

## QUESTION 29: “DIVORCE, REMARRIAGE AND COHABITATION — WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?” (Genesis 2:18-24)

2.2.20

### INTRODUCTION

This is the third of four messages on what I have seen as ultimately being about reflecting the image of God. Reflecting the image of God is what we have been called to:

- 1) First, by what happens to us when we surrender to Christ: ***So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ — Paul, Galatians 3:26-27.***
- 2) Second, by the process of sanctification, that process of becoming like Christ: ***[Y]ou have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator — Paul, Colossians 3:9b-10.***

That’s important to keep in mind, because it is the image of God that determines our response to these (and many other) issues. So as we move forward from that foundation, we have determined a few things:

- 1) Gay marriage is wrong because it denies the design of God in creating male and female to be the only human union that reflects his image.
- 2) Transgenderism is wrong because it denies the design of God in creating two, and only two, genders that are planned to reflect his image.
- 3) Anything that denies, distracts or disputes the design of God’s creation is wrong because, as the the OT book of Isaiah says: ***You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, “You did not make me”? Can the pot say to the potter, “You know nothing?” — Isaiah 29:16.***

Today we will be looking at the question: What does the Bible have to say about divorce, cohabitation and remarriage?

Now a couple of weeks ago, when we were talking about gay marriage, we laid out three (3) reason why God gave us marriage:

- 1) To “be fruitful and multiply.”
- 2) For the joy of marital intimacy.
- 3) As a spiritual creation reflecting God’s desire for intimate relationship.

As Jeff Myers observes so well in his book, *Understanding The Culture*: “One key indicator of a society’s state of health is the state of marriage in that society. Men and women who are married with children are a society’s most basic stabilizing influence. But the landscape is changing. In a 2010 survey, 40 percent of Americans said they believe marriage is ‘becoming obsolete’” — Jeff Myers, *Understanding The Culture*, page 259.

There was a time when marriage was considered to be a lifetime commitment; there were no alternatives. The character Major Frank Burns in the “M\*A\*S\*H” TV show famously said this regarding his marriage during a fifth-season episode called “Dear Sigmund”: “I happen to believe in the sanctity of marriage, no matter how ugly or disgusting it gets. I’ll kill her before I divorce her.” Even unhappy marriages were continued to the end of life. And, in a recent article in “People” magazine, actress Sarah Michelle Gellar shared this regarding marriage in general, and her ongoing, 18-year marriage to actor Freddie Prinze Jr. in particular: “Marriage is like a deck of cards. In the beginning, all you need are two hearts and a diamond. But years later, you wish you had a club and a spade.”

Now of course, in an age where it has become unreservedly “all about me, my happiness, my feelings,” such commitment seems to be a relic of another time, like something you’d find in an antique store. And, certainly, we need to be reminded of some sobering statistics of what our contemporary sense of commitment has wound up meaning:

- 1) In the United States, nearly 50% of all marriages end in divorce.
- 2) Statistically, a divorce occurs every 13 seconds.

We also talked a couple of weeks ago that approximately 4.5% of Americans self-identify as “gay/lesbian” (June 2019), meaning a little over 11 million Americans — so basically, somewhere between 1 in 20-25 Americans. Approximately 0.6% (some 1.3 million adults) identify themselves as transgender — so basically, somewhere around 6 out of every 1,000 Americans.

So when you compare those stats to divorce stats, it becomes readily apparent that we are far more likely to intersect with people who have dealt with divorce than we are with people who identify with the LGBTQ community. And, of course, divorce is not just about the two people in the marriage, but also any children who are a part of a family going through that process — not to mention extended family, friends and so on. So our ability to be able to be effective ambassadors for Christ is critically important because this is both such a frequent and debilitating occurrence in the world in which we live.

Now, before we get into this, I also know that divorce has impacted a number of you here in our church family. I am truly sorry for anybody who has gone through that, especially because I know that divorce was not the original plan when you said, “I do” — yet it still happened. So I hope that, through all that is said, these words come across not as judgmental but as truth spoken in absolute love, and I hope that you will realize that as much as I do.

So we are going to be looking at three issues this morning:

- 1) What does the Bible say about divorce?
- 2) What does the Bible say about cohabitation?
- 3) What does the Bible say about remarriage?

To do that, let’s look again at our text, specifically the last three verses:

### **TEXT**

***Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh [this person is a part of me]; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh — Genesis 2:22-24.***

Now that last verse in particular gives us a pretty clear picture of what God’s expectations and ideals for marriage are:

- 1) Leaving one relationship — “father and mother” — for another relationship — “his wife” — suggests a moment of public acknowledgement when a man leaves being a member of one household for creating another one.
- 2) The man being “united to his wife” suggests a relationship of singular uniqueness between one man and one woman. The Hebrew word that translates as “cleave” in the KJV and which the NIV translates as “united” means literally to adhere to, cling to, be joined together unlike any other relationship there is.

- 3) The two becoming “one” suggests a relationship of complete love and acceptance.
- 4) The two becoming one “flesh” suggests a relationship of complete unity — not only sexually but completely sharing in each other’s lives. The Hebrew word that translates as “flesh” refers not only to the physical person but to the whole person — everything that makes up who a person is.
- 5) And, in the NT, Christ’s saying “***So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate***” — *Jesus Christ, Matthew 19:6* suggests a relationship of permanence.

So, what does that tell us as far as God’s expectation of marriage? A public testimony of an inner covenant between one man and one woman, built on love and the gift of physical intimacy creating a completely unique unity, and designed to be permanent. That’s the standard. Marriage is so important to God that he made it a fundamental part of his purposes when he included it in his creation.

But we also need to understand God’s intention for marriage through the filter of understanding the idea of a “covenant.” In simple terms, a covenant is simply an agreement between two people that involves promises from each to the other. But a marriage covenant is much more. A covenant is quite literally who God is, it’s a part of how he operates, how he defines his relationship between himself and his people, and gives binding expression to statements of his plans and purposes.

That’s important because, while we can think of marriage as a legally binding arrangement, at its heart, it is a covenant, a pledge of promise before God. Marriage is the daily, hourly, moment-by-moment working out of that covenant. It’s important to view marriage from this perspective because, in a society that only sees in terms of laws and loopholes, covenant is a reflection of the heart and, ultimately, of our relationship to God. And while we may end a legal arrangement, God looks at marriage as a statement of covenant — promises made before and witnessed by him. What ends in human eyes is still valid in God’s eyes.

The “God-piece” is extremely important because, when people get wrapped up in a society that has strayed from biblical ideals — “the image of God” — marriage, the family, children and individuals all pay the hideous price we call “divorce.” And yet, despite the consequences, 50% of all marriages experience that outcome.

## APPLICATION

So, with all that said, what does the Bible have to say about divorce? In the OT, both because of the damage that is done, and also because God created marriage as a metaphor for his desired relationship with mankind, he said through the prophet Malachi: “***The man who hates and divorces his wife . . . does violence to the one he should protect. . . . So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful***” — *God speaking, Malachi 2:16*. Other translations render this in much stronger terms (and so does the NIV in giving an alternative translation): “***I hate divorce . . . because the man who divorces his wife covers his garment with violence***” — *God speaking*. God hates divorce in this context because it violates his original and ongoing design for marriage, and it is the breaking of a covenant relationship which he holds as sacred. In the OT, it also left the woman exposed and alone in a society that did not practice many social safety nets. Nevertheless, divorce in the OT was allowed, but only because of the “hardness of hearts” — a stubborn refusal to submit to God’s plans. In practice, divorce had become an action that could be initiated for any cause. As a result, society was become increasingly broken. As long as a

husband presented the wife who no longer pleased him with a certificate of divorce, he could marry again and the wife, armed with her certificate, would retain her marital inheritance, plus be free to remarry. Adultery, of course, was already covered in the Law as a capital offense.

In the NT, there are two (2) situations where divorce is allowed:

- 1) From Christ: ***“I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery. . . . Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 19:9; Mark 10:11-12.***
- 2) From Paul: ***[I]f the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace — Paul, I Corinthians 7:15.***

Now it must be understood that what Jesus and Paul were saying was to give permission to divorce, and not command. Even if unfaithfulness has occurred, you are not automatically to divorce your spouse. Obviously forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration and ongoing love in those circumstances would paint an incredibly vivid picture of what God’s love and forgiveness look like by showing that example in a human relationship. But these were to be the only allowable, biblical circumstances where divorce is a legitimate outcome.

Now, what about cohabitation? There is an argument prevalent in our society that says that, due to the high incidence of divorce, wouldn’t just living together, to get used to each other before marriage, make sense? In a word, no. But why?

For one thing, statistics tell us that that isn’t how that idea actually works out. While some studies have shown that the first year of marriage works well for those who lived together first, by year five, a higher percentage of these relationships have ended in divorce than couples who have followed a more traditional route. Other studies have shown that divorces following a cohabiting arrangement are some 20-30% higher than the rates for couples who followed a traditional course of marriage. Some of the reasons given for that higher rate were:

- 1) Becoming used to each other without really thinking through the implications of marriage.
- 2) Coming together for reasons other than purely relationship — finances were a huge factor in this decision.
- 3) Difficulties of parting from a shared life (common property, etc.) kept people in the relationship until they simply couldn’t bear living with each other anymore.

But at the end of the day, living together declares no covenant relationship, no public commitment, no personal commitment or, most of all, no inclusion of God in terms of a covenant with him. It’s not a whole lot different than breaking up from a dating relationship — other than maybe needing to clear out a closet.

But beyond that, the Bible uses the word “fornication” to describe living together outside of marriage, and uses it as a spiritual metaphor for unfaithfulness to God. Fornication means to have sexual relations between unmarried persons. There are several reasons why this kind of behavior is condemned:

- 1) Sex bonds a husband and wife together as one. The marriage ceremony is the public testimony to this commitment. Within that commitment, sex has a sacramental role in the marriage as it is designed as a means of deepening and sealing an intimate covenantal relationship that is intended to last a lifetime. As God accused Israel: ***“[T]he Lord is the***

*witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant” — God speaking, Malachi 2:14.* As Erwin Lutzer points out, “[S]exual intercourse in and of itself does not constitute marriage. A man and a woman are made husband and wife by a covenant taken in the presence of God and witnesses. . . . The covenant justifies the sexual relationship; the sexual relationship does not justify the covenant” — Erwin Lutzer, *The Truth About Same-Sex Marriage*, page 51.

- 2) Because marriage is designed to be such a specific covenant commitment, God designed it to reflect complete and total faithfulness by each of the participants in the covenant. Going outside that design is essentially reflecting unfaithfulness in our relationship with God.
- 3) Sex outside the specific parameters of marriage is using others to satisfy yourself; it is incredibly selfish. Part of our obligation to God is to value others as made in the image of God and therefore of inestimable value. Casual sex makes such a viewpoint impossible, whenever or however any people pursue any sex outside of marriage. As the writer of Proverbs said in such a wonderfully picturesque way: ***Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched? So is he who sleeps with another man’s wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished — Proverbs 6:27-29.***
- 4) “Paul says that, [even ] when a man has [casual] sex . . . even then ‘the two will become one flesh.’ Sex binds two people together not just physically, but also in the soul and spirit even apart from marriage; there is an imprint made by two such partners with each other. [Casual sex] forms an *alien* bond [a bond that violates the biblical boundaries], a bond outside the boundaries and nurture of a marriage covenant. This bond is an intruder, a violation of what God intended” — Erwin Lutzer, *The Truth About Same-Sex Marriage*, page 53. In a very real sense, a person’s sexually sinful past makes meaningful relationships even more difficult — precisely because the God-designed gift of sex, intended for a lifetime, was stolen, traded for a moment. Again, sex outside of the biblical standards of marriage is wrong because it operates outside the image of God, trading his intentions for ours.
- 5) And Jesus made a point of showing God’s displeasure in a man and a woman living together outside of marriage. Remember the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4? During their conversation, we read these words: ***[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 just said is quite true” — John 4:16-18.*** Jesus makes a point to differentiate between the men she has lived with in her life, between married and unmarried. There is no reason to make that point if there is no difference between being married and living together.

So divorce outside of very specific circumstances is wrong, and cohabitation is wrong — again because both go against God’s design that reflects God’s image. OK, but here’s where this gets particularly dicey, what about the person who has experienced divorce and then remarried? What if that is simply a part of your personal history? And maybe it’s even occurred more than once. What do we do with that? Does the Bible give any guidance in this situation?

Well, that certainly is a part of our culture, particularly our celebrity culture. Actress and socialite Zsa Zsa Gabor was married nine (9) times; she famously remarked: “A man in love is incomplete

until he has married. Then he is finished.” Elizabeth Taylor had eight (8) husbands, including one — Richard Burton — that she married twice. Hollywood legend Rita Hayworth had five (5) marriages, as did Judy Garland, while Judy’s daughter Liza Minnelli has had four (4). But not to be outdone, Mickey Rooney had eight (8) wives, as has interview legend Larry King (who ironically wrote a book entitled, *How To Talk To Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere: The Secrets To Good Communication*). Film director Martin Scorsese has had five (5) marriages, as did Larry Linville, who famously played our aforementioned Major Frank Burns on TV’s “M\*A\*S\*H.” Frank Sinatra had four (4) marriages, as did boxing champion Muhammad Ali. That list could go on and on. So how does the Bible view present relationships in light of past mistakes?

Any idea of remarriage has to ask the following questions, and they all revolve not around the legal aspects of the marriage or divorce, but the covenantal issues:

- 1) Were both parties living faithful to the marriage covenant?
- 2) At what point was the covenant broken in the eyes of God by the other party? (Notice no mention of “irreconcilable differences.” Our human or legal conclusions of what ends a marriage carry no weight if they contradict God’s design.)

The Bible comes at this not from the standpoint of “Can a Christian divorce?” but rather, “Is the marriage covenant broken or still in place?” Aside from the two reasons previously stated for ending a marriage, very serious consideration needs to be given if an additional marriage is being considered. Just because a marriage is ended by a human court does not mean that the original covenant has ended in the eyes of God. There can be sin against the covenant (i.e., anger at my spouse), but that does not equate with the breaking of the covenant. Only biblical allowances for divorce — unfaithfulness (adultery) and abandonment — should be considered as legitimate reasons for allowing the freedom to remarry.

There is, however, (potentially) one more reason why a marriage can be ended, and it is actually is considered by some to be an appropriate extension of the abandonment issue.

In the ancient Middle East, women, even as wives, were often considered to be not much more than property. As such, the husbands often exercised wide latitude in how they treated their wives. Physical abuse was common (and probably other abuses as well). But in our contemporary society, we now shine a very different light on spousal abuse. The question: Is this a legitimate ground for divorce? This takes us back to the abandonment issue. In Exodus 21, we find these words: ***“If [a man] selects [another man’s daughter] for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter. If [the son] marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights. If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free” — God speaking, Exodus 21:9-11a.*** The idea here is the assumption that the husband is covenantally responsible to his wife for her material and emotional needs. If he refuses her, he has breached his marital covenant by abandoning her. In this context, she was free to be gone, and to marry again.

If we look at the vows of a traditional marriage ceremony, we see words that tell us that the husband is “to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.” Physical abuse by many standards would qualify as abandonment by forsaking the promises of the marriage covenant. In that sense, divorce and remarriage would potentially be allowed. Of course, separation may be necessary simply for the immediate concerns of safety and distance. And again, while divorce

could be pursued (and may need to be considered for safety's sake), it is not required to be pursued.

And one more: How about (and here's where it's a bit tricky) past marriages that may have occurred in somebody's history, and then they come to Christ, or rededicate their lives to Christ? It seems likely that the fact of their present marriage is the marriage that is in place. As Paul said: *[E]ach person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. . . . Keeping God's commands is what counts. Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. . . . Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God called them — Paul, I Corinthians 7:17a, 19b-20, 24.* For those who are in this situation, they should consider their present marriage their true and valid marriage. However, they should also do everything within their power to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with past spouses and churches as possible where the ending of the marriage was questionable according to biblical standards. But their present church family should receive them and minister to them, and love them, as they would any other married couple. And they should pursue their present marriage as the valid covenant relationship that they have entered into in the eyes of God.

This is also an area where Satan can attack.

## CONCLUSION

Marriage is one of the most up-front issues where it most emphatically plays out in God's eyes. What society allows or promotes is totally irrelevant. What has happened in God's eyes is all that matters.

One of the things that should be clear is that marriage deserves very careful consideration going into it. Parents, we owe it to our kids that they understand the biblical standards for marriage. It IS for a lifetime. The vows we speak ARE a covenant being made before God. Our kids need to learn to pray to God for clarity as they look to make that commitment to the one whom he has chosen.

And parents, our marriages are the first examples of marriage our kids see. What lessons, what examples, of love and forgiveness are they learning? What examples of honoring God and the covenant made before him are they seeing? This is incredibly important to how they enter into and live in their own marriage. A California pastor, evangelist and author, Erwin McManus, made note of the fact that one of the reasons that we live in a post-modern world where truth is considered relative and nothing can be believed is because our kids, particularly kids whose parents have divorced, have seen one thing above all others: Their parents couldn't keep even one promise — to have and to hold as long as they both shall live. How can I believe anything if I've seen two people who can't even do that one thing?

God created marriage to be an incredible experience like nothing else in the human experience. And when he is kept in the covenant, in the relationship, in the lives of the two-become-one, it is the most beautiful, satisfying, enjoyable, breathtaking relationship humanity can know. This culture has its own ideas — and the failure rate is all around us. God does not fail. His relationships, expressing his image, for his honor and glory, are worth waiting for, and working through. Let's pray!