

## “God’s Gift Of Marriage”

Matthew 5:21-37

February 16, 2020

Several years ago when Ryne Sandberg, the former All-Star second baseman for the Chicago Cubs, was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame, he said that day was the “second-best” thing that ever happened to him. “My wife, Margaret, is the best thing that has ever happened to me,” he said, “She is my best friend, the love of my life, she is my sun, my moon, and my stars. She is my past, my present, and my future. She is everything that’s good about life, and I thank her for entering my life at a time when I needed her most.” I think we would all agree that was a beautiful tribute Ryne Sandberg made to his wife.

Over the course of 24 years of pastoral ministry, I have had the joy performing the weddings of many couples. And I cannot think of a single one of them who, when I first sat down with the couple to discuss and pray about their upcoming marriage, did not have in their eyes the dream of building a marriage something like Ryne Sandberg described. All of them began with a vision of having not just a surviving marriage, but a Hall of Fame marriage – one of the great marriages, the kind of relationship that brings out the best in each other, that helps each other rise above adversity. The kind of bond that the children, grandchildren, friends, and neighbors will look at and say, “O Lord, give me a marriage like that.”

While Ryne Sandberg was an excellent baseball player, he certainly would not claim to be excellent at marriage as Margaret was not his first wife. He married his high school sweetheart, Cindy, in 1979 and they had two children, but they divorced in 1995. In a society in which many studies indicate that half of all marriages end in divorce, Jesus’ words on the subject seem extreme and unreasonably harsh. Jesus said in verse 32, “Everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” What are we to make of these words? This is one of those texts that many people would prefer to ignore and many pastors would like to avoid. But Jesus’ world of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century was actually very similar to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in this respect: the institution of marriage was in crisis. In Bible times, divorce was the prerogative only of husbands. A woman could not get a divorce for any reason. But a husband could get one very easily for almost any reason. As a result a divorced woman was often reduced to begging in order to survive. So one reason Jesus was so strongly opposed to divorce was because He witnessed the sad condition of its victims – especially the women and children. Plus, society could easily stigmatize the woman as one who may have committed adultery, even if her husband did not charge her with such an offense. So any man who marries her after she is divorced would also then be suspected of having committed adultery. Therefore, Jesus was not pronouncing judgment on innocent people with His words, rather He was reminding us that divorce is always a serious matter for both a husband and a wife.

Sadly, in our country today the institution of marriage has been degraded, it is mocked, and people have become too casual about divorce. We have reality dating shows on television in which a man or woman is expected to pick a life partner from a random pool of people chosen by a TV producer. For a lot of people then, marriage has become a form of entertainment or something to try out, like a new hairstyle. We have become a culture of divorce that produces disposable spouses and turns the solemn covenant of marriage into a contract of convenience. Many husbands and wives caught in a troubled marriage race for the exit of divorce rather than hanging in there long enough to work through their problems.

Therefore, when we consider Jesus’ words about marriage and divorce, there are 2 key truths we need to remember. First, God’s plan for marriage is a life-long union that is incapable of being dissolved. Divorce was never in God’s original plans. It was an invention of sinful humanity. Later, in Matthew 19, Jesus takes us back to God’s original plan for marriage, explaining that it was God’s intention that a husband and wife become one flesh. In verses 5-6 Jesus said, “...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 man not separate.” This means more than just the merging of two bodies. It refers to the merging of personalities, sorrows, joys, hopes, and dreams in an unbreakable bond. Just as we cannot separate cream from our coffee after we mix them together, so neither can we separate a husband and wife after they become one flesh. Note, also, that Jesus said it is God who joins them together, not a pastor or a church or a justice of the peace. And Jesus said that when God puts two people together, no human agency can tear them apart.

Our task as a church then is to challenge and encourage couples experiencing problems in their marriage to hang in there and to work through them with the help of God. Satan sees every troubled marriage as an opportunity. He tries to take advantage of our anger and impatience; He encourages us to say or do things that would make reconciliation very difficult; and He pushes us to commit adultery or to do anything that would destroy a marriage. If we're completely honest, we would all admit that most married couples have those moments when they don't like each other very much. But success in marriage is not so much finding the right person as being the right person. The greatest marriages on earth are not the so-called "perfect fits," where people have never argued or questioned what their spouse does. The greatest marriages are those between a husband and wife who can honestly say, "If Jesus were not the boss of our marriage, we would not be together. We have had our difficulties and disagreements, but Jesus has enabled us to bridge our differences and resolve our difficulties." That's the greatest kind of marriage, because it gives God the glory.

The second truth from Jesus about marriage and divorce is: Divorce is forgivable. It is covered by God's grace. I know there are people here today who have gone through divorce and some of you have remarried. I want you to hear this second truth, because I'm sure you may feel a sense of guilt every time you hear Jesus' words on this subject. Jesus once talked with a woman at a well who He knew had been married 5 times and she was living with a man who was not her husband. In John 4 Jesus told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have said is quite true." You will notice that Jesus did not command her to go back and find her first husband and live with him, no matter how miserable they might be. No, Jesus met her where she was, He forgave her, and He went on to help her start a new life.

As much as Jesus despised divorce, I don't believe He would have insisted that all marriages be maintained, no matter what. Some marriages can fall apart to the point that they are destructive and dangerous. In this sinful world there are situations when a Christian may say, "I have tried everything reasonable to make this marriage work. I have prayed, I have tried counseling, but after years of work things have only gotten worse and I see evidence that people are being hurt by the continuation of this marriage. Therefore, I am going to ask God's forgiveness for whatever fault I may bear in this failed marriage and make a new start." Since our Lord is full of forgiveness and grace, I know that He will hear such a prayer and assist with a fresh start.

The words of Jesus about divorce sound harsh, but they are not His last words. Jesus also said that the church is His bride, and just as husbands and wives make promises to each other, Jesus makes a promise to each of us saying, "I take you for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish. You are mine; not even death can tear us apart. Because I live, you also shall live. This is my promise to you." And Jesus never breaks His promises. As we look at our marriages and relationships with each other, and consider how our words and actions with each other may affect our relationship with God, what symbol do you see? The cross. At the intersection of God's harsh words and our sinful actions, we will always find the cross; and with the cross of Jesus we will always find hope, forgiveness, and life.