

The Sanctity of Marriage

(Sermon online from Focus on the Family)
July 7, 2004

This sermon addresses the sanctity of marriage and God's purpose for it. The objective is in no way intended to be critical of those who don't have perfect marital relationships. None of us have achieved that. This is about God's *ideal*.

Though all of us fall woefully short of God's ideal for marriage, we should nevertheless be striving toward it. Many people have experienced the pain of a broken marriage, possibly for reasons beyond their control. This is not intended to add to that pain. Many people are doing a heroic job of single parenting, and should be applauded for their courageous efforts.

Nor is the intention of this sermon to alienate those who are not married. The Scriptures are very clear that there is a season for singleness, and in some cases, God has gifted individuals for singlehood.

The objective is simply to encourage congregations about God's purpose and design for marriage and why we, as the church, must strive to uphold His ideal for this foundational and divine institution.

I. Marriage in Decline

Rutgers sociologists Dr. David Popenoe and Dr. Barbara Defoe Whitehead recently released a report on marriage titled, "The State of Our Unions -- The Social Health of Marriage in America." Here is how they summarize their findings:

"Key social indicators suggest a substantial weakening of the institution of marriage. Americans have become less likely to marry. When they do marry, their marriages are less happy. And married couples face a high likelihood of divorce. Over the past four decades, marriage has declined as the first living together experience for couples and as a status of parenthood. Unmarried cohabitation and unwed births have grown enormously, and so has the percentage of children who grow up in fragile families."¹

A. *The Statistics*

- The number of cohabiting couples has increased 865 percent since 1960, a number that recently topped the 4 million mark.²

- The percentage of children living in single-parent families has risen from 9 percent in 1960 to 28 percent in 1998. Thirty-five percent of children under 18 years old now live apart from their biological fathers. ³
- More than 40 percent of first-time mothers, ages 15-29, are not married. ⁴

B. *These aren't simply dry statistics. Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family recently wrote:*

"Behind these numbers are millions of hurting people -- husbands, wives and children for whom everything stable and predictable has shattered. They represent the pain of loving wives who committed themselves wholly and unreservedly to men who later rejected them for other lovers. They speak of husbands who are struggling to raise their kids alone because their wives decided they didn't want to be mothers anymore. And, of course, they reflect the pain of children who cry themselves to sleep at night because they can hear their parents at each other's throats." ⁵

C. *The numbers are virtually the same for Christians and non-Christians.*

The Barna Research Group released a poll showing that among those identified as born-again Christians, 27% have previously been divorced, compared to 24% among adults who are not born again. ⁶

II. *What is happening to marriage?*

One more quote from the Rutgers study gets to the heart of the problem. Their research shows that:

"As an institution, marriage has lost much of its legal, religious and social meaning and authority. **It has dwindled to a couples relationship, mainly designed for the sexual and emotional gratification of each adult.**"⁷

A. *This statement reveals two things.*

1. The primary goal in relationships has become personal gratification. When people evaluate a relationship, the first thing they often ask is, "What's in it for me? Will all of my needs be met?" If the relationship they are currently in no longer meets their personal needs, they move on to one that will.
2. Sexual and emotional gratification, which in the past was culturally reserved for married couples, is now available in abundance outside of marriage. As a result, marriage is seen as superfluous.

Marriage is no longer viewed as sacred or even special. It is merely another way for people to "couple," a way of being sexually and emotionally gratified, having no more moral or social significance than two people living together or casual sexual relationships. If that's all there is to marriage, then why bother?

B. *And indeed, more and more people are not bothering with it.*

1. Many people have come to the conclusion: "What's the point of marriage? If I can have a decent relationship, isn't that all that matters? What difference does it make whether I've signed a sheet of paper and gone through a ceremony?" As one writer put it, many people view the idea of marriage as "a form of monogamous notarized dating with police approval."⁸
2. A number of elites in the media and academia are arguing that it's time we drop the idea all together. In a recent national news article, one psychologist argued that marriage has become outdated. She said, "It's unrealistic to expect couples to balance modern work demands and desires for personal happiness against a life-long mandate to be faithful lovers, diligent parents and tireless helpmates."⁹
3. Thanks to Hollywood characters like Murphy Brown, and real-life characters like Madonna and Rosie O'Donnell who have purposely chosen and celebrate the "virtues" of single motherhood, married motherhood is no longer viewed as the ideal environment for raising children.

III. Why Marriage?

That is the question of the day. Why should we hang on to and protect the institution of marriage? Why is it important for a man and a woman to covenant together in matrimony? For the answer, we have to go back to the beginning and discover what God's "point" is with marriage.

A. Read Genesis 2:18-25.

1. God's purpose for marriage is for male/female companionship. From God's perspective, everything was good *except for Adam's being alone*. Adam's loneliness was more than not having others around. His "aleness" was a result of having no one around that was suitable for him. There was no one to complement him, and by that we mean everything from biological to complex psychological and spiritual complementation. He was a sole piece of a puzzle, designed for another piece where none existed. After seeing Eve, the female, Adam understood this profound truth. He realized God made male for female, "together she and I are one bone, one flesh," -- in essence, one being.
2. Marriage between a man and a woman is God's idea. In this passage we discover that husband and wife in marriage is the very first institution that God created. It is the primary institution of the society God created.
3. God designed marriage between a man and a woman to be the first system of interdependent human relationships.
4. God designed the husband and wife relationship as the primary relationship of the family.

B. It is this "oneness" that is the primary purpose in marriage. Pursuing God's design for marriage is essential in fulfilling God's purposes for mankind.

1. God's design for marriage is for a man and a woman, in all their masculine and feminine differences, to come together and become "one." Not just "one flesh" in the sense of the physical, sexual union, but more than that. The oneness that occurs during intercourse is a beautiful,

physical illustration of God's intention for the rest of their relationship: Intimate oneness.

2. Married individuals are not carbon copies of each other, but two people who are both being transformed into the image of Christ. The more each individual is transformed into the image of Christ, the more they move toward oneness. God's design is that by moving toward oneness with your spouse, you learn to love, you mature, and you develop as a human in a way that no other relationship is capable of producing. Put simply, marriage makes us more like God wants us to be.
3. This "oneness" is a profoundly unique thing that is strengthened by years of shared experiences, trials, triumphs, challenges, and victories. It's why grandpa can start a sentence and grandma can finish it. It's why when she cries he tastes the salt. It's her knowing what's wrong without his speaking a word. It's two lives becoming one. It takes time, effort, sweat and tenacity. But the rewards are like none other on earth.

IV. God's purpose in "two" becoming "one."

A. Genesis 1:26-27. *To mirror God's image.*

In many ways, marriage mirrors the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At the very core of the nature of the Trinity is relationship. Each member of the Trinity complements one another perfectly, and as the Godhead are "one." Yet, each plays a unique role in the Divine plan of the universe. It should be the same with husband and wife. Each plays a unique role in God's plan for the family, yet they are to be "one flesh." Their "oneness" reflects the character and unity of God.

B. Genesis 2:18, 1 Corinthians 11:11. *To mutually complete one another (mutual interdependence).*

To mutually complete one another means to create something together that does not exist apart. This presupposes that men and women are essentially not the

same thing, and a male needs a female (and vice-versa) to be complete. Although it has been fashionable at times to think there are no real differences between men and women, volumes of research and common sense prove otherwise. They are equal in worth but different in design, and God made them that way for a purpose -- to complement and complete one another. Only in the union of a man and a woman can each be mutually complemented in the way God has designed us, physically, psychologically and spiritually.

C. Ephesians 5:25-33. *To illustrate the relationship between Christ and the church.*

As a husband and wife serve one another, love each other unconditionally, put the other's needs before their own, and lay down their lives for one another, they illustrate the relationship between Christ and His church. Just as Christ loves and laid down His life for the church, so a husband is to lead his family by laying down his life for his wife and children. He leads by serving. And just as the Church loves and serves Christ, so a wife is to graciously submit to her husband's headship.

D. Genesis 1:28a. *To multiply a godly legacy.*

Marriage provides the context for having and rearing children. Neither women nor men are made emotionally, spiritually or physically to raise children by themselves. God created family in such a way that it is the primary learning environment for children. It serves as a "small society" where children learn to love, to relate and, by watching mom and dad, to understand and appreciate their spiritual, emotional and sexual identity. Only in the union of man and a woman can a godly legacy be fruitfully multiplied.

1. The evidence that children do better in homes with their two married, biological parents is so overwhelming, it caused David Popenoe, professor

of sociology at Rutgers University to state: "In three decades of work as a social scientist, I know of few other bodies of data in which the weight of evidence is so decisively on one side of the issue: On the whole, for children, two-parent families are preferable ... If our prevailing views on family structure hinged solely on scholarly evidence, the current debate would never have arisen in the first place." ¹⁰

2. Karl Zinsmeister, a leading researcher on the family and the DeWitt Wallace Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute says, "There is a mountain of scientific evidence showing that when families disintegrate, children often end up with intellectual, physical, and emotional scars that persist for life ... We talk about the drug crisis, the education crisis, and the problem of teen pregnancy and juvenile crime. But all these ills trace back predominantly to one source: broken families." ¹¹

E. *To serve as a foundation for a healthy society.*

While there are many courageous single moms and dads and others in less than ideal family settings who are accomplishing the task, God created marriage as the basic building block upon which to construct a society. The special and sacred bond shared between husband and wife provides for strong families which, in turn, provide for stable, healthy social structures. Only in the unique union of a man and a woman can the foundation for a healthy society be built. Historians tell us that every civilization that strays from the union of a man and a woman in marriage will eventually collapse.

V. Conclusion

- A. *If we in the church strive to recapture and uphold God's ideal for the relationship between a man and a woman, the significance cannot be overstated.***

1. Individuals will thrive. In marriage, an individual is made "complete" by experiencing "oneness" with his or her spouse. People long to be completed, but without marriage many will pursue that longing in ways that destroy them spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, and in some cases, physically.
2. Children will thrive. The scientific research clearly confirms that children fare better when a mom and a dad are in the home. Without a stable home, children will live in peril. We have examples all around us of what happens to kids when parents are not around to invest in them. They too, will suffer spiritually, emotionally, psychologically and physically.
3. Society will thrive. Historians remind us that when marriage is held up as the social ideal, societies flourish. Without strong, committed, stable unions that serve as the primary building block of social structure, the rest of society will be weakened and eventually crumble.
4. God will be glorified. The primary purpose of marriage is to glorify God. It is His design for man and woman. It has been His created purpose from the beginning of time, His way of illustrating His love for the world. Marriage brings glory to God.

B. *It is critical that we as the church honor this divine institution for what it is: God's purpose for His created order.*

¹ David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America," The National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 1999, p. 2. To access the report via the Internet, please see <http://marriage.rutgers.edu>.

² *Ibid.*

³ Popenoe and Whitehead.

⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census.

⁵ Dr. James Dobson, Monthly Newsletter, November 1999.

⁶ Barna Research Group News Release, December 21, 1999.

⁷ Popenoe and Whitehead.

⁸ Steven L. Varnis, "Broken Vows, Therapeutic Sentiments, Legal Sanctions," *Society*, Nov.-Dec. 1997, p. 32f.

⁹ William R. Macklin, "Modern Love: Current Concept of Marriage Unlikely to Stand Test of Time Critics Say," *Knight Ridder News Service*, Jan. 30, 1999.

¹⁰ David Popenoe, "The Controversial Truth: Two Parent Families are Better," *The New York Times*, December 26, 1992.

¹¹ Karl Zinsmeister, "Raising Hiroko," *The American Enterprise* (March/April 1990), pp. 53-59.

Pastoral Care Line

The staff of Pastoral Ministries is available for a word of advice, the name of a resource or simply a listening ear. Ministers and their families are invited to contact us Monday through Friday via a toll-free phone line. If you have a concern, call **1-877-233-4455**.

Web Site

Our Web site for people in ministry is called The Parsonage. Visit us at www.family.org/pastor for additional sermon outlines, other pastoral resources, services and events.

Fact Sheet

Current snapshot of marriage in America

Over the past three decades there has been a significant and increasing loss of the ideal of marriage in our nation.

- In 1970, 3.2 percent of the nation's population over 18 was divorced. By 1996, that percentage rose to 9.4. ¹
- From 1960 to 1990, the number of children living with a divorced parent increased 352 percent. ²
- From 1970 to 1996, the percent of cohabiting couples rose 412 percent. ³
- From 1970 to 1996, the number of all people over 18 years of age who had never married increased from 16 percent to 23 percent. ⁴

"If the family of recent decades are extended into the future, the result will be not only growing uncertainty within marriage, but the gradual elimination of marriage in favor of casual liaisons oriented to adult expressiveness and self-fulfillment. The problem with this scenario is that children will be harmed, adults will probably be no happier, and the social order could collapse." -- Sociologist David Popenoe. ⁵

Marriage and Sexuality

Research shows that sexuality functions best when it is exercised within the confines of marriage.

- Married people are most likely to report they are "extremely" or "very satisfied" with the physical and emotional parts of their sex life.⁶
- People who have engaged in premarital sex "fairly often" with someone other than their spouse are more likely to be unfaithful after marriage.⁷
- In a recent study on premarital sex and the risk of divorce, the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* reported that those women who had been sexually active prior to marriage faced "a considerably higher risk of marital disruption than women who were virgin brides."⁸

Marriage and Well-Being

Adults who are married do markedly better in every measure of well-being than those who are not married.

- Married people live longer and generally are more emotionally and physically healthy than the unmarried.⁹
- Married people have lower rates of alcoholism, suicide and mental health problems than unmarried.¹⁰
- Married people are more likely to describe themselves as "happy and contented with life."¹¹
- For women, being unmarried is more dangerous than having cancer, being 20 pounds overweight or being of low socio-economic status.¹² For men, being unmarried is more dangerous than each of these, as well as heart disease.¹³

Marriage and Children

Children who are born to and live with their married parents do markedly better in every measure of well-being than children who do not.

- Children living with both parents are significantly more likely to do better in every measure of educational success than those with only one parent.¹⁴
- Boys living with both parents are much less likely to be convicted of a crime or have "run-ins" with the law.¹⁵

- Children living with both biological parents are 20-35 percent less likely to be vulnerable to health problems and are much less likely to be treated for emotional and behavioral problems.

16

Marriage vs. Cohabiting

Cohabitants have less healthy relationships than married couples, and when they do marry, their marriages are at a much greater risk of dissolution than those who do not cohabit.

- Those who cohabit before marriage have anywhere from 50 to 100 percent higher divorce rates than those who do not.¹⁷
- There is a much higher occurrence of domestic violence among cohabiting couples than among married couples.¹⁸
- Women in cohabiting relationships report a much greater rates of depression than women in married relationships (second only to those twiced divorced).¹⁹

Recovering a Marriage Culture

Many steps are being taken to recover our nation from the fallout of what's been called the "divorce revolution," begun in the 1960's when no-fault divorce laws went into effect in several states. By 1985, each of the fifty states had enacted some variation of no-fault divorce laws. Today sociologists are reporting that no-fault divorce laws have been a failure by every measure, causing one researcher to report, "seldom in U.S. history have laws been enacted with higher hopes and poorer results than the no-fault divorce statutes."²⁰

Here are several ways to help recover a marriage culture:

- Married couples can seek ways to improve their own marriage and encourage other couples to do the same. There is a vast amount of educational tools available to engaged and married couples to help strengthen their marriage and help those marriages that are facing troubles. Books, study guides, video and audio tapes, and marriage conferences are just a few tools that are available for couples interested in having strong, healthy marriages.
- Churches can adopt "covenant marriage policies." These policies set guidelines as to how they will approach marriage in their congregation. Typically these guidelines include any combination of statements about pre-marital counseling, the

- length of engagement, accountability, and so forth. For any couple wishing to get married in that church, they must agree to honor the marriage policy. With the church still being the place where the vast majority of marriages occur, policies like these can have a tremendous impact.
- Support divorce reform laws that encourage more reflection on the divorce process and require parents to consider the long-term impact that divorce will have upon them and their children.
 - Support "covenant marriage" legislation like was recently passed in Louisiana, where couples who are getting married can, *if they so choose*, apply to their marriage legislation that requires premarital counseling, limits grounds for divorce, and requires struggling couples to get counseling before they call it quits.
 - Many communities are adopting resolutions, these are not laws, that affirm life-long marriage and strong, intact families as a community norm and goal.
 - Support tax code changes that do not penalize married couples by taxing them at a higher rate. These marriage penalty taxes serve only to encourage couples to cohabit rather than get married.

Reformation Resources

There are a variety of resources available to individuals and churches to help strengthen marriages and recover a marriage culture.

Recommended Reading:

Stanton, Glenn. *Why Marriage Matters: Reasons to Believe in Marriage in Postmodern Society*. Colorado Springs, CO: Pinon Press. 1997.

Parkman, Allen M. *No-Fault Divorce: What Went Wrong?* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992.

Organizations:

The following organizations offer Christian marriage seminars and conferences. Please note that Focus on the Family has not reviewed the information that is presented or the materials that are recommended or provided by these groups. This listing has been compiled for your information and review and does not represent an endorsement by Focus on the Family. This is only a partial listing. For a complete listing contact Focus on the Family.

Family Life Conferences

Rev. Dennis Rainey
P.O. Box 23840

Little Rock, AR 72221-5114
501/223-8663
800/333-1433

<http://www.familylife-ccc.org>

This ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ provides a special weekend away for married couples and for those contemplating marriage. Held in major hotels nationwide, workshops on stress, conflict, and sex are offered. Special classes for women only, men only, and engaged couples are also presented. In addition, a video series for Canadian viewers and a Spanish manual are available.

Marriage Savers Institute

Mike McManus

9500 Michael's Court

Bethesda, MD 20817

301/469-5870 (evenings)

Information on the Community Marriage Policy program with Jim Talley is available

Dr. Scott M. Stanley

PREP

1780 S. Bellaire St., Suite 620

Denver, CO 80222

303/759-9931

303/759-4212 (fax)

Dr. Stanley offers premarital and marriage seminars, resources, and seminars for mental health professionals, pastors and lay leaders interested in marriage counseling.

Today's Family

Gary Smalley

1482 Lakeshore Drive

Branson, MO 65616

417/335-4321

417/336-6329

<http://www.garysmalley.com>

This organization offers a seminar taught by Gary Smalley and Dr. John Trent designed to help couples and singles learn to establish a treasured and lasting marriage relationship. Books, workbooks, and tapes to help the husband and wife apply what they learn at Family Heritage Marriage Seminars are available.

¹ Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1993, p. 53, and 1997, p. 55, comparing total number of divorced people over 18 to the total population over 18.

² U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, p. 23, No. 180, "Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the 1990's."

³ Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1993, p. 54, and 1997, p. 57, comparing total number of cohabiting couples to total population over 18.

⁴ Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1993, p. 53, and 1997, p. 55, comparing total number of never married people over 18 to the total population over 18.

⁵ David Popenoe, "Modern Marriage: Revisiting the Cultural Script," *Promises to Keep*, 1996, p. 248.

⁶ Robert Michael, et al., *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1994); E.O. Laumann, et al., *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁷ Andrew M. Greeley, *Faithful Attraction: Discovering Intimacy, Love and Fidelity in American Marriage* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1991).

⁸ Joan R. Kahn and Kathryn A. London, "Premarital Sex and the Risk of Divorce," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 53 (1991): 845-855.

⁹ Robert H. Coombs, "Marital Status and Personal Well-Being: A Literature Review," *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, (1991) 40:97-102, p. 97.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Darin R. Featherstone, Bert P. Cundick, and Larry C. Jensen, "Differences in School Behavior and Achievement Between Children From Intact, Reconstituted, and Single-Parent Families," *Adolescence* 27 (1992): 1-12.

¹⁵ M. Anne Hill and June O'Neill, "Underclass Behaviors in the United States: Measurement and Analysis of Determinants," (Center for the Study of Business and Government, Baruch College/The City University of New York, August 1993), p. 73.

¹⁶ Deborah A. Dawson, "Family Structure and Children's Health and Well-Being: Data from the 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (1991): 578-579

¹⁷ T.R. Balakrishnan, K. Vaninadha Rao, Evelyne Lapierre-Adamcyk, and Karol J. Krotki, "A Hazard Model of the Co-variates of Marriage Dissolution in Canada," *Demography* 24 (1987): 395-406.

¹⁸ Kersti Yllo and Murray A. Straus, "Interpersonal Violence Among Married and Cohabiting Couples," *Family Relations* 30 (1981): p. 343.

¹⁹ Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994) p. 251.

²⁰ Allen M. Parkman, *No-Fault Divorce: What Went Wrong?*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), p. 53.

This sermon outline and information sheet
may be reproduced for non-commercial purposes only
without prior permission from Focus on the Family.
Copyright © 2000 Focus on the Family.
All rights reserved. International copyright secured.