

God's Servant Honors Marriage

Mark 10-1-11

Over thirty-seven years ago, I entered the sanctuary of Grace Presbyterian Church on a snowy Saturday afternoon to receive an amazing gift from God. I walked to the front of that church with full confidence that my steady, masculine demeanor would prevail through the wedding ceremony . . . but halfway through the service emotions overwhelmed me, and tears poured down my happy cheeks.

"He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD." (Proverbs 18:22 ESV)

I still marvel that God should favor me in such a lavish way. I often wake up in the morning, look at Kimberly and think, *"Thank you, Lord, for your grace in my life."*

That December afternoon in 1987, my brother Scott, who was the pastor leading our wedding and asked me a profound question:

"Ritch, do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife and do you solemnly promise before God and these witnesses that you will love, honor and cherish her and that forsaking all others for her alone you will live with her according to the ordinance of God so long as you both shall live?"

In great confidence, I said, "I do!" At the time, I thought I understood what was going to be required of me to fulfill that vow. **I must have reasoned that I was such an unselfish, giving, generous person that this vow to place Kimberly's interests above my own interests would always be like hitting the "Easy Button".**

One of the great discoveries that marriage unearthed to me is how often I think about me and about mine and how deficient I am in thinking about her and hers. **Marriage opened my eyes to my own selfishness.**

If you are married, God designs to use your marriage to teach you how to become more like Jesus and how to glorify Him through the way you honor and cherish your spouse.

I realize that in a group this large there are all sorts of marriages represented . . . in this room there are **marriages that are happy, marriages that are hard, marriages that are hurtful, marriages that are just barely hanging on.** I also realize that many of you are single and have not married. I know that some of you have been married and are now divorced. Regardless of your connection to marriage, I pray that the message today brings hope and encouragement to us all!

Today, we open our Bibles to Mark 10 where we sit at Jesus' feet to learn about the spiritual blessing God intends to bring to us through marriage.

Main Idea: God created marriage to advance the worship of His divine Person. When we follow Jesus, our ATTITUDES ABOUT marriage and our ACTIONS WITHIN marriage re-align to His good design.

At first glance, it might seem like Mark introduces Jesus' teaching on marriage begins abruptly with little groundwork to ready us for the subject. But if we look closely at Mark 9, **we will see the logical flow that Mark uses to prepare our hearts to listen to Jesus teach us about marriage:**

But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:34-35 [ESV](#))

Mark is getting us ready to think about marriage in terms of our being the servant in our relationship with our spouse. He is preparing us to ask, "What can I do to put my spouse first in our relationship?"

And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me." (Mark 9:36-37 [ESV](#))

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea." (Mark 9:42 [ESV](#))

Mark is getting us ready to think about marriage in terms of Jesus' love for our children. Marriage is a place where many moms and dads may cause stumbling in little ones. Little ones often stumble over the Gospel when they see their Christian mom and dad treat each other harshly or have hard hearts toward each other.

"Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." (Mark 9:50 [ESV](#))

The Gospel allows places the onus of pursuing peace upon us. Disciples of Jesus do not wait for the other to act peaceably before we commit to postures of peace.

All of this leads up to Mark sharing with us the question that the Pharisees bring to Jesus.

And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again. And again, as was his custom, he taught them. And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"" (Mark 10:1-2 [ESV](#))

The Pharisees were not in agreement among themselves regarding the Law of God in reference to divorce. Surprise! Can you imagine that this subject would be a source of disagreement among religious people? Some Pharisees were very lenient regarding divorce and allowed it for almost any reason, while others were more strict.

Now the Pharisees are not really looking for Jesus to help them with their interpretation of scripture so much as wanting to "test" Him. They want to stir up trouble against Jesus. They know that regardless of how He answers, some who were following Him were going to be upset. They know that this is a topic where Jesus is going to lose loyalty from some of His base.

But Jesus is not afraid. **He is not a politician courting public opinion. He is the Great Prophet who represents God to man.** Notice Jesus' answer:

"He answered them, "What did Moses command you?"" (Mark 10:3 [ESV](#))

Jesus takes them to scripture to discover the answer to their practical questions.

Friends, if you are a disciple of Jesus, you will make the Bible the basis for your life. You will not answer the big questions of your life based upon **experiences, emotions or experts**. You will answer the big questions of your life based upon scripture alone.

Experiences, emotions and experts can be helpful, but these must not be our foundation for the truths we firmly hold. Only God's Word possesses such authority and finality!!

Illustration: Seminary Greek Professor. *"You are going to study your Greek New Testaments and come to one position about divorce and remarriage. But then you are going to become pastors and shepherd hurting people and you are going to change your position."* I remember being stunned by his statement then and I still am stunned today. He was saying that our experiences and our emotions would change the way that we interpret scripture. Now this man is a really, really

godly man. I still respect him to this day for the way he lives and the way he leads his class. But on this point, he is really, really wrong.

After serving as a pastor for 38 years, I understand WHY my prof said it. No doctrine has been as emotionally difficult to teach than the doctrine of divorce and remarriage. I have longed to be able to relax my position. I have lost precious relationships because of my position. I ache for those who have marriages that are miserable and intolerable to an extreme.

Yet friends, I plead with you, do not let your emotions or your experience change the way you interpret scripture. If we do so, the Bible will become a wax nose . . . it will bend to our whim rather than bend us to its will.

Principle: Let the Bible sit in judgment upon your emotions, your experiences and your favorite experts. Resist the temptation to judge the Bible by these weak, contradictory and unstable sources.

"Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." (John 17:17 [ESV](#))

When Jesus asks the question about Moses, the Pharisees immediately think of Deuteronomy 24. These are guys who KNOW the scriptures. Their problem is that they have hard hearts so that they do not understand the meaning or practical application of what they know.

"When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand . . . and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce . . . then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD." (Deuteronomy 24:1-4 [ESV](#))

So the Pharisees answer Jesus:

"They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.""
(Mark 10:4 [ESV](#))

They felt very pleased with their answer until Jesus says,

""And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment.""
(Mark 10:5 [ESV](#))

Jesus says, *“The reason why Moses put this limitation upon divorce is because of YOUR hard hearts! Hard hearts are always looking for loopholes to righteousness. So Moses made this law so that wives had some legal protection against being used by men. But if YOUR hearts were soft, no such law would have been written.”*

Jesus then takes them back to Moses’ earliest writing: Genesis 1-2.

But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’”
(Mark 10:6-8 [ESV](#))

Jesus quotes from Genesis 2:

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” (Genesis 2:24 [ESV](#))

Genesis 2 does not envision divorce at all! Genesis 2 does not make allowance for it in God’s plan.

Then Jesus adds His own commentary:

“What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Mark 10:9 [ESV](#))

Well, this ended the conversation with the Pharisees. Remember they started with the question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” And we see Jesus’ answer to this question is, *“Not if your heart is soft to the LORD. Marriage is His work. Man does not have a right to tear apart what God joins together.”*

Well, Jesus’ answer surprises the disciples! **They cannot imagine having to endure some scenarios of remaining married to a woman who is extremely difficult.** So when they get back to the house where they are staying, they have some more questions for Jesus. We can imagine what they might be. I think they were bringing up various scenarios where it seems like it would be impossible to stay married to a woman who was so difficult. Here is Jesus’ summary:

“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” (Mark 10:11-12 [ESV](#))

Jesus has much to say about the covenant of marriage. The covenant of marriage forms a relationship that is unique and different from every other kinds of relationship. How so?

Marriage is . . .

1. A Creation of God.

When the Pharisees ask Jesus a question about divorce, takes them back to the first week of Creation. Jesus wants us to remember that marriage is not an idea that we had for ourselves, but it is an idea that God created for man. From the beginning marriage is God's idea and God's creation.

"Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.'" (Genesis 2:18 [ESV](#))

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man." (Genesis 2:21-22 [ESV](#))

Three truths flow from marriage being God's creation:

Truth #1: Because God created marriage, He knows its design and its definition.

Man has no right to define marriage. Man did not create this thing that the whole world throughout time and through culture has enjoyed. Some say that "Love is love. And people have a right to love whomever they want to love." Well, I do not know what "love" means to the person who makes such a statement. That is a longer conversation. But Jesus clearly follows God's design and definition when He says, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife. And the two shall become one flesh." God created marriage to be a covenant made with Him between two people . . . not three or four or more, but two. One of those person's is a man. The other of those persons is a woman.

Definition of marriage: A sacred, lifelong covenant with God between one man and one woman whereby the two become one.

Who gives me the right to define marriage this way? Answer: “No one gives me the right to define marriage this way.” God created marriage and He alone can define it. What I am doing when I share this definition is to state what God has already made clear. I am not creating a definition of marriage. I am merely repeating what God has revealed to us.

Truth #2: Because God created marriage, He regulates it according to His wisdom.

Married couples do not have the right to sit down and say, “What principles do we want to make to guide the way we relate to each other?”

God regulates marriage without our advice. God gives an abundance of rules to follow in the context of our marriage. He gives us rules about patience, gentleness, kindness, humility, generosity, honesty, forgiveness, forbearance, commitment and tenderheartedness.

God also tells us that the husband is the head of his wife. And the wife is the helpmate to her husband. He outlines clear complementary roles for the husband and the wife.

Who gives me the right to say that the role of the husband is different from the role of the wife? Answer: I do not have the right to regulate marriage in any way. But I am simply repeating what God has already revealed about His regulation of marriage.

NOW . . . it is VERY important that we do not twist God’s meaning of headship or of submission in a way that demeans the beautiful relationship that He created to display His glory! We are right to be VERY CAREFUL about any clarification of these roles in marriage. We must not be led by our emotions, our experiences or the experts, but by the WORD OF GOD alone.

Truth #3: Because God created marriage, He purposes it for His pleasure and glory.

Marriage is not mainly about man, but mainly about God. God did intend to bring pleasure to mankind through marriage. But God’s first priority is His glory . . . the worship of His divine Person.

"Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." Isaiah 43:6b–7,

Everything in this world which God created is created for the chief purpose of bringing Him pleasure by knowing Him and making Him known. That includes you and me! That includes marriage. **God created marriage so that in marriage we might reflect specific glories of His person that could not be reflected were marriage not created.** The whole design of marriage is Godward in its purpose.

Principle: God did not create marriage mainly for the joy of sex, or for procreation, or for companionship, or for personal satisfaction with our lives. These are all intended benefits of marriage, but God created marriage so that we would magnify the glory of God through it.

I love the story God shares with us of how He created marriage. What an amazing design He crafted in that first week of creation!

2. A Miracle of God.

‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Mark 10:7-9 [ESV](#))

God attends every true wedding. He works invisibly to create a bond so very unique and mysterious. He takes two and joins them together so that they are no longer two, but one flesh. This miracle is far greater than turning the water into wine like Jesus did at the wedding in Cana. Changing water into wine is a miracle involving particles. But making two into one is a miracle involving persons.

This miracle joins two people together in a way that fundamentally changes their identity. In this union the man gives up his independent identity and joins to his wife. In this union, the woman gives up her independent identity and joins to her husband. From this day forward, they are no longer two. God has made them one.

If we understand the miracle of God inside of the marriage covenant, we will understand more of why God forbids divorce. Jesus explains this part of God’s heart when He says, *“What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”* (Mark 10:7-9 [ESV](#))

At the wedding the husband and the wife do not join themselves to each other. The promise of marriage is not something man can accomplish through his/her own efforts. At the wedding, God is at work making the mystery of oneness a reality. For sure, man is involved, but God alone performs the miracle.

Truth: Since God performs a miracle at each wedding, He invests Himself in the lasting nature of His miracle. He jealousy holds the miracle He performs.

Illustration: Sand castle on the beach. You and family work all day long. Very skilled sculpture. About to take a picture when someone comes along and jumps into it, smashing it. How do you respond?

Marriage is God's miracle work. Let us honor the work He has done and is willing to do.

3. A Vow to God.

In Christian weddings, there is always a part where the couple recites wedding vows to one another. Traditional vows are not flowery and sentimental, so much as serious and foundational.

I, _____, take you, _____ to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part. To this I pledge you my good faith and my honor.

Notice that these vows are not expressions of **what we expect from the other**, but of what the other can expect from us. **These vows bind us to being a picture of the Gospel through the way you relate to one another.**

Notice also that these vows are beyond our ability to fulfill them. **They are too great, too unselfish, too God-honoring to be fulfilled in our own strength. We need the Spirit of God working in us every day to fulfill these vows.**

Finally, notice that these vows are spoken to God as well as to our spouse. We are making a vow to the LORD to fulfill our part in the marriage covenant that He created and blesses. He is the central participant in our marriage and we are promising God that we will love, honor and cherish this person as long as we shall live.

I often begin weddings with these words, *“What you are about to witness is a testimony of God's grace and goodness as these two pledge their love to one another. It is a holy covenant being made with God Himself. It is a commitment*

first and foremost to the Lord that what is now bound in heaven will be bound on earth as long as these two shall live."

Undoubtedly, Satan will tempt us to think, "OK. *You made those vows to this person. But they have changed for the worse! They do not deserve to have a spouse who honors and cherishes them!*" And he may have a point there.

But when we consider that our vows are to the Lord, we find our feet back on solid ground. What did God do to deserve our breaking of our vow to Him? He never fails us. He never stops loving us. He always fulfills His promise to us.

What argument can we make to defend breaking our vow to HIM?

These vows are gifts from God meant to drive the stakes deep into the rock of His grace so that we will not be moved by life's struggles nor by your own failings.

Three practical questions:

Question #1: What should a believer do if they are endangered by the abuse of a spouse?

Illustration: Saul. Get out of the way of the spear. Sometimes a person has to leave the house in order to be safe. In Illinois, there is a legal way to do that without divorce.

Question #2: Can a person be divorced and yet innocent of the sin of divorce?

Yes!! The Bible speaks of two circumstances a person may be divorced and yet not be guilty of sin.

1. If your spouse initiates the divorce and leaves you.

"But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace." (1 Corinthians 7:15 [ESV](#))

2. If you divorce your spouse because of sexual immorality.

"And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." (Matthew 19:9 [ESV](#))

Question #3: Does the sin of divorce leave a permanent mark of shame on a person's life?

No. Confession of our sin to God removes the guilt and shame of our sin completely. 1 John 1:9 applies to you. If you have committed the sin of divorce and have not confessed it as sin to God, I urge you to talk to the Lord today. If you have confessed your sin to the Lord, receive the full impact of His cleansing power. Satan wants you to look in the rearview mirror for the rest of your life and feel shame. Jesus offers you freedom from shame.

4. A Concern of God.

Notice that Jesus engages with the Pharisees on this subject. The Pharisees chose it, but Jesus leans into it. Jesus knows that marriage is a matter of importance to the Father. Marriage is a creation gift . . . given not only to true disciples, but to people all over the world.

But note also that Jesus continues the conversation with His disciples when the day draws to a close. Jesus teaches so clearly about marriage because marriage is a discipleship issue.

Why do pastors commit time and energy to marriage counseling? There are many ways a pastor might answer that question:

1. Pastors desire to be a practical help to people. We wish to labor to make a difference in the day to day lives of church members.
2. Pastors care about the suffering that troubled marriages produce. We do not wish to see people suffer. We know that a bad marriage is a factory that churns out human anguish.
3. Pastors loves to see marriage bring happiness. We know that marriage can bring happiness to husbands, wives, children and grandchildren. We want to be used by God to bring **generational joy** to those in our flock.

These three motivations are good and right. But there is a fourth reason that far surpasses all others.

Pastors commit time and energy to marriage counseling because we have a laser focus on making disciples.

God ordains for marriage to be a core class to help a follower of Jesus grow and mature in his/her devotion to God. **When we walk by the Spirit, marriage helps the believer to become a person who is more noble, more complete, more like Jesus.**

This is NOT to assert that a single person has less advantage than a married person in spiritual growth. This is to assert that if you are married, God ordains your marriage to be an incubator for growth in Christlikeness. If we catch this priority, we will ask very different questions when we think about our marriage.

There are some questions about marriage that unbelievers and believers have in common. These are legitimate and important questions like,

“How can my spouse and I find peace together?”

“How can we resolve conflict together?”

“How can we get on the same page in our goals together?”

“How can we grow in physical intimacy together?”

“How can we communicate in a way that is satisfying to both of us?”

“How can we agree on a budget together?”

“How can we forgive the terrible wrongs that our marriage has suffered?”

“How can we keep from getting on each others’ nerves?”

All these are good questions to ask. Yet these questions are often motivated by a heart that is self-centered and self-promoting. Such a heart says, *“I want a good marriage so that my life will be what I want it to be.”*

Both believers and unbelievers often ask these questions because our eyes are focused on ourselves.

When the Holy Spirit indwells us, He turns our eyes away from self and on to Jesus. The Holy Spirit reminds us that we are nothing and that Jesus is everything. This is a radical transformation!

When the Holy Spirit fills us, we ask a fundamentally different question. We ask, *“How does God intend for my marriage to be used for me to become more like Jesus and give more glory to Jesus? How does God want to use my marriage with all of its challenges to help me be more loving, more serving, more forgiving, more patient, more generous, more joyful, more prayerful, more glorifying to God?”* Yes, we want to be happy. Yes, we do not want to be miserable. But more than that, we want to make much of Jesus. We want to live to His praise and glory.

Truth: God’s ability to bless us through our marriage does not rely upon our spouse, but on the LORD who promises to complete the work He began in us.

Jesus gives not so much **marriage seminar** as He is giving a **discipleship seminar**. Jesus’ primary interest centers upon making disciples.

Here, Jesus teaches us that the way that a disciple THINKS ABOUT marriage and ACTS IN marriage is a test of his/her devotion to God. Marriage is one of the many practical ways that a person either veers away from living as a disciple of Jesus OR that a person locks in to Jesus’ Lordship.

Truth: God designs marriage to be His sanctifying tool to shape us into the image of His Son and His pulpit to proclaim His redemptive love to the world.

5. A Metaphor from God

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.” (Ephesians 5:31-33 [ESV](#))

God’s vision for marriage is that this unique relationship would be a sermon about the covenant relationship of Jesus with His church.

Marriage is a portrait of the Gospel in living color. The Gospel shouts, *“Jesus loves His church so much that He willingly gives up His life for her! He sacrifices His own body on the cross so that the church might be clean and pure and forgiven. He loves her with an enduring love . . . even though she fails Him, He does not give up on her. He never stops loving her. He never removes His covenant promise from her. He always works for her ultimate and eternal good.* Satan hates the Gospel so Satan hates marriage. But more specifically, know that Satan hates YOUR marriage. He is constantly at work to destroy it because he hates the Gospel.

Protect the picture of the Gospel that God has given you to share with the world. Out of protection of the Gospel picture, Jesus teaches us . . .

“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”” (Mark 10:11-12 [ESV](#))

Divorce defaces the picture that God is painting for the world to see and be saved.

GOSPEL HERE.

Practical Considerations:

1. **Invite the Lord to your table every day.** Listen to Him speak to you together. Pray OUT LOUD with each other. We need Him to lead us and to help us.

Husbands, I encourage you to lead in this. Humbly and lovingly ask your wife, “Do you mind if we listen to God by reading His word together?” Then choose a book of the Bible—1 Peter or Gospel of Mark. And read one paragraph. “What is God saying to us?” Then ask, “Can I pray with you? What can I pray for you about?” Leading spiritually is the foundation of everything else you do as a man in your marriage.

2. **Own 100% of the 5%.** Let us not look over and make observations about what our spouse should do to make our marriage healthy. Focus on the 5% that you
3. **Seek biblical counsel from someone who will help you follow Jesus.** Do not try to go it alone. Make following Jesus your priority. Most people wait to ask for help when one has already decided to end the marriage.