



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“The Love Lab” Matthew 19:1-12

June is the month of many marriages. Sharon and I were married on June 9th, 35 years ago. How many other couples here had June weddings?

It just seemed right to slip in a Bible message about marriage during the month of June. And who knew how many ways such a simple subject would reverberate in our culture just now?

Jesus did not talk much about marriage. But he was asked about divorce. It reminds me of something Arnold Schwarzenegger is quoted as saying: "I read where one wife plans to divorce her husband as soon as she can find a way to do so without making him happy."

Let's find Matthew 19 in our Bibles, and let's hear what Jesus had to say about this. Listen with me for God's Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud, starting in verse one. *[text]*

Sometimes, when you read a text from the Bible, it feels like you walked into the middle of a movie. Perhaps you felt that way just now, as I read this. And in a way, you're right. So let's see if I can narrate the early part of this Jesus movie for you.

In this passage, Jesus is in an argument with Pharisees concerning his interpretation of the Law of Moses from Exodus through Deuteronomy of the Hebrew Bible. The Law was given to Moses by God perhaps about 1280 B.C. First God delivered them from slavery in Egypt, and then God gave them these directions about how they were to live once they got to the new land God had promised them. While on the journey, even then they were to practice these laws and customs that marked them out as a separated people, whose chief loyalty was to this God who had delivered them from "the house of bondage".

In our passage today, Jesus makes it clear that marriage between a man and a woman. Marriage was ordered by God to be a permanent relationship--no divorce--because marriage is a reflection of God. How is that? First, because God IS relationship. The Christian understanding of God is "3 for the price of one"—that is, the ONE God is THREE--Father, Son and Holy Spirit, together. No divorce there! And second, our God is a God who makes promises and keeps them--even if His covenant partners (the Hebrew people living in Israel) break their part of the agreement. A permanent promise—that's what a "covenant" is. In our traditional wedding ceremonies, we try to make this clear by mentioning things that can change in our lives—"for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health". And even if things change, we say, [it's] "for as long as we both shall live." That's how God lives. That's what God wants.

But God also provided for divorce. In fact, if there was infidelity (which is the case Jesus names here), Rabbinic Judaism required divorce; divorce was the penalty for marital infidelity. Literally, the man would write out for the woman a legal document called, a "certificate of

divorce”, and give it to her. This would allow her to remarry. [You may remember that this was the thought going through the mind of Joseph, the adoptive father of Jesus, when Mary turned up pregnant during their engagement, and Joseph knew he could not be the father.]

Without that certificate of divorce, the woman could not go home to her father’s house, nor marry another man. She could well starve to death, unless she was willing to earn money as a prostitute. Pretty grim. So the “certificate” was another concession in that patriarchal culture, because women got the raw end of the deal in the event of divorce.

Now, since the time Moses passed on the Law about 1280 B.C., the religious leaders had to apply it again and again to their people’s lives. And this called for interpretation. What does this “adultery”, this “unfaithfulness” mean, exactly? Might it mean, “anything that contradicts the decisions of the husband”? Isn’t that being “unfaithful”? This argument was behind the Pharisees’ question to Jesus, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” One group of famous teachers, under the banner of Rabbi Hillel, thought that “unfaithfulness” included such ordinary conflicts of life. The School of Shammai, however, held a stricter interpretation; it had to be a wife sleeping with another man who was not her husband, or a husband sleeping with another woman not his wife—though this latter case was rarely pressed (as you can see in John, chapter 8). So, in our text, the Pharisees were trying to get Rabbi Jesus to commit himself—was he of the School of Hillel, or the School of Shammai, when it came to marriage? Was he going to play for the National League, or the American League? Was he a Republican or a Democrat? (Remember, the Israelite government was a theocracy, where both religious and civil authority was administered together. So, what we today call “political parties” were also “religious parties”, and vice-versa.)

Jesus says, what God wants is no divorce at all—not by Shammai’s rules nor by Hillel’s rules. Divorce is a concession to human sin, because marriage is so difficult, and humans are so selfish. In the Kingdom of God which Jesus was inaugurating, we are going to live by God’s intent and desire, not by human situational ethics.

Jesus’ disciples have been listening to this, and they are pretty upset. “Hey, if that’s what marriage means,” they say, “it’s better not to get married at all.”

And Jesus agrees with them. Marriage IS hard. It is one of the hardest things people can do, as we’ll see in a moment. “Not everyone can abide by sexual abstinence,” Jesus says. But some people will have the gift of being so in love with the Kingdom Life God is bringing that they will even forego marriage—even turn their backs on the “be fruitful and multiply” order of Genesis—in order to push the Kingdom forward.”

That’s what Jesus is saying about “eunuchs” who have little sexual desire. Some are that way physically by birth or by decision; but others act as if they were eunuchs in order to serve a value they see as even higher.

I hope I’ve helped make clear what Jesus was discussing with the Pharisees here in Matthew 19. Marriage between a woman and a man is a high value for God. Divorce is not God’s intent, but a reluctant accommodation to human sin. I sin, you sin, we all sin—the alienation in a marriage that leads to divorce is just one of so many ways we can try to run our lives without God. But as high a value as marriage has to God—and remember, a marriage covenant is a reflection of the faithful covenant God made with His people—marriage is not the

highest value. The personal relationship with God is the highest value. Living Kingdom Life is the highest value. And if a husband and wife have that in place with each other, their relationship gets transformed.

Marriage is difficult. It's like the way Scott Peck begins his book, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*. He begins with a simple, three-word sentence: "Life is difficult." Well, relationships make life more difficult, but they also make it better. And marriage is one of the hardest and yet one of the most fruitful relationships there is.

Why is marriage so difficult? Because in the pressure of being under the same roof, marriage requires us to let our go of our ego enough so that indeed, we can become "one" with our mate. As Jesus quoted from Genesis, " 'A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'. So [these people] are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." One man, one woman, one God. When we fulfill God's will, when we have God in our center instead of our own egos, we can indeed become one. I tell couples, "It's as if your marriage is your first child. Like a child, it has to be fed, cared for, and the poop has to be cleaned out—or the marriage will die." As anyone who has brought a child into their home knows, having a child changes everything. It needs to be the same in a marriage.

Dying to our ego—especially when we are young—is very, very hard. Only by God's grace can we do that. We have to learn from God and draw from God and trust God that He will look after our interests if we take our ego grip off the steering wheel of our lives. Not many can do that as teenagers, or as young adults. The part of the brain that provides us the ability to reason and overrule our emotions doesn't even fully develop, we now know, until we're about 25 years old. No wonder so many people make bad decisions in marriage. Our wishes, our hopes, our lusts, our loves—that's a lot to organize!

Marriage is hard. A man walking along a California beach was deep in prayer. All of a sudden he said out loud, "Lord grant me one wish." At once the sky clouded above his head and in a booming voice the Lord said, "Because you have TRIED to be faithful to me in all ways, I will grant you one wish" The man said, "Build a bridge to Hawaii, so I can drive over anytime I want to." The Lord said, "Your request is very materialistic. Think of the logistics of that kind of undertaking. The supports required to reach the bottom of the Pacific! The concrete and steel it would take! I can do it, but it is hard for me to justify your desire for worldly things. Take a little more time and think of another wish, a wish you think would honor and glorify me." The man thought about it for a long time. Finally he said, "Lord, I have been married and divorced four times. All of my wives said that I am uncaring and insensitive. I wish that I could understand women. I want to know how they feel inside, what they are thinking when they give me the silent treatment, why they cry, what they mean when they say "nothing", and how I can make a woman truly happy." After a few minutes God said, "You want two lanes or four on that bridge?"

Marriage is hard. That's why, when I do a wedding, I take a moment to address the crowd. I tell them "the price of admission to this party" is their promise to support this couple as they launch out on this major life challenge. They are to speak well of one, to the other. They are to pray for this new relationship. They are to listen, they are to encourage. Then they are

indeed “friends of the bride” (on the left side, facing forward) or “friends of the groom” (on the right side, facing forward).

You may have heard about the couple that was on the way to their wedding at the church when they were killed in an automobile accident. They went to the Gate of Heaven and were met by St. Peter. They asked, "St. Peter, we really wanted to get married on earth but we were killed before we got to the church. Do you think you could arrange for us to get married as we come into Heaven so we could become husband and wife for eternity?" Peter replied, "I think so! Just wait here and I will go make the arrangements." Three weeks later he finally reappeared and said, "Everything is in readiness. We can have the ceremony now." They replied, "St. Peter, we have been doing a lot of thinking during the three weeks you've been gone and we wonder if we find that we are not compatible, will it be possible to get a divorce so that we won't have to spend eternity as man and wife?" Peter shook his head and said, "I'm afraid that is impossible! It has taken me three weeks to find a minister up here and I don't think I'll ever find a lawyer!"

Think about the last wedding you attended. Every time we attend a wedding, we step into a “wish factory”. We see the couple exchanging vows, with moist eyes, and with hope high in their hearts. Many of us get caught up in that moment; we want the best for them. In those moments, we are witnesses to a committed experiment in stretching the capacities of each partner for life and love.

The new couple now enters The Love Lab, with many new experiences, problems and challenges, so that they can expand their capacities for real love. Shouldn't we join in God's high value for marriage, so we support each couple who has embarked on this gamble, this sacrifice of egos in hopes of great rewards, this imitation of the faithfulness of God? Can we imagine trusting some other couple enough—perhaps a pair that has been together for 20 years—that we would open up our lives for them to see our marriage enough to know how to cheer us on? Would you couples—especially new ones--care enough about each other to do that?

Today and tomorrow are the last days of June, this month of marriages. If you are fortunate enough to have this commitment in place with someone, then take some time today or tomorrow to tell your mate you love them, and want to make this next year better than the one you've just finished. Renew your vows to each other. (And this is for spouses who have been married in any month, not just “June”.)

I'd like to pray for our marriages now. Shall we bow before God and ask God's blessing?

O God, we are all selfish human beings. Like Adam and Eve, we want to run our lives by our own dim lights, and we often go wrong. But when we marry, we are getting closer to imitating You, and that means we especially need Your help. Without You in our marriages, our marriages are marooned on an island, surrounded by sharks. Step into our marriage partnerships, Father, please. Help us fulfill the covenants we have made.

Many here have suffered a broken marriage covenant. Your Word shows You suffered that again and again from the unfaithful nation. Yet you did not divorce Israel. You called out to them to return, to heal, to start again. O God, grant that people who have suffered divorce

may come to trust again—wiser about their own needs, and able to say what they want in another such relationship, and sensitive to Your leading in their human love.

You said, “It is not good for a human to be alone.” You know how we are made, because You made us. Help us--Creator God, God of Covenant Love—to keep close to You in the marriage covenants we have made. We pray this in Jesus’ Name. [And all God’s people said... Amen.]

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on June 29, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]