

“All In the Family”

Matthew 19:1-15

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • March 16, 2014

It's no secret that our society is becoming more and more divided with a greater gap between the sides. Talking with someone with whom we disagree has been replaced with talking *at* them. Maybe shouting at them is a better description. In the middle of this culture war we find the issue of marriage.

It seems a bit ironic to me that marriage is at the center of the national debate. Marriage in Western nations has been in significant decline for many years. In fact, today only about half of adults are married. Compare that to 72% in 1960 and over 90% in the 1920s. Fewer and fewer people are getting married and that trend is expected to continue, at least for the next few years. Add to that fact that nearly half of all marriages end in divorce and now more than half, 53%, of all children born in the US are born to single mothers. Marriage is in rapid decline. But the importance of marriage is not.

In today's passage, some Pharisees came to Jesus and asked him a question about divorce. It was a question that the rabbis had debated for some time. They said, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason?" In other words, they were asking if there were any restrictions on divorce. Their question is based on Deuteronomy 24, which gives instructions on what a husband must do to divorce his wife. The reason for the divorce, according to that passage, is if "she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her." That's where the argument comes in. One side of the argument claimed that the indecency had to be something serious like sexual infidelity. The other side argued that the wife's indecency could be something as simple as serving a bad meal or even if the man found someone that was more attractive.

So the Pharisees come to Jesus. But Matthew tells us that they came to test him. They were hoping to trap him hoping that Jesus would say something they could use against

him. At the heart of their question, though, was the issue of the minimum requirements necessary to claim they were keeping the law. They wanted to know where the line was. We do the same thing. We want to know where the line is. As John Ortberg says, we want to know the minimum entrance requirements to get into heaven. What's the least I have to do? Jesus, however, is rarely interested in the minimum entrance requirements. He never draws the line in the sand and says, "if you cross this line you're out," or "you need to keep at least 70% of the Ten Commandments to pass." Jesus is always interested in showing us what's best for us. He wants us to know God's intentions for us, which is always the best thing for us.

While the Pharisees point to Moses, Jesus points redirects them all the way back to creation. He says, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 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'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." This is the second time in Matthew's gospel that Jesus has made this statement about marriage and it's almost word-for-word with the Sermon on the Mount. Why does Matthew repeat it?

I really think it's here deliberately. Jesus has just finished a long discussion on humility and forgiveness. He says that being a part of the Kingdom of Heaven requires humility like a very young child. Then he gave instructions on how to restore broken relationships. He said that the key component is forgiveness. Peter asked how many times he should forgive and Jesus basically said, "more times than you can count." Chapter 18 ended with a warning from Jesus about what could happen to us if we are unwilling to forgive. As Christians we are to

forgive others because we have been forgiven so much by God. Matthew follows this discussion on forgiveness with the discussion on marriage and families. Marriage is the closest of human relationships, followed by the parent/child relationship. We are most likely to hurt those who are closest to us and so if a marriage is going to last there will have to be lots of forgiveness.

I think the current state of marriage breaks God's heart. God loves marriage. He designed it. As Jesus has said here, marriage was part of God's design from the beginning. God created male and female to be complementary. The opposite sexes are designed for each other. As one author put it, men and women are similar enough to be comfortable with each other but different enough to be interesting to each other.

Jesus emphasizes his quote from Genesis 2 when he adds, "So they are no longer two but one flesh." With the advancements in brain imaging and research, scientists are discovering the powerful effect sex has on us, but Jesus knew 2,000 years ago. Sexual intimacy creates a physical, psychological and emotional bond between the two people. That's why sex outside of marriage is such a problem. It destroys the person's ability to create that permanent bond with a spouse. Jesus mentions this in verse 9. He says, "Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." The idea behind sexual immorality here is anything sexual outside of a marriage, including before marriage.

One of the reasons that marriage is in decline and that the divorce rate is so high is that, like the Pharisees in this passage, people today view marriage as a *contract*. It's viewed as an agreement between two people based on feelings of love and either party to the contract may terminate it if they feel that the other person is not fulfilling his or her obligations. "But the Bible views marriage as a *covenantal commitment between a man and a woman to live in a permanent and exclusive union of two*

lives." Do you see the difference? A contract is a 50/50 arrangement. Each person is responsible for his or her half of the agreement. A marriage is not 50/50, it's 100/100. Each person must give 100%.

In the Bible, a covenant is serious. Part of the covenant making ceremony was the killing of an animal. It was a way of saying, "If I don't keep my end of the agreement you can do this to me." A covenantal commitment in marriage means that it's not based on feelings. Our feelings can change in a moment and a marriage built on feelings cannot last. A marriage that lasts is built on commitment, no matter what. In verse 6, Jesus says, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." It's God who ultimately joins a man and woman in a marriage.

In 1943, while he was imprisoned in a German concentration camp, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote "A Wedding Sermon from a Prison Cell." In that sermon he captured the essence of a biblical marriage. He said, "God is guiding your marriage. Marriage is more than your love for each other. It has a higher dignity and power... In your love you see only the heaven of your own happiness, but in marriage you are placed at a post of responsibility towards the world and mankind. Your love is your own private possession, but marriage is more than something personal – it is a status, an office. Just as it is the crown, and not merely the will to rule, that makes the king, so it is marriage, and not merely your love for each other, that joins you together in the sight of God and man. It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love."

Christian marriage has a much higher purpose than just two people agreeing to be joined together legally. In Ephesians 5, the Apostle Paul also quotes the same passage from Genesis 2 that Jesus used here. He writes, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the

washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."

What Paul is saying is that God designed marriage to show others how much Christ loves the church. That's why Bonhoeffer says that marriage is an office. As Jesus has made clear, God has very high standards for marriage. In fact, none of us is able to achieve that standard perfectly. But how heartbreaking it is when people enter into a marriage seeking something other than God's design.

Jesus' disciples realize how high the standard is and they try to get Jesus to reconsider. They say, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." In other words, they want to know if it would be better to remain single. The high standard God has set scares them. Jesus responds with a discussion about being single by talking about eunuchs. A eunuch was a man who had been neutered, frequently as a servant to guard female royalty. Jesus uses that image to point out four reasons why people are single. First, as the disciples indicated, some are single because of a fear of commitment. They thought it better not to marry. Jesus responds that their suggestion is unacceptable. He says, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given." I think what he means is that being single is not for everyone, but that God does call some to remain single.

He says some are single because of some physical inability, perhaps a debilitating disease. Some are unable to marry because of actions by

other people. Finally, Jesus says that some people choose to remain unmarried in order to serve the Lord in a unique way. The time and resources that would go to a family are instead dedicated to God's service. He is clear that this is a special calling from God and very few can accept it. The main point, though, is that just as God loves marriage, God also loves single people.

In the final section of this passage some parents brought children to Jesus for him to lay his hands on them and pray. But the disciples tried to get them to go away. They apparently thought Jesus' time was too valuable for these kids. Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them." God also loves children.

Let me now share a few thoughts about how this passage affects us today. First, God's standard for marriage is only for Christians. It would not be appropriate for us to try to impose that standard on non-believers. Second, the standard Jesus lays out is nearly impossible. At some point we hurt or disappoint our spouse. Jesus is not laying out rules for us to use against each other, he's showing us God's ideal. Remember that Jesus here is teaching "in the shadow of the cross." He is preparing to go to the cross to bring forgiveness to you and me, including forgiveness for the mess we make of marriages. Third, Many Christians find that divorce becomes unavoidable. Sadly, there are people who use those unfortunate circumstances to against people as a means of excluding them from the church. God is able to redeem every situation and he's eager to restore anyone who comes to him humbly seeking forgiveness. Finally, the church is to be a family. We are to care for and encourage one another and find a place for the married, the divorced, and the single. And the church should be a place where children are welcomed. May it be so.

Amen