
VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: BIBLICAL MARRIAGE

LECTURE 2: THE UNITY IN MARRIAGE

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The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module

BIBLICAL MARRIAGE

8 LECTURES

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1. Priorities in a Christian Marriage
- 2. The Unity in Marriage**
3. Headship
4. Servant and Shepherd
5. Godly Wives 1
6. Godly Wives 2
7. Communication
8. Finances and Physical Relationship

Lecture 2

THE UNITY IN MARRIAGE

TRANSCRIPT LECTURE 2

If you were to visit a harbor at the sea, you could go down onto the docks and find ships and other large vessels tied there. If you were to look carefully, you would discover that the ships are anchored to the docks with large, carefully woven ropes. The fibers of the rope are tightly braided together in order to give them strength, but if you were to unravel the rope and tie a single cord to the ship, it would be weak. It would snap when the wind and waves began to pull the ship away from the dock. Biblical marriage is like a tightly woven cord. When a husband and wife are bound to Christ and then woven together in biblical unity, the marriage is strong. But when it begins to unravel, it becomes fragile and unable to withstand the pressures of life.

What threatens unity in marriage? How does disunity manifest itself? What does God tell us to watch against? How can we protect a godly marriage from these harmful influences? How do we restore unity when it has been undermined or weakened? And what bond has God specifically provided for the preservation of biblical marriage? In the first lecture, we established from Scripture that God defines unity as a top priority in a biblical marriage. In this lecture, we will explore how this unity can be maintained amid all of the hurdles and obstacles that threaten to disrupt oneness in marriage.

We'll consider three things: first of all, the threat of sin. Every marriage, even a biblical marriage, consists of two sinners, a sinful husband and a sinful wife. The believer's greatest struggle relates to his or her war against sin. Paul makes this clear in Romans 7:14 and following. This is true in life in general, so it should be no surprise to us that sin is the root cause of all the potential problems in marriage as well. The Bible says that offences will come whenever any two sinners are involved. James writes, "For in many things we offend all," chapter 3 verse 2. And he says in the next chapter, "From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?"

Two of the major sins that threaten unity and the pursuit of love are selfishness, which basically says, "Me first", and pride, which says, "Me best." The believer cannot elevate himself and his desire without causing damage in his or her marriage. In addition, the root problem in taking offense at another's actions often stems from misplacing our ultimate source of joy. We desire to get what we want rather than finding joy in Christ Himself. We touched on this in the first lecture. Sin results in personal conflicts, including disruption in the marriage relationship. When those conflicts are not prevented, then they must be resolved. But before we address the resolution of conflicts, we need to remember that the motivation for biblically resolving conflicts cannot itself be self-serving. In other words, we may be motivated to resolve a conflict just because of our desire for personal peace, or perhaps to get something that we want. So we need to be on guard against that. We must do what is right for the right reasons, namely seeking God's glory and the good of our spouse.

That brings us to biblical conflict resolution. In the first lecture, we were focusing on how to cultivate unity. Now we're addressing how to repair unity when it has been broken, and that requires us to think specifically about how to resolve conflicts that arise within marriage. First of all, absolutely every single argument or disagreement must be biblically resolved to maintain oneness. The temptation is to sweep a matter under the rug, but that's never permitted. It is those kinds of unresolved, back-logged conflicts that build up over time and

destroy marriages. So rather than sweeping up a mess in a room and then disposing of it in the trash, if you're merely sweeping the trash under the rug, and you do it again the next day and the next day, eventually you're going to end up with a big mound or mountain under the rug. Many marriages face this similar problem where they've had months, perhaps years, of merely putting things under the carpet without ever biblically resolving the conflicts that have arisen.

Well, this requires several biblical commitments from every believer. If you're going to resolve conflicts biblically it entails, first of all, the need to tell your spouse what they have done before, during, and perhaps after an argument that was sinful or hurtful to you. This is what Jesus says in Matthew 18:15, "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." So here is the principle of being open, cultivating trust by expressing frankly the things that a spouse has done that is sinful against us. But secondly, we have to admit to our spouse our own offense and our own sin, ideally even before they tell us, if possible. Think of Jesus' words in Matthew 5:23-24, "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." So here, if we know that we have done something or said something sinful, we are to take the initiative in going to acknowledge that to our spouse. Well, both of these things require humility. In 1 Peter 5:5-6, we read, "Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time." And so humility is required. Another thing that is required is self-denial. And we also need a greater commitment to a godly marriage than to our rights and feelings.

Well, all of this must always end not only with confession of sin, but also with granting biblical forgiveness to one another. If a spouse points out the fact that their husband or wife has sinned against them, or if a spouse takes the initiative and acknowledges that sin ahead of time, that's only the first step. There must be follow-through that leads to forgiveness. That means promising to bury the issue and to not bring up the forgiven sin to others. It also means not bringing up that sin to your spouse, or to rehearse the offence, even in your own head. The reason is because of how the Bible defines forgiveness.

Forgiveness, as we'll see, includes a commitment to forget. We are to forgive in the way that God forgives. Ephesians 4:32 says this, "forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." We forgive one another in the same manner that God forgives His people in Christ, and God forgives by forgetting, if you will. Now, God is omniscient; He knows all things, but you notice the language of Scripture. [In] many places throughout the prophets and the psalms, we are told that He casts the sins of the believer behind His back. Elsewhere, we are told that He casts their sins into the depths of the sea. We are told that He separates their sins from them as far as the east is from the west, and will remember them no more. Well, there are many other examples of that same concept. God is putting the sin out from the front of His face, as it were. He is not holding up that sin. He is burying the issue of sin, and this is what God calls upon His people to do in relationship to one another.

So in the context of a marriage where one spouse has sinned against another, perhaps both have sinned against each other, when there is an agreement to forgive, it's actually a promise to forget, a promise to bury the issue that has arisen. So if you think of the big picture and overview of dealing with a sinful offense, you have two parties. You have, on the one hand, the recipient of the offense, that is to say the person who has been sinned against, and as we saw in Matthew 18, there is a process to pursue: you are to go and tell your brother, your husband, your wife, how they have sinned against you. But the Bible also gives us the attitude in which to pursue that. Galatians 6:1 says, "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted." So you have the person who has been sinned against. But then, on the other hand, you have the perpetrator of the offense; you have the one who is doing the sinning, who has sinned against the other, and we saw again the process to pursue in Matthew 5. If you are made conscious of the fact that your brother has ought against you, you are to leave your gift at the altar and go and be reconciled to your brother. But, the Bible also gives us the attitude in which to pursue that in 1 Peter 5:5, where we're told that there is to be humility, as we noted earlier, a humbling of ourselves in acknowledging our wrongdoing. And so, if you're thinking in terms of an overview, of the big picture, what should happen is when there is a conflict between a husband and a wife, and there's a separation of unity, both the person who has

sinned and the person who's been sinned against should be returning to one another and will, if you will, meet in the middle. They'll be found, as it were, coming back together to resolve this conflict that has arisen.

We should think of patterns of reconciliation that the Lord has given to us in the Scriptures. So first of all, if you can overlook an offense in love, then you should do so. Not everything that is offensive requires that it be addressed. So 1 Peter 4:8 reads, "And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins." What does that mean? It means that the more you love your spouse, the more easily you will be able to bear patiently with him or her. So there are many circumstances in situations where a passing and minor offence should just be covered in love. But secondly, if the offence is of such a nature that you cannot overlook it, so perhaps you've tried to, but you can't get it out of your mind and you're still emoting over it, well then you are to gently confront your spouse with his or her sin, as we saw in Matthew 18:15. Thirdly, the person being confronted should humbly receive the admonition, and if it is true, what's being said, then they should repent of it and be reconciled to their spouse.

Secondly, in this lecture, we need to think about serving Christ in unity as co-heirs; so that's a description of a godly husband and wife. In 1 Peter 3:7 we read that husbands and wives are "heirs together of the grace of life." Now what does that entail, serving Christ as co-heirs? Well, first of all, the husband must know and understand his wife. That same passage in 1 Peter 3:7 says, "Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel." A wise husband will learn to know his wife and to know her well enough to utilize her fully as a helpmeet, to be able to draw upon her counsel and her insight and her gifts and her abilities.

This entails knowing what it means for her to be a weaker vessel and caring for her accordingly. It means understanding her physical, emotional, and spiritual limitations and sensibilities. A godly husband will be devoted to giving honor to her, as we saw in 1 Peter 3:7 and as you see, for example, in Proverbs 31:28. This involves supporting and encouraging, even defending and praising her in front of others and privately. It includes a husband cherishing her by not doing what would be considered rude, which is an attribute of love as defined in 1 Corinthians 13:5. As you turn to the Old Testament, you discover that it is the husband's job to cheer up his wife, [Deuteronomy] 24:5, where the Lord says that a man in Old Testament Israel would, that first year of marriage, devote himself chiefly to cheering up his wife. That means concentrating on being sensitive to her many needs.

On the other hand, a wife must respect and honor her husband. That's repeated at least three times in Ephesians 5:22 and following. A wise helpmeet will strengthen and defend and assist her husband, even in his areas of weakness. You think of Abigail in the Old Testament in 1 Samuel 25. Abigail is an imperfect but nevertheless a good example in this regard. Prudence will crown a godly wife's decision making as Proverbs 19:14 says. She will also know and fulfill her husband's wishes as she is able. You note the example that is given from Peter in 1 Peter 3, and he highlights especially the example of Sarah in her relationship to Abraham. Likewise, Paul speaks to this in Titus 2:5. In addition, a virtuous wife is industrious and productive for her husband. The prime example of this would be found in Proverbs 31, and she will honor him by going to him for spiritual instruction, counsel, and help. In 1 Corinthians 14:35, Paul is telling the Corinthians that women are to be silent in the church, that if wives have questions, they should ask their husbands at home.

And so, as we'll note more in the next lecture, the husband is to be giving spiritual oversight and instruction to his wife, and the wife is to be seeking that out from him. A godly woman will honor her husband by assisting him in lovingly raising their children in the ways of the Lord. There are many examples in the Old Testament of this, as well as in the New Testament. She'll even be able to extend her family's ministry to teaching other ladies to do the same. In Titus 2, Paul instructs the older women to teach the younger women how to be godly wives and godly mothers.

Being co-heirs together of the grace of life means cultivating harmony. You can ask the question, what are our complementary strengths and weaknesses? Well, this requires some reflection. For example, spiritually, how do we complement one another in our strengths and weaknesses? What are your individual sins that you especially struggle with, or the graces that you especially shine with? What are the spiritual gifts that the Lord has given to you? And how do the differences between the husband and wife in these areas dovetail together? You can also think of complementary strengths and weaknesses emotionally; levels of emotion, frequency of various emotions. You can think of the same with regards to your physical condition, your health, your strength, your

energy levels, your ability to pursue various activities. There will be complementary strengths and weaknesses with regards to your interests, whether they be academic background and training, or your recreational interests, and so on. And you need to think of the relationship of gifts and abilities, or even the relationship that you have in terms of differences of personality bent, different temperaments. Some people are task-oriented; others are people-oriented, and there are many other features that belong to someone's personality. How do these two people work together in using their strengths in the service of the Lord Jesus Christ?

But thirdly, in this lecture, we should think of the bond of unity, and the biblical bond of unity is vows. God has provided the ordinance of vows for the preservation of the marriage relationship. A vow is a solemn promise in the presence of God, and it serves as an additional bond that ties the husband and wife together. This reflects the fact, vows reflect the fact, that marriage is a covenant relationship. The Bible uses the terminology, 'your wife by covenant' in Malachi 2:14. It is sinful, for example, for a believer to marry an unbeliever, to be unequally yoked to an unbeliever, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6:14. Being unequally yoked is a biblical picture of being bound or tied to another by covenant. You can picture two livestock, and they have a yoke that goes over the neck of both of them, and they pull in the harness and in that yoke, perhaps a cart or a plow or something. This is a biblical picture of being tied to another by covenant. The description of marriage in the beginning of the Bible was "cleaving and becoming one flesh," Genesis 2:24. Now, if God converts a spouse after they are married and they find themselves in that circumstance married to an unbeliever, well, then they are to seek as best as they are able to continue in that relationship, which Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 7. All of this is backed by the fact that God is ultimately the One who is joining a husband and a wife together in marriage. The Lord says, 'What God hath joined together, let no man separate,' in Matthew 19:6.

Well, since vows are an important part of the unity that God has established for a marriage relationship, we need to ask a couple of questions. First of all, who is involved in the taking of vows? And, this is important because your marriage vows are first and foremost to God Himself. Deuteronomy 23:21 says, "When thou shalt vow a vow unto the LORD thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it: for the LORD thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee." But secondly, of course, your vow is also a pledge to another. This is why a husband can refer to his wife as a wife by covenant (Malachi 2). Those attending a wedding, for example, are responsible to serve as witnesses to the vows that take place. By their attendance at a wedding, they're actually committing themselves to both witness and to hold you to your promises. Now there are many examples in the Old Testament of this. You think of Joshua 24:22, where Joshua calls for witnesses to the vows that Israel was making before God. Well, this underlines the fact that taking vows is a serious matter.

I would encourage you to look at the opening of Ecclesiastes 5. We learn several things; we learn, first of all, that you are not to take vows quickly or hastily. Ecclesiastes 5:2 says, "Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few." Verse 2 of that same chapter reinforces the fact that you are not to take them thoughtlessly. You are to be reflective; you are to be conscious about what it is that you are saying in your vows. And once a lawful vow is taken, there is no return, no matter how much you regret it. If you look at verse 4 of Ecclesiastes 5, you'll see that. We also sing about this in the Psalms. Think of Psalm 76:11, or Psalm 15 and the end of verse 4, where it's saying that a godly man will swear to his own hurt and still keep his word. Well, that means it is better not to vow than to vow and not pay. Again, Ecclesiastes 5:5, "Better is it that thou shouldst not vow, than that thou shouldst vow and not pay." Do you see the merciful provision that God has given to marriage in the ordinance of marriage vows? This is an additional bond, if you will, that ties a husband and wife together in the presence and fear of God. It is a tool for the preservation of that relationship.

God not only prescribes unity for a biblical marriage, but He also provides all the instructions we need for preserving that unity. Sin, as we have seen, threatens disruption. But the gospel of grace teaches us repentance and forgiveness in Christ Jesus. I would encourage you to go over your notes and look up the passages of Scripture that we've referred to with your spouse. Discuss particular instances in your relationship where these principles should have been applied and other instances in which they perhaps successfully were implemented. Identify the specific areas which need to be changed. Formulate a concrete plan of how you are going to apply these biblical principles to the specifics of your own situation. For example, if there is a backlog of conflicts which have not been biblically resolved from the past, then you need to start by addressing those. And, of course, you

should water all of your study and all of your discussions with much prayer. We know that, “Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it,” Psalm 127:1. In the next lecture, we will turn our attention to what the Bible teaches about the role and responsibilities of a biblical husband.