

# When Marriage Gets Difficult

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**Bible Verse:** Matthew 5:31  
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For tonight, let's turn to Matthew chapter 5. We've come to verses 31 and 32 in our exposition of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus, I'll remind you just briefly, is describing what the righteousness is that God actually requires. He requires a heart righteousness, worship from sincerity of heart, you might say, and righteousness of heart, and it was a great contrast to the prevailing teaching in Jewish circles there in the first century. So we've come to the third segment of it. He had dealt with the sin of anger as being an inward act of murder. He dealt with the inward sin of lust as being an expression of the sin of adultery. And now we come to the matter of divorce. You know, divorce sadly is prevalent in the church, broadly speaking. I know that some of you have been hurt deeply by divorce in your lives, and so when we come to the topic of marriage and when we come to the topic of divorce, I am very, very mindful that we together, collectively speaking, as the body, local body of Truth Community Church, I'm very mindful that many of us have had our hands burned on the hot stove of a difficult marriage or divorce, and even though, in a sense, you've moved on, you still carry those scars with you in your heart. And so it's a topic that I approach with a lot of sympathy, with a lot of pastoral concern; that's why I invite the feedback, because I would be happy to expand on this beyond tonight's message if that would be helpful to you.

Now, with that said, let's read our two verses that we're going to deal with. These two messages will encompass a couple of messages, regardless of the response. Just in verse 31, we read this. Jesus says,

31 "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Now, just so you know where we're going here this evening, I'm going to leave verse 32 to a future time. We're not going to get into that so much this evening, we're just going to talk about marriage in general and what Jesus was alluding to in verse 31. Remember that the broad context, the broad context here is that God is looking for an inner righteousness. That's the broad context in verses 21 to 48, that God requires an inner righteousness from his people. An external religion that is hypocritical, is not real, is something that is not acceptable in the sight of God. So it's very important for us to

remember that broad context and it will certainly help us understand verse 31 as we come to it in a moment.

Now, let's just start with a little bit of American history here. The Declaration of Independence has conditioned Americans to think and to have a sense of entitlement to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and there is no question but that that has filtered its way through the expectations that Christians or churchgoers, let's say more broadly, that churchgoers bring to their church experience. It's a consumer mindset, you know, you give me what I want or I'll take my business elsewhere kind of thing, all because we have this deeply rooted sense in our Western culture, in our American culture, that we're entitled to something. We're entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And I'm not going to try to undo American history in what I'm about to say over the next 50 minutes or so, but I just want to remind you as the people of God that a declaration from Jesus Christ tells us something different, it tells us something different about what our aspirations are to be. The primary goal for a Christian is not liberty, as American culture defines it, the primary goal for a Christian is not happiness, even though we all like to be happy. That is not the goal, that is not what we are to pursue and to seek.

Let me remind you, if you'll turn over a chapter in Matthew 6 to verse 33, what our Lord Jesus says about our pursuits and our priorities and our affections in life. In Matthew 6 verse 33, Jesus says, "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." The material needs of life will be added to you, but that's not what you seek first in life. What you seek first is the kingdom of God, the word of God, the Son of God, the righteousness of God, and living that out in your life is the supreme priority of a Christian. And so your main ambition in life If you want to be a Christian, if you are a professing Christian, your first and primary ambition in life is the righteousness of God, the worship of God, the glory of God, as we saw on Sunday, and you see that reinforced simply in the way that Jesus teaches us to pray. If you look up a little bit in Matthew chapter 6, when he teaches us to pray, he says, "Don't pray with a bunch of empty words and don't multiply your words before God. Keep the themes simple and direct." And he says in verse 9, "Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." You know, those are the opening ways that Jesus teaches us to pray. It's so much different than the way most of us usually pray as we go to God and say, "God, I have this problem. I need your help here. And can you fix this thing over here and help this suffering person over there?" And it's very horizontal and human and man-centered. And that is not the way that Christ teaches us to pray. There's an aspect for those human concerns in prayer, Jesus gets into that in the rest of the prayer, but he teaches us to seek the glory of God, the will of God, the kingdom of God, as that which is the highest pursuit of what we seek in prayer.

And so when you set that over against one of the founding documents of our nation, you start to see that there's a bifurcation, there's a cleavage, there's a separation, there's a wedge here that we need to take to heart and to practice. On the one hand, a self-centered pursuit of life, liberty, and the pursuit of personal happiness. On the other, the righteousness of God, the glory of God, the will of God. And that's the very broad, those

are the broad principles that inform everything else and those are the broad principles that inform the institution of marriage from a Christian perspective. And so your main ambition in life is the pursuit of the righteousness and the will of God, period, full stop. If marriage comes to you as a result of pursuing the will of God, praise the Lord. Good for you, blessings be upon you. If God delays marriage, the pursuit of marriage for you, you're still pursuing the righteousness of God even if that human relationship is delayed from your perspective. But let's talk about marriage and the idea with which we pursue marriage in light of what I've just been saying here.

Marriage, Christian marriage, is not lived with the thought, Christian marriage is not pursued with the expectation that, "I have a right to be happy." Let me say that again, Christian marriage is not lived with the prevailing thought, "I have a right to be happy." We all want to be happy, I get that, but that is not the first and the supreme ambition, that's not our entitlement. Our entitlement is expressed in completely different ways. Our thinking should be completely different in light of what we've said already here this evening. What you should say when it comes to marriage, what you should increasingly conform your heart and desires and submission to Christ is along these lines. You should say, "I have a responsibility to be righteous here." In my marriage, I have a responsibility to be righteous that transcends my thinking about happiness, what my expectations are about my spouse, or anything like that. You start with a vertical perception, a vertical recognition, you alone apart from your mate in the presence of God that says, "Lord, I have a responsibility to practice inner heart righteousness before you and to live that out in my marriage no matter what is happening around me." That is revolutionary, even within Christian circles, I would dare say. But beloved, I want you to know and to understand that what we're talking about is very basic principles of Christian living. The glory of God is our purpose. Christ explicitly says, "Seek first the kingdom and his righteousness," and then the other things fall into place one way or another after that, but we don't reverse the process and it's because so many husbands and so many wives reverse the expectations and say, "You have a responsibility to do what I want," and all of that, and it becomes a matter of making demands instead of fulfilling duties, that we go so far astray. And so let's carry those thoughts into tonight's passage. Let them frame our understanding of what we're going to see. And I intend this message, I've planned this message to be very practical in its orientation in the last part of the message.

So first of all, our first point tonight cleverly phrased as this: the Pharisees and divorce. The Pharisees and divorce. You say, "There's nothing clever about that," and I say, I know, but that is what passes for clever in my world. The Pharisees and divorce. It's descriptive rather than being clever. The Pharisees in the first century practiced divorce based on their understanding of an Old Testament text that we're going to look at. If you'll go back to the fifth book of the Bible, the book of Deuteronomy, Deuteronomy, a word that means second law, it's kind of the second statement of the law of God that God had given to Moses in Exodus. But in Exodus chapter 24, you'll find an important text that helps us understand what is going on in the background of what Jesus is saying in Matthew chapter 5. In Deuteronomy chapter 24 verse 1, we're not going to spend a lot of time here, I'm just going to touch on it very superficially. Chapter 24 verse 1, we read this, "When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes

because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man's wife," so there's a long string of conditions here. Verse 3, "and the latter man," meaning her second husband, "hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife," now we've come full circle. Verse 4, "then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance." And kind of the key thing to see for the way the New Testament treats this passage is that whole matter of a certificate of divorce. There was paperwork, you might say, that was involved. When a man decided to send his wife away, he needed to give her a certificate of divorce that showed that she was genuinely separated from him, you might say.

Well, that was some 1,400 years before the time of Christ that this was revealed through Moses. By the time of Jesus, 1,400 years later, some of the Jews had developed a very loose attitude toward divorce, and they justified it based on that passage that we had just read in Deuteronomy 24. What God was actually doing through Moses was this. God never approved of divorce. It says in Malachi that God hates divorce, and he said in Genesis in the second chapter that, "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife," and Scripture goes on to say that what God has joined together, let no man separate. We'll see that in a moment in another place in Matthew. So God's plan for marriage was that it would be exclusive, that it would be monogamous, that it would be permanent. God intended the institution of marriage to be a singular devotion between one man and one woman, a biological man and a biological woman, and no others outside of that construct, but divorce was happening anyway, and so what God was doing in Deuteronomy 24 is he provided for this bill of divorcement to provide legal protection to the wife. And what the general sense of it is, is that the prohibition against remarriage from the first husband to the wife that he sent away and divorced, it provided a protection for the wife. It showed that she had been sent away and so she was pursuing remarriage based with an established legal precedent there, and it also kept the husband from walking in and out of the marriage. "I divorce you. No, now I bring you back. No, I divorce you. No, I bring you back." It set a boundary so that there would be a permanence to this and that the institution of marriage would not be treated in such a casual way. If you sent her away, you couldn't get her back after she had remarried.

Now flash forward to Jesus in the midst of the Pharisees a millennia and a half later. The Pharisees at this time had an internal dispute going over what the proper grounds for divorce could be. There was a rabbi named Shammai who justified divorce only in the cases of adultery. That was the conservative position. There was another rabbi named Hillel who said a man could divorce for any reason that he wanted to. So you're limited only to matters of divorce or you can divorce for whatever reason pleases you. You can see this reflected if you'll turn to Matthew chapter 19. Matthew chapter 19, as the Pharisees came to Jesus, trying to trip him up and test him yet once again. We read this in verse 3 of Matthew chapter 9. The "Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, 'Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?'" They're wanting to, you know, "You

take sides in the dispute that we have, this internal dispute that we have. Some of us say adultery only, some of us say any ground that the man desires." And look at what Jesus says in verse 4. He says, "He answered, 'Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.'" He starts by telling them, "You guys are missing the fundamental principle here to begin with. The very way you frame your question shows that you're missing the main point." God's view of marriage required intimacy and sacrificial love and permanence and exclusivity. You can't just jump over that and ignore that to get into the questions about how can I divorce my wife and not get into trouble. And so you start with what the righteousness of God requires. Do you see that? Jesus takes them back to what the righteousness of God requires rather than jumping right into the middle of what, in some ways, was an academic dispute between men that were treating the law very loosely.

And so when Jesus brings this forth and says, you know, what God has joined together, let no man separate, and how clear this is from the one flesh principle going all the way back to Genesis 2, you ask the question, how could the Pharisees ever have gotten to a point where some of them were saying you can divorce for any reason whatsoever? How could they do that? Well, the indecency that Deuteronomy 24 speaks of was interpreted very, very broadly, and they would interpret it according to the subjective views of the husband. If the husband didn't like the way the wife cooked his food, or if he found a more attractive woman, by these more liberal views of the Pharisees, he had legitimate grounds for divorce. From the husband's perspective, there was something indecent, there was something unacceptable in his wife, and because he felt that way inside, then he had legitimate grounds for divorce no matter how it affected the woman to whom he had been married. What they did was this, the exact same thing that we've seen played out in the course of our legal system and jurisprudence over the past several decades with no-fault divorce and the like. They trivialized divorce so that they could live any way that they pleased. There was no regard for the righteousness of God. There was no love even for the spouse, for the wife under those circumstances. They were content to go through the very technical, the very external, the very cold process that as long as you gave the wife her certificate of divorce, you could divorce and have no guilt before God, as if what God cared about was the paperwork of the matter as opposed to the righteousness of the reality of how the man lived with the woman that he had sworn and vowed that he would honor. What Jesus does, as he's done in the prior two sections on anger and lust, is he takes this external, limited view of the law and elevates to show what its true meaning is and gets to the heart of the matter, what the inner righteousness is that God required.

So, let's just stay here in chapter 19 for the moment. Jesus had said these things in verses 4 to 6, and they kept arguing with him, as the Pharisees loved to do. And the Pharisees said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" "Jesus, if what you're saying is true, then why is this provision in there for a certificate of divorce? What you're saying makes no sense. It is inconsistent with things." Jesus goes on and says in verse 8, "He said to them, 'It's because of your hardness

of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives." He's recognizing that there is a prevailing practice of divorce and there was at the time of Moses that needed some order brought to it so that it wouldn't be a chaotic free-for-all as people were disrupting their marriages. Divorce was never God's will. It was never God's plan but he allowed for it and he regulated it in recognition of the sinfulness of the human heart, the sinfulness of his people. He regulated it, but that did not mean that it had his blessing or approval on it at any point.

And so he goes on to say, and like I say, we'll look at this in the future, verse 9 he says, "I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." He brings it, he lassoes, you could say, he throws a lasso around the whole convoluted mess of the prevailing views of divorce, and he brings it all in and says, what matters is the righteousness of God, the plan of God for marriage. Yes, there is a limited exception in the case of adultery. The law of Moses provided for that. Adultery was grounds for the death penalty in many circumstances. And so Jesus brings it all back and says the point is the righteousness of God, the purpose of marriage. There's one limited exception here, but otherwise marriage is intended to be permanent and exclusive, monogamous, and an expression of lifelong sacrificial love from a man to a woman. That had no place or role in the scheme that the Pharisees had cooked up that just made it a matter of whether the man was happy or not, and if he was discontent in the marriage, then he could get out rather than practicing the righteousness that God required.

Now, let's take that principle of discontent and a loose view, a very loose and sinful view of marriage, let's take this into present day application, and much of what we're going to do for the rest of the evening, however long it goes, is going to be related to the personal, the practical application side of things. The Pharisees said that if you're unhappy in your marriage, you can get out, and it's easy, just do the paperwork. It's just like today. Just go see the lawyer, get the 99 cent, or \$99, no lawyer charges 99 cents for anything except his paper clips, get the cheap divorce and go on living your life. It's so parallel. But let's talk about it within the church. The Pharisees sympathized with and enabled men to act upon their dissatisfaction with their spouse but what we want to do here now is to kind of confront things in our own lives. The Pharisees could be very hard-hearted toward their wives but what I want to do now is just kind of lay out before you a little bit of spiritual Phariseeism that it can be like for Christians today within the church, and remembering, very important for you to remember, that I prefaced this whole message by saying that I'm here in sympathy with you, I'm here to support and help you, but also to give the unvarnished word of God to you.

Beloved, you are a spiritual Pharisee. You are practicing the wrong-headed ways that the Pharisees did in marriage in the first century. You're a spiritual Pharisee if you live your life and you are indifferent to the way your spouse feels or what your spouse says. If you can just ignore your spouse, ignore their input, set them aside, that's a spiritual Pharisee. That is not respecting the institution of marriage as God intended it to be. He intended this to be a lifelong covenant of love, of spiritual self-sacrifice from one to another, and to fall into that pattern of just ignoring your wife and what concerns her and what she's feeling, or your husband as the case may be, that's a spiritual Pharisee. That's not

honoring the institution of marriage as God created it. It's not loving your spouse in an Ephesians 5 way.

As I said last week when I was talking about Jesus on lust, you're a spiritual Pharisee violating the spirit of the marriage relationship if you have flirtatious relationships with others or if you work out your fantasies online somehow. That is a violation of the marriage covenant even if it's something that you only do in your heart or just with verbal playfulness. You know what you're doing when you do that. You know that you're flirting with boundaries and you're crossing boundaries in your heart, even when you do it in what appears to be a joking way. That's the spiritual Phariseeism that's at work.

For others, and perhaps this applies a bit more to the ladies in our midst than it does to the men, although it certainly can go both ways, you're a spiritual Pharisee if you punish your spouse with the silent treatment when they have upset you, or if you withhold intimacy from them because of an argument that you've had. All of that is a grave violation, my dear friends, of the marriage covenant, of what God intended marriage to be. To leave a father and mother, to cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh, to see in Ephesians chapter 5 that marriage is to be a highly exalted picture of the relationship between Jesus Christ and the church so that the wife submits to her husband as the church submits to Christ and the husband loves his wife and gives himself up for her as Christ loved the church and gave himself up to the church, even to the self-sacrificial point of death on a cross. That's the picture of marriage. That's the lofty standard that God has established for all of mankind and certainly for his people.

Now beloved, when you see it like that, step back, step back and compare that to what we opened with. "I have a right to be happy. I have a right to fulfillment. I have a right to have fun in my marriage," or whatever the case may be. Well, you know, what happened to "for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness or in health. Regardless of the external circumstances, I vow and I commit in the presence of God and these witnesses to give my heart and my love to you unconditionally till death do us part." You see, beloved, when you set forth these different things of indifference, of emotional flirtation, let alone the pursuit of pornography or an actual adulterous relationship, just pursuing that in your heart and in your imaginations is a violation of marriage. Punishing your spouse, where does this fit in with the forgiveness that Christ showers upon the church? All of a sudden, you start to realize that this institution of marriage is something sacred, something searching, something spiritual, something that's lived out in the sight of God, that when you start to understand that, it drives out, or it should drive out, the selfishness and the hard-heartedness that is too often the case for the way marriage is practiced. And all of a sudden, all of a sudden, when you go back to Matthew chapter 5, if you will, all of a sudden, you're reading Matthew 5 verse 31, "whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you..." all of a sudden you realize that there's something really serious going on here, and it's sobering and I want to say a few things about that as we go on. Our second point is going to be when marriage gets difficult. The second point is going to be when marriage gets difficult.

Now, we've just in very general terms set forth, just in very general terms we have set forth a picture of marriage as God intended it to be and in the loftiness of the principles and the loftiness of the intentions of God, you start to get the idea that marriage was intended to be a very special union that was designed to bring joy to the man and woman in the relationship. That's why Scripture talks about marriage as being a grace of life, the grace of life in 1 Peter chapter 3. But the reality is, alongside the lofty principles of marriage, the reality is that marriage often is difficult. Wow, no one seems shocked that I made that statement. That's great. You're tracking with me. The reality is, is that marriage is often difficult and I want to take a moment on a couple of illustrations here, one a reference that I'll get to in just a second, another by a true story from prior experience in ministry here to kind of illustrate all of this and to bring it out.

Our second point is going to be when marriage gets difficult and we've been dealing with the matter of easy divorce and how quickly sin enters in. The question is, what do we do when marriage gets difficult? That's the question that we're eventually getting to here this evening. But first of all, I want to describe a cartoon, of all things. I don't know if I've ever quoted a cartoon in a message, but it has a very serious and very helpful perspective on things that I'm going to contrast with something else. The cartoon, the title caption of it is, is "The Six Stages of Marriage," and it has a progression of drawings of a couple as they advance through life, okay? That's the general picture of it. And in the first panel of the cartoon, you see a picture of this happy couple on the beach. They're in their wedding clothes, they're in their twenties, and it's their wedding day, and they are saying to each other, "You're the greatest thing that ever happened to me." Then you come to the next panel and the couple is now sitting on the couch but their backs are turned to each other and they're sitting on the edge of the couch with a good deal of space between them and they're simultaneously saying, "You're not as great as I thought." And then the next panel, they're in their 40s, they're outside and they're in an argument and the man and the woman say to each other, "You need to be changed." And then the next panel, they're in their 50s, they're back at the beach and they're obviously older now and they simultaneously say, "You can't be changed." They've given up. Then in their 60s or in their 70s, the next panel shows them hugging in their older age. They're embracing one another and they say, "I accept you as you are." And then in the final panel, it's come full circle and the words are, "You're the greatest thing that ever happened to me." The sad part is, is it's the man sitting at his wife's grave and he's come full circle, sitting by her grave.

I appreciate that cartoon. I don't recommend the cartoon. It's usually, it can be okay. I don't read it on a regular basis. It can be very irreverent at times, but "Pearls Before Swine" is where that came from. I remember reading this cartoon years ago. I Googled for it as I was preparing for this and it popped up and I said, "Okay, this fits." What I like about it, what I like about it is that there is a life realism about what it says here and I want to contrast it, I want to contrast it with something from ministry. You know, and I've been in ministry a long time, and so, you know, just keep that in mind and don't assume that you have any idea who I'm talking about. Years ago in ministry, I was aware of a couple that projected this image of the happy, ideal family. You could see it in the social media pictures, the staged pictures with the kids and with the parents and on

vacation and all of that. What a great husband, what great kids, blah, blah, blah. And this was a professing Christian family of which I speak. Now, I will never forget I will never forget counseling with a different family member one brief time and that other family member referring to the couple said in passing, this was not the point that they came to me at all, this had nothing to do with why they came. They just said it in passing. They said, "I am so tired of family discussions that revolve around their marriage problems." And so you had the picture that was painted and portrayed and projected, and then you had the reality.

Now listen, beloved, I want to be really clear on why I'm saying these things. I'm saying these things to help you. And as we're talking about when marriage gets difficult, I want you to know my perspective on the marriage troubles that inevitably and certainly many of you have or that you have had in the past, maybe your spouse is gone and you know, all of that. It is not a problem to have problems. It's not a problem to have problems. It is a problem to actively pretend that you're someone that you're not. That's a problem. Because when you pretend that you're someone that you're not, and you go out of your way to create this image in the presence of others, 1) you're practicing deception against the commandment that you shall not lie, but beyond that, and for the sake of those of you in the room, the reason that I mention that and that I'm kind of animated against it is this, it's for your sake, not for anybody that doesn't even have any involvement with my ministry any longer. I realize and I know that people like that can be a great discouragement if you are having difficulties. "Why don't I have the great marriage they obviously have?" Well, and we all know this if we just stop and think about it for a moment. You know, social media is just like movie producers that show you only within the viewfinder what they want you to see and they leave out everything else in order to drive you to a conclusion about a particular image. What I detest about that and why I speak against that and why I think that Christians should not try to portray themselves in any particular fashion about their families on social media, is because of the discouraging, deadening effect it has on those who say, "My life's not like that. Obviously there's something wrong with me," and you withdraw and people don't feel the freedom to even get help because of the pressure that is brought to bear upon their lives and upon their minds by people who don't even have the reality that they pretend to have. That's what I really object to. I object to the deception of it. I object to the hypocrisy of it. And I object and as a pastor I have a duty before God to protect the flock from such false influences discouraging them in their marriage and in their walk with Christ. I'm not going to have anything to do with that or at least I'm going to speak against it when I can as I can here tonight.

That's the problem and think about it, beloved. I take it as a given that generally speaking, generally speaking, Christians tend to act that way, and I think it's a sad state of affairs when a comic strip is more honest about the nature of life and the nature of marriage than many if not most Christians are. That ain't right. That's not the way it should be. And so we want to keep it real here tonight in the time that we have left. I suppose I should say this is not news. I've said this in the past, Nancy and I have gone through some challenging times in our marriage. The early years of our marriage in particular were difficult. I used to joke and say it was all her fault. I don't do that anymore. This is not a

joking matter. The truth is that I've been the source of those problems with my bad attitudes and my sullen disposition in private and things like that. And that's more than enough about it. This isn't about me or my marriage or anything like that. But just enough for you to see that I'm not trying to play the game of projecting things myself. I'm a man standing before you in need of grace, having received much grace from God and much grace from my wife over the course of 36 years of marriage next month. 36 years. And so I'm not here to play the image game with you as we speak here. I'm just here to help you and to give you some simple guidance on when marriage gets difficult. That's our second point here for this evening. I suppose I should say one other thing before we move on to that, is that I'm not presupposing that every one of you have difficulties in your marriage. I'm not assuming anything one way or the other about your marriage relationship or your future marriage relationship. I'm not assuming anything here. I'm just acknowledging what is the reality is that marriage is often difficult and so, you know, let's keep it real and deal with it from that perspective.

Now here's a point that I want you to remember, to write down if you're taking notes or at least try to remember it for 30 minutes after the message is over, and then I'll remind you another time: marriage troubles, marriage difficulties, even between two Christians, marriage difficulties, marriage troubles, even between two Christians, they are to be expected. They are to be expected, beloved, and that is easy to prove from the Bible itself. That is easy to prove from the Bible itself. I spent five minutes mentally going through the Bible in just a quick, fly-through mental activity, thinking about marriage and marriage difficulties in Scripture. Without trying, without even trying, I came up with 12 different books of the Bible. I'm not saying this is all of them. I just came up with six Old Testament books and six New Testament books that deal with marriage difficulties or describe marriage difficulties in narrative texts without even trying. And so in the Old Testament you could go to Genesis, Deuteronomy, you could go to Judges and think about Samson and his terrible married life. You could go to the book of Proverbs which talks about living with a contentious woman. You can go to the book of Hosea and read about the prophet who had an adulterous wife. You go to the New Testament and the precepts of the New Testament and you see marriage difficulties described or aspects of marriage difficulties described in 1 Corinthians 7, Ephesians 5 we already alluded to, book of Colossians chapter 3, 1 Peter chapter 3. Titus chapter 2 speaks about older women teaching younger women how to love their husbands and to love their children. The book of Hebrews talks about how the marriage bed is to be kept undefiled.

Beloved, maybe the question's never occurred to you. Why, why does the New Testament talk about marriage so much and seem to be addressing marriage issues so often? It's because marriage gets difficult. It's because marriage troubles are to be expected. It's because even in the apostolic era, people in the church were having difficulties with their marriage, difficulties with sexual purity, and therefore God in his grace through the apostles is giving them instruction on how to have a more sanctified approach to marriage. You'll notice I left out the gospels where Jesus talks about marriage so often in that. You know, you could easily get, I'm sure you could easily get to half of the Bible in one way or another addressing, half of the books of the Bible in one way or another addressing marriage difficulties.

Now, if I'm you, and I'm in a difficult marriage, married to another Christian, married to a non-Christian, all of a sudden the simple knowledge that Scripture speaks honestly to this is a great encouragement to me. I see that God has anticipated it in advance. God deals with reality in the Scriptures. The Bible speaks to us as we really are rather than to what we're not and it comes alongside us in our problems and shows us a way forward. And so marriage troubles are to be expected and what do you do when marriage gets difficult? I'm gonna go quickly through five quick points.

Let me start with a word of encouragement. If marriage has brought you sorrow and hurt, beloved, all is not lost. All is not lost. Remember your Lord. Remember what Scripture says about Christ. In Hebrews 4, we read, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw nearer to the throne of grace that you may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." We find that in our marriage difficulties that the throne of grace is open 24/7 to us, and that the one who sits on that throne of grace sympathizes with us, and that you can come to him and say, "Lord, this spouse is impossible." Or, "Lord, I have hurt and violated my spouse. I have not been the spouse I needed to be." Whether you recognize that you're the issue or you think your spouse is the issue, you can go to him with all of that, pour out your heart before him, and find grace to help you in the midst of the difficulty. I find that very encouraging and I'll say more about relationships within the church in just a moment, I guess.

What do you find when you come to Christ? What do you find when you turn to Christ and in his word? I'm just going to quickly give you five things here and just remind you that you can ask me and I'll be happy to talk about this more. I just need to hear from you if that would be meaningful to you.

First of all, what do you find when you turn to Christ in his word about this? Well, number one's kind of a hard one but Scripture will remind you that you are also a sinner in this season of life and in this difficulty. It's not just your spouse that is the sinner. Scripture says in James 3:2 we all stumble in many ways, and so my dear brother, my dear sister, let me encourage you in this way with this word of counsel and encouragement: temper, restrain your sense of entitlement, restrain your sense of frustration with a little bit of humility. Say, you know, at this point I'm not trying to talk you out of how bad your spouse is or how bad the problem is. I'm not trying to talk you out of that at all. All I'm saying is just step back for a moment, take a deep breath and say, "You know what, I'm a sinner here too. I may not see how my sin has contributed to the problem. I may think it's all his fault, but Scripture tells me that I stumble also. Maybe there's something that I've done wrong over the course of our relationship. Maybe I've contributed to this problem in a way that I don't recognize." And, you know, as Jesus says elsewhere, you know, you take out the log that's in your own eye before you address the speck that's in your spouse's eye. That's always a good place to start. That's a very broad principle. You're a sinner too, not just your spouse.

Now secondly, when marriage gets difficult, you remember that you're a sinner also. Secondly, you should remember this, is that in one way or another, God himself has appointed this season for you. God has appointed this season for you. God even ordained that wicked men would crucify his Son, as we read in Acts chapter 2, verse 23. God uses all things to accomplish his purpose. The Bible says in Ephesians chapter 1 that he works all things after the counsel of his own will. And so what that means is there is a purpose from God for you in this life with your difficult spouse, there is a purpose in it even if you cannot feel it or you cannot see it. You can't begin to comprehend how anything good would come out of this, the truth of the matter is, is that God has sovereign purposes in everything that happens to you and if a difficult marriage is part of your life right now, God has a purpose in that for you that will prove to be good in the end.

Now thirdly, when marriage gets difficult, here's where church relationships come in a bit and I'm not going to apologize for what I have to say here. Thirdly, be discerning in the counsel that you seek. Be discerning in the counsel you seek. I could state it a different way: be careful about who you talk about your marriage difficulties with, even in the church, especially within the church. Now we all have a tendency, we prefer people who tell us what we want to hear rather than people who tell us things that don't necessarily agree with us. It's one of my greatest weaknesses. But in your season of difficult marriage, beloved, you need someone who will tell you the truth, not someone who exacerbates the issue by telling you how right you are and what a bad spouse you must have and aren't you the victim here. You need someone who will speak truth to you even if it hurts. Proverbs 27 verse 6 says faithful are the wounds of a friend. And so, beloved, now we're getting down to the real brass tacks and perhaps in a way that applies even more to the younger couples in our midst than to the older ones. Remember the point here is be discerning in the counsel you seek. Do not go to the so-called social media influencers for counsel on what to do. They're just telling you what you want to hear. They're telling you that which will get them clicks and subscribers and all of that. Don't go to them, and even more, don't be one of them. Don't be one of them. You know, if you're in your 20s or 30s, you've got nothing to say, really, from your experience in marriage and child-rearing to help other people. If your family is still young, you don't know what lies ahead. You don't know what's going to happen in your family. You don't know how your kids are going to turn out.

I read something, didn't document the source of it, but it was along these lines. This is not a direct quote, but it's talking about pastors. And the young pastor will have a message titled, "Six Rules for a Happy Marriage." You know, keep these rules and your marriage will be happy. Then he gets midway through his ministry and he says "Some Guiding Principles for Your Marriage." And then by the end of his ministry you get more to where I'm at, "Well, here's a couple of suggestions that might work for you." The idea is life has a way of humbling you and if you haven't been humbled yet in life by your marriage or by your children, maybe it's time for you to stay quiet rather than to assume that you've got all the answers.

Let me go further. Speaking within the room here, I'm often mindful of the people outside our walls listen to our messages sometimes, but let me speak within the room here, and

especially to those of you newer to our church, those of you younger, this is so very important. You should not assume that everyone who attends Truth Community Church is wise. You should not assume that everyone who attends Truth Community Church is even trustworthy. We have a church that's just large enough that a lot of people come and go, and we don't really know them all that well. We don't know everybody really well. There are different levels of relationships and maybe you get connected with somebody who seems friendly and knowledgeable, but just be careful. Just be careful about that when you don't really know. You can always come to the elders and say, "You know, I'd like somebody to talk to. Who do you recommend that I talk to?" We have a bit of an idea of who's trustworthy. We have people that we gladly refer others to say, "You can talk to this person and be confident in what they say," and let us help you rather than just being a little bit too trusting and undiscerning and just assuming because someone sits next to you that they're going to be a capable counselor for you. That may not be the case at all.

Let me say this too. You ask them, "Are you a member here? How long have you been here? You're not a member? Why is it that you're avoiding membership? Why have you not become a member?" Because, you know, in a church that emphasizes membership, for someone to be at the church for a period of time and consciously avoiding it, I'm not talking about people who are new, still getting acquainted. I'm talking about those who consciously distance themselves, sometimes with criticisms of the church, and yet keep coming. Those are people to stay away from. If they aren't settled in their spiritual convictions enough to commit to a local church, beloved, they are not going to help you be settled in your marriage. So just be careful. Now look, I know that what I just said probably will manage to offend a few people, but I don't care about that. I don't care about offending people by saying something, first of all, that's true, and I also don't care about offending someone if it will have the effect that it will protect you from ungodly counsel and ungodly influences that you don't recognize at first glance. I'd rather have them mad at me than destroying you.

So let your elders guide you to someone trustworthy. Scripture says the elders are there to watch over your soul. We're happy to do that. So be discerning in the counsel that you seek. Fourthly, this season of difficulty in your marriage, beloved, as grinding and difficult and as much as it may seem like there's no way forward, this season of difficulty in your marriage is not more than you can handle. It is not more than you can handle. God measures his trials out to you very carefully. He has a scale, so to speak, I'm using a metaphor here, and he measures out every grain of sand that contributes to the weight of your trial, and he knows it precisely. He knows you better than you know yourself, and he measures all of that out, and through it all he says, "My grace is sufficient for you," 2 Corinthians 12. And sometimes the effect, if not the actual ultimate intent of an extended difficulty in your message is simply to humble you and to teach you to treasure Christ as your ultimate sense of love and source of love and fulfillment, and to learn to lean on him and to drive out some of the pride that's in your heart. You know, it's kind of hard to carry yourself with a proud, boastful attitude when you know that at home you've got a marriage that you're not able to work it out. That's humbling. That's healthy in a long-term spiritual perspective.

Fifthly, finally, time got away from me again. Imagine that. God will bring you through this season to a place of blessing. God will bring you through this season. He will bring you through this difficult message. [laughter] Okay, yeah, it's been a difficult message, but you know that's not what I meant. This difficult marriage and he'll bring you through this difficult message to a place of blessing. The plan of Christ is always to transform your sorrows into ultimate blessing for you. In 2 Corinthians 4 we read momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. This affliction that your marriage has brought to you for a time, it's not permanent, it's not eternal. God's using it to shape you, to sanctify you, and to prepare you for blessing that you would otherwise have missed in the end.

So, to bring all of this down to an immediate landing on the runway, what do you do when marriage gets difficult? You remember Christ and you keep your eyes on the prize. We'll leave it there for tonight.

Let's bow in prayer.

*Gracious Father, there are precious, precious men and women before you, some experienced in marriage, some knowing joy and very little difficulty in their marriage. Father, we thank you for that and for the gift of the grace of life that you've given to them. Others long for marriage. It's withheld from them. Some are on the brink of marriage. Father, be gracious to them in your own way. And for those that are in the middle and those that know what seasons of difficulty in marriage are like, would you pour out your grace, your comfort, your generous kindness to them, to strengthen their hearts, to know that they are not alone first of all, that you are with us always even to the end of the age, to let them know that even in the church, within the people of God, there are others walking through difficulty even if they don't know it for themselves, and let them find comfort and a sense of closer intimacy with you as you work out your will in their lives through the institution of marriage that you appointed. Thank you for this time. May it be an encouragement and a protection for many. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.*

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