



I love this time of year for a lot of reasons. I love baseball season. I love better weather. I also love what we get in the mail. Buried among the advertisements and bills, I'll spot a beautiful, bulging envelope. The writing is carefully scripted. I know what's in it before I open it. It's a wedding invitation. Everyone loves to get an invitation like that. Immediately we begin to think of what kind of wedding it will be. Will it be outdoors or indoors? What should I wear? What kind of gift should I bring? What kind of food will we eat?

Lynn and I have been on the other end of one of those invitations when our own daughter got married. Of course, then you ask all sorts of different questions. Where will the reception be? What will we serve? What about the dress? Who will we invite? How are we ever going to afford this?

Revelation 19 is a chapter of the Bible where invitations are sent out to two very different feasts. Both of these feasts picture what will happen at the end of time when Christ returns. John wants us to know that the destiny of every person is a feast. Both of these feasts are prepared by God. One is a wedding feast for his Son and his Son's bride. It's a feast of great joy and victory. The other is a gory feast for the birds, who eat up the carcasses of God's enemies. It's a feast of great regret and sadness.

This morning we're looking at the first of these two feasts, called the marriage supper of the lamb.

"After these things I heard something like a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God; BECAUSE HIS JUDGMENTS ARE TRUE AND RIGHTEOUS; for He has judged the great harlot who was corrupting the earth with her immorality, and HE HAS AVENGED THE BLOOD OF HIS BOND-SERVANTS ON HER.' And a second time they said, 'Hallelujah! HER SMOKE RISES UP FOREVER AND EVER.' And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who sits on the throne saying, 'Amen Hallelujah!' And a voice came from the throne, saying, 'Give praise to our God, all you His bond-servants, you who fear Him, the small and the great.' Then I heard something like the voice of a great multitude and like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and

His bride has made herself ready.' It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, 'Write, "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."' And he said to me, 'These are true words of God'" (Revelation 19:1–9).

The marriage feast of the lamb is accompanied by Hallelujahs

The chapter begins with four *Hallelujahs*. By the way, this is the only time in the New Testament that word *Hallelujah* appears. It's all over the Old Testament but never in the New Testament before we get to Revelation 19. The word is really a Hebrew word. It means *You praise God* or literally *You praise Yahweh*. *Hallelu* means *You praise* while *Hallelu-jah* means *You praise Yah*.

This word is shouted all over the book of Psalms. The place where the word is used the most is in what are called the *Hallel* psalms—Psalms 113–118. These were songs faithful Jews sang at their Passover meal. As a matter of fact, when Jesus ate the last supper with his disciples, which was the Passover meal, it says, **"after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives" (Mk 14:26)**. What did they sing? *Amazing Grace*? No! They sang one of these *Hallel* psalms from Psalm 115–118.

Here is an important point: The thread that runs throughout all the *Hallel* psalms is how God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. When God delivers his people, it's appropriate to say *Hallelujah*. And that's why this word suddenly appears again at the end of the Bible in Revelation. Chapter 18 told us all about the fall of Babylon, the great city, the great harlot. She was the one who oppressed and persecuted the people of God. But now she's fallen, God's people are rescued, and once again it's appropriate for us to shout **"Hallelujah. He has judged the great harlot. Her smoke rises up forever and ever."**

Hallelujah was sung at the Passover meal celebrating how God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt. Now it's sung again to celebrate an even greater deliverance from Babylon, the great harlot. Once again it's sung at a meal, a feast. Only now it's not the Passover feast. Now a new feast is at hand: the marriage supper of the lamb.

The mention of this feast is a signal to us that the arrival of God's kingdom has come in its fullness. Isaiah looked forward to this, saying, **"On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a**

feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine — the best of meats and the finest of wines.” (Is 25:6). This is what Jesus was talking about at the last supper when he said to his disciples, *“I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Lk 22:15-16).* The fulfillment of God’s kingdom will be celebrated with a feast.

Jesus also told a parable about a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. He told about those who didn’t RSVP to the invitation and how important it was to be dressed appropriately for the event. In essence, Jesus was saying that one day God the Father would throw a big party for his Son, because one day his Son will get married. This will be an quite a feast! Well, here it is in Revelation 19. I hope you can feel the thrill of that. Hallelujah!

God’s people are called to be his bride

Isn’t it a thrilling thing to know we’re not just called to be followers of Jesus? We’re not just called to be disciples. We’re not just called to be witnesses. We’re not just called to be servants and priests. All those are wonderful things. But here is an even better thing: we’re called to be his Bride!

This theme runs throughout the Bible. God speaks through Isaiah the prophet to Israel, *“Fear not, for you will not be put to shame... the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your husband is your Maker, whose name is the LORD of hosts; and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, who is called the God of all the earth. For the LORD has called you, like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, even like a wife of one’s youth when she is rejected” (Is 54:4-6).*

We also see this theme in the New Testament. John the Baptist comes into the world and calls himself *“the friend of the bridegroom,”* the best man at the wedding (Jn 3:29). He points to Jesus as the groom who came into the world to take a bride for himself.

In John 4 Jesus comes to a well. In the Bible, when you want to find a bride, you go to a well. A lot of love stories happen at the well. Was Jesus looking for a bride? Well, sort of. But this woman Jesus meets at the well has had five husbands and is now living with a man who is not her husband. But we can’t help but wonder in that encounter with Jesus if she hasn’t indeed met her true husband!

Paul picks up on this same theme in Ephesians. He says, *“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless” (Eph 5:25-27).*

Right now we are engaged to the lamb

What if I told you that all of us are engaged to Jesus? That’s what Paul said to the Corinthians: *“For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin” (2 Cor. 11:2).* As Christ followers, we’ve been betrothed. It’s the same idea as being engaged. But the way that worked back in Jesus’ day was very different from the way it works in our culture today. Let me give you some background on this that will help you appreciate your engagement. There were three steps in getting married: there was betrothal; preparation for the wedding; and the wedding party itself.

Step one: the betrothal ceremony. The prospective groom would leave his father’s house and travel with his best man to the bride’s house. There the groom would finalize arrangements with the bride’s father. In that day, a woman was bought with a price, so they would settle on the purchase price. As soon as the groom paid the price, the marriage went into effect. The man and woman were legally husband and wife, but they didn’t live together and consummate the marriage for some time. She was declared to be “set apart” for the groom. A covenant was made and it was sealed by drinking a cup of wine.

Step two: the groom would leave the bride’s house and return to his father’s house. He would be away from her for several months. During the period of separation, the groom would prepare a room for the bride in his father’s house, and the bride would prepare herself for the wedding. Though they didn’t see each other during this time, they were legally and spiritually bound to each other. As a matter of fact, if the man died during the betrothal period, the woman was considered a widow. And to break the betrothal was a divorce.

Step three: The bridegroom, all dressed up, would make his way back to the bride’s house with his best man and friends. Although everyone had a rough idea of when the groom would arrive, they didn’t know the exact day or hour. Sometimes, to add the element of surprise, he’d come at midnight. His arrival would be preceded by a shout, “Here’s the bridegroom! Come out. Come out to meet him.” Then, with great joy, the bride, veiled and accompanied by her maidens, would come out to join the groom and his attendants. The groom would “take” the bride from her home, and the whole bridal party would make its way to the groom’s father’s house. There they would find the wedding guests gathered and all dressed up. The feast would take off! It would last seven days, sometimes fourteen days. You fathers, how would you like to pick up the tab for that party?

Think of this in light of Jesus’ last Passover meal with his disciples in the upper room. He takes a cup of wine, gives it to his disciples. He says, *“This cup is the new covenant in my blood.”* Jesus then tells them he’s leaving. And he tells them they can’t come

where he's going—yet. He says, *“Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to myself...”* (Jn 14:1-3).

Do you hear what Jesus is saying? He's the Bridegroom. We're his bride. He's paid the purchase price with his own blood. He's sealed the engagement with a cup of wine. We've been betrothed! Now he's gone away to prepare a room for us in his Father's house. And he'll come back to take us to himself.

We've been betrothed! Now imagine the thrill of his readers when John now says, “Hallelujah! The time has come for the marriage feast. Send out the invitations! Blessed is everyone who is invited to the marriage supper of the lamb!” Notice John mixes his metaphors in that first we were the bride but now we're the invited guests. The image of the bride pictures God's people corporately as one. The image of invited guests pictures us as individuals. In both cases, God initiates. He's the One who clothes the bride in fine linen and he's the One who invites each of us to the feast as well.

Lessons in discipleship as those engaged to the lamb

What does all of this mean for us today? The book of Revelation wasn't written as a crystal ball to help us figure out what will happen in the future. It was written to help real Christians live in the real world today. It was written as a guide to discipleship. So what does all of this mean for us as disciples of Jesus today?

First, a little bit of bad news. If we're betrothed to the lamb, our sin is worse than we thought. Sometimes sin is seen as missing the mark like with a bow and arrow. Sometimes it's seen as falling short like not passing your driver's test. But here we see that sin is adultery. It's a relational thing. It's going out on your husband, not just some husband who ignores you, but One who delights in you and lavishes you with gifts.

God said to Israel through Ezekiel, *“Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you... and you became mine. I bathed you with water and washed the blood from you and put ointments on you. I clothed you with an embroidered dress and put leather sandals on you. I dressed you in fine linen and covered you with costly garments. I adorned you with jewelry... Your food was fine flour, honey and olive oil. You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen. And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect...”* Now that's some husband!

But Israel was unfaithful. So God says, *“But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became*

his... Such things should not happen, nor should they ever occur.” (Ezek 16:8-16).

How shameful is our sin? How much does it grieve the heart of God? As much as it would hurt the most faithful husband to see his wife sell her body to any man who came along.

Second, some good news. If we're betrothed to the lamb, we're also loved more than we thought. It's great to know he calls us as his disciples and friends. It's great to know he even calls us his brothers and sisters. It's great to know we're the body of Christ. It's great to know we're the temple of God. All of these are wonderful pictures of how he sees us. But none of those images are as tender and intimate as this: we're his bride. He loves us; he desires us as his bride. I love my children. I love my dad. I love my brother. I love this church. But I don't love anyone the way I love my wife. That's how Jesus feels about us. We're his bride. This is the kind of love in which we can feel very secure. To make us as his own he paid quite a purchase price—he bought us with his own blood! That's why this is the marriage supper of the lamb. He entered into a solemn covenant which he could never break. He said, “This is the new covenant in my blood.”

We wonder, how great is this love? Is there anything I could do to make him **not** love me? There is one Old Testament book that presents a very powerful picture of his love. It's the book of Hosea. God tells Hosea to go and marry a prostitute. He marries this woman named Gomer. They have three kids. We're not even sure if they're all his because she goes out on him. She goes back to her old lifestyle. What will Hosea do? Wash his hands of her? God says to him in 3:1a, *“Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress.”* So he goes and buys her for 15 shekels of silver and a bit of barley. That's about half of what a slave was worth. She was “damaged goods” but he pays the price for her and brings her home. All of this was an object lesson to Israel of how much God loved her despite their unfaithfulness. God said to Hosea, *“Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes”* (3:1b).

How much does God love you? How loyal is he? How much would he pay? What could you possibly do to make him reject you? Some of you fear that. You really wonder if you've just gone too far this time. You feel like a cheap prostitute. I can't tell you that he won't discipline you. He will. But I can tell you that he would buy you again and again and again. He doesn't have to because once was enough. The life of his beloved Son was more than enough to pay for all your sin.

Third, if we're engaged to the lamb, the big issues of discipleship are fidelity and readiness. Fidelity. What I mean here is we don't want to be found in bed with another lover. That's the fundamental issue of discipleship. Obedience is one thing. The problem with obedience is we all know sometimes it's reluctant or even

forced. It can have nothing to do with love. Obedience isn't really an issue within a loving marriage; the issue is fidelity. That's the issue for us. And this isn't always easy because Babylon, the great harlot, is seductive. She'll do everything she can to make us think we can stay engaged to the lamb but still play around a little bit with other lovers. But that's ridiculous when you think about it. How can you be engaged and fool around at the same time? I suppose some people have tried that but what a mess they make! What a mess for a Christ-follower who has been bought with a price to fall in love with money or power or fame or fun or anything else.

Discipleship is also about readiness. The bridegroom has gone away to prepare a room for us in his Father's house. And, oh, what a house it is! We're going to see what kind of house it is in Revelation 21-22. But as he's preparing the room, what are we supposed to be doing? We're supposed to be getting ready for the wedding. We're supposed to be preparing ourselves. That's what brides do, right?

Look again at verses 7-8, *"Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. And it was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints."* Notice the tension there. On the one hand, *"the bride has made herself ready."* That's something we do. But on the other hand, *"it was given to her to clothe herself."* That's something God does for us. So what is it? Do we make ourselves ready for that wedding day or does he make us ready? Want to know the answer? It's both. That's what Paul says in Phil 2. He says, *"work out your salvation with fear and trembling"* (that's our part). But in the next breath he says, *"for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."* We

work out what God works in us. The result is what he calls here in v. 8 *"the righteous acts of the saints."* When he comes, will you be wearing that? Will you be ready? Will you have worked out what he has worked in you?

Conclusion

The fact is, if we're engaged to the lamb, the Christian life really isn't that complicated. I think we make it way too complicated. It's very simple. The most important thing is to stay in love. You who are married, remember when you were engaged? Remember how simple it all was? You just loved being together. It wasn't a real problem making time for that; you just did it. Being in love does that—it simplifies life.

The most important thing in the Christian life is staying in love with Jesus. Remember that verse we looked at at Easter? *"Though you have not seen him, you love him" (1 Pt 1:8)*. We've seen this ever since we started studying Revelation. Remember how Jesus wrote a bunch of letters at the start? He wrote to the church at Ephesus and said, "Listen, you're doing a lot of really great things, and you seem to have your theology pretty straight, but here's the problem, you've left your first love" (Rev 2:4). And then he says, *"Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first" (Rev 2:5)*. More than anything else, Jesus wants lovers. Are you a lover? Do you love the lamb? Are you getting ready for the big day? Will you say with that great multitude and the 24 elders and the four living creatures, *"Hallelujah! The bride is ready! Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."*?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.