

## **A Thoroughly Counter-Cultural Approach to Marriage and Divorce**

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Life As It Was Meant To Be  
Matthew 5:31-32

I've been teaching from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and today we are going to tackle one of the toughest and most painful subjects facing the church today and that is the subject of marriage and divorce. Divorce is such a problem for America that the magazine *In Style* has been embarrassed on several occasions because by the time the magazine arrived on newsstands with photos of a married couple grinning and cutting their wedding cake, the couple had already filed for divorce.

For example, and this is a very common story, an actress named Kelli Rutherford, who starred in a bunch of evening soap opera dramas married a Venezuelan banker a few years ago at a Catholic church in Beverly Hills. Ms. Rutherford got a 3-carat emerald cut diamond according to the article. On her wedding day she wore a designer gown and hundreds of wedding guests danced to salsa music in the Sunset Room of the Beverly Hills Hotel until the wee hours of the morning. Unfortunately, by the time pictures of her wedding were printed by *In Style* magazine, Ms. Rutherford had already filed for divorce.

In order to protect themselves, or at least protect their financial assets, more and more Hollywood couples turn to prenuptial agreements. Of course, these are not just done in Hollywood. Many Americans with money are turning to prenuptial agreements to protect their estates. Several years ago it was reported that Catherine Zeta-Jones received \$20 million as a wedding present when she married Michael Douglas. She will get \$3 million for every year she is married to him, if they get divorced. I don't know what your reaction to that is, but I say, "Not enough! He is 50 years older than you! You should have held out for more." There is also a clause in their prenuptial agreement giving her \$5 million if Michael Douglas cheats on her. Now, why would Michael Douglas cheat on Catherine Zeta-Jones? Because he found someone more beautiful?

Divorce, of course, causes enormous pain to children. In a very famous study by Judith Wallerstein, written just a couple of years ago, titled *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, Judith Wallerstein reported the findings of a 30-year study she had conducted concerning 131 children and adolescents from 60 divorcing families. What she discovered was contrary to the popular myth that says the effects of a parents' divorce on their children is like a bad cold. Your child might get sick for a little while, but then it is over. Wallerstein discovered instead that the effects are long-term and that the divorce of parents is like giving your children a life-long debilitating disease. Two and even three decades later,

children of divorce still experience the consequences and pain of their parents' divorce.

Let me share with you personally the worst event of my childhood was my parents' divorce. My parents had a terrible marriage. They were two very immature people. There was constant fighting and yelling and cursing with continual accusations of infidelity. There were constant money problems. But despite all the fighting that I witnessed as a child, I did not want my parents to get divorced. I used to pray for them in Hebrew to stay together when I went to bed and they would be fighting.

My parents' divorce was final when I turned 14. We moved out from my house and neighborhood in the suburbs where I was very happy and had tons of friends. And we moved into an apartment in New York City where I attended a city high school that was on triple sessions. As a sophomore I went to high school from 11:30-5:30 in the evening every day. The worst thing for me about my parents' divorce was not us getting rid of the house, not me being separated from all my friends, it was the fact that I no longer had my dad at home with whom I was very close. And so in high school I turned to partying and various kinds of escapist activities.

Millions of kids go through the pain of their parents' divorce every year. Little kids, 2-3-4 years old, teenagers have to adjust to two houses, two families, and two lives. They have to learn to reconfigure their lives again for new step-parents, many of whom they may not like, and many of whom are threatened by them and do not like them.

It is certainly not just children who are affected by divorce. How many of you have personally been divorced, or experienced the divorce of your parents, your siblings, or one of your children? For Christian parents, the divorce of one of their kids is one of the most painful things a parent can go through. A Christian parent often deeply loves their son-in-law or daughter-in-law. They brought that person into their family and into their heart. They hate watching their children's family getting dissolved. Their children's divorce may actually separate them from their grandchildren.

In the past several decades we have moved from a situation in America where divorce carried an enormous stigma to a situation where divorce has become the norm. Before age 12, I only had one friend that I can remember whose parents were divorced. My grandparents actually used to whisper the word "divorce" the same way my grandmother would whisper the word "cancer." *She has cancer. He got divorced.* Now, divorce is normal. When my kids were in school they had classes where half the kids' parents were divorced.

While the rate of divorce has fallen, more than a third of all marriages end in divorce. It is not as high as the 50% statistic often cited, but it is almost 40% of

all marriages that end in divorce. The church has basically capitulated before the divorce epidemic that has swept over the nation in the last 35 years. In fact, there is no statistical difference between the rate of divorces among those who claim to be born-again in America and those who do not claim to be born-again. Actually, the born-again statistics for divorce are slightly higher than the general public. The states with the highest rates of divorce are solidly in the Bible Belt – states like Arkansas, Oklahoma, Alabama, and Mississippi. The lowest rates of divorce are found in liberal Massachusetts.

What we are going to discover today is Jesus is really strict about divorce. The reason, in part, that he is so strict is because he wants to keep us from the pain of divorce. If you have ever been divorced, or you've been the child of divorce, or your children have gotten divorced, or even your siblings, you don't wish this on anyone else. We've been going through the Sermon on the Mount together over the last couple of months. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus intends to form a counter-cultural community, a community that has been impacted and that has been intersected by the Kingdom of God. The Sermon on the Mount is what happens to a community of people when God grabs hold of them. What Jesus is saying in this message is that when God grabs hold of your life and of a church then the way the church community approaches anger is different than the world around it. The church community has a different approach to lust, a different approach to revenge, and especially a different approach to marriage and divorce.

And so today I've called this message "A Thoroughly Counter-Cultural Approach to Marriage and Divorce." Let's pray.

**Matthew 5:31-32**

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

I will begin by saying that the church in America is not counter-cultural regarding the subject of marriage and divorce. In mainline church there is a general de facto tolerance of divorce. The theology underlining this, if there is one, rests in the conviction that we must avoid being judgmental at all costs. In much of the mainline church the very worst thing a person can be is judgmental. And the most important verse in many mainline churches is Matthew 7:1:

**Matthew 7:1**

Do not judge, or you too will be judged.

Of course, in its original context, Jesus was warning us against judging each other lest we incur the judgment and wrath of God. But as New Testament professor Richard Hayes reported, in many churches this verse is basically

reduced to a very convenient social arrangement in which everyone looks the other way. And we all say to each other, "If you don't judge me, I promise not to judge you."

And so regarding opting out of your marriage, the feeling is marriage is everyone's own private business. No one should presume to second guess anyone else's decisions at all.

The wider cultural lens, of course, is that marriage is a purely private affair based on feelings of love. Marriage is a means of personal fulfillment. But when personal fulfillment is blocked, when feelings of love die, a person is permitted freely to opt out of their marriage. And in so many places the church is so utterly complicit with our culture that one Episcopal Bishop actually has created a service for the recognition of the end of a marriage. There is an actual liturgy for ending a marriage.

This Bishop said that one of the couples that went through this liturgy had a marriage in which there was more hurt than healing, more offense than forgiveness. There was an increasing inability to communicate that seemed to emerge out of the radically different life paths that each of the married persons was walking out. And so this couple stood in an Episcopal church before a priest. They faced each other and spoke to each other about pain and failure. They spoke of loneliness and the need to learn new ways of relating. They asked each other forgiveness and they pledged to be friends forever, to stand united when relating to their children, to be civil and responsible with each other. They thanked their friends for watching this. The husband had a groomsman, the wife had her maid of honor there.

Then the congregation rose up and spoke to the couple and said,

We affirm you in the new covenant you have made, one that finds you separated but still caring for each other and wishing each other good will; one that enables you to support and love your children. Count on God's presence with you; trust our support as you begin anew.

And then they all went to the fellowship hall and had wine and cheese together.

When I read about this parody of marriage, I wondered to myself about a couple that can stand in front of their friends and ask forgiveness, pledge lifelong friendship and unity regarding the kids, and they have a church community pledging prayer and support; I wondered how did the church ever allow itself to become so complicit in the divorce culture of America?

On the other hand, in conservative churches, in many evangelical churches and charismatic churches, there is often a legalistic, Pharisaic-like obsession with discovering the grounds for divorce. I can't tell you over the last two decades

how often I have had a conversation with a church member that basically sounded something like this:

- “So, if my wife committed adultery ten years ago, can I get out of this marriage?”
- “Is my husband’s pornography use sexual immorality of the type that would permit me to end the marriage?”
- “Why do you define abuse so narrowly? If my husband shoved me, can I get out of this marriage?”
- “Is emotional abuse sufficient for me to get out of this marriage?”

I can’t tell you how many couples have approached me basically with the Pharisee’s guide to ending the marriage. Does this offense by my spouse qualify me to get my “get out of jail free card?” So I can leave and have my conscience clear before God.

The mainline church says: Don’t judge me and I won’t judge you. The conservative church says: What are the exceptions to the rule of me having to stay married? And how can I squeeze my situation into one of those exceptions? What are the grounds? What are the grounds?

The church is supposed to be a counter-cultural community. We are supposed to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. The church is supposed to be a sign of hope to a world that has lost all hope. People often ask the question “Is it possible to recover and heal a broken marriage? Is it possible to commit to love someone else, no matter how bad things have gotten?”

But you know when the Christian church, both the liberal and conservative wings of the church, capitulate to the cultural epidemic of divorce, where can any couple find hope today? What Jesus intends in his teaching, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, is to create a group of people that give hope to the world. Hope that things can be fixed. Dead things can be resurrected. And so we read in Matthew 5:31-32:

**Matthew 5:31-32**

“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.”

What were the issues Jesus was speaking to? Jesus is quoting the religious leaders’ paraphrase of a teaching by Moses in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 24:1-4 we read this:

**Deuteronomy 24:1-4**

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

Let me give you the context of Moses teaching in Deuteronomy 24. In the ancient Near East, like in much of the Third World today, women were not considered to be persons, but rather they were considered to be property. A woman's identity was tied to her relationship with a man – her father, her brother, her husband. Men had total control over women in the Ancient Near East. They felt they had a right to divorce their wives at any time for any reason. So Deuteronomy 24 lays out a few protections for women in a culture in which women are no more than property of their husbands.

First of all, Deuteronomy 24 required there to be a certificate of divorce issued in the presence of two witnesses stating the reason for the divorce. This protected women because it would have been assumed apart from a list of reasons for the divorce that the woman had been unfaithful and she could be taken out and stoned. Certainly no one would remarry her, if she had been unfaithful. Requiring a certificate of divorce listing the reasons for divorce would offer a woman at least some protection from the false community assumption of her unfaithfulness.

And second, because there was a formal certificate of divorce, it slowed men down from just tossing their wives out in the heat of passion. The requirement of a formal certificate of divorce and witnesses meant that the community was now involved and could help this couple to have a more deliberate, a more thoughtful approach to their marriage.

And third, if a bill of divorce was given, and the woman remarried and got divorced again, Moses taught that the first husband could not remarry his ex-wife. Again, this was designed to prevent hasty, thoughtless divorces. The basic rule was: Men, if you take this step and divorce your wife, it is final. You can't change your mind later and decide to remarry her again. This is permanent. Are you sure you really want to do this?

Just as a side note, I would say that with the essentially no-fault divorce laws at work in almost every state encourage hasty divorces. I've talked with many, many people who looking back on their divorces regretted them. They said, "The truth is, we could have done more to save our marriage. We were both stubborn

and pig-headed. She wasn't a bad wife; he was a decent guy – we could have made it work.”

Are any of you at all in that situation? Are there any of you who feel that you tossed in the towel too early? It is for that reason I would love to see the Ohio Legislature pass a Covenant Marriage Bill here in Ohio. I would love to see Christian legislators here in Ohio finally pass a bill that would support a Christian view of marriage for those who want a covenant marriage license.

Deuteronomy 24 was designed to prevent thoughtless, hasty divorces. Now, over the centuries controversy arose regarding what Moses meant by the phrase “something indecent” in Deuteronomy 24:1:

**Deuteronomy 24:1**

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house

In Jesus' day, there were two schools of thought regarding what this meant. One school was represented by the conservative Rabbi Shammai. Rabbi Shammai said that something indecent simply referred to sexual infidelity by the wife. There was another school, a liberal school represented by Rabbi Hillel, who said something indecent could include burning the morning toast, or not cleaning house well enough. The famous Rabbi Akiba following the liberal school said something indecent might include a wife who is not as pretty as another woman that the husband wanted to marry.

And so the Pharisees, even though they were super strict about things like hand washing and keeping the Sabbath, they surprisingly took the liberal position in this controversy. They went along with Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Akiba. And in Matthew 19:3 the Pharisees want to embroil Jesus in the debate of the day.

“Jesus, concerning the grounds for divorce, will you take the conservative approach of Rabbi Shammai, only marital infidelity ends a marriage; or will you take the liberal approach advocated by Rabbis Hillel and Akiba, men can end their marriage for any reason, burnt toast, a prettier woman, I'm just tired of you.”

**Matthew 19:3**

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

Well, Jesus refuses to go along with their obsession and with the contemporary evangelical church's obsession and the modern Vineyard church members' obsession with the grounds for divorce. In fact, Jesus doesn't answer the Pharisees question at all. Instead, he poses a counter question in Matthew 19:4-6:

**Matthew 19:4-6**

“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?’ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

Jesus is not ignoring Deuteronomy 24. He suggests later this was a divine concession, a way for God to limit and prevent even worse sin. But what Jesus is doing is pointing people away from the issue of the grounds for divorce. He is pointing us to the fundamental and utterly counter-cultural question: What was God’s intention regarding marriage in the beginning?

Talk about different counsel! When someone comes in and says to you, “Can I get out of this?” “Does my friend have grounds?” Well, maybe. You know, there are grounds for divorce in the Bible. Marital unfaithfulness is a ground; abandonment by an unbelieving spouse is a ground; we here at the Vineyard along with lots of churches would add domestic violence as a possible ground. You don’t have to live with an unfaithful partner. You don’t have to be a punching bag. You can get out. Some of you have been dragged unwillingly into a divorce by a spouse who just wanted out.

But Jesus says: I didn’t come to talk with you about the grounds for ending your marriage. I came to remind you of God’s intention for marriage from the beginning. You see, Jesus’ purpose is to form a counter-cultural community, not a community in which every one of us turns the other way and says, “You don’t judge me; I won’t judge you.” He doesn’t want a community in which we are madly searching for whether our situation fits the exceptions to the rule. Jesus’ purpose is to form a counter-cultural community.

So Jesus says:

I want you to recover the counter-cultural meaning of covenant.

In contemporary America, the basic storyline, the basic narrative of marriage that we see repeated a million times, a billion times, in every popular song, and in every popular movie, and on every popular TV show, and told in countless magazines is that the foundation for marriage is falling in love. “We met one another and we fell in love. We knew it. It was an instant attraction.”

And over against being in love, or feelings of love, Jesus says that marriage is founded on a covenant. Marriage is not just a private agreement between two people for as long as we both shall love. Marriage is not even just a legal arrangement, the way it is described so often today in corporate health policies or the great debate about domestic partnership statutes. Marriage, according to



Jesus, is not just a legal arrangement for the purpose of sharing government benefits or health insurance, or inheritance rights.

Marriage is a covenant. That is why in the marriage ceremony we do not ask couples to pledge to feel love for each other. We do not ask couples to pledge to be in love with each other. What we say in the marriage ceremony is will you love? We ask for an exchange of vows, or commitments.

And Jesus describes marriage as a covenant in Matthew 19:5-6 when he says:

**Matthew 19:5-6**

and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

This means that God stands behind the vows that are exchanged and God desires to enforce them. Marriage is a covenant. A covenant is a sacred God-witnessed, public, mutually binding, irrevocable relationship between two persons who willingly promise to choose to love one another for life. And because marriage is a covenant, that means that God desires marriage to be a permanent union.

Even when one of the parties fails in upholding their end of the covenant, maybe one of the parties fails miserably in upholding their end of the covenant, that doesn't mean the other person *must* end the marriage. And by the way, do you know that the entire Bible from beginning to end is the story of irrevocable covenants between God and human beings? In fact, God in a very unashamed way uses marriage to describe his covenant relationship with a faithless people.

Marriage is a covenant. A covenant is a sacred, God-witnessed, public, mutually binding, and irrevocable relationship between two persons who willingly promise to choose to love one another for life.

You know, this irrevocable, covenant nature of marriage is graphically illustrated in the Old Testament book of Hosea. God commands Hosea the prophet to marry a prostitute; and Hosea does so. But then Hosea's prostitute wife reverts to her old way of life and turns back to prostitution. She is unfaithful to the terms of their marriage covenant. And what does God do? Does he say: Hosea, you now have grounds for divorce? No, he says instead, "I want you, Hosea, to go and purchase your wife out of prostitution again and live with her in faithfulness because I want you to model my covenant faithfulness with Israel, who is an unfaithful people." Hosea is an absolutely counter-cultural book.

See, in our contemporary evangelical obsession with finding grounds for divorce, we almost never ask the question in the church today: Is God asking anyone

these days to model covenant faithfulness to their spouse regardless? Is God asking anyone in the church today to be Hosea? To hold up their end of the covenant regardless?

I get tons of email from advocates for ending marriages. I don't believe I've ever gotten an email from someone saying, "Why don't we hold up Hosea as a model?" He's in the Bible.

Years ago I made a mistake with a woman by recommending to her that she divorce her notoriously unfaithful husband. It was the only time I have ever recommended to someone that they divorce. I've supported many people's choice to divorce. But this was the only time I have ever recommended to someone that she divorce.

In any case, she left the office angry with my suggestion. She stayed married. She wrote me a number of years later saying that her husband had repented. They have a wonderful marriage today. And had she followed my advice, her kids would not be growing up with a wonderful father. I, of course, wrote her a long letter of apology. It didn't occur to me at the time that God was calling her to be Hosea.

In forming a counter-cultural community:

Jesus wants us to recover the counter-cultural meaning of being one flesh.

In Matthew 19:5 we read this:

**Matthew 19:5**

and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.'

Years ago my favorite Christian writer, C.S. Lewis, in his hugely important book *Mere Christianity*, wrote about the difference between the contemporary view of marriage and divorce and the Christian view of marriage and divorce. Now, Lewis was speaking to a different age, well before contemporary church's acceptance of divorce, but here is what he says:

They [various churches] all regard divorce as something like cutting up a living body, as a kind of surgical operation. Some of them think the operation is so violent that it cannot be done at all; others admit it as a desperate remedy in extreme cases. They are all agreed that it is more like having both your legs cut off than it is like dissolving a business partnership or even deserting a regiment. What they all disagree with is the modern view that it is a simple readjustment of partners, to be made whenever people feel they are no longer in love with one another, or when either of them falls in love with someone else.

You say, “But I got married for all the wrong reasons.” Congratulations, welcome to the human race. 99.9% of people get married for at least some bad reasons, some silly reasons, some selfish reasons.

- I’ve talked with women who got married because this was the only guy who proposed to them.
- Because they wanted to get out of the house.
- People get married because they have powerful physical attractions for each other.
- Because they want to stop fornicating.
- Because they were pregnant.
- Because they felt sorry for the other person.
- Because they were dating someone for a long time and every one expected them to marry.
- Because they were on the rebound from another relationship.
- Because whenever they were sad, he could make them laugh.
- Because they were thrown out of their home and needed some place to live.

Whatever the reason, it doesn’t matter why you got into this – it would have been better for you to have good reasons and not have to play catch-up, but if you’ve exchanged vows you are now one flesh. And ending your marriage is not like ending a business partnership, shaking hands and going in two different directions. As C.S. Lewis said, it is more like cutting off your legs. You are one body.

Wow! If I, as a pastor, could get everyone in our church to believe this view of marriage, that ending it is like cutting up a body, we would be a long way towards being the counter-cultural community Christ intends for us to be.

How are we going to be counter-cultural?

Jesus wants us to recover the counter-cultural practices of the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus tells us that he didn’t come to abolish the law of the prophets, but to fulfill them. And then he gives six specific illustrations of fulfillers. Here is how God intends for his law to be fulfilled in people’s lives. Now, all the things we read about in the second half of Matthew 5 are interrelated with each other. We say, “How can I be a covenant-keeping person? How can I take the high road and have my spouse and I commit ourselves to lifelong marriage?” Well the other five commandments in chapter 5 help us with our marriages. For example, in verses 21-26:

### **Matthew 5:21-26**

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift. "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

Deal with unresolved anger and you will be able to live out your marriage call.

Verses 27-30:

**Matthew 5:27-30**

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Deal with undisciplined lust and you will be able to live out your covenant call.

Verses 33-37:

**Matthew 5:33-37**

"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply 'Yes,' or 'No;' anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Deal with the issue of promise-keeping and you will be able to keep your covenant.

Verses 38-42:

**Matthew 5:38-42**

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Give up playing tit-for-tat; stop responding to your spouse’s cuts with cuts of your own.

And verses 43-48:

**Matthew 5:43-48**

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Choose to respond to your partner’s sins by willing the best towards them. Live out the rest of the Sermon on the Mount and you will be a long way towards fulfilling this portion of the Sermon on the Mount regarding the counter-cultural nature of marriage.

Fourth, we need:

To recover the counter-cultural role of the Christian community in supporting marriages.

In football, coaches and players will often talk about the help they receive from the 12<sup>th</sup> man on the field. By the 12<sup>th</sup> man, they are talking about the fans. Football has 11 players on each side, for those of you who aren’t football fans. The 12<sup>th</sup> man is the fans. And over and over again after a game you will hear coaches and players telling the interviewer that “the fans were great today. They really got behind our team. We really felt their support.” Players truly get an emotional and psychological lift from the cheering, applause, and enthusiastic support of fans. That’s why there really is a phenomenon of home field advantage – not only because players get to play on a familiar surrounding. It is not only because they get to sleep in their own beds and they don’t have a long plane flight. It makes a difference if they play in front of an empty stadium or a stadium filled with screaming supportive fans.

So let me ask you an honest question church: Where is the cheering section, where are the fans, where are the enthusiastic supporters of people's marriages when people stumble? You know, when a woman shares a problem she is having in her marriage with friends, what is the typical response at work? Friends may pile on complaints they have about their husbands or their boyfriends about how men in general are jerks, or rats, or weasels, or some other little rodent. If she comes to church and shares a problem she is having with her husband in a women's group, very often women will be empathetic. They will offer to pray.

But where is the person, Christian or non-Christian, who cheers for the marriage? This woman might get lots of individual support, feel the arms around her and feel the tears. But my observation is that once you get married, it is lonely out there. You are playing in front of an empty stadium. Where is the person who not only supports the individual, but supports the marriage? Where is the person even in our church who shows empathy, but says, "Listen. I'm not just on your side. I'm not just on your spouse's side. I'm on the side of your marriage."

How rare it is for parents to speak to their sons about their marriage and confront their sons about their selfishness in marriage. How rare it is for parents to urge their children to compromise, to serve their mates, to fulfill their vows even when their partners have not.

As a church community, we are laboring to form that 12<sup>th</sup> man, that cheering section for marriages. That is why we spend so much time and energy preparing couples for marriage and strengthening existing marriages. Our Marriage and Family Ministry offers programs along a whole spectrum:

- Vineyard offers a 6-week premarital class for singles, dating and engaged couples offered three times per year. Heart2Heart Premarital Coaching available from trained married couples (meet 5-6 times before wedding, 1-2 post-wed). We also offer a 'remarriage and creating a stepfamily' series three times per year.
- Marriage Seminars available bi-monthly to help couples build intimacy.
- Seasons of Marriage series help couples to enrich their marriage based on what stage they are in (0-5 years, 6-10 years, 10-20 years, 20+ years).
- Celebration of Marriage date nights for couples to celebrate oneness.
- Marriage Retreats once per year, off-site to work on building friendship within the marriage relationship.
- Vineyard offers the Begin Again Marriage Restoration Ministry three times per year: This is a weekend seminar with six-weeks of follow-up in the homes of mentors.

We want to cheer on marriages in this church and give marriages the best possible, fighting chance for success.

And finally, we need to

Recover counter-cultural reasons to stay married.

As I said earlier, it is absolutely a lie that if you and your spouse are unhappy and fighting that your kids will be unhappy. Therefore, the best thing you can do for your kids is to end the marriage. Certainly, if your children are being physically abused, or you are being physically abused, that is one thing. You need to protect your children from abuse. You don't have to be a punching bag. But for you to get a divorce when there hasn't been physical abuse, or sexual infidelity or abandonment, what are you communicating to your children?

Let me share with you some of the things you are communicating to your kids. You are communicating that love doesn't last. You are communicating that it's okay to give up on your marriage, if your marriage is really bad. You are communicating that if something is hard, quit. You are communicating that it doesn't ultimately matter what God says. You are communicating to your children that if the Bible tells you something you don't like, then you don't have to do it. You are communicating to your children that they aren't worth staying together for – they must not be that special. You are communicating to your kids ultimately that your happiness is more important than their happiness.

What do you communicate to your children if you choose to stay in a very difficult marriage? What are you communicating then? You are communicating that you are willing to obey God even when it's costly. You are communicating not only that true love waits, but discipleship sometimes hurts. You are communicating that you have submitted your lives to the Bible even when you don't like what it says. You are communicating to your kids that their happiness and long-term health is more important to you than your own happiness. You are communicating to your kids the value of endurance, of persistence and of commitment. You are communicating to your kids that love does last, that love doesn't fail. That faith in God endures. That when you make promises and vows you keep them.

What a heritage to give to your children. To be able to look your kids in the eye and say, "We, in our family, keep our promises." "We're the kind of people who because of God's grace, we keep our commitments."

Staying in a difficult marriage is an opportunity for you to grow in your faith. How many of you who are followers of Christ, would say my greatest aspiration in life is to be a really weak Christian? I want to be, until I die, an immature follower of Christ. My goal is to have a weak faith, to live with lots of doubts and to have the kind of roller-coaster existence where I'm excited about God one day and I'm turning my back on him another. Every follower of Jesus that's worth anything would say, "I want to grow in my faith. I want to have a strong faith. I want to be a mature believer."

Well, how do you get a strong faith? How do you mature as a Christian?

Do we say, “Well, we get a strong faith by avoiding everything that’s hard, by running from everything that hurts? We get a strong faith by quitting when it’s tough, by turning tail, by giving up.”

No. God grows your faith and my faith the way he grew the faith of people in the Bible. How did he grow the faith of people in the Bible? He grew their faith by bringing them to the edge of disaster and then rescuing them. He brings them right to the shore of the Red Sea, the Red Sea is at their back, the Egyptians are at their front, they are about to be slaughtered, and then God parts the Red Sea. Or God brings people into the middle of disaster. The prophet Daniel is put in the lion’s den, and then God rescues him.

Why have this counter-cultural approach to marriage? Because the church is the hope of the world. Because the church is the last place that anyone in the world can look to find hope for marriages and families today. Everyone else has thrown in the towel. There are online services helping you to write your own dissolution agreement. There are dozens of books about how to explain your divorce to your five-year old. But only in the church is anyone holding up a different vision, a vision of living beyond ourselves and our own temporary fulfillment, a vision of promise-keepers, and love choosers, where people cheer one another on and hold one another accountable. That is the kind of community the world wants to see. That’s the kind of community God wants to build here. Let’s pray.



# **A Thoroughly Counter-Cultural Approach to Marriage and Divorce**

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Rich Nathan  
March 11-12, 2006  
Life As It Was Meant To Be  
Matthew 5:31-32

## **I. The Church's Complicity with Our Divorce Culture**

- A. The Mainline Church (Matthew 7:1)
- B. The Conservative Church

## **II. The Religious Leaders Complicity with Divorce In Jesus' Day**

- A. The Reason For Moses' Instruction (Deuteronomy 24:1-4)
- B. The Focus Upon God's Intentions (Matthew 19:4-6)

## **III. The Call To Counter-Cultural Living**

- A. The Call to Recover the Counter-Cultural Meaning of Covenant (Matthew 19:6)
- B. The Call to Recover the Counter-Cultural Meaning of One Flesh (Matthew 19:5)
- C. The Call to Recover the Counter-Cultural Practice of the Sermon On The Mount (Matthew 5:21-48)
- D. The Call to Recover the Counter-Cultural Role of the Christian Community
- E. The Call to Recover the Counter-Cultural Reasons to Stay Married