

DIVORCE
February 18, 2001
Malachi 2:13-16
Dr. JERRY NELSON

Today the topic of the sermon is divorce.

What I have to say today is difficult.

It is difficult because I know some of you have gone through divorce and others of you going through it now or thinking of it.

I believe, and you know, that very few arrive at such a decision easily.

It is painful to say the least and it is frightening – frightening for you and frightening for your children.

I do not wish to cause you more pain than you are already experiencing but I must speak to this important issue.

It doesn't take a social scientist to see that many of the children and youth of this country are in trouble.

Close to 1/3 are being raised by only one birth parent.

A significant and growing percentage are economically deprived.

Half a million babies are born each year to teenage girls ill prepared to assume the responsibilities of parenthood.

Another half million babies each year are killed in their teenage mothers wombs.

That means one million young men each year have likewise entered into a relationship for which they are not prepared.

Yes, every generation has decried the condition of its youth, but no one would disagree that a higher percentage of our children than ever are in danger.

Our young people are confused - confused about values.

In times past some youth broke the rules.

Today they don't know what the rules are.

And largely that is because the adults in their lives won't tell them what the rules are or won't model those rules even if they do.

Where would you expect to read quotes such as the following:

"Parent's bear the primary responsibility for...providing moral guidance and direction" (for their children.).

"Children do best when they have the personal involvement and material support of a father and a mother and when both parents fulfill their responsibility to be loving providers.

"The family is and should remain society's primary institution for bringing children into the world and for supporting their growth and development throughout childhood. (P XIX Beyond Rhetoric)

No, these was not from a Focus on the Family newsletter or a Christian book on parenting.

These quotes are from the report of the National Commission on Children appointed some years ago by the President and Congress of the United States and chaired by Senator John D. Rockefeller IV.

NOW even the social engineers of our age recognize the trouble we're in.

That same report indicated that children from single-parent families are 2 to 3 times more likely to suffer from developmental, learning or behavioral problems. (p31)

They wrote that 43% of mother-only families are poor compared to only 7% of two parent families. (p 24)

Only 36% of black households are headed by a married couple.
(p 1NR Family in America Feb 92)

Barbara Whitehead reported that the scientific evidence is overwhelming: The decline of the two biological parent family is extracting a horrific toll on our nation's children (C.T. May 17, 1993 p 20)

This does not mean every single parent is failing or that every child of a single parent family is doomed - there are many single parents who by God's grace are succeeding but that does not mitigate the growing crisis in our land.

The government's commission on children reports that 84,000 children each month experience the divorce of their parents.

In fact, the report admits, divorce and separation are the major causes of single parenthood in the U.S.

I believe **no one factor is contributing more devastatingly** to the decline of the family in America **than divorce**.

Divorce is an assault on our children's physical, psychological and spiritual welfare.

It is a killer of the very context in which human relationships (adult as well as children) are best nurtured to maturity and fruitfulness.

And it is a blight on the country - causing its very soul to wither.

Please hear me, this message is to the perpetrators of divorce not to the victims either the spouses or the children.

In the magazine Psychology Today (June 1993) there was a lengthy article on the changing American family.

The author wrote that until the 1950s the dominant family form in America was what he calls the Institutional Family.

This family was based on a network of extended family members, was expected to produce economically and the marriage was seen as a partnership even more importantly than as a romantic relationship.

Family loyalty and traditions were very important and the highest value was responsibility.

But by the 1950s a new kind of family was emerging. This was the Psychological Family.

This family was more mobile and thus less tied to the extended family. It was more private and it revolved around the goals of the individual members.

The basis for continuing a marriage was no longer responsibility but mutual attraction.

The number one value of this new family was satisfaction.

But between 1966 and 1974 this Psychological Family came apart, as personal freedom and self-actualization became the most important values in life.

The late 60s saw a spate of books telling us that self-fulfillment, and individual satisfaction were everyone's right.

By the early 70s authors were telling us, in books such as The Open Marriage, we should be rid of the old moralistic notions of marriage and enter into the exciting new world of unlimited sexual freedom and marital intimacy.

The problem is it didn't work. Spouses weren't so tolerant and with every member of the family watching out for Number One - the family came apart.

Following that came a new flurry of books telling us that divorce was the ultimate growth experience and that children would actually benefit from it.

The force driving the whole change in the culture was the acceptance of personal satisfaction as a higher value than responsibility.

This is not the first time a people has succumbed to that lie.

It happened 2500 years ago in Israel as well.

Please look with me at Malachi 2

READ Malachi 2:13-16

In Malachi 2:13 we find that the people of God are discouraged.

They are powerless in the face of their foreign governors and their fields and lives are not as fruitful as they expected.

Something is clearly wrong - God isn't blessing them like they expected.

They cry out to God in their prayers and they bring their offerings in worship but sense they are out of touch with God - that he doesn't hear them or respond.

They go through all the motions of worship and living out their lives but it's without joy.

Verse 14. They ask, "Why? What's wrong?"

Malachi then tells them what's wrong!

"It is because the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant."

You are divorcing each other - that is what's wrong!

You are not experiencing the blessing of God because you are sabotaging yourselves.

As a people, divorce is ever more common.

The very family that ought to provide for the physical and emotional security of its members is being torn apart.

In verses 14 and 15 we see two reasons why God reacts so strongly to divorce:

I. The first of them, in v 14, is that **by divorcing you are breaking a covenant.**

When you study the Scriptures you discover that God's plan for people through all the ages is built on COVENANTS.

These covenants are agreements- covenant-agreements between God and people and covenant-agreements between people and other people such as the marriage covenant.

Our spiritual lives are based on God's covenant with us.

The New Covenant (New Testament) is that God will forgive our sins based on Jesus' death in our place.

Our response must be one of obedient faith in the person and work of Christ.

Not only our spiritual lives but our social lives as well are built on covenants:

Government is built on a covenant.

God established an agreement between the government and the people.

The governors had responsibilities and the governed had responsibilities.

Marriage likewise is built on a covenant.

In Genesis 2, Moses, writing at God's instruction, describes marriage as a person leaving his parents and joining himself to his wife and the two becoming one.

Implied throughout is the covenant-agreement the two make to each other.

In fact in Proverbs 2:17 marriage is specifically called a covenant made before God.

And in Ezekial 16:8 marriage used as an analogy is spoken of as a solemn oath by which two people enter into a covenant.

Incidentally, it is for this reason that it is wrong for two people to just decide to live together.

There are people who wonder what the big deal is about a wedding. After all if they love each other why can't they just move in together?

The "big deal" is the covenant!

A covenant is a very specific and intentional commitment accompanied by symbols of that covenant and attested by witnesses.

It is not a marriage (and it is immoral sex) if there is not the formal entering of a covenant-agreement.

It is interesting that for at least 4000 years some of the accouterments of the marriage covenant making have remained the same:

In Genesis 29 there was a feast as part of the marriage

In Psa 45 there is reference to the bridesmaids

In Gen 24 the veil is spoken of and in Isa 61 there is reference to the special wedding clothing.

And in Jeremiah 7 there is a wedding procession through the streets.

But most importantly there has always been the spoken taking of the oath, the vows of the covenant.

Another characteristic of a covenant is that it is unalterable and permanent. God intended that the covenants we make with him and with each other be kept.

Our God is a COVENANT making and COVENANT keeping God.

Our God has called us to make the proper covenants and to keep them.

To break a covenant is despicable in God's eyes.

To break one covenant is to treat all covenants as less valuable.

For millions in a culture to disregard their oaths, their vows, is to create a climate in which all vows are cheapened.

Malachi gives us a sense of the injustice, unfairness and just downright treachery of breaking the covenant of marriage:

He describes the wife in three ways (it could be applied to the husband as well):

She is the wife of your youth,
she is your partner,
and she is the wife of your marriage covenant.

One Puritan writer summarizes it very crisply:

She whom you have wronged was the companion of your earlier and brighter days, when in the bloom of her young beauty she left her father's house and shared your early struggles, and rejoiced in your later success; who walked arm in arm with you along the pilgrimage of life, cheering you in its trials by her gentle ministry; and now, when the bloom of her youth has faded and the friends of her youth have gone, when her father and mother whom she left for you are in the grave, then you cruelly cast her off as a worn-out, worthless thing and insult her holiest affections by putting another in her place. (Kaiser p 465)

God declares that he hates divorce - it is the breaking of a covenant, which you have made with another human being, and God was one of the witnesses to it.

Covenant breaking is a serious matter to God - it is for that reason, Malachi writes, that your prayers are not heard and your worship is unacceptable.

II. But there is another reason why God hates divorce:

V 15. Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring."

This is admittedly a hard verse to interpret because it is first of all a hard verse to translate. The Hebrew is quite difficult.

But Hebrew scholars indicate that the sense given in the NIV translation is probably closest to the meaning.

And certainly the meaning given here is taught elsewhere in the Scriptures.

The meaning would go something like this:

"By divorcing your spouse you are destroying and you are treating as worthless two primary means God has established by which he will build his kingdom."

Those two primary means are Godly parents and a Godly marriage.

The fifth commandment is "honor your father and your mother".

When that command is coupled with the many other instructions throughout the Old and New Testaments, it is clear that God ordained the family, a mother and a father, to be the school where God's way of life is learned and practiced.

God designed marriage (one man and one woman who are following Him) to be the nurturing environment in which children (the parents' off-spring) would learn of God.

I think it is safe to say that more people come to saving-faith in Christ through the godly influence of their parents than by any other single means - maybe than by all other means put together.

When divorce occurs, it does more than change people's addresses. It destroys the best, the God-ordained, nursery for young spiritual life.

One psychologist writing of divorce said this about the effect on children: "Today half of all marriages end in divorce.

People who cohabit, just live together, are more likely to divorce, not less.

"Most divorced people remarry. More second marriages end in divorce than first marriages. And more third marriages end in divorce than second

marriages. More and more children are living in single-parent, stepparent and cohabiting homes.

While there are many notable exceptions, children of marriages that end in divorce, and children of single mothers are more likely to be poor and stay poor, to be dependent on welfare, essentially to be deserted by their fathers both financially and relationally, to fail to achieve academically, to get pregnant, abuse drugs and alcohol, to get in trouble with the law, and to be sexually and physically abused.

Children in stepfamilies are generally worse off than kids in single parent homes. They are more likely to be sexually or physically abused. They are less likely to feel a part of a family. Stepparents invest less rather than more time in their kids.

In perhaps the most tragic irony, many have difficulty forming lasting love relationships and are more likely to get divorced themselves." (CT May 17, 1993, p 20)

Is that environment one in which Children can best come to know, trust and love God?

Is it any wonder God hates divorce?

I said divorce corrupts **two** primary means by which God has chosen to build his kingdom: the first was godly parents and **the second is a godly marriage.**

When the Apostle Paul spoke of marriage to the Ephesians he made reference to the same Genesis text that I think is alluded to here in Malachi 2:15.

In marriage the two become one.

The Apostle Paul uses the marriage analogy to describe the Christ-Church relationship.

Godly permanent marriages are witnesses to those around of the relationship God desires with each of us - an enduring relationship of love.

That is not far-fetched.

Jesus in John 17 said that our unity, our enduring love for each other is the strongest testimony to the world around us that Jesus has come from the Father.

Certainly, marriage, the most intimate of relationships should best reflect that unity that demonstrates God's life-changing power.

Divorce says to a watching world, there is no more love and unity there than what we experience.

Divorce corrupts the witness of a godly marriage.

Is it any wonder God hates divorce?

Even the secular psychologists and sociologists recognize that what has happened in our culture is a value shift.

We have moved from being a people who value **responsibility most** to a people who value personal and **immediate satisfaction most**.

Even in the Church, as in Israel of old, we have made the same shift.

The dominant value is **immediate personal happiness**.

Obedience to God,
trust in the ultimate justice of God,
and faithfulness to the covenants we make, are secondary to our
"rights",
 what we "deserve",
 our "freedom",
 and our limited perception of what is "best" for us.

Malachi ends this warning with a call to "stop it" - stop breaking faith.

Guard yourself in your spirit or "watch out for your life" and stop divorcing one another.

Now I realize Malachi's teaching and warning are not very popular today.

He doesn't seem to realize that we are not supposed to make people feel guilty.

You see one of the highest virtues in our culture is the uncritical acceptance of whatever people want to think or do.

They alone are the judge of whether their action is right or wrong.

To suggest that there are absolutes by which decisions are made, even hard, painful, life-long decisions is considered impossible, impractical, and opposed to human freedom.

But Malachi comes along and says, "stop it" - don't divorce and if you do "shame" on you.

The world wants nothing to do with shame or guilt - they don't want to hear it because the world doesn't know what to do with it.

And because they don't know how to handle it they try to pretend guilt and shame don't exist.

But it does exist and God knows how to handle it:

If we have sinned, God calls us to repentance and confession.

And if we confess our sin He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Even the sin of covenant breaking is pardoned by our gracious God.

What then do we do in the light of God's teaching on divorce?

First of all we pray for, encourage and support those who are the victims of divorce.

The people of God, the church, more than any others, bear the responsibility to help those who have been treated unjustly through divorce

I am so grateful for Pastor Fritz Dale and Dr. Chris Miller and the many single and married people who provide some of the best help in this city for those who have experienced divorce.

I'm thankful for our pastors Craig Steiner and Dan Leubcke and Kristen Kirkham and the other youth leaders who day by day meet with, counsel, and support the students whose parents have divorced or are divorcing.

Secondly, we must teach and model for our children and each other the inviolability of marriage.

Each married couple bears responsibility not only for their children and grandchildren but for every other person in the community - Yes, we either build or tear down the concept of covenant keeping by our conduct.

Your children are confronted by divorce all the time.

Talk about it, assure them of the security of their home.

Help them see that strain, difficulty, and problems in marriage don't mean divorce but mean faithful hard work.

Thirdly, we must help those who are married.

I believe the most important thing we do for marriages in this church is the weekly teaching of God's Word in sermons, Sunday School, bible Studies and through the encouraging of people in their own study of the Bible.

The strongest foundation of an enduring marriage covenant is one or two people who are personally committed to obedience to Jesus Christ.

But in addition to the regular teaching of the Bible there needs to be godly counsel available – godly counsel from godly, mature Christians.

Currently we use a team of an overseeing Pastor, a counselor if needed, a mentoring couple and prayer partners.

There needs to be special emphases on marriage in our Adult Congregations and Growth Groups.

I thank God for the great teaching and good response in our Cornerstone Class on this subject just recently and for the plans in the Home Improvement, Body Builders and Young Families.

This is all happening to some degree in our church but I look forward to what our Family Ministries Task Force is planning for the months to come.

The members of that Task Force are: Ed and Sue Spitzlberger, Terry and Nancy Kipp, Mark and Melissa Whaley, Bob and Claire Knapp, Chris and Carissa Hart, and Pastor Fritz Dale.

Fourthly, we must help those who are now struggling with the temptation to divorce.

Some of you are in very difficult marriages - divorce is not only tempting it seems like the only reasonable solution.

I agree there are exceptions to "no divorce". God specifically says that when your spouse breaks the covenant by adultery or by desertion you are not bound by the covenant any longer.

Incidentally I do believe God gives you the freedom to reestablish a covenant in a new marriage, if you choose.

But with those exceptions in mind, I do believe God has forbidden us from breaking the marriage covenant.

Let me quickly say I do not mean that a man or a woman is thereby required to stay in a situation dangerous to him or her or the children.

While divorce may not be appropriate, separation for safety sake is certainly called for.

I do not say any of this lightly.

I have sat with hundreds of people (some of you) and my heart has broken as I have heard of the pain through which you are living day after day and the seeming impossibility of your situations.

But even as I hear the pain, I know that my God loves you more deeply than I ever could and he has said to trust him, to believe him that enduring obedience will bring a more lasting joy and satisfaction than the temporary respite of divorce.

And what we must offer to you is the day by day support of prayer, listening and encouragement - standing with you through those struggling hours. Please let us help.

We must all decide to stand with each other and hold each other accountable for the covenants we have made.

Dr. James Dobson's father wrote the following letter to his fiancée just before their wedding.

(Illy 949 on Divorce)

“I want you to understand and be fully aware of my feelings concerning the marriage covenant which we are about to enter. I have been taught at my mother's knee and in harmony with the word of God that the marriage vows are inviolable, and by entering them I am binding myself for life. The idea of estrangement from you through divorce will never at any time be permitted to enter my thinking. I'm not naive in this. On the contrary, I'm fully aware of the possibility, unlikely as it now appears, that mutual incompatibility or other unforeseen circumstances could result in extreme mental suffering. If such becomes the case, I am resolved for my part to accept it as a consequence of the commitment I am now making, and to bear it, if necessary, to the end of our lives together.

Guard yourself in your spirit and do not break faith!