

Dr. Jerram Barrs: The Love of Our Bridegroom for His Bride and Our Response

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Thank you. Thank you. I remember the first time I preached in a black church. This is when we first moved to St. Louis. It was a conference of nine black pastors and me and the choir. Being English, my style was a little different. We had just an absolutely wonderful time. But I started my message and somebody called out, "Preach it, brother". I said, "I'm trying". That broke the ice. We went on fine from there. Okay. It's just been a joy to be here. I want to thank Grant and Dr. Halverson and Stephanie and Kat for bringing me here. It's just been a joy to be here with you and to get to know a few of you in the smaller discussion sessions. It's just been a very great pleasure and encouragement to me to be here. So, thank you. I should be the one giving the applause this morning just for the privilege of coming here to be with you. This morning, I want to give this third session on true spirituality. I decided to dispense with the PowerPoint. It's distracting to me; it's distracting to you. I'm just going to talk to you this morning as I did yesterday.

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In this third session on true spirituality, I guess I'm going to address the issue which most Christians think about when they think about spirituality. They think about our personal devotion, that's really the issue I'm going to address this morning. My theme is The Love of Our Bridegroom for His Bride and What Our Response is to Be. The very heart of the Christian faith is this. On our first session, I had this passage for you from 1 John 4. This is the very center of everything we live for. Thank you for the hymns you chose this morning. Heal Us Emanuel, as one of my favorite hymns. It's very appropriate that hymn, as you go away, think about those words and pray that they'll dwell in your heart today and be your attitude every day. Heal me, Emanuel. You were the one to whom we cry. But John wrote this

In this, the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through Him. This is love. Not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins.

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This is the very heart of the Christian faith. You didn't love God first, nor did I. He loved us. And as I said yesterday, much the astonishment of some of you, Jesus loves us not in spite of our sins, but because of them. That's why he came into the world. That's why the Father sent him. Because he loved us who were rebels against him, who were trapped in sin and alienation, deep wounded souls. He loved us not in spite of that, but because of that, because he wanted to redeem us. That is what the Christian faith is about, this beautiful, unmerited love of God for us. It's a really lovely, lovely thing. Paul writes, Christ loved the Church. He loved her and gave himself for her. Christ is our bridegroom who is preparing a wedding feast for us. It'll be the greatest feast you will have ever attended in your life. Christ will be the host at the table

and we will be his guests. He will be the bridegroom. We will all be his bride, men and women. We are all in that sense, female in relationship to the Lord that we are his bride.

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Francis Schaefer used to say about this, this truth that Christ is the bridegroom and we are the bride. This is the Christian faith. This is the very center of it. If we don't understand that, we really understand nothing about the Gospel. Now, what is our response to be? What is our response to be? We are to love Him in return for his love for us. We are to offer ourselves to him as a bride gives herself to her husband. And as we give ourselves to Him, then he will bear fruit through us, but not otherwise. Not if we don't offer ourselves to him and give ourselves to Him gladly. And as we do, His desire, Paul writes, is to sanctify us, to make us holy so that He can present us to himself in splendor. You are going to be splendid. Covered in splendor in God's sight, you already are. I said yesterday to someone afterwards, when you read the Gospels and you read the account of Jesus' beautiful life, you're actually reading the account of your life as the Lord sees you. Because Christ wasn't simply the one who died for our sins, but he lived a life of perfect and splendid moral virtue and has imputed that, given that to us.

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So, you read this beautiful life of Jesus in the Gospels, and that's how the Lord sees you. When your hearts get cast down and overwhelmed by your own failures and your own wounds, remember that the Lord is seeing you as Christ's bride through the beauty of Christ's own life. He's presenting us himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing that we might be holy and without blemish. For that to happen, for that to begin to happen in our lives, we need to give ourselves to Him daily. But we will never, ever become pure and holy without His work. We need to listen to His word. Isaiah in the servant's song speaks of Christ the Messiah, the servant of God, as one who woke up every morning and opened his ear to his heavenly Father, to listen as one who was taught and not be rebellious. That's our calling every day when we wake up and all through the day to say, Lord, give me your words, teach me today so that I may know how to speak to others. Jesus said repeatedly in the Gospels, The words I speak are not my own words.

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These are the words the Father has given me to say, taught me what to say. It's an amazing thing for the eternal son of God to say. I'm not saying what I want to say. I'm saying what the Father desires me to say. I listen to Him every day. That's your calling. My calling to say, Lord, teach me today. Give me your words. We are to trust Christ to do his work in us. Francis Schaefer used to say, and this is really what true spirituality, his book is about, is that we're not simply justified through faith, we are sanctified through faith. You cannot make yourself holy. You can't make anybody else holy. Schaefer used to say it was every day in the work. What we're trying to do isn't difficult. It's impossible. You can't save anybody. Neither can I. You can't sanctify anybody. Neither can I. But God can. God can. He can sanctify you and he can use you to be a blessing to other people. What Jesus requires from us is devotion. Now, what kind

of devotion does he desire from his bride, from you and me? In Matthew 6, Jesus talks about devotion, what we think of as the devotional life.

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He talks about giving and about praying and about fasting. He doesn't say, If you do this, he simply says, When you give, this is what you're going to do. As somebody who loves Jesus, you are going to give. It doesn't matter how little or how much money you've got, you're going to give. That's why Jesus uses the illustration of the widow who put her might in the box at the temple. God's sword is far more significant than the money the wealthy were putting in and making sure that everybody else saw them as they did. He says, When you pray and when you fast. Then Jesus says something very interesting to us. Somebody asked me the other day in one of our discussion groups, tell us about your devotional life. I just said no. Not because I'm ashamed, though, that the very beginning of growing as a Christian is recognizing my spiritual poverty. I'm not good at giving, praying, fasting, loving God, loving other people, anything else. I need the Lord. I'm a wounded soul every day of my life. But Jesus tells us when we give and when we pray and when we fast, we're to do it privately.

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He actually uses the word secretly, not so that anybody else can see us and praise us, and not so that we can be proud of ourselves. We have nothing to be proud of. We are utterly dependent on Jesus and his mercy every day of our lives. But we are to give and to pray and to fast secretly just between us and the Lord. Now, we all have to teach children to pray and young believers to pray. And if we're pastors or involved in any ministry, teaching any Bible study, leading any group of children or young people or men or women, we have to pray and we try to be a model. The important thing, though, is we need to ask ourselves, are those really the only prayers I pray? To teach somebody else and make sure when you do, even your little children, they're real prayers that are coming from your heart. God is much more interested in our prayers when we're alone just with Him. So don't let your public prayer become something you're proud of. So Jesus contrasts the way we are to give and pray and fast with the way many of the spiritual leaders in his day did.

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They gave publicly so that people... And Jesus has a wonderful sense of humor, and he imagines them. He describes them as going down the street with a trumpeter, blowing a trumpeter ahead of them, saying, "Watch this man. He's going to give. Isn't this wonderful? Isn't he godly? Isn't he spiritual?" It's an absurd picture, and it's intended to be. And then Jesus talks about prayer and how many of the spiritual leaders of his days had prayed at the entrance of the synagogues and in the prominent places? Well, the reason was the Synagogue was either on a hill, if it was a hilly community, and it was at the corner of the street. And so they would stand outside the door of the Synagogue and bow their heads and pray so nobody else could get in, but everybody could see them from every direction, these very spiritual people. And Jesus just says, Don't be like that. And don't pray great long prayers to impress other people. And then

when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them, the Lord teaches how to pray. The answer is very simple. You have the Lord's prayer. Maybe it takes 20 seconds to say.

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It's not some great long prayer. God's not interested in how long we pray for or how impressive our language is, or anything else. He just wants us to come to Him. It's as simple as that. Now, as we pray, the Lord's prayer, which Jesus taught us, talks about God's Kingdom, Your Kingdom come, and mentions it again at the end of the prayer. We need to ask the question, who builds God's Kingdom? Do we or does God? The answer is we don't build it, he does. This is really the key question for any of you who are going into ministry or are in ministry already or in ministry in any part of life because there are no secular jobs out there. You're going to be in ministry, whatever you're doing, whether you're being a plumber or cutting people's hair or serving tables or proclaiming God's word or taking the gospel to the ends of the earth or teaching little children, all of you will spend your lives in ministry. But what is the heart of this? The heart of this is praying that God will build his kingdom. Francis and Eitan Schaefer had written into the consensus that governs Liberty Fellowship and everybody who works in it.

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These words, and they're really important. They wrote, We draw a distinction between Christian men and women who are building the Kingdom of God and Christian men and women who are praying that God will build his Kingdom and that he might be pleased to use us as he does. Those are hugely different things. If we think we're building God's kingdom for him, what happens, and you see this with many people in ministry, they end up building their own kingdom. That's what happens. Making a name for themselves. God's responsibility is to give us a name. So we're going to be praying that God will build his kingdom and be pleased to use us in his mercy as he does. I want to finish these three talks with a personal illustration, not about me, but about my wife's father. I'll simply call him dad. My father died back in 1972. And so till Vicky's dad died a few years ago at 91, he's been my dad for many years, and that's how I still think of him. And as I said to you the other day, he was a farmer. He had 40 acres of fruit trees in central California, 30 miles south of Fresno, out in the country there.

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That's what he did all his life. He left school at 12 because his father needed him to work on the farm. His pastor, sadly, regarded him and all the other members of his congregation as ignorant farmers. So he said, I don't bother to prepare my sermons because they're just ignorant farmers. Give a 10 minute talk with no content at all. It's terrible! Don't ever think of anybody like that. My dear father-in-law, Dad knew the Bible far better than his pastor. As he was pruning all through the winter, he'd listen to the Bible on tape and to Jay Vern and McGee preaching from the Old Testament. He knew much of the scriptures by heart. But he was a very godly man. I'll just tell him my story because I don't want to run over time here. It's a very beautiful story. You have to imagine this is a peach, not an orange. I couldn't find a peach at

this time of the year. Every summer when I was in seminary, this is back in the late 60s, we would go out to California and live with my mom and dad, my wife's parents, on the farm.

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I would work on the farm. I was coming back, this 40 acres of fruit trees, plums and peaches and nectarines and persimmons and kiwis and grapes. And he had lots of different varieties because he said, If you don't diversify, you'll die. If you put everything into one crop, that'll be it. You'll be done. But so each patch was maybe four or five acres of some different fruit or different variety. But I was coming back, he planted watermelons between his young trees. So we had been harvesting huge watermelons all morning. I was coming back for lunch. And through the trees, I saw dad just kneeling down on the ground. I'm a bit too old to do this, so I'll get up again quickly. But he was kneeling there and he had a peach in each hand. And it was obvious he didn't know anybody else was around. So I walked very closely up behind him so I could hear him. I heard him praying something like this, Lord, these are your peaches. These are your trees. This is your farm. I belong to you. Help me to serve you in everything I do. And then he got up and he saw me there.

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He was a bit surprised but I said to him, to break the ice tell me what you were doing. And he said, Well, son, when you read the law of Moses, he knew the Old Testament very well, though his pastor never preached on it. When you read the law of Moses, you read about the service of first fruits that the Israelites were called to offer. You see these young trees here, and they were little trees, five or six feet high. Each of them had five or six huge peaches on them. He said, This is their first crop. They're going to carry on bearing for the next 15 or 20 years. But this is the first crop, and these are the best fruits they will ever produce. Every time any of my trees, any patch of my orchard starts bearing, I come out here and I have this little service of first fruits to offer the fruit to the Lord. I said, Dad, that's just beautiful. Now, this was completely secret. He really took Jesus' words secretly, very deeply, seriously. I spoke about this little service he had, and he had it regularly. Every time any of his trees started bearing, and his sons, his daughter, his wife didn't even know that he had this.

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It was just between him and the Lord. This dedication of his life and all that he had to Christ and offering himself to him. The fruits of this in his life. If we change it to a metaphorical meaning, we're amazing. He was giving constantly. He wasn't a wealthy man, but he gave away over 50 % of his income every year to missions work, to his church, to charities, to needy children, to orphanages. It was just beautiful. He was audited by the IRS one year because they didn't believe him. So, he sent everything in and they said, Mr. Buxman, he showed me the letter. He was really moved by it. Your bookkeeping is impeccable. Your generosity is extraordinary. There's only one problem with your return. You're not allowed to give so much. And he had no idea. In fact, the limit is one third that you can put down on your tax return. But he

didn't know that. But he carried on giving just as much. But he just put down a third of it in its tax return in the future. He was incredibly generous. He fasted without telling anybody, except, of course, his wife.

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When one of his sons rebelled for a while against the Lord, he didn't eat for a week. But nobody knew except mom. She had to know, of course, why he wasn't eating. But he hid it from the rest of the family. It was for the Lord. He was so generous and faithful in his treatment of his employees. Just like any other farmer in that part of California, all the people who worked for him picked his fruit in the summer and helped him pack it and worked on the farm in other ways. They were all people coming up from Mexico every summer. He treated them with such dignity, kindness, generosity. He never paid anybody the minimum wage in his life. He would take them ice cream and cold drinks on hot days. He would make lunch for them. He would ask about their wives and children. And one day when he was in his late 80s, one of these men came by to thank him, said, I should have been before. For 50 years, I crossed the border every summer and made a beeline for your farm. You treated us so differently from most of the other farmers around here, many of whom claimed to be Christians.

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You really cared about us. He listed all the things that he appreciated. Then he said, I tried to raise my three sons to be like you. When I had the privilege of taking his funeral, all kinds of people I'd never seen before got up and said, Things like, He always paid me more than I deserved. He and Mum were extraordinarily hospitable. I don't have time to tell you those stories, but I'll simply say this is your calling. To offer your life, whatever work God is calling you to, whether in the church or in some business or insurance company, somewhere in whatever setting. To offer yourself and your work to the Lord and say, Lord, here I am. Make me an instrument of your generosity and mercy, kindness, patience, love. That's the calling of every one of us. That's what true spirituality is.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the beauty of your gospel. Lord, you have given yourself so utterly to us. Saved us to the uttermost, as your word says. Help us to give ourselves back to you, we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.