



**GOSPEL
SHAPED
MARRIAGE**

*Grace for Sinners to
Love Like Saints*

**CHAD & EMILY
VAN DIXHOORN**

Foreword by
ALISTAIR BEGG

Gospel-Shaped Marriage

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Grace for Sinners to Love Like Saints

Chad Van Dixhoorn and
Emily Van Dixhoorn

Foreword by Alistair Begg

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Gospel-Shaped Marriage: Grace for Sinners to Love Like Saints

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Jordan Singer

First printing 2022

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-8071-0

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-8074-1

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-8072-7

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-8073-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Van Dixhoorn, Chad B., author. | Van Dixhoorn, Emily, author.

Title: Gospel-shaped marriage : grace for sinners to love like saints / Chad Van Dixhoorn and Emily

Van Dixhoorn ; foreword by Alistair Begg.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2022. | Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021046473 (print) | LCCN 2021046474 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433580710

(hardcover) | ISBN 9781433580727 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433580734 (mobipocket) | ISBN

9781433580741 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Marriage—Biblical teaching.

Classification: LCC BS680.M35 V36 2022 (print) | LCC BS680.M35 (ebook) | DDC 248.8/44—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021046473>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021046474>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB	31	30	29	28	27	26	25	24	23	22				
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

*To all the singles and couples who made our marriage stronger,
and especially to Berta Badenoch, and Ian and Joan Hamilton*

Contents

Foreword by Alistair Begg	9
Introduction	13
1 The Bible and Marriage	15
2 History and Marriage	25
3 Grace in Marriage	37
4 Women and Marriage	47
5 Men and Marriage	63
6 Winning in Marriage	75
7 Family and Marriage	93
8 Bedtime in Marriage	107
9 Growing in Marriage	119
Appendix: How to Change Your Spouse in Three Easy Steps	131
Discussion Questions	133
Notes	147
General Index	149
Scripture Index	153

Foreword

ONE OF THE GREAT JOYS of pastoral ministry is found in the “solemnization of matrimony.” It is a special privilege to be granted a ringside seat as one man and one woman enter this honorable estate instituted by God. There is benefit in using the archaic language of the *Book of Common Prayer* to remind us that marriage is not to be entered upon lightly or carelessly but thoughtfully, with reverence for God and with due consideration of the purposes for which it was established by God. Alongside procreation there is the preservation of human society, which can be strong and happy only where the marriage bond is held in honor. It is not uncommon when these words are read for the reaction to be an uneasy rapt silence or an uncomfortable restlessness in the congregation, because they challenge contemporary perspectives on the subject.

We are living through what is arguably the most rapid change in family structure in human history. The sexual revolution of the sixties, which held out hope for “true love” beyond the boundaries of God’s perfect plan, has left in its wake moral, emotional, and social confusion. Families that function together and that do so with a shared set of moral values are increasingly an

endangered species. Sociologists recognize that only a minority of American households are two-parent, mom-and-dad families. Marriage, where it is adopted, is no longer about childbearing or child-rearing but about personal fulfillment. Consider the falling birth rate and the fact that there are more American homes with pets than children! Our smartphones have made it possible for us to be “alone together.” The decentralization of family life is accompanied by a fascination with genealogy—the quest is to find our roots and assure ourselves that we belong somehow, genetically, emotionally, mystically, and spiritually in a solidarity of souls.

Instead of denouncing the darkness, which is easy to do, the social climate presents us with an opportunity to shine as lights in the world. This means viewing marriage in the context of the gospel. The apostle Paul’s specific directions for the Christian family are set within the larger framework of its place in the church family. He addresses his readers as “God’s chosen ones” (Col. 3:12), part of a vast company of men and women throughout the ages who were sought out by God, heard the gospel, and understood the grace of God in truth. At the time of writing, directives for household management were common, but Paul is not simply providing a list of ethical demands; rather, he encourages his readers with the reminder that in Christ we are enabled to fulfill our assigned roles. The one-flesh union as established from the beginning is not based on fluctuating human emotions but on the divine will and word. Marriage is not invented by culture; it is established by creation. What God has established by creation, no culture will be able to destroy; it will destroy itself first!

FOREWORD

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (Gen. 2:24)

This is more than a human contract; it is a divine covenant. It is exclusive, publicly declared, permanent, and consummated by sexual intercourse. (And the order of events is by God's design.)

The lordship of Jesus is to be on display not only in the public arena but in the privacy of our homes where, for better or worse, we are ourselves. Our marriages at best should be an advertisement for the Christian faith. If Christianity is going to make an impact on society, it must be seen to revolutionize our family life.

We are all in need of help in these matters. We need our local church family to teach us and train us and to remind us of God's enabling grace. A good marriage is in one respect like a golf swing in that it is not easy but it is straightforward. Only in Jesus do we find freedom from the distortions created by sin, including in our marriages. My wife and I are greatly encouraged by this book. It is a privilege to be able to commend it to you in this way.

Alistair Begg, Parkside Church, Chagrin Falls, Ohio

Introduction

THIS IS A BOOK FOR COUPLES, but not just couples. The institution of marriage is an integral part of the life of the Christian church. Time spent thinking about marriage will help some of us be more thoughtful about married life and all of us be more prayerful. For that reason, we appeal directly to married people throughout, but we also have in mind those who are only thinking about marriage or who want to support married people. There are no R-rated scenes. There are only helps for the married, prompts for those who want to pray, and encouragements for those who wish to defend and promote the institution of marriage, this gift from God that every church member ought to treasure, whether married or not.

This book has three main features that distinguish it from many other books on marriage. The most obvious is its brevity—busy people will find in only a few pages both a biblical defense of marriage and a practical guide to married life.

A second feature of this book is its frank assessment of who we are and of what we are capable. Many modern books on the Christian life acknowledge that Christians are sinners. In these

pages we remind readers that Christians are also saints (to use a common New Testament term). Connected to Christ our Savior, we are called and enabled by his grace to love others, including our spouse.

The third unique aspect of this book is the path that it charts, for here we follow an old insight recovered from a book written four hundred years ago. The book, by a pastor named William Gouge, is quaintly entitled *Domestical Duties*. Not everything in it is helpful, but some things are, and in these few pages we pass on the best of what we've learned and are trying to put into practice.

In considering this book we also owe a debt of gratitude to our parents; to Craig and Carol Troxel, who gave us our premarital counseling; to the couples who have sat through our counseling; to the friends who read drafts of the book (notably Greg and Ginger O'Brien, Pat Daly, Justen and Catherine Ellis, Paul and Joy Woo, and Carlton and Linley Wynne); and to the two groups who heard versions of these chapters delivered in adult education sessions, first at Grace Presbyterian Church in Virginia and then later at Calvary Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania. Your contributions have blessed readers with a better book.

The Bible and Marriage

RECOMMENDED READING

GENESIS 1:26–31; 2:15–25

Benjamin Franklin is credited with the wry comment that people should have their eyes wide open before marriage and half shut afterward. There is truth in both halves of the saying, but we want to talk about the “eyes wide open” part. What should we be looking for if we, or others close to us, are thinking about marriage?

One Man and One Woman

It turns out that the first thing that we should look for in a marriage is someone of the opposite sex. There is such a thing as male and female, and it is not merely a personal or social construct. We can see it in the way in which we are made, and the Bible points it out even before it gets to the topic of relationships: Genesis 1 introduces us to “male and female”; people who are in some ways the same (being made in the image of God) and in some ways different (intended to complement one another).

The idea of sex or gender is important, but not in isolation. One message of the opening chapter of the Bible is that the pinnacle of

creation is not one but two, and they go together. “God created man . . . male and female” (Gen. 1:27).

So men and women are meant to be paired. That is an important start. But when God chose to have *The Talk* with Adam, he introduced important additional information, for God talked about a man leaving his father and mother and cleaving to his wife. The words that God chose are significant, for they twice emphasize not only the proper sex for marriage, but the right number. First he says that a parental pair is to consist of a father and a mother. Then he says that marriage is supposed to be between a husband and a wife (Gen. 2:24).

Every Christian knows that even a hint of God’s revealed will should be considered with utmost seriousness. And in Genesis 2 God gave much more than a hint: it is God’s will for a man to have one wife, and for a woman to have one husband, and for neither to have more than one at the same time. Obviously the idea of one plus one was a command for Adam and Eve. After all, at least at first, they were the only human beings around. But clearly this was meant as a command for all future generations, even if it was hardly kept with any faithfulness. Sometimes people have taken more than one spouse at a time. All too often they have exchanged one spouse for another.

In some cases, remarriage is a gift from God for a wounded man or woman, and often for the children too. We can thank God for this gracious provision. But marriage is normally to be a lifelong commitment, and Jesus himself emphasized the God-given creational pattern for marriage, established in Genesis 2, with a warning that what God has put together, we must not separate (Mark 10:9).

Not Holy, but Special

So marriage is for a man and a woman. Any single man can marry a single woman. One does not need to be a Christian to make promises approximating what Malachi calls a marriage “covenant” (Mal. 2:13–16). Marriage is a civil ordinance, not a Christian sacrament. It is special, but it is not sacred. “Let marriage be held in honor among all,” the book of Hebrews tells us (Heb. 13:4).¹ The apostle Paul warns against those who forbid people to marry (1 Tim. 4:3). Quite the opposite attitude should be on display in the Christian community: we ought to encourage people—Christians or not—to choose the most visible, most committed form of marriage that a culture has. Christians need to be advocates for marriage maximalism, not marriage minimalism, as is the unhappy trend in some modern societies.

We live in a culture where sex, living together, and even marriage are often about getting rather than giving. This is most obviously true out of marriage, as wiser cultural pundits have noted. Cohabiting couples eventually realize that they are always auditioning or interviewing as potential marriage partners, especially in the bedroom. Such relationships rest on unwritten contracts. Whether people realize it or not, there is a sense in which they are commercialized, continuing only as long as each side gets what it wants.

Some cultures err in redefining who can be married or in undermining the usefulness and beauty of marriage. In rejecting these redefinitions or reevaluations, Christians cannot simply appeal to tradition. We must not simply exchange the misguided conventions of our day for the conventions of another age or

place, including those of other cultures or older societies. After all, there have been and still are societies where convention encourages people to be given in marriage even though one or both parties lacks the maturity and wisdom to make the decision or to consent to an arrangement. In the 1640s the English parliament rejected the idea, promoted by Puritan ministers, that people should marry only if they are able to exercise proper judgment and give their own consent. Today some religions and cultures would also object to these provisos. And thinking of tradition, it is perhaps here that we should add that Christians are also free to marry without respect to race, ethnic origins, and nationality, no matter what our cultural norms might be. Once marriage for the people of God was restricted to Israelites only. To be a follower of God one had to become a Jew and marry a Jew. Now we are as free as anyone to marry anyone in the Lord.

If we are to find a reliable model for marriage, we will need to do better than appeal to cultural norms, past or present. Marriage is for both Christians and non-Christians, but nonetheless, in developing a definition of marriage, Christians must go back to Scripture as their guide. A proper understanding of this gift from God, already emerging in our brief study, is that marriage is a lifelong, exclusive, and publicly recognized bond between a man and a woman. That this bond is an intimate one is implied by its exclusivity, but we will discuss intimate relations more thoroughly in a later chapter.

We'd like to add that marriage always ought to be consensual too, but here Scripture constrains us. There are hints in both the Old and New Testaments that a freedom of choice in marriage is a good thing. If we turn to the Old Testament, it is hard to escape

the sense that part of the beauty of the story of Isaac and Rebekah is that she was given a choice to marry this son of Abraham and bravely decided to do so (Gen. 24:57–58). As well, if we look at the possible options facing engaged couples in 1 Corinthians 7:36–38 it is not clear that the apostle Paul is discussing a parentally arranged marriage; it seems as if he is teaching potential partners how to make informed judgments about a betrothal or engagement. But we would be saying too much if we said that an arranged marriage is by definition not a true marriage. That said, we should probably mention in this context that age matters in all marriages. Marital union should take place only after puberty, for it is adults and not children who are to marry. And while we are on the topic of age, we should stress that proposed marriages with wide age discrepancies must be considered very carefully lest the purpose of marital companionship be marginalized or even jeopardized.

Two Believers

There is another reason why Christians are in favor of consent in marriage. And that is because Christians who want to marry have the responsibility of marrying other Christians. We get hints early in the Old Testament that further guidance was needed for God's people who were seeking a spouse. Some additional discernment was required in a relationship beyond identifying a coordinate gender.

The clues add up quickly. In Genesis we are told that those identified as God's people *did not wish* to marry the unbelieving people who were conveniently living around them. In Exodus we are informed that they *should not* marry from the nations around

them. It is too simplistic to say that the issue was merely racial. With increasing clarity, we are told that a follower of the Lord must not marry a follower of “foreign gods” because it will draw him or her away from a true loyalty to the one who made us, preserves us, even saves us (Deut. 6:10–7:5).

Now sometimes people face difficult circumstances. Esther did not choose her husband. Given the choice to marry someone who did not believe in the true God or face likely death, she married (Est. 1–2). Often people become Christians while they are married. If possible, they should remain married (1 Cor. 7). And yet, tragically, many who profess faithfulness to the Lord are willing to marry unbelievers under very different circumstances. They imagine that they are so strong that the unbeliever will be won over by their faith. “He will come my way.” Or, “I won’t drift her way.” The whole history of the nation of Israel says that the opposite is true. We ignore these lessons to our peril.

A Christian considering marriage must be clear about this basic requirement. Christians must assure themselves that they are marrying a Christian, and they must have solid grounds for such a conclusion. Of course, we cannot guarantee that people will continue to walk with the Lord. But we can ask good questions about their walk before we decide to commit: Does our prospective marriage partner clearly confess Christ? Does he or she make use of the gifts God has given for us to grow, like Bible reading, good preaching, the sacraments, and Christian fellowship? Does he or she pray? Do we find ourselves growing closer to the Lord as a result of this friendship?

The question of whether to marry a believer or an unbeliever is not merely a matter of wisdom. This is a matter of obedience, for

it is the plain teaching of the Bible. After Paul discusses marriage and remarriage in 1 Corinthians 7, he assures his readers that they are free to marry anyone, as long as he or she belongs to the Lord (1 Cor. 7:39). In other words, all other arrangements, no matter what the motive, are forbidden.

We can say more than that. Christians should find a life partner who is a member of a church that clearly loves and preaches the gospel—in fact, preaches the whole counsel of God, since all of that will be needed for a useful Christian life and a strong Christian marriage. Sometimes God so orders the events of our lives that Christians find themselves alone in prayer, alone in reading the Bible, alone in the pew. Sometimes we cannot help but have only one parent praying at a child's bedside, one parent bringing a child to church, one parent praying for faith and repentance, one parent prioritizing what is eternal over what is temporal—and all the while the other parent is silently not supporting, or even vocally opposing, these things. In God's providence this does happen. But for a Christian to plan this—to enter a situation where this is the case while hoping that one day it might not be the case? This is foolish, and God loves us so much that he forbids us from doing this (see 2 Cor. 6:14).

We need to remind ourselves, and sometimes we need to remind others, that if the concept of “evangelistic dating” has plausibility, or even fascination, for us or for our friends, this is in itself a sign of weakness, not of strength. It shows that our hearts are already privileging a relationship in this world over the one relationship that can live on into the next world. Members of cults flirt to convert. Christians must not use romance for outreach. We have already lost if we think that we can honor God by disobeying

him. Let us put Jesus Christ first in our lives, and then we will find guidance in our engagements and a model for our marriages.

What Is Marriage For?

Knowing who and how many people should be in a marriage, even to offer guidelines for Christian marriage partners, doesn't yet say what marriage is for. Once again, the beginning of an answer is already found in the first book of the Bible.

Marriage is for mutual support, companionship, reproduction of the human race, and the promotion of sexual purity. For Christians, we can also add that marriage is for church growth, for offering a context for children to be nurtured in the Christian faith, and for reflecting the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph. 5). And it is worth noting that all of this is more about giving than getting, an important idea that we'll return to in later chapters.

Going back to Genesis, God paraded every kind of creature in front of Adam not only so that he could help rule the world in naming the animals, but also so that it would be crystal clear that no random mammal could help and support him. For that, he needed a wife. He and his wife needed one another for company. For many centuries, even millennia, the fact that man and woman were to be friends, companions, was not emphasized in marriage narratives. But while Adam and Eve were to work together in this world, at a more basic level, they were called to *be* together.

Together, they were also to be fruitful and to multiply the human race. We see this in God's command in Genesis 1, which helps us to understand the importance of parenting. Sometimes

couples cannot give birth to children. But there needs to be an extraordinary reason for them to refuse to have children.

God also provides marriage as the only context for sexual activity and purity. About this, Scripture could not be clearer. Marriage was created at a time when there was no immorality, but it continues in a time where every kind of sexual problem abounds. In this world some can manage lifelong purity apart from marriage. Many will find this difficult, and they should make it their ambition to marry (1 Cor. 7:2, 9). That also means that people contemplating marriage—an exclusive relationship intended to promote purity and a context in which they will be trying to make babies together—should marry someone *they* find attractive, including physical attraction. Someone they love in every way.

So sex and number matter in marriage. Race and nationality should not. Friendship counts because we want companionship. Looks matter only to the looker. Age matters too. But most of all, a real and living faith must matter to every Christian who wishes by God's grace to be faithful. These are the biblical foundations of a Christian marriage.