

“Torn Asunder”
Matthew 19:1-9
December 14, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

The year 1970 was a pivotal year in the area of divorce law in our nation. That was the year in which California passed the first “no-fault” divorce law in the western world since the Christian movement first took hold in Europe. A no-fault divorce is one in which divorce can be granted without fault being found with either party. Such faults have typically included things like adultery, desertion or cruelty. Since 1985, every state in the nation has had a no-fault divorce law in which couples can terminate a marriage simply by one party stating a desire to do so. Not surprisingly, the divorce rate has increased dramatically. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 1965, before no-fault divorce laws, there was one divorce for every 4 marriages. By 1981, the divorce rate had dramatically increased to one divorce for every 2 marriages, where it has mostly stayed since then.

Some have been encouraged by the overall decline in the number of divorces since they peaked in the mid-1980s. But the decline can be explained completely by an equal decline in the number of marriages. Couples are losing confidence in marriage as a whole, deciding to go ahead and live together without marriage. And where there was never a marriage, there cannot be a divorce either. To bring this matter closer to home, did you know that Alabama has a higher divorce rate than all but 8 other states? In 2004, the national average was 3.7 divorces per year per 1000 population, while being 4.7 in Alabama.

Statistics are one thing, but people quite another. I would imagine that most of us have been touched by divorce to one degree or another. Some have experienced firsthand the pain of divorce, and others have witnessed friends or loved ones who have done so. What is needed to address this situation is the prophetic, priestly, and kingly ministry of the church. Jesus came as a prophet, priest and king, and now we as his church need to function in these same three roles to bring healing to the marriages of our nation. We need to declare God’s will (prophetic ministry), restore sinners who have been broken by adultery and divorce (priestly ministry), and nurture marriages so that divorce becomes increasingly unlikely (kingly ministry). Our passage this morning is one of the clearest and most extensive spoken by Jesus concerning divorce and marriage. I want to point out three things it says about divorce.

I. The Divine Origin of Each Marriage

This passage was occasioned by an attempt on the part of the Pharisees to trick Jesus, according to Matthew’s account of it. They weren’t asking out of a humble desire to learn, but with motives designed to harm Jesus. Their question

wanted Jesus to declare his position on the proper interpretation of Deut. 24:1, which features prominently in this whole passage. This passage says, **“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...”** The passage then goes on to say that she may not remarry this husband who has put her away if there has been an intervening marriage. The big interpretive issue of the day was how to understand “some indecency.” There were two camps. One camp, the followers of a rabbi named Shammai, said that this indecency had to be gross indecency, such as adultery or something like that. The other camp, the followers of Hillel, broadened it to include even minor offenses, such as an improperly cooked meal. So Hillel really taught that a man could divorce his wife for any reason at all. The Pharisees were hoping they could get Jesus into trouble by asking him to state his position. It was this whole issue of divorce, after all, that had gotten John the Baptist in trouble with Herod, which led ultimately to his execution.

Jesus answers their question by taking them back to a place much earlier than the giving of the law in Deuteronomy. He goes back to the origin of marriage in Genesis 2, where God said that a man should leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, so that the two should become one flesh. He then makes explicit the implication this has for divorce. In a statement appearing nowhere else in the Bible except the parallel passage in Mark, Jesus says, **“What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate”** (v. 6). Jesus says about marriage that God joins together the man and the woman, and this becomes his starting point for how we are to think of divorce.

Let’s think about a couple of things we learn from Jesus’ statement that in marriage God is joining together two people into a deep unity. One thing it means is that as soon as you are married, you can have the confidence that God has put you together with your husband or wife. That is the case even if you realize later that your motives were all messed up in choosing the person you chose. So suppose you were drawn to your husband largely because of his good sense of humor. He made you laugh, and it was fun to be around him. But after you get married, you realize that he only used his good sense of humor to cover some basic insecurities of his life. Now, instead of laughing at his humor, you want to choke him when he’s being funny in a group of people. In these kinds of situations, we need to take refuge in Jesus’ words. God does not need for us always to make completely mature decisions in order for him to say that he has joined together two people. Take a moment to receive and believe this word from Jesus regarding your own marriage. He has joined you together with your husband or wife. He is bigger than your shortsighted decisions and has intentions to bless you through your marriage that you do not know.

A second implication of Jesus’ words here is to understand that marriage is a covenant instead of a contract. In a contract, you try to anticipate all the major issues that may arise between two parties and specify how those issues will be handled. So when we sold our previous house, the buyers wrote into the contract

all the fixtures that they understood were to stay with the house—the ceiling fans, garage door openers, kitchen appliances, etc. In a covenant, on the other hand, there is a commitment made to a person. There is no need to anticipate possible areas of conflict because the essence of the commitment is to say, “I am in this relationship 100 percent, and I will do whatever it takes to be loyal and faithful to you.” This is reflected in the central commitments made in the wedding ceremony. When I perform a wedding, I will first ask the husband and then his wife, with appropriate changes, “Wilt thou have this Woman to be thy wife, and wilt thou pledge thy loyalty to her, in all love and honor, in all duty and service, in all faith and tenderness, to live with her, and cherish her, according to the ordinance of God, in the holy bond of marriage?” Notice the absence of any condition attached to this promise. And then they will make their vows to one another. The vows I use read as follows: “I, John, take thee, Laura, to be my wedded wife. And I do promise and covenant, before God and these witnesses, to be thy loving and faithful husband, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.”

Jesus makes it very clear here that this kind of personal, covenant faithfulness is his intention for marriage. It is within such a commitment that our marriages will prosper, and husbands and wives as individuals will prosper. In his book *When Sinners Say I Do*, Dave Harvey tells the story of Mark and Carol. Married right out of college, they soon grew apart. Mark began spending a great deal of time at work and playing sports or watching sports on TV with his friends. As is typical in troubled marriages, they each blamed the other for their marriage problems and were largely blind to their own sins. Mark’s job required that he spend a lot of time with women, and he confessed later that he began to have emotional affairs with some of these women. But eventually they sought help with a counselor, who gave them a simple homework assignment of writing three reasons why they married each other and then talk about their reasons with one another. Mark found this exercise very difficult, but reports that God used it to break through. He saw his self-centeredness and irresponsibility and repented of it. God then began to renew in his heart a love for his wife. Shortly after that, Carol was diagnosed with chronic multiple sclerosis, eventually leading her to require a wheelchair. But the renewal of their marriage continued. Mark says, “By the time the MS began to show, the Lord had already begun to turn my heart toward Carol. The diagnosis came at almost the same time as the breakthrough in our marriage. MS had affected Carol’s sight, motor skills, features, mobility—it seemed that nothing lay untouched. But I had fallen in love again with Carol. I only saw how beautiful she was to me” (p. 174). Mark took Carol to the Sweethearts Banquet at their church. During a slow dance, he grabbed her hand and the wheelchair and took her to the dance floor, turning her chair and telling her of his love for her. When asked about his loyalty to his wife, Marks says, “I see it as a privilege and honor to serve Carol this way. It does have difficulties, but it is God’s way of showing me how much he loves me. I sense his love *for* me in how he has entrusted Carol *to* me.”

II. The Human Ending of Marriage

Jesus says that man is not to separate what God has joined. This is a command from him, requiring those who are married to take steps to secure their marriage against the painful rending apart that occurs in a divorce. Let me suggest a few things to do to strengthen your marriage. First, seek a broken, humble heart as you ask God to show you your sin in the marriage. Second, ask God to help you be filled with joy in knowing the love and forgiveness of Jesus. Hearts that are satisfied in Jesus are able to approach a spouse with an attitude of loving service instead of one of neediness. Third, pursue emotional and physical intimacy and guard against seeking such intimacy with members of the opposite sex other than your spouse. As mentioned last week, the sharing of secrets like this moves us well down the road toward intimacy outside of marriage. Finally, respond to marital troubles by trusting in God for your marriage instead of trying to seize control and attempting to manipulate your spouse back into a healthy relationship. In his book, *When the One You Love Wants to Leave*, Donald Harvey illustrates what this looks like by using the imagery of a swing. A swing can only go out so far before it must swing back in the other direction. In a marriage, one spouse will sometimes move away from the marriage in pursuit of an illusion, the idea that things would be better away from the marriage. Trusting God simply means that you let that spouse go. Often, he or she will then swing back into the marriage after discovering that the desire for something outside the marriage was in fact an illusion. But if the other spouse desperately clings to the relationship, this process cannot happen.

What happens, though, if a spouse swings out and doesn't swing back in? Trusting God and allowing the spouse to go doesn't always yield the return of that spouse to the marriage. Jesus acknowledges the reality of that situation in this passage where he makes an exception to his general rule about divorce. The general rule is that divorce is forbidden on the grounds of God's original design of marriage being the joining of two into one. The exception occurs when there has been "**sexual immorality**" (v. 9). There is a great deal of disagreement about the precise meaning of this phrase. We do not have time to review all the possibilities as to the meaning of this word in this context. So let me give you my conclusion. I agree with David Jones who, in his book on Christian ethics says that it refers specifically to the sexual sin of adultery and also to "violations of the marriage covenant [that] are the moral equivalent of adultery.... All these actions strike at the heart of the marriage relationship" (p. 203). So I think, for example, that a husband's abuse of his wife could rise to the level of this kind of violation. Paul understands desertion to be an appropriate reason for divorce (1 Cor. 7). My conclusions on this are the same as those of a denominational study committee reporting on this issue several years ago. Those conclusions can be summarized under two points. First, all divorces are biblical unlawful except those where there has been adultery and desertion. Second, since adultery and desertion are not always black and white issues, any who seek divorce on biblical grounds need the counsel of church leaders, who will be able to advise if particular behaviors rise to the level of one of these biblical grounds.

III. The Divine Ending of Marriage

There is an implication in these words of Jesus that is made clear elsewhere in the Bible. Man is not to terminate a marriage, except for the reasons stated in the Bible, but God can do so. He does so at death, as is taught in the final phrase of our marriage vows—“as long as we both shall live.” Jesus said that **“in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven”** (Matt. 22:30). Marriage as we know it will not exist in heaven. It will pass away not because there is anything wrong with it, but because it will be fulfilled. Marriage is designed to be a picture of Jesus’ love for his people, and when the real thing appears, the representation of it becomes unnecessary. If I am apart from my family, I enjoy looking at their pictures. But if my wife were in the room with me, I would never turn away from her to look at her picture. When she is there, something much better than her picture is present. Marriage passes away because something much better is coming. The fulfillment of Jesus’ love is coming, and it will be breathtakingly joyful. Listen to the way Charles Spurgeon speaks of the heavenly wedding that will bring together Jesus and his people.

On that day... what a measureless flood of delight shall overflow the souls of all glorified spirits as they perceive that the consummation of love’s great design is come—“The marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready”! We do not know yet, beloved, of what happiness we are capable... Oh, may I be there!... Oh, what a day that will be when every member of Christ shall be crowned in him, and with him, and every member of the mystical body shall be glorified in the glory of the Bridegroom! A day will come, the day of days, time’s crown and glory, when... the saints, arrayed in the righteousness of Christ, shall be eternally one with him in living, loving, lasting union, partaking together of the same glory, the glory of the Most High. What must it be to be there!

CONCLUSION:

This is good news for all who belong to Jesus, no matter your marital status. If you have a very happy marriage that continues to bring you great joy, thank the Lord for that. But the best is yet to come, and the joy of your marriage shall be multiplied many times over. If you have a troubled marriage, know that your troubles are temporary. Your eternal spouse, Jesus Christ, will give you the grace and perseverance you need for your earthly marriage and will bring you into perfect joy in your heavenly marriage. And if you are single and often battling loneliness, with no relief in sight from a possible future marriage, your life is not over. The best is yet to come, as you spend eternity in the kind of marital joy of which the best earthly marriage is but a shadowy outline.