

Brothers and sisters, the topic of marriage opens up deep wounds causing inner turmoil. Discussing marriage taps into deep longings and ignites a range of emotions. Exploring what marriage is, opens up feelings and responses that go to the core of our being. Listening to a talk on marriage is a profoundly personal experience touching on hidden hurts, desires and expectations. Speaking on marriage is a walk through a minefield of public and private opinion and understanding; opening up profound clashes of worldview and lifestyle. Given the option, preachers avoid the topic. When forced to say something preachers skirt round the key issues raised by the Bible and culture. Today I am doing neither. I speak with a sense of responsibility and some trepidation knowing that God's word makes an impact.

Hebrews 4:12, *'For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.'* Our series on marriage will be painful and challenging as God's word teaches us and exposes the condition of our inner being. Thanks be to God. We do not tackle this topic in isolation from the loving presence of our heavenly Father. *'He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.'* **Isaiah 40:11**

How about we pray now to the Shepherd who holds us close to his heart. Sisters and brothers, disciples of Christ seek the transformation that flows from a renewed mind. Disciples of Christ look to obedience to Christ as the way of life rather than conforming to the pattern of this world. The Holy Spirit renews us and leads us into obedience through the agency of God's word. It is God's word to which we are to go as we seek the truth in the midst of overwhelming pressure to redefine and reshape marriage to include same sex couples. It is God's word we go to as we seek to interpret and respond to our personal experiences of marriage. God is not silent on the nature and practice of marriage. He speaks as the creator of marriage. Marriage is not a humanly designed relationship periodically revised and remodeled to suit the changing social environment. Marriage is instituted by God. The importance of understanding this goes beyond saying no to so called same sex marriage. It is about modelling and honouring biblical marriage in our own lives. Defining marriage is the starting point of Christian understanding and response. So we turn to the Bible. There our discovery may well reveal to us more than we presently understand about the nature and role of marriage in God's purposes. Marriage is

foundational to human society. It is the first relationship between human beings in the creation pattern. As the foundational relationship its nature is defined by the Creator. Today, 3 key aspects of biblical teaching. Revealing a clear definition of marriage; enabling us to test biblically what relationships are rightly named 'marriage'. Firstly, marriage is an exclusive, lifelong, gendered union. That is Jesus' definition, spoken in the context of a question put to Jesus about divorce and recorded in the gospels. *Haven't you read," he (Jesus) replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.* **Matthew 19:4-6** Jesus definition is grounded in creation. Jesus quotes from the first two chapters in the Bible. By referring back to creation Jesus is teaching about the fundamental nature of creation. Hardwired into the pattern of the world and how it functions is the existence of two equally created, equally valued genders in humanity. Equal but different. Male and female. Different in a variety of ways but most obviously in the reproductive organs created by God. Male and female designed with complimentary reproductive organs. As Jesus defines marriage he is describing a gendered relationship. True marriage requires a male and a female. Jesus' description includes the intimacy of sexual union where two become one flesh. Only possible between a male and a female. Jesus tells us who the ultimate marriage celebrant is: God. He is the one who joins male and female together. Marriage, as defined biblically, is not a relationship given a particular legal status by an Act of parliament. It is a union in which God joins a man and a woman together making them one. According to Jesus' words, it is a union that is lifelong and it is an exclusive union. No one is to come between husband and wife sexually or in any other manner in a way that breaches the union. Death is the only means by which the union ends. In a later message we will explore the concessions God makes about the ending of a marriage due to our fallen nature. Secondly, marriage is a covenant. Described in **Malachi 2:14** *'You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.'* A covenant is a binding contract entered into by the solemn promise of two parties usually sealed by some form of oath or public ritual. This means there are witnesses to the binding agreement. In

Malachi's words the Lord is the ultimate witness to the covenant of marriage. This distinguishes marriage from de facto relationships which usually lack binding commitment and public declaration. Thirdly, marriage is orientated toward children. This is the Bible testimony. The sexual union that creates oneness in body, mind and spirit is also procreative. Again hardwired into the created order is the multiplication of species. God commands the male and female he created to have children. Within the exclusive lifelong one flesh union between husband and wife children are to be brought into the world. **Malachi 2:15** adds to our understanding of that, *'Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth.'* Children are to be nurtured in loving, faithful marriages to fulfil God's desire for the next generation to love and follow him. The New Testament confirms this in its teaching about parents providing for the material and spiritual needs of their children. Brothers and sisters it is unpopular, countercultural and personally costly to take seriously, and stand up for, the biblically defined nature of marriage. One outcome is that same sex relationships cannot satisfy the Bible's definition of marriage. Same sex relationships are entitled to a status and protection under the law but that status cannot be marriage. It is biblically impossible. Finally, understanding the nature of marriage shows us why the Bible speaks strongly against sexual immorality. **Hebrews 13:4**, *'Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.'* The last phrase covers sex outside marriage and before marriage. Both undermine the present and future oneness of marriage. Brothers and sisters, remember the forgiveness of God as we confront any failure to live up to the Biblical ideal. Marriage is the exclusive, life-long union of a man and a woman joined together by God.