

Series: "Single. Married." (Part 1)
"What Marriage Is Meant To Be (But So Often Is Not")

I'm beginning an 8 week series of messages called "Single. Married." These messages really are about *relationships*, what it means to be male or female.

We will be talking about love and marriage quite a bit. I hope these sermons will give those who are married some practical tools to help us become better husbands and wives. But this series is also designed with unmarried people in mind. If marriage is a possibility for your future, I hope this series will prepare you, so that *if* you marry, you will go into it in a more wise and healthy way. Even if you have no interest in ever marrying, I hope the messages will broaden your understanding of persons and enrich your relationships with the people in your life.

I will try to make these sermons *practical* and *down-to-earth*. Certainly they will be based on *Scripture* and what God says to us through the *Bible*. Add to that any wisdom I may have gained in my work as a marriage and family therapist, plus whatever I've learned from being married to my wife Nancy for over 51 years.

I want to be up front in saying that this series of sermons is in part based on a series of messages preached by Adam Hamilton, lead pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. I am indebted to this gifted United Methodist pastor and leader for a number of the core ideas expressed in this series.

I first preached this series in 2003, so I have updated some of the material. Since then, gay marriage has become legal in the U.S. (as of June 26, 2015). Currently, there is a whole lot of public debate about gender issues, what constitutes male-femaleness. I certainly don't want to ignore these realities. However, these sermons will represent a more traditional approach. Keep in mind, the issues that play out between a husband and wife in many ways play out in the committed relationship of a gay couple. And the essence of being male or female remain the same over time.

So let's get started! Today's message is entitled, "What Marriage Is Meant to Be (But So Often Is Not)" ***I think we are all aware that many marriages in our society today do not last.*** It's often claimed that 1 out of 2 marriages end in divorce. This may or may not be true. Getting accurate information about divorce rates is more complex than one might think. Without going into detail about why it's hard to figure out divorce statistics, let me just summarize a few of the trends regarding marriage and divorce.

The divorce rate has increased since 1960, but since 1990 there's been a downward trend in the number of divorces. For instance, in 2019 for every 1,000 people married, only 14.9 marriages ended in divorce – the lowest rate in 50 years.

However, the divorce rate for those over 50 has risen dramatically (it nearly doubled from 1990 to 2015). But also, fewer people are getting married. This hit an all time low in 2019, when out of every 1,000 unmarried adults, only 33 got married (compared to 86 in 1970).

Another fact: remarriage increases the risk of divorce (i.e. the divorce rate is higher for 2nd and 3rd marriages). Divorce rates vary dramatically from state to state, and according to one's socio-economic status, education level, and age. For example, 64% of Americans in the top third income bracket are still in their first marriage, compared to 24% of Americans in the lower-third income bracket (according to the 2018 Census data).

Well, we can debate statistics on divorce at length, but the bottom line is that many marriages today don't last. For instance, in 2017 there were about 787,250 divorces. That's over one and a half million people divorcing! I would guess that just about everyone here has been touched by divorce – either we ourselves are divorced, or someone in our family is divorced.

Even couples who stay together often are not very happy in their marriages! Comedian Rodney Dangerfield once said this of him and his wife: “We sleep in separate rooms, we have dinner apart, we take separate vacations – we're doing everything we can to keep our marriage together.”

***It's hard to have a successful relationship with someone of the opposite sex!
Why, what makes it so difficult?***

For one thing, we're different! You may be thinking, “That's brilliant, Harry. I'm so glad I'm hearing this sermon, because I never knew that!” Really – men and women differ not just *physically* and *biologically* – but in the way we see things, in the way we're wired. Failing to understand some of the basic differences between men and women can create undue tension and frustration. We'll look at some of this in the next two weeks as we think about these topics: “What Women Wish Men Knew About Women” and “What Men Wish Women Knew About Men.”

Here's the thing: God made us this way! His purpose in creating us male and female is that in some ways we would not be alike!

Another reason why it's so hard to have successful relationships with persons of the opposite sex is due to the nature of our human condition. As human beings, we are flawed creatures. “Sinners”, to use Biblical language. We want the world to revolve around us and our wants. We see things from a very self-centered perspective, and our actions are often governed by self-interest. This only heightens and intensifies

our basic differences as male and female.

We tend not to see this in the early stages of dating and courtship. This person we're in love with is a wonderful person! Oh, he or she may have their little faults, but it's "nothing, really". But once we get married, that illusion vanishes, and we see the person in more realistic terms. He or she is far from perfect, just like everyone else. We begin to see the quirks, the pettiness, the irrationality, the thoughtlessness of this partner at times. And we can find it hard to love this person when these unpleasant parts of their character surface – or when it seems we're giving so much and getting so little in return.

I've performed many wedding ceremonies over the years. Often, I include a brief meditation or message. Occasionally at that time I remind the bride and groom as they stand at the altar that the person they are marrying is a sinner, and hopefully they'll learn to overlook that person's faults and love the partner unconditionally. Of course, I hesitate to spend too much time focusing on this rather negative side of marriage, especially on their joyful wedding day, but there's truth in it! *This is one of the reasons why no marriage can be all that it was meant to be without God, and without God's help, and our inviting God to be part of our relationship.*

God is very interested in what happens in our marriages. God demonstrated His high regard for marriage by using marriage as a metaphor or a symbol of His relationship to His people. In the Old Testament God is the bridegroom and Israel is the bride. In the New Testament, Christ is the bridegroom and the Church is His bride.

Let me ask you this. Where do we go to find out what love and marriage is all about? Where can we go to find the truth about how to authentically live as a single man or a single woman? Do we go to the R rated movies? Afternoon soap operas? TV talk shows? Cosmopolitan or Gentleman's Quarterly magazines? Unfortunately, that's where many people turn to get their cues. But the best place to go is the Designer's Handbook – the Bible!

We don't have to go very far in the Bible to come across a story that has to do with male-female relationships! Where is it? It's in the Book of Genesis, the story of Adam and Eve, found in chapter 2 in Genesis. Try not to get hung up on the *literalism* of this story. It was not written to be a *scientific treatise* on the origins of man. It wasn't intended to be a *biology* or *earth science* textbook, but rather divinely inspired *theological* truth – truth about us humans, and our relationship with God and each other.

In the story, God creates the *man*. Let's pick up the narrative. "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'"

(Genesis 2:18). So then, God created *animals* to address the problem of the man's loneliness. If you're an animal lover, you know animals can be our "friends" – be it a dog or cat, a parrot, or a horse, or whatever! But the animals didn't provide the intimate companionship the man needed (pets can only do so much for us!). "Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. *But for Adam no suitable helper was found*" (Genesis 2:19-20).

God saw that the man was still incomplete. So God performs a little surgery. He causes a deep sleep to fall over Adam, then He takes one of Adam's ribs, and from that God fashions a woman. "Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man" (Genesis 2:22).

Adam is in the recovery room. He starts to wake up. His eyes start to focus. He sees this.....*creature*.....standing next to his bed. He looks her over.....and thinks, "Oo la la! Cooooo!" (that's a loose translation). "The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called "woman", for she was taken out of man'" (Genesis 2:23). This creature (woman) is like him – bone of his bones, flesh of his flesh – yet tantalizingly, frustratingly different!

What can we learn from this ancient creation story in the Book of Genesis? For one thing, we can see that *God created men and women to be different*. Imagine what it would be like if God had not created women! Only men! Some of you men may think that would be great! You could watch football all day without being nagged about cleaning out the garage or painting the bedroom. You wouldn't have to sit through any "chic flick" movies. You could spend all your money on tools and cars. You'd have all that closet space that usually goes to the women. You could communicate by just grunting at one another every once in a while. You wouldn't have to get into any touchy-feely stuff! Wouldn't it be a great world? *Well no, not really!* God created men and women to be different – to add color and zest to life!

Then too, *the Genesis story suggests that men and women need each other*. Now I'm not saying that you have to be married, or that everyone should be married. In fact, in some parts of the New Testament singleness is held up as a preferred state, and the highest calling. But even if you're unmarried, we need people of the opposite sex if our life is to have the richness and completeness God intended. Having women in leadership positions in politics and business and the church has brought a healthy balance and perspective that we wouldn't have if we just had men in these positions. Men and women need each other.

The Genesis story also tells us that sex and our sexuality are meant to be beautiful. Genesis 2:25 says, “The man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.” God made sex beautiful and good. It’s only after sin and disobedience entered the picture in chapter 3 of Genesis that this innocence was gone. We humans, in our fallen state, often distort the gift of our sexuality – we use sex to exercise power over others, to demean others, and to serve our selfish ends.

The Genesis story suggests that marriage helps meet our need for companionship and mutual assistance. God created Eve to be a companion and helper for Adam. But it’s a mutual thing. The man was to be a companion and helper for the woman too.

Marriage, at best, is a sacred calling from God – a call to serve this person to whom we’ve committed in marriage. Marriage is more than just a romantic, giddy feeling, the type of love portrayed so often on TV and in movies. I like what Adam Hamilton says about this. He says that if what you’re looking for is a euphoric experience, *don’t get married*. Date around, move from one to person to another. Certainly, there should be romance and pleasurable feelings in marriage! But marriage involves a lot more, doesn’t it!

I am called to be a companion to this partner, to help meet the needs of this other human being who is my wife or husband. Now I can’t meet all my wife’s needs, and she can’t meet all my needs. It’s not fair to lay that burden on anyone. Only God can meet our needs in the fullest sense. But there is a way in which God wants a couple in marriage to be each other’s helpers. For instance, maybe it’s been a stressful day - someone at the church is acting like a jerk! - and I come home and just need someone to be there as I unload, someone to listen and care. And Nancy comes to me at some point and says that this “little thingie” in the car is making a noise. It helps if I have an idea what that “little thingie” is – or at least that I can get the car to a mechanic to find out what the problem is. God wants us in marriage to help meet each other’s needs.

In *Christian* marriage, God wants each partner to assist the other one to be a disciple. In the best of Christian marriages, I should be able to say: I’m a better Christian and a more mature follower of Jesus because of my husband, my wife. Marriage, at best, gives us an opportunity to minister to, to serve, to help meet the needs of another human being during the whole span of our married years.

In my next message in this series I want to say more about the inherent differences between men and women, and play around a bit with the “Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus” theme. The title of next week’s message is, “What Women Wish Men Knew About Women”.

