

Introduction

This past summer Melissa and I celebrated that we have been married for 33 years! As joyous and satisfying as was our marriage in the early years, the joy and satisfaction have continually increased through the years as each of us continues to grow in grace. It is not that we have not encountered difficulties. We sure have. There have been battles from without but certainly also battles within. There have been times when life was hard like when Melissa's brother was killed and when we had three miscarriages and faced church turmoil. And we have not always seen eye to eye. We have experienced the reality of being two sinners who have said, "I do." However, one of the things that has always secured us whenever in the midst of a time of testing is that we have a settled commitment that divorce will never be a consideration. Neither of us has to worry that the other would seek to get out. And it makes so much difference as we seek to navigate life together. This kind of commitment is part of God's prescription for marriage which was instituted from the beginning. But it has never ceased to go unchallenged. Godly marriage is at the foundation of a healthy family, a healthy church, and a healthy society. So it has been the target of satanic attack through the ages and that attack rages today. Marriage was also under attack in the days of Jesus' earthly pilgrimage. His instructions about marriage, therefore, are highly relevant to us, and we turn to them this morning as we return to our study of the gospel according to Matthew.

[Read Text and Pray]

God instituted marriage to be a delightful relationship. That is the way it was experienced by the first couple. God brought the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens to Adam and he gave them their names. This opportunity brought to Adam the realization that he was missing something. He was alone as a human. Then God made from Adam a woman and brought her to him. Adam expressed exceeding delight in her and God instituted marriage. There were no attendants to invite to that first wedding, but the joy and satisfaction are apparent in Adam's exuberance and the fact that there was no shame. There was nothing to be ashamed of at that time. There was no sin. But the very next event to which we come in scripture is the fall. Adam and Eve sinned and this marriage came under the effects of curse. Since that time, sin has stood as a constant opponent to the delight in marriage as God originally provided.

God instituted marriage as a delightful relationship whose permanence was unthreatened at first. But ever since humanity fell into a state of sin, the truth about what marriage requires is hard to swallow. And yet the hard truth, if we will swallow it, is what will, nevertheless, make marriage the delight God intends it to be.

Young people and everyone, this is the big idea or main point today. I am going to state it as simply as I can. A delightful marriage is hard but it is worth it. A delightful marriage is hard but it is worth it. The point arises as Jesus leaves Galilee and arrives in the region on the east side of the Jordan River. The Pharisees come to him with a question about divorce and we end up learning a lot about marriage.

I. Human Inclination Concerning Marriage

A. Human inclination is to take marriage lightly. This is just what people tend to do. We tend to take all our commitments lightly. As long as they are convenient and do not demand too much of us

and we do not forget, we keep them. But even when it comes to something as seemingly serious as marriage, the human inclination is stay in it only so long as the demands are not too high.

B. The fact is illustrated by the manner in which the Pharisees approached Jesus. Remember that they have been conspiring for some time now how to destroy Jesus. It steamed them now that as Jesus came into a region nearer to Jerusalem, large crowds were following him. So they came and tested him with this question about divorce.

The subject of divorce was a contentious one among the Jews with two schools of thought. In Deuteronomy 24, the law given through Moses allowed for the existence of divorce. The Hillel school taught that divorce was permissible for almost any reason—even to include if a wife burned supper. On the other end of the spectrum, the Shammai school believed divorce to be permissible only if there was marital unfaithfulness. And then there is human nature as we observe it. Whatever people may say about divorce in general, when it comes to them and they want to divorce, they will come up with a reason. The idea of being stuck with someone with whom you have fallen out of love is repugnant in our culture and had to have been for them as well. So this was an area of controversy in which the Pharisees must have reasoned they could discredit Jesus with at least some of the people. So they ask, "Is it lawful for one to divorce one's wife for any cause?"

C. Their approach brings to light the fact that people are inclined to take marriage lightly. Oftentimes a couple becomes infatuated with each other. They find one another physically attractive; they experience surges of emotion. They begin to think that if this one gets away they might not find someone to marry. In our day many of these become sexually involved with each other, which the Bible tells us is sinful and destructive. But in the midst of all this euphoria the couple is blind to each other's blemishes and character defects and selfishness and imperfections. Godliness is not the consideration. And since they "love" each other, they decide to get married. After all if they ever fall out of love or begin to get on each other's nerves, they can just get a divorce. The human inclination is to get caught up with fairy tale images and idealistic dreams, thinking of marriage as living on a cloud. But it does not take long for reality to set in. People do have habits that annoy. They are selfish. They offend. Bills come due. Work has to be done. Decisions have to be made. Conflict of desires is inevitable. People also age and sag.

The human inclination is to dismiss these realities from mind in the moment of a wedding. They take lightly their vows or they come up with vows they can live with. People who want to write their own vows usually fill them with flowery romanticized language about how they feel but fail to consider that a vow is not an expression of emotion but the solemn making of a covenant promise. If you go in with the idea that divorce is an easy solution, your marriage is doomed from the beginning. It is never going to delight and satisfy and strengthen the way God intended. I hear of husbands and wives using the D-word almost at the drop of a hat. That is like drawing a sword and stabbing the relationship. That is a human inclination, but it is destructive and it is not right.

II. Divine Design for Marriage

Jesus replies to the Pharisees' question as he usually responded to this kind of question—with authority and gravity. It matters not to him whether his answer will be popular among the masses. He is concerned with the word of God and the glory of God.

A. "Have you not read?" he says. May I just sneak something in here? JESUS BELIEVED THE BIBLE. The Son of God turned to the word of God as authoritative in knowing right from wrong and truth from error and to answer our questions about the will of God.

B. And Jesus points the Pharisees to the word of God back behind the law of Moses to God's creation of human beings. God made them male and female and God spoke. And God said THEREFORE a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. God designed humans male and female for the purpose of marital union. God did not design a male for a male or a female for a female. There are two genders. There are but two sexes—male and female. And each was made for the other. Desires for intimacy with the same sex are contrary to God's design. They are sinful desires from which those who experience them must repent. God's design is for a marital union of male and female.

The design is to be a union of companionship. Taking us back to Genesis 2, Jesus takes us back to the reality first of a man who was alone. And God said, "it is not good for man to be alone." It is also a union of productivity. There was work to do and God made the woman as a helper. Moreover, the design is for intimacy. That means sexual and otherwise. The two shall be one is not just an act but also a state of being. This is not a union for the purposes of being apart but to be together in heart and mind and body. And the divine design is of an indissoluble union. When husband and wife are united, they make the promises and God does a great work. God's design in marriage is to make one out of two. In marriage God joins two together to be parted only by death.

But God's design is for the union to be fruitful as well. His first act with regard to the man and his wife was to bless them and commission them to be fruitful and multiply. Out of their oneness was to come children raised up to worship and honor God. And in their oneness was to be the fruitfulness of delight and satisfaction. Think how the Bible commends marital love. Proverbs 5:18 says, "Let your fountain be blessed and rejoice in the wife of your youth." There is the whole of the Song of Solomon. God's design is not for heartache and frustration. It is not for competition and conflict. His design is for delight, fulfillment, satisfaction, enjoyment, support, and glory to God. Man did not dream it up and we cannot change it up.

III. Divine Imperative for Marriage

In the course of his reply, Jesus sets forth two imperatives for married couples. One is positive and the other is negative but both work together. On the one hand the couple is to "hold fast" to one another. They are to hang on to one another. They are to adhere to one another, to stick together. And on the other hand, Jesus says, "Let no man separate what God has joined together."

If you have seen the movie "Fireproof," you may recall the scene at the firehouse where the captain took the salt shaker and the pepper shaker. He said, "salt and pepper are different but you always see them together." He glued the two shakers together and handed them to Caleb who was insistently asking him why he did it. As Caleb starts to pull the shakers apart, Michael says, "Don't do it! Don't do it, Caleb! If you pull them apart now, you will break either one or both of them."

The divine imperatives are to do what is necessary to stick together and not to pull apart. Clearly, there is more to following God's imperative than simply avoiding divorce. Well then, HOW does a couple fulfill these imperatives?

1. First they remember that they are joined by covenant. As Alstair Begg says, "Marriage before God is not a contract of temporary convenience." God spoke through the Old Testament prophet Malachi to reproach his people for their sins. He charged them with faithlessness in marriage. It is violence because men have not been faithful to the covenant by which a woman was joined to them

as companion and wife. The marriage covenant is a vow of utter seriousness to one's spouse before God to be kept as though one's life depended upon it. Marriage is a covenant. Keep your word.

2. How do you fulfill the divine imperatives? First, remember you have made a covenant NOT to separate. Second, do everything you can to cleave. See this relationship as a garden to be kept alive and beautiful by meticulous care. My yard is not the most beautiful in my neighborhood. It is not bad and we have planted stuff from the plant sale which brightens things up through the summer. But I just do not have the time or the commitment to tend to it everyday. Sometimes I look at park-like yards that others have and feel a little longing that mine could look like theirs. But almost always I see someone in the yard working at it. And I am reminded that the beauty I see takes time and attention.

Making sure you do not separate what God has joined together requires time and attention. It requires time and attention to the relationship itself. It requires the opposite of what will bring separation. Husbands and wives need to cultivate their oneness. You must spend time together. You have to look well to each other's needs. You need to study one another. This has to be the most important relationship to you outside of that with Christ. You should do as much as you can together. But it is more than simply being together. You must also guard yourself from any other who would threaten to breach this relationship. And you must pursue Christlikeness with all your being.

John MacArthur writes, "Many marriages, including a tragic number of Christian marriages, seem to be little more than a socially recognized battleground where warfare between the spouses is the rule and harmony the exception." Godly men and women must bring Christlikeness to greet one another and determine NOT to fight. They need what Christ calls for to follow him—self-denial. And they need what Christ says is true greatness—the determination to serve. You do not get married to GET. You get married to GIVE. When you get married in order to get, you never will; but if you marry in order to give, you will receive. That is the beauty of Christlikeness in a husband and in a wife. But growing in the likeness of Christ in the power of the Spirit is how you exert yourself to preserve what God has joined together. It is hard work. This is the hard truth about marriage.

So why, ask the Pharisees, did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce? Just like the devil they twist the words. Moses did not give such a command but an allowance. Do not mistake the allowance for affirmation. Divorce was allowed because of hard-hearted people. In fact the result of divorce is adultery, unless adultery is the reason for seeking a divorce. The breaking of a marriage is ugly, is unfaithfulness, and it is a dark sin before God. It is to be detested. It is to be avoided.

But what if you have divorced? What if you did so because you simply didn't want to be married to that other person any more? Sin is sin, but God's mercy is greater than our sin. Perhaps I need to be even a little more assertive on this point. A person came through here a few weeks ago and as he was leaving told me that king David did not go to heaven because he committed the unpardonable sin of adultery. How wrong he was! Adultery is grievous sin, but the Lord is a great Savior. Think of his mercy to adulterers! For one there was the woman at the well. Knowing her situation, Jesus approached her and offered her eternal life. He told her to go and get her husband. She said I have no husband. He said, "I know. You have had five husbands and you are not married to the man you are living with now." She went and told the whole Samaritan town about Christ and brought them to meet him and many believed in him. And then there is this wonderful statement made by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit

the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you WERE JUSTIFIED in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God." Our sins are many. Our sins disqualify us for heaven, but by the work of Jesus Christ suffering and dying on the cross and rising from the dead, there is justification and cleansing for all who believe in him, including adulterers. He is a very great savior indeed. Do you feel yourself totally unworthy for God? Maybe divorce is not your sin. Maybe it is sexual immorality. Maybe it is uncontrolled anger. Maybe it is idolatry. Maybe it is jealousy. Maybe it is thievery. Maybe it is homosexuality. Maybe greed or drunkenness. Your sin is not too great for the blood of Jesus to cover if you will get up from it and with a broken heart come to him in faith.

IV. Human Skepticism Concerning God's Design

Did you notice the reaction of the very disciples of Jesus when they heard his teaching? "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." Even the disciples demonstrate the human inclination not to take the marriage covenant seriously. They think what Jesus is calling for is too hard; it is too much work. It is too unpleasant. I tell you this is the reaction of a bunch of selfish boys. They weren't ready. But they underestimated the blessing of marriage and they overestimated the freedom of being a bachelor. Basically Jesus said, "You do not know what you are talking about. Not everyone can receive this saying. Celibacy is a gift not everyone has received."

Jesus told them there are three kinds of eunuchs. Some are born that way. Some are made that way. And others take the way of celibacy as a choice for devoting themselves to serving the kingdom of heaven. If God gives you the gift, then fine. But most men and women will marry. The implication is that marriage is a marvelous gift and the challenges it involves and the self-sacrifice for which it calls are a small price to pay for the delight God gives to those who hold one another fast and cultivate their love.

Conclusion

The hard truth about marriage—that it involves self-sacrifice and serving another faithfully until you die—if you will live it out is actually what makes marriage beautiful and delightfully satisfying. Living to preserve your marriage will give you satisfaction in serving Christ—even if your spouse is not. Living to preserve what God has joined together will also beautifully put the glory of God on display.

When couples live out godly marital fidelity, they magnify Christ. The things it takes to build up a marriage are the very qualities that demonstrate the power of Christ's work—the fruit of the Spirit, sacrificial serving, and covenant-keeping til death.

When couples live out godly marital fidelity, they experience satisfying joy. God's directives in marriage do not squelch joy but amplify it.

When couples live out godly marital fidelity, they become a visible illustration of the faithfulness of God. When they make vows and keep them even to their own harm, they display what a great God we have.

God has made a covenant with all who draw near to him in Christ. He will certainly save them and keep them unto himself. And Jesus Christ did everything required so as not lose even one of those whom the Father gave him. He went so far as shedding his own blood in order not to separate what God joined together in him. We celebrate that covenant every time we partake in the Lord's Supper.

As Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper and distributed the cup, he said, "this cup is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's Kingdom." "That day" is when we who belong to Christ as his bride all join in at the MARRIAGE supper of the Lamb! He selflessly shed his blood to obtain and keep his bride unto himself. May you and I follow his lead in seeking to keep our spouses unto ourselves according to the design and directive of God. And if you are looking toward and preparing for a day when you hope to be married, look hard at Jesus and prepare to imitate him.