Series: The Mystery and the Masterpiece

April 9, 2017

Message Five:

**The Play**

Ephesians 5:31-32; Matthew 25:1-13

**Intro:** “The play’s the thing!” That’s a line from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet.* Plays, movies, and dramas have often had the purpose of delivering a message.

While thinking of God’s plan for our sexuality in marriage, I see not only the painting I’ve described, but I also see that we have been given parts in a grand play (or a drama, or a movie, whichever you prefer).

Today is Palm Sunday – it’s called that because in Matthew 21, Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah that the King of Israel would coming riding into Jerusalem on a donkey’s colt.

He knew that He was riding to time and place where He would become the sacrifice for our sins –

The people welcomed Him – rejoiced – threw their cloaks in the road and waved palm branches – this was their sign that they were welcoming Him as a king.

In a sense – this is a play – in just a few days, those same people who welcomed Him would call for His crucifixion, because things didn’t work out the way they wanted. They wanted Him to be an earthly king, overthrowing the Roman Empire, and setting up the Jewish nation.

It was kind of like some marriages – this was a big deal of a wedding with Jesus as the Groom coming in – the Bride welcoming Him – but after a few days, the enthusiasm of the wedding is over and the Bride didn’t really like the Groom she ended up with. He didn’t meet up to her expectations. So, the Jewish people walked away from the covenant.

And in these next few days, immediately after the Palm Sunday Jesus rode into Jerusalem, He tells a story about a wedding.

This all relates to the mystery Paul reveals in

Ephesians 5:31-32 - As the Scriptures say, ‘A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.’ This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one.

So we’ve been cast in a play. The play has been going on since the beginning of time and will continue until the people of God are joined to Christ in the ultimate marriage. This passage is often taught as guidance for husbands and wives in their relationships. It is guidance to a certain extent, but that is clearly not the main point of the passage. Paul says, “This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one.”

Beyond the guidance we receive here for our own marriage relationships, we see the roles we have in the play. Understanding this also helps clear up misunderstandings and resistance to what the passage says. For example -

Ephesians 5:22 - "For wives, this means submit to your husbands as to the Lord."

Our modern sensibilities do not like the idea of the woman submitting to the man in any way, shape, or form. That is because our modern sensibilities do not understand the roles of the play!

Ephesians 5:25 - "For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her.”

If the husband is given the role of portraying Christ, then the husband must love his wife as Christ loves the church. He loved the church so much that He died for her. The husband must be willing to die for the wife! This is certainly not the picture of a harsh, slave-owning taskmaster. Thus, the wife is not to submit to the husband as to a harsh, slave-owning taskmaster. The role of the wife in the play is to be the church (which refers to all people in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ). How does the church love Christ? How does the church submit to Christ? How does the church react and respond to Christ?

I know that neither party plays its role perfectly. Certainly as a husband I have failed to love my wife as Christ loves the church. Thankfully, I have been given the best wife in the world! My wife is like one of the greatest actresses the world has ever seen. When we are on the stage and I am ruining the play, ruining my lines, and living in such a way that no one could possibly get the message that God, the Playwright, designed, she is not going to let the play go under. When her fellow actor is destroying things she makes no excuses, she plays her role even better. That’s the idea! We have a message to get across to the world through our lives that Christ is a Husband and the church is His bride. In our marriages, the husband is to play the part of Christ and the wife is to play the part of the bride.

Our marriages are a temporary illustration of that eternal reality. Matthew, one of Jesus’ disciples, records a story of Jesus being questioned shortly after this Palm Sunday ride into Jerusalem, and His answer reveals that earthly marriages are a temporary illustration of this one eternal marriage we are describing:

Matthew 22:23–30 -

Sadducees… posed this question: “…’If a man dies without children, his brother should marry the widow and have a child who will carry on the brother’s name.’ Well, suppose there were seven brothers. The oldest one married and then died without children, so his brother married the widow. But the second brother also died, and the third brother married her. This continued with all seven of them. Last of all, the woman also died. So tell us, whose wife will she be in the resurrection? For all seven were married to her.”

Jesus replied, “Your mistake is that you don’t know the Scriptures, and you don’t know the power of God. For when the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage.

I will not be married to my wife in heaven. My relationship with her now is to be an illustration of the relationship between Christ and His bride!

“The play’s the thing!”

When Jesus came on the scene, John the Baptist announced Him saying this:

John 3:29 - It is the bridegroom who marries the bride, and the best man is simply glad to stand with him and hear his vows. Therefore, I am filled with joy at his success.

Have you seen yet that this is the picture that God is giving all the way through the Bible? This isn’t an isolated concept from a few rare passages. John calls Jesus the Bridegroom and refers to himself as the best man! Jesus also refers to Himself as the bridegroom in Luke 5, Matthew 9 & Mark 2.

In Matthew 25, again in the time between the Palm Sunday ride & His crucifixion, Jesus tells a parable of bridesmaids waiting for a bridegroom:

Matthew 25:1–13 - The Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. The five who were foolish didn’t take enough olive oil for their lamps, but the other five were wise enough to take along extra oil. When the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

At midnight they were roused by the shout, “Look, the bridegroom is coming! Come out and meet him!”

All the bridesmaids got up and prepared their lamps. Then the five foolish ones asked the others, “Please give us some of your oil because our lamps are going out.”

But the others replied, “We don’t have enough for all of us. Go to a shop and buy some for yourselves.”

But while they were gone to buy oil, the bridegroom came. Then those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was locked. Later, when the other five bridesmaids returned, they stood outside, calling, “Lord! Lord! Open the door for us!”

But he called back, “Believe me, I don’t know you!”

So you, too, must keep watch! For you do not know the day or hour of my return.

Dick Reuben is a Christian teacher with a Jewish background. He specializes in teaching about the Jewish roots of Christianity. He tells us this story is based on how Jewish brides & grooms got together.

In the time of Christ, when a young man saw a girl he liked, and he wanted to marry her, he didn’t talk to her. He talked to her father. He might have seen her at the well. He may have noticed her beautiful eyes. He may have noticed her strength at being able to draw water from the well and skillfully carry it back to her home.

The young man went to the father to express that he had an interest in the girl. Negotiations would have to take place. The father would be losing a contributing worker to his family. What could replace her? What was she worth? What did the young man have to give in exchange for the father giving his daughter in marriage?

The young man might start by offering that he had a few young sheep to give. The father might respond that this was surely not enough for his daughter. She was worth more than that. Any responsible young man worthy of his daughter would also have more to give. He would ask for more sheep, a few goats, and a camel!

These negotiations might continue for different lengths of time until eventually an agreement was reached. The father would invite the young man over to his house at a time when the daughter would be available to give her opinion. She had a choice, just as those who would be part of the bride of Christ have a choice as to whether or not to accept His offer.

The young lady sat down in the room with her father and the young man. A cup of wine was placed on a table in front of her. Her father explained the negotiations. He explained that he gave his approval, that he felt this was a fine young man and a good match for her. The agreement was placed in front of her in writing.

She would look over the agreement, and maybe look over the young man as well. Had she seen him by the well? Had she noticed him looking at her? Were they acquaintances from childhood? Had they brushed up against one another in the market?

She would not speak a word. She trusted her father. She knew her father cared about her and was only interested in her best interests. He father must believe this is a good agreement and that this young man would take care of her. Without speaking a word, if she agreed to the contract, she would drink from the cup of wine, and she was betrothed! In that culture that did not mean they were married, but it was more binding than today’s engagement. This was a firm commitment. There was no backing out. She was going to marry this man.

When the young man saw her drink from the cup of wine, his response was, “I am going to prepare a place for you.”

This calls to mind what Jesus said in

John 14:2–3, “I am going to prepare a place for you… When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am.”

The Jewish girl knew that the young man would come back, but she didn’t know when. He would go to his father and tell him all about the betrothal. The young man would excitedly tell his father all about the girl, the negotiations, the deal he made, and how wonderful was his bride!

His father would say, “Son, you’re not ready to get married! Where are you going to live? Where are you going to raise a family? We are going to have to build a bride-chamber!”

So the son would begin to build a bride-chamber onto his father’s house. It would take time. Maybe one year—maybe two—maybe more—all while the young lady waited. The father would inspect the bride-chamber. He would make corrections. He would make sure it was a perfectly adequate place for the bride and his son. One day, after time had passed, the father would make the final inspection and say, “Go get your bride!”

Mark 13:32–33 - However, no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows. And since you don’t know when that time will come, be on guard! Stay alert!

All this time the Jewish betrothed bride-in-waiting would have a lamp burning in the window. That lamp burning at all times indicated the woman was betrothed. She was called for. She was taken. She was dedicated. She was faithful. She was waiting on her bridegroom to come get her, not knowing when he would come. She did not know when the place would be ready, but she was faithfully waiting. She did not give up. She kept her lamp trimmed with the oil burning.

That oil is symbolic of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, aiding us in faithfulness while we wait for our Bridegroom to return and take us to the place He has prepared for us!

When the father said, “Son, go get your bride!” the young man would go get a group of his closest friends, and in the middle of the night they would go to the house of the bride. As they walked through the streets, the young men would shout, “Look! The Bridegroom is coming! Come out to meet Him!” just as Jesus described in His parable.

The young man would find her because he would see the light burning in the window! He would climb up to that window, which was built high to protect her, and he would go to her where she was faithfully waiting.

She had heard the shouts. She knew his coming was soon! Her heart would beat! She was getting excited! After all this time, the place is ready! She would soon be leaving! The one she had seen by the well was coming to get her!

He would come to her, take her away in the middle of the night, and they would begin a lifetime of loving together!

1 Thessalonians 5:2 - For you know quite well that the day of the Lord’s return will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night.

She would be wearing a bridal gown of white linen! The first night, when they slept together, she would actually sleep in this white linen gown. The next morning, the bride’s friends would go in, they would take her wedding gown and the bridal sheets.

If there was no blood, there was no covenant—and the bride could be stoned—a picture of judgment for impurity and unfaithfulness.

If blood was found on the sheets, then a week-long celebration would begin! The bride had kept herself pure! She had waited! She had not consorted with other lovers. She had kept herself holy and pure waiting for the return of the bridegroom!

We have been bought with a blood covenant! We are betrothed to One who is coming to take us to the place He has prepared for us—for an eternity of loving! As Adam entered into Eve in the Garden, as a husband today enters into his wife in covenant, Christ has claimed us, betrothed us to Himself, and one day we will be united with Him as one—fully one with Him! The church is the bride of Christ, and marriage was designed by God from the beginning to be this beautiful portrait! These are our parts in the play!

Anything less than this—anything outside of this—any sexual relationship of any kind outside of covenant marriage between a man and a woman—ruins the play! Anything else is not what the Playwright wrote!

Revelation 19 tells us there will be a great wedding feast for Jesus the Bridegroom and the church His bride. Many interpret Scripture to say this feast will last seven years— the Jewish seven-day wedding celebration would be a reflection of that time element. Once again, we see this picture throughout the Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation!

Our lives in sex and marriage are to portray this exclusive covenant relationship.

John 14:6 - Jesus told him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.”

Acts 4:12 - There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.

This is a covenant of blood. We have to receive the bloody One into us, who was bloodied on the cross, in order to be His bride in this covenant!

Revelation 3:20 NRSV - Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

John 1:12 NIV - Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Have you received Him into yourself?

The bread and juice of communion are reminders of His body and blood and reminders that we take Jesus into ourselves. In John 6, many left following Jesus because they could not understand when He talked about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. Jesus clearly said,

John 6:63 - The very words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

**Our physical practices reflect spiritual realities.**

“The play’s the thing!” Are you playing your part well? Are you acting the part according to the writing of the Playwright?

The desires of people to have relationships outside of this biblical description of marriage are self-centered. They say, “It’s my body! It’s my life! I have the right to do want I want! Freedom! No one has the right to tell me how to live! Tolerance! Don’t judge me!”

The problem is that self-centeredness is the chief destroyer of existing marriages. We cannot be self-centered in marriage. Put every aspect of your marriage into this picture—into this play. Husband: Is Jesus self-centered? Wife: isn’t His bride dedicated totally to Him?

This is the highest truth of marriage—and putting this into practice could bring healing to your marriage.

I challenge you: in every single aspect and detail of your marriage, or of your sexual relationships, are you playing the part as the Script—the Scripture—describes? Could playing the part this way bring healing to your relationships?

If you are not yet married but hope to be someday, are you ready for marriage as it is described in this book? Are you ready to be part of a great portrayal of God’s desired relationship with humanity? Ravi Zacharias, in *I Isaac, Take Thee, Rebekah*, shared this story that came from England:

*It is the story of a young man named George who was in love with a girl named Mary. Mary and George were engaged to be married, but World War II erupted and George was suddenly called into the army. Recognizing that this could mean death for him, he decided that he and Mary should wait to be married until after his safe return. So George pled with her, “Mary, please wait for me. After the war is over, I’ll come back, and we’ll get married.” Mary agreed.*

*Many weeks and months went by. George’s letters came and kept Mary’s heart aglow. But suddenly the letters stopped coming. One week, two weeks, three weeks, four weeks, many weeks went by—and there were no more letters. Finally, the family received a communication from the army that George was missing in action and believed to be dead.*

*Mary’s heart was broken. She could not believe that George was really gone. She did not know what to do. As hard as she tried to put her loss behind her, she was not able to get George out of her mind and heart. After several months, she returned home from work one evening and said to her mother, “Mother, I’m really under the weather. I’m just going to go to my room to be alone. Please don’t disturb me for anyone.” She closed the door behind her and took all of George’s letters from her dresser drawer. Lying back on her bed she began to read them again, one by one, as her tears flowed. She picked up George’s picture from her dresser, so handsome in his uniform, and held it to her as she continued to read the letters and weep.*

*For the first time since the news of his loss, she took out her wedding dress that had been bought before George had left. She put it on and stood in front of the mirror looking at herself all bedecked in her gown, holding his picture and the letters, sobbing her heart out.*

*Downstairs, there was a knock at the door, and her mother went to answer it. She opened the door and grabbed her heart.*

*“George!” she gasped. “What are you doing here?”*

*George said, “Mother, is Mary home?”*

*“Yes, but, George, you…you…you’re supposed to be dead!”*

*“Well…ah…no, I’m all right. Tell me, is Mary married?”*

*“No, but, George, what happened? We…we…heard—”*

*George interrupted her gently. “Mother, if Mary isn’t married, may I see her?” As she stepped aside and motioned toward Mary’s room, George headed up the stairway. In England, some of the keyholes are so big you can almost walk through them, and as George looked through the keyhole, he was shocked at what he saw. There stood Mary, just as beautiful as he remembered her to be, in her wedding dress, his picture in one hand, a letter in the other. He opened the door and said gently, “Mary!”*

*She turned toward him in a state of shock and then screamed, “Georgie!” She wrapped her arms around him…[after a while] he loosened one arm with difficulty, dipped into his hip pocket, and took out a dog-eared piece of paper. “Mary,” he said, “of all the letters you wrote to me, this one was the most precious. I carried it with me through everything. It says this, ‘Georgie, dear, I love you. I love you. I love you. And when you come home, I’ll be ready.’ Darling, I didn’t know you’d be this ready!”*

*What a moment! What a glorious thing it is when a bride and groom meet and they are both ready.*

I remember when Sharon walked down this aisle to me … That’s mine!

I want Jesus to see me that way when He comes for us!

*He is the Bridegroom coming for the bride, and He will come [for a] bride is ready for Him. If marriage is as grand as the Bible intended it to be, then it is worth it to wait until you are ready for that right moment…for the right one.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

***Salvation***

***Prayer for actors to play their role better …***

***Growth Track today – Step 2 – Connection – How the bride, the church, connects to one another to be stronger – we need one another to play this part well.***

1. (Zacharias, 2004) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)