Sermon on Ephesians 5: 21 – 33 – God’s Blueprint For A Healthy Marriage.

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord... Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church... For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”

“Never leave your partner behind.” An old firefighter’s adage that became the theme of a Christian film about marriage. He was the captain of a fire station. In control of everything, except his marriage at home. He and his wife had different priorities. For him, it was saving money for a new boat. For her, it was medical supplies for a sick parent. It’s been said that husbands and wives both crave love and respect in marriage. Neither of them was showing that to each other. It seemed like a marriage doomed for failure until a parent stepped in with a challenge. It dared the husband to stop thinking only about himself and start thinking more about his wife. The greatest thing that helped him was seeing how Jesus loved him. It was this love that would lead him to start loving his spouse from the heart. The money he had been saving for the new boat went to pay for medical supplies for the sick parent instead. Wedding vows were renewed. The marriage was saved. If only all struggling marriages had happy endings like these. We live in a land where one out of every two marriages ends in divorce. It seems like the odds are against marriage, but God is for it. In our text for today we see, **God’s Blueprint For A Healthy Marriage.**

I. Begins with a solid foundation.

Think about the time and planning that goes into building a home. Location, location, location. Once you find a location, you secure the necessary permits. You do the necessary excavation. You pour the footings and foundation. A lot of time and effort goes into something that most people will never see. But the time and effort you put into the foundation determines whether or not the home will stand the test of time. The same could be said about a good foundation for our spiritual lives. The Apostle Paul writes, “no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid which is Jesus Christ.” Jesus once used the illustration of a wise man building his house on the rock and a foolish man building his house on the sand. When the storms came, the house on the rock stood firm, whereas the house on the sand fell with a mighty crash. Jesus is the solid rock foundation on which we build. Marriage is an earthly institution. What we have in Christ will last for time and eternity.

II. Builds according to God’s plan.

Single or married, God’s greatest blessing to you is Jesus. Single or married, you are a child of God through faith in Jesus. As children of God, Paul says, “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Paul uses the word submit later when he says, “wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.” That word “submit” carries a negative connotation in today’s world. So much so that people have asked if I could take that word “submit” out of their wedding ceremony. The Greek word doesn’t imply superiority or inferiority. It simply means to “to rank in order under some specific pattern.” Single or married, God’s greatest blessing to you is Jesus. Single or married, you are a child of God through faith in Jesus. As children of God, Paul says, “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Paul uses the word submit later when he says, “wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.” That word “submit” carries a negative connotation in today’s world. So much so that people have asked if I could take that word “submit” out of their wedding ceremony. The Greek word doesn’t imply superiority or inferiority. It simply means to “to rank in order under some specific pattern.”

A neat example I came across put it this way. When a truck driver submits to a 14-year-old crossing guard by stopping his truck when the sign goes up, he isn’t showing himself to be weaker or inferior. He submits because he realizes the order of authority established for the good of drivers and pedestrians alike. He submits to the crossing guard for the sake of peace and order. To take the word “submit” out of a wedding ceremony would be tantamount to subtracting from God’s Word and we know how God feels about that. When it comes to life, God makes the rules. When it comes to marriage, God also makes the rules. And the rules are meant to be a blessing, not a burden.

Paul emphasizes this blessing when he says, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church.” Husbands loving wives leaves no room for dictators or tyrants. Husbands loving wives leaves no room for sinful pride and selfishness. Husbands loving wives leaves no room for a lack of love and appreciation. Paul says, “husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies.” It’s natural to look out for our own wants and needs. It’s unnatural to put the wants and needs of others before our own. Sinful pride and selfishness leads us to look out for number one. But God wants us to look out for others, especially the other “self” God gives us in marriage. A marriage that says, “what’s in it for me,” will often struggle. But a marriage that says “what’s in it for my spouse,” will often experience that wonderful snowball effect of spouses almost “competing” with each other to see what they can do out of love for each other.
The example comes from Christ. More importantly, the forgiveness for our many failures also comes from Christ who “loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” What a beautiful picture Paul paints of a filthy Cinderella being transformed into a beautiful bride. It’s a picture of what Jesus has done for us. Taking filthy sinners like you and me and washing us in his blood, dressing us in his righteousness, presenting us as holy and blameless to God, ready to enjoy the never-ending Wedding Supper of the Lamb in Heaven.

We sometimes refer to God’s love for us in Christ as agape love. An unconditional, self-sacrificing kind of love. The kind of love that isn’t always easy to come by. The kind of love that isn’t always easy to show. We see that in the fact that we haven’t always loved God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and we certainly haven’t always loved our neighbor as ourselves. The punishment we deserve is hell where people will be separated from God and his love for all eternity. But God doesn’t want that for anyone. That’s why he sent Jesus to be our Savior. Jesus tells us in the Book of John, “God so (agape) loved the world that he sent his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Jesus also tells us in the Book of John, “greater (agape) love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” And we are his friends through faith created and strengthened by the Holy Spirit working through Word and Sacrament.

God’s agape love for us motivates us to agape love others. Love that imitates the love our Savior has for the Church. The love that held nothing back when it came to our salvation. Jesus didn’t just give his share, he gave his all. He gave his life on the cross to forgive our sins. He rose from the grave to give us the gift of heaven. Paul writes, “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is a gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.” Salvation is a gift from God. Love is also a gift from God. God’s love for us will be reflected in the way we love others. God’s love for us in Jesus changes the way God sees us. May it also change the way we see others. May God’s agape love for us lead us to agape love others. Not just a friendly, “let’s try and get along as best as we can” kind of love, but an unconditional, self-sacrificing, agape kind of love that seeks to love and serve others as our Savior loved and served us.

For many in today’s world, marriage is simply a contract easily made and easily broken. It’s just a sheet of paper. In God’s eyes, marriage is much more than that. It’s a promise to God and each other. It’s a life-long union of one man and one woman. As we hear in the Order of Marriage from our hymnal, “Those whom God has joined together, let no one separate.” It’s been said that, “marriages are made in heaven.” It’s unfortunate when they become just the opposite here on earth. That wasn’t God’s plan and it isn’t God’s fault. Sin is to blame. Sinful people with sinful natures who think, say, and do sinful things. That’s why it’s so important for husbands and wives to not only say, “I love you,” but also to say things like, “I’m sorry…please forgive me…..” to God and each other.

In today’s world, very few teachings from God’s Word meet greater ridicule than the teachings laid out in our text for today. The world thinks it has everything figured out when it comes to what’s right and what’s wrong, what’s acceptable and unacceptable when it comes to the roles of men and women and husbands and wives. If that’s so, maybe someone could explain the following statistics to me. In a land where the national divorce rate is 1 out of 2, why does that divorce rate drop to 1 out of 40 for those who regularly attend church? Why does it drop even further to 1 out of 400 for those who regularly have devotions in their homes? Proof of what the world knows and what God knows. Proof of what God’s Word can accomplish in the hearts and lives of people. Proof of why it’s so important to begin with a solid foundation and build according to God’s plan.

Because our primary goal in life isn’t a perfect marriage here on earth. Our primary goal is to one day take our seat at the Wedding Supper of the Lamb in Heaven together with Jesus and all believers. Something to which we’ve all been invited. Something at which we are all expected. Something at which God wants all people to be. Something to which we won’t need to bring a gift because God has already provided the gift. He’s provided everything we need in Jesus our Savior.

Amen.