

## God's Beautiful Design – Getting Our Tone Right

The aim of this series of sermons is to look at what the Bible teaches about gender, marriage, sexuality & other things associated with these. The reason for doing the series now is partly in light of the upcoming marriage referendum, partly because I know that many Christians find it difficult to know how to approach this subject & partly because we live in a time where there is generally a lot of confusion around gender, marriage & sexuality from a Christian perspective.

People have questions regarding this whole area, so one of the things I've done is provide a box for people to put in any questions they have in relation to the series. You might have questions now, questions might arise as I'm speaking or you might see a weakness in my reasoning. This is an opportunity to engage with the subject & to help me serve you as I study, write & preach this series. Also if anyone wants to meet up to talk through anything that arises then please don't hesitate to arrange a time with me.

Next week I plan to give an overview of how the Bible consistently holds up & assumes God's design for marriage as one woman with one man. Here is a summary of next week: The '*one man one woman*' is the model for marriage God instituted at creation (Gen 1:26-31; Gen 2: 4-24) & the only one Jesus (Matt 19:4-6; Mark 10:5-9; John 2:1-11) & the NT letters reaffirm (Rom 7:2-3; 1 Cor. 7; Eph 5:22-23; Col 3:18-20; 1 Tim 3:2, 12; Heb 13:4; 1 Pet 3:1-7). Every other arrangement recorded in Scripture is a result of or was necessary because of the fall (apart from celibacy which Jesus & Paul also hold up as at least equally honourable – Matt 19:10-12; 1 Cor. 7). None of the other marital arrangements recorded in Scripture erase God's clear, original & beautiful design for marriage between the two complementary genders he created, evident in both Scripture & in how the male & female are created. Notably none of the other marital arrangements recorded include the union of a same sex couple.

Scripture does not hide the mess of relational & sexual brokenness & sin that we all know at some level (it's not a pretty picture) but neither does Scripture hide God's created design for marriage. One which I believe is foundational for a healthy & flourishing family, church & society. This is a summary of where we're going next week & maybe the week after.

This morning however I want to start by focusing on getting our tone & posture right for the series & for living out biblical faith in a world often at odds with Christian faith, ethics & values.

***Firstly we need to be humble as we approach this subject & everything associated with it.*** We need to be humble if we desire to have God's eye (favour) & humble if we desire to gain the ears of others who think differently. Psalm 25:9 says; **"He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way."** We need's God guidance in dealing with this subject in the days we live in & our desire should be to learn & follow his way... Therefore humility must be our starting point.

Isaiah 66:2 says; **“These are the ones I look on with favour: those who are humble & contrite in spirit, & who tremble at my word.”** This sentence from Isaiah, & others that echo it, are most likely what Jesus had in his mind when he began the *Sermon on the Mount* with the words; **“Blessed are the poor in spirit”**. These words help set the whole tone & posture of the Christian life. Then the other beatitudes unpack how to walk in humility before God & others. For this reason I believe the beatitudes give us a good overview of what our attitude & character should be when dealing with this subject, as well as in every other area of life.

One thing that’s important to point out is that the beatitudes are not prescriptive of how to become a Christian; they are descriptive of a quality of spirituality already present in the Christian’s life. In other words this is what the Holy Spirit has worked into our lives & this is what he is working to bring forth from our lives. If the seeds planted through new birth are there then this is the fruit that will come forth as we grow & mature in Christ. The beatitudes are the Christian attitudes towards life & that means towards this subject we’re dealing with now. ***Let’s read them & I’ll comment briefly as we go to highlight what I mean.***

The beatitudes start with & are permeated by joyful humility. For example if we are the blessed poor in spirit described here then we will approach this subject knowing we are sinners, & indeed likely sexual sinners by Jesus’ standard, rescued by God’s mercy & grace. Therefore we are looking down on no one. Our posture cannot be arrogance or judgement. No, we are simply trying to hold up God’s revealed truth which is part of our God-given role as church according to 1 Tim 3:15 – the same truth that makes us aware of our sin & points us to Christ to be saved from it...

***Secondly we need to be pastoral as we approach this subject.***

We need to be pastoral. We need to be prepared to get involved with & do Christian discipleship with people who are struggling with same sex attraction, confused about gender or who are living in sexual sin (whatever form that takes). We need to be welcoming & open towards people who do not view Scripture, & therefore marriage, sex & sexuality, as we do. We ought to be willing to engage in ongoing conversation in friendship with people who see things differently. That is as good for us as it is for them.

This is part of the work of organic evangelism. We should not fear people who are different or who hold different worldviews. We should not fear their questions, or getting to know them, or them coming into our church environment. We need to be able to love, befriend & engage with whomever without compromising Christian faith. We need to learn how to accept others without affirming all they believe or do. This is simply the reality of relationships in this world if we think about it. We all have good relationship with people who do not affirm our Christian faith. Why should it be any different the other way around?

I do not believe that someone hates me because they do not believe the Christian faith as I do, so why would it be true the other way around. Our whole life, identity & hope is built on the fundamental Christian belief that Jesus rose from the dead! However we don't conclude a person hates us if they do not affirm that. So neither can it logically be concluded Christians hate or fear a person who has built their life around an LGBT identity simply because we do not affirm part of their lifestyle.

Acceptance never means affirming everything about another person, but it does mean showing love, kindness, mercy, understanding, compassion, commitment & patience. All the things Christ has shown towards us. I often think of Paul's words to Timothy; **"And the Lords servant must not be quarrelsome but be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful (or patiently enduring evil). Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth."** We can be kind to all & ought to be patient with all & when it comes to instructing others in truth gentleness is the spirit & tone of the Christian. Our hope is in God to change hearts; this should free us to be humble, kind, patient & gentle in our relationships with those who do not agree with us. This is not an excuse for saying nothing since the verses assume teaching & instructing in Christian faith, it's simply an encouragement not to shut down when others do not see as we see.

It's also important to understand that when people do respond to the gospel they respond where they are at not where we would often like them to be. Discipleship meets them there & patiently & pastorally teaches them the mind & way of Christ. This is messy work, for as worldviews collide things will need to be unlearned, learned & relearned. Teaching is not a one off seminar, or a series... It is ongoing lifelong discipleship. This means bringing grace & truth into the brokenness & worldliness of the lives of real people. This is really important to understand if we're to be a loving church that reaches & disciple's people.

**Thirdly we need to be CLEAR as we approach the subject of gender, marriage & sexuality.** In his book *Counter Culture* David Platt writes; *"May it be said of us that we not only held firm to the gospel, but that we spoke clearly with the gospel to the most pressing issues of our day."* We need to be clear. To me the Bible is not lots of disjointed verses, texts & books it is one complete picture & that complete picture communicates something about God's purpose for gender, marriage & sexuality. I believe it communicates it clearly from a number of angles. We don't help anyone by holding back what we believe the Bible clearly teaches about these things. We don't help ourselves, we don't help young people growing up in a morally confused world & we don't help lost people in a lost world. Neither do we help fellow sinners by avoiding calling sin sin! As well as being humble & pastoral we need to be clear & honest about what the Bible teaches because we believe it is God's Word & therefore what's best.

In his book David Platt continues & writes;

*“On popular issues like poverty & slavery, where Christians are likely to be applauded for our social action, we are quick to stand up & speak out. Yet on controversial issues like homosexuality & abortion, where Christians are likely to be criticized for our involvement, we are content to sit down & stay quiet. It’s as if we’ve decided to pick & choose which social issues we’ll contest & which we’ll concede. And our picking & choosing normally revolves around what is most comfortable—and least costly—for us in our culture. If you ask any popular Christian leader in the public square to make a statement on poverty, sex trafficking, or the orphan crisis, that leader will gladly, boldly & clearly share his or her convictions. However, if you asked the same Christian leader in the same public setting to make a statement on homosexuality or abortion, that leader will respond with either nervous hesitancy or virtual heresy, if he or she responds at all.”*

Whatever issue we speak on we need to be as clear as the Bible is no matter how well we think it will be received. I think again of Paul’s words to Timothy, ***this time let’s turn to 2 Timothy 4:1-5***. Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 4:2; **“by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.”** The truth can be set out plainly & therefore we should do so with an awareness of God’s oversight.

***Fourthly we need to be wise as we approach the subject of gender, marriage & sexuality.***

In the letter of James, chapter 1:2-4, Scripture says; **“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”**

Christians need not fear the various trials that come our way but rather joyfully view them as an opportunity to mature in faith. Trials are designed to produce spiritual maturity & should therefore be counted as joy. There are many different types of trials but they each have the potential to help us grow in faith. As Bible believing Christian’s we could view the upcoming marriage referendum as one of those various trials we meet... Our understanding & belief that marriage is fundamentally a complementary union between two people of the opposite sex is up for being redefined in our state constitution. This will test our faith on a number of levels.

It will test our commitment to revealed truth. It’s easy to affirm God’s vision for marriage when everyone else assumes the same view. We don’t have to defend it or even articulate it very well when everyone around us is on the same page. However everyone around us is not on the same page anymore, with a predicted yes vote we clearly don’t live in such a time. Yet God has us here to be salt and light & we should consider it pure joy because before us is an opportunity to grow in faith. Our courage is going to be tested when we are asked for our opinion. Our understanding of our own conviction will be tested & therefore our reasoning will need to be sharpened. We’ll be asked questions we’ve never had to answer before but all of this is part of living the Christian life in the real world.

Our attitudes towards those who do not share our views & whose lifestyles we cannot affirm will also be

tested – especially when we feel misrepresented & misunderstood. Will we fall into the stereotypes some want us to fall into? Or will we be able to faithfully articulate & abide by God's vision for marriage with dignity, humility & grace? The test before us provides us with an opportunity to grow in such things. We find ourselves in a time not unlike that which the first Christian's found themselves! This is where I feel the next verses in James become helpful.

James continues in verses 5-8 & writes; **"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."**

Wisdom is something the Irish Church really needs to ask for at this time. Trials & tests help remind us we don't know everything, we don't have all the answers, but they equally remind us God does. James tells us to ask God for wisdom with the great encouragement that he gives generously to all without holding back. With one condition – we ask in faith, with no doubting. In other words we come to God with our mind made up that what God says is true is true. Otherwise the exercise is pointless; we'll just be driven & tossed like a wave of the sea between what God says & what everyone else says. God's opinion in that case will just be one among many to us. That's confusion, that's double mindedness & James understandably says such a person is unstable in all his ways.

Contrast the double-minded man with what James writes about God in verse 17; **"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."** There is no double-mindedness or instability in God. This is why we go to him for wisdom, with settled trust & confidence that is based on his character & what he has revealed in Scripture. The only true stability we have is his unchanging nature. Therefore he alone can stabilise us in our convictions, attitudes & practice.

We can know God's created design for marriage & human flourishing, Scripture & nature is not unclear. However we need his wisdom to help us communicate & model it in a way that brings not condemnation but light, grace, healing & hope to a relationally & sexually broken world. In a way that helps us not shut down conversations but open & continue them. We need his wisdom to help us engage with a world that does not view Scripture, & therefore marriage, as we do. We also need wisdom to know how to privately & publically pray for this referendum & its consequences. We not only need to pray for wisdom we also need wisdom to know how to pray, preach & discuss this with others. We don't want our prayers (or preaching

or attitude etc) to be insensitive to what people around us might be wrestling with. This is why we need to be humble, pastoral, clear & wise as we approach this subject. May God help us for his glory & the gospel.