

## 2. The Path to Marriage

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, you might like to turn up the passage you read in Romans chapter 1, but have your finger in Genesis chapter 2, which we'll turn back to this evening, as we did last week.

Last week we began our series on this theme of right relationships by looking at the Bible's teaching on the purpose of marriage.

That's pretty basic. It's the obvious place to start. If we don't know what something is really for, then we're likely to misuse it.

And to make a mess. And even to get ourselves hurt as well. Sometimes we think that we know what things are for just because something can be used for a particular purpose.

But just because something can be used for a purpose doesn't mean it is for that purpose. If you take petrol, for example, petrol is for putting in your car and running your car.

[ 1 : 22 ] It's highly combustible. We know that. And its place is for the use in the internal combustion engine. It's not for starting your barbecue with.

I learned that not very long ago. I mean, I knew that, but I learned it in a rather more existential sense.

My barbecue wasn't lighting. I couldn't find any fire lighters. It was rather a damp day and I wasn't sure what to do. And then I had the brainwave. I've got a can of petrol in the garage.

Now, I'm not a fool. I knew I had to be very careful. I didn't just throw petrol onto the barbecue, of course. I just very carefully soaked some newspaper and put it in.

I put the can away. But nevertheless, when I very carefully went near with a match, I still nearly lost my eyebrows. I did have a roaring barbecue right now.

[ 2 : 19 ] But here's an early point of application in the sermon. Don't try that at home. And be very careful if you come to my house for a barbecue. But you see, that's not what petrol's for, even though it can be used for that sort of thing.

And it's not so difficult with the whole subject of marriage and sexual relationships. Just because sexual relationships and marriage itself can be used for certain purposes, that doesn't mean that that's what they're for.

And it does mean that it can be dangerous to use it in a different way, the wrong way. So last time we saw together that marriage from the very beginning was created for a very definite purpose.

It was created for the service of God, for the worship of God. That's what worship is, of course.

Worship is serving God in our lives. I wish we could get the hang of that.

Not about singing. It's not even about just being in church. It's the same word in the Bible, service and worship. And that's what marriage is for. Marriage is for mission. It's for the kingdom of God.

[ 3 : 28 ] It serves God's purpose for humanity in creation and in redemption through recreation of this world. And we saw that clearly in Genesis 1 and 2, and in the Lord Jesus' reiteration of that teaching in Matthew chapter 19.

That is the whole context of the Bible's teaching about marriage. It's to serve the kingdom of God.

And we saw that the particular subsidiary purposes of marriage are all there to serve that primary end, the three Ps of marriage, the purpose of the partnership in marriage, the personal mutual sexual union of marriage.

It's to serve the kingdom of God. And procreation, childbearing and child nurturing and rearing through sexual union in marriage, that too is to serve the kingdom of God.

And the protection that marriage receives through public recognition is there to serve the kingdom of God, through preventing wrongful relationships outside marriage and preventing the destruction of the marriage relationship.

That last one, of course, wasn't necessary before the fall, but is very, very necessary since the sin of man, because we're all so easily corrupted. So we've seen that the purpose of marriage is for the kingdom of God.

[ 4 : 53 ] But tonight I want to focus on the path to partnership in marriage. Now that's, I guess, especially relevant for younger people.

But not only for them. Now you may feel, well look here, I'm confirmed single. Or you may feel, well I've been married for years, so what's in this for me? Well, the New Testament commands us all, doesn't it?

That we're all to give serious thought to marriage. What does Hebrews 13 say? Let marriage be held in honour by all. Not just some, all. Whether you're married or not.

Whether you'll ever be married or not. And that's because, like it or not, we are our brother's keepers and our sister's keepers. Marriage is a public matter.

It's a matter that affects all of us. And in the church, certainly, we have a responsibility to help one another honour God in our marriages. And that's true whether we ourselves are in a marriage or whether we're not in a marriage.

[ 5 : 56 ] So, marriage is to be held in honour by all. That ought to be justification enough for us to study this. But of course, there's plenty of practical reasons too, aren't there? Many of us are parents. Many of us will face our children being in relationships.

And we need wisdom in terms of giving them guidance, don't we? Many of our friends expect or certainly need advice and counsel from us in terms of their own relationships.

There are many reasons why we should consider this. And it's an important subject, the path to partnership in marriage. And all that that brings, of course, with parenthood and family life and all of these things.

Now, it seems to be an area of great difficulty among many people. Great angst, even. Not to say obsession with some folk. And part of this is, of course, the great confusion that reigns around the whole subject of guidance in the Christian life.

Now, I want to direct you to some of the studies that we did a year or so ago. And if you haven't listened to those or you weren't here, I encourage you to listen to those because we haven't got time to go into all of that tonight.

[ 7 : 09 ] But what I want to focus on tonight is a more fundamental issue. I want us to see how many, if not most, of the difficulties that we face in this whole fraught area really stem from a misunderstanding, conscious or unconscious, of what marriage really is all about.

What marriage is for. In society at large, and therefore, alas, in the church too, because we imbibe far more of the world's thinking than we ever realize, we've totally misunderstood, and indeed the world has utterly reversed, turned on its head, God's purpose for marriage.

And that's where all the problems stems from. Problems in practice always come from problems in our thinking. Problems in Christian life always come from problems in Christian theology.

Always. So I want to look first tonight at how we have reversed marriage's rightful place in life. And then think about how we can reclaim right thinking about true biblical marriage.

So firstly then, the reversal of marriage's purpose and place. What we need to realize is that in our society now, we have gone through a complete and utter reversal of what marriage is really meant to be all about.

[ 8 : 35 ] We live in a society now that no longer in any way recognizes that marriage and sexual relationships are for God. Rather, in fact, we worship marriage and sex as God.

Now, it's something, of course, that's basic to the very nature of the fall. A rebellion of the human race against God.

But more particularly still, this is something that we've seen intensified and magnified in our society over the past generation or two. As we've jettisoned the Christian heritage that we used to have in this country.

As we've become a de-Christianized society. A totally secular post-Christian culture. We don't give any attention anymore, do we, to the Christianized worldview that once was the substructure of our thinking in this country.

That's not to say, of course, that we were ever a Christian nation, in the sense that everybody was Christians. Of course not. But we were a Christianized country.

[ 9 : 45 ] Our morality, our laws, our institutions, all of these things stood essentially on a Christian foundation. But not now.

And that's the point. If you look at Romans 1, 18 and following, that we read earlier on, you'll see how Paul describes the human condition.

And as we were reading it, didn't you think, isn't that exactly the condition of our Western society, our society in this country, in the year 2007?

Verse 21. We don't honour God. Our thinking is futile in all of these ethical matters. Our hearts are darkened.

Do you see how in verses 24 and 25, in fact in the whole passage, these verses link so closely sexual immorality with idolatry?

[ 10 : 46 ] Do you see that? That's the characteristic that sums up our sexually confused and a sexually promiscuous and a sexually obsessed society.

It's idolatry, says Paul. Verse 25. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature, that is the created thing, rather than the creator.

You see, people have stopped worshipping God in our society and have instead started worshipping the relationships that they have with one another, including the wrong and the sinful relationships that we as human beings aspire to.

And wrong thinking about sexual relationships is one expression of idolatry. In fact, in the Bible, it's one of the very key expressions of idolatry.

It's the basic sin of man, idolatry. It's self-worship. It's anti-worship of God. It's worshipping the created thing, whether God's good gifts or anything else in his world, and not the creator.

[ 11 : 53 ] That's what the very essence of sin is. We displace God from the centre of the whole world and the world of our thinking. And we push him out to the periphery.

Instead of God being at the centre and us worshipping him, we become at the centre and God is there to serve us and to serve our needs and to give us the things that we desire.

And that's the basic heart of all sin. The Bible paints it as idolatry, worshipping something which is not God, just a creature, a created thing.

It's the basic force that is at the heart of all humanity. There's a relentless tendency in all of us to reverse God's created order.

We've been seeing that in the book of Ecclesiastes. It's just what the preacher says. Ecclesiastes 7, verse 19. God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

[ 12 : 55 ] Always pushing away from God at the centre and pushing ourselves at the centre and God to the periphery. And we'll scheme to reverse the created order in every possible area of life because at heart we are rebels.

At heart we are idolaters. We are anti-worshippers of God. And the greater the gifts of God, the more precious they are, the nearer the blessing is to God, the greater the opportunity and the greater the danger for idolatrous reversal of what God has given us.

It's well worth reading C.S. Lewis' book *The Four Loves*. I mentioned it last week, but in his chapter there on Eros, he speaks about that. That by the very nature of sexual love and relationship that God has given to humanity, by the very nature of the fact that it's so close to God and it's so close to reflect his image in us.

It's such a ripe opportunity for us to pervert, to turn against God and to make into idolatry. And that is what we do with marriage and with sexual relationships generally.

It's happened all the way through the history of humanity. But also it's happened very aggressively in our recent history, in our post-Christian society.

[ 14 : 22 ] I want us to think about that shift in our society and then think about how those shifts have affected the church, have seeped into our thinking as Christian people. Just think about the shift in society's thinking about marriage and sex, at least until, well, the early post-war years of last century.

Marriage was still viewed by most people still as a very public thing, wasn't it? It was part and parcel of a healthy society. It fitted into a web of family relationships and social relationships.

And especially it was clearly understood to be taken up with childbearing, with part of a lifelong commitment of personal relationship and parenting relationship.

And even though most people perhaps didn't think of marriage in exclusively Christian terms, in terms of serving God and his kingdom, nevertheless, they thought about marriage in a very much

more public and relational way.

Never was it thought of as purely a private one-to-one relationship. But that's drastically changed, hasn't it? Perhaps, I suppose, the 1960s marked the biggest shift.

[15:41] There's too many things, of course, to go into there now, but it was very much the decade, wasn't it, of free love. And, of course, many factors brought in to play there. The contraceptive pill was part of it, a big part of that sexual liberation.

The so-called women's liberation movement of feminism was all part of it. But without doubt, since then, and certainly nowadays, all the focus on sexual relationships is all upon the relationship itself, the one-to-one relationship of love and intimacy, and what it gives, and what it offers, and what it provides to me and to us.

It's certainly true that procreation is no longer a defining feature in any way at all. Nor is the public place of marriage, nor is the sense of interdependency of relationships within the family and the community and society.

No. Relationships now, for us, have become supremely personal, supremely private. It's nobody's business but mine. We see that, don't we, in the public and private divide that we have with people in public life.

We're always being told that what a public figure does in their private life or their private relationships is nobody else's business. It has nothing to do with their public life. No concern for anybody.

[17:04] That's what we're told. I mean, it's preposterous, obviously, isn't it? But that's the line that we take. But you see how the focus has been so narrowed, not only has God been left out of the picture, but everybody else has been left out of the picture in our relationships.

The family, the community, society as a whole, the public. Everything's about us and about our relationship. But you see, of course, since at our hearts we're all sinful and selfish, the focus really is much narrower still than that, isn't it?

Actually, in sexual relationships, what we're really interested in is not just us, but more particularly, me. All the focus on our private, intimate, individual relationships is really about self-fulfillment.

It's about me. It's about my personal development. It's about my satisfaction. It's about my sense of worth. It's about my identity. It's about me. But you see what's happened.

When we think like that, we're simply exemplifying exactly what we read in Romans 1, verse 25. We're worshipping the creature, the sexual relationship, instead of the creator of that relationship, who gave us that gift.

[18:35] We've become idolaters. We're bowing down before sexual relationships, or marriage relationships even. We're bowing down before them as though they were a power that had the power to give us what we need in life in terms of fulfillment and satisfaction and identity and meaning.

In fact, we've begun to treat sex as though it were our saviour. Let me quote to you again from Christopher Ashe, and I do recommend his book on marriage.

He sees this particular point very, very clearly indeed. He says this, when all this has happened to sex, there is no alternative but to deify it. Sex as a source of fulfillment is sex as saviour.

Now, you only have to think for a minute before you realise that this is exactly how our society thinks about sex and sexual relationships. Think of all the books and the TV programmes and the videos that there are all round about on how to improve your sex life.

Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that there's no place for these sorts of things at all, for the right kind of thing. Yes, sex comes naturally to people but not necessarily good and right sex.

[19:58] And yes, there may well indeed be a place for helping people with things like that. And the Bible's very clear. It has a very high view of sexual relationships within marriage.

And there may very well be a place for helping couples, especially newlyweds and so on. I've got no problem with that, nor should any of us. We shouldn't be prudish about these things. It's God's good gift.

Paul himself is very frank about these things. Don't worry, it's not a subject that I'm going to address from the pulpit. But you see, if you go into the Borders bookshop or any other bookshop or anything like that, you'll find that so many of these things, all about how to have a better sex life, actually deify sex.

Some of them are overtly religious. Tantric sex, the Kama Sutra, mystical ideas, all these things that are there to help lead you through your sexual relationship into spiritual wholeness.

Sex as saviour, you see. That's exactly what it is. People are looking to their human relationships and to marriage itself for self-fulfillment.

[ 21 : 07 ] You see it all the time. You just read the newspapers. I even read the Daily Telegraph yesterday. They have an agony column. It's all about sexual problems, all about sexual relationships. A huge number of marriage-related problems and causes for marriages to break down are due to sexual relationships.

People are dissatisfied with not receiving what they want, what they expect and what they desire in terms of fulfillment from that relationship. But you see, if sex and sexual relationships and marriage itself is your God, is your saviour, then you're bound to be in for nothing but disappointment, aren't you?

Because it's a dumb idol. It's a created thing. It's not a God. It's not your creator. No relationship can save you except for the relationship with God, your creator, through Jesus Christ.

No human relationship anywhere of any kind can ever deliver the kind of things that people are looking for marriage to deliver to them. And that's why we shouldn't be surprised of the number of marital breakups that we see.

Four out of ten is the statistic now or perhaps it's even more. Heading for six out of ten marriages end in divorce. Despite far fewer marriages and despite more cohabitation.

[ 22 : 35 ] Nearly half marriages or second marriages. We live in a world with a vast and a growing trail of bitter disappointment and misery through broken marriages.

And of course, people now have begun to get a sense that the God of sex and marriage doesn't always seem to deliver salvation in the way that we hope. And so, there's an increasing fear, isn't there?

A reluctance to commit in case something goes wrong. And so, what we have is a society where serial monogamy rules. There's sex, there's desire to be together for a little, but there's no commitment.

We can't possibly commit until later, until we're absolutely sure that this is the one that's not going to disappoint. When in fact, of course, all the evidence actually shows that those who cohabit together before marriage in fact have a much higher incidence of marital breakup.

Commitment later, marriage later, children later, if at all, and all the disappointment that often is revealed when people do try for children so much later.

[ 23 : 49 ] That's our society. You see, we could go on and on just showing the evidence of this. But it's surely clear that this is where we are in society. Marriage and sex is not for God.

We've made it into God. But it's a dumb idol. People bow down to it and pray to it and seek fulfillment in it.

But it's just like the priests of Baal up on Mount Carmel, isn't it? No voice, no one answered, no one paid attention. And that's the tragedy of the reversal of marriage, marital relationships and their place in life.

We've turned it from what it is, a good and a wonderful gift of God to be used for God, we've started to worship marriage and sexual relationships as God.

And it's like all idols. It's nothing. And it delivers nothing. And yet, at the same time, it's also very powerful, isn't it? It's very deceptive. It can rob us. And that's why, of course, the sex industry is the biggest industry in the world, isn't it?

[ 25 : 02 ] Massive amounts of profit for the cynical manipulators who understand the human heart better than we often understand ourselves. But heaps and heaps and oceans of misery for the exploited ones.

Well, that's the shift in our society. But just think about how that shift has seeped into our thinking in the church. Isn't it true that it has?

We do tend to lay so much store by relationships and we make them so often our primary goal. Isn't that right? It's easy to get beguiled, you see, down the path of seeing that real fulfillment and real significance and real identity, that it all comes in finding that dream relationship.

relationship. And for many folks, that dream, that goal, can become an all-consuming thought in our Christian lives. It fills our prayer lives.

All our prayers are full of things about how to get help to find that right person. We dress it up in lots of pious-sounding language. But in reality, what we're just saying is we want God to serve our desire for relationship instead of the other way around.

[ 26 : 21 ] It can be there when you're married too, of course, when you even have children. How can this church or how can that book or how can that course improve my marriage, improve my family, improve my children?

There's not necessarily anything wrong in wanting to improve your family or your marriage or your children. But I ask the question, who's serving whom? Or if you're not married, you may very well choose your church or your job or where you live or whatever else it is purely on the basis of whether you think it will give you a chance of being led to a better relationship.

When people talk about guidance, it's no accident, is it, that almost always at the top of the list is a desire for guidance about relationships. Who's the right person for me?

And yet, you see, when you open the New Testament and you look, you will look in vain for any interest whatsoever in guidance on that particular subject. There just isn't any. This is the will of God, says Paul to the Thessalonians, your holiness.

Rejoice, pray, give thanks in all circumstances. For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. That's the will of God that God's interested in. But we don't like that.

[ 27 : 41 ] And that's because this whole concept of marriage and relationships being back to front has so much seeped into our thinking without us realizing it.

We've made relationships too easily into God's instead of it all about being serving God. And we want God to bow down and to serve our relationships instead of our relationships bowing down and serving God.

Am I wrong in that? I think the evidence of that seepage into the church of that kind of thinking is all around us.

Christians also tend to be marrying much, much later, waiting much, much longer to commit, cycling through partners, anxiously looking for the perfect partner.

In many ways we're just doing things the world's way. the world's culture has seeped into our consciousness or into our unconscious perhaps. And we seem to have the same fear and the same angst and the same dissatisfaction as the world outside.

[ 28 : 52 ] Isn't that right? And something that's even worse is that when we add on to that some kind of perverse and utterly unbiblical view of God's guidance that so many of us seem to have that somehow we've got to expect for God to reveal in advance with complete assurance his will for our lives whatever that means for every choice that we've got to make.

Something you'll never find in Scripture by the way. Well that just adds doesn't it to the angst to the fear to the paralysis. How can we ever get anywhere in this?

My friends I want to plead in the face of all this imbibe reversal of the world's understanding of marriage that we set ourselves to reclaim right thinking about marriage and reclaim therefore right thinking about the path to marriage too.

Let me say some things about that in practical terms about reclaiming the path to purposeful marriage. We read in Colossians 2 As you receive Christ Jesus the Lord so walk in him rooted and built up in him and established in the faith just as you were taught abounding in thanksgiving. That's where you begin Paul says and he goes on see to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit. Don't be taken in by the world's reversal of God's purpose for human relationships and marriage.

[ 30 : 27 ] No, have clear heads. Focus yourselves on Christ and on the gospel and on his kingdom. That's the part that's the place to start the path to purposeful marriage and it's the only safe place to be.

I want to say some things about that now. You might like to turn back to Genesis 2 because we'll refer to that. Everything about this takes us right back to the beginning. A few practical things that the Bible points us to to help us to walk soundly in Christ as we've been taught.

Three do's and two don'ts. First of all do be trusting. Trust God. Trust God's revealed purpose for marriage and trust the Lord Jesus for your own personal life too.

That simply means get on with serving God and his kingdom and his claim upon your life and leave the rest to God. If you look at Genesis 2 verse 15 it's very striking of course that it was as Adam lived out his creation purpose of serving God's kingdom.

It was as he did that what he was made for that God gave him the helper that he needed for that purpose. marriage is for serving in God's garden then the first place for us to be is with our welly boots on in the garden serving.

[ 32 : 02 ] And you can be sure that if that's what you're doing and God feels that you need a helper then he'll find one for you. You can trust God. What does Jesus say in Matthew 6.33?

Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added to you. Not necessarily of course all the things that you want. Not all the things that we think we need but all the things that God thinks that we need.

Read the whole of Matthew chapter 6. Don't be anxious about your life. That's the refrain again and again and again isn't it? Your heavenly father knows what you need. Be trusting.

And if the purpose of marriage is as a helper in serving the kingdom well the more you're engaged in his service the clearer it's going to become to you and to others the kind of helper that you need. So the first step on the path to purposeful marriage is to have your wellies on and be at work in God's garden. It's to be serving the kingdom. Not just spectating but serving, throwing yourself into the purpose for which God created you.

[ 33 : 14 ] And you can trust God to do the rest. So be trusting. Second, be real. In Genesis 2 verse 18 it's clear and we're told that a marriage partner is first and foremost a helper.

That's why God created the sexes. For helping, not for hindering his purposes in the kingdom. Now there's no middle way in that. the truth is that a spouse, a marriage partner, will either be a help or a hindrance in your service of the kingdom.

And so you've got to be real, you've got to recognise that. As many a Christian man's been fooled by a pretty face and fluttering eyelids, as many a Christian woman's been fooled by a dazzling bloke to the ruination of both.

We've got to be realistic. That's what Paul says plainly in 2 Corinthians 6, isn't it, where he says to us, don't be unequally yoked with an unbeliever.

That is utterly basic. And yet, you know, it's amazing how easily we can rationalise away that piece of very specific command from the Bible. We can wonder how God is guiding us about somebody when there's a plain piece of guidance right in front of our nose.

[ 34 : 37 ] We say, well, it'll be different in my case. Friends, it is never going to be different in your case. That is why God put that in the Bible. Be real.

A partner in marriage is a partner, a fellow worker in God's kingdom. Don't get yourself hooked up with a sluggard, with somebody who's going to pull you backwards. Even if they do profess faith, even if they say that they will do everything to take on your beliefs and your ways.

it won't happen. A marriage partner is, first of all, a helper. And that is, again, in verse 18, it's a suitable helper.

It's a fitting helper. Now, of course, here he's primarily speaking about the differentiation of the sexes. Men and women are complementary. They're not the same.

They complement one another, and that's God's design. And, of course, that's why same-sex unions are utterly against the created order. You don't need any specific prohibitions, you just need that one word there.

[ 35 : 44 ] But that's true on the individual level, too. A partner must be compatible, must be suitable. Now, as somebody said, a little incompatibility can be the spice of life, especially if he has income and she is compatible.

compatible. But we know that sometimes opposites do attract, don't we? Sometimes you can have an absolutely brilliantly compatible couple who are absolutely different from each other.

We all know couples like that. I've got a relative who's always late for absolutely everything, and her husband is fastidiously early for absolutely everything, and yet they complement one another brilliantly.

They have a great marriage. Drive each other nuts, but they have a great marriage. And we all know that there are so many things like that. But on a serious level, we've got to be real, haven't we?

You see, if you're a person who is zealous for overseas missionary work, and you're determined to serve Christ abroad, but the person that you're drawn to could never imagine possibly doing that, then you really do need to have a serious rethink, preferably long before you start getting seriously involved, don't you?

[ 37 : 03 ] Because that's just never going to be a suitable match, is it? Be real. Don't fall crazily in love with somebody that can never be a suitable helper to you in the kingdom of God.

Don't be carried away by silly romanticism just because you've fallen in love. That is a lot of absolute rubbish. It doesn't mean a thing. Be very clear about that.

All sorts of married people fall in love all the time with other people that they're not married to. They make all sorts of ideas that somehow this is different, this is all right for them.

They rationalize it. But that crazy notion of falling in love rubs you of all rationality. Ignore it. It's just emotion. It can be frivolous.

It can be absolutely foolish. I fell in love with Olivia Newton-John when I was a schoolboy and I saw Greece. Every time I see it again or I see her in a fall, I fall in love with her all over again.

[ 38 : 00 ] But she's not going to be a suitable marriage partner for me, even if I wasn't married. Even though she never seems to get any older, it's amazing, isn't it? We've got to be real.

And here's the thing. Other people, your friends, your relatives and others, they're often much more real than you are. Listen to them. Listen to fellow Christians, wise people who love you.

And listen to your father as well. This business about, you know, asking father's permission for marriage is not just a silly tradition. It recognizes that marriage is a public thing. It involves other relationships.

It involves the family. It involves society. It involves the church. Listen to other people. And especially if you're a girl, listen to your father. Your father may have a much better idea of who's suitable for you than you do yourself.

And I'm going to keep saying that for the next 15 years. And hopefully it will become receive wisdom by then. Be real. Be wise.

[ 39 : 07 ] Be wise about when it's time to set out on this path. Look at verse 24 of chapter 2. It says a man and a wife. Do you notice that? Not a boy and a girl.

Now what that speaks of is a certain maturity, a certain readiness to make serious commitment for life. It's a holding fast to your wife. It's a cleaving forever. It comes with a new stage of leaving immaturity behind, leaving the old life, the primary family relationship behind.

Now of course, there are going to be all sorts of different factors that we have to take into consideration there. It's going to depend on culture, on temperament, on education, all sorts of things. If you've left school at 16, by the time you're 18, you've been in working life for two years. You're a man. If you're still a student at 28, doing your third PhD or whatever, you're very possibly still not grown up at all. So all of these things are going to be different.

But the point is, don't rush into marriage in the hopes that somehow that's going to suddenly give you your purpose and your direction in life. You need to know what you're about in your life first, so that you can enter marriage as a team, because that's what marriage is.

[ 40 : 23 ] It's about serving together in God's kingdom. You need to be ready to serve together so that you'll be a helper to one another, not handicaps to one another.

So be wise. But on the other hand, don't be paralyzed. Yes, we've got to be real.

Don't ignore caution from other people. We've got to be wise. Don't rush immaturity into relationships. But on the other hand, don't ignore encouragement. It was God who brought Adam his wife.

God was the original matchmaker. So don't despise a nudge from somebody else, necessarily. I don't mean frivolity and stupid matchmaking. Of course not. But sometimes, real Christian friends and others and family, they may know a lot better than you, someone who would be a good helper and partner in the kingdom for you.

I'm especially speaking, I think, to the blokes here. Sometimes, we blokes, we need a nudge. Sometimes a very hefty push. And I speak from experience.

[ 41 : 27 ] I look back and I just can't believe that my wife waited around so long for me to get myself together. I needed a really hefty nudge from some Christian friends who were much more mature, from an older couple who knew us and loved us.

Gave me a kick in the backside and said, get on with it. And I'm jolly glad he did. Don't be paralyzed. Don't be put off.

Marriage is not just a private thing. It's a public thing. It involves the fellowship. It involves your friends. It involves family. Other people may have great wisdom that you could usefully listen to.

And I think the older folk in a congregation like ours should have very special permission to do some nudging. You've got lots of wisdom. You've got lots of sense. You've seen a lot of life. Sometimes you need to take a younger person by the scruff of their neck and say, listen, brother, have you had a good think about this?

Maybe, just maybe, that'll start him thinking. Don't be paralyzed. But don't be snatchers either. Don't be so determined to find a partner that you'll try and snatch what God isn't giving.

[ 42 : 37 ] There's no real difference, is there, between just cycling through relationships that may not involve sexual expression and cycling through relationships that do.

There's no real difference. And again, I think, a word to men. We need to be careful. Don't be cavalier with girls. You'll hurt them much more easily than you think and they'll be hurt much more than you will be.

Very, very easily indeed. Be careful. Don't be philanderers. It's very unimpressive to God and we all make mistakes, but if you do make a mistake, be very slow to go and make that mistake again.

Don't be a snatcher. And girls, don't be chasers either. There's nothing so frightening to the male of the species than a woman on the hunt.

Believe me, it will send them running away very, very quickly indeed. Don't be a pushy female. And don't be a flirt either.

[ 43 : 39 ] It may work and it can be very successful, but you'll only attract the kind of man who will be shallow and inadequate and very likely let you down. So don't do that.

Trust God. Set your goal on serving God. And if it is his way for you, and usually it is, then he will bring you together with the right person.

He knows your needs. He gives us fellow servants around us, Christian brothers and sisters, to help us to be real and wise. And so that we don't have to be paralyzed with fear.

So that we can go forward in faith and with thanksgiving. But last, somebody is going to say to me, what about romance? Isn't there any room for romance?

Well, the answer is no and yes. No, if what we mean is the kind of shallow nonsense of our Valentine's Day culture, worshipping relationships, seeking satisfaction in them.

[ 44 : 43 ] That can only deceive. That can only take us captive. Leaves us disappointed, dejected. Now, there is no place for that kind of thing in a Christian understanding of marriage.

But real romance? Oh yes, indeed there is. Because the gospel is romance. It's the romance, isn't it? It's a story that we're all caught up in if we belong to the Lord Jesus.

It's a story of love that does promise satisfaction. And that delivers fulfillment forever, not just for now. And quite simply, you see, if you are more and more taken up with that romance, with love to the Lord Jesus Christ, with joy in extending his family, then you will find that you find others who share that love more and more attractive to you, and vice versa.

And you'll begin to find that bonds develop as you share the same joy and the same goals in service. And romantic love that blossoms that way is the kind of love that's real, that outlasts because it's the kind of love that will outlast life.

It's love in the Lord Jesus Christ. Whereas the other can so easily just be superficial and blow away. God isn't perverse.

[ 46 : 06 ] It's not a choice between godly marriage or fun marriage. It's not a choice between marrying for love and looks or submitting to God and just lumping it with some ogre. It's not that.

You think that sometimes. We do, don't we? But God is our heavenly Father. He knows what we need.

He loves us. He won't give us a snake when we ask for bread. And when you seek first his kingdom, when you trust him, and you can trust him, then he will give you the helper that you need if that's what you need.

And when he does, the helper that you need will be the lover that you want. Because your goals will be one. It will be a marriage that serves the Lord Jesus Christ and his kingdom, which is the great kingdom of romance and of love and of joy.

So if we think like that, then we will reclaim the path to purposeful marriage. And we'll also reclaim the power of marriage to serve the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 47 : 18 ] But it's hard because the seepage of this world is so powerful and we need to help one another, don't we? And we all have a part to play in a fellowship like this, young and old, male and female, married and single.

Are you willing to play your part in the health of marriage in our church and in our society? That's the question. Let marriage be held in honour by all.

Let's know what marriage is for and let's trust God to show us the right path to the partnership that truly serves him and that serves his kingdom.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we're conscious that it may be hard to think about these things, to listen to these things, to think of ourselves in our own position.

Many of us may find it difficult and we pray that you would help us, every one of us, to play our part in seeking to hold marriage in high honour, that we might help one another, that our marriages in our fellowship together may serve the glory of Christ.

[ 48 : 48 ] Help us, we pray, to know our part, to know what we can do, above all, to love and to honour and to cherish our Lord Jesus Christ and seek his kingdom above all things, knowing that you, our Heavenly Father, love us and cherish us and know our needs and will meet all of our needs in Christ Jesus.

So help us to love you, to serve you, to follow you, to trust you, that together we may speak of you and radiate your love for the sake of the glory of your eternal kingdom.

Amen.