

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 19, 2015**

**THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE**

**Mark 10:1-9**

Nine days from now, on Tuesday, April 28, the Supreme Court of the United States will hear arguments in a landmark case to decide whether it is legal for states (such as Virginia) to define marriage as the union of one man and one woman, or whether the Constitution requires that the right of marriage be extended to same-sex couples. The Court is expected to announce its decision in late June. In the words of Russell Moore, who heads the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, "It is a watershed moment in our nation's history." For better or for worse, it *is* an epic watershed moment with potentially transformative consequences in American life.

You may be aware of another recent development related to the definition of marriage. Last month the Presbyterian Church (USA), the denomination in which I was ordained as a minister of the gospel more than 30 years ago, and of which many of us were at one time a part, officially approved changes to its constitution to redefine marriage to include couples of the same sex, and to give pastors the freedom, in states or jurisdictions where same-sex marriage is legal, to officiate at the weddings of same-sex couples.

Concerned that some might mistakenly identify our denomination, the EPC, or our church family here at Faith, with the Presbyterian Church (USA) and its policies and pronouncements, we at Faith published a statement last month *Reaffirming the Biblical Definition of Marriage* along with two supporting documents: 1) A news release from Dr. Jeff Jeremiah, the Stated Clerk of the EPC, reaffirming the EPC's commitment to the biblical definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman in a lifelong covenant of fidelity and love; and 2) An official position paper on *The Sanctity of Marriage* adopted by the 24<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the EPC in 2004. If you haven't read them, I encourage you to do so. As is noted in your bulletin today, you can access these documents on the church's web site ([www.faithepchurch.org](http://www.faithepchurch.org)). Or you can pick up a hard copy at the Welcome Table in the lobby area.

I want to talk with you today about what we – as a collection of undeserving sinners who have been saved by grace and incorporated into God's family, as followers of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, as the *ekklesia*, the called-out people of God we talked about last Sunday, as members of the branch of God's family known as the Evangelical Presbyterian Church – believe about the meaning of marriage. Even more than that, though, I want us to see what Jesus says about marriage.

In the passage we read from Mark 10, some Pharisees come to Jesus with a question about divorce, hoping to get Jesus to say something they can use against Him, something to damage His reputation as a teacher and cause His popularity to plummet. Divorce was an accepted practice in 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism. The regulation of divorce among the Jewish people went back to the time of Moses. The law regarding divorce is found in Deuteronomy 24. Nowhere in

the law does Moses (or God) *command* divorce. But Moses *permitted* divorce. As did God. As *does* God. Not because it was part of God's original design and intention for marriage. It was not. It was permitted because of the stubbornness, the sclerosis or hardness of men's (and women's) hearts. Notice what Jesus says to the Pharisees in verse 4: "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses gave you this law." The provision in the Mosaic law governing divorce did not and does not reflect God's perfect design and intention for marriage going back to the beginning of creation.

Which is exactly where Jesus takes the conversation – back to the very beginning, to the Book of Genesis. Quoting Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, Jesus says: "But at the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason" – because God made humankind male and female, and made them for each other – "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh" (Mark 10:6-8a).

In the parallel passage in Matthew 19:1-9, Matthew quotes Jesus as saying: "Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'" (19:4-5)? It is as if Jesus is saying to the Pharisees: "Come on, guys! Don't you read the Bible? Don't you know what it says? Don't you pay attention to it anymore?" Which, of course, are valid and relevant questions in both the church and the world of today.

Isn't it clear that God created us male and female so that a man and a woman, a husband and a wife, should come together in a one-flesh relationship that is meant to be a lifelong union of exclusive love and fidelity? I trust it is. This was God's intention from the very beginning. And it is still His intention today. God's design and plan for marriage haven't changed. That is why Jesus says: "Therefore what God has joined together (in marriage), let no one separate" (Mark 10:9).

Divorce happens, yes. And, yes, God permits it. But we know it grieves the heart of God. The hardness of human hearts that leads to divorce, that is exposed so starkly in some divorces, grieves the heart of God. Though it may seem inevitable or become necessary in some situations, we know it is not God's ideal for marriage. We also know that being divorced does not and will not – *does not and will not* – change God's unchanging, unstoppable, never-ending love for you, for anyone you know who has ever gone through divorce, or anyone who ever will.

On the surface, at least, the Pharisees' question to Jesus was about divorce. But Jesus' answer focuses more on God's original design and intention for marriage to last as long as both husband and wife shall live than it does on the fine points of divorce law. And, as becomes a matter of primary importance in America today, Jesus declares without any ambiguity that marriage is the union of a man and a woman. Not the union of two men. Nor the union of two women.

Let me read to you a passage from Timothy and Kathy Keller's book, *The Meaning of Marriage*, which I highly commend to you for the way it combines clear biblical teaching with a spirit of humility and winsomeness:

As the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship says, God “established marriage for the welfare and happiness of humankind.” (I hope these words sound familiar to some of you, at least.) Marriage did not evolve in the late Bronze Age as a way to determine property rights. At the climax of the Genesis account of creation we see God bringing a woman and a man together to unite them in marriage. The Bible begins with a wedding (of Adam and Eve) and ends in the book of Revelation with a wedding (of Christ and the church). Marriage is God’s idea. It is certainly also a human institution, and it reflects the character of the particular human culture in which it is embedded. But the concept and roots of human marriage are in God’s own action, and therefore what the Bible says about God’s design for marriage is crucial.

That is why the Presbyterian service of marriage says that marriage is “instituted by God, regulated by His commandments, (and) blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ.” What God institutes He also regulates. If God invented marriage, then those who enter it should make every effort to understand and submit to His purposes for it.

... In this book, we examine the Christian understanding of marriage [which] is based ... on a straightforward reading of Biblical texts. This means we are defining marriage as a lifelong, monogamous relationship between a man and a woman. According to the Bible, God devised marriage to reflect His saving love for us in Christ, to refine our character, to create stable human community for the birth and nurture of children, and to accomplish all this by bringing the complementary sexes into an enduring, whole-life union. It needs to be said, therefore, that this Christian vision for marriage is not something that can be realized by two people of the same sex. That is the unanimous view of the Biblical authors (*The Meaning of Marriage*, 13, 16).

This is also the view we hold at Faith and in our denominational family, the EPC. Our confessional standard, the Westminster Confession of Faith, affirms the clear teaching of the Bible that “marriage is a union between one man and one woman, designed of God to last so long as they both shall live” (WCF 24.1).

The 2004 EPC Position Paper on *The Sanctity of Marriage* declares that God “ordained marriage as the fundamental institution of society” (Genesis 1:27-28). In marriage, a man and [a] woman leave their families of origin and become united as “one flesh” in a new family unit (Genesis 2:24). The judgment of Scripture is that marriage is to be honored by all (Hebrews 13:4).

God ordained marriage for the following ends:

### The Glory of God

Marriage exists first and foremost to glorify God. Human beings are individually image bearers of God (Genesis 1:26), but man and woman in marriage also display His glory (Genesis 1:27-28). Marriage as a creation ordinance glorifies God as Creator. Beyond that, however, marriage is to glorify God as Redeemer, for Christian marriage is the consummate illustration of the redeeming grace of God in Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33). To the degree that Christians live out this pattern of God's love through His grace in Christ (Ephesians 5:1-2), (we) witness to one another, (our) children, the church, and the world the gospel of God's redeeming love in Christ.

Did you know all that? Did you know that in the keeping of your wedding vows you bear witness to the love the Lord Jesus Christ has for His church?

Marriage exists not only for God's glory but for our good in the following ways: To provide companionship, mutual assistance, and the context for the bearing, nurturing, and training of children. Another God-ordained purpose of marriage is to promote the stability of society. Our EPC Position Paper says pointedly:

When marriage, the foundational human relationship, is degraded, the family unit disintegrates and the fabric of any nation unravels (cf. Genesis 2).

It is not only by the promotion, advocacy, and acceptance of same-sex unions that marriage is degraded. Marriage is degraded in numerous ways: by no-fault divorce; by a culture that promotes and glorifies sex pretty much anywhere, pretty much anytime, and with pretty much anyone; by the use of pornography, which fuels desires and expectations that one's wife or husband cannot possibly satisfy; by the infidelity of adultery. Marriage is degraded when a husband abandons his wife, or vice versa, whether the abandonment is physical or emotional. It is degraded as well by professing Christians who have a faulty, unbiblical view of marriage and, consequently, expect their wife or husband to meet all their needs, or who give up on their marriage when they hit a rough patch, rather than resolving to work through their problems. Any or all of these can degrade marriage.

There is one more stated purpose of marriage cited in the EPC Position Paper on Marriage:

## The Proper Context of Human Sexuality

Hebrews 13:4 clearly teaches that sexual intimacy should be reserved for a man and a woman within the covenant of marriage.

It goes on to say:

From Genesis to Revelation, sexual union in marriage is to be between a man and a woman. Scripture emphatically condemns same-sex unions and sexual intercourse between people of the same sex. [See Romans 1:24-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.]

Sexual relations outside of marriage are forbidden by Scripture (1 Corinthians 6:16-20; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4).

As followers of Christ, we are to “abstain from sexual immorality” of all kinds (1 Thessalonians 4:3). In fact, as Paul writes in Ephesians 5:3, “Among you” – among *us* – “there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, for these are improper for God’s holy people.” It is not just sexual immorality that God is concerned about. He is concerned about immorality or impurity of any kind, including greed. In fact, he gives this warning in 1 Corinthians 6: “Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (6:9-10) – meaning unrepentant sinners of any kind, not just those who commit sexual sins. Paul’s warning, though, is followed immediately by this word of grace: “And that” – sinners of these different kinds – “is what some of you were. But you were washed [in the blood of Jesus], you were sanctified [by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit], you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (6:11).

Which is awfully good news for us, sinners that we all are.

Where does all of this teaching from the Bible and from Jesus Himself about the meaning of marriage and sexual intimacy leave us? There is no doubt that we who look to the Bible as the inspired Word of God, the final authority and the only infallible rule for faith and life find ourselves increasingly in the minority when it comes to political and cultural influence. Which, we are discovering, or have already discovered, is not a particularly pleasant or comfortable place to be, especially when we find our long held convictions under attack.

What then shall we do? Give in to the current of cultural change and go with the flow? We know that is not the answer. What we also know is that we do not have the right, and the Supreme Court of the United States does not have the right, nor does the President nor the Congress nor any state legislature nor any church have the right to redefine what God Himself

defined when He established marriage at the beginning of creation and presided over the first marriage ceremony of a man and a woman in Genesis 2.

Regardless of how the Court may rule or what the law may say, we will hold fast in our adherence to the God-ordained definition of marriage as the union of a man and a woman in a covenant of love and fidelity that is meant to last a lifetime. And we will – we *must*, if we are to be faithful to God in our witness and in the whole manner of our lives – hold fast to the truth with hearts full of compassion and love for people who disagree with us and think we are bigoted because we oppose the redefinition of marriage to include same-sex couples. We must be firm in affirming what the Bible teaches about marriage. We must also be winsome and loving in our words and actions, modeling the love of Jesus for sinners of all kinds (including us, of course), and expressing our convictions, as Peter says, “with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak against (our) good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (1 Peter 3:15-16). It is a tall order. In fact, it is a mission in which we are doomed to fail, unless we surrender ourselves – heart, mind, soul, and body – to the Lord Jesus Christ and allow the Holy Spirit to form the character of Christ in us.

We must also not forget, even for a moment, that God remains sovereign, even if courts presume to overrule Him, or people and nations persist in doing what is right in their own eyes.

May we hold fast to Him in faith, hope, and love. Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.