that you would remind us again of your provision for us.
Help us to find in you great joy and great satisfaction. And please give us wisdom. And please give us perseverance on all that we need in all of the different relationships that we have.
And we ask for this. We really need to ask for this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

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