Introduction

Did you know God wants to be married to you?

Sounds a little weird, doesn’t it? But it’s a common image in the Bible, spread throughout Old and New Testaments. Marriage is used as a picture of our reciprocal commitment with God – the so-called “covenant relationship” – and also of the intimacy of that relationship. We see this from the beginning of the Bible, starting in Genesis, continuing through the Law of Moses and then the Prophets, picked up again in the Gospels and in the letters of Peter and Paul, all the way through to the last book, the Revelation to John. As we look at First Peter today, I think that we can understand the teaching better if we look at it in the context of the big Bible picture.

We’re in the middle of our series on First Peter called, “When the Going Gets Tough.” We have learned about being “living stones” built on the foundation of Christ, moving forward with “living hope”. Last week Libby talked about honoring authority, and the text included those difficult words of “submission” and “slaves”. All people are to submit to civic authorities “for the sake of the Lord” (2:13) and slaves or servants (equivalent in some ways to employees today) were to submit to their masters “in reverent fear of God” (2:18). Peter seems to be acknowledging the existing system or hierarchy and suggesting we do our best within it – at least when times are tough – and that this is somehow virtuous. And we will experience something of that principle again today, and unpack it a bit.

Let us continue in the letter starting at chapter 3, verse 1:

1 Peter 3:1-8 (TNIV)

Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves. They submitted themselves to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her lord. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear. Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers. Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.
The Marriage of God with His People in the Bible

Before we look more closely at Peter’s text, we will do a quick Bible overview on Marriage as a symbol for the relationship between God and His people. That will be the first part. Part 2 will be working through the First Peter text. And finally, in part 3 I’ll share some practical, pastoral observations. In fact, let me share one pastoral point right this minute: Though Peter writes to wives and husbands, I hope my message will apply to unmarried people as well. It’s about our relationships with God and with each other, and not just in marriage.

Old Testament

Now here’s your 5-minute Bible survey on Marriage as a picture for human and divine relationships. It starts off right in the beginning, at Genesis, where at creation we learn that Humankind is made in God’s image – as a social being. God is 3 in 1, and humankind is at least 2 in 1: “God created them male and female and called them Man” (Gen 1:27). This male and female unit becomes the first married couple, and this marriage relationship informs our understanding of what God’s image is: it is social, and it is intimate – they become “one flesh” (Gen 2:24), figuratively when making love, and quite literally when children are born. And this oneness is one way we reflect the image of God.

So there is something about the very nature of God bound up in the marriage relationship in Genesis, and when we move on in the Old Testament, we find the that God speaks through the prophets to tell us that marriage not only helps us understand the nature of God, but also the nature of godly relationships.

Are you with me so far?

Then there is the passage from Isaiah, who tells us that the Creator is Israel’s “husband”, and that He rejects His chosen people for a time when they are unfaithful. They go through a separation. But it is always God’s plan to heal that relationship and bring back His people (Is 54:5-7). Jeremiah also gives us God’s words of longing for Israel, who “like a bride” followed Him devotedly in the beginning (Jer 2:2). And later when Jeremiah prophesies the New Covenant, he has God saying “I was a husband to them” (Jer 31:32).

And we could cite other Old Testament references – especially from Hosea – for God’s desire to have a mutually close and loyal relationship, a healthy marriage of fidelity, with His chosen people, and His pain and anger when Israel repeatedly breaks the marriage vows, breaks the covenant, and pursues other gods or providers.

For now, though, we just hold on to the idea that the Old Testament uses marriage as an image of the relationship of God with His people: intimate and exclusive.

New Testament

As we move on to the New Testament, there is the remarkable marriage image at the conception of the Lord, when the Holy Spirit comes on Mary (Lk 1:35; Mt 1:20). Later we find John the Baptist referring to himself as the best man of the bridegroom Jesus (Jn 3:29), and Jesus refers to Himself as the bridegroom more than once (Mt 9:15, 25:1ff.; Mk 2:19; Lk 5:24). Bridegroom of whom? Well, you know the answer to that question. Who’s the “bride of Christ”? It’s the Church, the New Israel, the completed People of God.
The Apostle Paul refers to the mystery of Christ and the Church being like a married couple in Ephesians 5; you remember that from our Ephesians study last fall. And then there’s the image of the wedding feast of the Lamb of God and His bride, the Church – the people of the New Jerusalem – which comes up in Revelation 19, 21, 22.

That’s your 5-minute overview from Genesis to Revelation; now we focus in on First Peter. Please have the text in front of you.

**Working Through the Text -- 1 Peter 3:1-8**

“Wives, in the same way…” – Wait. In the same way as what? What came before this passage? Well at the end of ch. 2 there was the example of Christ (2:21-25), Who did not retaliate against the powers under whose control He had placed Himself. Are wives supposed to emulate Christ? Well, yes, we all are. In Ephesians, Paul spells out something similar for: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy…” (Eph 5:25-26). Peter is saying something similar for wives. Wives are to “submit” to their husbands and win them over for God by their behavior. There’s a parallel here to the Ephesians notion of husbands giving themselves up for their wives “to make them holy” (Eph 5:26).

Now, there is that difficult word, “submit”. This is not the first time Peter has used it. We heard it at least twice last week, with regard to servants and their masters and to everybody with the civic authorities. Now it is wives and their husbands, and we begin to notice a certain pattern here: Peter seems to imply, “Whatever organizational or cultural structure you find yourself in, serve God as best you can there. Rather than fighting the system, make the most of your position in the current hierarchical order.” So between the lines Peter may be saying to wives. “Look, our current reality is a patriarchal society. Husbands are the heads of your households. Resistance is relatively futile, but you can exert influence even from your lower position in the pecking order. Live exemplary lives and win respect and influence; you may even win over your husbands to the way of Christ through your example, if not through the words he won’t let you say anyway.”

I do not see this verse as a prescription for marital hierarchy, let alone mandatory gender roles. Rather, the big principle here is: Make the most of your situation in whatever system you’re in, for God’s purposes. “Submit… SO THAT (v.3) your men may be won over to God by your behavior.” Peter focuses, as did Paul and even the Lord Himself, on attitude and behavior, not on changing the external, systemic structure. They focus on the heart. It’s change from the inside out, not from outside social structures in.

Peter illustrates it another way, starting at v.3. Again, he is basically saying, “not from the outside in, but from the inside out,” when he warns against overly focusing on external beauty at the expense of inner beauty. It’s as if he senses a temptation for some wives to manipulate their husbands by “dolling themselves up”. Trying to gain acceptance through appearance. Instead, he urges wives to focus on issues of character rather than cosmetics, to prioritize inner qualities rather than outer ones. Now, let’s not over-simplify Peter’s message here… This is not a prohibition against hairstyles or jewelry or nice clothes. Is it? No, of course not! It is about not getting too caught up in externals, and focusing instead on the development of inner beauty and depth of character rather than on appearance or social standing.
That takes us through verse 4. Now comes that strange passage beginning at v.5, referring to holy women of the past and Abraham and Sarah, and how Sarah obeys her “lord” Abraham. I confess I’m not sure what to make of this, and we won’t take much time with it here. Sarah made some questionable decisions, and was not always a role model. Why is Peter lifting her up here? There’s only one reason I can see: Because whatever her own opinions and actions were, she submitted to what God was doing through her husband, and she got in line with that covenant plan that led to their son Isaac and the unfolding of God’s plan for redemption in the Old Testament. We are her children when we get with God’s plan despite our own anxieties (v.6).

Now Peter extends a brief word to the husbands, who, again “in the same way”, are to be “considerate” of their wives. The word “submit” is not used here, though “in the same way” may indicate that husbands are expected to humble themselves like wives and slaves are expected to do, NOT to lord it over their wives and households but to be considerate and respectful of their partners. Yes it says “weaker” partners, but the word “weak” is probably just tied to the old idea that strength has to do with size and muscle. Let’s not get hung up on that. Don’t let that old “weaker vessel” stuff distract you from what comes next in v.7, because it’s important: wives are “heirs with you of the gracious gift of life”. That’s a big deal. Heirs of the same gift of life that was coming to the husbands. “Co-heirs”(Rom 8:17). There is an implied egalitarianism in this statement that, for me, points to a kind of future life when the existing hierarchical order will have evolved into something better. Two thousand years later, it seems to me, we can observe some progress, though not as much as we might have expected. Still: emperors are fewer; slavery is abolished in some places. Mutual submission in marriage is not as scary – today there are more relationships based on God-gifting rather than gender than there used to be, though oppressive patriarchy is as prevalent as ever in some parts of the world.

Peter goes on to say in v.7 that failure on the part husbands to be respectful will have consequences in their spiritual lives: God may ignore their prayers. That’s a strong statement, and one worth thinking about if your own prayers seem ineffective.

And the passage ends (v.8) addressed to “all of you”. It’s as if Peter says, “OK, I’ve singled out slaves and wives and husbands, but my final word is for all of you: Seek unity… be like-minded. Be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble” (v.8). The bottom line is, whatever your role in the household may be, follow the way of Christ, the way of love. We are connected, and we are mutually committed to one another, whether in a marriage relationship or as members of the household of God: living stones interlocked as God’s holy temple… the Body of Christ, with all parts inextricably connected – one flesh.

We started with the big Bible picture on marriage as a symbol for God and His people. We just worked through the passage. How shall we tie all this together?

Observations

Well, remember what I said at the outset: God wants to be married to you. That is, He wants to be close to you, like someone you’re going to live with forever. He has said “I do.” In Jesus Christ He has said it about as emphatically as possible. God has said, “I do,” and He will keep His marriage promises. And He wants us to do so, too. And the good news is that, when we make those vows to God, “I do, Lord… and I will stay with You, forsaking all others, through thick and thin,” He gives us the support of
His Spirit. He empowers us to keep our own vows. Not without effort, that’s for sure. We have to work at it, just like we do with any close relationship. But know this: He is working at it, too. And He is quietly working away within us, even when we do not know it, healing and growing us to be the perfect partner, best friend, “spouse” if you want... a beloved and indispensable member of His family.

*(At the Communion Table.)* And here’s the family table. It represents the sacrificial altar from the days when Yahweh was “married” to His ancient people of Israel. But that altar was transformed by the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus of Nazareth, Who is Lord of the Universe. Through Him it became the table of the family of God, where the Lord’s Supper is celebrated. And it points to the future, representing the table at that wedding feast of the Lamb and His bride, the eternal People of God of the New Jerusalem, which will include many of us.

How about you? Have you said, “I do” to God yet? Have you gotten off the fence and committed? If not, this is your family table, too. For God has made you a brother or sister of the Lord Jesus Himself. If not, you are still welcome as a guest; if you are seeking to know and follow Jesus Christ, He wants you to take part today. Part of the mystery unfolds right here, the mystery of the divine-human marriage, for here we become “one flesh” with the Lord, don’t we? One flesh and blood!

“...That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you...” This is what Jesus prayed for us. “I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity.” *(Jn 17:22-23)* It is for this unity, this union, between God and humans and between men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children, neighbors, church families... it was for this that Jesus gave Himself, it was for us that He went through Hell to offer us Heaven. Grateful for this grace, I gladly submit... to my wife, to my children, my congregation... to whatever entity necessary, in order to follow Him and serve His purposes for drawing people to Himself.

I do.