

Introduction

It's now my 19th time to listen to that jingle... (Laughter)... and I laugh every single time that I listen to it. I love it. If you have your Bible, go ahead and get it out with me at this time, to the Book of Ephesians chapter 5. We're going to start in verse 22. Let me just pray over us, and then we'll jump right into the Word this morning.

"God, how good You are... how gracious You are. Lord, these are serious topics. God, I pray that You would help me to speak with the right balance of truth and love. Lord, let me speak from Your power and Your Spirit, not from my power. God, let the Gospel be proclaimed; let people hear of Your nature of grace. God, let us see more of You because this isn't really about teaching how we're supposed to live; it's really about teaching about Your grace and how it changes us. God, we love You. I just pray that You would have Your way in this room today. In the Name of Your Son Jesus Christ. Amen."

Before we get started this morning, I just want to make it very clear. Any time we start talking about issues like these, what we're really doing is we're responding to the Gospel. That's what is happening. We're talking about how the Gospel affects and impacts these particular issues. If we don't approach them that way, what we're really doing is just self-help; so this sermon is not "Ten Steps to a Better Marriage." This sermon is "If the grace of God is true, then how would it affect the way that we live within the covenant of marriage?" Do you see the difference? What I want you to know is that everything we're going to talk about flows from the Gospel. So if you're saying, "What is the Gospel? What do we mean by that?" This is what we mean. Whenever we say the words "The Gospel" what we mean is this: God wanted relationship with you... with humanity. He wanted to redeem humanity so badly that He pursued humanity and became flesh in the person of Jesus. That's called "Incarnation." He then gave His life on the cross because you and I had sinned; we deserved death and punishment. God gave His own Son's life on the cross, and that Crucifixion paid the penalty for my sin and for your sin. Then three days later, He rose again. He conquered death. He said, "You can have the truth and beauty and hope of eternal life." That is the Gospel. We did nothing to earn that. We did nothing to deserve that. In fact, we deserve hell but we get life, so the fact that that is given is called "grace." Every breath I take is grace; everything I have in my life is grace. It's all just a free gift given to me by God. If that is true, then what will marriage look like? That's what we want to talk about today.

About a year ago, I wrote a little booklet called "The Application of Grace." I think we've given out pretty much all the hard copies that we printed. You might be able to find a few around campus somewhere. But if you want to read that and you want to understand my perspective on this, go to hnw.org/blessthisMess and at the bottom of the page there, you can download that booklet as a .pdf and you can read about that, and you'll understand the perspective that we are taking through this series.

Ephesians 5, starting in verse 22: *"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord..."* This is going to be a really light sermon today. (Laughter) It's not going to be tough at all. *"...For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, His body, and is Himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands."*

"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of His body. 'Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband."

We are going to talk about marriage today and all that entails, including intimacy. So if you've got little ears with you today... you got nervous as soon as I said the word "intimacy," and you went "Whoa!" This is going to PG; it might run up to PG13, maybe... not really. But if you're nervous about that, this is your chance to move right now. Okay? You've been warned.

One of the first things that we've got to talk about today when we start talking about marriage is the picture of marriage according to Scripture. In the West... this is no great secret... there is an idolatry of marriage. Right? We've got Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty in our minds. We've got music that swells. We've got romance. We've got this idea that marriage is essentially something that must be perfect, and if it's not perfect then something is wrong. The truth of the matter is that rather than the never-ending story of romance, true marriage is actually the never-ending story of laundry... and I think if you don't understand that then today you're going to actually hear, I think, from Scripture what marriage is actually like. Marriage is not the secret of the universe. It's not the answer to all of your problems. Jesus was single. Paul was single. There is no reason to be married unless the Lord brings you to that particular position. It's not saying that marriage is bad, but it's also not saying that marriage is the end-all, be-all. Marriage is one of the ways that we respond to the institution and reflection of God's grace. It is not the only way. So, in other words, we cannot worship marriage. If you are worshipping marriage, you're in for a disappointment. The controlling image of marriage in the pages of the New Testament is the relationship between Jesus Christ and His Church. So, if you want to know what marriage really is supposed to look like, it's supposed to be a reflection of the way that Jesus and His Church relate to one another. How does Jesus love the Church? How does the Church love Jesus? If you think about that kind of relationship, then you're starting to understand the model of the relationship husbands and wives are supposed to have. We're going to discuss three aspects of that picture real quick and then we'll move on.

1. The Picture Of Marriage.

- **It's Complementary (Gen 2:22-24)**

First of all, marriages are designed (according to the pages of Scripture, particularly there in Ephesians chapter 5) to be complementary. What does that mean? It means that two very different sorts of creatures are going to live together... two very different creatures... men and women... Right? (Laughter) They're going to try and live together. This actually reflects the picture of Jesus and the Church... two very different things: something human and flawed and fallen, yet redeemed... and something celestial and

heavenly and beautiful. Both of those relationships are complementary, as well, and so is the actual idea of marriage. Genesis 2:22-24 tells us that in the beginning these people created in the image of God are going to try and live together. Listen to this: *"And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man He made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.' Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed."*

God made gender and in gender God gave different aspects of His character to different individuals... to different genders. Both men and women, according to Genesis 1:28, were created in God's image; so it's not that men are better than women or women are better than men. They are different. They are complementary. In fact, whenever they come together and they live in relationship with one another, they get different aspects and a different picture of the very nature of God which is very, very good. Let me put this very plainly. Men... it is good that you are a man. Grunt a little bit there. Your wife does not need you to be a woman. Can I get an "Amen" from you ladies? (Laughter) Alright... there you go. I know that many people in this world are attempting to change that, but I want to challenge you. There are good things about being a man. The place where you want to push the envelope, take risks, do things that will end up on YouTube as you get hurt. Those are actually good given qualities by God because that is how God made you. And your families need you to take risks... but not stupid risks. They need you to take risks so that you would follow Jesus and demonstrate what it takes to follow God in a way that's not always easy. So whenever Scripture says, "Men, husbands... love your wives as Christ loved the Church"... Jesus died for the Church. I meet too many men who are more concerned about their hobby than giving of themselves for their wife and for their kids. Men... die for your family. Not literally but figuratively... lay yourself down on the altar. If you do that, good things happen. Ladies... it's good that you are a woman. Your husband does not need you to be a man. Can I get an "Amen"? (Laughter) I know... I know. You're supposed to become more like a man in the post-liberation enlightened world. I got it. I'm not a caveman. I embrace those rights and those privileges. Actually, I'm probably more friendly and open to that than a lot of people in this particular position, but I still want you to hear this. God has given you sensitivity and a nurturing side and an encouraging side, and you are the one who is often trying to create stability while your husband is doing those same YouTube tricks. Why? ...Because, in you, God wants to show His ever-present nature, His safety, and His security that is always loving and gracious. When Scripture tells you to submit to your husband, the reason that that jumps up against us is actually, believe it or not, the same reason that ladies in the first century would have struggled with it. Do you know that the Gospel of grace was so radical in the first century that ladies were suddenly elevated to a position that was almost scandalous in the first century. So Paul had to tell ladies, "Ladies, don't upset the balance of structure and order in the family. It's okay; submit to your husband, even though you are equal in God's eyes." Why did he do that? ...Because it's going to reflect the relationship of grace within the Church.

Now guys... I'm going to come back to you. Do you want to know why sometimes wives do not want to submit? ...Because you are not leading. You see, ladies cannot submit if there's nothing to submit to. The great sin of males in the 21st century is we are too passive: "My wife will take care of that." And you're right, they will... because they can think of 98 things at the same time (Laughter) ...and you can't. You're at

a disadvantage from the beginning. (Laughter) That's why it's actually sacrificial for your wife to follow you because she could probably do a better job in a lot of cases. But nevertheless, she does it because it reflects Jesus. But if you fall down on your job and don't lead, it's hard for her to submit. Ladies... let your husband lead. Sometimes, do you know why husbands don't lead? ...Because they've tried to lead and you've squashed him... (claps)...just like that. Lead and submission. Love and service... Those things work together. They are complementary and they are not scandalous. Only to a world who believes that there is no difference between men and women.

- **It's Covenantal**

Next... It's covenantal. The relationship between a husband and a wife is covenant, meaning that it is intended to last for life. Jesus communicated that divorce isn't what God intended for marriage. He said, in Matthew 19:4-6, *"Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."* In other words, marriage is intended last for all of life. That's why it's there.

Now, a quick aside. If you're here today and you've been divorced... do not hear judgement in my words because there is no judgement here. I actually was raised in a home where divorce took place. I understand it all too well. I also have read Scripture and I know this: The grace of God is large enough to cover any brokenness, any sinfulness, and any rebellion that may have taken place at any point within your life. So if your marriage failed, the Lord still gives you His grace. In Romans 8:39, we read that *"nothing in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."* That includes divorce. So this is not condemnation; this is just for me to talk about the intention and the picture of marriage. It is covenant. You see, the reason that marriage is intended to last for all of life is to reflect the fidelity that Jesus Christ has for us. It is to show faithfulness. The problem is that in our own world, in our own context, many of us allow marriage to be driven by personal desire and by personal preference.

Dallas Willard talks about this in his book, "Renovation Of The Heart." "Western dating is basically an exercise in an open economy." We go out and we go, "Okay, I'll pick some of that." "Okay, that's pretty good." "Nah... I don't know." "I'm definitely not getting that." Then the idea is, "Well, if I take something and if I get home and I don't like it, then I'll take it back." That is a great idea in capitalism. That is a terrible idea in covenant relationship. Here's the thing. Many of us think, "I'll be part of this relationship, and if it doesn't work out then I'll take it back." Well, you know, I'm not saying that's not a bad thing in dating, but what I am saying is that within marriage, you never actually get to take it back because the best thing for you is not to take that person back. The best thing, when both people are moving toward Jesus Christ and doing the thing that God has called them to do, is to be faithful. ...Because, in being faithful, we learn more about the very grace of God.

This is what I mean: God stayed with Abram even when Abram was faithless. God stayed with Israel whenever Israel rebelled. God allowed the House of David to still stay on the throne, even though David and Solomon and many of the kings after rebelled. You and I turn our back on Jesus Christ day-in and

day-out, yet He continues to give grace. That is covenant. It's faithfulness. If you want to demonstrate and picture the love of God to an unbelieving world, you are faithful.

Now, in our world right now, there is something pretty common called "cohabitation." Cohabitation is when two people live together without having the covenant of marriage over them. I think to our world it makes perfect sense. In fact, I talk to many believers, people who are believers in Jesus Christ who say, "We're going to live together before we get married." Let me tell you why we teach against that as a church. ...Because we think that, according to Scripture... what Scripture says, is that you ought to enter into the covenant of marriage, and then sex and living together follows after that. Why? I know you probably are thinking, "That doesn't make sense; I want to see if I know that person... if I really like that person... if I trust that person... if I'm able to be together." News Flash: You never will completely. I mean, you're going to be scared... You're like, "I don't know; that's frightening. They might turn out to be completely crazy." Yes... that is true. (Laughter) It's absolutely true. You see the thing about cohabitation is whenever two people live together but they're not committed in covenant, they're implicitly stating, "At any moment, if this relationship becomes too difficult, I can walk away." You see, in marriage... in covenant... what we're saying is "We're going to reflect the relationship that God gave us in Jesus Christ, and He never walked away." So He stayed. You say, "Whoo... That's tough. That's scary." Yes. Welcome to marriage. That is the way that it's supposed to be. So I would just challenge you: If you're in a relationship right now where you're living together and you're not married... to move toward marriage immediately or to end the relationship. Because that's what God has called us to do: To enter into covenant to reflect back the grace that He has so faithfully demonstrated through the Gospel.

- **It's Conjugal.**

So, it's complementary, it's covenant, but it's also conjugal. It's a sexual relationship. Now, there are a lot of studies out there that would maybe surprise you. You watch TV and people act like, "After marriage, sex ends." Did you know that studies show that married couples have more and better sex than their supposed swinging single counterparts? Why is that? ...Because within the confines of marriage, there is a safety and an intimacy. I think you might be surprised to see just how often the Bible says that marriage is designed to be sexual. In fact, it's supposed to... get ready for this... Sex reflects the relationship between Jesus and His Church. I Corinthians 7, starting in verse 2: *"Because of immorality, each man is to have his own wife and each woman is to have her own husband. The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer."* Is that funny to anybody besides me? I don't know. *"...Come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. But this I say by way of concession, not of command, yet I wish that all men were even as myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one this manner and another in that. I say to the unmarried and to widows, it is good for them if they remain even as I, but if they do not have self-control, let them marry for it's better to marry than to burn with passion."*

God is not ignorant. He knows that you want to have sex... and that's why He designed marriage. He said, "It's a good thing. It's a reflective thing." He even says, "Your body belongs to your spouse. It's better to marry than to burn with passion." You didn't get out of bed thinking you were going to hear that this morning, I know. (Laughter) Proverbs 5:18-19: *"Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe, let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love."* The Bible says "It's a good thing." Have you guys read Song of Solomon? I mean, come on. That's Bible study for this afternoon. You can go home and read that. God commanded the first married couple, *"Be fruitful and multiply."* What does that mean? Have sex, have babies, fill this earth with people who will know who I am because you'll teach them. The command of marriage is to enjoy one another in that particular way, and that sex is a living picture of how close the union is between Christ and His Church. Look... Ephesians 5:31: *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife and the two shall become one flesh..."* It's talking about sex. *"...This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."* What? Some of you are like, "Man... he's really messed that up for me." But that is what he is saying. When a husband and wife come together they are showing the intimacy between Jesus and the Church... that God knows His Bride in the Church... beautifully and in a fulfilling way.

This is the reason, by the way, why pornography is a problem. Why? Why is sexual immorality a problem? Why is adultery a problem? ...Because any of those sorts of things that take place... guess what they do? They betray that sort of intimacy. You cannot have that kind of open, intimate, vulnerable relationship with more than one person because if you do, things start to get really messy... really, really fast. That's why within Scripture we read Hebrews 13:4: *"Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous."* Jesus said, "Really the only reason that you need to be divorced is because of sexual unfaithfulness." There's this idea that what happens within sex is so spiritual, so personal, so private, that it actually cannot be betrayed because, if so, it ruptures the covenant in a way that is very difficult to overcome. So this means that we need to be careful about what we look at. This means that we need to be careful about the things that we engage in with other people that are outside of the marriage because it can rupture the covenant itself. So that's the picture of marriage according to Scripture.

2. The Problems Of Marriage.

We all know that if there is marriage, marriage always leads to problems. There are problems in marriage. Anytime that two people who are sinners live together there will be conflict. Therefore, all marriages have conflict. I'll never forget the very first fight that my wife and I had. We had the smoothest dating ever. Two days before we got married, we had our first fight. Her mom and her were moving all of her stuff in, and I was working over at the office. I came home at lunch. I went into the bedroom, and they had taken everything I owned, and they had taken it out of the closet and off of the shelves. It was just stacked on top of the bed... all the way. This rage kind of came over me. I was like, "Ohhh... This is not good." I just turned around and walked out. I was going to get a glass of water. "I'm going to calm down." I opened the cabinet and the glasses were not there anymore. (Laughter) Immediately I was like, "Ohhhh..." I walked over and opened another one... they weren't there either. ...Another one... No, they weren't there either.

And another one... They weren't there either. I freaked out and "Boom." It was big. I mean, things happened in that moment. The reason that I share that with you is to say that I got a glimpse, even before I went to the altar, of the sort of conflict that would happen in marriage. Now Joy and I have never fought since then... (Laughter) Okay... maybe a few hundred times. But, the thing is, is that you begin to understand and discover that there's actually... if you can believe this... a spiritual good that comes out of conflict within marriage.

I Corinthians 7:10-11: *"To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): The wife should not separate from her husband..."* He's talking actually about unbelieving husbands. *"...(but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife."* There's this idea that within marriage a good thing happens when people have conflict, and then they learn to forgive one another and reconcile. Interesting...

Why do we have issues in our marriage? Well most of it's because we have messed-up expectations. Right? Have you guys seen this TV show that's out right now called "Married At First Sight." Has anybody seen this? This is real. Literally... this is not an exaggeration. They say, "Yeah, I'll be on the show." They meet at the altar. I'm not kidding. "I'm Steve.... what's your name?" "Yep... I do." And they get married, right there. Which is nuts... and if you're thinking, "That's a complete train wreck waiting to happen." Yes, it is. That's why people watch it because we like to watch train wrecks. (Laughter) Here's the thing about that... In that show, I think that one of the reasons that some people get horrified at that... "Well, you can't do that! You've got to wait on your soulmate." Let's turn to the passage that talks about soulmates in the Bible here. Wait... there's not one. (Laughter) You know actually there's actually one soulmate that Christians have. His Name is Jesus. You see, Jesus is the only person who can meet all of your needs. I just want to free you right now. If you're mad at your husband or your wife because they are not meeting your needs, guess what? They're not supposed to. It doesn't mean that we don't serve one another and love one another. But if you have needs that aren't being met, start by turning first to the Lord. If you start there, you'll be amazed at how much less angry you are at the person you live with. Again, we've been fed this line that there has to be a soulmate... like with a swelling of music within our mind whenever we see this person. That's just not actually the case whatsoever.

One of the things that I'm actually going to say that may even be more controversial is this: The more that I discover about marriage, the more that I realize a TV show like "Married At First Sight" might be a wreck because these people don't know anything about the Lord. I'm actually convinced, the more that I learn about the nature of marriage and the way that it actually works, if two people who wanted more than anything to honor and serve the Lord Jesus met at the altar, they might have a lot of issues, but I actually thing that they could make a marriage work. They would have the same idea of a covenant relationship committed to sanctification in Jesus Christ. Here's the thing: Anytime that you have difficulty in your marriage, do you know why it is? It is because at least one person has decided to not act like Jesus. I mean that's it, right? Anytime that you're having a fight, just look and ask yourself, "Okay... is it me that's not acting like Jesus?" (Laughter) "Is it her who's not acting like Jesus... or is it both of us? I can't control her but I can control me. I can start acting like Jesus Christ." Anytime that I'm having a fight with Joy, one of the first things I do is I just say, "Am I loving my wife like Christ loved the Church right now?" You would

be amazed at how often the answer to that question is "No... you are not... so stop it, and start loving her as you are supposed to." When I start doing that, I immediately hit the "Reset" button, and things go a lot smoother.

You see, there's actually this weird, beautiful thing that's supposed to happen. It is that you are supposed to have conflict to see the imperfections in others. But also at the same time you are supposed to reconcile and get past that because that is a reflection of the Gospel of grace in the first place. You betrayed Jesus and He gave you grace anyway.

Over the years I've had the opportunity to listen to my wife give marriage advice to many different brides-to-be. She has one that she always brings out and I love it. She will tell them, "When it comes to marriage and conflict within marriage, you basically have two choices: You can be right or you can be happy, but you can't be both." (Laughter) Ladies, do you know what? It must be nice to be you... I mean, being right about 99% of the time. (Laughter) It's good, right? It's fulfilling. Can I tell you an easy way that you can submit in marriage to your husband? Let him think that he's right about half the time. (Laughter) ...Even if he's not. You're like, "Ahhh... He drives me insane!" Yeah. That's grace. Husbands, do you want to know an easy way that you can show grace to your wife? You've got the perfect zinging comeback right here in your mind, and you are ready to let it fly... If there was a video camera there, you might get on your own TV show because it's that good. Like, you're going to replace Fallon... it's that kind of a thing. But if you say those kinds of words right then in that moment... do you know what's going to happen? It's not going to reflect Jesus Christ. Show grace. ...Because whenever I love my wife like Christ loved the Church and my wife submits to me as to the Lord, do you know what happens? A reciprocal and complimentary relationship begins to display itself which actually reflects the very grace and nature of God.

II Corinthians chapter 5, verses 16 and following says this: *"From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."* God, in Jesus, gave to His Church the ministry of reconciliation. Do you know what that means? ...That we are always looking to reconcile brokenness. If your marriage is broken, your job is to work towards reconciliation as best you can. Now listen... you might say, "It's impossible." Okay... Maybe it is." I'm not in your house; I don't know. But you still do that as best as God equips you to do so. When both people within the house want to work toward reconciliation, do you know what happens? Forgiveness... reflection of grace... Jesus is lifted high... The Gospel is displayed because that is what's intended to happen... particularly according to my spouse. Conflict within my marriage, whenever I forgive my wife, my wife forgives me. It actually shows the very grace that has been bestowed upon us by God through Jesus on the cross.

3. The Purpose Of Marriage.

Finally, the purpose of marriage: Back to Ephesians 5:32: *"This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church."* The relationship between husband and wife, ultimately it is said over and over, that it is intended to reflect back to the world what Jesus looks like in His relationship with the Church. In other words, whenever I look at a marriage that is grounded in Scripture and grounded in the Gospel, I ought to see the very nature of God displayed to the world. That's the way that it's intended to be.

How does that work? Well, whenever I display the love of God in Christ, within my house, I preach the Gospel to myself. If my wife does something that upsets me and I'm angry at her... I give her grace... I forgive her. What happens? I preach the Gospel to myself because I'm reminded, "God forgave me whenever I was an enemy of His." I preach the Gospel of grace to my wife because every time that she does something that hurts me and I forgive her or I work toward reconciliation or I do something that upsets her and I have the courage to say, "I'm sorry; I was wrong." I show grace toward her in refusing to be hard-hearted and stiff-necked. Whenever I do that, I actually preach the Gospel to her. And whenever we go out into the world together and we're both loving in that way and we're reflecting the Gospel of grace toward one another... if you've been married, you've had that great opportunity to disagree with one another in front of friends... always an awesome ministry chance. Right? (Laughter) My wife and I tend to have this great pattern. We love to have our biggest and best fights in the car on the way to parties. That's like our favorite thing to do. Right? So then we walk in and we're like, "Hey! We're great!" We split up and we don't talk to each the whole night; we come back and get in the car... man... we're at it again. Right? (Laughter) But do you know what happens is that actually if you disagree in front of friends or in front of family and you demonstrate grace to one another publicly... people go, "Oh, I see that. That's real; they actually do love Jesus Christ. That's real there. That's not just fake; that's not just pretend." That actually is the Gospel of grace taking root within their lives. You see, simply put... marriage itself is being on mission for God because if I learn to love just one other person like I love myself and display that to the world, then it actually builds the Kingdom of God.

One of the things that I've discovered over the years is that if I can then find a way to serve with my wife, then I actually can end up building community. Joy has stuff that she does that she loves and that she's passionate about, and she serves in her own way. I have things that I am passionate about, and I serve in my own way. We have different gifts in that area... different personalities. It was very, very good whenever we discovered that we had a common love, and that was inviting people into our home and displaying the hospitality of God for others. I've shared with you guys that when we have people over to our house, we like to ask them to sign the bottom of our table. We like to feed people and pray over them and just get to know them and minister to them and disciple them around the kitchen table. The reason that we do those things is that it's brought us closer together. There is something weird about being on mission together. By being on mission actually draws Joy and I into more and more love with one another because we get our eyes off of ourselves, and I stop thinking about all of the things I'm upset about. It actually moves us into a place where we're concerned about others, and we're worshipping the Lord together when we're serving. If you would say, "My wife and I..." or "My husband and I really need to repair our

relationship and get closer together"... one of the best things that you could do is find a way that you could serve together. Go work in a preschool class together... go take some kids and disciple them together. Have people over to your home together. Serve in your neighborhood together... Sing in One Voice together. Whatever it is that God calls you to do... when you do those things what ends up happening is you go on ministry, and God is able to work.

I've kind of come to the end of this, and I know some of you are sitting there and are like, "You know... I really didn't want to come to church today because I knew that you were talking about marriage. I'm really only here because I thought maybe I should." Some of you didn't want to be here because you're single, and you don't want to be single. You might even say you're kind of mad at God about it, if you're honest. I just want to say something very quickly. Sometimes the Church has communicated, unintentionally, but nevertheless it has communicated that if you are not married, then you are somehow spiritually inferior or lacking in some way. I want you to hear me, "That's not the truth, and I'm really sorry that that's happened in the past sometimes." Here in a couple of weeks we're going to talk about singleness itself. It's just another mode of being and another different calling for that stage of life that you're in. I want you to hear that. Others of you... you're single and you don't want to be single because you desperately desire to be married. Or... you're married and you're like, "Man, my marriage stinks." You would look at me right now and you would say, "Steve, I have done everything that I could do. There is nothing left that I could do."

In Luke 5:5 there's a story where Peter goes out and he goes fishing. He fishes all night and he didn't catch anything. He's ready to give up. Do you remember this story? Jesus sees him and He says, "Just fish one more time. Throw the nets on the other side of the boat." Peter's like, "Lord.... we fished all night. We haven't caught anything. I don't know if You know this... Fishing on the other side of the boat really doesn't make a difference." But then he said, "But because You asked me to do so, I will." They throw the nets in the water, and they bring up a catch that is so large that it's about to burst the nets. I read in a devotional this week that Max Lucado wrote: "Some of us just need one more time to trust the Lord enough to say, 'I feel like I have done as much as I can do. I've done everything that I can do.' But the Lord would say, 'One more time... would you go fish one more time? Would you just throw your nets again, for no other reason than because Jesus asks you to do so? Would you just keep fishing for that grace?'" You see, here's the thing: Some of us today, we're married and you know what we need to do? We have had the wrong picture for our marriage. We've been thinking in terms of white horses and knights riding on them... or some sort of sexual fantasy... but instead we need to go to the picture of the Gospel. I want to challenge us to focus on that... that God rescued us. Others of us, we have issues in our marriage because we've never committed to the ministry of reconciliation and forgiveness. I want to challenge you to consider that today. Then others of us, we've never decided to actually display the Gospel publicly, and we didn't understand that that was what was happening. Wherever you are at today... God wants to use your marriage to draw people to Himself and to draw you to Him. You see, the way that you come together, instead of going this way, is you both go toward Jesus, and it pulls you together in the end.

So what we're going to do right now is we're going to have a time to pray and respond. Here in a second we're going to sing. People are going to be standing here at the front, and I want to ask you to stand up

at that time; we're going to sing. If you need to pray and say to your spouse, "Let's go to the front and let's just pray and let's ask someone to pray over us and get our marriage centered on the Gospel," you can do that. If you need to come and pray and forgive one another, you can do that. If you need to pray and say, "We want to be used to display God's mercy on mission"... then you can do that. Whatever God has called you to do, you can do that. If you say, "I just need prayer, generally." You can come and do that. So, let me pray over us. Then once I've done that, then we are going to respond together in worship and respond together in prayer. Would you bow with me at this time?

"God, how good marriage is and how difficult it is. It is the best and hardest life, in many ways. It gives great gifts but has great difficulties. Lord, it's a beautiful picture of Your Gospel. Lord, I pray that we would see, completely and fully, how beautiful and how rich it is. And God I pray that we would intentionally embrace it. Lord, I want to issue a blessing over every couple here. I bet there are many here right now who want to give up... or they feel like they are at their wits end. God, I pray that You would just help them to have the courage to throw their nets back in the water one more time, and God, by Your grace, I pray that You would fill them. We can pray that believing, because of Your Son. Lord, help us to hear and to respond to Your Word right now. And we pray this in the Name of Your Son Jesus Christ. Amen."