



Lesson 7

Marriage

Worship

Beginning psalm verses from the service of “Christian Marriage” in *Christian Worship* (spoken responsively by half verse):

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good.

His love endures forever.

The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and rich in love;

He is good to all.

God is our refuge and strength,

An ever-present help in trouble.

He is our God forever and ever;

He will be our guide even to the end.

May God be gracious to us and bless us

and make his face shine on us.

Prayer: Gracious Father, in your goodness you bring people together into families and enrich their lives with abundant blessings. Renew the love of husbands and wives, parents and children, that they may strengthen and support each other on the way that leads to our heavenly home, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

Because marriage matters were controlled and managed by the Roman Catholic Church (marriage was one of the seven “sacraments”), it was inevitable that Luther’s reform would impact the conventions that regulated the institution. The clergy lived celibate lives, and their station was regarded as more honorable than the married estate of a layperson. The church also made decisions about propriety in all marriage and divorce situations.

But marriage was not therefore entirely revered as God’s holy institution. Luther’s world had its share of marital difficulties. Sins against the Sixth Commandment (adultery) were a problem in German society. Gender roles were often defined by stereotype. Some perceived marriage to be a “shackle” that constrained freedom. And the custom of arranged marriages—while observed in biblical (especially Old Testament) contexts—often resulted in some confusion in practice.



Luther's own marriage—to Katherine von Bora, a former nun, in June of 1525—was a shocking event. Not only did it take some of his colleagues by surprise, but it signaled a significant break from the “law of celibacy” among Roman Catholic clergy. Luther was making a statement—marriage is God's honorable estate, and there is no “law” that inhibits clergy from sharing in this blessing.

Martin and Katie enjoyed a unique and loving relationship, rooted strongly in the forgiving love of Christ. God blessed them with six children—two of whom God took at a young age to be with him. Since Martin was busy with the demanding duties as preacher and teacher, Katie managed the household and business affairs. Martin's letters to Katie reveal a tender, sometimes humorous, side that cherished her selfless devotion to him, their family, and the Lord.

The excerpt from Luther's writing contained in this study was taken from a document titled *The Estate of Marriage*, written in 1522, shortly after his return to Wittenberg from his stay at the Wartburg Castle. Luther was aware that people were looking for guidance about marriage matters. Note that he wrote the piece several years before his own marriage. Regarding this Luther comments: “I will not mention the other advantages and delights implicit in a marriage that goes well—that husband and wife cherish one another, become one, serve one another, and other attendant blessings—*lest somebody shut me up by saying that I am speaking about something I have not experienced*, and that there is more gall than honey in marriage. I base my remarks on Scripture, which to me is surer than all experience and cannot lie to me” [emphasis added] (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 45, p. 43). Luther's understanding of marriage was solidly rooted in Scripture.

The Power of the Word in the Early Church

Ephesians 5:21-33

²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

1. In groups of two to four people (or on your own if you prefer), take 90 seconds and list ways that husbands and wives “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:20). We’ll hear samples from the groups.
2. Paul supplies general principles for the marriage relationship. On your own, name at least three real-life ways that wives and husbands can put these principles into practice. You will have one minute. Then compare your answers with the person next to you. We will hear a sampling.
3. Some marriage counselors have noted that the use of “love” and “respect” (in verse 33) offer a very important distinction. Why might the Spirit, through Paul, have used “love” for what a husband must show to his wife and “respect” for what a wife should give to her husband?

The Power of the Word in the Reformation

Select one of the four excerpts to read on your own. Underline two points you found particularly helpful. You will have four minutes. We'll hear a sampling. The excerpts are from *The Estate of Marriage* (1522) – *Luther's Work's*, Vol. 45, pp. 17-49.

A. In the first part we shall consider which persons may enter into marriage with one another. In order to proceed aright let us direct our attention to Genesis 1 [:27], "So God created man . . . male and female he created them." From this passage we may be assured that God divided mankind into two classes, namely, male and female, or a he and a she. This was so pleasing to him that he himself called it a good creation [Gen. 1:31]. Therefore, each one of us must have the kind of body God has created for us. I cannot make myself a woman, nor can you make yourself a man; we do not have that power. But we are exactly as he created us: I a man and you a woman. Moreover, he wills to have his excellent handiwork honored as his divine creation, and not despised. The man is not to despise or scoff at the woman or her body, nor the woman the man. But each should honor the other's image and body as a divine and good creation that is well-pleasing unto God himself.

In the second place, after God had made man and woman he blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply" [Gen. 1:28]. From this passage we may be assured that man and woman should and must come together in order to multiply. Now this [ordinance] is just as inflexible as the first, and no more to be despised and made fun of than the other, since God gives it his blessing and does something over and above the act of creation.

B. The world says of marriage, "Brief is the joy, lasting the bitterness." Let them say what they please; what God wills and creates is bound to be a laughingstock to them. The kind of joy and pleasure they have outside of wedlock they will be most acutely aware of, I suspect, in their consciences. To recognize the estate of marriage is something quite different from merely being married. He who is married but does not recognize the estate of marriage cannot continue in wedlock without bitterness, drudgery, and anguish; he will inevitably complain and blaspheme like the pagans and blind, irrational men. But he who recognizes the estate of marriage will find therein delight, love, and joy without end; as Solomon says, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing," etc. [Prov. 18:22].

Now the ones who recognize the estate of marriage are those who firmly believe that God himself instituted it, brought husband and wife together, and ordained that they should beget children and care for them. For this they have God's word, Genesis 1 [:28], and they can be certain that he does not lie. They can therefore also be certain that the estate of marriage and everything that goes with it in the way of conduct, works, and suffering is pleasing to God. Now tell me, how can the heart have greater good, joy, and delight than in God, when one is certain that his estate, conduct, and work is pleasing to God?

- C. We err in that we judge the work of God according to our own feelings, and regard not his will but our own desire. This is why we are unable to recognize his works and persist in making evil that which is good, and regarding as bitter that which is pleasant. Nothing is so bad, not even death itself, but that it becomes sweet and tolerable if only I know and am certain that it is pleasing to God. Then there follows immediately that of which Solomon speaks, “He obtains favor from the Lord” [Prov. 18:22].

What then does Christian faith say to this? It opens its eyes, looks upon all these insignificant, distasteful, and despised duties [that are part of married life] in the Spirit, and is aware that they are all adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels. It says, “O God, because I am certain that thou hast created me as a man and hast from my body begotten this child, I also know for a certainty that it meets with thy perfect pleasure. I confess to thee that I am not worthy to rock the little babe or wash its diapers, or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother. How is it that I, without any merit, have come to this distinction of being certain that I am serving thy creature and thy most precious will? O how gladly will I do so, though the duties should be even more insignificant and despised. Neither frost nor heat, neither drudgery nor labor, will distress or dissuade me, for I am certain that it is thus pleasing in thy sight.”

Now you tell me, when a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other mean task for his child, and someone ridicules him as an effeminate fool—though that father is acting in the spirit just described and in Christian faith—my dear fellow you tell me, which of the two is most keenly ridiculing the other? God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling—not because that father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith. Those who sneer at him and see only the task but not the faith are ridiculing God with all his creatures, as the biggest fool on earth. Indeed, they are only ridiculing themselves; with all their cleverness they are nothing but devil’s fools.

I say these things in order that we may learn how honorable a thing it is to live in that estate which God has ordained. In it we find God’s word and good pleasure, by which all the works, conduct, and sufferings of that estate become holy, godly, and precious so that Solomon even congratulates such a man and says in Proverbs 5 [:18], “Rejoice in the wife of your youth,” and again in Ecclesiastes 11 [9:9], “Enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life.” Doubtless, Solomon is not speaking here of carnal pleasure, since it is the Holy Spirit who speaks through him. He is rather offering godly comfort to those who find much drudgery in married life. This he does by way of defense against those who scoff at the divine ordinance and, like the pagans, seek but fail to find in marriage anything beyond a carnal and fleeting sensual pleasure.

D. Observe that thus far I have told you nothing of the estate of marriage except that which the world and reason in their blindness shrink from and sneer at as a mean, unhappy, troublesome mode of life. We have seen how all these shortcomings in fact comprise noble virtues and true delight if one but looks at God's word and will, and thereby recognizes its true nature. I will not mention the other advantages and delights implicit in a marriage that goes well—that husband and wife cherish one another, become one, serve one another, and other attendant blessings—lest somebody shut me up by saying that I am speaking about something I have not experienced, and that there is more gall than honey in marriage. I base my remarks on Scripture, which to me is surer than all experience and cannot lie to me. He who finds still other good things in marriage profits all the more, and should give thanks to God. Whatever God calls good must of necessity always be good, unless men do not recognize it or perversely misuse it.

4. Why are Genesis chapters 1 and 2 so critical to the discussion of marriage matters in our world today? Those who chose excerpt A may have some insight.

5. Luther makes this comment: "We err in that we judge the work of God according to our own feelings" (excerpt C). How might this statement apply to marriage? How might it apply to life in a more general way?

6. Luther admits that everyday life in a marriage relationship will have its share of difficulties. What perspectives does Luther offer to help adjust one's attitude? Those who chose excerpt D may have some insight.

NOTES

The Power of the Word Today

It hardly needs to be stated, but marriage has come under assault in our world. People are genuinely confused by what they see, hear, and experience. We may tend to think that the situation in our day is worse than that of Bible times or of Luther's time, but these comparisons are neither certain nor particularly useful. In every circumstance the enduring Word of God speaks truth. Marriage was God's design from the time of creation, and so it will endure by that design until the end of time. A Christian will seek to understand marriage matters on God's terms.

7. Ruth says, "If my husband and I want help with our marriage, we want to meet with a married pastor. Only a married pastor can adequately serve as a marriage counselor." How would you respond to Ruth?

8. Some say that marriage customs change with the times. How do you think Luther would have responded to this statement?

9. What is one lesson from Luther you will want to remember from today's study?

NOTES

Summary

Luther emphasized consistently that marriage is God's institution. We will continue to honor it as such and seek the guidance of God's Word as we reflect his love in that relationship.

At Home

For those who are married: Sit together and review your wedding photos (or the video of your ceremony). Consider the blessing your marriage has been. How have you grown together in faith and love?

For those who are unmarried: Share an encouragement (or card) with a married couple (perhaps your parents) who have been a blessing to you.

Additional Reading

"Sermon on the Estate of Marriage" (1519) – *Luther's Works*, Vol. 44, pp. 3-14

A treatise on *The Estate of Marriage* (1522) – *Luther's Works*, Vol. 45, pp. 11-49

"Sermon at the Marriage of Sigismund von Lindenau" (1535) – *Luther's Works*, Vol. 51, pp. 355-367

"The Order of Marriage for Common Pastors" [Liturgy] (1529) – *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, pp. 110-115

Closing Prayer

Hymn: "O Master of the Loving Heart" (CW 491:1,4)

1. O Master of the loving heart,
The friend of all in need,
We pray that we may be like you
In thought and word and deed.
4. Oh, grant us hearts like yours, dear Lord,
So joyous, free, and true,
That all your children, ev'rywhere,
Be drawn by us to you.