

My wife and I have been married to each other for 32 years. And we would say 29 those 32 years have been terrific. We have a strong marriage, but by no means perfect. I love the opportunity to be an advocate for getting marital help and counseling. A season of counseling in year seven of our marriage made a huge difference for us.

It isn't breaking news to any of us here to say that a good marriage isn't easy. Everyone has suffered because of divorce. It might be your own, or maybe your parent's, or your kid's divorce. And for those of you who have not, you have experienced the reality of what I call, low intimacy marriages. Maybe you tried to encourage others, maybe you have seen the effects of low intimacy marriage in your family spill over into your marriage.

I've heard it said wives look through pink tinted glasses and husbands look through blue tinted glasses. So not only do we see things differently, and then have the challenges of understanding these differences, but we look through lenses that are scratched, dirty and cloudy.

We look through lenses that may be scratched with the pain of past betrayal of infidelity, physical abuse, emotional abuse, or addiction. These are scratches that can only be buffed out by God's grace, which brings forgiveness and eventual healing.

We look through lenses that are dirty through our own sin. This sin needs to be washed off by confession, repentance, and trusting in a new way of following Jesus.

We look through lenses clouded with our own fingerprints, which clouds our vision with thumbprints of our own selfishness and pride. It is only the clean cloth of God's Word that wipes away the blurriness of self-interest, which helps us to see clearly to walk in a new way in our relationships before him.

I enjoy spending time doing pre-marital counseling with young couples who are trying to prepare for marriage. And I've yet to meet a couple who were actually planning not to stay together for the rest of their lives. It's right for CPC to help anyone who asks how to navigate through the landmines of marriage and the lure of divorce. The church must be a safe place for healing and forgiveness for those who have been through the pain of divorce, but it should also be a place where marriage commitments are nurtured and honored. It is reality that we live in a fallen and broken world. And this must be taken into account in applying the heart of our Scripture to our topic this morning. That's what Jesus was doing in Matthew 19: 1-12.

*When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. (Matthew 19: 1-2)*

Jesus was finishing saying the things in chapter 18 about forgiving one another, and about humility being a sign of greatness in his new community. Jesus left the region around the Sea of Galilee to the north where he had spent a long time teaching, and healing. In fact his ministry in Galilee goes all the way back to chapter 4 verse 12. Where was he going? Jesus was on the move. He was moving toward Jerusalem, he was moving toward the cross, he was moving toward his final and ultimate act of forgiveness. Matthew tells us that he took a well-traveled road on the east side of the Jordan, following the road south toward Jerusalem.

It doesn't say he healed a blind man, or a leprous woman, Matthew said he healed whole "crowds," plural. And after all the healing, then came the Pharisees. Instead of asking them where his miraculous powers came from, they asked about divorce. Instead of asking him if he was the Messiah, the promised one, they asked about divorce.

**Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" (Matthew 19: 3)**

Their motivation was to test Jesus, trip him up, and get him to say something people would misinterpret so they'd stop following him. If Jesus was said this... he doesn't revere Moses. Or if Jesus said that, then Jesus said men can indulge in any lust that suits them.

Divorce and God's people is a hot button issue today and it was also a hot button issue back in Jesus day. The debate centered on the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1. They wondered if a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, could he divorce her for any and every reason?

There were two ways to think about divorce in Jesus' time. The key phrase was how to interpret, something indecent. The conservative school said divorce should never happen except in the case of adultery. If Jesus came down in the small and narrow conservative position he would be unpopular with the authorities, and the Pharisee's hope was Jesus would go the way of John the Baptist and end up getting arrested as John did when he ticked off Herod for confronting him about his adultery.

If Jesus came down in the more liberal camp, which said a man could divorce a woman for virtually any reason at all then they could accuse Jesus of going against Moses' more strict teaching of what was indecent according to the law. Did you know that a man could divorce his wife at a whim in the days of Jesus. Indecent meant your not pretty enough anymore, or you burned my dinner. It was crazy? Now could a woman divorce a man for any reason or even for adultery? Absolutely not. Women had no legal rights in the time of Jesus. Women had no part in public life. They could not vote. School was only for boys. Women were bought, sold and traded while enduring the worst things imaginable.

Understand the religious leaders didn't care about women. They were not asking, "What if a man beats his wife, can she divorce him for that reason?" Although we know there is much more we need to do to protect women and the most vulnerable from abusers, as a father of two daughters I am thankful that my girls live in 2018 and not in Jesus day.

So the trap is set. Would Jesus tick off Herod or would he tick off those who followed Moses? The trap was set. And this is Jesus' brilliant answer. He said, "You're are quoting Moses who you don't follow anyway, let me take you back further than culture, tradition, and opinion to help you understand what Moses was teaching." Instead of telling them ways they could exit their marriages, he told them why they should stay in and fight for their marriages.

### **Jesus on the Riches of Marriage**

To reveal to us the riches of marriage, Jesus went all the way back to the second chapter of Genesis, the first book of the Bible.

*"Haven't you read," "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'?" (Matthew 19: 4-5)*

Jesus links marriage all the way back to the original designer. Jesus was saying, "Marriage is designed by God, and it's as old as time. And the marriage that is designed by God is to be a complementation socially, spiritually, and physically between a man and a woman, both made equal in the image of God." He was saying that Marriage isn't designed by men, it isn't a contract between two human parties, it is a covenant established by God, where two separate individuals, a man and a woman, before God become a "we."

The covenant means "one flesh." When a marriage is formed, a spiritual transaction is made in heaven and the two become one. Physically, we become one flesh as we enjoy the beauty of our sexual union. Emotionally, we become one flesh in the process of living together, working together, and struggling together. Spiritually, we become one flesh as we follow Jesus together

through prayer, worship, and serving. In a mysterious way, God glues two people together.

*So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." (Matthew 19:6)*

The one flesh is a picture of something new created. And it is a picture of permanence. You can't take something God has glued together and separate it. If it were a man made thing, maybe you could, but it's not. This is why divorce brings such deep pain and suffering. Because we are undoing something God has glued together. Someone once said, "If it's true that in marriage one plus one equals one, then how can you divide the number one without making fractions?" The deception of divorce is to think we can divide one flesh and be left with two whole individuals. A divorce is like an amputation. You may survive, but there is less of you. And that is why a couple that struggles needs to pursue all the help they can to keep and experience the covenant as God intended.

The Pharisees neither saw the beauty or the brilliance of Jesus' answer. In a divorce happy culture, Jesus upheld God's dream for marriage, which is two people, one man and one woman, standing before each other naked and not ashamed. They cling and grow together through life's uncertainties, giving and receiving forgiveness until they are parted by death. But the Pharisees only saw their trap. And all they have to do was push a little harder and their trap would snap and catch Jesus. They pursued their argument further into the divorce and in doing so Jesus expressed to them and to all of us that not only was there riches in marriage, there was poverty in divorce.

### **Jesus on the Poverty of Divorce**

I want to start here. Here is what the Lord says about divorce. "For I hate divorce," says the LORD, the God of Israel" (Malachi 2:16a). The nation of Israel according to Malachi has broken faith. Their sons had married daughters of foreign gods. They broke their covenant with God. They brought great pain and suffering on themselves, and they asked God why? And God told them, because they had "left the wives of their youth."

**The Pharisees then asked,**

**"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"**

**(Matthew 19:7)**

It's important we understand that as harmful as a divorce is, marriages can and sometimes should end. But if marriage is such a marvelous institution, why do so many of these unions end with amputation. In verse 8 he identified the real culprit behind broken marriages and really every broken thing in society.

*Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives (permitted, not commanded as the Pharisee's said in verse 7) because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery." (Matthew 19: 8-9)*

Hardness of heart is part of the Fall in Genesis 3. Hardness of heart is part of the brokenness in humanity. There has to be an allowance for divorce because of our brokenness, our sin, and our hardness of hearts. And in verse 9 Jesus mentions one of the two exemptions for divorce - adultery.

The original word for immorality is *porneia*. It's a word that refers to every kind of illicit sexual relationship. Jesus said any type of sexual infidelity involving a person with another that you are not married to is a violation of the marriage covenant, so much so that divorce is allowed. Jesus is saying, "The world may say that sex is just biology, just a physical act, but it's so much more, it involves us at a deep spiritual level. And it can justifiably end a marriage.

But adultery doesn't require divorce. Hearts can be softened and some marriages survive adultery. Some marriages have survived adultery because of God's grace and mercy softens hearts to repent, forgive, and reconcile. I don't want to minimize the horror and pain of adultery, but God can work a miracle and some marriages can actually thrive afterward. Jesus is also saying, "If you divorce for any other reason than a spouse's infidelity and then remarry, you are committing adultery."

After Jesus finishes verse 9, how do the Pharisee's respond? We don't know. It is as if they have disappeared with their empty traps in hand.

For the next couple of minutes, I want to leave Matthew and have us turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 7 beginning in verse 10. If you are like me, you have some real questions about other real life scenarios that affect us and people we love. I believe Paul adds another exception in a very different context. It's the early church, and people are coming to Christ, and it was quite common that only one spouse would come to Christ. What should the new Christians in Corinth do?

*To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. (1Corinthians 7: 10-11)*

Paul is talking about cases where adultery isn't an issue. He recognized that sometimes believers did separate. I have no hesitation saying that if a wife is being physically abused she should get out of the situation. This is about the deepest kind of violation of the sanctity of life, and unless there is repentance and proven change, I counsel separation at the least. If there is emotional or verbal abuse with a spouse, I investigate it more thoroughly

before counseling on separation and divorce. I have counseled legal separation in cases of addiction that could lead to financial ruin, or to the degree kids are involved. This can get the attention of the addict to seek the help they need. But understand, I don't encourage separation lightly and I certainly don't encourage divorce in most cases not involving adultery. But what if our spouse does not believe in Jesus? Does that matter? In the Corinthian church when one became a follower of Jesus, the question came up, shouldn't I put what was in my former life behind me and that includes my yet to believe spouse?

*To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): (Paul is saying I speak with apostolic authority, and Jesus didn't address this in Matthew 19, so I will) If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. (1Corinthians 7: 12-13)*

Now in verse 14, Paul states why they are not to leave...

*For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. (1Corinthians 7: 14)*

This doesn't mean that your unbelieving family members are automatically saved because of you. The word, sanctify, means "set apart." Paul was saying, "Your spouse and children are now "set apart" under the positive influence of the good news of Jesus because of you." There is no guarantee your spouse or children will come to believe in Jesus, but Paul's words are certainly an encouragement that they may. If you are in this situation, this should free you to love your unbelieving spouse with all your heart and be the best wife or husband you can be. It should give you hope.

But what happens if your unbelieving spouse wants out of the marriage?

*But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (1Corinthians 7: 15-16)*

Paul is envisioning a situation where the unbelieving spouse chooses to leave. If the unbeliever deserts and is determined not to return, then let him or her go. When Paul said we are not under bondage, he means the bond of marriage has been broken and you are free to remarry. So there are only two situations where divorce is permissible - adultery according to Jesus and abandonment according to Paul.

The church must be a safe place for healing and forgiveness for those who are followers of Christ who have been through the pain of divorce. Remember, Jesus is full of grace to us who

are broken people. His grace and mercy extends to followers of Christ who divorce and remarry against the will of God. My pastoral counsel to you, if you have divorced and remarried against the will of God, is to confess and ask God for forgiveness. Stop looking backward but honor God in your marriage for the rest of your life.

If you are in a bad marriage I want you to know throughout history, Christians have lived with tremendous joy, and experienced great freedom in bad situations. Accept the fact that marriage is hard work. Look in the mirror and focus more on changing yourself than changing your spouse. Keep praying God will change you and restore your love for one another. You may be thinking, "Dan you don't know my marriage. You can't relate." I don't pretend to relate, but I can give you this encouragement. I want you to know that no matter your background, God loves to come alongside you in your pain and bring comfort. Remember God hates divorce, but he doesn't hate divorcees. You may have been abandoned, but God will never abandon his children.

Jesus has shown us the riches of marriage and the poverty of divorce and now Jesus shows us the power of singleness.

### **Jesus on the Power of Singleness**

*The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry." (Matthew 19: 10)*

The disciples were making a statement. Marriage is so complicated that why would anyone want to do it? Marriage is beautiful, and there is nothing like it, but not all are called to marriage. Those who are not called to marriage right now or ever, need to consider they have a higher calling, which is their commitment to serving God and expanding his kingdom.

*Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, (about the high calling of marriage) but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it." (Matthew 19: 11-12)*

Jesus sees single people who love him as having a special ability and opportunity to live for the kingdom of God, and have a powerful impact on the kingdom of God in ways a married person could never have. Some who are single, see their calling as so important they would give up a future marriage for it. May the

church lift up the singles among us and bless them as Christ lifts them up here in this passage.

We need a miracle. Whether we feel responsible for our own pain or have taken responsibility for the pain we have caused others in the past, whatever it is, there is a loss you may feel. Maybe it feels like a loss of a dream. Whatever your current relationship status is, I want you to know God's plan and desire is you would experience union, oneness, and fellowship with God.

But to get there, everyone of us needs to know we will have to go through something called, "The Dark Night of the Soul." The dark night can be suffering, depression, setback, a disappointment, or something in your life where it feels God's a million miles away. To grow and mature as a follower of Jesus, every one of us at some time must pass through the dark night of the soul. No Christian is exempt from it. The Dark Night of the Soul is a place of stripping, purging, and cleansing. It is the place where "I want my will" is transformed to say, "I want God's will."

A dark night of the soul is an opportunity for us to wait on God to strengthen our soul, to change our appetites, and to develop our appetite for God. To see the resurrection power of Jesus there must be death to bitterness, anger, and unforgiveness. If we wait on God, persevere, and gain all we can, God will do a deep work in our lives and bring a new beginning of something beautiful regardless of your marital status.

There is truth and healing that can only be discovered through suffering. Through suffering, we realize truth. Through suffering, seeds are planted for something new to grow.

*"It's in the shadow of death, we are not to look back to the past but to seek in utter darkness the dawn of God." (Theologian Pierre Chardin)*

If you are waiting for a miracle, don't look backward, look forward, and in the utter darkness around you look for something new. A new dawn will come as you pass through the dark night of the soul. Wait on God for the dawn of something beautiful, for a resurrection, for God to unfold your life in a way of which you never dreamed.