

Sermon Reading: Matthew 19:1-12

**Sermon Theme: “Is Marriage Really Till Death Do Us Part?”**

When something is broken you either choose to fix it or throw it away and start all over again with something fresh. How we decide what to do often times comes down to how much we value the item. If your new car breaks down for the first time, there’s a good chance you are going to try and fix it. But if your plastic fork you are using at the picnic breaks, you aren’t going to waste your time trying to fix it...just get a new one. But even those things that held great value at one point, don’t always keep that value. Eventually you get tired of fixing them, the effort is no longer worth it, and you finally get sick of it and decide to trade in that old car for a new one.

It’s really sad when this gift of marriage is treated in a similar way. But that’s what seems to happen. Depending on where you look at your statistics, supposedly divorce rates have been decreasing in the last years. But even still, you know how prevalent divorce remains. Now, I don’t think it’s because people go into marriage with the plan that in so many years they will be divorced. When the couple makes the promise that they will stay together, “as long as we both shall live,” I feel like in general they hope that it’s going to work out. But all too often that’s all it is: a **hope** while in the back of the mind there sits that thought, “But if it doesn’t—when you are tired of working on it, fed up trying to fix it, when it gets old, not as exciting, not going the way you expected—I have options, don’t I?” When we consider life and the world around us, is marriage really till death do us part—or is that just a nice thought in the wedding ceremony?

We are told in Matthew 19 verse 3 some Pharisees come to Jesus to test him. **They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”** The Pharisees’ question had already been debated quite often. It was based on the Law of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy 24:1 where a certificate of divorce could be written *if a husband decides his wife has become displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her*. There were two prevailing schools of thought on what this exactly means. There was the school of Shammai and his followers who saw this referring to adultery, being unfaithful, betrayal in a marriage. Then there was the school of Hillel and his followers who took it to mean that one could divorce for the flimsiest of reasons such as she served food that was burnt or she talked too loudly. So the trap is to get Jesus to say something that should anger someone and start a raging argument that could be used to discredit Jesus. Or so the Pharisees thought.

But Jesus again deftly avoids the trap. He shows with his response it’s not a question of experience and it’s not a question of the various circumstances the couple might face. The question comes down to the principle, “Is it God’s will to get a divorce?” And in order to answer that question Jesus goes back to Creation. Quoting Genesis Jesus says in verse 4 and 5, **“At the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ v 5 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?’”**

Remember how when the earth was six days old, God created man. And after creating man, Adam, God made the declaration that it is not good for man to be alone—he needs a partner, a companion, someone by his side to work with him, to support and help him. Man’s best friend wasn’t his buddies he hangs out with; man’s best friend wasn’t a dog. The perfect companion for man was the one who Adam described as, “This is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.” It was woman. Only two humans were created at the beginning. Had it been intended that man leave one wife for another, God should have created more wives. But he didn’t. Instead, he created male and female, the perfect combination to be joined together.

It’s for that reason of joining together that man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife. The Fourth Commandment is still very much in place that parents are to be honored and respected. But both parents and children need to realize that the once intimate relationship of parent and child must be left behind. No matter how close you were with mom and dad or with family, this new relationship you have with your spouse is greater and closer. With your parents you are blood-related; with your spouse it’s a union of one flesh.

And what a beautiful thing this one-flesh union is. It’s not just the sexual, physical union God gives and blesses in marriage. It’s a mental bond where sometimes it seems like you can read your partner’s thoughts or know how they feel. It’s a conforming of wills so you work together. It’s a bond of trust and commitment to each other. It’s such a close bond that when it is broken it can feel like you personally are broken. Think of an older couple, married for many years, and a spouse passes away—there’s a feeling of something missing that you feel should be there. The two, in marriage, became one flesh. And just to make sure we get the point Jesus repeats it in v.6 **“So they are no longer two, but one flesh.”**

Notice when this all starts: at marriage when two individuals are committed and joined together. This isn’t living together to make sure you are compatible, it’s the most convenient right now, or even that it makes sense. It’s not having someone who you are kind of close to and so you keep around enjoying the benefits of marriage. This one flesh bond is for a married couple. These are principles that are to be upheld, supported, and promoted whether one is married, single, or dating. As our reading from Hebrews put it: **Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral (13:4).**

But Jesus’ response isn’t good enough. The Pharisees ask in v.7 **“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”** To which Jesus replied, **“Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.** Why was there the certificate of divorce? The Israelites were stubborn people. They didn’t like what God had said. They wanted an escape route when things weren’t going the way they hoped or wanted. Jesus is saying, because you refused to follow God’s will, Moses allowed divorce but wasn’t condoning it. Divorce was not God’s intended will from the beginning. The exception does not change the principle. Jesus then clarifies in v.9, **“I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality,**

**and marries another woman commits adultery.”** Sexual immorality, being unfaithful, cheating, however you want to state it, breaks the one-flesh bond that was promised and established at marriage. Therefore, the divorce makes public what already happened in private.

But even Jesus’ disciples are having trouble with this. They say, **“If this is the situation between husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”** They recognize the magnitude of what Jesus is saying. It’s not like people today are the first ones to be enlightened that married until death do us part is difficult and a seemingly unreasonable, outdated way to think. The disciples see it too because Jesus just took away the escape route if things get really difficult in a marriage. The only out is death or you cheat on your spouse and then can divorce. But then you commit the sin of adultery and God will judge you; you don’t want that. Or you have to hope your spouse commits adultery and then you can divorce. But again no one wants that to happen either.

For the disciples what Jesus says sounds unrealistic; almost impossible. For us it might feel the same way because marriage is hard. It’s difficult. We don’t want to feel stuck but there is this desire to have an escape, a back door to get out of this promise. It still hasn’t changed since the days of Moses: Because of the hardness of our hearts we struggle to follow God’s will.

“But, Pastor, you don’t understand what we, what they were going through. If you just listen to our situation, it’s different. He’s let himself go and doesn’t seem to care anymore about anyone or anything. She’s not doing anything around the house and leaving it all to me. He’s not setting enough time for me and the kids. She no longer has eyes for me but her gaze is wandering to others. We are always fighting; we have fallen out of love.” That’s a big one, right. And for some it’s the nail in the coffin for a dead marriage: we no longer love each other.

Notice how Jesus says that at that time you are then allowed a divorce. Oh wait, he doesn’t. Some days you don’t like your spouse. Other days you might question your love. But marriage is not based on the feeling of love. It’s a commitment to a promise. Jesus says, “What God has joined together, let man not separate.” Yes, you may have chosen each other, but you don’t have sole ownership of marriage. It’s God who instituted marriage. It’s what God has brought together. And his rules are, “Let man not separate.”

The biggest problem, what leads to the most trouble and divorce in marriage—and our relationships with each other in general—is the refusal and the struggle to practice God’s love. Because it is hard. It takes a lot of work. And it doesn’t always seem very rewarding. But think about how God didn’t fall in love with you. There was nothing lovable about our dirty, decaying, dead corpse of sin. All he was aware of and saw was your rotting, rebellion, pushing-back of sin and he hated it. There was nothing there to fall in love with.

No, God chose to love you. From before creation God chose you to be his own and he decided that he was going to give you his love. And because he chose to love you, he sent his one and only Son to be the sacrifice that would make us at one with him and fixed your relationship with God. Because he chose to love you, Jesus chose to live and to die for you. Jesus willingly gave

himself up for you dying on that cross to make you holy—that is without sin—making you clean of sin by the washing of water through the Word in baptism. You are made a new creation: a living holy child of God, the bride of Jesus who chose you to be his own. He didn't wait for you to deserve; he knew you never could. He didn't wait until you improved; he knew you never would. But because he chose to love you he chose to give his forgiveness and love freely.

The secret to marriage—the secret to every relationship we have—is to treat your partner as Jesus treats you: with patient unconditional love and forgiveness. Christ's love says, "I'll go first." In that, "I will forgive you first. I won't wait for you to deserve it in some way. I'm not going to wait until you are better—whatever that even means. I'll chose to love you and forgive you first because that's what Jesus does for me." And the beautiful thing is that in marriage God gives husband and wife the opportunity to practice and to show that loving, unconditional forgiveness with each other as long as they both shall live.

Not everyone can accept this teaching. Jesus says, "**Only those to whom it has been given,**" are able to. But if you don't pay attention to the designer—God who instituted marriage and his Will, then anything goes with marriage and divorce. Unless you pay attention to what God has given to you in his Word, you aren't going to get it. Yes, there are some who are better off not being married, which is the point Jesus is making in v. 12. You aren't sinning because you are single; in fact, there are different ways you are able to serve others and God by being single. Yes, "Till death do us part" is hard. Not everyone can accept this teaching. But it is true. And by faith God that gives to you, through his Word given to you, we believe it to be both true and God's will.

I'm sure there are things that have been said that have made you uncomfortable and maybe you've felt yourself pushing against. So first and foremost I invite you to repent with me and let God's forgiveness wash over you. Just as we are all liars and cheat, so we all need to repent of that sin of adultery in thought, word, and deed and not always honoring marriage. Repent and be forgiven. The fact you had failures in the past does not keep you from restarting in the forgiveness of Christ. Each day is a new day of his grace and forgiveness that he abundantly pours out on you. Be filled up with Jesus' love and forgiveness. Come forward and receive it with your hands and mouth at the Lord's Supper. The more we are filled up with Jesus' love recognizing it in our own lives and how much we need it, the more willing and the more we desire to share Jesus' love with others. As you have been forgiven, so you are able to forgive. Share that love whether you are single, dating, or married. Share Christ's love unconditionally and freely given. Amen.