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in the Season after Pentecost

The Lord Guides Our Family

Marriage and family are blessings the almighty God grants not only to believers but to all people on earth. In a society where God's guidance is so often ignored, we Christians long to hear the Lord's instructions for marriage and family life and strive to follow his will. In today's Gospel, Jesus repeats the truths about God's guidance and grace.

Sermon

Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" "What did Moses command you?" he replied. They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. "But at the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

¹⁰When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."

People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

It hasn't slipped your notice that marriage is not what it used to be. Many consider marriage a purely personal choice, while divorce is no longer seen as having ramifications but is simply a personal choice. Some people even go so far as to consider marriage a relic of a bygone era. One journalist even said that in marriage, women serve as mere property with which men bargain. That view of marriage hurts us to listen to; it just does. The effects of the shifting attitudes toward marriage are clear: marriage rates have never been lower. The average age of people who get married for the first time has never been higher. The divorce rates are abysmal. We understand that divorce is not the only sin, and we know that divorce may be necessary in some cases, but the way society views marriage is not something we want to leave for the next generation. Many in our society care nothing for upholding marriage values, and it shows.

This perspective on marriage isn't the first time in history that people have despised marriage. If we look back to the time before the Reformation in Europe, the Catholic Church viewed marriage as merely an action meant to produce children. In the opinion of the church at that time, it was much better if you would remain celibate and live in a monastery-- that was God-pleasing. They would say, "Marriage? I guess if you have to..." Go back even farther, and you have the Pharisees in Jesus' day who failed to respect marriage as God wanted them to.

They disrespected marriage in one of the ways that our society does: they had no problems accepting and even promoting divorce. That's why they came to Jesus to test him. They thought they could put Jesus into a tight spot

regarding divorce. It was a hot topic, and maybe, just maybe, they could pit Jesus against Moses. They knew the law well, and they knew that Moses had written some regulations concerning divorce. So, when Jesus put the question back on them, "What does Moses command," they were ready with an answer: "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." Moses regulated divorce, so it must be okay, right? Jesus' answer tells us that the problem wasn't with Moses, but rather with their understanding of marriage.

That is why he speaks in such a definitive way. From other parts of Scripture, including the passage that the Pharisees quote from Deuteronomy, we know that God does allow divorce in cases where other sins predominate. But here, Jesus' focus isn't on divorce as much as it is on marriage. He says, "*It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,*" Jesus replied.

Moses did not permit divorce; Moses and God understood that divorces would happen no matter what God said. As many in the nation of Israel drifted away from God, terrible sins would plague marriage. Sinners with hard hearts were going to divorce their spouses one way or another. So Moses wrote a regulation to control the damage that divorce would have on the people of Israel. He wrote this not because divorce was God-pleasing, but because divorce became a reality. But that reality of sin did not erase what God wanted to give to his people in marriage. That is why Jesus takes the Pharisees back to the beginning, to show them what marriage means. "*But at the beginning of creation God' made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.*"

That is the description of marriage as God created it to be. Man and woman made for one another to live in such perfect harmony that they viewed each other as an extension of themselves. This unity is so close that they are properly called not two, but one. One flesh, united by God to love and serve one another in perfection.

That's a high standard. Do we always treat marriage with such reverence? Using Paul's comparison in his letter to the Ephesians, can we honestly look at our marriages and say, "I have loved my wife as Christ loved the church?" Can we honestly say, "I have loved my husband as I love the Lord?" That is an incredibly high standard, but that is what God intended marriage to look like.

And if you aren't married, have you been thinking, "I am glad this doesn't apply to me"? It does. Do you honor the blessing of sexual intimacy that God has given exclusively to a husband and wife? The spirit may be willing, but the flesh is just so weak. The world that we live in just keeps telling us over and over that sexual desires are just an itch to be scratched, just a person's lifestyle, that it doesn't affect anything or anyone. When our sinful flesh hears those thoughts, it is easy to think that it might be true, that sex might be nothing more than a desire of the body that doesn't affect the soul. But it does. Oh, does it ever. All this sin just keeps driving a wedge between our God and us. When we ignore God's will and ways, the unity between us and God begins to drift apart and may eventually break, just as a broken, shattered marriage inevitably ends in divorce. In a very real sense, the whole human race had divorced and separated itself from God because of sin.

But that is not what God wanted. He was not content to write us off or to send us away from himself. He desired unity with us so much that he sent his Son to fix the relationship. Counseling experts tell us that if both people in a marriage don't want the marriage to work, then it will never work. The relationship between God and us was so broken and so one-sided that it seems almost as though it could never work. Both parties must be committed. This wasn't the case at all with Jesus. He came to fix a relationship in which he was the one who had to do all the work. And he gladly did it. He gave everything that he had, up to and including his own life, for you. You were never a lost cause to him. Even though you were born in rebellion to him, God wanted unity with you in your sinful state. Even though the sinful nature in you still fights against God's will now, he still wants unity with you. And he has it in Christ. Through the waters of baptism, you have become worthy to be called one with Christ. You are a member of the true Church, the bride of Christ. You live in perfect unity with your heavenly Father. There is nothing that can separate you from his love. Divorce from God is scary, but the unity we have through God's promise of life in Christ will never end that way.

And it is in the promise of Christ that we can live in unity within marriage. We are not perfect spouses, but we are forgiven spouses. The unity that Christ bought and paid for is yours and it is a unity in which you can live with your spouse and everyone else, for that matter. This is how we live out the expectation of God: that wives love their husbands as they love the Lord. That husbands love their wives like Christ loves the church. In faith and trust in God's will, we respect the gift of sexual intimacy that God gave to be enjoyed within the bounds of marriage. It is in Christ's love for us that we pray for the marriages of others. By his love, we support one another and encourage our fellow Christians to live in God-pleasing ways regarding marriage. And when we fail to live up to those expectations, which we inevitably will as sinner-saints, we know right where to go. We go to the cross of Christ. There, we remember that Jesus died for even that sin and we live in the forgiveness that he has to offer to us.

What a blessing marriage is. How marvelous that God has revealed to us the blessings that he offers in marriage and his desire that we defend marriage. What is more, we know that we live as forgiven children of God, forgiven husbands and wives, bound in perfect unity with our Lord who loved us enough to die for us. The world's view of marriage may be declining rapidly but rest secure that God's view of marriage hasn't changed and God's view of you hasn't changed, either. You are his own dear child. Amen.

Vicar Joshua Busch