

Hope and Healing for Hurting Marriages

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer

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No. 8: Towards a Loving Marriage
Scripture: Matthew 19:1-12 and John 2:1-11

Today we conclude our series **Towards a Loving Marriage.**

I want to begin by expressing my gratitude.

First, I want to thank you as a congregation for your receptivity. I have never had so many comments about a series as I have about this one.

Thank you for your calls, emails and conversations both with me and my colleagues.

I am especially grateful to those who are not married who affirmed the value of this series.

Some of you worked hard to find a personal application for your own life as a single person.

Recognizing that less than half of our weekend congregation are married I fully expected attendance to decline. In fact, it increased 13 percent over the same weekends of last summer.

Second, I am grateful to my colleagues who shared this series with me. I especially wanted their input because my experience of marriage is limited to the 34 wonderful years I have spent with Gretchen.

Bill Price, Dan Farm and Andy Kumpel were able to bring their own perspectives to the biblical text which I think was wonderfully helpful.

In addition I am enormously grateful to those who gave their faith stories about marriage during this series or wrote articles in RidgeLines.

It took great courage to be so honest and vulnerable in front of 1700 or 1800 people but that is what I am convinced is necessary.

For far too long we have been afraid to ask for help when things go wrong. At the start of this series I said that my number one goal was to create a culture of openness in our marriages so that asking for help becomes normal.

The reality is that none of us will get through our marriage without times of stress. When that occurs let's seek support.

Third, I am grateful for those who helped prepare this series. Back in February I asked a wonderful group of



couples to tell me how the church could help them in their marriages. Then three couples created this series. They selected the titles and the texts. Their work has been invaluable.



They were insistent that we offer encouragement to those marriages that are struggling and so today we are going to talk about **Hope and Healing for Hurting Marriages**. There is an outline in your RidgeLines if you would like to follow along.

When we turn to scripture we discover that hope and healing for hurting marriages arrive in three ways.

First they come in the form of **A PERMISSION**.

We just read that passage from Matthew 19 where Jesus teaches on divorce. He begins by stating God's ideal plan for marriage when he tells the Pharisees, **"Haven't you read, 'that in 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 man not separate.'" (Matthew 19:4-6)**

Our heavenly Father wants the best for his children.

He longs for our homes to be happy and holy.

But we live in a fallen world and we know that in some marriages that is not the situation.

So Jesus addresses what happens when a marriage has irretrievably broken down.

He says, **"Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard." (V 8)**

Here we see that God permits divorce because of adultery. He knows that unfaithfulness can destroy trust so that it is virtually impossible for a husband and wife to continue to live together.

Jesus is certainly not encouraging divorce and it should always be a last resort. But where a marriage has been ruined and cannot be rebuilt divorce is a means of God's mercy.

In Matthew 19 Jesus permits divorce for adultery.

In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul permits divorce because of desertion. Many scholars believe that scripture also permits divorce because of neglect which can include emotional or physical abuse.

They draw this from Exodus 21 which says that if a husband, **"Marries another woman he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital**

rights. If he does not provide her with these three things she is to go free, without any payment of money.” (Exodus 21:10-11)



David Instone-Brewer in his book “Divorce and Remarriage in the Church” writes “Putting all this together gives us a clear and consistent set of rules for divorce and remarriage. Divorce is only allowed for a limited number of grounds that are found in the Old Testament and affirmed in the New Testament. These are adultery, emotional and physical neglect, and abandonment and abuse.”

When these things occurred in biblical times a marriage was considered broken and so a divorce was issued. Because the marriage was ended the couple were free to remarry.

The situation in our day is somewhat different.
In Minnesota we have No Fault Divorce.

One party in a marriage can initiate a divorce and it is granted, although their partner does not want it and does everything they can to save the marriage.

Some of you are in that situation.

You were willing to forgive an unfaithful spouse.

You wanted to go to counseling and work things out but your spouse ignored your pleading and left. Listening to this series on marriage must have been difficult and painful because it reminded you of what you have lost.

So let’s look at some important truths. God permits divorce because sometimes it can’t be avoided.

God hates it as much as you do because he knows the enormous pain that it brings. However, divorce doesn’t mean you are a failure or there is no future for you.

Your value is not determined by your marital status but by who you are in Christ.

If you belong to him you are God’s child, you are Jesus’ friend, you have bought with a price, you are a member of Christ’s body.

You are a saint and that means you are forever free from condemnation. You cannot be separated from the love of God. Your life is hidden with Christ in God. You are a citizen of heaven, so you are truly significant. You are God’s coworker. You are seated with Christ in the heavenly realm.

You are God’s workmanship so you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.

It is possible we are partially to blame for our divorce. We recognize that our behavior wasn’t perfect.

If that is the case let us rejoice that the cross of Christ covers all sins and that when we are sorry and ask for forgiveness our gracious God cleanses us and gives us a new start.

God has wonderfully used divorced people.

I will give you one dramatic example of that statement.

It is likely the Apostle Paul was a divorced man.

As a Jewish Rabbi he would have been required to marry.

It is quite possible when Paul became a Christian his wife left him and that caused him to write those words in 1st Corinthians 7 that, **"If the unbeliever leaves let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances."** (1 Corinthians 7:15)

It is likely that Paul knew the pain of divorce and yet

God used him in remarkable and extraordinary ways.

So if you find yourself divorced be encouraged.

God has a purpose for you. He has not forgotten you.

He loves you with an everlasting love.

You are his precious child.

Second hope and healing for hurting marriages comes in the form of **A PERSON.**

This is God himself. More than 100 times in the Bible we are told that God is our helper.

The Prophet Isaiah gives his own testimony that, **"The Sovereign Lord helps me."** (Isaiah 50:7)

God's ministry of help is particularly relevant to those who are single parents as a result of divorce.

For Psalm 10 tells us that God is, **"The helper of the fatherless."** (Psalm 10:14)

But how does God help us?

Psalm 70 tells us that God is **"A help and deliverer."** (Psalm 70:5) God helps us by protecting us for he is our **"Help and shield."**

Psalm 46 assures us that God is always available for he is, **"An ever present help in times of trouble."**

This guarantee of God's assistance is reaffirmed in the New Testament where the book of Hebrews assures us, **"We say with confidence, the Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"** (Hebrews 13:6)

Some problems require special help. Last Monday was Labor Day and I felt convicted to clean our bathroom.

Our water comes from a well. It is hard and filled with rust. These impurities leave their mark on the shower and bath.

My heart sunk as I anticipated scrubbing for hours.
 Then I thought of Hercules cleaning the Aegean Stables. You remember the story,
 how Hercules diverts the local rivers to make them flow through the stables.
 As a result he cleans them up in no time.
 I realized I needed my own river.
 Then it struck me that I had one. A friend had left his power washer in my garage.
 That would do the job.

Now I wasn't sure that Gretchen would be on board with this
 idea so I waited for her to go on a bike ride.

Then I fired up the power washer.

I stand before you to tell you that power washing is the way
 to go if your bathroom is as bad as ours.

It not only cleaned the shower and the tub but the walls and
 the ceiling. It had the additional advantage of turning the
 bathroom into a swimming pool.

For some tasks we need a lot of help and this is God's
 specialty.

He washes out the pain and hurt and pours in the cooling
 water of his hope and healing.

Crisis can bring us to Christ and there are few crises worse
 than a divorce.

It has been the testimony of many that their divorce brought them closer to Jesus.
 In their loneliness they turned to the Lord.



This weekend we commemorate the tenth anniversary of 9/11. That too was a time
 of great crisis.

Whether the crisis is an attack on our nation or an attack on our marriage we feel
 devastated and when we cannot help ourselves God steps in.

He sends Jesus who is the supreme first responder.

He lays his life down in order to lift us to safety.

So if you have been beaten down by a bad marriage or a dreadful divorce ask
 almighty God to help you.

However God is not the only helper found in the Bible. People also fill that role.

Isaiah speaks of a society in which **"Each helps the other and says to his
 brother, be strong." (Isaiah 41:6)**

The gifts of the Spirit include **"Those able to help others."
 (1 Corinthians 12:28)**

You are not alone in your sorrow over a broken marriage.

God provides his people to walk with you through this dark valley.

So please ask for help.

Join a small group who can give you godly advice.

There is a danger following a divorce of surrounding ourselves with people who have also been hurt and they have become bitter as a consequence. They pour poison into our soul.

That doesn't do us any good.

It only makes us feel worse.

God wants us to be with people who will help us to forgive and to come through the experience as a stronger and wiser person.

Third scripture shows us that hope and healing come in the form of **A PRACTICE**. Maybe you are not divorced but you know that if things don't improve in your marriage you soon will be.

There is no affection left in your relationship.

You are living together as roommates more than a couple. If you are honest you would say you don't love your spouse anymore.

One way to describe the situation would be to say that the wine has run out of your marriage.

That is what happened to a young couple in Cana.

They had invited guests to a great wedding reception when the wine ran out.

In first century Israel that was an appalling disgrace.

You can't have a Jewish wedding without wine.

It seemed like the end of everything.

But then something extraordinary happens.

John tells us about it in his gospel.

"On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

"Dear woman why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew.



**Then he called the bridegroom aside and said,
 “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the
 cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to
 drink; but you have saved the best till now.”
 (John 2:1-10)**



It is a fantastic story.

Jesus performed a miracle and disaster is turned to delight. The marriage is saved. The crisis is averted.

Yet it leaves us asking the question. Why did Jesus tell the servants, “Fill the jars with water?” God was certainly able to produce the wine without the water.

This problem intrigued C.S. Lewis and he writes about it in his book *Miracles*. Lewis points out that whenever Jesus worked a miracle on earth he followed the pattern of his Father in heaven but on a smaller and speeded up scale.

The truth is that God is always turning water into wine but it takes several years for water to become wine by the natural method as the vine draws out water by its roots and with the aid of the sun turns that water into juice that will ferment and become wine.

Here at the wedding in Cana, Jesus speeded up the process and produced the wine in just a moment of time.

Lewis also points out that God begins with what there is and goes on to increase and multiply it.

So although Jesus could have produced wine in those empty water pots our Lord would not do so because it would not be in harmony with the way God works. Jesus begins with what’s available and proceeds from there to work an amazing miracle.

Now what has this got to do with our marriage?

It may be that in our marriage the wine of true love has run out. We need a miracle.

Christ can give us that miracle but he is not going to act contrary to the laws of the universe and suddenly change our feelings and attitudes towards our spouse without any effort from us.

However, once we fill the waterpots by showing God by our commitment and determination that we are willing to do all he asks then we position ourselves for a miracle.

We supply the water and God turns it into wine.

This is the practice which can bring love back into our lives.

Now the Bible speaks about three forms of love.

They are eros, philia and agape.

Eros is sexual love.
 Philia is friendship love.
 Agape is unconditional love.

Now most relationships start with eros love.

We are sexually attracted to another person.
 LeRoy Koopman says that eros is the lingering touch of the fingers, the deep kiss, candles and music for dinner. Him giving her a see through negligee for her birthday and her wearing it for him the same night.

Eros love is glorious but it doesn't last.

Elaine Walster interviewed 100,000 people over a period of 15 years in order to study the difference between passionate and compassionate love.

She claims that for most couples intense passion lasts from six months to about 2 ½ years.

I think the reason why so many Hollywood marriages burn out quickly is because they are only based on eros love. It is fine but it needs to mature and become philia love which shows real interest in the other person not for what they can give you but for what they are.

Philia love is enjoying each other's company.

It is turning off the TV to discuss something of mutual interest. It is feeling lonely when your partner is away from home. It is going for a walk together and working on a project together.

Agape love is the highest love we can experience in this life. It is the way that God loves, for it is love that goes on loving even when the other person becomes unlovable. Agape love is a commitment of the will in which a person decides to love. It is self giving love.

This kind of love can revive eros and philia love even when they have diminished or died.

So the practice that will bring back hope and healing to marriage is to do those things that create an environment for agape love.

We can't make ourselves feel differently just by an act of the will but feelings of romance follow doing the right thing. When we begin to do the loving thing towards those we are commanded by God to love then God, seeing our obedience, comes to our aid and gives us the ability and desire to truly love our spouse.

So here is what a couple can do who want to bring back love into their marriage. They can make a commitment to God and to each other. I think it is helpful to put this commitment in writing. Selwyn Hughes gives an example of a commitment one couple made.

It is quite long but here are three points from it.

First. We decide to rebuild our relationship and not end it.

Second. We decide to forgive each other here and now for past failures and mistakes.

Third. We decide to end each day by praying together and reading scripture.

Fourth. To minister to each other needs and concentrate on being givers rather than getters in our marriage.

Five. To establish clear lines of communication and have appointed times for dealing with important issues.

Now that is filling up the water jars with the knowledge that God is going to transform the water of our commitment into the wine of true love.

Notice point 3 speaks about praying together.

This week I met with Jim Hanson of the Minnesota Family Counsel. He told me about a study the Southern Baptist have done.

They have discovered that when couples pray together every day the divorce rate drops to 1 in 1500.

So don't underestimate the power of prayer.

A couple of weeks ago we looked at 1st Corinthians 7 where Paul tells couples to abstain from sexual activity in order to spend time in prayer.

At that time I said I had never come across anyone who had actually done this.

Following the service a lady came up to me and told her story. She and her husband were having difficulties being intimate. She had recently given birth and she did not want to get pregnant again. She was fearful and was not enjoying the act of lovemaking.

Her husband very wisely suggested they apply Paul's teaching. For 30 days they decided to pray together and abstain from intimacy asking that God would bless this important part of their marriage.

The wife recounted that it was a wonderful gift from her husband and at the end of the 30 days they were able to come back together with great joy in each other.

Perhaps we are having similar difficulties with physical intimacy.

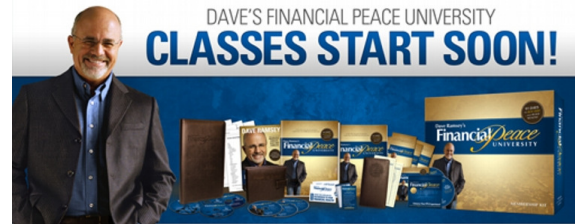
To accept that state of affair means we miss out on a very important part of God's purpose for marriage.

It would be well worthwhile talking this over and agreeing to pray together for a period of time to see if God can bring a transformation in our attitudes.

This series may be over but as a church we want to continue to help you to keep your commitment to each other.

We know that many people struggle with finances and so we are offering **Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University** which starts on September 24.

Financial Peace University is a life changing program that teaches you how to make the right money decisions to achieve your financial goals and God's plan for your life. The course includes practical lessons on eliminating debt, building wealth, and giving like never before. I encourage you to attend.



Then in October we have a **Marriage Enrichment Retreat** at the Elizabeth Lodge. We want you to spend time together communicating about how your marriage is doing and how you want it to grow. You can register on the church website. The cost is only \$30 a couple.



At that marriage in Cana, Mary, the mother of Jesus, said something very important to the servants. It was **"Do whatever he tells you." (John 2:5)**

Jesus tells us to hold our empty cups under the great waterfall of the Father's agape love so that he may fill us. That is how God provides his hope and healing for our hurting marriages.