

Scriptures

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

¹⁵ See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰ loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Psalm 119:1-8

Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the Lord.

**Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart,
who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways.**

You have commanded your precepts
to be kept diligently.

**O that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping your statutes!**

Then I shall not be put to shame,
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.

**I will praise you with an upright heart,
when I learn your righteous ordinances.**

I will observe your statutes;
do not utterly forsake me.

Matthew 5:21-37

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye

causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Sermon: You have heard it said – Part I

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

This week we continue working through Jesus’ sermon on the mount. Last week was about anger and violence, and how Jesus took away the distinction between the two, and declared that what is true in our hearts will become our reality.

This week we’re going to take that same biblical concept that what begins inside manifests itself on the outside and apply it to sex and marriage.

The institution of marriage has changed a great deal in our history, and with this in mind I expected that as I researched and wrote this sermon that I would find that at least some of what Jesus had to say about marriage, divorce, and lust would be outdated and no longer apply to our situations.

After all, in Jesus’ time, marriage seems to have more in common with the contract to buy a camel than Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet soaring on the bow of the Titanic. Women were more like possessions than partners, and in our enlightened post-modern definitions marriage was a patriarchal institution created to subjugate women. If that is the case, then what advice could Jesus possibly give that would be relevant in today’s world?

As it turns out, Jesus’ advice seems more relevant than ever; what he has to say to us in this mornings’ reading is spot on. So, let’s dig in....

We should begin with trying to define what marriage is. Why do we do it, who is involved, and under what authority do we get married? Is living together the same as being married?

Historically, marriage served several vital functions in the public realm. First, the marriage cemented the basic building block of society – the family. Modern secular thinking would have us believe that the base unit of humanity is the individual; that society is a co-operative collection of ones. From this philosophy comes of course a world view that is me-centered. Personal fulfillment, personal achievement, and personal happiness are the ideals of post-modernism. Individual expression is the goal.

In contrast, Genesis tells us that God intended for humans to be a complementary binary pair. Just as God is a community, so too are humans designed to be in community. This doesn't mean that you can't have a full life as a single person – Jesus was single, Paul was single, Jonah was single. But we are designed to share our lives with another. This means that rather than the individual being the base unit of society, the family is the base unit, and marriage is the glue that holds this base unit together.

Even without introducing the religious element, we see that as far back as we are able to look there has always been some kind of civil or tribal law that grants recognition to marriage. Marriage is a public affair because the succession of generations is a matter of public interest.

This understanding of marriage as a matter of public interest runs counter to what our present culture would have us believe. We rather think that our relationships are our own business, that it's nobody else's concern. This falls in line with our modern obsession with self and our conception of society as a conglomeration of individuals.

But whether we choose to admit it or not, we all live within a larger narrative – we are defined by our community. When we choose to exclude our community, and consider ourselves to be self-made, then we quickly find ourselves to be alienated beings with no purpose or value.

Our western ideal of independence is flawed at the root – we don't come into being by our own volition, nor are we self-sustaining throughout our lives. As infants, we are fully dependent; as adults, we are inter-dependent. Perhaps the only thing that we truly do independently is die – this would be a rather direct indictment of our infatuation with independence; that it is only fully realized in death.

Throughout history, until our lifetimes, it has been the case that the family is the basic unit of which our society is built, and that marriage is the cement that holds those units in place.

Now, is there a difference between a civil marriage, and a Christian one? I would say 'yes there is.' A civil marriage is a contract, with all that this implies; namely, contracts can be voided. If one person breaks one of the terms of the contract, the other is released from their obligations. If the painter doesn't paint my house, then I don't have to pay him. Likewise, if a spouse breaks part of the contract, the whole marriage can be declared void. It is a matter for the courts to decide.

A Christian marriage, however, is not a contract but a covenant. A covenant is a word that never changes – God has made several covenants with his people; Never again will I wipe out humanity in a flood, and I'll put my bow in the sky to remind you; to Abraham God said that he would be the father of nations and through his offspring God would bless all the earth; to David God said that from his seed would come the King of Kings who would establish an everlasting kingdom.

Notice the difference – contracts are conditional, covenants are unconditional.

This is why Jesus said 'I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.' Jesus is saying that just because you go out and get a piece of paper that legally declares your marriage contract void, the covenant still stands. Being legal is not the same thing as being righteous.

This is going to hit pretty close to home for some people, and to you I want to say that I don't preach to you from a position of superiority. When there is one finger pointing out at someone else there are three pointing back at me; I preach to myself as well as to you.

I have a broken relationship in my past – a woman I lived with for ten years and had children with. We weren't married, which means the adultery was present from the beginning rather than coming at the end. I don't know if that makes the situation better or worse, but the point is that I don't exclude myself from the message that I deliver.

The message from Jesus is that if you divorce your spouse, you are responsible for making them an adulterer or adulteress. Of course, in Jesus day only men could petition for divorce so he spoke in gender specific language, but today this applies to both women and men. When we divorce, Jesus said, either we force our ex to be alone for the rest of their lives, or if they get remarried, which is most likely to happen, we turn both our ex and their future spouse into adulterers. We put them into a position of breaking a covenant. Jesus said we can't use legal cover to mask our moral failure.

Jesus did make an exception to this – he said in the case of unchastity one could divorce – meaning that if the spouse is already an adulterer by their own volition then the one initiating the divorce doesn't incur more guilt of their own. The intent of marriage always has been that the union will be forever; even though the law will allow a writ of divorce, Jesus declares the divorce legal but not spiritually valid.

This theme of adultery is an important one to understand; often we miss the point because of the times in which we live. Technology has changed our world significantly. There are two changes that I'd like to draw your attention to.

The first is the invention of the birth control pill in the sixties. The effect of this is that sex has been divorced from procreation. Traditionally marriage ensured a stable family unit to care for the offspring that were the natural outcome of sexual relations; with the pill and other birth control methods created by modern science humanity found the ability to enjoy sex with little risk of little people being produced. Not coincidentally the institution of marriage began to weaken during this time.

The second change in technology is at the other end of the spectrum – not only can sex be enjoyed without procreation, but now procreation is possible without sex. These two changes have put enormous pressure on the traditional male/female family unit.

It is now, not only common, but expected, that people will have multiple sex partners. Dating is about 'test driving' partners to determine which ones are able to provide that personal fulfillment that is the goal of modernism. Unfortunately, this has the opposite effect of what many people expect.

By technologically separating sex and procreation we have reduced sex to mere biology. In effect, we remove love and partnership from the equation. When sex is reduced to a biological function that is separate from love, then it also removes the trust and intimacy that is required for sex to become truly satisfying. Sex becomes a matter of self-satisfaction, rather than a giving and sharing event. In sex, as in all areas of life, a purely self-seeking motivation cannot lead to true satisfaction, only to eventual degradation and emptiness.

At this point, lust enters in. When sex is only biology, not necessarily tied to love and a secure relationship, then any person is a potential partner. Jesus spoke of lust and said it's more than what we do physically, it is something that happens in our hearts. Just as our anger is violence, our wandering eyes and thoughts are adultery.

That is because what we harbor in our hearts eventually becomes manifest. We're all familiar with David and Bathsheba – the initial admiration and infatuation became something truly detestable. So it is with us – if we allow ourselves to start thinking of co-workers or neighbours in ways that we ought not to, when the situation presents itself we will fall into sin. We're fooling ourselves if we think any differently.

Just as a quick aside, I'd like to point out that Jesus' extension of the law against adultery to include lustful thinking is a declaration that women should not be regarded as sex objects. The burden is placed on the man: women are not seen as responsible for enticing men into sexual misconduct. This is very much in line with modern thought on victim shaming and sexual assault – many people like to say that the Bible is all about subjugating women but when we read it and pay attention we find that Jesus was in fact a strong feminist.

To return to adultery, the reason that adultery is such a serious sin is that sex is not just biology. It's not just about creating babies. Sex is a gift from God; sex is sacramental. Remember, something is sacramental if it is an outward sign of inward grace, or a visible sign of the invisible God.

During sex with a trusted, loving partner we find ourselves at our most open and vulnerable – there is great trust in leaving ourselves, not just physically, but emotionally bare before the other. We find ourselves immersed in our partner and less aware of ourselves. During sex we become one flesh, we discover a unity unlike any other, which is the closest on earth that we will get to the unity promised in heaven.

There is a bond that is created during sex – this is why there is no such thing as casual sex. The example I used with my older sons and their girlfriends, and yes, their girlfriends were present during 'the talk,' was to glue two pieces of cardboard together. This is the bond that is formed. But when the bond is broken, when the partners split up, when the cardboard is separated, there is great damage. Bits of each person are left stuck on the other.

That means that with each subsequent partner we are bringing little bits of other people into the relationship with us. There are residual parts of every past lover that come along, and for some that may mean that the bed is very crowded indeed.

There can be no casual sex, there can be no little affairs that don't mean anything. There can only be a string of broken relationships that leave broken people. A legal cancellation of a contract won't change that – this is demonstrated when exes find themselves together at graduations or marriages. There may be resentment or pain, or perhaps a nostalgic longing, but either way, it is clear that a relationship still exists – no piece of paper will change that.

Again, we're back to marriage being a covenant, not a contract. It's not something that can be nullified by a judge, and both parties made whole.

A good example of this covenant love is the story of Hosea. You will remember that Hosea was commanded by God to go marry a prostitute. His lesson was to learn the difference between love as a feeling and love as a commitment.

Covenant love, of which Hosea learned, is not a love of interpersonal affection but a love that is 'defined in terms of loyalty, service and obedience.' Covenantal love is not a love that we feel, but a love that we do. As such, it is a love that can stand the test of time and trial. Because we are creatures made in the image of our Creator, we have the capacity to exercise our free will. We cannot claim control over our feelings; by definition we are the subject of the feeling.

So instead of our marriage being subject to infatuation, it falls under the realm of the will. We can choose to act in love, and especially when the feeling of infatuation fades, this intentional acting in love is what sustains long term relationships.

This may not seem as exciting as love as portrayed in popular media, but it is a deeply fulfilling, satisfying love. It is a love that raises up the other, rather than burning out the self. When it gets right down to it, while I enjoy infatuation, I cannot image a more stressful and tiresome life than constantly living in that hormone induced, heart pounding, shortness of breath, unquenchable desire state of being that infatuation is.

Love is not merely what we feel, love is what we do, and now we come to Jesus saying on oaths. Do not make an oath, Jesus said. Do not swear by heaven, by earth, by the holy city, or by your own life. Simply let your yes be yes, and your no be no.

Now this makes a lot of sense – essentially Jesus is telling us to live in such a way that our word is trustworthy. Jesus wants us to do what we say, and say what we do. We put our full commitment behind every utterance so that we don't get in the situation where people are unwilling to believe us and we have to give an oath. Essentially, when we give an oath, when we say 'I promise,' what we're really saying is 'most of what I say is unreliable, but this time I really mean it.' Jesus instructs us to speak as ones who inherit the kingdom, where everything is true.

So, what does this mean for wedding vows? Aren't our vows an oath? Do we not make promises to our spouse in front of God and witnesses? If we are not to swear, not to give oaths, then is Jesus telling us that common-law is the way to go?

Let's go back to the beginning of the sermon. Marriage is a public affair. Creating the building blocks of society is a matter of public interest. Marriage is not about me; it's not about Kyoungsoo. It's about building community. I didn't understand this when I got married, I really thought that my wedding vows were for Kyoungsoo. But they are not. They are for those gathered as witnesses.

When I say my vows, I am making, not so much an oath, as a public declaration. In professing my love and commitment to Kyoungsoo, in effect what I am saying is that I am no longer available. I am declaring to everyone that I am off the market; by doing this publicly I make my declaration known to any potential partners that may be in attendance, and I also am involving everyone there and inviting them to hold me accountable. My public vows to Kyoungsoo are actually a statement that we are now a stable building block, ready to take our place in the community.

My real vows to Kyoungsoo are something completely different. Kyoungsoo already knew how I felt. My wedding day was not the first time that I had told her I loved her, it was not the first time that I said that I would be by her side. My vows to her are not spoken, but lived. That's not to say I never tell her I love her, but my vows more often take the form of being up at night with a sick child, buying Sugar Crisp because I know she likes it, surviving the smell of seaweed soup, and listening to her thoughts and feelings. Covenantal love is what we do, not what we feel.

In this way, in our marriage our yes is yes, our no is no. Our lives bear out our words rather than needing to invoke some external power to make us believe each other.

Our covenantal love is not dependent on the actions of the other, or the attributes of the other. That's because a covenant is a pledge for the future, not the past. In fulfilling our covenants, we become the kind of person who demonstrates integrity, tolerance, and self-discipline. Even if we didn't have those traits when we entered into the covenant, when we work towards fulfilling our promise we become the men and women that we were created to be. We become kingdom bearers.

This is why adultery is so much more than just letting our partner down, or making a mistake. Adultery destroys God's purpose for marriage, which is to anticipate and live into the mutuality of the Kingdom. Covenantal marriage, the unbreakable commitment to togetherness is an act of rebellion against the forces of this world. It is sacramental, it is holy.

The family, born of marriage, is the unit that carries the promises and the covenant of God, one generation at a time, toward their full completion and realization. They are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one rent asunder.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.