

“It’s About Perseverance!”

Matthew 19: 1-6

June 1, 2008

Rev. Curtis J. Young

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No doubt about it, when our Lord said, “What God has brought together, let man not separate,” he was teaching the permanence of marriage. So we the church have in our wedding vows this final phrase, “for as long as we both shall live.”

This morning, however, the permanence of marriage will not be our emphasis. But rather, perseverance in marriage.

I don’t lead us in this direction from any hesitation about the permanence of marriage but to support it.

In I Corinthians 7, Paul laid down the principle for believers: “A wife must not *separate* from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else *be reconciled* to her husband.” He immediately applied the same to Christian husbands. (I Corinthians 10-11)

This certainly affirms the permanence of marriage. Notice also how Paul set off two verbs against each other. The contrast is between “must not separate” with “must be reconciled”. The antithesis of “separation” is “reconciliation”.

This certainly applies to Matthew 19. You know that rabbis often taught using the negative to stress the truth of the opposite. Jesus was no exception.

When Jesus taught, “Do not think I have come to abolish the law and the prophets,” what did he mean? “I have come to fulfill.” (Matthew 5:17)

Or when he taught, “Do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you?”, what did he mean? “Give to the one who asks you.” (Matthew 5:42)

So when Jesus said, “What God has brought together, let man not separate,” what did he mean? What God has brought together, let man keep together. In fact the tense of the verb “separate” is present, speaking of continual action, so we can paraphrase this, “let man keep on keeping together.”

Given Paul’s antithesis between separate in reconcile in I Corinthians 7 applies, the edge is finer still: “Whom God as joined together, let them be reconciling continually.”

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The perseverance I am talking about is perseverance in reconciling with one another. If marriage is between two sinners, how can it not be all about reconciliation? If marriage mirrors the relationship between God and his people, Christ and his church, how can it not be about reconciliation?

In II Corinthians 5, Paul said that God has given “us the ministry of reconciliation.” For those who are married, the ministry of reconciliation begins with marriage. It requires perseverance.

Jesus did a radical thing when he taught this. He elevated marriage to the level of a spiritual discipline. In the words he chose in verse, he doesn’t mention either the husband or the wife. The two are now one. The only point of reference is God so that marriage is what God has joined together.

To speak of perseverance today is more timely than ever. Because marriage has changed. I’m not headed where you think I am.

In 1911, marriages lasted on average 28 years. By 1967, the average length of marriage increased to 42 years. People are living longer, much longer. That makes perseverance more timely. Still, whether 28 or 42 or 142 years, it is still relatively short when Christ is our example.

He has persevered with his church for over 2,000 years, interceding, praying, forgiving, restoring, renewing. He is our model. In Matthew 19, he calls us to the same spiritual discipline that defines his own life.

One of the realizations I have come to in my study of marriage for this series is that reconciliation is the essence of the marriage relationship. Reconciliation is not an additional burden in marriage that one from time to time must take on. It is the core of the marriage relationship.

It not only is how the union of marriage is preserved (permanence) but strengthened, deepened.

Recently the Fatherhood Initiative conducted research, asking men and women who are divorced their reason for their divorce. The most frequent reason they gave was “lack of commitment.” The second most frequent reason was ‘too much conflict and arguing.’ The third was ‘infidelity.’

When asked, “Do you wish your ex-spouse had worked harder to save the marriage?” 62% of men and women answered “yes”.

Reconciliation is the essence of the marriage relationship. It calls for perseverance. That is true commitment.

In 2004 the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology published the results of a study that tracked 82 couples from within 3 months of their wedding to four years out. After four years 17

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of the couples had divorced. Let me give you the BBC summary as to why the remaining couples were married: Those who avoided divorce managed to do so by being forgiving and having charitable explanations for their partner’s negative behavior. (This sounds a lot like reconciliation to me. *Added*) But those individuals who had extremely high expectations and did not have these excellent relationship skills, were more likely to be sorely disappointed with their one true love.”

Reconciliation. Not lording our spouse’s faults or lesser abilities or ignorance over him or her. Learning to value and love our spouse in spite of these and a hundred other flaws.

If we are honest with ourselves, that’s shouldn’t be hard to do. In the early years of marriage, it is not what I discovered about my wife that appalled me but what I saw in myself. Talk about a debtor to mercy and love.

I say, “if we are honest with ourselves,” because sin makes us smug and proud. In the twisted world our egos so easily construct, it’s very hard to find anything really wrong with ourselves. Virtually anything can be explained away or excused rather than confessed and utterly rejected.

When Christians speak of reconciliation we often recall how Jesus calls us to be the first to forgive. I agree. Yet if you asked me, which is the greater obligation, to forgive my spouse his or her faults or to repent of my own, I would argue that the answer is to repent.

The first priority is to recognize and remove the log from our own eye before we attempt to deal with the splinter in our spouse’s; to restore myself to my spouse rather than restore my spouse to me.

I speak of perseverance and reconciliation, and here I arrive at repentance, personal repentance. The hardest thing for me to hear in sitting with angry couples is how clearly they speak of each other’s faults and ignore their own, how insistent they are that the log is in their partner’s eye leaving only a splinter in their own.

You have all heard the practice makes perfect? This also is true. When it comes to bad habits, practice makes permanent. The skill of skewering our spouse comes at a steep price of blindness to our own faults.

The way we talk and think about our spouse tells us a great deal about ourselves. What should we expect from our spouses, perfection? No, yet the question of expectations is crucial.

Because what we expect, we tend to demand. In fact the more out of touch we are with God’s grace in our own lives, the more we will tend to demand our expectations be met. Apart from the Spirit’s work of grace and faith, we are all legalists at heart who find satisfaction in condemning others.

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Unleashed condemnation and criticism give rise to what John Gottman calls “flooding,” a condition that leaves the recipient literally unable to think or function normally.

Husbands, a word from a fellow pilgrim. The greatest privilege you will ever have in life is being the one man in the world who gets to restore your wife, who gets to show her grace in those areas that she only shares with you. Honestly, this is the point where a husband man can be a hero every day, or a troll. Why squander the honor?!

I realize we have limited time, so I want to close with a word about the importance of communication. Every self-help marriage manual talks about it, but what does it mean?

In Secrets of Lasting Love, Gary Smalley draws from research on communication to identify five levels of intimacy. In other words, people communicate on the level of:

Clichés: “How are you?” “Fine.” This is totally safe and meaningless.

Facts: “Looks like the sun is out.” “Sure does.” This is usually safe and forgettable.

Opinions. “I think Kobe is far better than MJ.” “You’re nuts!” This is not so safe, but interesting.

Feelings: “I feel like you don’t care what I think.” This is unsafe but meaningful.

Deeper needs: “I am so unfulfilled.” This is complete defenseless exposure and most significant.

The more we reveal of ourselves, the more meaningful our communication, and the more intimate we become.

If you tend to contradict and challenge me when I share a fact with you, am I going to share an opinion, let alone risk some revelation about myself? No.

If I ridicule a whimsical dream you have, are you going to tell me how you really feel about your appearance or change the subject to the price of gasoline?

For true reconciliation to occur, must we talk on the level of cliché or fact or opinion, or feeling, or need? The answer is our deepest needs. Because reconciliation requires us to come clean about ourselves before one another; to disclose the insecurities, anxieties, fears and temptations that drive us to act like troglodytes. So there is understanding, so barriers are removed, so mercy flows easily, so we remain on the same side as friends rather than enemies.

Here is the call to persevere in marriage, to regard perseverance as our spiritual discipline, even as Christ regards it as his.

Here is the call to practice and grow in the art of reconciliation, to live out the essence of what marriage is. What God has joined together, let no man separate.