

The Ultimate Marriage (Ephesians 5:21-33)

What is more important: sexuality or spirituality? Romance or religion? And how are they connected?

What is more important: Sexuality or Spirituality? Romance or Religion?

I guess that is not a question that is often asked or considered. What do I mean by it?

By sexuality, I mean our sense of identity, our hopes, our thinking, our to do with sexual matters and how we live out our sexual lives and relationships.

By spirituality, I mean our sense of identity, our hopes, our thinking to do with spiritual matters and how we live for and relate to God.

Perhaps as those attending a church on Sunday morning in August you may be more likely to say that spirituality is most important.

Yet, we live in a society and culture, where spirituality is de-emphasised and sexuality is emphasised. After all how many songs on the radio or programmes on TV have something to do with sexuality or romantic love and how many have anything to do with spirituality or religion? Compare how many people you know that think true happiness will be found by finding the right romantic partner with how many think it will be found through a right relationship with God.

A while ago we watched a drama series on Netflix called, The One. It was a Science Fiction show set in the near future, where someone had discovered a way of using people's DNA to match them up with the one romantic partner that would make them perfectly happy. The whole concept, although make believe played brilliantly to the fact that many people today believe true happiness, fulfilment, acceptance, even redemption will be found once you find the right romantic partner.

And isn't this why the Gay Rights movement is so passionate and strident? If you believe your only shot at happiness is by being sexually attached to someone you are attracted to, but you only find yourself attracted to people of the same sex, then to say that such sexual relationships are wrong is to deny someone's ultimate chance of happiness. No wonder so many today see gay rights as one of the fundamental fights for justice around.

But maybe this attitude is also one of the reasons why so many romantic relationships and marriages don't lead to happiness, but fail. After all, if you think the route to happiness is through romance, then your expectations on what you are going to gain from the romantic relationship are going to be exceptionally high! The chances are that the other person in the relationship is not going to provide that level of happiness, fulfilment and acceptance and so the strain on the relationship can be enormous.

Yet, the Christian message points to a different route to lasting happiness. In Christ, we can find acceptance, fulfilment and purpose in life, which is truly joyful and at peace. In a sense spirituality is more important than sexuality, religion more important than romance, because Christ has the power to truly give what romance never can.

That is not to say that sexuality and romance do not matter for us as Christians. The Bible starts and ends with a wedding. Its heroes are sexual beings who sometimes struggle with their sexuality - think of Jacob in love with Rachel, but tricked into marrying her sister before her. Potiphar's wife trying to seduce Joseph. David committing adultery with Bathsheba, Solomon being led astray by his

many wives. There's even a book in the Bible called, Song of Songs, which talks celebrates the power of sexual attraction and love.

For Christianity, sexuality matters, but spirituality matters more. Marriage is one of the most profound relationships for many people in this life, but for Christians our relationship with Christ is even more important and is for eternity.

But, sexuality also matters for our spirituality. In fact, in our passage from Ephesians, Paul says that our sexuality is a pointer to our spirituality.

Sexuality is a pointer to Spirituality

What is sexuality for?

In a recent book, Ed Shaw, asks a fundamental question: "What is sexuality for?"

Ed would describe himself as same sex attracted, what others would describe as gay. Yet as a Christian he believes the Bible is clear that he should not enter into a sexual relationship or marriage with another man.

The question he asks is then quite profound. If God says that because he is gay he cannot enter into a sexual relationship, then what is the point of his sexuality? Hasn't God just given him with desire that cannot be fulfilled?

The same question could be asked by those who even though they are heterosexual find themselves unable to find a marriage partner.

For those of you who are single, you may be thinking what has this passage from Ephesians about how husbands and wives should behave got to do with me?

What is sexuality for? Even if we are not in a romantic relationship, it helps us to understand and emphasise with those who are. It means that we can enjoy romantic books and films. We can celebrate along with others at a wedding, because our sexuality helps us to understand the joy that others are entering into.

But there is an even deeper and more profound reason for our sexuality. It helps us understand Christ's relationship with the church.

Before we look at that we need to see how the Bible understands sexuality.

Biblical Sexuality - Genesis 2:24

In Ephesians, Paul quotes from Genesis 2:24:

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh." (Genesis 2:24).

This verse is fundamental to the Bible's teaching on sexuality.

Jesus uses it in the debate about divorce to argue that God's plan for marriage is that it is for life, because what God has joined together - i.e. made one flesh, people should not separate.

Paul uses it in 1 Corinthians 6 as an argument against sex outside marriage. How can you become 'one flesh' with someone who you are not committed to be united with for life?

In this passage, Paul uses it as the fundamental verse to show how we should live within marriage, but he also takes it a step further.

Christ and the Church

In verse 32, Paul says:

"This is a profound mystery - but I am talking about Christ and the Church." (Ephesians 5:32)

By 'mystery' Paul does not mean we don't understand, but something that has now been revealed by Christ that was not clear in the past. So, what has been revealed? That Jesus is the bridegroom and the church is his bride. This is the ultimate wedding at the end of the Bible in Revelation 21.

It is this imagery that helps explain the Big Picture that Paul is talking about in Ephesians, that we are in Christ. The fact that in a sense man and woman become one body, points to the fact that we as the church are the body of Christ. The one flesh nature of marriage that lives to that deep inter-personal union between man and wife is a beautiful picture of the deep inter-personal union that we have with Christ.

What is the point of our sexuality? It helps us understand just how intimately committed Jesus is to us as the Church. It enables us to understand in a profound way his love for and union with us as his people. A love and union that is our route to true and lasting happiness, acceptance and hope.

And for all of us who are Christians, who are in Christ, this is our future hope.

You wouldn't complain about missing out on the trailer for a film, if you know you are getting to see the full feature length film.

For Christians, marriage is just the trailer. Our eternal future as Christ's church, his bride, is to be his forevermore. That is true whether we are married in this life or not.

Christian Spirituality a model for our Sexuality

So, the profound mystery that Paul reveals is that our sexuality is a pointer for our spirituality. But, for those working out what it means to be married, our spiritual relationship with Christ becomes a model for our sexuality.

But, here is where it becomes controversial. Paul begins by saying, 'wives submit to your husbands'. Is the Bible fundamentally sexist in its approach to men and women? Does Christianity oppress women, like we fear the Taliban is oppressing women in Afghanistan.

Sexual Equality

Well we need to read any teaching in the context of the whole Bible. It is all God's word. When we do so, we see that the Bible's fundamental understanding of men and women is of a deep sexual equality.

Generally

Back to Genesis 1, it says explicitly that both men and women are made in God's image. Whether male or female our fundamental value, identity and self-understanding comes from this amazing picture of what it is to be human. Women are equal to me in this respect and share in God's calling in Genesis 1 to rule over creation.

In the Ten Commandments, again children are explicitly told to obey fathers and mothers, both have an equal authority over their children.

In the New Testament, Paul underlines how in Christ this equality between the sexes becomes even deeper and more profound as our fundamental identity whether male or female is that we belong to him:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28)

Generally speaking, the Bible teaches a fundamental equality between the sexes.

Within Marriage

And within marriage, the 'one flesh' understanding suggests a deep mutuality in the partnership. In 1 Corinthians 7, having quoted Genesis 2:24 in the previous chapter, Paul says in what is a radical expression of sexual equality, that the one fleshness of marriage means that not only does a wife's body belong to her husband, but the husband's body belongs to the man.

Sexual Complementarity

Yet, when we come to this passage, and as Paul reflects on the marriage relationship in the light of our spiritual relationship with Christ, he suggests there is a complementarity in the way that husbands and wives are to relate:

The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church.

What does Paul say this means in practice? Remember the key concept is the 'one flesh' idea, the deep unity that marriage brings about. If husband and wife are to hold that unity, then they cannot go off in different directions in life. To stop that happening there needs to be leadership within the marriage, one person who makes the final decision, but in a way that is good for both. For Paul, the husband has that God-given role as leader.

Submission modelled on Christ

So, Paul says, that wives should submit to their husbands. They need to accept his leadership for the sake of harmony and unity within marriage, in a way that is modelled on accepting Christ as the head of the Church.

But, submission is not just for women. In verse 21, we are all called to submit to one another! There should be a willing on the part of all of us to submit to others.

As a vicar, I have to swear to obey the Bishop, who happens to be a woman in all things lawful! I have to submit to her, because she is a Bishop.

And ultimately, our submission to others is modelled on Christ. Who submitted himself, to the Father as his head. Even, though it meant obeying him and going to die on the cross.

Submission is not just for women, but within marriage, women are called to submit to their husbands as the leader of the marriage.

Love modelled on Christ

But this is certainly not a licence for abuse or exploitation. For, Paul's demands on husbands is even higher. They are called to love their wives!

Again, Paul is not saying that the call to love is limited to husbands! As Christians we are called to a life of love.

But, within marriage, Paul is saying that Christian husbands have a particular calling as head of the marriage to behave like Christ, the head of the church, by loving their wives.

Christ gave up his life for the church to make her more wonderful and beautiful. In marriage men are called to give up their lives for their wives, to help them to flourish and become more fully the people God wants them to be - no matter what the personal cost to the husband. It is a call to sacrifice.

What is more important sexuality or spirituality?

I started off by saying that our society is far more concerned with sexuality than spirituality, but the result is that marriages are often loaded with expectations of producing happiness that they cannot bear.

As Christians we are called to a better way of life, where our sexuality, although important is seen as a pointer to help us understand our spirituality - what it means to be in Christ.

Yet, it as we understand more fully our relationship with Christ, that we learn to submission and love that is needed to create flourishing and life giving marriages.

What is more important sexuality or spirituality? Let's not get sucked in to the world's way of thinking, but lets hold more fully to the true happiness we find in Christ.