

Marriage Matters to the Master, Part 3: The Gift and the Giver
From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Introduces Us to the King of the Universe”
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Introduction

There was a song in the 1960s that caught the spirit of that decade. It was sung by a group called “The Five Man Electrical Band”. It had a simple title with just one word: “Signs”.

Here’s the chorus:

Sign, sign, everywhere a sign
Blockin' out the scenery, breakin' my mind
Do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign?
(1970 Les Emmerson – The Five Man Electrical Band)

Imagine you’re walking along one day. You see a park with beautiful grass. You think, boy, what a great place to walk. What a great place for children to play. What a great place to lie down and enjoy nature. Then, you see the sign: Keep off the grass. You think to yourself, “Why is that sign there?” Why would someone plant a beautiful field full of grass and then tell everyone that they can’t go there? As you walk along, you see other signs: No parking – Speed limit - Keep out.



To some people, life feels like a big, long series of signs listing things they can’t do. Does life feel like that to you sometimes?

Over the last few sessions, we’ve used some images, some symbols that illustrate how people relate to God. In our last session, we said that some people view God like a store. You go into the store, you pay for something, you expect to get it. People who follow this line of thinking believe that a relationship with God can be reduced to a set of rules. Do certain things, follow the rules, and God is obligated to give you things - Just like a store.

Today, we’re going to learn that some people view God as though he’s the owner of a big lawn. The lawn is beautiful and inviting - But there’s a big sign saying, “Keep off the grass”. In fact, it’s not just a lawn, it’s the whole world. To many, God appears to have created a whole world full of wonderful things. He then filled that world with “Do not” signs. Like the song says: Don’t do this, don’t do that. Can’t you read the sign?

There's a great 25 cent word: Curmudgeon. A Curmudgeon is a bad-tempered person, especially an old one. A curmudgeon cultivates a beautiful lawn and then spends all day yelling at kids to keep off. Sadly, many people think God is a curmudgeon.

Nowhere is this more apparent than with marriage and the things that come with it. In this session, we're going to delve more deeply into the topic of marriage. In our series, "What matters to the Master", Jesus tells us about things that matter to him. But he also tells us those things are under attack. So, our discussion today will have three parts.

- We'll expand on the idea of a gift, and a God who gives good gifts.
- We'll see how to better enjoy the gift of Marriage that God has given us.
- We'll see more ways that the gift has come under attack.

Let's start.

I. The Gift and the Giver

Is God a store? In our last session, we learned that the answer is, no. God is loving and generous. He is a gift giver who gives away good and perfect things without expecting anything in return.

Is God a curmudgeon, the ultimate creator of "Keep off the grass" signs? Again, no. However, the good and perfect gifts he gives are sometimes complex. Here's why I say that.

Imagine that I give you a gift – a beautiful, ripe, perfect apple. Imagine though, that no one ever told you what to do with an apple. So, you leave it sitting on the table. You can partially enjoy it, because it looks nice. But, in order to fully enjoy everything that an apple offers, you need to do some work. You need to pick it up and take a bite out of it. You need to chew. If you do that, you will experience an explosion of flavor. Your body will begin to utilize the nutrition in the apple. It has vitamins and complex carbohydrates and fiber. I've heard there is likely truth in the saying, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." But for all this to happen, you need to do some work. So, the gift of an apple is complex.

Add to this the entry of sin into our world. You know what happens if you leave the apple on the table for too long? Sure you do - It starts to get soft. Then it turns brown. Eventually, you can no longer eat it. Or maybe you don't watch it, and when you do get around to eating it, you find that some creatures have invaded your gift - slimy creatures. Apples are also fragile. You don't want to drop one. If you do, the process of turning brown speeds up a lot.

Apples are great. If you didn't know that, and I wanted you to enjoy your gift, I might create a sign. "You Shall eat your apple soon after you get it." I could add: "You shall bite into your apple." Or "You Shall chew your apple."

Maybe I would create a sign to indicate how fragile apples are: "You shall not drop Your apple"

Here's where the character of the giver comes in. A curmudgeon, a mean, selfish old man, might make all kinds of signs designed to keep special things for himself. ***But a generous, giving man would make signs that are designed to help people enjoy his gifts.***

God is not a store, where people do good works to purchase things from him. God is not a curmudgeon, who creates beautiful things and then makes "Keep off the grass signs" for selfish reasons. God is generous and is the giver of good and perfect gifts. These gifts are sometimes complex, so because he wants us to enjoy the gifts to their fullest, he gives us rules.

The gift of marriage is like that. Let's look at some of the things he says about it. Let's look at some of the things that will help us to enjoy God's gift. We'll look at what to do, and what to avoid.

II. What to do (how to better enjoy the gift of Marriage that God has given us)

Let's start with the things God tells to do.

A. Understand the value of marriage.

This is review from the first session, so if you've read that, follow along for just a bit.

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.
(Genesis 1:27)

We are created in God's image. We are not like any other created thing. Right after we're told that we're created in God's image, we're told that part of that image is being male and female. As we said in a previous session, "Gender matters to the Master". We reflect God's image without doing anything. But we reflect it in special ways when men and women relate to each other. More on that later.

28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1:27)

We are to "increase in number". We are to multiply. So, Families Matter to the master.

And remember, God made multiplying fun. This is where we get the three-letter word: SEX. Here's a vitally important point: ***Our sexuality was created by God.*** It is a beautiful thing. It is not dirty. It is not embarrassing.

I once heard a pastor say that, on his wedding night, he and his new bride knelt down by the side of the bed and thanked God for the wonderful gift that they were about to enjoy. That's a beautiful thought - And it's a totally biblical thought. Marriage is a wonderful gift where we reflect the image of God. Our sexuality is part of that wonderful gift.

Please know this: God smiles on what he creates. God smiles on people who enjoy his gifts in the ways that he directs.

Here are some things that he directs.

B. Understand the boundaries of marriage.

After we understand the value of marriage, we need to understand the boundaries of marriage. For our sexuality to be properly enjoyed, it is to be enjoyed without the bounds of marriage.

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure (Hebrews 13:4)

Our sexuality should only be enjoyed within the boundaries of marriage. Think of that "Keep off the grass" sign. Maybe the sign is there because the grass is newly seeded. So, it's delicate. Wait just a few more weeks, and the grass in that field will be a perfectly fine place to play and walk and whatever you want. It's just not ready yet. Marriage is like that.

Marriage is also powerful. Imagine fire in fireplace. It's warm, it's inviting, it's pleasant. Now, imagine fire in the curtains. That's bad - very bad. Your house may burn down!

To fully enjoy marriage, we must understand the boundaries of marriage.

Incidentally, I believe this is something we should tell our children about when they're young, before they've gotten all kinds of bad ideas. There's a Christian organization called "Focus on the Family". This organization provides great resources. Just type "focus on the family" and "Explain sex to children" into a browser and you'll get tons of help.

C. Understand the requirements of marriage

Next, we need to understand the requirements of marriage.

1) As a gift of God, marriage is best enjoyed by two people who are both dedicated to following Jesus.

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have

in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? (II Corinthians 6:14-16)

This is very strict, but very clear. When you become a true follower of Jesus, you leave behind the gods of this world. If your passion is following Jesus, you're not going to enjoy being married to someone who doesn't share that passion. This is not uppity or superior thinking. It has nothing to do with economic class or people group. It's not "don't marry someone who is beneath you". It means if you're passionate about something, you want someone else who is passionate for it, too. Some time ago, I shared an illustration of this, which I'll share again. Let's say that I'm a medical researcher, and I discover a pill that cures cancer. I'm very proud of my pill, and I tell everyone I meet about it. If someone has cancer and they take my pill, they will be cured. For the sake of illustration, let's assume this is true.

But let's say that everywhere I go, my wife follows after me and says, "My husband is a wonderful man, and I love him very much - but his pill doesn't work. Don't believe a word he says." That would be exasperating! That relationship would be under great stress.

Jesus did more than cure cancer. He triumphed over the grave. He offers a cure for death itself. Because of this, if you're a dedicated follower of Jesus, you want to know him better, and you want to tell others about him. If you're married to someone who doesn't believe what you believe, they're going to be constantly undermining you. That's a recipe for great pain.

This is something we need to teach our young people. I had a professor in seminary who took this very seriously. From the day his daughter was born, he started to pray for her future spouse. By the time his daughter was four years old, he had trained. He would ask, "Someday, when you get married, who are you going to marry?" She would answer, "A Christian". Then he would ask, "just any Christian?" She would say, "No, a dedicated and growing Christian."

So, this is something we need to take seriously on a personal level, and we need to teach it to our young people.

2) Marriage is for people willing to serve (submit to) each other.

We can reflect God's image through service to others. Let's be reminded of what the Apostle Paul tells us in Philippians:

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:
6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
7 rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
(Philippians 2:5-8)

Our Lord, who was God visiting the face of the earth, was a servant. He was so dedicated to serving others that he died on a cross. We can reflect God's image through dedicated service to others. There is no better opportunity for this than marriage.

Over in Ephesians, Paul laid out the pattern of roles in marriage. That passage requires special attention, so we'll look at it in detail another day. However, here's how it starts:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:21)

One of the reasons that we need two dedicated followers of Christ in a marriage is that no one else would understand this – It's only possible when the Spirit of God abides in the life of a person. When this happens, we can see wonderful things for God.

It's also practical. There is a Christian psychologist named Larry Crabb. He uses this illustration: Imagine that you have two fleas. Fleas live by sucking blood out of an animal. Let's say both fleas live on a dog. You will have two fat, happy fleas. But now let's say there is no dog. The two fleas only have each other. So, they suck each other dry. The result is two, famished, very hungry, and very unhappy fleas.

That's a colorful image - It's not meant to be perfect. But the idea is this: If you have two people who are nourished spiritually by God, they can serve their spouse and others. If you have two people who don't have God, they can only take from each other. They suck each other dry. When they've both reached the end, the only thing they can do is give up. They either break up and find someone else, or they live desperate, empty lives.

So, here are the things we need to do to enjoy the gift of marriage:

- Understand the value of marriage
- Understand the boundaries of marriage
- Understand the requirements of marriage.

At this point, we need to mention two things. Earlier, we talked about God's gifts being complex. We also talked about the fact that we live in a broken world. When complexity, sinfulness, and the gift of marriage meet, two things happen.

1) Singleness.

Not all people are given the opportunity to enjoy God's gift of marriage. This happens for 3 reasons.

A. They're set apart by God.

Note: This has nothing to do with sin. This was in fact the case with our Lord Jesus, and others like the apostle Paul. Sometimes God has a special path for people that is outside the norm. There is nothing wrong with this. In fact, like any other special calling, it's a wonderful thing. When this happens, God gives people special provision.

B. Through not fault of their own, some people are not asked to be married.

This is because of a sinful world, not because these people are sinful. I once heard of a professor who had a number of single female students. He referred to them as the "GLUB CLUB". The word "GLUB" stands for "God's Little Unclaimed Beauties."

C. Some people have failed in the task of character development.

In other words, yes, this is part of sin on their part. I once knew a young lady in a Christian single group who was asked to describe what she wanted in a future spouse. She said, "I want a mature spiritual man." She then added, "I'm tired working – I'd like him to make enough money for me to stay at home if I want." "I'd love for him to be a good dancer." "He should play tennis." "I like to sail." The list went on. This young lady never confronted the fact that she was a fantastically selfish individual. She saw marriage *not* as an opportunity to love and serve someone else. She clearly saw marriage as someone else having the opportunity to love and serve her - And she was ready to suck them dry when she accomplished her goal of marriage. Some people need to face their sin before they can be married.

2) Broken Marriages

The second thing that happens when the complex gift of marriage meets a broken world is broken marriages.

There may be some people who have been patiently following along during our whole three-part discussion about marriage. They've been thinking, "I or someone I know is stuck in a bad marriage or has been divorced." They may not let the words come out of their mouths, but they want to say, "Wipe that Pollyanna grin off your face and start talking about reality, please."

Well, in a sinful, broken world, not everyone gets to fully enjoy the gift of marriage. I am sorry to say that I know people who did a lot of right things in preparing for marriage, but who still saw their marriage fall apart.

I have three responses:

a. Don't forget the ideal.

Although we can't guarantee a perfect marriage, we can get a higher number of good marriages by properly preparing people. We can teach people to seek only other believers. We can teach our young people about the proper role of sexuality. We can do things like have pre-marital counseling when people want to be married.

b. Because we value marriage, we can encourage people to come to God when they have problems.

You would be amazed at what you can do if you invite God into a marriage and get proper counsel. Don't wait until you're feeling so much pain, that you're ready to do something desperate!

c. We can view even the toughest of times as opportunities for growth.

This sounds idealistic, but please consider it. We mentioned that our God came to earth to serve others. He served to the point of death. There are plenty of people on this earth that Jesus serves, but who give him little back. He still loves them and serves them anyway. I know this sounds hard, but maybe God is offering you an opportunity to meet him in a special way. Sometimes, we know God through suffering. Know that when God calls you to suffer, he will never leave you or forsake you. The gift of marriage is complex. If someone is stuck in a bad marriage, God can help them to make it. If someone has lost a marriage through divorce, God can heal.

This is where the body of Christ comes in. We need to be there for each other. Please contact us if you need help in this area.

Now we move on to our last point.

III. What to Avoid

Let's talk about more signs. You're continuing the walk that we started at the beginning of our discussion. The next sign you see says this: "Keep out". You begin to think, "Is this some selfish person who owns something wonderful? A beautiful property? A wonderful garden? Something great that they don't want to share? Is this a curmudgeon?"

But let's say, instead of just keep out, you see a sign with the following words: Danger – High voltage – keep out. Ah, that's different. Electricity is a wonderful thing. It powers our lights and appliances. It cooks our food and warms our homes. But, in order to have it you need generators and high-tension wires and transformers, and all kinds of things that could kill you if

you touched them. So, someone put up a sign to warn you. ***That someone cares about you and other people.***

Sometimes, complex gifts come with warnings - Warnings about what happens when they're used incorrectly.

In the same way, the loving God, the great gift giver, has given us the gift of marriage. And he has warned us that it has come under attack. When it comes under attack, bad things happen. There are places in the Bible where lists of sins occur. At the end of one list, God says this:

Keep all my decrees and laws and follow them, so that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out. (Leviticus 20:22)

When we looked at the fact that human life matters to the master, we looked at the Story of Cain and Abel. When Cain murdered his brother, God told him that his brother's blood cried out from the earth (Genesis 4:10). The same is true for sexual sin. We may think that God doesn't see but he does. And when he created our world in his infinite wisdom, he created a cosmic link between the earth and our sin. Sin piles up. When the piles get too big, things erupt. They break. So, God warns us with a list of sins to avoid. They're just like the sign, "Danger – High voltage - Keep out".

We started this section with a warning about adultery.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27-28)

How serious is adultery?

And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. (Matthew 5:30)

How serious is this? Hell – that's how serious this is.

We just read that adultery is deeper than the physical action. It's lust in the heart. Today, lust takes different forms. One of the most deceptive is pornography. Today, pornography is all over the Internet. The Focus on the Family site provides a horrifying statistic: "Seventy percent of boys and twenty-three percent of girls have spent more than 30 consecutive minutes looking at online pornography on at least one occasion." ("Digital Pornography Addiction" by Timothy Allen, 2016)

People seem to think, “I’m not committing sexual sin – I’m just thinking about it.” Jesus warned us that sexual sin is a matter of the heart as much as the physical action. So, adultery is a terrible problem. Pornography is also a terrible problem.

At the other end of the spectrum from pornography is real, professional sex. Prostitution is a problem in our country and our world. What’s really frightening is forced prostitution, also known as human trafficking. The numbers on this are terrifying. In an article from July of 2019, USA Today reported that there are an estimated 4 million victims of sex trafficking in the world. Four million. (“13 sex Trafficking statistics” Cara Kelly, USA Today, July 29, 2019)

Now, most people agree that adultery and prostitution are bad. A big problem comes with sexual sins that are becoming accepted and even popular. Remember, God created people male and female. That’s why we believe: Gender matters to the master

God’s image is reflected partially through gender (Genesis 1:27). God created humans as male and female. Men and women join together in marriage. But this too, is under attack.

Today, we not only see homosexuality practiced, we have legal gay marriage. We have people suggesting that there are more than two genders. In fact, as of 2014, ABC news reported that Facebook was offering 58 possible ways that people could identify their gender. (“58 Gender Options for Facebook Users”, Russel Goldman, 2/13/2014 ABC News)

The list goes on. We could spend a lot more time on this, but for now we’ll have to say that humans have found all kinds of ways to attack God’s gift of marriage. And the results are devastating.

I don’t bring this up because I want you to hate people. People who practice these things are our mission field. They need to learn about the great gift giver. They need to learn that God loves them, and that he forgives people who sin against him, no matter what form that sin takes. On the other hand, we need to warn people that they are in terrible danger. If they continue to sin against God, if they don’t repent and seek God’s forgiveness, there is a terrible penalty.

Let’s pull this all together.

Conclusion

Today we’ve learned that God is not a curmudgeon. He’s not a mean old man who created a world full of wonderful things and then created a lot of rules that are the equivalent of “Keep off the grass”. God is good and generous. He is the giver of good and perfect gifts.

One of those gifts is marriage. However, marriage is complex. So, God gives speaks to us in his Word. He tells us things we can do to enjoy that gift. He tells us things to avoid.

Why does he do this? Because Marriage matters to the Master.

And remember:

For the Master to be your Master, what matters to the Master must matter to you.

May God help us as we seek to honor him through this wonderful gift.