

The Church's Way

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[0 : 0 0] Well, thank you, Willie, for leading our service. You did very, very well, and we'll like to see you up here again soon. Maybe you'll take a little pressure off me. I'd actually like you to preach today as well.

This is a big sermon. It's on marriage and divorce and singleness and children all together in one sermon.

And so it is a challenge, and it's good to always pray for your preachers, but especially on a day like today. Each of these sections can be a sermon series, which would be very important for our life together.

And Jesus is speaking to you and me. He's speaking particularly to the church. He wants our relationships to reflect God and his grace and his wisdom and his teaching, which is often so very different from the wisdom of the world.

This is what he has been teaching his disciples as they're walking down towards Jerusalem, where Jesus has said he is going to suffer and die on a cross and rise again for the healing of the nations, for the relationships to be restored with God and with one another and with our creation as well.

[1 : 1 8] And Jesus is teaching as he's going along. He is teaching about the heart, about our hearts, and how important they are in all of this, trying to live for the kingdom of God.

I don't know if you noticed, but our readings both talked about the hardness of heart and how that is a temptation for all of us to fall into, where we are alienated from God because our hearts are hard towards him and towards his ways for us.

So Jesus is deeply interested in our hearts. The heart in the Bible is the ruling center of our whole person. It's the spring of our desires.

It's where it is the place of our will, of our intellect, and our feelings. And Jesus says, I want that heart to be alive to God, to be warm to God, to be soft towards him.

And in fact, just the passage before, if you, by the way, turn to Matthew 19, 1 through 15. It's very helpful. Page 824. And notice just before chapter 19, Jesus says that my father will judge you if you do not forgive your brother or your sister from your heart.

[2 : 4 1] From your heart. And so Jesus knows that it is a heart that is turned towards God alone that can do that kind of forgiving work.

So in our reading today, Jesus teaches us what it means to have a heart towards him. that we would love the things which Jesus commands and desire the things that Jesus promises.

I'm going to pray that prayer at the end. It's a wonderful way to understand what our hearts are meant to be. They are meant to be loving those things which Jesus commands and desiring those things which he promises.

Because when our hearts are fixed on God in this way, our relationships reflect God's glory, God's heart. We experience his goodness. And that's what Jesus wants in all the relationships in our church.

Whether we are married, whether we are single, whether we are children, the way that we are living and thinking that seeks God's glory first of all changes our relationship.

[3 : 44] And this is wisdom that's radically different from the world. Yet this is the way of blessing for you and for me. It's the way that we reach a lonely and purposeless world as well.

If we live this kind of relational life. So Jesus is diagnosing your heart this morning. He's diagnosing my heart as well.

He's asking us, are you alive to God or are you hardened to God in your relationships? And I want you to notice that all this teaching happens in the context of verse 2, which is Jesus doing many healings in great crowds that are following him.

And I think this is not an accident that Matthew tells us this context, because what Jesus teaches about our relationships is actually the way of healing. of healing our hurts, of healing damaged relationships, and of bringing us close to God, our great relationship.

So he begins by teaching about marriage in verse 3 through 9. And it all begins with the dangerous testing questions that the Pharisees ask him in verse 3. He says, they say, is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?

[4 : 59] So they just throw this out, out of the blue. It's a dangerous question, because Jesus and disciples are now going down on the east side of the Jordan River towards Jerusalem.

And this is the realm, the area of rule for Herod Antipas. And I don't know if you know about this rascal, but he is a guy who ended up meeting his half-brother's wife and thinking that she was great and divorcing his wife so that he could marry her.

John the Baptist, if you may remember, told Herod this was wrong. And John was beheaded for speaking up about it.

The Pharisees, I'm sure, were really hoping the same thing would happen to Jesus if he spoke out and Herod got back to him. But Jesus uses that trapping question to teach not so much about divorce, although that is here, but about what marriage is.

What is marriage meant to be all about? And then that changes your heart with regard to divorce. So look at verse 4 and 5. He says, Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made human beings male and female?

[6 : 16] And he said, Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.

What Jesus is saying here is marriage is not just a great idea that cultures came up with to order their society and to make things run well.

It was actually a gift of God from the very beginning of creation for all of humanity. He prepared marriage for males and females that he created so that the man will leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife.

And that word hold fast is a very important word. It is a sense of being welded or glued. In fact, I think a good picture of it is to think of grafting in a fruit tree.

So you know what happens with grafting is you take a bud and you cut a part of the host branch, the host trunk away, and you put it in there where that hole is, and then you tape it up.

[7 : 24] And when you read about grafting, it says you do this work and then you let nature do the rest of the work. And what they mean by that is that the sap begins to flow into that little bud, that branch, and it becomes one with that tree.

So it becomes part of the trunk itself. It becomes so unified that you wouldn't know that it was grafted in there. And that's a picture of what Jesus means by one flesh, which Jesus emphasizes here because God unifies two people, a man and a woman, like that tree trunk and bud.

They become one emotionally and physically, spiritually, intellectually. It's a living oneness that is actually God's work.

God does it. It's not the work of the couple who got married. It happens when they come together in marriage. In the marriage service, one of my favorite parts of it is when the minister pronounces that the couple is husband and wife.

And then there's this wonderful emphatic moment when the minister says Jesus' words in verse 6. And this is where it comes directly from. You say, what therefore God has joined together, let no one separate.

[8 : 49] And then the whole congregation very loudly says, Amen, enthusiastically. That is because it's God's perfect will for marriage that's being said in those words of Jesus.

He has grafted man and woman into a permanent union. And a person cannot undo this. Marriage is meant to reflect God's union with us in Jesus, which is a union that can't be broken either.

It is permanent. We can count on this for the rest of our life. We can give our life to that incredible commitment of God to us. And so, divorce is not meant by God to ever even be considered by a husband and wife as they go into it.

It's not to be considered an option. Marriage is a living union. And therefore, divorce, as Jesus is describing it, is a tearing apart of a living organism, of a living reality that always brings great pain.

And Jesus knows in his heart the depth of the hurt and the destruction that divorce brings. And it is something that comes not just to the couple in a deep, deep way and to their children, but also to friends and families of the couple in a lesser pain.

[10 : 16] Most of us have experienced this pain in our lives. Some of us directly in a deep way and some of us in a less direct way. But there is destruction.

There is a breaking apart. There is a pain. And this is something that Jesus bears in the forgiveness of our sins. That pain goes deep into his heart.

And he absorbs that and takes it into himself. So he is teaching how incredibly deep and important that oneness is and why it is not up to people to break that apart.

So the Pharisees are struck by this, obviously. In verse 7, they said, well, why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?

Why would he make it possible if you're saying you can't break that? Well, they get this from Deuteronomy 24, 1 through 4. And what the Pharisees did and the teachers in Israel did is to run with this so that men, men alone, could write a divorce certificate for their wives for even very trivial reasons.

[11 : 26] They spoiled the meal. I should be divorced many times over, I think. or because they didn't get along with their in-laws.

Anything that would say I'm displeased with my wife, they could write very easily a certificate of divorce. But Jesus said to them, it is actually because of your hardness of heart that Moses allowed this.

He didn't command it. Jesus is pointing out he allowed it that you could divorce your wives. But from the beginning, from God's intention, from God's heart, it is not so.

You see what Jesus is saying here? The reason for divorce is that divorce will always involve a hardness of heart. And he's talking here especially about a hardness of heart towards God, towards his intentions, towards his creative work in us.

And so what Jesus, what Moses allowed that Jesus mentioned here, is an attempt to bring order to a bad situation that's caused by human failure, by a hard-heartedness in that marriage.

[12 : 41] But again, Jesus says, this has happened, but I want to emphasize to you again the oneness of marriage. I say to you, Jesus said, whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality and marries another commits adultery.

And Jesus does this so that we can understand that our hearts need to be vital. They need to be alive to God in marriage.

That the hardness of heart is the danger that we need to avoid at all costs. And that's what Jesus has been teaching throughout his journey with his disciples.

He says, I'm going to suffer and die and rise again for you and for your salvation. And he's telling his disciples that it is in taking up your own cross and following me that you will soften your hearts, that you will find life.

It is giving away your life, he says, that you will find life. And that's why the cross makes all the difference in any marriage. In our marriages that we are part of, in the marriages in our church, the cross makes all the difference.

[13 : 52] And that's because the cross means I am the worst sinner in the room. It is saying that at unimaginable cost, Jesus forgave me and he forgives you as well.

Jesus' story about, that we just heard about the servant was one who was forgiven billions of dollars of debt that he could never pay. And it illustrates this cost to Jesus for our forgiveness.

But it also shows how greatly loved you are. Your eternal problem is solved. You belong to God. You are his child forever. You are his, his own with all that goes with that.

And that puts the unmet needs that you may feel in your marriage into perspective because your deepest need is met by Jesus. And to know that, soften your hearts towards God every day.

And there's a second way that the cross changes the disciples' hearts and our hearts in marriage. And that is that Jesus died to all his felt needs in order for us to live.

[15 : 07] And that is an example for us. We are to walk in his steps, Jesus says. Because in marriage, we are actually called to die to our felt needs and to serve the other person.

That's easier said than done. To focus on your spouse's felt needs. And this is not saying that you stay in a situation where you are being abused in a marriage.

In fact, what we just heard in the last chapters of Matthew is that if someone is sitting against you, you actually go to that person and say, this is wrong. And if they do not listen, then you bring two or three other people from the church into that situation.

And if even then there is very serious consequences that involves the whole church. So it doesn't mean staying in a situation that is evil and sinful. But it does need that you take your emotionally broken eyes off yourself and your own unmet needs and you plug yourself into your wife's needs or your husband's unmet needs.

And you plug yourself in and in that you find your satisfaction in giving her joy or him joy instead of yourself joy.

[16 : 18] This is odd sounding in our culture. It's utterly foreign to it. But it's God's wisdom. It's exactly what Jesus did on the cross who for the joy before him endured the cross for our sake.

Well, what was the joy before him? It wasn't just that he was going to be united with the Father in heaven. It was that he would see the result of the cross.

He would see our own resurrection and our own salvation. And this would give him satisfaction. This was the joy that he was looking forward to. Isaiah 53 prophesied that.

He said the Messiah was satisfied when he looked on the accomplishments of his suffering. You see, you are his crown. You are his pleasure because his death accomplished your resurrection.

And in the same way he says seek out the joy of serving your husband, of serving your wife and seeing the results of that in his or her life.

[17 : 25] Well, at this point the twelve disciples are saying what are we getting ourselves into in following Jesus? This is wisdom that is very different from anything we've heard.

Divorce was widespread in Palestine at that time because it was so easy. It was abused especially by the men. So it's exactly this is exactly what they are faced with which is very similar to our own century, our own culture because here again divorce is widespread in the same way.

So how did they respond? Well, it's attempted humor. They said look, if this is the case if we're going to be stuck with a marriage that we can never escape it's better not to marry, right?

And this was something ridiculous because singleness was unheard of in that culture. It was something to be avoided at all costs. You would never choose that.

So they're deliberately saying something that's not in the realm of possibility. But Jesus gives another radical teaching about God's kingdom and church. He says wait a second singleness is something that is part of our church part of God's kingdom that is a state that you will you can glorify God in powerful ways.

[18 : 45] And here's what he says verse 11 not everyone can receive this saying what you are saying disciples about maybe being choosing to be single and celibate but only those to whom it's given.

You see Jesus here raises the status of singleness and in the same way that he's raised the status of marriage so that is a situation given by God to glorify God in people's lives.

And I want you to look at verse 12 because he gives eunuchs as an example of this. And I have to explain what eunuchs are. It's not something you come up with an everyday conversation. How many of you have used that word in the last year?

Not many. And so we have to say why does Jesus repeat it about five times? Well eunuchs very simply were people that for various reasons could not have sexual relationships.

It was men that could not have sexual relationships. And what he says here is that they are because of physical defects or because they have been castrated. Often so that they could be trusted to work in a royal court with women without harassment.

[19 : 56] They had a very low status in Jesus' time. But Jesus in verse 12 calls eunuchs into the kingdom of heaven. He says this. He says for there are eunuchs who have been so far from birth.

There are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men castrated for that purpose. And there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

Let the one who is able to receive this receive it. Now at the end there, it's very important what Jesus says. He's not saying that men castrate themselves deliberately for the kingdom of God.

It's not literal. He is teaching about men who choose to be celibate for the sake of serving God in his kingdom. John the Baptist was one of these. He devoted his life to preparing people for Jesus to come.

He never married. Paul was likely a widower and he was single during all of his life as a missionary, the rest of his life in the Bible. Jesus himself chose to be single for the sake of that message and mission to seek and save the lost.

[21 : 06] And we know well-known women throughout recent history like Corrie ten Boom, Elizabeth Elliott, Mother Teresa, who gave their lives in singleness to God and his work.

John Stott and Dick Lucas have a tremendous effect on the kingdom of God because of their life of singleness serving Jesus in that state.

And there's many single women and men today that serve him in this congregation in that state of singleness. In fact, all of us are single at one time.

We're single before as we're looking for somebody to get married if that is what God is calling us to. We are single if we lose a spouse to death as well. And Jesus is saying in that state of singleness you are exalted, you are raised up as somebody who lives for the kingdom of God and for his glory.

Now as a single person, Jesus knew that there was a cost to being single. Just as there was a cost to being faithful in marriage, there is a loneliness that can come, there is pain, there's unfilled hopes, there's dreams for a family that aren't met.

[22 : 22] Many of us don't choose to be single. We have not yet found the right person to marry or our husband or wife has died. In fact, Jesus says here that in this state, God will glorify Jesus.

It's not a time of waiting for loose ends to be tied up. The beauty of singlehood is that it is a gospel way. The good news of Jesus is that we are united to him when we trust in him and in his death for us.

And we are united in a way that is deeper than any marriage. And that's why Jesus is called the bridegroom. And we in the church are called the bride.

One Anglican minister, I think, illustrated this really, really well. He said that he is committed to celibacy because he's same-sex attracted.

And he wants to be faithful to Jesus. And he said that singleness showed that the good news is perfectly sufficient for us, for each of us, actually.

[23 : 26] Perfectly sufficient. The one marriage that we can't live without is the marriage that we have with Jesus Christ and the church. We can live without earthly marriage because deeper than sexual longings, he said, is the longing for Jesus Christ.

In fact, he said marriage simply points to something beyond itself, to something far greater, and that's our union to Jesus Christ, who we will see one day and live out that union, that marriage, forever.

So singleness and marriage need to be put into perspective. Both are temporary. But what is permanent is that we are married to Christ. Now, I want to say that sufficiency in the gospel is not self-sufficiency.

In the church, those who are married have a task, I think. They have a responsibility, and that is to bring others into our families. Psalm 68 says this.

It says, God sets the lonely into families. Well, how does he do that except through the families of the church? It is what God calls us to as we relate to one another in these healthy ways.

[24 : 39] So there's our challenge, and I want to close very briefly with a very powerful picture, and it is a picture of children in verses 13 through 15.

Why does he end that way? Well, as Ben rightly said, that is one of the primary reasons for marriage, is that we would have children. But children teach us many, many things about how it is that we relate to one another, their status.

And I want you to look at verse 13 and 15, because there, children were brought to Jesus, that he might lay hands on them and pray. And what you see in the next part is a hardness of heart.

The disciples rebuke Jesus. They rebuke the people, I should say. Actually, Jesus too. And they said, don't bring these children. Don't bother the master. But Jesus said this.

He said, let the little children come to me. Do not hinder them, for such belongs the kingdom of heaven. He is saying that children glorify God.

[25 : 46] He laid his hands on them and went away. And I wonder whether that was sort of a commissioning for them, to pray that they would be God's blessing to the world. Our world tells us that children are an encumbrance.

They cost money. You don't want to have too many. But in the kingdom of God, children are precious. They are a means that we bless the world as a church, as they grow up loving and knowing the Lord Jesus.

He lays his hands on them and he goes away. Well, what this teaches us is that the way we relate to children in God's kingdom is very simply to work together to bring them to Jesus.

To bring them to the place where Jesus blesses them and makes them to be a blessing to the world in his name. And as a church, we are meant to pray for children as Jesus did, to show them how to follow Jesus, to support the discipleship of parents, whatever age we are.

It might mean helping out in Sunday school. It might mean praying for them. It might be the way that you relate to them and model your Christian life to them. But as a church, we say that they glorify God.

[26 : 59] And most of all, we glorify Jesus when we reflect what it looks like to be a child, where we show our vulnerability and our dependence upon God our Father, where we show our trust in him as our Father, where we enjoy him as children enjoy their parents, where we enjoy our Heavenly Father forever and ever.

May God give us grace then to have hearts that are soft to him in all our relationships, that God will be glorified in whatever relationship and state that we are in, and the church is strengthened to be the place that light shines a light to the world, that desperately needs that kind of healing, that kind of company in the face of loneliness, holiness, and that purpose and hope that only God can give.

And I want to close by a prayer that it would be good for you to read this week as you go. It's from the fourth Sunday after Easter, and let's bow our heads and pray this prayer.

You don't have to follow along, but just follow along as you hear my words here. prayer. It's a call for God to change our hearts and admits that we have unruly wills and affections that need to be changed.

So let's pray. Oh, almighty God, who alone can order the unruly wills and affections of sinful people, grant unto your people gathered here at St.

[28 : 33] John's that they may love the thing which you command and desire that which you promise, that so among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.