

Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

³ *"What did Moses command you?" he replied.*

⁴ *They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."*

⁵ *"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. ⁶ "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' ⁷ 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, ⁸ and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. ⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."*

¹⁰ *When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. ¹¹ He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. ¹² And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."*

¹³ *People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵ I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶ And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them. (Mark 10:2-16)*

God Blesses Us through Marriage

Am I doing it right? I've been in the ministry for twenty-two years. During that time, I've officiated at seventeen weddings. In every case, I spent time with the couple not just planning the wedding, but doing premarital counseling – talking about what God says about marriage and about the issues that often lead to conflict in a marriage. I always tried to make sure that couple had the best possible start and to make the ceremony itself was both beautiful and focused on the gospel. And you know what? Most of those marriages have ended in divorce. Am I doing something wrong? Why doesn't it stick? Well, someone once said, "It's not about you." Marriage is about three people: the husband, the wife and the Lord. Jesus' words to us this morning force us to talk about divorce. But before we do that, we want to talk about marriage, about what it is and why God gave it. If we understand the gift God gives us in marriage and family, then maybe we won't be so quick to throw it away. **God blesses us through marriage.**

I.

The heart of that blessing is what God gives to the husband and the wife: the closest and the most important relationship we can have with another human being in this life. That relationship comes before children, before parents, before friends or work or even what we want ourselves. Jesus said, **"So they are no longer two, but one."** Obviously, he doesn't mean that we merge into one single person. But in every circumstance of life, in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, a husband and wife face the world together. **God blesses us through marriage. He makes two people one.**

Jesus made that point in answer to a question: **"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"** Now, that question didn't mean exactly the same thing that it would mean in our society. God set up the Jewish nation as a religious state. He made the rules not just for church and for personal morality, but also for how they were supposed to run their country, which is why Jesus pointed them to Moses and not to the laws of the Roman Empire. But let's look at it this morning as if that question were asked today. To us, it would mean, "Is it legal for a man to divorce his wife or for a woman to divorce her husband?" Obviously, the answer is yes. It's been legal in most states to get a "no fault divorce" for decades. Ronald Reagan, that darling of conservatives, signed the first American no fault divorce law that went into effect on January 1, 1970 in California.

But Jesus' answer to the people of his day matters to us today. Moses allowed for divorce, even in God's theocracy. But Jesus says, **"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law."** He points out that divorce was never God's intention. So even though the government that God has given us today allows divorce for any and every reason, that doesn't mean that God is pleased by it. It's only because our hearts are hard in America today that we fail to see the true purpose and blessing that God intended for us when he created marriage.

Jesus points out that God intended marriage for one man and one woman for as long as they both shall live. Why did God do that? Jesus refers to the institution of marriage, which was our Old Testament lesson for today. In the Garden of Eden, when everything was perfect and there was no pain or sorrow or sin of any kind, God said, **“It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”** Even in a perfect world, we needed someone to share our lives. That’s the way God made us. And the first and longest lasting purpose of marriage is companionship. A man and a woman share that oneness that only God could’ve invented. You know, when I visit a widow the week after her husband’s funeral, and we talk about thirty or forty or fifty years of marriage and how much she hurts now, she never tells me that she misses sex or raising children. Often, both those things were over already. But she misses her husband. She walks into the living room expecting to see him in his favorite chair and he isn’t there and it hurts all over again. God makes two people one.

And in a Christian marriage, there’s an added dimension to that oneness: God designed the family as one of the central places that we learn about Jesus. A good Christian marriage gives the husband and wife the opportunity to share their faith. They come to church together. They study God’s word together at home. They work together to teach their children to know the Lord. Now, if your spouse doesn’t share your faith, you are still one. But if he or she does, you have an even deeper part of yourself to share.

Then from that oneness comes at least two other ways that God blesses us in marriage. One is children. The other is God-pleasing sexual intimacy. Both of those gifts proceed from the emotional intimacy that comes from leaving your father and mother and being publicly united to your spouse for as long as you both shall live.

Jesus says, **“Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”** This is his answer to the question of divorce. It is legal. God even gave specific circumstances under which a Christian may get a divorce. But all that is only because our sinful hearts are hard. God intended us to remain married for as long as both husband and wife shall live. Any time there is a divorce, someone is guilty of sin. Now, it might be that one spouse has cheated. It might be that one spouse has packed up and left – or has done the equivalent of leaving by abandoning all intimacy for drugs or alcohol or even through physical abuse. We all can see that is clearly sin. But what our society does not want to accept and what we here in church at times don’t want to accept, is that when two people say, “We don’t love each other anymore,” or “We just can’t take the fighting anymore,” and then get a divorce, that *is* sin. You swore before God that you would stay together and be faithful to each other and love each other for as long as you both shall live. Any divorce means that somehow, at least one of you, and quite possibly both of you, broke that vow. For that sin you deserve God’s punishment in hell forever.

That’s a tough teaching. It was in Jesus’ day, too. Notice, the disciples had to ask Jesus about his uncompromising position. They couldn’t believe their ears. But Jesus didn’t back down. Hard as it is for us to hear in America today, this is what God’s Word teaches. So where does that leave us? I know there are many of us here today who are divorced. Where do you stand as far as God is concerned? There may be some among us who are thinking about divorce. I’m certain there are people here whose marriages are under stress because one or both members sin against their spouse by being selfish, by hurting the feelings of the person that’s supposed to be closest to them in the world, by refusing to repent and ask their spouse for forgiveness. Where do we all stand today? Is there one married person here today who can claim that he or she has never sinned against their spouse? Every one of those sins is sin against the Lord who gave us marriage and gave us our spouse.

Where do we stand? We stand with Jesus, who not only condemned all the sins that harm our marriages, he also died to set us free from all of them. Even though Jesus was never married himself, he still honored marriage perfectly. He held up God’s institution with his words and also with his holy life. By a miracle of God’s love, that perfect life of the unmarried Christ counts for us and makes us all perfect in our marriages in the sight of God. Jesus died and he paid for every time that we were selfish in our marriages, for every time we hurt that person we’re supposed to love the most, for every time that we failed to face the world as one. He even died and paid for every person who ever cheated or left their marriage. He died and paid for every sin in every divorce. Then he rose and said that all that sin is gone forever. You are free. I am free. We are now holy in God’s sight.

Now there is but one thing for us to do: honor God by honoring and loving our spouse. Follow Christ by joining our spouse in hearing and studying his word. Be faithful to the Lord by being faithful to that man or

woman for as long as you both shall live. And if you don't have a husband or wife right now, even if you are divorced right now, honor God's institution of marriage the way that Jesus did: through sexual purity, through encouragement of those you know who are married, through a clear confession of the gift that God gave us when he created marriage.

II.

I said before that one of the blessings of marriage is children. So even though our gospel lesson really includes two separate incidents, I don't think it's an accident that the Holy Spirit put them next to each other. The point of each is related to the other. **God blesses us through marriage. He creates Christian families.**

In the last few verses of this reading we see believing families in action. People brought their children to Jesus. That's what a Christian family does. Notice, the church of their day got in the way! The disciples didn't want to bother Jesus with these little kids. The ancient world didn't always value children the way that we do today. But how did Jesus react? He was indignant. He told the disciples to let the children come to him. He held those children up as a model of faith: **"I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."** Think about how they lift up their voices when they sing in church. Think about how simply and clearly they confess their faith. They don't question it. They simply know that Jesus loves them, that he died for them and he's going to take them to heaven.

Where does that faith come from? It comes from the gospel in the word and in baptism just like it does for us adults. But God's plan is for the family to be the primary faith incubator. There's nothing wrong with having Sunday schools and Christian schools and catechism classes. They are wonderful tools the church uses. But the primary responsibility to teach our children to know the Lord belongs to us parents. It's not supposed to be my job as your pastor to hunt your children down and drag them to catechism class. It shouldn't happen that half the families with children in our school only come to church during the school year when the teachers are taking attendance, but in the summer they forget where the church is. It's not supposed to be true that the only place they hear about Jesus and his love is inside this building. God calls parents to bring their children to Jesus.

It's your job. Do you do it? Only you can answer that question. But examine your church attendance. Think about how often you talk about your faith to your kids. If your kids are grown and they don't come to church anymore, it's still your job to call them to repent. Do you do that? If we don't do these things, we're sinning. We have failed to create a true Christian family as God calls us to.

But the only solution is Christ. He loved us and died for us and paid for our sins. And he gathered us into a community of believers. He gave us the gospel. He washed even these sins away in our baptisms and he gives us his body and blood in communion over and over again to forgive even this unfaithfulness. God has wiped all your sin away. Bring your children to hear that message. Teach them that they are loved and forgiven by God and by you. Nourish their faith in your home. If you honestly don't know how, come and see me and we'll find ways to help you.

God blesses us with Christian families. Those families begin when a Christian man and woman declare their love and commitment to each other on their wedding day. God blesses all marriages, even those of unbelievers, with love and unity. When did the erosion of marriage begin in our society? It wasn't when the Supreme Court allowed gay marriage as a legal right. It wasn't even when no fault divorce became legal, although that was a huge step. It was when we sinners forgot the gift of unity that God gave us in our marriage and the joy we have in following Christ together. That began in the Garden of Eden when Adam blamed Eve for his own sin. But in Christ, we are forgiven. In Christ, we are made new. Make Christ the center of your marriage and family and grow together in faith. Amen.