

The Power of A Spouse

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Date: 26 May 2019

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[0 : 0 0] are visiting with us, welcome. We're glad that you're here, and we're glad that you're here not because we are trying to fill seats, but because we are following Jesus together as one community. And as we follow Jesus together, we've become convinced that there's no one so good that they don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it, which means that God has something to say to everyone in his word, something to say to people who have been Christians their entire lives, and also something to say to people who have doubts or questions or objections about Christianity. And so we're glad for everyone that's here with us as we're following Jesus together. Over the last several months, actually since January, we've been reading the book of Nehemiah together. And as you know, the book of Nehemiah is about a man named Nehemiah who lived in the fifth century and led God's people to rebuild the wall around the city of Jerusalem. And as we've seen, he did not just lead God's people in returning to God's wall, but he also led God's people in returning to God's word and God's ways and his mission. And so that means fundamentally the book of Nehemiah is a book about spiritual renewal and revival. It tells us a story and it paints us a picture about what it looks like when God's people turn back to God's word and his ways.

And if you have been with us, you also know that there's two endings. We had the first ending a couple weeks ago in Nehemiah chapter 12. The wall was completed. There was great rejoicing. The people walked on top of the wall that they had rebuilt. There were two separate choirs. They met in God's temple and worshiped him. And that would have been a wonderful place for this book to end.

But instead, we have a second ending. And this second ending, chapter 13, seems somewhat strange, maybe anticlimactic, perhaps counterintuitive. It would be nice to just end with celebration, right? Why not end on a high note? But instead, we find out in chapter 13 that renewal and revival did not last. Nehemiah was there as a governor for 12 years, and then he had promised the king of Persia that he was going to return. And so he returns to the Persian empire from Israel.

And at some later point, we're not sure exactly when, he comes back to Israel and he finds, to his dismay, that many of his reforms have not lasted. Despite the celebration in chapter 12, God's people have not continued to follow God's ways and his mission. And so this tells us, the second ending tells us two things. One of them I've been telling you the last two weeks, which is that spiritual revival and renewal, is not something that we arrive at. We're always tempted to turn away from what God has called us to. And so we always need to be coming back and returning again and again and again. The second thing that this tells us that I have not pointed out is that we cannot have spiritual renewal and revival without hard and painful conversations.

So think about it this way. Let's say that someone came to you. Let's say that you're married. Not all of us are married, but some of us are. And they said, I want to ask you a question. Do you, would you want your marriage to be better than it's ever been? Do you want to have renewal and revival in your marriage? Do you want to see more of a relationship than you've ever seen before, more joy and more intimacy? What would you say? Of course, many people would say, yes, that sounds great. That sounds amazing. So this person asking you, let's say they're a counselor, they'd respond, well, that's great. That's wonderful. I'm glad you're willing to have the best marriage you've ever had. So we're going to have to have some conversations first. First, we're going to have to talk about that thing that he did two years ago that he still hasn't apologized for that's kind of between you and you haven't been able to talk about, and it's creating some distance. And then after we talk about that, we're going to have to talk about some of the ways that he has not been able to live up to her expectations because her dad was really good at certain things, and he's not good at those same things, and she still hasn't forgiven him for that, and he doesn't have the permission to not be perfect sometimes. And then after we have that conversation, we're going to have to talk about some of the ways that you guys have conflict, and we're going to have to build some new patterns of relating and working through areas where you disagree.

[4 : 19] No, our marriage is great. It's amazing. No, we're good. We don't, things are going well. The same thing is true of the church as well. There are many people who long and say, we really want there to be revival in this country. We would love for this church to have more joy and faith than it's ever had before. We would love for the hearts of God's people in this nation to turn back to God. And so if someone might ask, church, do you want to have revival and renewal?

Is that something that you long for? And everyone would say, yes, right? That's something that we want. It's something that we hope for. Okay, well, great. Well, first, we're going to have to have some really hard conversations. Nehemiah chapter 13, we're going to have to talk about the ways that we use money and the times that we want to trust in money rather than in God. Nehemiah chapter 5, we're going to have to talk about the ways that we treat people who are on the margins of society. Back to Nehemiah chapter 13, we're going to have to talk about our time and the ways that we use it. And maybe there's places where the way that we use our time gets in the way of our relationship with God. And we're actually trusting our work rather than God and his provision for us.

With this second ending, we've had, now we're about to have three hard conversations in a row. And it hasn't just been feel-good sermons about God's love and his justice and his passion and his mercy. And if you've been listening carefully, there's probably some point or multiple points at which I've offended you or which you've strongly disagreed with me. And that's okay.

But it's a reminder to us that the cost of Christian discipleship is very high. And if we want and long for God's presence, we have to have hard and difficult conversations.

And so we have one hard and difficult conversation left. That's how the book of Nehemiah ends, and it's a conversation about marriage. The question is this, what do our marriages have to do with God and his ways?

[6 : 29] What does marriage have to do with returning to God and his mission for the world? What does marriage have to do with spiritual renewal and revival? It's with that question that we come to our very last section of the book of Nehemiah.

We're going to be reading chapter 13, starting in verse 22. And as we come to this passage, remember that this is God's word. And God tells us that his word is more precious than gold, even the finest gold.

And it is sweeter than honey, even honey that comes straight from the honeycomb. Which means that we turn to it now, starting in verse 23. In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab.

And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod. And they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people. And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair.

And I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. Verse 26.

[7 : 39] Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God. And God made him king over all Israel.

Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil, and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?

Verse 28. Verse 30.

Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work. And I provided for the wood offering at appointed times and for the firstfruits.

Remember me, O my God, for good. Please pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Dear Father in heaven, we thank you for your word that you give to us.

[8 : 53] We thank you that you give us words of encouragement. We thank you that you also give us words of challenge. That you're not afraid to have hard conversations with us, because you love us and you care for us.

We ask that you would send your Holy Spirit this morning to help us do that, to help us listen well. That we would be able to see and know and understand and believe everything that you have for us in your word.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. We saw in the very beginning of Nehemiah, as they were rebuilding the wall in chapters 4 and 6, that they were enemies who were coming up against God's people.

That God has real enemies in real time and real space. And so they had to stand firm, trusting God and knowing that he would defend them, despite the attempts to make them afraid and to stop the work that they were doing. And they overcame that and finished the wall.

These enemies were separated. But now when Nehemiah returns, remember he was governor for 12 years, he returns to Persia and then he comes back to Israel. He finds that the very enemies that God's people had separated from are now at the very center of Israel.

[10 : 07] We saw two weeks ago that one of them had made his way all the way into one of the storehouses for the tithes and he turned it into a storage unit for his furniture. And so Nehemiah had to cast him out and tell them, no, this is not good.

We have to instead use these things for the purposes that God's given them. Now he comes up against another way that God's people have been mixing with God's enemies. He finds, verse 23, that they have not just allowed God's enemies into some of God's places, but they've actually gone so far as to marry them.

Now some of these names are going to sound familiar. Ashdod. We saw in chapter 4 that the Ashdodites were one of the enemies that were coming up to try to stop the building of the wall. We've already heard in this chapter about the Ammonites and the Moabites.

Tobiah, by the way, remember Tobiah is one of the men who was trying to stop God's people and destroy the wall. He's an Ammonite. And then we know about the Moabites. And we find out even more than that, not just that the Israelites are marrying God's enemies, but just as happened before, we have this one bad actor, Eliashib, verse 28.

He's the same one who let God's enemies into the storehouses. And now it turns out that his son has married Tobiah's daughter. So one of God's greatest enemies has not just found his way into God's storehouses, which Nehemiah has already taken care of, but now he's actually intermarried into one of the most powerful families in Israel.

[11 : 37] He is connected with the priesthood itself. And so the Israelites, in just a short time, have turned away from following God with their whole heart and their whole lives.

Now when we read passages like this, it's tempting, and sometimes it can be confusing when we talk about marrying foreigners. So let me just first of all say what this passage is not saying.

It is not talking primarily about interracial marriage. This passage is not saying we cannot marry people of other races. What we have to understand is that Israel in the Old Testament was both a race and a nation, and it was also God's people.

And so race and religion were mixed or combined in a way that they are not combined as much today. So the command that God had given for his people not to marry other races was not primarily a racial issue.

It was a religious issue. It's not a racial issue as much as it's a religious issue. And we know this for a lot of different reasons. First of all, we talked about this a couple weeks ago.

[12 : 45] We have a whole book of the Bible that we went through last summer that's named after a woman whose name is what? Ruth. And Ruth is what? A Moabite.

Ruth is a foreigner. And we have a whole book in the Bible that talks about how wonderful it is that this Moabite, this foreigner, married one of God's people. Why was it okay for a foreigner to marry an Israelite?

Well, do you remember what Ruth said in Ruth chapter 1? She says, Your God is my God. Ruth had embraced Yahweh.

She'd embraced the religion of the Israelites. So because of that, her race was not an issue. And that's not the only place we see it in the Old Testament. We also have an issue that shows up in the book of Numbers.

Moses marries a woman named Zipporah. And this woman named Zipporah is an African. So Moses is a Jew. She's an African. And Miriam and Aaron make fun of Moses for marrying an African.

[13 : 47] What does God do to Moses and Aaron? Excuse me, Miriam and Aaron. Miriam and Aaron are punished. In fact, God gives Miriam leprosy.

In other words, God is saying, You want to make fun of someone? You want to make fun of Moses for marrying someone who's dark-skinned? I will make you as light-skinned as you can possibly be.

Because, of course, one of the effects of leprosy is that you turn this deathly white. And so it's important to put a bookmark here at the beginning and say, This issue is not about race.

It's about religion. But in the Old Testament, because the Israelites were an ethnic people, race and religion often overlapped. John Piper tells the story about the time that he was at a conference.

And he heard a man named Warren Webster speak. And this man was a former missionary to Pakistan. And he was taking questions from the audience. And one student raised his hand and said, What if your daughter falls in love with a Pakistani while you're on the mission field and wants to marry him?

[14 : 54] And without hesitating, this man Warren Webster replied, The Bible would say, Better a Christian Pakistani than a godless white American.

God's passion and his zeal in this passage is that his people, when they marry, would marry those who share their love for his word and his ways and his mission.

And everything they've turned back to in this book. Another way of putting that quote would be this. Boaz was better off marrying Ruth, a Moabite, than many of the women of Israel at that time.

Because as we know from the book of Ruth, she was an example to them of what it looked like to be faithful, to follow after the Lord. If the reason is not race, then why is God so opposed to his people marrying foreigners?

Thankfully, I don't have to go to other passages in the Bible. It's right here in this section for us. First of all, verse 24. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people.

[16 : 11] This means that in these intermarriages between two different religions, in fact, it would probably be more appropriate here to speak about an interfaith marriage than an interracial marriage.

In this situation, the mothers, the foreigners, had so much influence that these children could not even speak their father's language. And so it's clear to Nehemiah that these fathers are not doing anything to disciple their children, to raise them up, to know the God of Israel.

Second of all, this language issue is important because as we've seen in Nehemiah 8, 9, and 10, God's people return to God's word, which, if you can't speak the language of God's people, you can't read.

And so there's a tremendous generational threat that the next generation of Israelites are not going to follow after God. It's already bad enough without any foreigners, right?

We've seen them abandoning the tithe. They've abandoned the Sabbath day. And they've done that without having to bring in any outside influence, as we talked about earlier in the book.

[17 : 17] We don't need any help to sin. We don't need to worry about non-Christians causing us to sin because we do enough on our own. It's not their fault, right?

It's our fault. It's the sinful heart that we have. And so verse 24, that's the first reason that these marriages are bad news. The second reason is in verse 26 and 27.

Did not Solomon, king of Israel, sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin.

In other words, Solomon, if anyone was not to be corrupted, it was Solomon. If anyone was a model Israelite, in fact, that was the point of the king of Israel, that they would be a model of what it's like to follow God.

If anyone was a model, it was Solomon. And guess what? Even Solomon's wives caused him to sin. The point is this.

[18 : 21] First, there is nothing that is more important than our relationship with the Lord. Second, there may not be anyone with more power and influence in your life than your spouse.

There may not be anyone with more power and influence in your life than your spouse. And so the Israelites, when they are marrying foreign women, they are making the person with the most influence and power and greatest ability, they are putting that as a person who has the potential and the capacity and the willingness to take them away from what is most important in their lives.

They are giving someone who has the most influence and power in their life the power to take them away from what's most important in their life. That is the threat that Nehemiah is up against here, and that's the two principles.

That our relationship with God is the most important, and our spouse is the most powerful. And so that's why Nehemiah comes with so much frustration and anger here.

Because he sees, as we talked about last week, he's like a parent seeing his child walk along the wrong way. And he wants to do anything he can to pull them back onto the right path. So those are our two principles.

[20 : 14] And then we have a variety of applications for different stages of life. First of all, if you're single, which, by the way, many of us are.

Many of us are married, and many of us are single. I'm single. There are others of us who are in our 20s and 30s that are single. There's also a lot of widows in this church, and if you're a widow, you're single. If you are single, don't marry non-Christians.

If you are single, don't marry non-Christians. And we say this because this is a constant issue and temptation in the church. In fact, it's becoming more and more accepted in our society.

I remember about 10 years ago, Chelsea Clinton was married. She claimed to be a Christian. She married this man who was a Jew. And there was all this hype made about just how wonderful it was that they had this interfaith marriage.

Of course, I didn't judge them for that. They're legal-free adults. They can do whatever they want. But I did think they must not take their faith very seriously. This must be more of a cultural thing than a religious thing for them.

[21 : 25] Now, there's a reason that this is a constant temptation and issue in the church. It's a temptation for a lot of good reasons. First of all, finding a spouse is very complicated. If you don't believe me, ask anyone who's single.

Finding a spouse is very complicated. It's complicated without talking about any of this. So it's complicated because you have to find someone that you're attracted to physically. You've got to find someone that you're compatible with. Somehow you get along.

You're able to communicate at some level. You have to have a somewhat similar vision of life. And that is a lot harder than it sounds. You know, there's one thing that happens if you're single a lot, which is that people try to set you up.

And I'm not going to throw anyone under the bus for that. I think it's wonderful. It's a very helpful way to connect people. Very grateful for people in the church who set other people up and introduced people who would not have otherwise met. So don't hear what I'm not about to say.

I've had people try to set me up many times. And most of the time, I'm very grateful. But every once in a while, it goes like this. Hey, I really want you to meet so-and-so. Great.

[22 : 28] And I always press them a little bit, right? Why do you think so-and-so and I need to meet? Why do you think this is a good fit? Well, you're both Christians and you're both the same age.

Wow, that has been my problem all along. I have never in my life met someone who is a Christian who is also my age. Where have you been?

And I say that to say that marriage is complicated. It is difficult to find a spouse. And it is tempting to marry non-Christians because adding that as another factor on top of everything else that is difficult narrows your pool even more.

It makes finding a spouse even more challenging. Another way of putting it would be this. A lot of people in the church are single because they have chosen to remain faithful to the Lord.

There are many single people in the church who have many options for a spouse. And they've chosen to say no to all of them because they know how important it is to marry someone who shares their faith.

[23 : 44] So one of the reasons it's tempting to marry a non-Christian is that finding a spouse is difficult. Making it a Christian spouse makes it increasingly more difficult.

So it's just a lot simpler to take that out of the equation. The second reason it's tempting to marry a non-Christian is because of the very challenging struggle sometimes of being single. And one of them is loneliness.

And so people will think, well, it would be better to be married to someone than no one. It would be better to be married to a non-Christian than to not be married at all.

A less than ideal marriage is better than no marriage. The problem is there is more than one kind of loneliness.

Right? You think it's better to be married. At least I won't be lonely. But if you've lived life long enough, you know what it's like to be in a room full of people and still feel alone.

[24 : 47] There's a loneliness that comes from not having someone physically with you. There's also a loneliness that comes when you and the person you're with do not love the same things.

Now this happens on a trivial scale, right? If you love the Avengers and no one else in the city you live in loves the Avengers, there's a certain loneliness that comes with that.

If you love cycling and you live in a city and there's no one else who cycles, if you love getting outside, there's no one else who does that, there's a certain loneliness to loving something that no one else loves. That's why certain conferences and gatherings are so important for people.

We have people who go up to Denver every year for Comic-Con so that they can find other people who care about the same things that they do. There's a special fellowship and community there, right? You come in here to church and you have a special connection with people around you because we care and pursue the same things.

There is a specific and special kind of loneliness and heartbreak that comes from being married to someone who does not value what is most important to you.

[26 : 07] So it's tempting to marry non-Christians because it limits the field, right? It's tempting to marry non-Christians because we think it's better to have some marriage than no marriage. And finally, it's tempting to marry non-Christians because sometimes people tell me they're more exciting.

You might hear it put this way. I just, Christian guys, you know, they just don't have any game. In fact, I had a friend in seminary who said he was going to, we had these seminars during lunch times when I was a student where you'd have different missionaries share about their ministries.

And he said at one point he was going to do a ministry lunch and it was going to be about game. He said, I'm going to teach Christian men how to talk to Christian women. That's my goal because I think this is such a bad thing in the church.

I'm going to solve it. Now, he never did that, so I won't forgive him for that. Or you might hear it this way. Okay, Christian guys have no game.

Christian girls, they're really boring. Christian guys are really boring. Christian girls have no game. And then there's someone who's not a Christian who comes along incredibly exciting, right? They share some of the same passions that you do.

[27 : 15] You connect really well. And yet all of that will fade over time. That excitement will wear off.

It will wear off partially because that's what happens as we age and become to know each other better. But it will also wear off as you come to realize, hopefully not too late, that you have very different compasses when it comes to figuring out your life.

Finally, it's tempting because non-Christians are still created in the image of God. And so I don't want you to hear anything that I say today to imply that I think that Christians are better people than non-Christians.

We're all saved by grace. It's not something that we did. It's something that God has given to us. And so we meet many people in this world who do not know Jesus, who sometimes are wiser than us.

Sometimes they're kinder than we are. Sometimes they're more generous than we are. And what that tells us is not that Christianity is false, but that what God has told us is true.

[28 : 32] That he's made everyone in his image. And so whether we run from it or not, there are ways in which we reflect God and his character, whether we know him or we rebel against him. What's most important is this, that that person, if you marry them, has no interest in your relationship with the Lord.

They may discourage it merely by the fact that they're not interested, or they may be outright hostile to it. I could list many other reasons.

But the point is this. We don't marry non-Christians. And we don't do it not because we believe that we're better than them, but because we want God's mission more than anything else.

And so we know if we're going to do that, the most influential and powerful person in our life needs to want God's mission as well. Kids, listen to me.

You may not believe it right now, and I can't guarantee you that this is going to happen to you. But it will probably happen to you. At some point, you are going to meet someone.

[30 : 02] And you are going to get along really well. You're going to like the same things. You're going to have some of the same hobbies and interests. You're going to be attracted to them, whether you believe me or not.

And you're going to think, there's nothing more that I want right now than to be with this person. But that person may not be a Christian.

If they're not, don't do it. I'm telling you now to prepare you. It will happen. Almost, if not every single Christian person you have met has had that experience.

And so as I said before, many people, many Christians are single. Not because they don't have options or opportunities for relationships. Because they have chosen that they want God and his mission more than anything else.

Second, so we've talked about the single people, all of us. This passage also has a lot to say to married people. If you are married, and you have married a non-Christian, there is still tremendous hope for you and your marriage.

[31 : 28] We read a New Testament passage this morning, and that New Testament passage was about 1 Corinthians 7, about Christians who are married to non-Christians. What does Paul say? Stay married.

You don't know whether or not you might win them over to the Lord. If your spouse is the most powerful and influential person in your life, it cuts both ways.

You, if you're a Christian, and you're married to a non-Christian, you are the most powerful and influential person in their life. Paul's not naive.

This was obviously something that happened in the first century church. It's still true in the church today. It's true for a variety of reasons. Sometimes two people get married, neither of them are Christians, and then one becomes a Christian. Sometimes someone is a Christian, but they decide they want to marry a non-Christian, and that happens.

And so I talk about all of these things not to shame people who are in marriages, these mixed marriages, but because it's important to give a warning to those who aren't.

[32 : 33] But also this principle cuts through in every area. This principle is true for you as well. Peter talks in 1 Peter 3 about winning over your spouse without a word.

In other words, if you're married to a non-Christian God and his power and his presence are still with you, he sees you. He's given you the church to strengthen and support you.

And you do not know whether or not one day your faithfulness will win over your spouse. You are the most powerful and influential person in their life.

Finally, if you're married to a Christian, you might be thinking, Okay, this is great. I'm learning a lot of helpful things that I can say to people who aren't married.

This passage still has something to say directly to you as well. First of all, in the same way that I talked about suffering, if you're not suffering now, you will be suffering one day. If you are not single now, the odds of you being single one day are high.

[33 : 44] If you don't believe me, ask any of the widows in our church. Second, if these principles are true, if one, there's nothing more important than our relationship with the Lord, and two, there's no one in our life who is more powerful and influential than our spouse, then if you are both Christians, there is no one who is more capable than you are of enabling and empowering and encouraging your spouse to remain faithful to the Lord.

There is no one who is more able to stir up good works and love and joy in your spouse's life than you. In other words, God has given you tremendous power.

Use it for good. Use it for good to encourage and love and care for your spouse. Share that same mission together.

Pursue it. And love it. Ultimately, we're not here as a church to talk about marriage.

We do because it's part of the Christian life and it's an important topic. But we're here because, as we've discussed so many times, our relationship with God is the only path to life.

[35 : 12] It's the only path for those inside the church, and it's the only path for those outside of the church. And so we do everything we can to stay on the path to life and encourage others as they go.

We do it, and we know that it's the path to life because of Jesus. He's the only one who has paid for our sins.

He's the only one who offers us forgiveness. He's the only one who offers us joy, and he does it because he was willing to be separated from the most powerful and influential person in his life.

He was willing to be separated from the Father in his death so that we could be connected with him. And so there's nothing that we do to get in the way of that.

If you're struggling with singleness and wonder if it's worth it to stay that way for the sake of being faithful to God, remember that the gospel is our greatest treasure.

[36 : 18] And there is nothing that is worth giving up for it. Second, we trust God. Not only is he our greatest treasure, but he's our greatest provider.

And so we know that there's nothing that we need that he won't give to us. And so we keep trusting him and following him, remembering the promise that we're given in Romans 8, that if he's given us his son, will he not also give us everything else with it?

And if we wonder, there's a home and a place for us. We know Jesus' promise as well in the book of John that he's preparing a place for us, that there are many rooms in his father's house.

And if it were not so, he would not have told us. And so because of that, we trust God. We follow after God. We believe him and we obey him, no matter what the cost.

Please pray with me. Dear Father in heaven, we thank you that you are faithful to us. We thank you for the hard words that you give to us.

[37 : 31] We ask that you would build our love and our trust and our confidence in you, that we would remain faithful no matter what, and that we would love you with all of our hearts and minds and strength.

We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.