

Sermon 67, The Grace of Marriage, Proverbs 18:22, 19:14

Proposition: The wise Son gets the girl, and He gets her from the LORD.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, for Mother's Day we paused in our trek through Proverbs to focus more closely on the statement in ch. 14 that every wise woman builds her house. As we saw at that time, Solomon is not talking particularly about being a wife, being a mother, or some other particular calling that some women have. He was not talking about some women, but about all. Indeed, we saw that that verse teaches that if you are a woman, you ought to be in the business of homemaking. As we saw there, that is the task God has assigned to His daughters is irrespective of whether they're married, whether they have children, whether they're old or young, and so on. If you have a home, sisters, it is your God-given task to build it. But our text this morning doesn't address women as such. Instead, it tells us something about wives — that they are good, indeed, that finding a wife is a gift so good that it must come from God Himself. Though our text does not mention the wise Son by name, we know that the entire book of Proverbs is addressed to Him and describes Him. Thus, we'll look at our text this morning as ultimately teaching that the wise Son gets the girl, and He gets her from the LORD. First, however we'll talk about what a good thing a wife is and how she can come only from God Himself.

I. A Wife is a Good Thing, 18:22 with 8:35

Brothers and sisters, if you take away one thing from this sermon, make it this: a wife is a good thing. The man who finds a wife finds something good, something beneficial, beautiful, helpful, and worthwhile. Obviously, this earthly truth is in service of a larger theological point, like everything we've seen in Proverbs. But that doesn't mean that we ought to neglect the earthly truth or give it less than its full due!

A. She is like Lady Wisdom

Lady Wisdom says at the end of her long speech in Prov. 8, "For he who finds me finds life, And obtains favor from the LORD." Clearly, then, this verse in Prov. 18 is a rewrite of that key verse.

We have seen over and over the affirmation that Wisdom brings life, indeed that begotten Wisdom, Personified Wisdom, *is* life. Ultimately, of course, this claim is explained in the New Testament with reference to Jesus Christ as the Father's only-begotten who has life in Himself from the Father and who will communicate that life to everyone who is joined to Him by faith. Thus, using alternate terms than Father and Son, Solomon speaks of Yahweh bringing forth Wisdom, and of those who find Wisdom finding life and obtaining favor from the LORD. But here in Prov. 18, that verse is rephrased to say "He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD."

Getting a wife is like getting Lady Wisdom! Indeed, a good wife is throughout this book explicitly and implicitly compared to Lady Wisdom. A good wife is the human analogue to the divine figure of Lady Wisdom, just as the strange woman (i.e., a woman who is not your wife and with whom you have no business getting intimate) is the human analogue to the demonic figure of Dame Folly. Let me say that again: getting a wife is like getting saved. Finding a good woman is like finding Jesus. Alternatively, of course, getting sexually involved with any woman who's not your wife is like getting damned. Consorting with the strange woman is like finding Satan and letting him rape you.

Brothers and sisters, I have heard the charge thrown around that conservative Christians "idolize marriage." This charge is usually repeated by bitter single people. They are single either because they have never been married, or because they've gone through a divorce that their Christian friends told them was an awful thing and may have even told them was a sinful thing. But here's the thing: If we merely repeat what Scripture says about marriage, we are almost guaranteed to be accused of idolizing it by those who don't have it! I'm not making up this comparison between finding a wife and finding Jesus. It is right here in the text of Proverbs. And it course it appears again, even more explicitly, in the New Testament, where we are told repeatedly that Jesus' relationship to His people is like marriage. "This is a great mystery, but I am speaking of Christ and the church."

Our culture is obsessed with gender, obsessed with it basically to the point of mental illness. A glance at the articles coming out of mainstream outlets like the *New Yorker* and *New York Times* will make that clear. We are hyper-allergic to anything that might be considered demeaning to women, and over-eager to justify women by running men down. This is presented as the necessary corrective to thousands of years of patriarchal domination. I say this not because we're going to get into those issues directly, but rather because in order to properly understand our text this morning we need to reckon with the relationship between the wise Son and Lady Wisdom. As we have seen many times, both of them are ways of talking about Jesus Christ, who is the Father's begotten Wisdom. Thus, in one sense the relationship between the wise Son and His bride is not a relationship of diversity but one of identity. The wise Son is the only-begotten of the Father, and so is Lady Wisdom. Indeed, the Son of God *is* Lady Wisdom. Now, what do we make of this?

First, let me outline the *wrong* response. The wrong response is to say “Hot dog! God is male and female. The wise Son and the wise Woman are one and the same. Masculinity and femininity are really all one, numerically identical even if they appear under different names and forms in the changing flux of this world.” A bunch of wacky people have gone down that road, and not only in our era. That approach is essentially the tradition of the esoteric, gnostic, Kabbalistic forms of faith. It has been alive and well as a minority strand within Christianity, Judaism, and Islam since shortly after the time of Christ. But what’s at the end of that road? Pantheism, and a merger with the divine for human beings that is the drop falling back into the ocean.

I think we all instinctively feel that this is the wrong response. But why is it the wrong response? Well, let’s go back to the text. How is Lady Wisdom portrayed throughout the prologue of Proverbs? As a single woman. She doesn’t have a husband. She has a home, and she invites people into that home, but she is never represented as having a husband or biological children.

In the same way, how is the wise Son portrayed? As a single young man, setting out on the path of life, looking for a wife but not yet married. However, when He is told about marriage, who is the bride? It’s not Lady Wisdom, the divine figure of chs. 1-9. It is an ordinary human woman, one who is wise and prudent but who is every bit as earthy and real as the strange woman. The wise Son is not looking to be united to Himself in His alter ego as Lady Wisdom. He is looking to be united to a girl from earth. And ultimately, of course, brothers and sisters, we see this truth in the union of Christ and the church. The church is not Christ’s alter ego, not another name for Jesus. The church is His human counterpart, the helper fitting for Him. She is His bride, but she is not Him. The church is not Lady Wisdom, not The Wise Woman but *a* wise woman, a prudent wife who is the Father’s gift to His Son.

Let’s put this in chart format to make it clear. Here we have a chart representing the relationships between wise and foolish human women and their ideal types, Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly.

Divine/Supernatural	Human/Natural
Lady Wisdom	A prudent wife
Dame Folly	A strange woman

And here we have a chart showing the marriage relationship between Christ and His people as Scripture conceives it. You can look at it from both directions. From one angle, Christ weds the church. From the other, the human soul conceived as masculine weds Lady Wisdom. You can think of it as the individual and corporate sides of the Christian life, or as the truth that is distorted and ruined by the esoteric pantheists.

Divine/Supernatural	Human/Natural
The only begotten Son (masc)	The church (fem)
Lady Wisdom (fem)	The wise man (masc)

Anyway, ladies, this simultaneously removes the burden you shouldn't be carrying and lays on you the burden you should be carrying. Do you have to be the divine, life-giving Lady Wisdom, such that to find you is to find life, and you are and do everything that is ascribed to Wisdom in this book? Not at all! You are not called to become a goddess. You don't have to be the be-all end-all for yourself, for your family, for your husband, or for God. Instead, as a human daughter of God you are called to embrace Lady Wisdom as a friend, to wed the Son of God as your lover, and to be the wise, prudent woman that Proverbs describes as the human analogue to the divine Lady Wisdom. If you are, if you're following God and being wise in the mode appropriate to you as a human woman, a daughter of Eve, then should the Lord choose to bestow you on some man you will be like the gift of wisdom. You are not personally the gift of wisdom; you are not the begotten Wisdom of God. But you are like her, and your personal prudence or lack thereof will have a huge impact on the life of the man to whom God gives you. If you are a good wife, you will be the best thing that ever happened to your man on a human level, just as an acquaintance with Lady Wisdom is the best thing that could ever happen to a man on the divine level.

I have no hesitation at all in saying that Alexa has been analogous to Lady Wisdom to me. She is best thing that's ever happened to me on this earth, and I hear people saying good things about her all the time.

B. She is like life itself

Indeed, then, a good wife is analogous to the gift of life. I had a couple tell me before I got married, "When you get married then you begin to really live!" That kind of statement, of course, plays right into the hands of those who accuse Christians of idolizing marriage. But though it is indeed possible to idolize marriage — that is, to essentially make your wife over into Lady Wisdom and expect from her the blessings that only God can give — the Bible still speaks about the blessing of marriage in the very strongest terms. If we put the verse here in Prov. 18 side-by-side with the verse in Prov. 8, we see that "a good thing" has been substituted in for "life." Those of you who think that marriage is an idol, you're right about this: It can't give life. That was taken out. A wife is a good thing, but she is not the best thing. She is not the ultimate good. And any Christian who says marriage is the chief good is either confused or indeed an idolater. Let me say it loud and clear: Getting married is not getting life. But at the same time, it is *like* getting life. Though "life" was taken out and replaced with "good thing," the echo of it is still there in our memories. Is life a good thing? Of course it is. In one sense, it is the best thing, particularly as it is a property of the Living God and of His Son who has life in Himself. To find

a wife is like finding life. In what way? Well, in this way: A prudent wife will bless you and enhance your life more than any other earthly thing or person can. A wife is not the divine good; she is not god, and if you idolize your wife or the idea of getting married, it will kill like any other false god. But a wife is a very great good, the greatest that one can receive short of Lady Wisdom herself. This is because a wise wife is the human analogue to the divine Lady Wisdom.

Brothers and sisters, if we have looked to marriage as a greater good than Jesus, then we are guilty of the bitter charge so often hurled that we idolize marriage. But those hurting people who have not been given a spouse, or who have lost a spouse to divorce or death, can't be comforted by us lying about the good of marriage and saying that it's not really that good. It is really that good when both spouses know Lady Wisdom, when the man acts like the wise Son and the woman acts like Lady Wisdom. When that's the case, then on the human level we are enacting and proclaiming the relationship between Jesus Christ and His bride. And there is no greater good than the good of being a member of Christ's bride, one taken to enjoy Him in the closest possible relationship for all eternity.

Brothers and sisters, do you believe that? Can you simultaneously affirm the glory of marriage and affirm the greater glory of Christ? Can you hang onto the truth that marriage is a picture and metaphor of Christ and His bride without getting obsessed with the picture to the point where you lose the thing depicted? The one who finds a wife finds a good thing, but the one who finds Jesus finds life.

II. A Wife is a Mark of God's Favor, 18:22b

Well, the syntax of the verse is a little odd. It almost seems to suggest, at least in English, that two different benefits are in view. First is a wife; that's good. Second is God's unmerited favor, which of course is also good. But I think we need to read the verse as implying that God's favor is particularly displayed by His gift of a wife. To those who say "Well, there you go idolizing marriage again," I simply ask: Why does the text explicitly link God's favor and the goodness of a wife? I'll tell you why: It's because, as the next chapter states in so many words, a wife is God's gift.

III. A Wife is God's Gift, 19:14

That's the point here. That's why a wife is a mark of God's favor. When your friend gives you a birthday gift, why does he do it? Because you're his friend. That by definition means that he regards you with more favor than he does some total stranger. He doesn't give everyone in the world a birthday gift; he gave you one. And of course, God doesn't give everyone in the world wealth, fame, health, a good neighborhood, or anything else. He does give us all air, life and breath, as Acts says — but even that is of no value to some people when their throat swells shut, or if they fall into water and can't reach the air. God doesn't give the same things to everyone. He is not an egalitarian.

A. Your parents can give you material prosperity

That said, your fathers — your family line and family circumstances — can give you a number of advantages. They can give you a patrimony, an ancestral home, and wealth. Though few

people actually inherit vast sums of money from their parents, some do. And we all know that if your parents were well off, you're more likely to be well off. Hence the titles of financial books: *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* and the like. Do you have a nice house in a good neighborhood? Did your parents? Your answer to both of those questions will probably be the same. Now, obviously the proverb is not denying that behind your parents' prosperity lies God's providential ordering of their lives. That's not the issue here.

B. Only God can give you a prudent wife

The issue is rather that parents are absolutely powerless when it comes to picking a prudent wife. Moms and dads, you know this! You might like a girl, and she might turn out to be an absolute dud. If you have money, you can give it to your children. If you have education, you can give it to your children. But if you have a good wife, you can't give her to your children! Who your kids meet and whether a relationship works out is entirely in God's hands.

So what's the message? The best way to look for a wife is through prayer. Of course, you have to be friendly, meet girls, etc. But a wife is God's gift, and there is literally no other way to get a good one. The Puritan Thomas Manton preached on the text in Genesis 2, "and brought her unto the man." His point? Those who get married have to receive their spouse from the Lord. Brothers, if you're an involuntary celibate today, cast yourself on the mercy of God. Beg Him for the favor of a wife. He may not answer that request with a "Yes." But He will teach you to trust Him, and He will teach you that Lady Wisdom is the greatest prize of all.

IV. A Wife is the Wise Son's Reward, 18:22 with 8:35 and 31:10-31

The other thing to learn is that God is going to reward His wise Son with a wife. That wife is the church, the bride of Christ, the woman of excellence who closes out the book of Proverbs. We started this book with exhortations to the son to listen to his father. We end the book with the greatest reward of wisdom: a wise and capable woman. History is moving toward a wedding. It's moving toward the marriage supper of the lamb.

Now, the wrong conclusion to take from this is "I'm single. Therefore God doesn't favor me or consider me wise enough to merit a wife." Believe me, if you could earn a wife that would completely destroy your marriage. A wife you deserved is not a wife with whom you're going to have a good marriage, because you'll constantly be reminding her of how you deserved her.

I remember my classics professor in college exclaiming when someone mentioned how movies are loaded with "gratuitous sex." He said, "Gratuitous sex? That's the best kind!" And he was exactly right. Sexual relations only work when you freely give yourself to your spouse, and when she freely receives you and gives herself to you. A wife is and can only be a gift, because sexual relations, to be worthy of the name and morally upright, have to be completely gratuitous.

God rewards His Son with a bride. Many of you have experienced this privilege. For those who haven't (and even those who have!), don't make an idol of marriage. Instead, worship Lady Wisdom. Worship God's wise Son. Recognize that a wife is analogous to Lady Wisdom and life, but that to know Christ is the real thing. Amen.