

LET NO MAN

The title for this talk is taken from Matthew 19:6 and Mark 10:9 (NAS), in which Jesus says, “Therefore what God has joined together, let no man separate.”

I. OVERVIEW

- A. Who is this for?
- This is designed primarily for married men with children, particularly those who are now, or may be in the future, considering a divorce.
- B. What is the message?
- This is an anti-divorce message. It is not my purpose to offend anyone. But offense may be an unintended consequence of what I’m going to say. Please forgive me if it is.
 - There are many reasons why divorce is bad. To name a few: it takes a financial toll on the family; it is against God’s express instructions; it is emotionally painful for the husband and wife; and it hurts the children.
 - I am going to talk about the horror of divorce from the perspective of a child.
 - It may seem obvious to you that divorce is bad for the children. But judging from the number of divorces that occur, not everyone believes that. And I have talked to more than one man in the midst of a divorce who asserted that his kids would be just fine.
 - I hope to expose that attitude as a delusion or a lie. I hope to obliterate any trace of doubt that divorce is a terrible tragedy for children, that it would hurt your children more than you can imagine, and that you should avoid it like death.
- C. Who am I?
- I am a businessman, not a marriage counselor.
 - I am far from perfect as a husband or a father, but I am blessed with a wonderful wife and two great kids.
 - I have a close relationship with my mother and father and I love them both very much.
 - But underneath all of that I am a Child of Divorce ... and that episode from over 30 years ago is the source of chronic pain that afflicts me to this day. It is a specter that follows me everywhere.
- D. Why am I telling you this?
- Perhaps I will be able to warn you of an impending disaster.
 - If my sons wandered too close to a steep cliff and I didn’t know it, but you did, I would want you to tell me.
 - Likewise, you may not see the pain a divorce would cause your children ... but I can tell you about it.
 - I won’t presume to make any value judgment for anyone about whether divorce is the lesser of two evils under particular circumstances. But any

cost-benefit analysis you undertake requires an appreciation of the magnitude of evil that divorce unleashes on children.

II. DIVORCE FROM A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

First a word about the ultimate truth: about God's word on the subject of divorce.

The Bible says God hates divorce. I'm not paraphrasing or interpreting. That is a direct quote from the Old Testament: "I hate divorce," says the Lord God of Israel." Malachi 2:16

The Book of Genesis says that when a man and woman marry they become "one flesh." Genesis 2.24. Divorce tears that flesh in two. One translation of Malachi calls it a "violent dismembering of the 'one flesh' of marriage." Malachi 2:16 (The Message).

The very first story told in the New Testament is about an angel – a messenger of God – convincing Joseph not to divorce his pregnant wife. Matt. 1:19-24.

Jesus spoke against divorce several times. On one such occasion – recorded in the Books of Matthew and Mark – Jesus referred to the Genesis passages about husband and wife creating one flesh, and then he said the words spoken in most wedding ceremonies: "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." Something remarkable happened next in this story. Immediately after he finished speaking against divorce, "some children were brought to Him so that He might lay His hands on them and pray; and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, 'Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.' After laying His hands on them, He departed from there." Jesus had just finished telling the adults that divorce was wrong. Then, like he knew that some would not follow his instructions, he prays for their children.¹

III. DIVORCE FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

Like with every other subject, God knows what He's talking about.

There are a lot of depressing statistics about the effect divorce has on children. I won't recite a long list of statistics. However, there is a quotation from a divorce study that very accurately captures the essence of divorce for children.

"The most pervasive fact was the enormity of the grief all the children studied felt over their parents' divorce. They were sad beyond measure."

I don't think a child -- particularly a young child -- would be willing or capable of explaining to his or her parents how a divorce feels. But I can tell you from my own experience how it feels.

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¹ See the document entitled "God Hates Divorce" for additional Bible passages about divorce.

My parents got a Divorce when I was 8 years old. That is over 30 years ago ... and I still can feel the wounds today.

It was late summer in 1974. My parents gathered us -- their 5 children -- outside on the front steps of our house. I don't remember their exact words but they told us they were getting a Divorce. I didn't know what it meant but they explained that they wouldn't be married anymore and would live in different houses. As they talked, and the awful reality hit me, I staggered off the steps like someone hit me with a two-by-four. Then it was like some Goliath rose up, took a massive meat cleaver and split the ground in front of me. The earth ripped open into a wide, deep chasm. My world divided underneath me and I had one foot on both sides. But my little legs weren't long enough to span the gap, so I lost my footing and I fell into the pit. Right there in the front yard of my childhood home. That is how it felt. Physically I was walking aimlessly through our front yard kicking something around, crying uncontrollably and shouting "no! NO!" Emotionally I was falling deep and yelling for help and from my perspective no-one answered.

I remember only one other thing from that terrible day. I'm not even sure it is a real memory because it isn't something we like to talk about. But I remember my older brother not crying a single tear. To feel what we all felt but not to let it out is true torment. Caged grief hurts worse. When I told my brother I was going to start giving this talk he confirmed that, "something important in [him] was blown away by the Divorce."

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Sadness, pain and fear have a companion: its name is guilt. Often children will blame themselves for their parents' divorce. It is a regular consequence. My parents purposely and frequently assured us that their Divorce was not our fault. And intellectually I know that. But in some ways I blamed myself anyway. There are two things I remember in particular:

One is this: Several months before the Divorce announcement my parents had a date to hear the Boston Pops orchestra play at a beautiful outdoor venue in western Massachusetts. For some reason I insisted on going with them instead of staying with a sitter. They gave in. So instead of having a romantic evening together listening to classical music, they had me tagging along. Later, in hindsight, I felt like I probably had ruined their date, and thus damaged their relationship, and thus probably was at least partially to blame for their Divorce. Even though I know it can't be true, I can't shake that feeling.

The second is worse: At some point after my parents announced they would be getting a Divorce they had to make it official. I don't know the exact grim process by which "one flesh" is legally torn asunder, but I remember there was a court date approaching. I thought that was going to be the official "Divorce ceremony," like some grotesque opposite of a wedding ceremony.

I saw an opening to derail the Divorce and I made a plan. When the awful day came, I was going to hide. My parents wouldn't be able to find me, so they would miss the Divorce ceremony, and they would stay married. Simple. Good. That was my plan.

But my plan failed. Through a prior arrangement that I didn't know about, a friend and his mother came to get me so I could spend the day at his house. I was uncomfortable with them there so I came out of my hiding place. The Divorce took place as scheduled. In my 8-year-old mind my parents got a Divorce because I failed to stop it.

Sure it is irrational, but I was 8. That is some heavy guilt for a child. And my parents never knew. And you won't know that your children are going through that same kind of anguish. That is the kind of misery you set loose in the world when you set out to rip apart the one flesh that man and wife become.

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It was always my hope as a child that my parents would remarry each other and our family would be reunited. I prayed so hard and so often that God would make it all right again. And when he didn't I had little use for Him. I became determined to be the master of my own fate and the captain of my soul. For the longest time my parents' Divorce was a direct hindrance to my relationship with Jesus, just as Jesus warned against when he prayed for the children.

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In spite of all this, I must stress that I had -- and have -- fantastic parents whom I deeply love. They are honorable, ethical, loving, intelligent, admirable people. They probably have little idea how much pain their Divorce caused their children. Had they known beforehand the depth of the suffering it would cause, I think they would have taken a different path. But no-one warned them.

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So that is what it was like for me. What would it be like for your children? Do you think your situation is different? Do you think in your case divorce would be the right thing for all involved? I've heard fathers try to rationalize by saying their children are well adjusted and level-headed and will handle the divorce well.

Don't fool yourself. That is the serpent hissing in the garden. A divorce will cause profound pain to your children. It will inflict wounds that never fully heal ... at least not down here on Earth.

I was well adjusted and level-headed. I was good at sports, got good grades and had lots of friends. But it got me.

And don't think you can defeat the devil of Divorce by loving your kids more and spending more time with them. Without question that would be important but it wouldn't be enough. My parents were so good. They gave us as much love and time as any parents have given their children. I remember many of the little things. We kids all lived with our mother during the school week. Every morning before school she made all 5 of us a hot breakfast instead of cold cereal. She fed us healthy dinners, made sure we did our homework, planned birthday parties, attended school plays, drove us to sports, and more. We would spend the weekends and a month in the summer with my Dad. He was always there for us, too. He coached me in sports, took me on business trips, went to school events, and spent both quality and quantity time with me and my brother and sisters.

My parents are in many ways role models for me as I raise my own sons. They were almost the ideal parents. But they weren't together. And this tore me apart.

What your children know is mama and daddy together in the same house. That is the way God designed it. That is what they need. That is their world. A divorce cracks that world in two.

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Maybe you think divorce would be better than your children seeing you constantly argue with your wife. Maybe you think it would be too painful for you to stay in your marriage. Sure, staying married might hurt, but the alternative is worse.

Suppose you had to choose between these two options:

Option A: Everyday for the rest of your life, when you get up in the morning, you will be punched in the stomach so hard you can't breathe. And sometimes your son will see you suffer.

Option B: You're off the hook. But everyday for the rest of your son's life, when he gets up in the morning, he will be punched in the stomach so hard he can't breathe. You can avoid watching if you want, but his suffering will happen.

What would you choose? Any father worthy of being called a man would choose to take the punishment himself.

But it's worse than that. Being punched in the stomach is physical pain. There are worse kinds of pain. To a child, the pain of divorce is something that can't be understood because there is nothing to compare it to. A child has no frame of reference from which to understand what is happening. Imagine the "one flesh" that God spoke of several times. Imagine tearing flesh apart and ripping it from the bone. That approximates the agony.

It would be like your child going to school one day and discovering none of his friends will talk to him anymore.

And the next day you tell him his birthday has been canceled forever.

And the next day he watches helplessly as his dog gets run over in the street.

And then a day comes – and this day will come -- when your child learns that you could have stopped the flesh from being torn. But because you didn't want to hurt yourself, you sacrificed him. You chose him to be crushed for your iniquities (Isaiah 53:5) and for him to be acquainted with grief. (Isaiah 53:3). Imagine how that will feel to your child: Daddy ... why have you forsaken me?

What kind of man would knowingly make such a choice? Tragedies happen all the time. Parents die, children suffer injuries and abuse. There is a lot of misery in the world. Why would you choose to add to it? Children need to be protected. That's a father's job. If a father knows what divorce would do to his children, he must face up to the harsh facts and ask himself: will I stand in the breach and protect my children ... or will I crawl into a corner, cover my eyes, and cower?

Let no man shun his solemn duty.

IV. SOURCE OF STRENGTH

Staying might not be easy. But the stakes are worth the struggle.

How do you avoid divorce? I can't answer that for you. I wish I could because it is so essential. I don't know great secrets for a successful marriage, but I experienced the consequences of a failed one.

Some basic suggestions for avoiding divorce:

For starters, just say no. Eliminate divorce as an option. If you knew that taking a particular action was going to cause your child's death, you wouldn't do it. Let's say someone told you, "Sir, if you do X, your child will surely die." Though X seems impossible to avoid, or maybe X even seems desirable, you would do everything you could to avoid X, and you might even pray to be delivered from X. I won't say divorce will kill your children, but it will gravely wound them, it will hurt their souls, and perhaps a part of them will die. Divorce may seem inevitable, or even desirable, but you should treat it like death. I repeat: eliminate divorce as an option.

Realize that your wife does not have an obligation to meet your emotional and physical needs perfectly. Nothing in this world – no person or possession – has the obligation or the capacity to bring you peace and happiness. Only Jesus can, and already does, know you entirely, accept you completely, and love you perfectly, forever and ever, without condition. Look to Him – and only to Him -- for fulfillment.

I can't say don't sin, because we're all sinners. But be purposeful to avoid actions, and inattention, that are likely to incite the divorce disaster.

And remember the word “forgive.”

If you are at fault for something, be quick to beg forgiveness. If necessary, do this on your hands and knees, groveling.

If your wife is at fault, be quick to forgive. Do this even if no-one would blame you if you didn't forgive her.

If you don't know who to blame, take the blame.

Don't let pride get in the way. Pride is from the Devil.

Pray earnestly because your own will won't be strong enough and you will need God. Jesus said: “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” Matt. 11:28.

Miracles happen.

But even if you suffer a dry, loveless marriage for decades, your children will consider that a miracle compared to the alternative.

This is an age in which men seem not to have glorious causes to pursue. However, a fight to save your marriage and protect your children's fragile hearts – that fight is a glorious cause and one of eternal significance.

And many years from now, when they are grown, sit down with your children and tell them your story. Let them learn from you about love and personal sacrifice. And, I pray, let them learn from you about redemption and resurrection.

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