

A Refresher on Marriage and Singleness

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sermonaudio.com

Preached on: Sunday, October 16, 2011

The GraceLife Pulpit

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Welcome to Grace Life this morning. We've come to a new chapter in Grace Life, by which I mean this: now that I've finished 1 John, I've kind of been wondering where to go next in my preaching and it's long been on my heart for many many years to do a series of messages from the Old Testament prophets and I intend to do that in the coming weeks. It will probably come in waves and not necessarily be the unbroken pattern of what I do but we don't get to the Old Testament prophets as often as we do other Scriptures, and yet the New Testament affirms their significance. For us today, for our daily lives today, Romans 15 says that whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction so that through perseverance and the encouragement of Scriptures we might have hope, and the fact that we aren't quite as familiar with the Old Testament prophets as we are other parts of the Scripture, gives us an opportunity to look at that and to delve into the hope that is there for us, the profound understanding that is there, because among other things the Old Testament prophets teach us the purposes of God in world history. They give us the overarching sense of what governs the universe. They give us a sense on the rise and fall of nations and in doing that they give us a sense of where we fit, they give us a sense of perspective that you don't get if you're simply focused on devotional material on how to get through today and all of that. They give us perspective. They teach us profound lessons, profound lessons about the ways of God with his people. And I can tell you that what I'm going to teach on next week, I'm very energized to do that. The prophets give us perspective on our own crumbling political and moral times. How do we understand what's going on around us in our own nation today as the fabric seems to be fraying? The prophets help us see that and in doing that, trust me, the prophets will give us greater spiritual strength which will change your daily life. No question about it. So I'm excited about what lies ahead.

Now, today is a transition from where we've been to where we are going. Where we're going today you would not be expecting from what I just said but next week I plan to preach from the book of Hosea and I would encourage you to read Hosea this week, read it a few times, 15-20 minutes, to prepare for next week because I know it's not familiar Scripture. That's part of the reason why I want to bring it to you. So read it and be familiar with it, the text, so that you will benefit even more next week. But here's the point for today: the prophet Hosea used marriage and his own failed marriage through no fault of his own, to illustrate his message. He used his own difficult marriage to illustrate what God had to say to Israel back in those days and what I wanted to do today in order to prepare for next week was to do a one time refresher message on marriage and on

singleness that will help us not only to prepare for next week but also to help us in our present relationships here today and in the coming days of your lives.

Grace Life has quite a cross-section of demographics and we won't even get into the racial dynamic of that. We have single people. We have newly married people. We have couples that have been married for decades. We have troubled marriages. Oh, do I know about troubled marriages, not from experience but from counseling matters that I'm delighted to deal with and help people with. But we have troubled marriages, we have great marriages. We have people married for a long time, those that are newly married trying to figure out their way. We have widows and widowers. Some of you have tasted the bitter fruit of divorce. Some of you have remarried after various circumstances. And in addition to all of that, our own personal experience with marriage, we all, of course, are the products of the way that our parents approached marriage even if your parents never married at all. Their neglect of the institution of marriage affected you. The way that your parents lived out marriage has affected you and set the course that it brought you to where you are at today. The point of all of that is to say this: is that marriage has profoundly affected us. Each one of us. Some for good, some for bad. Some for joy, some for sorrow.

So I believe that we will all benefit from considering what God has said about marriage in a refresher course on marriage and singleness here this morning, and this is a bigger point than just today's message. I'm increasingly increasingly convinced that the thing that we all need more of is foundational thinking; to go back to foundational matters that set the whole context. I know that the temptation is that we want an immediate answer for an immediate problem and this is more than just marriage. We want immediate answers for immediate problems. How do I deal with this practical issue in my life? As I counsel, as I minister over the years, it's just increasingly evident to me that if we would take the time to step back and think foundationally about governing matters, about more foundational principles in our lives, then we would have a context where these other practical issues would fit and they would not cause the trouble to us that they sometimes do. So I want to approach marriage today from that standpoint, not how to help you solve a particular problem today but to think about the institution of marriage and to see and to go back to that and let that come back and inform the issues that we face in daily life.

There are two main points today: one is God's plan for marriage, and then secondly, what this means for you, and it's going to be more practical than you might suspect. So God's plan for marriage. There are going to be four subpoints here that I have for you. God's plan for marriage. What was marriage supposed to be like? What is marriage supposed to be like? What was the design? What was God after and what did it reflect? What did it indicate? It's so much more, there is so much more at stake in the institution of marriage, so much more at stake than your individual relationship with your spouse. There is so much more that God was doing when he established this institution.

It's not my intent this morning to cover every biblical point that could be made, I just want to set some foundational things in your mind so let's define marriage to start with as the homosexual marriage continues to encroach on it. Let's just define marriage biblically

speaking to be clear about that, and I'm going to define marriage this way, and I'll say this a couple of times so that you can get it in your notes: marriage is that God-ordained institution in which a man and woman covenant with one another to live as husband and wife in an exclusive monogamous relationship for the remainder of their earthly lives together. Marriage is that God-ordained institution in which a man and woman, thereby excluding any other alternate forms of marriage, a man and a woman covenant with one another to live as husband and wife in an exclusive monogamous relationship for the remainder of their earthly lives together. Till death do us part, is the idea. That's what marriage is and it's ironic if you follow the news reports on so-called gay marriage and all of that, that they never bother to define marriage to begin with, do they? It's just assumed and they want to define it as whatever they want it to be, define it on their own terms. But where did marriage come from? It's God-ordained. It's God's institution and we as humans are not free to redefine it to fit our own salacious desires. The very redefinition of marriage, the fact that anyone would even start to do that is a reflection on how far we have strayed from a biblical mindset in our society because it does not belong to men at all, it is God's institution and man is not free to redefine it at all, and God has stated plainly in Scripture what he wants it to be.

I want to show you four major points about God's plan for marriage. Each of these points could be and perhaps should be an independent message on its own, but I just want to give you an overview. I want you to think big picture here today, and as we think big picture, as we step back from our individual relationships, our own marriages or our desires for marriage or our memories of marriage, I want to step back from all of that and just think about it from God's perspective. What was he doing? What did he plan it to be? And then, trust me, at the end there is going to be a lot of practical application that comes from this, so stay with me through this, okay?

First point: marriage is a permanent union. Marriage is a permanent union, permanent for this earthly life. God's ideal in marriage was that it would be a permanent and exclusive relationship between a man and a woman, and with all of that introduction, let's turn to the Scriptures in Genesis 2. I like to point out whenever I teach on marriage the few times that I do, that marriage was instituted before the fall of man into sin. However demonic and devilish you may think your own marriage is, the truth of the matter is that the institution predates all of that. It predates the fall. God's intentions in marriage were pure and good from the very start and sometimes we need to just wash away everything and come back to before the fall and just remember what the whole idea was to begin with.

Genesis 2, you know the story. God had created Adam. Adam was in the garden of Eden and yet he was alone. There was no human companion for him and in Genesis 2:18, God took note of that condition. In chapter 2, verse 18, it says, "the LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.'" And so, verse 19, "Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them," and so on it goes. But in verse 20, at the end of verse 20 it says, "for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him." The animals were not a suitable companion and so verse 21, "So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of

his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place." By the way, not that I need to say this here but it needs to be said: this is not an allegory, this is not a product of millions of years of evolution. This is what God did in the first week of creation, the first literal week of creation.

"So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man.'" Now look in verse 24 and this is the key passage for our purposes this morning, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." One flesh. A union between man and woman. A permanent union so profound, so life-changing that a man would leave his father and mother, he would leave his home and establish a new home with the woman that God gave to him. Joined together, they become one flesh. This is intended to be permanent and it is intended to be an exclusive relationship; that there would be a relationship between man and wife, husband and wife, that is unlike any other relationship in your life.

It's a permanent union. Jesus picked up on this in Matthew 19, if you would turn to Matthew 19 with me. Marriage is a permanent union. Matthew 19, beginning in verse 3. I'll give you time to turn there in your own Bibles. I like for you to see the words of Scripture in your own Bible. I don't want you to just hear me quoting them or referring to them or alluding to them. I want you to see this with your own eyes.

Matthew 19:3, "Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?' And He answered and said," now, right there you should see that in their question, embedded in their question was a whole approach to marriage that was wrong. They were viewing marriage as temporary. They were viewing it as something that was less than permanent. So there was a fundamental flaw in their thinking even in the way that they phrased their question and Jesus rebukes that and corrects that in verse 4. The Scriptures say that Jesus answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined 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 no man separate." Permanent union. In the garden of Eden, God declared that the two would become one flesh and after several thousand intervening years, Jesus steps up and says that nothing has changed. The standard is still a permanent union. Jesus said, "What God has joined together, let no man separate."

So I'm not going to get into the whole issue of divorce and remarriage here in this message. That's not my point. That's an important issue. The Bible addresses that. We're just talking about the design of marriage today and I don't want to drift into the issues of divorce and remarriage here.

The question is: what is God's original design? What is the purpose of marriage? What should our thinking about marriage be as we live out married life, for some of you as you anticipate married life, for many of you as you counsel people who are in troubled marriages? The fundamental starting point that we always need to go back to is that marriage is a permanent union, a lifelong permanent union between a man and a wife. That was God's intention and Jesus said, "What God has joined together, let no man separate." There should be a high and lofty and exalted view of marriage, of the permanence of this relationship, that makes us tremble at the thought of injecting something that would break it up, either breaking it up through our own actions, through our own words, through the sin of adultery or anything like that. God says this is permanent. It is one flesh. They are joined together and that should cause us to have a healthy sense of fear in our hearts of doing anything that would undermine the foundation of marriage. And those judges and those politicians who are gladly and eagerly attacking the foundations of marriage in order to expand the earthly definition of it, the human definition of it, are facing a serious judgment from God for attacking what he established before sin even entered into the world, and it just shows how godless and how the total lack of fear of God that are in the minds of men that this is even a topic of discussion, let alone something that is being introduced into our society. Marriage is a permanent union between man and woman and man is not free to redefine it. For those of us in our own circles, we need to approach it saying, "This is a holy institution. This is sacred. There is something uniquely affirmed in marriage that I need to support and live out in my own life." Marriage is a permanent union in God's plan for marriage.

Now secondly: marriage is an exclusive union. Marriage is an exclusive union. Permanent monogamy was the standard. One man with one woman until death separated them. One man with one woman until death separated them. If this standard was upheld, the scourge of all of the transmitted diseases would not even be an issue and the fact that you even state that is grounds for being ridiculed, but that's the truth of the matter. One man with one woman until death separated them, if we lived by this, there would be so much less disease and sadness in the world today. It's not a problem with marriage, it's the way that marriage has been abused and violated by countless millions of people throughout the world and throughout our country.

Exodus 20:14, God couldn't have been clearer about it. He said, "You shall not commit adultery." You shall not commit adultery. It is one of the 10 Commandments that undergirds this institution of marriage, this permanent, exclusive union between a man and a woman. Exclusivity is the standard. "You shall not commit adultery."

Now, that doesn't need much explanation but what I want to remind you of here today, and this is where it gets into more internal matters, that isn't only an external command that God gave. Jesus made that clear. You're still in Matthew, turn back to chapter 5 in Matthew, Matthew 5. What was God after in this exclusivity? Was it simply a physical exclusivity that he commanded when he established the institution of marriage? No. There was so much more at stake and there is so much more at stake.

Matthew 5:27, a familiar passage. We've taught on it in the course of the Sermon on the Mount in years gone by. Matthew 5:27, Jesus interprets the meaning of that commandment that I just read from Exodus 20. He said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." The internal lust is a violation of God's command for an exclusive union in the marriage relationship. The desire, the fantasies, the dreaming about other people is a serious violation of God's exclusive design for marriage. As Jesus makes clear, God in establishing the institution of marriage was requiring more than external purity. The whole design of marriage is that it would be an exclusive internal matter of your desires as well; that there would be an internal heart purity that marriage points us to; that those of us that are married, that our desires would be to one person alone, and that there wouldn't even be a straying of your heart even if you keep it secret and never mentioned it to anyone else, even if you never act upon it. If the spirit of adultery is present in you, you are violating the exclusive union that God intends marriage to be. That's very challenging, very convicting, I'm sure, for some of you but understand that the spiritual dynamic of marriage is at stake. It is an exclusive union not only externally but also internally as well.

You wives and you husbands should be and must be under the command of God. You must be a person of one spirit. You must be someone who has one person as the singular focus of your desires. The singular exclusive focus of your desires and your affections goes to that mate of yours. No one else. No one else.

I remember many many years ago, this predates even my own marriage, there was a couple in a church that I was familiar with. They ran into a rough spot in their marriage because the man had been counseling another woman. Giving him the benefit of the doubt that his desires were pure at the start, it went into an emotional attachment and he came home one day and said, "I'm in love with another woman. We haven't committed adultery but I want you to know that I love another woman," thinking that the fact that there had been no physical attachment, no physical involvement, exonerated him from the sin of adultery. Nothing could have been further from the truth. His emotional attachment to that other woman was adultery itself. And that's why men, you and I really have no business getting beyond anything beyond the most superficial of relationships with other women if we are married. "Hi, how are you? I've got to go now."

Good pastors sometimes are perceived as being cold toward women. There is a reason for that. There is a reason for that that the pastor doesn't sit down with you alone and talk with you for an hour or 90 minutes about your emotions. It's designed to protect the exclusivity of his own marriage and it is designed to communicate by his own example the high and lofty and exalted nature of God's institution of marriage. It is not simply a physical exclusivity that it talks about, there is an emotional exclusivity, there is an exclusivity of desire that goes into this. It is all woven together. You can't harbor duplicitous desires, you can't harbor adulterous desires and fantasies and be faithful to God's plan for marriage. If that's you, understand you have some serious repentance to do, even if no one knows about it. God sees the secret desires of your heart and holds you

accountable for them, as if in the same manner as if you had acted on them, the sin is the same. So we need to see that and respond to it.

Now, thirdly. We've said that marriage is a permanent union, it is an exclusive union, thirdly: marriage is an intimate union. It is an intimate union. It's easy to see that marriage is easily the deepest human relationship on the face of the earth. There is a closeness and an intimacy and an immediacy and a permanence to the relationship that is unlike any other relationship that we have. Even the parent/child relationship ends over time; it doesn't end but it changes. Children move out and they move on to their own things. There is not the permanence to that relationship in the same way that there is to marriage. It's easily the deepest human relationship and in God's design, the physical expression of that union, the sexual union, is an expression of that intimacy. It must not be shared outside of marriage. That's the whole point of exclusivity. But the Scriptures clearly teach that within marriage it must be shared with each other.

Look at 1 Corinthians 7. I'm just going to touch on this. 1 Corinthians 7, beginning in verse 3. 1 Corinthians 7:3-5. I want to tread on this lightly and with dignity but it needs to be said if we're going to talk about marriage as God designed it. Marriage is an intimate union. Chapter 7, verse 3, "The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." The sexual relationship is meant to be shared with one another inside marriage; not outside of marriage but it must be shared with one another. It's an expression of that oneness of flesh. It is an expression of the intimacy and it is a necessary, regular, designed good part of marriage that God calls us to. And the only reason I'm saying this is because Scripture speaks to it. Scripture speaks to this and so we have to respond to it. It must be shared with one another in that intimacy.

Now fourthly. We've said that marriage is an intimate union, exclusive and permanent, fourthly, and this kind of sets the context for everything else: marriage is a loving union. Marriage is a loving union. Marriage is so good in the plan of God that even after the fall, even in the New Testament, God uses marriage to picture the love that Christ has for his church. And I know that you're familiar with this but turn to Ephesians 5 anyway. We want to see the whole picture here. Ephesians 5, beginning in verse 22, "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord." So your submission to your husband is a picture of your submission to the Lord. You can't have one without the other, let's put it that way.

"For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything." Now, shame on you men who stop reading there at the end of verse 24 and demand submission from your wife without going into verse 25. The truth of the matter is that the Lord is speaking to the wives in

those three verses as shown by the first word in verse 22, "Wives." Be careful about reading someone else's mail as though God's statement to wives became your prerogative to demand from them. If you're really serious about God's plan for marriage, men, you won't start in verse 22 with saying what does this mean for my marriage, you'll go straight to verse 25 and see how it applies to you because this is where God speaks to you, you men.

"Husbands," the vocative, "Husbands, love your wives" there is a loving aspect of the union. "Love your wives just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless." So verse 28, "So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church." I didn't bother to count the number of times that the word "love" is used here. That would have been a useful exercise if I had, but love your wives. Christ loved the church. Husbands ought to love their wives. He who loves his wife loves himself. No one ever hated his own flesh but nourishes and cherishes it just as Christ also does the church.

Marriage is designed to be a loving union that God uses to picture the relationship between Christ and believers, Christ and the church, and you cannot disfigure your own marriage relationship with unloving attitudes and actions without disfiguring what should be the picture of Christ and the church. There should be a bond of love, a bond of service, a bond of submission, that is the context in which this oneness of flesh takes place in this permanent, exclusive, intimate union. It's designed to be one of love, not distance; one of love, not harshness; one of love, not silence with one another. You can't seriously say that you love someone that you won't talk to, can you? There is a positive active dimension to this that you can't fulfill by simply isolating yourself in order to avoid the conflict. It's a loving union, the picture of Christ and the church.

Well, like I said, all four of those points could independently be their own separate message, I just wanted to give you the big picture, a view of the vista rather than getting into the individual details. But here's where I want to go now and to just be very pastoral in the time that we have left here, point 2 is: what this means for you. What this means for you and it might surprise you that even if you're not married, even if you're a very young person, even if you have no desires for marriage, this all has profound significance for you as well. None of us could walk out and say, "Well, that didn't mean anything for me." That's just not true, not when you think through it, not when you see, beloved, the fundamental spiritual principles that undergird marriage. When you see the fundamental principles that undergird marriage, you see that this is a reflection of spiritual life for each one of us regardless of our relationship to the institution of marriage.

So let me just address this. We want to address four different groups of people here today. You can listen in when I don't speak to your particular group, okay? First of all, single people, you single people, what does this mean for you? Some of you are happy in

your singleness. Some of you are a tad impatient. I understand that. Let God's plan for marriage shape the kind of spouse that you seek. Let that shape the kind of spouse that you seek. It doesn't do any good to get any warm body who has no internal commitment to these principles. That's a recipe for disaster and I'm sure that we all could recite stories of people who got in a hurry, got married unwisely, got married against counsel, and now are suffering the consequences. If you're single, you're in a position to avoid that. Don't let impatience compromise biblical standards.

Charles Spurgeon said this, he said, "It can never add to the comfort of any Christian man or woman to be unequally yoked together with an unbeliever." It can never help you. It's never going to make things better by marrying an unbeliever. It's not going to add to your comfort to marry a professing Christian who is not serious about these issues, who shows no serious commitment to Christ even if he makes a verbal profession of it. Don't fool yourselves, that person is a recipe for your personal disaster.

Spurgeon went on to say, "You are far better to remain in the cold of your unmarried life," the cold, c-o-l-d, "You are far better to remain in the cold of your unmarried life than to warm your hands at the fire of an unsanctified marriage." It's better to be cold outside than warm your hands at the fire of an ungodly marriage, marriage with an ungodly person. That's just a recipe for disaster. An unmarried friend said to me and has said many times, "It is better to want something that you don't have than to have something you don't want." Think about that and take it to heart and no amens from those of you who are in that position. You just need to restrain yourself at that point. "Amen, pastor!" And the spouse looks, "What's that about?" We're not going there today. This is a positive message.

No, single people, God's plan is for permanent, exclusive, intimate and loving marriage. Don't marry an unbeliever or someone who lacks the Christian character to fulfill that plan. And if I could go a step further: don't make excuses for them in order to justify it. Keep the standard high, even if it means that you wait even longer. Keep the standard high so that you honor the institution of marriage as God designed it and you experience the blessing of his reward on your patience and your trust in him. Wait for a godly mate. You need a godly mate, not any mate. God knows you're single. He is well aware of that. Prove your trust in him by waiting for a spouse who shares a commitment to biblical marriage with you. Show God, prove to God, prove to the world, prove to your watching friends, "I'm going to trust God. And this yokel that I did know, when I think about it, there is no serious commitment to Christ in his life. Why would I marry him and dishonor the institution of marriage just because I feel impatient and I'm a little bit lonely?" Don't go that route. Prove that you trust God to take care of you especially when life is on the line. Prove that you trust God when your deepest desires, your deepest frustrations are on the line. Step up like a man, step up like a godly woman and say, "I'm going to trust God even here. And if I never get married, I'll come to the end of my life having proven that I trusted God more than anything else, that I loved God and entrusted my life and my soul to him even when I didn't understand. And I won't compromise that just for the sake of a few years of troubled earthly companionship." Trust him. He'll reward you for it.

Now, you young marrieds. Talked to singles, now talk to young marrieds, just saying to you what I would say if you were in my living room and we were talking about these issues together. Just think about it in that context. I just want to be a pastor to you right now. We have several young marrieds in Grace Life. Your vows are still fresh on your mind or your vows are just ahead of you for some of you in a few weeks. That's exciting. Let me say this as we think about marriage being a permanent, exclusive, intimate, loving union. You must approach marriage if you haven't already, you must approach marriage in such a way that divorce will never be an option to you. You have to have that settled in your mind that when you walked into marriage, you locked the door behind you and you don't even entertain the thought of divorce in your mind, let alone actually threaten it or openly discuss it. You don't even entertain the thought. Here's why you don't entertain the thought: you don't entertain the thought because of an even more important vertical commitment that you have to Christ. You say, "I understand what God's intention for the institution of marriage is. There is more at stake here, there is more that is important here than my day to day happiness. What's more important is that I myself would be faithful to what God has established; that I would come to the end of my life, that I would walk through day to day life being faithful to what God has established and I know from the Scriptures that God intended marriage to be permanent, exclusive, intimate and loving, and I'm not going to be the one who violates that."

So you don't even entertain the thought. You never let anything shake you from that conviction. You don't hold it open as a possible option if things ever go bad. It is settled in your mind that that cannot happen, that will not happen. That has to be the fundamental conviction which drives your approach to marriage. You do that for the sake of your spouse, to be sure, and your spouse benefits from that, but as a matter of first principle, that is your attitude toward marriage because you are doing it for the sake of Christ who saved you from your sins. It is Christ's call on you in your marriage. It's not about whether you're happy or not that you have this conviction. That's not the point. Your happiness is secondary to a bigger point, a bigger principle, which is this is what God calls us to in marriage.

So we honor that. Just as lusting in Matthew 5 is an expression of adultery, cherishing, harboring, holding out the possibility of divorce if things ever get too bad for you, if you hold that out you are carrying on the spirit of adultery when you do that because you're saying, "There might be circumstances where I would allow this no longer to be permanent. There might be circumstances where this would no longer be exclusive and so I'm going to keep my options open. I'll close the door behind me but I won't lock it." That's wrong and we need to come face-to-face with ourselves in the mirror and say, "No, that is not going to be me. My fundamental conviction is that divorce is never going to be an option for me." And that's the conviction that you young marrieds bring to the marriage to each other. Young man, young woman, this is your approach to marriage.

So here's the practical working out of that. When a serious problem comes up, when it's a question of whether it's oatmeal or cream of wheat for breakfast and it's all on the line, when it's a matter of really serious differences of approach, it matters where you have been seriously hurt and forgiveness seems far away, when those kinds of serious

problems come up, you don't consider divorce. It doesn't even enter into your mind. And when the thought is insinuated to you, perhaps through some kind of stupid counsel from a so-called Christian friend, you just reject it out of hand and say, "No. That's not even an option. That's not even something that I'll think about." Your commitment to Christ means that your commitment to your mate is permanent, intimate and loving, and you persevere sometimes when your spouse doesn't give you reason to persevere. Christ always is your reason to persevere in it, never to compromise that, never to allow the spirit of divorce to enter into your heart.

And that approach is really practical. It requires you to look for a solution that will take you through the problem instead of one that will take you out of the problem. Your approach with each other, I'd encourage you to say this to each other if you're in the midst of difficulty, you look at each other and even if you don't feel like talking to each other you say, "Well," you shrug your shoulders and say, "Hey, look, we might as well solve this problem because we're not going anywhere anyway. We're here. You know, we're here and so we might as well work through this because we are not going anywhere so let's get this out of the way and get back to the idea of having a joyful loving marriage again, okay? Here's what I'll do to compromise." That's where it leads you.

Now, number 3. We've had young marrieds, I don't know how to refer to this, we'll call it long marrieds. I didn't want to say old marrieds because as soon as I do you say, "That's not me. I'm not old." Long marrieds. Let me say this to you, think about the course of your marriage, those years, those decades, let me say this: how you treat your spouse, how you have treated your spouse over the years in private when no one was looking, that is a reliable barometer of your spiritual life. Sound theology is no substitute for a righteous relationship with your wife. I don't care if you can articulate these principles and recite them back to me if your spouse doesn't know something about loving exclusive intimacy from you. If you're a bear with your wife, don't kid yourself about where you're at with the Lord.

So over the course of your life, here's the question, over the course of your life, you long marrieds: has your spouse known marriage as permanent? As exclusive? As intimate? As loving? Notice how I phrased the question, my friends. Notice how I phrased the question, it was deliberate. I'm not asking whether you have known marriage like that. That's not my question at all. My question to you is this: has your spouse known marriage like that? That's the question. What have you brought to your marriage, not what have you gotten out of it. Many of you, many of you long marrieds, have a great testimony and have been a great testimony to our church and I thank God for you. A few of you, a few of you in light of these things that we have said here today, a few of you should be ashamed of yourselves and you know it, and this is brought to your attention today as an opportunity one more time from the Lord in your life, to repent and manifest by your conduct and your attitudes toward your spouse the expression of marriage as it's supposed to be. If you're still here and you're still breathing, there is still time.

Now, fourthly, last group that I want to speak to here today and that would be the widowed amongst us. Widowed through death, some of you widowed in a manner of

speaking through divorce that wasn't of your own choosing. There are so many exemplary widowed people in Grace Life that I hardly have to say anything. You still love others, you're still serving, but I know the house must get quiet for you. You miss that spouse that has gone on to be with the Lord. Let me just say here in this context, remember Psalm 146:9, the Scriptures say, "The LORD protects the strangers; He supports the fatherless and the widow, But He thwarts the way of the wicked." Widow, widower, you have a special place in the heart of God, so much so that he points you out repeatedly in Scripture as a special object of his provision, protection and love. You can draw near to your Father even though your mate is no longer with you.

Let's step back and close this off. What I want you to see, what I hope that you've seen here in this message today is that God's design for marriage, God's intentions in the institution of marriage transcend marriage. It's about more than marriage, really, because it reflects the loving character of God toward his people. Our marriages are meant to reflect him, be a witness, a testimony to him, a manifestation of his character in the practical details of life. And even if you're not married, regardless of your marital status, the biblical teaching on marriage comes to you and asks you these kinds of questions: are you a person of fidelity toward God? Are you a person of sacrificial love? Do you bring those kinds of traits to your closest relationships, that fidelity, that serious commitment? You see, your marriage should just be an overflow of your character. Of your overall character. Your marriage is just an expression of something bigger and that is who are you in the presence of God? Do your physical eyes and your heart desires set themselves on righteousness or sin?

We need a gracious word as we close. Scriptures are so convicting, aren't they? Even when our hearts desire and we try to orient our lives toward this, we are still mindful that we fall short of what we should be. Just remember this: Christ came to redeem you. Christ came to pay for your sins. Forgiveness and cleansing are available. Proverbs 28:13 says, "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, But he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion." If you look and see marriage and say, "Oh, man, my marriage has been great." I do. I told Nancy beforehand. My wife is an expression of all the biblical teaching on marriage, just so you know. And if you see that approximated in your own life, give thanks to God. You don't have to walk away feeling beaten up. Walk away saying, "Wow, God's been gracious to me." If you're mindful that you have fallen short and you have been seriously convicted, confess it, forsake it, and enter into the Lord's promise of compassion. If you're here and you're breathing, the Lord's compassions and mercy on you aren't over yet. Just return to him and seek him with a humble and contrite spirit and you will find him merciful to you once again.

Let's pray.

Father, we honor you here this morning. We thank you for the institution of marriage. It's an expression of your concern and compassion that we would not be alone. When you take note of that, Father, you say it's not good for man to be alone, what you're saying is I can care about man and his earthly life and for that, Father, we thank you. Wherever we are at on the scale of marriage and singleness, Lord, I commit each one to you and

pray for your particular grace for tangible expressions of grace in their lives as we walk out here today, that having reflected on marriage would simply be a passageway for us to reflect on you and the permanent, exclusive, intimate love that you have bestowed upon us in Christ. Marriage is a reflection of the way that you love your own people, Lord. You know us by name. You know the number of hairs on our heads. You know the days that you have established for us. Your hand is upon our lives if we are in Christ and we trust you and thank you for that. Father, for the one here who does not know Christ, I pray for him. I pray for your Spirit to work in his heart and to draw him to Christ, draw him to a repentant faith where he turns from sin, turns from all of the darkness that has marked his life, her life, and embraces Christ and seeks to serve you henceforth forever more. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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