

Why Not Divorce?

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Last Sunday you remember, we talked a little about marriage and about how permanent God taught us marriage should be. And you remember we got that from Romans 7:2, if you'd like to look at it. Romans 7:2, "Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband." And you remember we quoted various parts of the wedding service. You probably remember the part where towards the end of the service the bride and groom would be standing there after the vows and then the words run, "For as much as John and Mary have consented together in holy wedlock and have witnessed the same before God and this company by joining of hands and by pledging together with a ring, I pronounce that they be man and wife in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Then I say these words, "Those whom God has joined together let no man put asunder."

So the whole wedding service is filled with this biblical teaching that marriage is forever. Now you remember we shared last Sunday how it comes that man or woman at times, puts asunder a marriage. And you remember we shared that often that happens because it is a marriage that God did not join together in the first place and that's often why a man or a woman can put asunder a marriage. Actually you cannot put asunder a marriage that God has joined together. And we shared last Sunday how vital it was for us to really live as children of a dear Father who looks after us and a Father who is interested in whom we are going to marry. And that it is our place to treat him like that and to treat marriage like that and not to scurry around together with our mums and dads trying to find the right partner, but to really trust the Father to lead us to the right partner. And then the person to whom he joins us we cannot put asunder from that person. And you remember we shared that kind of thing two Sundays ago.

And dear ones, that's the basis of all the marriages of past generations. That's why great great grandparents of ours were together year, after year, after year without half of the problems that seem to crop up in these days. It wasn't because they had never any disagreements. It was because as far as they were concerned their marriage was forever. God has intended them for each other. That was it they stuck with each other whatever happened. And it's amazing loved ones, how much you can make of a marriage if you have that attitude towards it. But that's why marriages seem so firm and so well cemented in those days. Because, our great grandparents accepted that if God joined them together that was it, they were together forever.

In other words, divorce was not negotiable. Do you remember at the beginning of the Cuban crisis, old Adlai Stevenson said something that looking back on it now seems rank superior imperialism but still he said, you remember, "Communism is not negotiable in this hemisphere." And looking back that seems a little naïve. But that's what holds a marriage together and that's what kept old marriages together. We would negotiate down to that line but below that line divorce was not negotiable.

So you would argue with each other, you would discuss with each other, you would talk with each other, you would even bicker with each other, but below that line you did not go. And oh loved ones, I really trust that God will set up that criterion among us here in our body at least and that you'll understand that at least you'll have my wrath to face and you'll probably have God's wrath to face as well. But that we'll enter into marriages that are forever and we do not negotiate under a certain line.

Now dear ones, to get into the nitty gritty of it, why are half the marriages in our society not like that because at least half of them end up in divorce? Now why are marriages not like that today? Well, I think there are lots of reasons but one reason is because men and women do not trust God to fulfill all their intellectual and emotional needs himself. And they marry in order to get their intellectual and emotional needs fulfilled. So many people destroy their marriage from the beginning because they expect more from their marriage than God ever intended them to get from it. And in fact, they end up doing really what God said we shouldn't do, if you look at it in Romans 1:25, you'll see it there they end up doing this in their marriage. Romans 1:25, "Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen." And that's what many people do when they enter into marriage.

They expect from the creature the intellectual, and emotional, and physical satisfaction that actually at the end of the day only the Creator can give them. And so they expect too much from marriage, they expect things from marriage that they should get only from their Father in heaven. Now in actual fact when you think of it, if you really analyze it fairly you can see that marriage at the first step means not an expansion for you, it actually means a contraction. That's why I say the only reason you should marry is because you know this is God's person for you. You should never marry just for the fun of it because at first step, marriage is a contraction it's not an expansion.

For instance, what kind of ice cream do you like? Chocolate chip? Okay, she likes vanilla. Alright, before you could buy a whole quart of chocolate chip, it didn't matter. Now you negotiated. Okay, this week we'll do it this way and next week we'll do it the other way. Where do you like to go on vacation? Well before you marry you have nobody to consult but yourself, you just decide where you want to go on vacation. When you marry you have two people to consult.

Now brothers and sisters, I know it seems a very elementary thing but I think a lot of us get into trouble because we marry thinking that marriage will be nothing but an expansion and a fulfilling of our needs. Loved ones, at first step marriage is a contraction. It is a lessening of your freedom. So the only good reason for going into marriage is because the Creator of the universe wants you to be married. What kind of car do you like to buy? Well, at the moment you've only to consult yourself and the Father. When you marry you have another person to think of.

In other words, do you see it means you begin to live your life in the light of another person's wants, and desires, and preferences? And that is a basic condition for a good marriage that you're prepared to at least half, and I suspect it's more than that, but at least half your preferences and your wishes. Now you see this is part of what Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 7:4. "For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does." And the Father was speaking there particularly about intercourse and physical intimacy but you can see that it applies right through marriage, that when you marry somebody you're giving up really the control of your body and the control of your clothing, and your food, and what you're going to do and when you're going to do it. You're giving that up to another person.

Now many marriages don't stay together because of course today that isn't a popular view at all. Today many husbands and wives regard that as an unjustifiable infringement of the freedom that they expect when they go into marriage. And many husbands and wives marry today for the very opposite of that, not so that they will lose something but so that they will get something. And so many

brothers and sisters seem to marry in order to get emotional and intellectual satisfaction from the other person and so they really marry for a kind of “philia” love. “Philia” is the Greek word for love that you get in the city Philadelphia which is love of brothers. And “philia” love is where you love another person because you’re interested in the same things that they are. Many brothers and sisters marry for that reason.

Loved ones, it’s not a good enough reason because “philia” love is basically selfish. You love her as long as she’s interested in bowling. You love her as long as she’s interested in skiing. But there comes a time when the poor thing can’t ski anymore. But you love each other as long as the other person does what you enjoy doing, or thinks about the things that you think, or talks about the things that you talk. But loved ones, there comes a time when the other dear person wants a little freedom not to have to talk about politics, not to have to talk even about church all the time, not to have to talk about sports all the time, not to have to talk about your career all the time. And many husbands and wives come into trouble because they don’t realize that and they regard that kind of expression of love as an unjustifiable infringement of their freedom. And they really base their marriage on “philia” love that their partner is almost a convenience to them that their partner ought to talk about the things that they’re interested in talking about. Their partner ought to be interested in the things that they’re interested in.

Now dear ones do you see that that is totally opposite to the kind of love that Jesus outlined through Paul in Ephesians? Maybe you’d look at it because it’s a piece of scripture that is read often in wedding services. Ephesians 5:25-28 expresses a kind of love that is utterly different from that selfish “philia” love that wants the other person only because he or she is convenient or is interested in the same things as you are. Jesus expresses on the other hand this kind of love, Ephesians 5:25, “Husbands, love your wives,” what way? With “philia” love? No, “As Christ loved the church.” And what was the heart of that love? “Gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it, as Christ does the church.”

In other words, the kind of love that God works in a marriage if you let him, is the love that is preoccupied with the other person’s needs, not preoccupied with your needs. A kind of love that is willing to give itself up for the sake of the other person. A kind of love that isn’t always looking in and saying, “Well, what do I want to do tonight? Do I want to go bowling, or do I want to go skiing, or do I want to go to a Bible study group but rather what does my partner want to do?” And it’s that kind of love that Jesus says the Holy Spirit sheds abroad in marriages that are given fully to him.

Now you know that that is just idealism today where we are taught that husbands and wives exist for the benefit of each other. You know that many husbands and wives not only expect from each other intellectual and emotional satisfaction that they should get from God, but many of them expect emotional thrill and physical satisfaction whenever they want it. And so many husbands and wives think that that kind of description of giving yourself and your own wishes and desires up for the other person is ridiculous.

They on the other hand say, “The other person exists for my benefit. When I want intercourse they ought to be prepared to have intercourse. When I want intimacy it’s their job to give me intimacy.”

They'll even quote bits of the Bible, they'll talk about their marital obligations and you have a right to give me this. And so many husbands and wives they actually married in the first place because they wanted to be able to express this passionate side of their own physical nature freely and without feeling any guilt or sin for it. And so many marriages are based on that kind of satisfaction.

Now loved ones, all that is what is described in 1 Thessalonians 4:5, this regarding the other person as someone who ought to provide you with your physical and natural necessity and right. This attitude is described by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:5, where he talks about choosing a wife, and he says you remember in 1 Thessalonians 4:4, "That each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God." But many husbands and wives exist together in the passion of lust.

It would be interesting to find out how many long moments of cold war a husband and wife have gone through because he didn't want physical intimacy when she did, or she didn't want it when he did. It would be interesting to count up the hours they have spent in resentment on each edge of the bed because they didn't want to do what the other person wanted at that time. And yet loved ones, do you see that that is the very heart of lust, that kind of attitude to one another and yet you husbands and wives, isn't it true that often we've spent ridiculous hours, ridiculous times of cold war that the brothers and sisters here don't really understand who aren't married. We've spent times in coldness not speaking to the other person at all. Why? Because they wouldn't do what we wanted them to do when we wanted it.

But loved ones, that is plain lust, it's not love. The only kind of love that makes a marriage stay together forever is the kind of love that flowed from Jesus on the cross. And he looked at the Roman soldiers who had just put a spear into his side and there wasn't a touch of resentment coming from his heart towards them. And he looked at Peter and the others who had deserted him immediately trouble began to show up on the horizon and he had nothing but love and affection for them. And he looked at the mob that had crowned him king as he entered into Jerusalem and were now insulting him and shouting at him and had just exchanged him for Barabbas a robber and he had nothing but love and kindness towards them.

Now that kind of love is the love that God sheds abroad in your heart by the Holy Spirit when you die to your rights. And he did not feel for a moment, "I have given so much time to Peter, and so much time to the disciples, and I've explained it all to them, and now they've betrayed me and they've abandoned me after I had explained it all to them." There wasn't a touch of that in Jesus. When he looked at the mob there wasn't the least feeling of resentment or criticism, "Oh, they'll follow someone else the next day. They followed me today somebody else the next day." There was only a love that came out from him because he did not believe that he had right to anything from the crowd. He did not believe he had a right to anything from the Roman soldiers. He did not believe he had a right to anything from his disciples.

Now brothers and sisters, when you marry and you die to your right to receive anything from your husband or your wife, and you really do trust the Father to give you all the emotional consolation and comfort, and even all the physical satisfaction that you need and that God wants you to have, then you'll find the Holy Spirit shedding abroad in your heart a love for the other person that keeps on whether they're loving you or not, that keeps on whether they're affectionate or not, that keeps on flowing out from you whether they're showing any love or affection to you at all. It's the kind of love that Jesus had for the leper. The leper he looked on him, the leper wasn't attractive

to him at all. The leper didn't fulfill any physical or emotional need that Jesus had Jesus just loved the leper because his heart was filled with love.

Now the Holy Spirit sheds abroad in your heart that kind of love when you're willing to die to your rights in marriage and to be prepared to regard the other person as an opportunity to express Jesus' love rather than an opportunity for you to get love. There is I think one other big reason why many husbands and wives don't stay together forever and it's a total, I would say misunderstanding, but at times I think they must be drunk when they repeat the words. It's a total failure to understand the promises that they make to each other and it's a total misunderstanding of the place of trials in their own life.

Here's what you promise. So, those of you who are going to go into it you ought to practice these words, these are the words you promise, the traditional vows, "I call upon these persons here present to witness that I John do take thee Mary to be my lawful wedded wife." Then here are the words dear ones, "To have and to hold from this day forward for better, for worse." Now that means for better for worse. That means whether you're better or whether you're worse than you are at present. That means whether circumstances are better or whether they are worse than they are at present. It means whether I'm better or worse than I am at present. It means for better for worse whether it seems good or whether it seems bad. Whether the marriage seems happy or whether it seems unhappy. We're together to have and to hold for better for worse because if we keep this vow God can at least do something. But if we part once it becomes worse and once it's not as good as it was at the beginning then God can do nothing. "For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health to love and to cherish till do us part according to God's holy law."

Now loved ones, the reason God joins us together at all as husband and wife is clearly stated in Genesis if you'd like to look at it here. Genesis 1:27 and I'll connect it up with what we just shared. Genesis 1:27, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." God made us male and female because he wanted us to be in his image. And so he knew the man would set forth the courage and the strength of Jesus and the woman would set forth the gentleness and the loving kindness of Jesus and he knew that when they got together these characteristics would begin to cross over. And all you husbands and wives that have been together for years know how alike you are to each other. It seems that you become like each other as the years past and that's why God made us man and woman, to make us more and more into his image.

Now will you look with me at one of the chief ways that God has of making us into his image, James 1:2-4, "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect," that you may come into the image of God, "And complete lacking in nothing. That's why you promise for better for worse.

Do you think that you can possibly live with another human being as imperfect and limited as yourself for 40 years and never expect or experience any trials because of them? But many husbands and wives do. Many husbands and wives regard a trial that comes through their partner as an unjustifiable interference with a continual calm sea of marital bliss. And they believe that, "This is unjustifiable. I ought not to experience any kind of trial from my partner, she's here to help me, he's here to help me."

Now loved ones, one of the reasons God joins you to a certain person is because that person has

exactly what you need not only in some of their good characteristics but you need to suffer some of their bad characteristics. And so loved ones, there are bound to be trials because God uses trials to make you like himself and there are things that God can get at in you through trials that he can't get at through any other way. And so often God will allow you to come into trials in your own marriage. And brothers and sisters what it does is produce backbone.

One of the great difficulties today is that once a person begins to experience any kind of limiting from their partner, or any kind of trial, they fly away to the lawyer or the attorney. And it's as if we are so weak kneed, and so soft, and we are so fearful of getting hurt that we can experience nothing like a trial from the other person. I know wives who have brought up sons and daughters in the fear and the love of God, and those sons and daughters have become like Jesus and that woman, I think of a particular woman in Belfast, has been married to an alcoholic for 40 years. But she didn't run at the first sign of the gunfire but she stayed with it.

Loved ones, I'm not saying that's always the right thing to do but I'm suggesting to you that there is something other than running that you can do and that God can use trials. I know husbands who have a woman that is like Shakespeare shrew you remember, in the Taming of the Shrew and she berates, and she nags, and she shouts at him day, after day, after day and the man is a man of God, gentle like Jesus and with love and understanding in his eyes and has been a tremendous blessing to hundreds of other people because of the trial that he has undergone.

I have one that is kind of a hero, John Wesley, kind of a hero. And old John God used him in the 18th Century you remember, to bring about that revival. And old John used to preach and his wife whom he married late in life used to sit in the audience and make faces at him. Yeah. She took his letters, changed them and published them in the English newspapers with the changes. She dragged him around the kitchen by his hair. Yeah. Yeah.

Now do you see brothers and sisters that I know that there's a time to break but really we often call uncle long before the Father wants us to. And the fact is that any marriage is going to have some trials and God is clear about trials, "Do not regard them as unpleasant interludes in an otherwise happy life. Greet them as pure joy my brethren when you enter into various trials," because God is trying to get at something inside you that needs to be changed. Well loved ones those are some of the reasons why marriages that are made by God last and why marriages where there is no trust in the Father for your needs do not last.

Nevertheless, it is true that God sets forth two plain situations where divorce is permissible and I think we should look at them and just be clear about them in our own minds. One is Matthew 19:9. Matthew 19:9, "And I say to you," Jesus is speaking, "And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery." And it is important to see that the main statement concerns Jesus' proclamation against divorce. Nevertheless he does use that phrase you see which is in the manuscript, "Except for unchastity." So it seems plainly logical that what Jesus is saying is, "If you divorce your wife and marry another you commit adultery unless that is your wife has committed unchastity, committed adultery herself, been unfaithful physically. Then in that case you can divorce your wife and marry another without committing adultery." So it seems that unchastity in the partner is a justifiable reason for suing for divorce, unchastity in the partner.

Nevertheless, brothers and sisters you have to see in Verse 8, that though Jesus is saying that's permissible he's not saying that that's the ideal situation. "He said to them, 'For your hardness

of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.” So one needs to see that honestly that Jesus is saying, “Look, I believe you should be together for life, this is a justifiable reason for divorce but from the beginning it was not so.” And in God’s own mind he wants you to be together.

Now is remarriage permissible? Well, you can see that it is in Verse 9, “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery.” Presumably Jesus is saying, “But if she is unchaste then you can divorce her and you can marry another without committing adultery.” On the other hand I think one has to see that Jesus is urging you to stay with the person.

Now would you look at the other example in 1 Corinthians 7:15, “But if the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. For God has called us to peace.” And so the Father sets for the second justifiable reason in scripture in divorce where the partner is not a Christian and does not want to stay and wants to leave. Now, on the other hand it is important to see that Paul urges you to stay with that partner if that partner will, by any means, stay with you. But if the partner won’t stay then you should let that partner go and you are not bound. And yet you have to see in 12 and 13 that the ideal is that you should stay with a person even if she isn’t a Christian or he isn’t a Christian, “To the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.”

So still the Father is saying, “Look, stay with each other that’s the ideal. Stay with each other whether the person is a Christian or a non-Christian. But in a situation where he or she is a non-Christian and wants to leave you then you are not bound.” What about remarriage? Well, you find it in 1 Corinthians 7:15, “If the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound.” And it would seem there is not bound in such a way that they cannot remarry.

On the other hand, brothers and sisters, you have with this remarriage business to see scripture’s plain message and its plain message obviously is you should be very careful before you go into remarriage even if it is on one of these grounds that are outlined here. You get that emphasis in 1 Corinthians 7:29-35. 1 Corinthians 7:29-35, “I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away.

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.” [audio ends abruptly 35:01]

