

This morning we are going to focus on the marriage supper of the Lamb. The world united in its opposition to God is symbolized as a prostitute. The prostitute is judged and the multitude in heaven rejoices and praises God. Then comes what God has been working towards in his whole plan of salvation – the marriage between himself and his people – the marriage between Christ and his Bride.

The Bible often uses the imagery of marriage to depict the relationship between God and his people. The imagery is used in different ways in different places to make different points and you can't come up with a systematic account of all the references that gives you a coherent account of the marriage relationship between God and his people. The key is to consider each reference in its own setting without worrying about how any one passage relates to all the others. In many cases the imagery is that of God and his people already married, but in other basis it is more like an engagement with the marriage still in the future. The point is that God in the Bible is not intending that all these passages be consistent with each other and that we must learn what each of them is teaching us.

In the OT the marriage imagery mostly has to do with God's love for his people and the spiritual adultery of their idolatry. In Jeremiah 31:32 God says of Israel that she broke the covenant that he made with her, "though I was their husband." The greatest use of the marriage imagery in the OT when applied to God and his people is to highlight God's love and faithfulness on the one hand, and Israel's unfaithfulness on the one hand. But one of the things that it does show is the kind of love that God had for his people and the kind of relationship that he desires with them. And in Isaiah 62:5 God promises his people that in the future "as the Bridegroom rejoices over the Bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."

In the NT there are a number of references that have to do with the relationship between Christ and the church which use the symbolism of Bride and Bridegroom or even husband and wife. Jesus refers to himself as a Bridegroom, but he never refers to the church as his Bride. In 2 Corinthians 11:2 Paul says to the Corinthians, "For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ." And then there is the key passage in Ephesians 5 which compares the relationship between a husband and a wife with the relationship between Christ and the Church. Ephesians 5:31-32 compares the one flesh relationship in marriage to the relationship between Christ and the church so in that passage the church is viewed as married to Christ.

And now in Revelation 19 there is a great wedding celebration, the marriage between Christ and his church. This is why I say that you can't get one coherent picture by trying to integrate all the passages that compare the relationship between God and his people with marriage. What you have to do is take them each on their own and discern what each of them is teaching about the relationship between God and his people. There is a sense in which the relationship between Christ and his church is like that between a husband and wife in that the one flesh union finds its ultimate fulfillment in the relationship between Christ and his church. But there is also a sense in which the relationship between Christ and his church is like that of a bride and groom on their

wedding day. And that is what we have in this text in Revelation 19 which is about the wedding. The church then is the Bride of Christ and these verses in Revelation 19 describe the wedding.

But one thing that all the verses in Scripture that describe the relationship between God and his people using the imagery of marriage or a wedding, shows is that God's desire for his relationship with his people is the closest possible intimacy. Marriage is meant to be the closest relationship between human beings. It is never all that it could be, but even when it is good, but not perfect, it is a very close relationship and results in great joy and satisfaction and fullness. And God uses that relationship to describe the kind of relationship he wants with his people. Actually, it is the other way around. God created marriage so that we might have some idea of what he has in mind for his relationship with his people.

This is an amazing truth. God desires a close relationship with his people. In a good marriage relationship the partner is the number one person among all other people. God is to be the number one person in our lives and he loves his people with that kind of exclusive faithful love. The marriage relationship is about commitment to one another. The relationship between God and his people is a covenanted relationship. Marriage is about deep knowledge and appreciation for other partner. The relationship between God and his people is about knowing and being known – about loving and being loved. There is a lot of joy and satisfaction marriage and so it is in an even greater way in our relationship with God.

Which is why it is possible to be single and still experience fullness of life. That is not to minimize how hard it is for some people to be single. Very few people choose to remain single. And we long for all our singles who want to be married to find a husband or a wife. And yet, it is a fundamental biblical truth that our relationship with God is more precious than any other relationship in life. A single person who loves God and is loved by God has a far richer life than a married person who does not know God. The point of the marriage as a symbol of the relationship between God and his people is that **our relationship with God** is the relationship that gives us fullness of life. Once Jesus returns, a human marriages will be over. When we experience the ultimate blessedness after this life is over, none of us will married to any human spouse.

We will be married to Christ and that relationship will give us the fullness of life and joy. In that relationship we will experience the ultimate joy and fulfillment and contentment. We will have relationships with other people, but Jesus will be our husband.

Now the idea of being married to Christ may have troublesome aspects to it for guys. Jesus is a male. Guys are males. Marriage seems to be the wrong image. Clearly we have to make some adjustments. When human marriage finds its fulfillment in the marriage between Christ and his church we will no longer be sexual beings in the same way that we are sexual beings now. Jesus says in Matthew 22:30, "For in the resurrection they neither marry or are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven." We will still be male and female because our gender is a fundamental part of our identity, but when it comes to our sexuality, we will be very

different. Whatever that means, it's clear that the relationship between Christ and his church is not a sexual relationship even though the sexual relationship points to it is.

Our relationship with Jesus now already has nothing of sex in it even though we relate to him as males and as females. There can be intimate love and adoration and worship and service without any sexual aspect to it. And so it will be in heaven. The church is the Bride of Christ. That has nothing to do with sex, but it has everything to do with the intimacy and unity that sex points to.

The passage that makes the connection between the sexual relationship between a husband and a wife and Jesus and the church is Ephesians 5:31-32 which says, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." The key point here is that the one flesh relationship unites a husband and his wife. The two become one. And that points to the way in which Christ and his people are one body. The ideas of union with Christ and the church as the body of Christ are very prominent idea in the NT. And it is this that the one flesh relationship in marriage points to.

So what the Bible does then is use a relationship that is sexual, human marriage, as a symbol for a relationship that is not sexual. It even uses the sexual relationship itself as a symbol for a relationship that is not sexual – the relationship between Christ and the church. Not everything transfers from the symbol to the reality that is symbolized. The idea of a husband and wife being one in their sexual relationship is a symbol for Christ and his people being one body in a non-sexual relationship. We need to make that transition to properly understand the way that the Bible uses the imagery of marriage to teach us things about the relationship between God and his people. The relationship between Christ and his Bride is not a romantic or sexual relationship. It is like a marriage relationship in some ways but not in every way.

So lets look at the ways that Revelation 19:6-8, uses the imagery of a wedding to teach us about the relationship between Christ and his church. The setting here is the worship in heaven. John hears "the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out...." The language here conveys the idea of a crescendo. All of world history has been building up to this and it is reflected in the volume and the intensity of the song. "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exalt and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come...."

Notice the reference to the reign of God. The wedding between Christ and his Bride takes place after the reign of God has been established. The wedding between Christ and his Bride takes place once the great prostitute has been finally judged. In the plan of God the relationship between Jesus and his people is consummated once all opposition to the reign of God has been destroyed. In the current situation the church lives in the context of the world in opposition to God and in that context, the church is making herself ready for her wedding day. While the opposition is still active, the Bride of Christ faces that opposition and suffers because of it. Allowing her to live in that context is part of the way that Jesus is preparing his Bride for the wedding

day. And it is only when God brings his kingdom in its fullness, by the final judgement of the great prostitute, that the day for the wedding supper has come.

The marriage of the Lamb is the occasion for rejoicing and exulting and giving glory to God. "Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come...." Weddings are times of celebration. They are joyful occasions. That joy is rooted in the joy of the couple which is getting married. This is a day for which they have been longing for most of their lives. Long before they even knew each other they lived in hope of one day meeting someone and falling in love and getting engaged and then finally getting married. Once they have met and become engaged, they are looking forward to the day of their wedding with great anticipation. That anticipation is certainly focused on the wedding itself, but the wedding itself is a joyful occasion because the married life that follows. Weddings are joyful occasions because marriage is such a deep and wonderful blessing.

This is one of the points of this description of the marriage of the Lamb with his Bride. It is described as a great and joyful celebration. And at the heart of that celebration is giving glory to God. That is also the case with a Christian marriage in the here and now. The joy of a Christian wedding celebration is not simply because of the good fortune of the couple getting married, it is a celebration of God's goodness in creating marriage in the first place and in his goodness to this couple in bringing them together. Just like all the blessings that we receive from God, a huge part of the enjoyment of them is that we receive them as expressions of God's love and goodness towards us. The joy in a Christian wedding is in celebrating the gift of marriage and the gift of this marriage as expressions of God's love.

So this description of the marriage of the Lamb and his Bride highlights the joy and the worship in the rich relationship that Christ and his Bride will enjoy forever. There has been a great longing for this day. The joy that is expressed is related to the fulfillment of the longing of the people of God through the ages to love and be loved in a way that has never been possible in this life. This longing is expressed in Psalm 73:25 which says, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you."

The relationship between Christ and his Bride in the new creation will be so rich and delightful that the wedding will be a time of great rejoicing in the relationship and in God's provision. This will be the fulfillment of all our longings. The marriage relationship on earth gives us a sense of how rich and delightful and fulfilling a love relationship can be and one of the great purposes of marriage is give us a sense of how rich and delightful and fulfilling it will be to married to Jesus.

Listen to the way in which Zephaniah describes the relationship between God and his people on the day of fulfillment of God's promises. Zephaniah 3:14,17, "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart O daughter of Jerusalem! ... The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing." One of the great things about marriage is that the one we love, loves us back. We delight in one

another. In the marriage between Christ and his church, there is our delight in Christ, in his kindness and gentleness and power and goodness, but there is also Christ's delight in us. One of our great needs as human beings is to know that we matter. In order to be whole we need to be loved and valued and delighted in. Christ delights in his Bride. He loves her like no other. He cares for us and values us and we matter to him in a way that is far more profound than the way a wife matters to her husband and a husband matters to his wife.

So the text speaks of the joy of the celebration of the marriage of the Lamb and his Bride. The second thing that it emphasizes is the preparation of the Bride for the wedding day – for her Bridegroom. This too is rooted in what we know about weddings. Brides tend to put lot of effort, planning, time, and money into being as beautiful as possible for their Bridegroom on their wedding day. There are many different customs surrounding weddings around the world, but one commonality is that Bride is has on a dress the like of which she will never wear again. Some of us tend to gently mock the hoopla around weddings and indeed they can be ridiculously expensive and extravagant and yet the imagery here in our text assumes that it is right and proper for a Bride to put a lot of effort into clothing herself and to be as beautiful as she can be for her Bridegroom on their wedding day.

The text uses this idea to describe the Bride of Christ at the marriage of the Lamb. Verses 7-8, "Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride as made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure – for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints." The beauty of the Bride as she presents herself to her Bridegroom is not physical beauty, but the beauty of purity, of holiness, of righteous deeds. It is the beauty of a life lived according to God's design.

The passage in Ephesians 5 describes this from the perspective of Jesus' love which is expressed in enabling his Bride to be all that she can be. Husbands are told to love their wives "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot of wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."

Now here the analogy breaks down a little. Its probably not a good idea for a guy to think of his girlfriend as someone he has to remake so that she will fit his idea of what he wants his wife to be. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church, but the focus there is on Christ giving himself in order to sanctify the church. Certainly husbands are to help their wives in their sanctification, but if that is going to be affective the reality of giving himself up for her better be prominent.

But the idea works perfectly when it comes to Christ and the church. Christ is the divine Bridegroom. The church, by nature is vile in her sinfulness. The only way there can be a wedding is if the Bridegroom gives himself up for her in order to cleanse her, to take away her sinful blemishes. And the engagement period is a period of Christ progressively sanctifying the church and the church cooperating with what her Bridegroom is doing by seeking to grow in living the life that is pleasing to him. There are similarities between the

relationship between Christ and the church, and human marriages, but there are differences as well. Human husbands are not divine; Christ the Bridegroom of the church is.

Now the text in Revelation 19 refers both to what Christ does to make his Bride ready and what the Bride does to make her self ready. Verse 8 says, “it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure....” When the text says “it was granted her” it is referring to what God does. God in Christ gives the fine linen garment, bright and pure. That is referring to the same thing that Ephesians 5 is talking about when it says that Christ loved the church and gave himself for her to make her pure and holy. The bright and pure garment that is given to the Bride symbolizes both justification and sanctification – both the gift of forgiveness and the ongoing gift of the Holy Spirit in growing the church in holiness. In terms of the imagery of the text, the Bride then is given the bright and pure garment of forgiveness and renewal of life. But then she is very much involved. The Bride makes herself ready by putting on the garment that Jesus has given her and by performing the righteous deeds that make up the garment.

The emphasis here is on the Bride making herself ready for the wedding on the basis of what God has first given her. And the idea of a human bride making herself ready for her wedding conveys the sense of the desire of the Bride to be beautiful for her husband.

This is the great motivation here. Human brides tend to be pretty passionate about how they will look for their bridegroom on their wedding day. That passion is the point of this part of the passage and is about the church being passionate about making her self ready to be presented to her Bridegroom, by means of righteous deeds. One of the great changes that salvation makes in us is that we love Jesus and want to please him. Jesus said in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” In Colossians 1:10 Paul prays that the Colossians would “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”

So Revelation 19:7-8 gives us a picture in the light of which to see our efforts towards growth in bearing fruit in every good work. When we do that we are making ourselves ready to be presented to the Lamb as his Bride. When seek to please God in the way that we live we are clothing ourselves in preparation for the marriage supper of the Lamb. We want to be beautiful for our Bridegroom and the righteous deeds of the saints is the fine linen bright and pure that will be a delight for our Bridegroom to see. The garment has been given to us in salvation, but it is also something that we put on and we do so in the same spirit that an earthly bride dresses herself on her wedding day.

That is a powerful motivation to give ourselves to perform righteous deeds – to nurture the kind of character that is inclined to perform righteous deeds. This is not about earning salvation. It is about love. It is about the love that the Bride has for her Bridegroom. It is about wanting to be pleasing to him. There is a sense in which we are already pleasing to him because he has cleansed us from our sins and given us the wedding garment of

his righteousness, but one of the great results of that is that we want to please him and so we are motivated by love to make ourselves ready for the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Verse 9 says, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” This shows how flexible the imagery is. In one verse we are the Bride. In the next we are the guests. The point is the blessedness of those who are invited to be there – the people of God – the people who remain faithful to God.

This is the fourth beatitude in the book of Revelation. Revelation 1:3, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.” Revelation, 14:13, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. Blessed indeed, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!” Revelation 16:15, “Behold I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!” Revelation 19:9 “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.”

The world has its allurements. Following Christ involves suffering and struggle. The book of Revelation reassures us that the way of blessing is the way of faithfulness in the midst of the struggles and we are sustained in them by the hope that is set before us.