

MARRIAGE KILLERS

Marriage Killers: Idolatry in Marriage

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Sermon Series Discussion Guide

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“You complete me!” What may quite possibly be the sappiest, yet most memorable line from a romantic movie from the last fifteen years lies at the heart of one of the great problems in marriage. The famous line initially uttered in *Jerry Maguire* has become a punch line due to its overly idealistic and desperate assessment of what being in a relationship with the right person can provide. Think about what is being implied for a moment. If a person can simply find the one perfect person in the world to be in a relationship with, then all of life’s disappointments and shortcomings will be forever thwarted. How ridiculous!

At the heart of the matter, though, many couples who are either married or considering marriage believe some form of that very thing. They wouldn’t come out and say that their spouse or potential spouse completes them – I hope. But we do use language like “soul mates” and other similar phrases that open the door to a growing set of expectations that no spouse could ever meet. When those unrealistic expectations are allowed to become the barometer for the success or failure of a marriage, pain, feelings of inadequacy, and bitterness lay on the horizon.

What is really at stake is our understanding of God. The gravitational pull of these expectations draw one’s spouse into a place where only God should be. Instead of finding identity and fulfillment in one’s relationship with Christ, fulfillment is mistakenly judged to be within our own reach – if only our spouse could get their act together. This is idolatry. God is supplanted as the provider of the love and fulfillment we need in favor of our spouse as the new provider of that love and fulfillment, according to the expectations that are placed upon them. Like any form of idolatry, any plan that replaces God with anything else is always destined to fail. The impact that has on a marriage relationship is one of the great Marriage Killers. We can see the conflict that it can cause in a brief couple of verses that open **Genesis 30**.

LEARN

In this particular portion of Genesis we find Jacob living on his uncle Laban’s estate after having fled his home in the face of his brother, Esau’s murderous threats against him. After arriving at Laban’s estate, Jacob immediately fell in love with Laban’s daughter, Rachel. Jacob vowed to work for his duplicitous uncle for seven years in exchange for the right to marry Rachel. At the conclusion of the seven years, Jacob marries Laban’s daughter, only to find out on his wedding night that the daughter he married was Leah, whom he did not love. Infuriated at having been cheated by his uncle, Jacob is forced to work another seven years for Rachel. Now Jacob has two wives, but there is no equality of affection. The Bible repeatedly and explicitly tells us that Rachel was the one that Jacob loved. Leah was not.

Much like Jacob was, Leah was a victim of Laban’s treachery – trapped in a loveless marriage to a man who had no regard for her. In fact, leading up to our passage, **Genesis 29:31** explains the tragic arrangement:

“When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.”

Hated is a pretty strong word, but appropriately used here. Recognizing her plight and Jacob’s scorn of her, God allowed Leah to be the only one of the two wives that gave Jacob any children – sons, in particular. In this culture, a woman was valued to a large degree on her ability to have children – again, especially sons. Sons not only carried on the family’s legacy, they were laborers for the family’s commercial enterprises and protectors of the family’s assets when threatened. In Jacob’s case specifically, his sons became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Ironically, while Leah craved the affection and adoration that Jacob lavished on Rachel, Rachel’s only desire was to be able to provide Jacob with sons like her sister did. It was deeper than simply the ability to have children. This was Rachel’s identity. This is how she was evaluated by society. She felt an overwhelming deficiency because she was barren, while Leah had already given Jacob four sons (Genesis 29:31 – 35 makes all of this quite clear).

All of this has bubbled and boiled underneath the surface, leading us to the confrontation between Jacob and Rachel as recorded in **Genesis 30:1 – 2**.

“When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, ‘Give me children, or I shall die!’” (Genesis 30:1)

Notice that at the beginning of the final paragraph of chapter 29 (29:31), the one responsible for Rachel having no children is God, not Jacob. But look who Rachel holds responsible. Without being overly or unnecessarily graphic, given Rachel’s incredible beauty as attributed to her when she is first introduced in Genesis 29:17, and the fact that she is the one that Jacob loved, it is highly unlikely that Jacob was not fulfilling his part in the procreation process. He favored her above Leah and adored her.

Rachel would have none of such thoughts. Surely if Jacob loved her as much as Leah, then she would have children as well. Her misplaced hope had led to a series of wrongfully deduced thoughts, ultimately laying the blame for this perceived deficiency in her life at Jacob’s feet. She had to be better than Leah (even though she was already more greatly loved). Her life wasn’t perfect and there was only one person to blame. No matter what blessing and favor was in her life, this one aspect of perceived lack made the tremendous blessing seem miniscule by comparison. So she lashes out at Jacob with an impassioned and irrational ultimatum. Jacob’s response is equally forceful.

“Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, ‘Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?’” (Genesis 30:2)

Jacob was resentful of the accusation that he was depriving his beloved wife of anything. In one jagged statement, he had been saddled with the burden of determining Rachel’s happiness based upon his ability to give her that which was not his to give. Jacob was backed in a corner by Rachel’s ultimatum and responded defensively – and correctly. Jacob had never lost perspective on who was responsible for providing this area of Rachel’s marital and familial fulfillment. While his response is anything but compassionate and consoling, his theology is right on target. It is not Jacob that she should be imploring, but God – just as Hannah did in 1 Samuel 1:9 – 18. Certainly at this point, Rachel’s life had not lived up to the way she had imagined married life would be. Because of her misplaced understanding of who the source of her joy and fulfillment was, there was enmity between Rachel and the man who loved her.

LIVE

Anyone that has ever been married has entered that sacred covenant with a set of expectations of what their life would be like on the other side of “I do.” Those expectations are never completely realistic. In those moments when expectation and reality conflict, it is critical for the future of the marriage that both husband and wife have a firm understanding of who is the only source of their ultimate love and fulfillment.

In our passage, the breaking point was over infertility – which does present a tremendous challenge for marriages. From a larger perspective, though, the issue could be anything that produces a sense of lack in our marriage relationship. Sometimes the issue is that we expect our spouse to always be a needed source of affirmation and encouragement. Sometimes we expect our spouse to be the foundation for our confidence. Sometimes we expect our spouse to provide social standing, limitless income, or ceaseless entertainment. Please realize that none of these expectations are possible for any human being to fulfill.

What is more, all of these desires are driven by a desire to worship self. When idolatry creeps in, we become the most important aspect in our marriage. The natural result is that we view that everything in our marriages should exist to make us feel better, more confident, satiated, content, and problem-free. Whatever needs to be sacrificed toward that end becomes dangerously viewed as a necessary sacrifice for our spouse and family. The truth is that none of these, even if a spouse could provide them, would ever be enough because they are brought about through man’s initiative. All the while, the intrinsic need we all have for God’s love and acceptance will never be filled by man’s effort. So the sense of lack will continue until God is allowed His rightful place of prominence – both in the individual heart of both husband and wife, and as the cornerstone of the marriage.

You may say, “well that’s all great, but how do I do it?” Here are a few helpful steps to addressing the threat of idolatry in your marriage:

1. **Re-affirm your own salvation** – God cannot have a place of prominence in your heart or marriage if you have never accepted Christ as your Savior. Without faith, it is impossible to please God. Take a few moments and write out your testimony, even if you have been a believer for many years. It is critical to spiritual health that we remember how God has worked in our lives to bring us to where we are and recognize His blessing. If you are not a believer in Jesus Christ, then your very next step toward battling idolatry in your marriage is to accept Christ.
2. **Find a way to serve your spouse** – Because idolatry in marriage is mainly centered on self-satisfaction at the expense of all others, fighting it requires a turning of focus. Ask your spouse to tell you two to three ways that you can serve them in your relationship. Serve them with gladness in the way they ask to be served.
3. **Worship together** – Battling idolatry cannot be a passive or covert action. The more you align your hearts together, focusing them on Christ, the stronger your resistance to idolatry will grow. Attend worship together, serve together, join a small group together, pray together. All of these environments are conducive to realigning our hearts and focusing on Christ.
4. **Talk about your expectations with your spouse** – Ask your spouse to tell you how your expectations for them are unrealistic and how they feel burdened to do them impossible in your relationship. Understand that this will not be a light-hearted conversation, but a necessary and helpful one. Verbally give them the freedom to be honest. Then commit to change.

LEAD

Small group leaders, as you draw your group time to a close, there will most likely be some discomfort in the room – especially if one or more of the couples deal with idolatry in their marriage. Begin your discussion by acknowledging that marriage always involves two imperfect people and that no relationship is without difficulty. However, because marriage is ordained by God, there is hope in all marriages to grow and be the God-honoring relationship He intends it to be. After your discussion, close in prayer. If you lead a couples

group, encourage the couples to pair off and pray for one another. If you lead a singles group, lead your group toward praying that their understanding of who they are will be assured by who Christ says they are and not by any relationship they may be in. The questions below will help.

1. How would you explain idolatry to someone?
2. Take a moment and reflect on your relationships. Which areas in your most important relationships, especially your marriage, that you are the most critical of? Why do you think that is? (Leaders, you may want to give them direction not to answer this one aloud.)
3. Currently, what role does God have in your marriage? Do you pray together? Worship together? What changes would you like to make in the next month?
4. How did your expectations before marriage change after you were married? How did you process those changes with your spouse?
5. Where do you look for security, meaning, happiness, fulfillment, joy or comfort?
6. Do you feel a constant need to change your spouse? What do you think that says about your expectations?
7. How easy is it for you to serve others? Is it easier or more difficult to serve your spouse than others?
8. Read the following verses. What do they say about your identity if you are a believer in Christ? How much of that is based on what you bring to the relationship?
 - a. Psalm 139:13 – 16
 - b. Ephesians 1:4 – 5
 - c. Ephesians 2:10
 - d. Galatians 3:26 – 27
 - e. Romans 8:14 – 15
 - f. 1 John 3:1
 - g. 2 Corinthians 5:17 - 21

