

Imago Dei: Marriage, God, and the Civil Government – Heb 13:4

Imago Dei and the Battle for Humanity - #3

Introduction – It has been said that there is nothing better to fight the anti-marriage legislation and culture, the downward spiral of unfaithfulness to God's definition, design and purpose for marriage, than vibrant Christian marriages and families. This is not only our first and best defense. This is our first and best offensive weapon, for in it we are proclaiming the gospel of our Lord (Eph 5:32). Let us make sure we understand marriage as God has defined, as well as the relationship of marriage to the civil government, both instruments of God's design for humanity.

The Covenant of Marriage – “*Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and the adulterous*” (Heb 13:4, ESV). This translation helps to emphasize that the writer is calling for a societal protection on what God has called marriage. A covenant is a solemn bond, sovereignly administered with attendant blessings and curses. This is the way God always relates with His creation. Marriage is a sexual union between a man and a woman with such powerful intimacy that it must be protected with covenant vows to one another, before God and the society in which it will exist. It is to be “*held in honor among all*” and the intimacy of the marriage bed protected from any defilement, defined by God.

The Purposes of the Marriage Covenant – God designed marriage with His particular purposes in mind.

Godly Offspring – The fruit of the sexual union of marriage is to have the potential of offspring. Families are God's instrument to accomplish the glorifying of His name with image-bearers filling the earth, full of generations upon generations of godly offspring. His covenant with Abraham pointed to it (Gen 17:6-7); it was reiterated through Moses (Deut 7:9) and passed on to all Christians (Eph 6:1-3). Malachi warns us that this is why God hates divorce (Mal 2:13-16).

Companionship – Prov 2:17 and Mal 2:14 both speak of the companionship which exists in this covenant. There is a commitment (covenant) which brings about the intimacy (companionship). This is why each individual in the marriage covenant takes vows to provide companionship regardless of the future circumstances; neither is making promises to *take* companionship. Each takes vows to give what the other needs regardless of whether or not he or she will ever receive the same in return.

Sexual Fidelity – 1 Cor 7:2-5 teaches us that sexual activity within the marriage is God's kind provision and practical help against sexual temptation, providing enjoyment and purity. There is no shame in an undefiled marriage bed. But of course all of this depends on definitions. Porneia (sexual immorality or fornication) and adultery God will judge.

The Power of Covenant – The covenant of marriage is the place where the deepest human needs and desires are met. Individuals are made in the image of God; they are independently fully human. But they are fully human only because we are made in the image of God, “*male and female*” with all the reasons within a society that we are to be image bearers. To enter into the covenant of marriage, one has to die to self through vows, trusting in the living God. To re-state a phrase of Jesus, “if a man seeks to find happiness for himself in marriage, he will lose it; if he seeks to give happiness in marriage to his spouse, he will find that same happiness to the glory of God.” All of this declares the gospel of Jesus Christ (again, Eph 5:32).

The Protective Purpose of the State – Why is there a thing called marriage which exists in the public square and is to be held in honor by all? And why is there a thing called a “*marriage bed*” that must be kept undefiled? Because God said so. And how, in a society, are those things to be held in honor and kept undefiled? Through laws recognizing that covenant, protecting that covenant, and punishing those who seek to dishonor or defile that covenant. Enter the civil government.

Render to Caesar that which is Caesar's (Mark 12:13-17) – In this short discourse we learn about image-bearing and the role of the State. It is perfectly appropriate for the civil government to tax its people for legitimate purposes (see also Rom 13:6). But in the same breath, Jesus makes clear that we are to render to God that which bears the image of God. One obvious application of this is that our children may not be rendered to the State, for they are created in the image of God. But another application of this image-bearing is the definition of marriage. God defines it. The State protects it. The image of God is not dependent in any way on the definitions of the State (and the whole issue of abortion is at stake here as well), and marriage exists prior to and independent of the State.

The State is God's Deacon (Rom 13:4) – The reason we are to submit to the authority of the civil government is because the State is a “*deacon*” of God. He is God's servant, “*executing wrath on him who practices evil*.” But notice, he has no authority to define evil or to redefine what is honorable or undefiled. The State has the responsibility to make sure issues of property, custody and inheritance are dealt with in a fallen world where marriages and families need objective judges. Another way to look at this is to remember that the State and Family are both governments defined and determined by God. They are to respect one another and work together for the glory of God. There is a separation of these governments from one another (as with the government of the Church) but there is no separation of any of these governments from God and His self-proclaimed Word.

Why I Mention Vibrant Christian Marriages and Families as the Solution – First of all, because God-honoring marriages embody the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world, the transforming message that will remake man, male and female, in the image of God. Second, because families are the backbone of society, both the church and the civil realm, Christian families will be the backbone of a reformed and revived society. Laws are not the backbone of society. Families are. When you mess with marriage you mess with the gospel.