

Critical Questions for American Christians
“What is the Future of Marriage?”
Mark 12:18-27

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A friend looked me in the eye a few weeks ago and said, “Howard, I appreciate the way you keep politics out of the pulpit.” I can only hope that person is still my friend after this sermon. For when it comes to the private and public aspects of marriage, politics and religion become strange and often conflicted bedfellows. First you need to know that I am not a politician, not even a very good church politician, and it’s certainly not my intent to make a political statement today. Furthermore, it would not be correct to classify me as a theologian. The deeper caverns of religious thought I have gladly left to those more scholarly than I. What I try to be is a local pastor who lives among the people and climbs the steps of this pulpit every seven days on trembling knees trying to make sense out of my life and the lives of those committed to my care. It is in that spirit that I want to make two statements about the institution of marriage in the 21st century.

MARRIAGE IS A SACRED COVENANT.

About twenty times a year, I stand before a couple as they stand in front of God and everybody and introduce the covenant of marriage by saying that “Holy Matrimony is an honorable estate, instituted by God, signifying to us the mystical union which exists between Christ and his Church.” Maybe it’s time to explain what I mean.

Marriage is an honorable estate. Hebrews 13:4 says, “*Marriages should be honored by all.*” I was coming to the end of my last session with a couple planning to be married, when the groom-to-be inquired, “Why is everyone so down on marriage these days?” Having just preached a sermon on the practical challenges of married life, the gentleman got my attention. Why are we so negative about marriage?

In the year 2000, 5.5 million couples were cohabitating in this country, an 11 fold increase since 1960 and a 70% increase in the 1990’s. How many of these couples living together without commitment do so because they are afraid of marriage?

Forty out of every 100 first marriages end in divorce. While the divorce rate is slightly declining, we still have the highest divorce rate in the Western world, and church-goers divorce as often as non-church-goers. Still, 3/4 of divorced men and 2/3 of divorced women remarry. By the grace of God they are willing to try again.

Thanks to increased life expectancy, marriages are lasting longer these days than ever before. Lots of couples celebrate 50 or more years together. When attending a golden wedding anniversary celebration I said to the husband, “Fifty

years is a long time.” With a gleam in his eye he responded, “Not nearly as long as it would have been without her.”

Strong marriages may not make the news, but they are no less real! They are still our best hope for enduring intimacy. They are still our best laboratory for raising responsible children. They are still the foundational fabric of a moral society. Are we doing enough in the church to prepare couples for marriage, strengthen couples in their marriage, assisting couples in developing healthy families? Singles ministries are essential. So are married ministries.

Marriage is a mystical union instituted by God.

There are multiple subjects about which Jesus was silent. Marriage is not one of them. Matthew 19:4-6 says, “*At the beginning, the Creator made them ‘male and female’ and said, ‘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. Therefore what God has joined together, let people not separate.*”

Marriage is a voluntary, sacred covenant between one man and one woman intended to last a lifetime for the glory of God, the mutual benefit of family members, and the good of society.

Marriage is a Spiritual union. At nearly every marriage ceremony I say, “Today an **us** is born between the two of you. **Me** and **my** must now always take into consideration an **us** and an **ours**.” Roman Catholics call marriage a sacrament. It is the mixing of two streams of water into one river. That’s why divorce, even when it’s necessary, is so painful and costly. Those of you who have been there know it better than I.

Marriage is by nature exclusive. It marks off a boundary of privacy and security from the rest of the world. Open Marriage is an oxymoron. Even those who promoted the idea back in the ’70’s have had second thoughts. Marriage is not for everyone and need not be. Paul was quite clear about the value of singleness. Jesus was a single adult.

Let those who enter this union find the grace to be faithful. The greatest enemy of marriage, according to Jesus, is adultery. Experts still estimate that 40% of married women and 50% of married men are having affairs these days. If you are sleeping with someone besides your spouse, let me urge you by the mercies of God to break it off, repent of your sins, turn your heart toward home. Others sitting here have done it. So can you.

In his sacrificial love, Jesus gives us the example for the love of husband and wife. **Marriage is a community of sacrificial love.** “*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her*” (Ephesians 5:25). Marriage is not about me, my, not about I,I,I. We glorify personal choice, autonomy, radical individualism, self-expression, and freedom from constraints. Marriage calls for mutual surrender, sacrifice, self-denial, fidelity, patience, and

forgiveness.

A friend listened to his buddy describe why he was hesitant to marry. Among his many reasons was that his fiancée failed to make him completely happy. Finally the friend said to his buddy, —you don't need a wife, you don't even need a dog, you need a goldfish—the pretty kind with the long tail that floats around, looks great and doesn't need a thing in return. In real marriage, wives are not trophies. Husbands are not gold mines.

Marriage is the work of two imperfect craftsmen shaping their dream together. They hammer their conflicts into harmony. They mend their breaks with mercy. They laugh and they suffer and they argue and they work. They work hard to overcome selfishness, to care honestly, to share freely. Jesus put it best, "*Greater love has no one that this: that he lay down his life for his friends.*" Love your spouse as Christ loved the Church.

MARRIAGE IS A LEGAL ARRANGEMENT.

More than once I have sent couples home to get their marriage licenses so I could conduct the ceremony. The state decides who can and cannot marry, who can officiate, what obligations and rights the agreement involves, whether it can be ended, when and how, what are the benefits and obligations.

Marriage laws and customs have evolved through the years. Wanting to thoroughly research this sermon, I walked into a bookstore last week and asked the clerk if she had any books on the history of marriage since I was preparing a sermon on the subject. "Why don't you go home and read the Bible?" she asked. I did.

Once you leave the paradise of Eden, the Bible gets messy when it comes to marriage. When Sarah couldn't have children, she insisted that Abraham sleep with her handmaiden, Hagar, whom she later hated. Jacob loved Rachel, but he had to marry Leah first because she was the oldest of Laban's daughters. King David had several wives, but that did not keep him from having an affair with a married woman by the name of Bathsheba. King Solomon had a harem of about 1,000 wives and concubines and managed to live an elaborate lifestyle beyond the means of the people of Israel. But in all of this hedonism and luxury Solomon laments "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity."

When the Sadducees wanted to challenge Jesus about the existence of heaven, they asked him to make a ruling regarding the Levirate law of marriage. According to Old Testament law, if a man dies childless his brother is under obligation to marry the widow and have children. In the Sadducees exaggerated case, the woman outlives seven brothers. So, who will be her husband when she gets to heaven? Jesus replies, relationships in heaven are in a realm of their own. Your small minds could not begin to comprehend it.

The history of marriage is a many splintered thing. For centuries marriages were

arranged by parents. Polygamy was a common practice among the rich. Women had few rights until the 20th century. The Council of Trent in 1563 made Roman Catholic marriages a religious ceremony. The Marriage Act of 1753 took control over marriage from the hands of individuals and vested it with the state. In 1948 Congress instituted a joint tax return for married couples. Until 1967 inter-racial marriages were prohibited in 16 states. The 1996 Defense of Marriage Act defined marriage to be between one woman and one man.

It is the business of the state to protect the civil rights of individuals.

In an age when men are known to conceive children with several women leaving 1/2 of all single mothers in the U.S. living below the poverty line, what are the civil rights of those children?

One of my closest friends asked me to officiate at her wedding. I had buried her husband a few years before. At a grief recovery group she had met a widower and they had fallen in love. “We have a problem,” she confided over the phone. “We cannot be legally married without facing financial disaster. So this marriage will only be blessed by the church, not the state.” After consulting with my bishop, I declined officiating at the wedding.

It was the middle of the night as I held my gay church member in my arms trying to comfort him after the sudden death of his forty-year partner. Later I watched him scramble for the right to make funeral arrangements and deal with common assets the two had accumulated over a lifetime companionship. Are there sufficient laws to protect the civil rights of such partnerships? Such is the nature of our current national debate.

So I conclude with some questions confronting us. Are we entering a post-marriage society? Will we change the rules of marriage to accommodate all kinds of relationships? Can we maintain a Biblical view of marriage while granting all persons their civil rights? May love and respect guide us through this debate. With malice toward none, with charity for all, may we be led with a light from above.