

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Mark 10:1-12 **“Lifting Up The Jewel Before A Jaded World”**

February 14, 2016
(5th Sunday After Epiphany/ Marriage Sunday)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

MARK 10:1-12

"LIFTING UP THE JEWEL BEFORE A JADED WORLD"

In A Larger Section On Discipleship, 8:31-10:52

1) v.1 Jesus As Teacher: Public Teaching To Crowds.

Earliest Teaching, 1 Cor. 7:10-11

Typical Intro: 2:13, 4:1, 6:34, 8:34

Ever Closer To His Death

1 And he (Jesus) left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and **crowds** gathered to him again; and again, as his custom was, he taught them.

Perea (Herod Antipas' Marriage: Serial Monogamy, John's Death)

2:13, 16, 24; 4:1, 6:34, 8:34, Jesus' Habitual Practice: Teacher

Form Of vv.2-9 = Scholastic Dialog ???/Their Reply, His Answer

2) v.2 QUESTION/ Test: Lawful To Divorce Wife?

Politically Loaded Issue, War 6:18

Pharisees Aligned With Herodians, 3:6

2 And Pharisees (or they = crowds?) came up and in order to test him asked,

Textual Variant, Q & A After Teaching, Grounds - Mt. 19:3

1:13 (Satan) //3:6, 12:13: Hostile Motive To Expose // Mt. 19:3

Q "Is it lawful (permitted) for a man to divorce (dismiss) his wife?"

any cause, Stupid Question //6:18 Herod

Taken For Granted Among Jewish Men vs. Mal. 2:16, Ezra 10, Issue Was Grounds

3) vv.3-4 Mosaic Citation Regulating Divorce.

Divorce Not Involve Courts Then

3 He answered them, "What did Moses command you?"

Their Choice Of Texts Is Instructive Of Their Motive

Jesus Moves From Question To Texts, Forces Language

He Seeks Command, They Speak Allow, Counter-question

4 They said,

Jesus Already Knew The Answer, Fishing For Answer To Reject

Limit A Problem, Not License A Practice! Not A Command

"Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce

Legal Damage Control After The Fact

and put her away."

Deut. 24:1-4 Assume/Regulates Divorce, Charges Of Adultery

Other Texts: Gen. 1, 2; Mal. 2:13-16, Ezra 10 (Conflicted Texts)

4) v.5 Principle Of Concession To Human Sinfulness/ Rebuke.

Authority: Jesus Speaks For God, Interprets Mosaic Allowance//3:5

5 But Jesus said to them,

Problem Not The Ideal Or The Law But Us! Willful Disobedience

"For your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. Personal Attack! Dt. 10:16

3:5, 4:10-12, 6:52, Pharisees Allowed Divorce, Essenes Forbade It

3') vv.6-8 Two Mosaic Citations Against Divorce.

Original Intent

Sexual Polarity = God's Work, Hard Hearts Are Not The Last Word

6 But from the beginning of creation,

Back To Original Intent (1) Higher Ground

Binary Creation Structure

1) 'God made them male and female.'

Marriage Involves Design, Same-Sex Unions Are Out!

2 Different Equals, Gen. 1:27, 5:2 [LXX] (2)

Cultural Outworking

2a) 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother,

Higher Loyalty (a)

In Marriage

b) and be joined to his wife,

Yoked Together, Identify/Join New Home (b)

c) and the two shall become one flesh'.

Not 3+, A New Thing = Bond/Children? ©

Reunification, Gen. 1:27, 2:24, Mal. 2:13-16, (3)

A New Reality

So they are no longer two but one flesh.

Organic Reality, Restatement Of Permanent Bond (4)

Indissoluble New Identity, Intended A Permanent Union// CD 4:21, Dt. 24:1-4

2') v.9 ANSWER: No Divorce For What God Joins.

Jesus Pits God Against Man!

9 A Solemn Warning

What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder."

3rd Person Imperative, Summary & Conclusion On Divorce (5)

Not Will Of God For Hard Hearts To Have Last Word

Warns Of Curse, Lest ... Male Not Lord Over Marriage; God Over Two Equals!

Husbands Warned: Yes, It's Technically Lawful; Not God's Intent

1') vv.10-12 Jesus As Teacher: Private Teaching To Disciples.

3:20, 7:17, 9:28, 33 Change Of Venue

10 And in the house **the disciples** asked him again about this matter.

Hard Hearts Have Not Yet Been Eliminated, Grave Consequences

Jesus' Counter-cultural Teaching Was Hard

11 And he said to them,

In Sinful World The Dream Not Always Realized, Lk. 16:8, Mt. 3:32, 19:9

Pronouncement Of Case Law, "If... then..." , Mt. 5:31-33

"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery with/against her,

Adultery Was Usually Seen As A Male Property Crime

Jewish Setting: Male Privilege, Women As Moral Victims

Nothing About Remarriage Of Rejected Partner

12 and if she divorces he husband and marries another,

3:28 Speaks Of Forgiveness For All Sins

she commits adultery [i.e. implied: with/against him].

Women Are Fully Culpable Moral Agents

Church Adaptation Of Teaching In New Roman Context// I Cor. 7:10-11

In Jesus' Kingdom We Have A Cure For Hard Hearts Which Is New Hearts

Protects Women From Being Castaways With No Support, Women/Children In Patriarchal Society, ? Of Life Expectancy

LIFTING UP THE JEWEL BEFORE A JADED WORLD

“What God has joined together, let not man put asunder.”

To deface a master work of God invites consequences.

M A R K 1 2 : 9

Legends are wonderful things, and the reason they speak to us is that they echo some deep theme in our lives, some high aspiration, some great quest. Think of King Arthur, or Robin Hood, the legends of the Holy Grail, and more recently *Indiana Jones And The Temple of Doom*. There is often an historical remembrance at the root of a legend, but over time the story takes on a life of its own as persons overlap and history goes fuzzy for the sake a good storytelling and mythic power. So it is with Valentine’s Day, or– more properly– St. Valentine’s Day.

Valentinus was a popular Roman name from the 4th through the 8th centuries, and there at least a dozen such men on the Catholic list of saints and several martyrs as well. An account from the 14th century is that Valentinus was a priest in Rome beheaded by the Emperor Claudius on February 14 in A.D. 270 for helping Christian couples wed in secret. Claudius was having trouble getting soldiers to leave wives and girlfriends for one of his bloody foreign campaigns, so he banned marriages and engagements. But Valentinus defied the ban; it cost him his life but made a witness that the church is pro-marriage, even if goes against current political winds.

Another spin is that while Valentinus was imprisoned, he healed the jailer’s daughter Julia of blindness, with the result that forty-four members of the household believed in Jesus and were baptized. He also wrote her a farewell letter signed, “From your Valentine,” and so the tradition of love letters and cards. Another spin– a bit more racy– is that he actually fell in love with Julia. There is always, it seems, a market for stories of celibate priests who finally found true love, especially among us Protestants who have official doctrinal statements that our ministers may marry, contrary to the practice of Rome, and it is a doctrine for which I am most grateful! So beloved is this teaching for my dear wife Lori that she refers to it on every

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Valentine’s card as *AR21*, being the short form for *The United Methodist Articles of Religion (AR)*, No. XXI: *Of the Marriage of Ministers*, so now you know our secret. And since you never read it, here it is a blunt alternative to Catholic teaching:

“The ministers of Christ are not commanded by God's law either to vow the estate of single life, or to abstain from marriage; therefore it is lawful for them, as for all other Christians, to marry *at their own discretion*, as they shall judge the same to serve best to godliness.”¹

I confess I am both a better man and a better minister because, in the providence of God, we found one another as I– a newly converted sophomore– went from Wake over to Salem late in the fall of ‘72 to check out the freshman babes. And when I saw the beautiful damsel descending the steps with her long and wavy tresses, I asked to be introduced, and the rest is romantic legend that grows every year. Now, since Lori– being a cradle Southern Baptist, has Calvinist tendencies toward divine determinism, she believes I was predestined as her one-true love from eternity past; but I– being more allowing of human freedom– believe I could technically have had a good life with many others but that when we found each other, I was smitten by Cupid’s arrow and cannot to this day imagine being married to anyone else, and on that we have agreement. She says, “I prayed for you and knew you’d come along,” and I say, “I’m glad we found one another,” and so the great debate continues.

Our brave Valentinus is the patron saint of engaged couples and happy marriages; his flower-adorned skull is supposedly on display at the Basilica of Santa Mario in Rome for your romantic viewing. But for those who love to debunk such matters, they point to the real culprit behind the holiday, one Geoffrey Chaucer of Canterbury fame, who in a poem linked the medieval tradition of courtly love to the feast day of St. Valentine, which till then received little attention. His poem refers to the 14th day of the second month when birds and humans come together to find a mate, and so wrote, “For this was on St. Valentine’s Day, when every bird cometh there to choose his mate.” The Hallmark company is indeed grateful for that most-prosperous couplet. In 18th century England the custom of giving flowers, sweets, and hand-written cards arose, and has now spread round the world.²

¹ *The Book of Discipline 2012*: 68-69.

² For an introductory article on Valentines’s Day and survey of customs around the world, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valentine%27s_Day.

So what we have- as with many holidays- are Christian roots and a present secular reality about the romantic relations of men and women and the energies of romantic attraction built into our deep structures. Male and female are not surface realities but coded into every cell, a design which- even though marred as everything else by the fall into sin- is still part of the imprint of God’s image in the two models of the human person who were designed to join in a binding union and covenant with potential for offspring, as we read in the stories of Genesis 1 and 2, as echoed throughout Scripture, and as sealed by the public teaching of Jesus himself against the abuse of the institution by men in his day. Not all disciples of Jesus will marry; some will marry and then divorce for a variety of reasons- some quite legitimate; some will never marry and live as faithful singles, and still others will remarry as both state and church allow. But whatever your current or past status or history, your success or failure, joy or sorrow, we must all reckon with what Rabbi Jesus taught because it is determinative for the church. Marriage is a this-worldly gift that will not continue into heaven and after that in the kingdom of God, as the Mormons falsely teach. It is great but limited good, as we remind every couple in the sober words, “Till death us do part,” and it is to be held in honor by all, as Hebrews states clearly.

Now the trends are not encouraging.³ Sociologically speaking, marriage is stable and strengthening among the educated and affluent in America where it tends to the creation and preservation of wealth and stability for children; it is fragile and weakening among the middle class and nearly vanishing among some sectors of the poor and minorities with out of wedlock births nearing eighty percent in some segments. What happens to a young man or woman when the last marriage anyone remembers in their family is three or four generations back? It’s not good. Many school children do not understand why Lori and I have the same last name, and when it’s explained that we are married, they act surprised since such realities are no longer on their radar. They’ve grow up in a post-marriage culture; and once lost, it is nearly impossible to recover. The big news is that among the 58 percent of American that used to compose the middle class, marriage is in steep decline. More and more kids grow up in the middle of America without a clue as to what a healthy marriage looks and feels like. The major institution that glues life together in the middle where high school grads scramble for jobs and a future is tattered and torn. One scholar writes:

³ For a quick summary of the data, www.foryourmarriage.org/factsfigures. And, for 30 conclusions from the social sciences on why marriage matters, http://nationalmarriageproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/WMM_summary.pdf

“For a substantial share of the U.S., economic mobility will be out of reach, their children’s life chances will diminish, and large numbers of young men will live apart from the civilizing influence of married life.... Marriage is in danger of becoming a luxury good attainable only to those with the material and cultural means to grab hold of it.”⁴

Marriage is God’s idea, and one Jesus defended against distortion, even though he never married and died as a single, celibate male. Few churches have explicit marriage ministries, which- by the way must include divorce recovery, a remarriage ministry that helps make a good second marriage possible, and also help with new, blended families which on average take seven full years to stabilize.⁵ Not enough clergy get the training to do quality pre-marital counseling. Many are themselves divorced and in conflicted homes, so it’s easy to skip over difficult texts and topics. So other than performing ceremonies and participating in an increasingly expensive culture of wedding hype, when did we in effect take a hands-off approach to this great gift of God, the very first of human institutions God gave us- the home? The silence is deafening. All the focus on the wedding, almost none on the marriage. Makes no sense at all. But it is a telling symptom of our fascination with style over substance. Have you thought about the fact that marriage seems to be one of the be taboo topics in our culture. Afternoon TV deals with the most explicit matters, but there is no discussion about the quality of marriage and how it affects the overall culture. Marriage is deeply personal- intimately so, but never merely private. It is public in its enormous effects and an asset to any culture. And who’s job is it to watch over the good thing God has given? It is the job of the church, and here we must recover our leadership by modeling and offering something better, something worthy of the aspirations of the young, something blessed by God and worth waiting for, “...to love and to cherish until we are parted by death.” One of our jobs as the Jesus people is to build the kind of people who can fulfill these vows.

So where do we start? With understanding, and for that we examine the teaching of Jesus that marriage is- for most of his followers- the form of life through

⁴ On the evidence, see William Phipps, *Was Jesus Married?* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1986).

⁵ Ron L. Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2002).

which their discipleship will be exercised.⁶ We know Peter was married when called, and we may safely assume this for most of the rest of the twelve since it was the norm in that day for young Jewish men. It may surprise you to learn that the United Methodist wedding service is conservative in that presumes that bride and groom are both baptized Christians and that their marriage is understood as their form of service to God.⁷ In other words, *it's not all about them* but something larger from the get-go. Our wedding services are not designed for secular or mixed marriages between believers and people of other faiths or no faith at all. Best to leave those to secular authorities because the deep wisdom of the church is that a stable home is not built on two different foundations. We must again teach our children to look for spouses who share this faith, and that is hard to do unless the parents are convinced Christians who believe what the church teaches and emphasize it at home. Romance is important; chemistry matters, but it's not enough. At the beginning of any relationship that might turn serious, the question is: Are we on the same page concerning Jesus Christ and the basics of a life of faith?

TURNING TO THE TEXT

So from our current location far down the road, we review a brief but intense debate Jesus had with a serious group of laity, the Pharisees.⁸ Because of some research by David Instone-Brewer on ancient Jewish wedding contracts, we now have a much

⁶ Jesus' teaching on marriage, Mark 10:1-12, is located in a larger section of Mark's gospel (8:31-10:32) which is structured into three large sections on discipleship; in other words, marriage is an issue of Christian vocation, of our calling.

⁷ The first set of vows, the vows of intention, are explicit, "I ask you, now, in the presence of God and these people, to declare your intention to enter into union with one another through the grace of Jesus Christ, who calls you into union with himself, as acknowledged in your baptism?" Note the priority *on union with Christ* before union with one another (*U.M. Hymnal*: 865). Some allowances are made in *The Book of Worship* (115-116), but these are a pastoral complications and not understood to be the norm. In our church clergy have the right to say Yes or No to marriages.

⁸ Some early manuscripts that say it was the *crowd* and not the Pharisees who posed the question, and- either way- the teaching is not substantially changed, only who it was that raised the issue.

clearer picture of the context in which Jesus worked.⁹ It was a Middle-Eastern Jewish world where divorce was widely practiced, mostly by men. Marriage contracts in that day were clear that a new wife- even if she was a slave- could not be denied the basics by her husband, and those were three: food, clothing, and marital love, as found in Exodus 21:10-11:

“If he takes another wife to himself- even a slave- he shall not diminish 1) her food, 2) her clothing, or 3) her marital rights. And if he does not do these things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money (i.e. the loss of dowry).”

In other words, a Jewish woman might seek divorce for functional abandonment. On adultery, the issue was more complex. Any unfaithfulness on her part was serious, but serious for him only if the other woman was married; if single, it didn't count, which is a clear double standard. Marriage was given by God with the intention of monogamy fidelity; God hates divorce and its pain said the prophet Malachi,¹⁰ but God loves people, so arrangements were made that the woman at least got a document that permitted her to remarry and prevented her husband from coming back should she remarry and be dismissed a second time.¹¹ Cultures change slowly, and God works within the limits to open up new possibilities; the Bible does not approve everything it records. The idea was to give women legal standing and prevent them from being traded among men one after the other, so it was a move in the right direction and set a long trajectory towards justice in this area. Whatever breaks the marriage contract was grounds for divorce, primarily adultery, emotional or physical neglect, or abuse.

This was the situation until a few decades before Jesus. Divorce was widely available, and there is no evidence- on my reading- to think Jesus was opposed to divorce on legitimate grounds, sad as it was. It was one more symptom of a broken world, a world out of sync with the One who made it. What he was utterly opposed

⁹ For a summary, see David Instone-Brewer, “What God Has Joined: What does the Bible really teach about divorce,” *Christianity Today*, October 2007; his important book is *Divorce And Remarriage In The Church: Biblical Solutions For Pastoral Realities* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2006).

¹⁰ 2:13-16.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

to, and the issue that our text deals with, is a new and popular kind of divorce that had been in effect for only several decades before he came along, a new arrangement that allowed Jewish husbands to dismiss their wives *for any cause*- basically *without cause*, even trivial ones like burning the toast or finding another woman more attractive. And it rested on a disputed reading of a single phrase in Deuteronomy 24:1, which reads, “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if she then finds no favor in his eyes because he has found *some indecency in her* (literally in Hebrew *a thing of nakedness*, and clearly a reference to immorality) and he writes her a bill of divorce....”

Some of the rabbis, led by Shammai, stuck to the clear meaning- *a thing of nakedness* or adultery as legitimate grounds. Let’s call them the conservatives because they valued precedent. But other rabbis, led by Hillel, and let’s called them the progressives, said “Aha! A new meaning! Why did Moses use two phrases, *a thing* and *of nakedness*, when only one was necessary? Is he not actually giving us two reasons for a wife’s dismissal, one that we have never before considered till our new reading came along? *Infidelity* but also *a thing*, which we take to mean *nearly anything at all*. A new loophole was found and was quickly exploited, which demonstrates how easily the Bible is twisted to serve bad motives.

Now because this new reading played into existing male privilege in the culture, and since it was a carefully argued ruling by an acknowledged expert, it spread quickly because- on my reading- it appeals to worst in men, not the best, and I will tell you that appealing to the worst in men is extremely easy to do! Something cold to drink and something forbidden to look at quickly melts the character of many who have not the internal structure to match outside temptations.¹²

Such rabbis as Hillel were not only the interpreters but the administrators of such laws- like current Muslim imams issuing rulings or fatwas, so a new reading of the Bible quickly led to a new social practice under the heading of, “If we can find it in the Bible, we can do it for our advantage.” There was no independent judiciary; no laws to be passed, just a progressive rabbinic ruling. Men trading in women without regard for their persons or their welfare, whether in the overly wicked forms of prostitution or porn, or in the perhaps less overt forms of polygamy or serial monogamy are nothing but wrong, and to find creative readings of Scripture to justify such a practice is just plain wicked because it twists Scripture to undermine the

¹² See the downward spiral of James 1:13-15.

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beautiful design of God for marriage. So if you want to toss a wife away in the decades just before Jesus, Rabbi Hillel is your man! It was a low point in Jewish marriage practice. Is it any wonder people keep looking for more and different and easier grounds with less consequences on which to sever a sacred covenant? It's a symptom of rebellion against God, and it ignores the issue of bad character.

Men who use and toss women are wicked; women who use and toss men are no better, and Jesus was utterly against practices which trivialize the deepest and most tender commitments of which we are capable, capacities for physical love and deep bonding, child-bearing and child-rearing that are rightly enfolded and protected within the covenant of Christian marriage. As a virginal single Jewish man, Jesus was pro-marriage this side of the kingdom- after which marriage as a first creation structure would be no more;¹³ Jesus did not argue with divorce for valid reasons, though he also did not require it because of the healing power of forgiveness he expected of his disciples; but Jesus was against any system of clever Bible reading that made it easier deface the creation gift of God in one uncommitted relationship after another. And at this point we need to note that religious men trading in women continues in Shia Islam, and to a lesser extent Sunni Islam, in a practice know in English as *temporary marriage* or *traveler's marriage* with a minimum duration of three days, which- when examined- is a legal form of prostitution under the cover of Sharia law, and so what Jesus opposed among the Jews of his day continues in ours in an even more virulent form. And it's is wrong before God, maybe not before Allah, but before Yahweh. Men trading in women in evil.¹⁴

This is the context that lies behind the question put to Jesus. And if you don't have the proper background, you misread the text, which sadly the church has done across much of its history by labeling all second marriages as adulterous, which they are clearly not.¹⁵ It was perfectly lawful in that day for a man- and to a lesser extent a woman- to divorce for cause, then remarry. Everyone knew that, so the question of verse 2 - at least on the surface- makes no sense, "... and in order to test him asked, 'Is it lawful- or permitted- for a man to divorce his wife?'" Of course it's lawful on legitimate grounds as Deuteronomy 24 and Exodus 10 both teach. But if the

¹³ Mark 12:25.

¹⁴ See "Nikah mut'ah, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikah_mut%E2%80%98ah.

¹⁵ On the history, see Michael Gorman, "Divorce and Remarriage from Augustine to Zwingli," at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/augustweb-only/46.0c.html>.

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question- as heard in that context- means, “Is it permitted for a man to divorce his wife *for any and every reason as we have done for several decades now with the help of Hillel?*” then the discussion is much more interesting.

Remember, their motive was hostile; it was not mere curiosity but in order *to test him*, to embarrass Jesus and put him in danger. “Take sides, Jesus. Enter the current debate. And if you take the wrong side, then you too will be caught criticizing the marriage practices of our ruler Herod Antipas, to whom your cousin John just lost his head because he criticized his unlawful marriage to his brother Phillips wife?”¹⁶ It was a loaded question on several fronts and offered high public drama. And Jesus was now standing in Perea, Herod’s territory!

Like any good rabbi, Jesus responded to their question with one of his own, verse 3: “What did Moses command you?” so his move is from recent rabbinic rulings to Scripture itself, which is a shift of grounds for the debate, and a clever move. Now their answer is highly revealing because of the text they choose and the word they used, verse 4: “They said, ‘Moses *allowed* a man to write a certificate of divorce and put her away.’” And right they were. Moses did not command divorce, but it was *allowed* as a concession, the motive for which Jesus quickly revealed, “For your *hardness of heart* he wrote you this commandment,” and he was speaking to men! In a fallen world of hard hearts and hard heads and hard realities, God allowed for divorce in a sinful culture of male privilege but bent it slightly in the direction of a new right for women. At least they get a legal document which allows them to remarry and not live in limbo.

But what comes next is what’s important. Jesus does not stop with his insight on why God allowed the concession of divorce because of the sin of hard hearts. His interest is not in the technical legalities of divorce management. Jesus is interested in the kingdom agenda of announcing God’s restorative intent for all creation, part of which is the honorable and loving relationship of men and women this side of the kingdom’s arrival, which is precisely why Jesus leapt over the long history of sin and hard hearts and landed us back in the paradise of Eden with a single phrase, “But from the beginning of creation....”

And what did the Lord do *in the beginning*? Well, God made one humanity in two models. Differentiated sexuality and gender complementary are God’s idea,

¹⁶ Luke 3:19.

imprinted into our flesh at the macro level of appearance and the micro level of genetics, imprinted on the deep hardware of the human person as a matter of structure. As Jesus noted, “God made them male and female,” a quote from Genesis 1:27. Two different equals, both necessary for fruitfulness, and not a word about patriarchy- which only inserted itself after the fall as recorded in Genesis 3. Jesus then goes on in the second part of verse 6 to display how this creation gift of male and female works itself out in the dynamic of family relationships.

First, a new bond pulls you away from family, “For this cause- meaning the attractive powers of maleness and femaleness- a man shall leave his father and mother.” So I sometimes ask, Are you ready to leave home, emotionally and financially, or are you still connected by an umbilical cord and on the family payroll?” Hard question, but the answer is highly revealing.

“For this reason a man shall *leave his father and mother*- and a woman her mother and father, and be joined to his wife- and she to her husband, and the two shall become one flesh,” which is a delightful play on words because it is the renewal of marriage in a sexual union that is the possibility of them becoming *one flesh* in a different way through a child, of which we are reminded every time someone says, “Why, they look just like you.”

Marriage is a new and higher loyalty which displaces the earlier loyalty to parents but also leaves room to honor them. It is celebrated in a physical union which forms a deep bond of intimacy between the two, “and be *joined* to his wife.” Joint finances, join life. You are not single; you are joined; you are married and need to build capital in each other. When I sense that a couple finds more life and joy with friends than each other, it’s a danger signal they’re avoiding each another. Can you have friends? Of course, but remember: you are not singles who happen to be married; you’re a married couple who still have friends.

Let me pause and make an appeal here. Studies differ, but a recent one found that adolescent girls, if sexually active between ages fourteen and nineteen, will - on average, have seven sexual partners in life, boys closer to ten.¹⁷ This means a cycle of bond-and-separate, bond-and-separate who knows how many times. And if we remember that to separate here is to *rip-and-tear* because the physical bond is God’s biological and emotional super-glue, and if we remember that- biblically speaking-

¹⁷ McKnight, *One.Life*, 125.

to give yourself to someone in an ultimate fashion is the tender personal core of marriage- the *becoming one flesh* part- then what we have at an emotional level is marriage-and-divorce and marriage-and-divorce every time they change partners. Every union is what was possibly a marriage, and the emotional and souls costs are much the same as it if had been. So when they come to me all excited about a first legal and blessed marriage, the deep truth of their lives is far different; they’ve been married many times before, which is why the church wisely sneaks in an oft-ignored phrase in the initial vows of intent, which is, “... and *forsaking all others*, be faithful to him- or her- as long as you both shall live,” all the while knowing that an appetite for variety is not necessarily cancelled by such vows. Those promiscuous before marriage are at increased risk for adultery after marriage precisely because they lack a strong capacity for self-control. And unless each party goes before God with a repentant heart and asks for the old bonds to be broken by the power of the Spirit, they will struggle because so many pieces of their hearts were scattered abroad and left behind with old lovers.

Jesus knows how precious and fragile this bond is; after all, with the Father and the Spirit the Son designed it in all its tenderness and strength! Which is why he stated so clearly that it deserved ultimate protection and issued a warning that God’s wrath would be on any and all who treat it lightly, verse 9: “What therefore God has joined and super-glued together, let not anyone put asunder and minimize or compromise and undermine in any way.” Don’t deface the Master’s work, or you make the Master your enemy.

Marriage is to be honored as a God-given institution by every Christian- whether married or not. “Let marriage be held in honor *by all*, and let the marriage bed be undefiled,” wrote the author of Hebrews. “because God will judge the immoral and adulterous.”¹⁸ Even if you are not married, and even if you never do, you have a stake in the marriages of others. So honor it. And every church, including this one, has people who are living under the judgment of God’s active resistance because they have comprised their own bond or undermined that of another and never repented, and until they do, the weight of God’s resistance is on the whole of their lives, and they wonder what’s wrong- why a dark cloud is over their every effort. God will forgive, but first you have to face and name it for what it was.

Friends, a wedding license and a church blessing are not trivial things, not just

¹⁸ 13:4.

a piece of paper and a few prayers. They are appropriate cultural supports and protections for the wonderful work of God known as marriage, and when we trivialize or ignore or attempt to redesign what God has done, it is we and our culture that suffer. When I read the large sociological studies, my heart hurts, first because I know how rich and good my life is in comparison, and secondly because I can put names and faces on the casualties. Jesus was not interested in arguing about more grounds for divorce, about how to help hard-hearted people trash each- though he was concerned about justice. His concern was that the brilliant design of male and female and their capacity for an enduring joyful union not be lost in the world he came to save. He went back to creation and lifted up the jewel for all to see. And he gave it to his church, in every age and place, to work for just laws, but more than that to lift up God’s original and from-the-beginning dream for marriage so that it would stay bright and available even in a broken and sinful and immoral world like ours. It is still by God’s grace a good and grand possibility that needs to be lifted up before the young and preserved among the not-so-young. It is a painful and poignant and beautiful thing to see a new widow or widower stand beside an open grave and in their hearts know that they- with God’s help- kept the promise “to love and to cherish *until we are parted* by death.” Painful but good because it points us beyond the limits of this life and tugs us to the life beyond that will eventually become the new heavens and earth of God’s forever kingdom.

The Christian gospel is about the whole of life; it’s much bigger than marriage and our current malaise, but it is not less, and what I am calling for and will work for- along with all my other dreams- is the recovery of a pro-marriage culture, beginning in the church. We must begin to push back against the corrosion of the culture and- at a minimum- preserve a robust culture of marriage within the church, so that when the world grows weary of its follies, there remains a place and a people where the treasures have been preserved and are on display. When I deal with these issues based on Scripture, I feel as if my heart is about to burst, so dear are they to me, so I am happy to report that my Valentine is my girlfriend is my wife!

So what about the tough verses on adultery at the end of our passage? They can’t be ignored. Are all divorces and remarriages adulterous? Some Christian traditions have read it this way and developed extensive canon law and marriage tribunals to determine who may and who may not receive the sacraments or remarry in the church. To the extent this shows seriousness about marriage in a throw-away world, it’s a good thing. But I think it fundamentally misreads the text. Jesus was speaking against a relatively recent form of loose divorce law that allowed Jewish men to dismiss wife after wife for trivial reasons, actually *for any reason*, which

means- on his reading- that the divorces were not valid. And if the divorces were not valid because the reasons were not, then remarriage was indeed adulterous since the first marriage was never severed, and this brought the religious scoundrels Jesus faced quickly back under the sanction of the Ten Commandments.

The point is that casual serial monogamy, whether in its married or its currently popular cohabiting form, is not pleasing to God and piles up a fearsome mountain of internal and external judgment, as seen in people who are always thinking the next one will make them happy and who seem constitutionally unable to settle into the commitment that is marriage. Seeking and never finding; that is their fate, because the problem is not the last one you left; the problem is within. Our God is utterly and unalterably opposed to such, because it treats as disposable something that was designed as precious and valuable, which are the hearts and futures and bodies and children of the men and women his only Son came to save.

CONCLUSION

When I meet with couple for their first of six or seven pre-marital counseling sessions, I tell them that my investment of ten hours plus the time of the rehearsal and wedding in their future is a gift from the good folk at Main Street Church. I then lay out three big issues that will shape their future. First, the work of working through what they bring— good and bad— from their family history into the marriage. Secondly, that there are skills they need to learn and that I can teach with the aid of several sophisticated tools and books. It’s just like going to school. But thirdly, and most difficult, is the issue of character. Will they follow Jesus in his church so that he can change them, build in new virtues, and make them into the kind of people who can live into the depth of the wedding vows until one of them lays the other in the ground? I am utterly committed to this work, because in a world of throw-away relationships, Jesus took time to lift up the jewel before all the world.
