

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 15, 2016**

THE MARRIAGE ANALOGY

Romans 7:1-6

I want to share something personal with you this morning. We are in the midst of an eventful “season” in the Smith family. In January, our son Nate got engaged to his girlfriend Amy, whom we love dearly. They plan to be married on July 31. Nate has been offered a staff position with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a ministry that had a huge impact on his life and the development of his faith during his years at James Madison University. Starting this fall, for his internship year with IV, he will be working with students at George Mason University in Fairfax, after which he will likely be assigned to a different university.

Daughter Lindsay currently serves as an instructional coach at Mark Twain Middle School after several years as a classroom teacher at Rolling Valley Elementary and then Mark Twain. She and her husband Dan have some big plans as well. Dan’s job with JP Morgan Chase is being transferred from Washington to New York City, which means they will be moving to Manhattan this summer, probably in July. We will miss having them so close by, but they are looking forward to the adventure of living in the city, and we are thrilled for them to have this opportunity.

Daughter Erin is nearing the completion of her first year as Upper School Principal (in charge of grades 5-8) at Immanuel Christian School in Springfield, where she taught for nine years prior to taking on the role of Upper School Principal. Last Sunday, on Mother’s Day, as some of you may have seen on Facebook or Instagram, Erin got engaged to her boyfriend David, who, like Lindsay’s husband Dan, is a great guy. They plan to be married sometime around the end of this year.

So, as you can imagine, there is a lot of excitement in our family these days, with not one but two weddings being planned as well as Lindsay and Dan’s pending move to Manhattan. We feel tremendously blessed. We *are* tremendously blessed. The thing that gives Mary Sue and me the greatest joy as we think about our family is that all three of our children and their mates or mates-to-be love the Lord Jesus and are walking with Him. We are filled to overflowing with thanks to the Lord for all His mercies to us.

You understand, it is not that Mary Sue and I did such a great job of raising our children. We didn’t! We made more than our share of mistakes. But God has been merciful and gracious to us, and has given us so many reasons to rejoice and give thanks to Him.

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Given Paul’s reference to marriage in our Scripture reading from Romans 7, it seemed appropriate to share these things with you today. Paul’s use of the marriage analogy in this passage also affords me the opportunity to say something about the institution of marriage as God designed and ordained it.

In a time of cultural confusion and the rejection of biblical norms, it becomes necessary to reiterate what the Bible teaches and, therefore, what we believe about marriage as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. As it says in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), the Bible teaches that “marriage is a union between one man and one woman, designed of God to last so long as they both shall live” (WCF 24.1). Marriage is a good and gracious gift from a good and gracious God and is intended, as the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship says, “for the welfare and happiness of humankind.”

While God makes allowances for separation and divorce, His intent is for marriage to be a lifelong relationship of exclusive love, fidelity, and sexual intimacy between one man and one woman. Nowhere in the Bible does God permit, condone, or approve of same-sex unions or sexual intimacy between persons of the same sex. As God designed it, as He blessed it and continues to bless it, marriage is always to be between a man and a woman. While seeking to extend the love of Jesus to all people, including those who think differently, this is what we believe, teach, and practice in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC).

In 2004 our denomination adopted a position paper on The Sanctity of Marriage that states: “Marriage exists first and foremost to glorify God.... (A)s a creation ordinance, [it] glorifies God as Creator. Beyond that, however, marriage is to glorify God as Redeemer, for Christian marriage is the consummate illustration of the redeeming grace of God in Christ.” In Ephesians 5:22-33, Paul indicates that the relationship between husband and wife is to be a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church, a relationship in which the love of the husband for his wife is to mirror the self-giving love of Jesus for the church.

Marriage also exists, we believe, to promote companionship and mutual assistance; to provide the proper context for the bearing, nurturing, and training of children; to promote and enhance the stability of society; and to provide the proper context for sexual intimacy (EPC Position Paper on Marriage, 2).

It may be unfashionable – and is becoming increasingly unfashionable – in our society to believe what we believe and to hold fast to our beliefs, but this is what we believe. And we believe what we believe because it is the clear and consistent teaching of the Bible, which we affirm to be the final and only infallible rule of faith and life.

Last fall *Time* magazine featured an article that asked the question: “Is Monogamy Over?” In asking about monogamy, *Time* might just as well have asked if marriage as we know it is over. The article offered a variety of opinions, including the notion that “monogamy is a charade” that leads to “institutionalizing dishonesty,” the belief that monogamy “is just an option, not the default,” and the idea that “there’s no right or wrong” concerning monogamy.

Fortunately, the article also included this biblical perspective from Andy Stanley, who said: “Monogamy” – which is essential to marriage as God designed it – “is more like an endangered species. Rare. Valuable. Something to be fed and protected. Perhaps,” he says, “an armed guard should be assigned to every monogamous couple to ward off poachers.”

He continues: “The value a culture places on monogamy determines the welfare of its women and children. Women and children do not fare well in societies that embrace polygamy or promiscuity. In the majority of cases, sexual freedom undermines the financial freedom of women. Sexual freedom eventually undermines the financial and emotional security of children” as well.

“If we are only biology,” says Stanley, “none of the above really matters. If we are only biology, monogamy was probably a flawed concept from the start. But very few of us live as if we are only biology.”

I would add: If we do live as if we are only biology, and I fear there are more who do than Stanley acknowledges, we demean and cheapen ourselves as well as others.

Stanley says: “The ‘I’ and ‘You’ that inhabit our bodies desire more than [just] another body. We desire intimacy – to know and be fully known without fear. Intimacy is fragile. Intimacy is powerful. Intimacy is fueled by exclusivity. So, no, monogamy is not obsolete. It is endangered.” (*Time*, September 11, 2015)

Monogamy matters because marriage as God ordained it and established it matters, because intimacy and exclusivity and faithfulness matter in marriage. To commit adultery, to cheat on your husband or wife, is to violate a sacred bond into which a husband has entered with his wife, and a wife with her husband. You know as well as I do that adultery or any other form of marital unfaithfulness can destroy a marriage. It doesn’t have to, but it can. It is possible, by God’s grace, for a marriage to survive infidelity, if there is honest confession, sincere repentance, a willingness to forgive, and time for healing to occur. Healing from adultery is possible, but it is usually hard and painful. I don’t think I’m telling you anything you don’t know.

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Now, let’s look at Paul’s marriage analogy in Romans 7. The principle he sets forth in verse 1 is pretty straightforward: The law has authority over you only while you are alive. You are subject to the law only as long as you are alive. When you die, the law is no longer binding on you. That is the general principle.

The specific example Paul gives is of a married woman who is bound by the law of marriage to her husband during her husband’s lifetime. As long as he is alive and they remain married to each other, she is not free to marry or live with another man, or to violate her marriage vows in any way. Paul knew, of course, that divorce was permitted under the law (though usually only the husband could initiate divorce proceedings against the wife, and not vice versa). He knew that divorce happens. But to stick with the analogy, the idea is that marriage was – and still is – meant to be a lifelong relationship, which was – and still is – meant to be ended only by the death of either the husband or the wife. If the husband dies, the wife is released from her marriage vows and is free to marry again. The same thing is true of the husband in the event of his wife’s death. If, however, a woman violates her marriage vows while she is still married, she “incurs the stigma of adultery,” as J. B. Phillips puts it in verse

3. In such a case, she is like Hester Prynne, who had to bear “the scarlet letter” for her indiscretion in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel of Puritan New England. She, of course, was no more (and no less) guilty than the Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale, with whom she had engaged in sexual relations outside of marriage.

There is a bit of a wrinkle in Paul’s application of this analogy to a person’s relationship with the law. F. F. Bruce’s explanation of the application is quite helpful. In the application, Paul compares the Christian believer to the wife, and the law with all its do’s and don’ts to the husband. But while in the illustration it is the husband who dies, in the application it is not the law that dies but the believer in Christ. The believer has died with Christ – through faith in Christ – and yet it is still the believer who, no longer bound to the law, is now free to be “married” to Christ. As death breaks the bond between a husband and a wife, so the believer’s “death-with-Christ” breaks the bond that formerly yoked us to the law, and now we are free to enter into a new, life-giving union with Christ.

Even though the law is good and has great value in exposing our sin and our need for a Savior, in restraining evil in society, and in showing us how to live godly lives that please God, our former association with the law – trying to live up to all its demands and requirements – did not enable us to produce the “fruit” of righteousness that God desires. But now that we have died to the law that once bound us and have been united to Christ, we are able, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit at work in us, to produce fruit for God – the kind of fruit that pleases God and serves His purposes in the world, fruit that glorifies God and blesses people. (Adapted from F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, 137).

The point Paul is making with this marriage analogy is that our “death” with Christ through faith in Him has secured our freedom from the tyranny of the law. We are free from the law with its ceaseless demands because, as Paul says in Galatians 5:1, “it is for freedom that Christ has set (us) free.” Christian freedom, though, is not a license to sin as much as we want without consequences. Not on your life! Christian freedom is not freedom to sin, but freedom to serve. As is often the case, I like the way John Stott puts it: “We serve [God] not because Christ is our master and we have to, but because Christ is our husband and we want to. Not because obedience leads to salvation” – it does not – “but because salvation leads to obedience” (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 197).

Do you see that? It is not that we could ever gain salvation through obedience, but that God’s grace in salvation makes us want to obey as a way of showing our gratitude to Him.

As Paul has said in Romans 6:15, “we are not under law but under grace,” which means that we are justified – declared righteous – in God’s sight not by our obedience to the law but by the sheer mercy and unmerited favor of God, and nothing else.

Accept it. Believe it. Embrace it. Rejoice in it. Let it – let Him – transform your life. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.