

"Heart-Righteousness and Holy Marriage"

Interestingly, Jesus, who feels most deeply the larger injustices of society, doesn't fail to also address the more personal and intimate issues of our lives. The ancient world was a world of tremendous racial and ethnic prejudice. Greeks, Samaritans, Romans, and Jews did not love and value each other. It was a world in which phalanxes of Roman legionnaires suppressed rioting mobs, and sometimes vacillating governors like Pontius Pilate gave into mob rule just to keep the peace. In this world, Jesus repeatedly spoke about love and justice for all people. Yet, while addressing the issues that undermine a just society, he never failed also to address personal matters of the heart.

It may or may surprise you to know that before the pandemic, the death of George Floyd, and the national discussion that has followed, one of the heaviest burdens I've been carrying has been for struggling marriages. In the last 6 months or so, I have shared with our elders how I have been burdened by stories of separations and divorces, even in long-term marriages. I reached out to Dr. Jim Coffield about coming to Daytona to do a seminar on marriage. The coronavirus postponed that. So, I want to take this opportunity as we work through the Sermon on the Mount to let it lead us into the actual development of all the character qualities that will enrich society and also the family.

This morning we come specifically to a place where Jesus directly addresses marriage in the Sermon on the Mount. What is especially vital for us to is that Jesus does this as part of a larger teaching and a whole-person-heart-deep view of life. If we miss this, we will misunderstand. He's not trying to give a complete teaching on marriage. He is using marriage as one of six examples of what it means to live with a hunger and thirst for a deeper righteousness. Remember, he's given us the nine beatitudes that call for deeply Christ-centered character. He's called us to be in practice what we are by grace, the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He's told us we need to live out a deeper righteousness, not just external conformity to the letter of the law but a heart that wants what God desires. Jesus chooses six examples to illustrate the difference between the self-satisfied religious conservatism that adheres only to the letter of the law, neglecting its spirit, and the true righteousness that begins in the heart with a hunger and thirst for what God desires.

In the third of his six examples, he speaks of divorce and marriage. This example is shorter than any of the others. The reason may be that Matthew is going to give a more detailed teaching of Jesus on marriage in **Matthew 19:3-12**. Nevertheless, in the larger context of the Sermon on the Mount, these verses convey an incredibly practical and powerful truth. ***God's purpose in marriage is to forge a bond of oneness between a man and a woman. Heart-righteousness will not look for ways to dissolve that but for ways to preserve it.***

You see, the overarching principle in the Sermon on the Mount is that...

I. HEART-RIGHTEOUSNESS IS WHAT THE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS STRIVE TO HONOR.

Look at **Matthew 5:31-32**, *“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”*

Jesus brings up marriage and divorce, as a means of addressing an issue of the heart. Jesus' comment about a certificate of divorce comes from **Deuteronomy (24:1¹)**. At a time when women were had few ways to provide for or protect themselves, the Scripture said that a man could not just divorce his wife at will but needed a just cause to do so and needed to give a certificate to enable her to remarry if she wanted to. The purpose of the command was twofold; 1st to give women some protection and 2nd to uphold the seriousness and sanctity of marriage. Marriage should not be treated as something you just step in and out of at will. ² What happened is men took the idea of a certificate of divorce and turned it into a sort of blanket permission slip that legitimized divorce for any reason.

What Jesus challenges is our tendency to find ways to go our own ways. This may not be the best analogy, but this made me think of how many states legalized medical marijuana. It was first argued that this is an act of compassion for people who suffer from things like Parkinson's disease and seizures, and I think it was all of that. Once it was legitimized on compassionate grounds, there are people who have taken advantage of that. They have gotten their medical Marijuana ID cards under questionable pretenses and are now abusing it. That's human. It's predictable. It's part of our broken human nature to take a law, and instead of honoring the spirit of the law, we look for loopholes,

exceptions, workarounds, or ways to work the angles in our favor or for our desires. That happened in Jesus' day, and it happens in ours. God gave a command to uphold the seriousness of marriage, and men turned it into a license to legitimize walking away from their wives, leaving them economically destitute and socially vulnerable.

In **2nd Corinthians 3:6**, Paul distinguishes between the spirit and the letter of the law. In **Titus 1:15**, Paul shares a principle: *To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled.* What Jesus is teaching and Paul is reiterating is that there is nothing more important than the state of your heart before God. Whether we are talking about marriage, racism, lust, anger, promises, or whatever, if your heart isn't right, you will find a way to twist, even the word of God, and wield it as a weapon against others or wave it as a license for indulgence.

Jesus wants the reality of your heart hungering after God. He says God's purpose is what the truly righteous strive to honor. Of course, that is sort of a general principle for all of the six antitheses, but he is more specific here about marriage. He says...

II. HEART-RIGHTEOUSNESS MEANS HOLDING ON TO THE PURPOSE OF MARRIAGE

That's why Jesus stuns his listeners with his strong words about adultery. The passage from **Matthew 19** helps us understand what Jesus is saying here. **Matthew 19:3** says, *And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"* How does Jesus respond? Jesus responds by basically saying you can not just take one passage out of the Bible and use it without taking into account the rest of the Scripture and especially the underlying purposes of God.

Jesus want you to think about God's purposes. He says, **verse 4**, *"Have you not read (quoting **Genesis 2**) that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?"* In **verse 6**, he repeats and underscores that with these words, *So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."* The discussion isn't over. **Verse 7**, *They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?"* **Verse 8** *He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning, it was not so. Did you know God in his mercy makes concessions to our*

weaknesses? He does. But that does not change his heart and his purposes. God's purpose for marriage is a bond of oneness.

Looking back at **Matthew 5:32**, Jesus makes one explicit exception. *"But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."* He doesn't say infidelity *has* to end a marriage, but he does give it as legitimate grounds for breaking the lasting bond that God desires.

Later in **1 Corinthians, 7:15** Scripture mentions another situation that frees a follower of Jesus to divorce and to remarry: desertion or abandonment. Scholars in the reformed tradition, to which we belong, have argued that abandonment does not require physical absence. If one person deals so maliciously with their partner that they create intolerable conditions and drive the more innocent party away. They are the ones to blame for the abandonment. So we might think of abuse or addiction as well as adultery or abandonment as effectively granting legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage. ³

All of these discussions have their place but let's also see that...
Jesus isn't primarily giving us a new but tougher law, he is calling us to a different mindset. Approaching his teaching on Marriage in a strictly legalistic way in which we focus on trying to identify the precise meaning of the exception clause is already to miss the point. Think about the teaching that comes right before and immediately after this teaching on marriage and divorce. In the preceding teaching, Jesus addressed lust in the heart, and he said this, *if your right eye causes you to sin gouge it out.* He wasn't speaking literally but telling us to deal decisively and resolutely with lust. In the immediately following teaching, he speaks of our vows. He says, He says, Let your "yes" be "yes and your "no" be "no" anything more than this is of the evil one. Does he literally mean he wants his followers never to say anything other than "yes" or "no"? Of course not. He is saying "be a man or woman of your word and if you say something mean it, and if you promise something, keep it." But he is making his points as forcefully as he can in a dramatic and even overstated way.

Think about that with respect to marriage. How many divorces would be avoided if we dealt decisively with the first signs of lust and if we were resolute and faithful to all our vows and promises?⁴ I am convinced that the whole thrust and spirit of the Sermon on the Mount is that we have to move past the kinds of questions the Pharisees would ask like, *"how much lust can I get away with or what kind of*

vows do I have to keep or what exactly would give me the right to bail out on my marriage,” and come at all of this with a radically different mindset. *How can I be light in the darkness? How can I have a heart-deep righteousness?* We will never heal a broken marriage, or bring justice and peace for all races and people, or build a quality of life that glorifies God and impacts the world for him unless we start with our hearts. Without heart-righteousness we are sloppy Christians or cunning legalists who look for loopholes and work the angles.

Think of it this way...

III. HEART-RIGHTEOUSNESS CALLS US TO FIGHT FOR THE ONENESS GOD WANTS IN MARRIAGE.

That mindset alone does justice to the Sermon on the Mount.

We fight for oneness in our marriages when we commit ourselves to partnership. I have used this analogy before, it isn't original with me, but it still holds up. A three-legged race isn't the most beautiful picture of a marriage, but it can teach us something. Once you are linked up with someone, the best way to move forward is to get in sync and work together as partners. The Bible compares life itself as a race in which you want to run well and finish strong. Most of us are called to run that race with another person, linked up in partnership together.

Dr. Ed Wheat, in His book, *Love-Life For Every Married Couple*, Has some helpful words. He says,

"If you want to test an action, attitude, or decision against the Biblical standard of cleaving, (uniting), ask yourself these questions. Will this draw us closer or drive us apart? Will this build our relationship or tear it down? Will it bring about a positive response or a negative response? Does it express my love and loyalty to my partner, or does it reveal my self-centered individualism?"

Where does the issue of partnership surface in your marriage? Where do you need to say, this issue, has been too much about me, and it needs to be about we – about us?

Forty-five years ago last Sunday, Connie and I got married. A couple of years ago, while on vacation in the mountains of North Carolina, Connie told me she was reading a great book on Marriage. She said it's by Gary Thomas, and it's called *Sacred Marriage*. She paused and said, "The subtitle is *What if God designed marriage to*

make us holy more than to make us happy?" I admit, for a moment, my reaction was to take that subtitle a little personally. "Are you saying I don't make you happy, but I *am* helping to make you holy?"

I knew better than to ask. Connie and I have been married 45 years now, and we have brought a lot of happiness to each other, but the reality is a commitment to God's purpose of oneness in marriage requires sacrifice and often requires a willingness to die to self and even to suffer for love's sake and for Christ sake as you grow deeper. Katherine Anne Porter said, "*Marriage is the merciless revealer, the great white searchlight turned on the darkest places of human nature.*" One of the insights of the book was that marriage is a sacrament that challenges every kind of self-centeredness. If entered into with a commitment to follow Christ, it will shape you through self-denial, humility, and even suffering and help you to become a more godly man or woman. I'm not talking about deeply toxic marriages, abuse, or all kinds of dysfunction or disorders. The truth is that even in a healthy marriage, you have human beings and many challenges. You will have to be willing to fight for God's purposes in marriage.

Conclusion

We all feel our inadequacies as men and women, don't we? That's why it is so important that we live out these challenging callings empowered by Christ and the gospel. On the cross, Jesus took responsibility for something that was not his fault and paid for our sins. That's the amazing love of God. You don't earn his saving grace or healing presence or his amazing promise to make all things right and to give you eternal life. You can't earn that. You turn to him and trust in him as your Savior and Lord. Start there but don't stop there.

Whether married or single, you need His presence at the core of your life as the source of your life. You need and can have his promises to watch and care for you. Give yourself to him in faith and know that he will become one with you and never leave you. Live your faith. What is it you most need to believe about the reality of Christ's love and God's care for you? What do you have to believe to so fully find life in him that you can live the way he calls you to live? Believe it. Let the grace of Jesus sink deep into your heart and let it not only heal you but, in the healing, change you.

Amen.

Prayer Of Response

God of truth and grace, we pause to respond with thanksgiving for the light you give us in your word and the grace you show us everyday. May we learn, not to twist the principles of Scripture or to settle for the letter of the law but to long for the spirit of your law to become the desire of our hearts. May we love you and others and walk as children of light in this world. Enable us through our Savior Jesus to fight for oneness in our marriages and to live in heart-felt devotion to you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Quoted by Parrott, Les and Leslie *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*, Zondervan, p. 33 ff—

¹ Deuteronomy 24:1 "When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house. In Jesus' day, there was a huge debate on what "some indecency" means. Some took it very broadly others very narrowly.

² "The whole force of the argument is again exactly the same; it is to make these people see that marriage is not something you can walk in and out of at will," Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies In the Sermon on the Mount, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1977, Volume 1, page 255.*

³ PCA Position paper on Divorce and Remarriage,

<http://docshare01.docshare.tips/files/27201/272016316.pdf> pp 14, 15, 17, 18, 20, 21, 50, 51, 100.

⁴ N.T. Wright makes the same point in *Matthew For Everyone*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p. 47-48