

WWJS About Marriage?

Matthew 19:3-12

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Harry and Martha had been married for fifty years when their friends and family threw an anniversary party for them. At the height of their celebration Harry proposed a toast with these words: “Martha and I have been married for fifty years and never had a fight. The secret to our bliss can be attributed to this. On the night of our wedding we agreed that whenever an argument arose between us, I would take a walk. Which, come to think of it, probably explains why I have lived a largely outdoor life.”

Marriage, who needs it? Marriage, why is it? Marriage, how long should it last? With questions like these, the Pharisees try to test Jesus. In response Jesus gives us a teaching about one of societies most sacred institutions. Let us see if we can understand what he says.

I would like to start at its end and work back toward its beginning and the closing passage of Jesus’ teaching; Jesus is very clear in saying, **SINGLENESS IS A VALID OPTION.**

Mae West was famous for saying, “Marriage is a great institution, but I am not ready for an institution yet.” Disciples say, after Jesus’ probing teaching about the sacredness of marriage, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.” Paul says in I Corinthians Chapter 7 ,which is a lengthy teaching of his understanding of marriage, “It is good for the unmarried and the widows to stay unmarried as I am.”

I point these scriptures out to you to remind us today that one is a whole number. We don’t have to be attached to somebody else in order to be a complete person. Churches, particularly, need to treat singles as whole persons and embrace you in all of the sense that we are in this family of faith together.

The last thing I say to a groom just before we walk down this aisle Saturday after Saturday is, “Are you sure you are ready for this?” I say it to ease the tension of the moment hoping he won’t faint in the midst of the ceremony, but Jesus said it to alter tradition.

Old Testament Law ordered every woman had to be attached to a man. It was a means of social security. Furthermore, her value was validated by bearing a male son. Women belonged to men in order to produce more men. Jesus, once and for all, put an end to that tradition. Sometimes we in the church need to be reminded that Jesus was a single person, over thirty who modeled a life of deep and intimate friendship without being married.

Why is it better for some people to be single? I suggest three reasons. Some are created for singleness. By genes or sexual orientation or personal opinion, the desire to be married simply is not there. I have a heterosexual friend in her late sixties who answers the endless question of why she never married by saying, “No man deserves to be as happy as I can make him!”

To be forced by cultural standards to pretend is a prescription for disaster. Some are single by circumstance. As a student pastor I was called to a member’s home on a cold and bitter winter night. I visited the elderly couple often and they had been married for nearly sixty years. That frigid night the wife died. We took her to the funeral home and immediately took him to the hospital. On the following Saturday I had her funeral and the Saturday after that I had his funeral. These two people, who had been together for sixty years, now happened to leave this world as one.

That is not the norm. That is not the way it usually happens and death and divorce force people to live single lives. It is simply the circumstance of the moment.

“Some people are single” says Jesus, *“By the call of God”*. What would Jesus have done had he been married? “Next year in Jerusalem” would have had a literal meaning for his spouse because he was always on the road traveling .

We like to talk about John Wesley in Methodist churches. Indeed, he brought a great

reaffirmation to England and a denomination to us. He was a wonderful preacher and reformer, but he was a very poor husband. When his wife died he didn't even know about it for nearly a month because he was out on the road traveling conducting his field campaign. If you happen to be married to your job, live for sports, always look out for number one, it would be very wise for you just to stay single. It is a valid way to live a Christian life. Not everybody ought to be married.

Jesus says in the text:

MARRIAGE IS A LIFE LONG SACRED COVENANT.

The setting for this teaching is this: There are two schools of thought among the Pharisees and Pharisees, being like you and me, always like to put people in a pigeon hole; get them in the right place. Likewise, they test Jesus by asking, 'Are you a liberal or are you a conservative when it comes to marriage?' Jesus refuses to land into anybody's category. Instead he goes back to creation and quotes this passage from Genesis, "*In the beginning the creator made them male and female and for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and they two shall become one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined let not people tear apart.*"

In saying this Jesus is trying to say profoundly and consistently that marriage is more than a legal contract. Marriage is a sacred covenant. I say to couples who come to this altar week after week, "Behold a mystery. Something has happened in this moment. Two have become one. A *me* and a *my* must now always take into consideration an *us* and an *ours*. A spiritual happening has taken place."

I suspect that somewhere down in the depths of our souls we know that. I think that is why we get all dressed up, spend a lot of money, invite friends and family and have a gigantic celebration. Marriage calls for our finest intentions and best support because something sacred is happening.

The promise of that lifetime covenant is now much longer than ever before in the history of the world. Rock Star, Rod Stewart, has said, "The problem with marriage is that our vows have been in existence for six hundred years. When they were said six hundred years ago the average lifespan was thirty-five years or so. If you married someone for a

lifetime, you were only married for fifteen years or so. Now it may be fifty, sixty or even seventy years.” To that extent Rod Steward is right. We are asking people to enter into a covenant for a much longer relationship than ever before because we live longer than we have ever lived before.

Fear of this has driven many couples in our day simply to “live together” instead of leaping into marriage. This “try it and see if you like it” philosophy brings with it some sobering statistics. According to Michael McManus of one hundred cohabitating couples, forty will break up before marriage and of the remaining sixty who marry, forty-five will end in divorce.

Why should a marriage be a life long covenant? I would like to suggest three reasons.

First of all, you deserve it. Marriage is a vulnerable estate. In marriage we come to know people as they really are. Intimacy deserves our unconditional commitment. If we are married unless you get cancer or as long as you stay attractive or until somebody else comes along, what hope is there for real love?

Phillip Yancey, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his marriage, wrote this letter to his wife entitled, “Yes, my legs ache but we made it”. In it Yancey compares the three hundred months of marriage to mountain climbing. “Some may make this marriage climb in a chair lift, but you and I have climbed it one step at a time, taking deep breaths, holding on tight, determined to reach the top. Sometimes slipping back and having to push forward again, no wonder our legs ache.” Having a life-long, loving commitment and creating the security of a family is hard work; but it is worth it. Anybody can marry for richer and for healthier and for better, but it is old rhythm that we say in those historic sacred vows that make family what it is: for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness, as well as in health. Why? Because you deserve it.

Trust demands it. Marriage is not a game of power and control. It is not a matter of superiority and submission. Marriage is a partnership of mutual trust. Sometimes you lead. Sometimes you follow. Always you try to be dependable, reliable, trustworthy. Marriage is the coming together of two tributaries which after being joined together flow in the same direction, carrying the same burdens of responsibility and obligations. That

is why divorce is so messy. It is trying to separate water that is flowing together in a common stream. Why should marriage be a lifetime covenant? Trust demands it and trust is a precious sacred thing between two people.

Why should marriage be a lifetime covenant? Children need it. Isn't it interesting and I think it is no accident that the immediate teaching of Jesus' passage on marriage happens to be his famous statement about children. "*Let the little come unto me and do not hinder them for the such belongs to the kingdom of God.*" It is also interesting that the teaching immediately before this one has to do with mercy, grace, and forgiveness and wedged between these two Jesus teaches the principal of the sacredness of marriage.

One million kids a year have their lives shattered by the divorce of their parents. Kids are flexible. They bounce back. But let us not fool ourselves. The safety, security and stability of a child are threatened when two people that child loves cannot live together anymore. Marriage is a life-long sacred covenant and the intentional will of God.

DIVORCE CAN BE A RELUCTANT NECESSITY.

Moses provided for it. Jesus makes an exception for it. Marriage is a promise not a prison. As long as marriage is made up of fallible people some marriages will fail. It is not as often as we might think. The pollsters have said one in two. In reality it is about one in eight, but nevertheless, some marriages will not make it.

Is divorce a sin? If by sin you mean "harmartia"—missing the mark of God's intentional will—then, yes indeed, it is a sin; but it is not an unpardonable sin. The woman at the well is welcomed by Jesus even though she has been married five times and is now simply living with her lover.

Divorce is not a lifetime curse that produces second class Christians. The ground at the cross is level, and both the married and divorced stand in need of the grace it alone provides. The God who made you is always present to make us new. That is why we celebrate at this altar marriages of previously married persons.

When is it time to go? I would like to suggest to you—when you cannot stay.

In Jasper, Indiana, about four years ago John Ritzert was supposed to meet his ex-wife, Theresa, to sign over the deed to the house that they once owned together. Instead, the brick layer, shortly after day break, broke into the home by shattering a door, took his 20 gauge shotgun and killed his three children. Marriage was not made for violence. If you are in an abusive marriage, get help or get out now. It will not get better with time. God has not called you to live in fear.

When is it time to go? When hearts turn to stone. Moses permitted divorce because of hard hearts. Jesus challenged the law of Moses because it was only useable by a male. In Jesus' day on the liberal side of Judaism divorce was the simple. If I, as a male, decided I did not want to be married to this female any longer, I would write a letter and say that it is over, goodbye, thank you very much and that was it. Jesus would be touched saying that the sacredness of marriage is trying to counteract that philosophy of life. You have to decide whether Jesus wiped out the law of Moses or simply reinterpreted it. Did he intend for people to stay together whose hearts have turned to stone is a question you will have to decide.

Have you ever watched people at a restaurant? I am such a people person that I sit in restaurants sometimes and watch people around me. At one table here are two couples engrossed in conversation with faces animated making every moment together count. At another table two people sit in a catatonic state. They have placed their order and have nothing else to say until the food arrives. There they sit in that awkward silence waiting for their food to be delivered. Theirs has died and they are really dead.

The same God who raised Jesus from the dead can break hearts of stone. That is our Christian belief, isn't it? It also takes willing persons to enter in to that resurrection. When is it time to go? When trust is destroyed. Jesus was quite explicit about this in all of his teachings. He always made an exception to this covenant rule.

You know, Dave did not mean to hurt anybody, he was just lonely, feeling inferior and needing a little boost to his ego. The flirting he started with the woman at the office did boost his ego, but it also busted his marriage. You know the story. It happens every day.

Does adultery destroy marriage? Absolutely not. There are healthy, meaningful marriages that have weathered the storms of unfaithfulness. All marriages are tested, tempted and tried over time. But marriage without trust is sure to wilt on the vine.

What would Jesus say about marriage? To some here today he would say, "Stay single. It is a valid way to live a Christian life." To some he would say, "Hang in there, just stick with it". To those the life long sacred covenant is worth it.

To all of us he would say,

"Live by grace and by grace alone,
for it is grace that's brought us safe this far
and grace will lead us home. "

This is the word of the Lord as I understand it. You may or may not understand it that way and that's O.K.

Let us pray. Oh, God of goodness and grace, you have created us as people you know and even though we hurt and mess up and miss the mark, you keep on loving us. In this moment and in this place, I pray for your healing spirit to descend upon us. Where there is hurt, brokenness, bring grace. Where there is a wavering of the will in a wondering about design, give us resolve. Help us always and altogether, Lord, find the grace sufficient for every state and stage of our lives. This we pray in the loving name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

