

## **28<sup>th</sup> Feburary 2021 10 am Ways We Drift Away From God's Teaching On Contentious Subjects**

Service led by Denise Coomber, including interview with Bekah about God at Work, and Bible readings. Talk by Revd. Andrew Attwood, Intercessions by Jeremy.

*This transcript is only of the reading and the main talk*

### ***Reading: Luke 12:4-10 [NIVUK 2011]***

4 'I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more.

5 But I will show you whom you should fear: fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. 6 Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. 7 Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

8 'I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God. 9 But whoever disowns me before others will be disowned before the angels of God. 10 And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

### ***Talk: Ways We Drift Away From God's Teaching On Contentious Subjects***

[Denise:] So we're going to hear from Andrew now, but just before he speaks, I'd like to pray for him.

So, Father, I pray that what Andrew says will be Your words, and that as he speaks about some controversial topics, and that people will listen with grace, and that Your words will be a challenge to all of us to be Your ambassadors where we are. So bless Andrew with Your Holy Spirit, Lord, and help us to listen. Amen.

[Andrew:] Amen. Thank you, Denise. [...]

So we're going to continue with this theme, looking at or beginning to look at the subject of marriage. You'll remember from last week that Graham Archer set the scene by giving us a steer into the early words of the Genesis account, looking at God's words on marriage there. The next few weeks will be as follows: today, I'm going to be looking at our fears around talking about marriage in this current social context; on March 14, Phil Swards will give a proper overview of the whole Bible's take on marriage; and the week after that, I will be talking about what Jesus said about marriage; and of course, there's going to be some resources that we'll make available to help you with your own study, too.

Now, as we look at the theology around the subject of marriage, we need to be honest and aware of the ways in which contentious subjects are sometimes avoided or deflected. This talk today is hopefully going to help us to honestly review our own approach and attitude to this subject. Now, of course, we certainly will need to consider pastoral implications around the current discussions on marriage. But the Western Church has an even greater need than considering pastoral matters. I would say already, if I'm honest, that our local church is already desiring to be a loving and caring church. To my mind, the first priority for us instead is our focus on the Word of God, and what God has already said about marriage. Now, as the church in recent weeks, we have already explored the topic of the Bible, coming to see that Almighty God has uniquely revealed Himself and His will, in the words of Scripture. Now, this is massively important, and primary. So the question of marriage must begin there. If a person regards the scriptures as God's true and reliable Word, then if God speaks clearly on marriage in Scripture, then that is how we settle the matter, and the matter is relatively straightforward. If, however, a person doesn't

regard Scripture as God's word, then the matter of marriage is inevitably more challenging and more complicated.

So today I want to point you to the best route through the subject of marriage. We will indeed address the pastoral questions. But our first responsibility is to discover if God has spoken clearly on the subject or not in the Bible. But I think we need to be realistic. Many Christians are in fact afraid of saying what the Bible says. Many Christians are routinely silent when the subject of sexuality is raised. But Jesus Himself addressed the likelihood of our fears. He told us what to do when it comes to fearing the opinions and actions of people. Let us have our first slide. And I'll just read to you again that passage that Denise mentioned. It says this:

"I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows....(Luke 12:4-10)



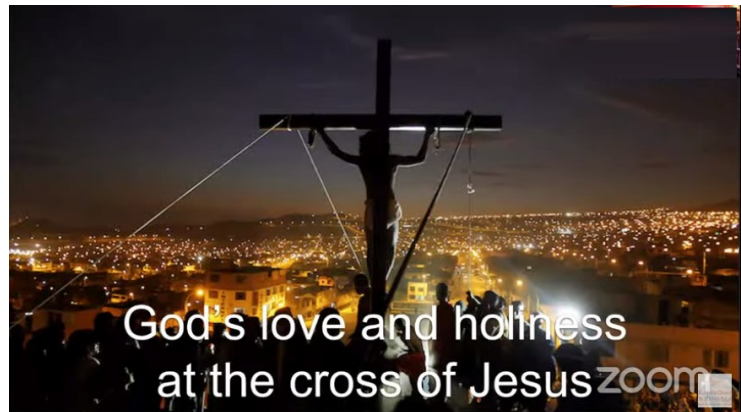
And Jesus goes on to say,

**8** 'I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God. **9** But whoever disowns me before others will be disowned before the angels of God. **10** And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

These are strong words from Jesus. Now, I'm speaking in the main, I think today, to people who would say they are followers of Jesus Christ. So are we listening to what our Lord Jesus Christ has said? Are we listening to Him? Who are we fearing? Now, whenever we are exploring ethical or moral matters, when society is raising questions, we need to remember the whole narrative of Scripture, because that is how we gain our compass bearing, our direction.

Let me remind you of a couple of themes that indicate how things tend to slide with human beings. At the very beginning of Genesis, we have the snake in the temptation passage in Genesis 3 saying, "Did God really say?" The entire approach of the serpent with Adam and Eve is to question what God had said. So that's one particular theme that set the course of how human beings related to God. Later, of course, we have the story of Israel, and there is a pattern with Israel, repeatedly being led into the practices of surrounding nations, instead of holding on to the commands that God gave. Now, in both these cases, both the Adam and Eve story, and Israel's story, exile was the result. Separation is the natural result of sin. And exile, if you like, is the historical equivalent of God's judgement. They turned away from God, and God inevitably removed them from His presence. You see, these two stories clearly point to God's final judgement on the Last Day. Now, in the passage that we've heard today, in Luke 12, Jesus reminds His own disciples not to fear people, but to fear the One who has authority to throw you into hell. He's talking about fear of the Lord. We are to heed God above all others.

Let's have our next slide. Now, how serious is this? You see, this view of Jesus reveals His own reverence for the holiness of God, Jesus' own understanding of how holy God was. His deep love for people never prevented Him from first honouring God, the Father. God's holiness was a tangible reality for Jesus, and it explains why He chose the Cross on our behalf, rather than colluding with humans who would wish to downplay sinfulness. Jesus accepts that sin is real. Sin is serious and it needs to be dealt with. So He honours God's holiness and expresses God's infinite love for sinners, when He became the sin-bearer on the Cross.



So, as we look at the subject of marriage, we need to sensitively hear what society is saying about marriage. But we need to hear even more clearly what God is saying, out of proper awe and respectful fear of Him. We have recently established that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God. There are no words with higher status. There are no human experiences that compare to the authority of the Word of God. Just as the angels cry out, "holy, holy, holy," if we truly know God, then we will be glad to sing of the purity and holiness of God above all other words, above all other commands.

However, my gut feeling is that there are many Christians today who seem struck down by the implicit and explicit messages in society. Some feel they simply must not question the freedoms of people to love as they please. People fear the threat of being cancelled (you know the 'cancel culture' idea). Some of us think we must not disagree with the changing ethics of our day.

What about you? How do you feel when the subject of marriage arises? Is it your first thought to turn to the Bible and establish what God has said? Do you carry questions with you and go through Scripture? Or do you read what society is saying instead? The question that I hear in my own heart is this: am I more concerned about the acceptance of people than the honouring of God? Perhaps I put more value on the approval of children or friends and colleagues than valuing the Word of God, God Almighty. Why? Why might I swerve in this way? It may be true that some of our colleagues and our friends would be shocked if we described a straightforward, orthodox biblical view of marriage and said that it was true. Our children may say that we're offensive in our beliefs. And so what do we do? Do we keep the peace by generally saying nothing?

Well, Paul, in one of his letters, helps us make a clear distinction. He tells us who Christians should be focusing on in terms of behaviour. This is from 1 Corinthians 5, verses 9 to 13. And Paul was addressing a particular sexual immorality problem that was happening in Corinth, and he says this,

**9** I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – **10** not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. **11** But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.

**12** What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? **13** God will judge those outside. 'Expel the wicked person from among you.'

So Paul gives us clarity. Paul gives us clarity as to who to focus on. You see, the wider UK population will behave as they choose. And that is between them and God, who we will all face on the Last Day. You see, God is the judge of all those wider people, not us. And He will assess each and every person according to what they've done, and those who know Christ will be saved. But we Christians, according to this passage in Corinthians, we Christians are to look to the beliefs and behaviour of the family of God. We are to be able to think clearly and speak confidently about important matters, without fear of what other people may say or do. But so often, we don't.

I want to look this morning at the ways we slip into unhelpful ways of dealing with this emotive subject of marriage. Let's have our next slide. You see, I think that quite a lot of us will slide into what I would call 'selective silence', where some Christians may be tempted to avoid disputed topics because we fear these topics will divide our churches. Some of us de-emphasise parts of the Bible that we don't want to talk about. We fear the ramifications from friends, family and wider society. And so even within church, we can be gradually led by the wider culture's values. Because the fearful church is silent, and isn't transparently addressing these matters, people slide in their beliefs. You end up with a heart embarrassment before the text. Some of us, some Christians, can be apologising for parts of what the Bible says, because they personally don't like those bits. And they distance themselves from what God has said, implicitly doing what? Implicitly undermining the authority of what the Bible teaches. Now, this inevitably has an influence on what our hearers think. If we can do that with the text, that may give them permission to do that to the text as well.



Let's have our next slide. I think there's also a pattern emerging particularly as we go into conversations and discussions about the subjects of marriage where people start to legitimise alternative positions that the Bible actually condemns. It's almost like you're holding multiple views, in an attempt to defuse the topic in hand. Some Christians develop a pattern of comparing multiple views, regardless of the strength or weakness of the different views. Now this approach can create the impression that all views are equal, when in fact, they often aren't.



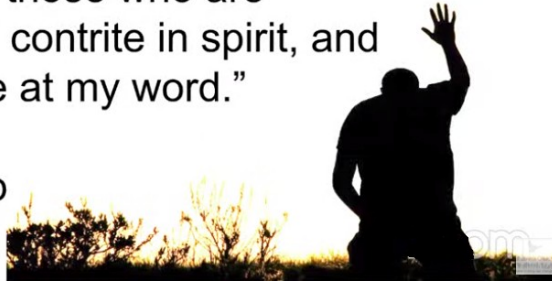
So I just want to encourage you this morning, integrity and honesty is really needed when we look at this subject of marriage, especially when we're reviewing newly-proposed views. There's a phrase that I heard someone teaching to me recently, where they talked about what was called 'the art of imperious ignorance', so I'll say that again, 'the art of imperious ignorance', where someone, after listening to two sides of a debate, someone may kind of throw their hands up and simply say, "well, we simply can't know what God has said on a given subject." And this is a kind of imposed pronouncement that attempts to silence the possibility of any conclusion, when in fact, a more rigorous study is needed to work towards a true and clear answer. We must resist such pronouncements because that's simply gagging conversation. And this leads me to where I would want to point you in terms of your proper attitude to the subject of marriage: there needs to be more reading to properly understand the matter. Now some may baulk at the work involved in properly researching subjects from multiple sources. But if this matter of marriage is important, and I do believe

it's very important, it requires us not to oversimplify for convenience. If God's Word is at stake, then hard and honest work must be done, regardless of the consequences.

Let me move on to the next slide. Because I want to set this in the context of what God says about people who truly engage with this, in fear and trembling before His Word. Isaiah 66 says this:

“These are the ones I look on  
with favour: those who are  
humble and contrite in spirit, and  
who tremble at my word.”

Isaiah 66:2b



Let me read that to you again. "These are the ones I look on with favour: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my Word." In our dealings with surrounding views and opinions, we can forget how much higher the Word of God is. Yet those who are humble and actually tremble before God and His Word will be the ones who can discern correctly without being confused or deceived.

Let me give you an example. Thinking back to what Graham Archer explored last week, he put before us as a church, the passages in Genesis, formative primary descriptions of human beings, male and female, designed by God to beautifully reflect His image, and designed to complement each other, as night and day are paired forever. When God makes humanity, and pairs male and female, God says, "very good." That's the first time He says, "very good," everything up until that point has been "good." But when He pairs male and female, when He makes humanity and pairs them together, He says, "This is very good." This was His best work of creation, His very, very best work. Do we tremble at the words of God? Do we stand in awe at the majesty of God's fantastic and precise creation of marriage? Just as all the other pairings in the Genesis account are established, till the end of the world, light and darkness, sky and earth, seas and dry lands, night and day, male and female are paired as God's fixed and perfect complimentary design. Do we bow down in reverence before the ways of God? Before the ways of God in making us this way? Do we worship God for His wise and good ordering of human life? Or do we go quiet and accept all other views as of equal status? Do we try hard to accommodate all views for fear of upsetting people?

I want to draw to a conclusion in a moment by asking you to be honest with yourself today. Who has your allegiance? Who has your devotion? Are you prepared to go back to the Bible, and to put the work in. If you call yourself a follower of Jesus, and I'm trying my best to, then you and I will need to heed the scriptures, just as Jesus Himself did. So today, this is an opportunity for you to recalibrate how you and I will approach the subject of marriage. Now, if it's just a trivial matter, we could easily say, it's just a matter of interpretation. But if it is a central, vital matter in Scripture, we need to be very clear about it. Because the consequences are enormous. Listen carefully: if we can change our minds about marriage, perhaps we can change our minds about the Gospel, or the Resurrection, or even about Jesus Himself. The consequences are huge. So this morning, do you want to be clear? Do you want to approach this with a true and holy reverence for God?

## **Prayerful Reflection**

Let's have a time of response to this. Let's pray.

This is touchy stuff. So Holy Spirit, would You just come to us now in a moment of quiet and stillness?

Can I encourage everyone to remember, we are in the presence of Almighty God, Almighty God.

Father, by Your Holy Spirit, would You reveal to us again, the attitudes and motives of our hearts. Help us to be honest, Lord.

And Father God, I want to pray that You would give courage to Your people now. I pray, Lord, that we would choose Your Word, that we would choose to honour You by honouring Your Word. Lord, in the hearts of all who listen and watch, would You set in there, in the heart, a higher view of Your Word than of any other opinion.

Cause us to be people, Lord, who tremble at the holy words of Almighty God.

And Father, from this place, would You then give us integrity to address the question of marriage, beginning with You, before we hear the voices of others.

I just want to pray a prayer to do with renouncing false allegiances. I apply this to myself, but I'm going to be praying it for us all. If you know that you have given your allegiance to pleasing other people, if you have given too much weight to keeping other people happy, bring that to God now.

And I just pray in the name of Jesus Christ, we renounce false allegiances, particularly the allegiance of keeping other people happy. Lord, we put the opinions and feelings of other people second to honouring You first. We've renounced those fears. And I pray Lord, You would lead us into a truer freedom, where we are faithful to You, above all. So fill us with Your Spirit and give Your Church courage at this time. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

So I'm going to finish there and we'll continue with some other prayers.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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