

## Sermon on Marriage & Divorce

By Mike McManus

“What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.”

Matthew 19:6

Jesus is quoted in three Gospels opposing divorce. Yet America, supposedly a Christian nation, has put asunder 46 million marriages just since 1970, shattering the lives of 44 million kids. Our divorce rate is triple that of Britain or France. After five years, 23% of Americans have divorced compared to only 8% of British or French, and it is double that of Canada. This is a scandal. However, there is hope for change.

Children of divorce are three times as likely to be expelled from school or get pregnant as teenagers as a child from an intact home. They are five times more likely to live in poverty. Such children are also more apt to suffer physical abuse. Physical abuse escalates the more the family breaks down or rearranges with repeat cohabiting parents (step cohabiting parents) having an abuse rate 10 times higher than the intact married family. Sexual abuse is 20 times higher in the cohabiting step family (mother living with a boyfriend not he father.)

Statistics do not reveal the pain of divorce for children. Michael Reagan, the adopted son of Ronald Reagan and Jane Wyman, wrote about his parents' divorce in *Twice Adopted*:

*“Divorce is where two adults take everything that matters to a child – the child’s home, family, security, and sense of being loved and protected – and they smash it all up, leave it in ruins on the floor, then walk out and leave the child to clean up the mess.”*

Ironically, Michael’s father, as Governor of California in 1969, signed America's first No Fault Divorce Law, which swept through state legislatures in less than a decade. While divorces nearly doubled in the 1960s, they soared another 86 percent from 639,000 in 1969 to 1,189,000 by 1980. President Reagan later told Michael that his signing the first No Fault Divorce Law was his "greatest regret" in public life.

America’s marriage problem is deeper than our sky-high divorce rate. Relatively few people are marrying at all. The U.S. marriage rate has plunged 54% since 1970 and 30% just since 1990. The biggest reason is soaring cohabitation which has jumped a stunning 17-fold, from 430,000 couples living together in 1960 to 7.5 million cohabiting in 2010. Most of America’s unwed births are to cohabiting couples. Nearly twice as many American kids will live in a cohabiting household compared to a home whose parents have divorced – 42% will live with a cohabiting parent vs. 23% who experience a parental divorce.

The result? Family Research Council estimates that only 46% of American teenagers were living with their own married parents. In other words, more than half of teens live in

homes where their parents have rejected each other – either by not splitting after cohabitation, or by divorce. This is shocking.

No wonder American kids perform poorly in international academic comparisons. Their disrupted home lives diminish their capacity to learn and develop. *TIME* reports that U.S. kids score 487 on math tests compared to 540 to 600 by Asian kids in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Shanghai. Why? *TIME* doesn't say, but Asian families are largely intact, while American families are mostly broken. For example, only 2% of Japanese children are born out of wedlock, vs. 41% in the U.S. (In the U.S. Asian Americans families are the most intact, also.)

Only 51% of Americans are currently married – a record low – down from 72% in 1960, according to a recent Pew Research Center analysis of Census data.

There are three major factors behind these trends.

First, the number of never-married Americans has nearly doubled from 15% to 28% from 1960-2010. Pew reports that many couples are cohabiting instead of marrying because “they fear divorce.” Why? As Mike and Harriet McManus state in their book, ***Living Together: Myths, Risks & Answers***, many cohabiting couples are adult children of divorce who do not want to live through such pain again. They think they can test their compatibility by living together. They report this is a myth. “You can't practice permanence,” they write. Of the 7.5 million couples who cohabited in 2010, only 1.4 million married. What happened to the other 6 million? Most broke up or will soon do so, for an 80% failure rate before there is a wedding. But what of those who marry after living together? Are they more successful? No. A Penn State study reports that these couples are 61% more likely to divorce than those who lived separately until the wedding. So nine out of 10 couples who began their union with cohabiting broke up before or after the wedding.

Second, the number of divorced and un-remarried people has grown from 5% to 14% of the population. Third, in the last 50 years the age at which people marry has jumped six years to 26 for women, and for men, to 29 years. Today only a fifth of adults aged 18-29 are married vs. three times as many in 1960, 59%.

What's troubling is not the delayed age at which people marry, which is generally wise, but the fact so many have never married. Only 72% of today's adults have ever married vs. 85 percent in 1960.

This is a big cultural change. What is behind this shift? Another recent Pew survey reported that four in ten Americans think marriage is “becoming obsolete.”

What's particularly interesting is that 47% of those who think marriage is becoming obsolete say they would like to marry – virtually the same share (45%) of unmarried adults who think marriage is not becoming obsolete, who claim they want to wed.

Those numbers suggest a much needed strategy for America's clergy, who perform nine of ten weddings: ***We need to make a case for marriage.***

Surely, Scripture is clear. "He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the Lord," we read in Proverbs 18:21. And Proverbs 31:10 asserts, "A wife of noble character, who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her, and lacks nothing of value." The chapter continues with 20 more verses on what a blessing a good wife is to a man.

However, our culture has strayed so far from Scripture, how can we persuade the younger generation that marriage, not cohabitation, is the answer? Well, to be honest, there are likely not many cohabiting couples in church to hear this sermon. However, there are many church-going parents of adult children who are at a loss as to what to say to them.

What is the best case that we pastors might make for the value of marriage? I suggest we point to secular evidence.

What follows is evidence of the importance of marriage that was published in an annual report, ***The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2011***, by the Institute for American Values (IAV.org).

Let's start with scientific evidence of what every pastor has long believed: "Couples who both agree that 'God is at the center of our marriage' are at least 26 percentage points more likely to report that they are 'very happy.'" While 50% of married men and women report being very happy, of those who believe God is at the center of their marriage, 77% of women and 76% of men are very happy.

These more religious couples are also more likely to report high levels of commitment and a pattern of generous behavior toward one another. "In other words, marital spirituality is linked to beliefs and behaviors that strengthen the marriage bond," stated the report.

Similarly, mothers and fathers who view parenting as one of "life's greatest joys," are about twice as likely to report being very happy in their marriages. It is one of the "Top Five Predictors of Marital Success."

However, the report cautions that "parenthood is typically associated with lower levels of *marital* happiness." Having a baby requires sacrifices such as a loss of sleep, less disposable income and often, less quality time with one another, resulting in less sex.

And there is a sad paradox among young Americans. While most would like to have two or three children, "a growing share of young women and men believe that a good marriage is personally unattainable, and more are raising children outside of marriage."

However the report, "When Baby Makes Three," provides new evidence that both husbands and wives – wives especially – are "more likely than their childless peers to feel their lives have a sense of meaning and purpose." And a substantial minority of married couples do not experience parenthood as an obstacle to marital happiness.

What is their secret? Two answers are shared housework chores and sexual satisfaction. This is fresh evidence that Paul was right when he advised: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." If husbands and wives submitted to one another, each will do a fair share of household tasks, and each will satisfy the sexual appetites of their spouses as well as that of themselves.

"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" of Ephesians 5:21 is the headline for very famous next verse: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord." Men always remember that one, but often forget Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..." Jesus died on the cross for the church, so we men have to give sacrificially to our wives.

Most important, however, is that the report provides evidence that a shared faith endows marriage "with transcendent significance." Attending services together is a top predictor of marital stability the study reports. Another key principle for those couples who did not experience parenthood as an obstacle to marital happiness: "Parenthood makes life meaningful and marriage makes parenthood bearable."

A book published a decade ago called "A Case for Marriage" by Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher provided additional secular evidence of the value of marriage:

- **Longer life:** A married man will live ten years longer than a single or divorced man; a woman will live four years less, and a child of divorce, five fewer years.
- **More & better sex:** Married couples have about 50% more sex than single or cohabiting couples, and find it more satisfying.
- **Wealthier:** A 1994 study found that as people enter their 60's, married couples have three to four times more assets than those who are single or divorced.

Another key factor is education. Americans without college degrees are three times as likely to divorce in the first ten years of marriage vs. those with college education. This is a disturbing finding. Few couples with a college degree are going to be able to get one. The dilemma suggests that our church must do more to help couples whose marriages are in crisis.

Some years ago a pastor in Jacksonville, Rev. Dick McGinnis of St. David's Episcopal Church, asked his church this question, which I am asking today of this congregation: "Are there any couples here whose marriages were once on the rocks, but who have successfully come off of them? If so, I would like to meet with you after the service."

Out of 180 people in that Jacksonville church that day, 10 couples met with Father Dick. He told them he was “astounded, overwhelmed and overjoyed,” thinking that only one or two couples might show up. He told them, “I’ve been wondering if God has a way of restoring marriages. There are so many marriages in trouble. I have more work than I can handle in marriage counseling. So I prayed about it. What came to my mind after I prayed was that I should not be looking at the problem, but the solution. That triggered in my mind how Alcoholics Anonymous got started. It began with “Bill” and “Doctor Bob” helping each other stay sober. Then they began helping other alcoholics stay sober. Two clergymen – a Roman Catholic and an Episcopalian - helped them, and from that assistance they were able to develop the Twelve Steps of AA that have helped millions stay sober.

“If God has a plan for restoring marriages, *you* are the people who would know. I want to meet with you over a period of time to hear what you had to do – or what God did – for you to restore your marriage.”

Seven of the 10 couples agreed to meet with Father Dick and Phyllis, his wife. Several couples met at Sunday School and others on a weekday night. They each shared their story of the crisis that nearly drove them apart. Their issues were very diverse. One woman had an eight year affair that her husband was unaware of. She confessed the affair, and they rebuilt their marriage. Sam was a bisexual, who cruised gay bars early in his marriage and was both a drug abuser and a drug dealer. His wife had such mental problems she went to a psychiatric hospital for extensive treatment four times. He declared bankruptcy and movers arrived to take his furniture to sell to pay off his debts. But the furniture was so shabby, they said, “You keep it.” Sam sat on his kitchen floor and wept. He had considered leaving his wife the fourth time she was committed. That day he decided to go to the hospital and bring her home. “She was my only asset,” he said. Another was Howard, who had been out of work for two years and his wife, Jackie, was threatening to leave him. Jackie talked about her unhappiness with a friend at work who said, “Why not try God?” She repeated that to her husband, who replied, “Why not? What have we got to lose?” The next Sunday there were at St. David’s. Bob is a dentist who was trying to pay off \$200,000 of dental school debt by doing his own lab work at night. His wife said, “What kind of marriage is this? I never see you.”

Despite this diversity, the group was able to agree on the steps each took to rebuild their marriages. Then they outlined those steps or Marriage Ministry Action Statements, or M&Ms, as they called them, that each couple took to heal their marriages. They spent months thrashing out the exact wording of the 17 M&Ms, which are analogous to the Twelve Steps for Alcoholics Anonymous, such as:

- We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
- We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
- We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.

Similarly, the Marriage Ministry developed 17 Action Statements. I will read all of them, because they are so inspirational. My prayer is that we will develop a similar Marriage Ministry here:

A. Christian Example

1. Through other Christians' testimony and example we/I found hope for our marriage.

B. Commitment to God

2. I experienced God's love and forgiveness.
3. I made a decision/*commitment to love*: Christ, mate self. (This wording indicates that this kind of love comes only after commitment is made. Known as *agape*, it is the form of love that is self-giving rather than self-receiving.)
4. I made a decision and commitment to follow Jesus as my Savior and Lord.
5. Once obedient to God, we were able to begin to love by his standards, not ours.
6. I became accountable to God for my behavior, thoughts, and actions, and became aware of my accountability to others.

C. Commitment to Partner

7. We/I made a decision to stay together.
8. We/I made a decision to forgive mate and myself.
9. I accepted my mate as he/she is.

D. Changed Myself

10. I realized that the problem was with *myself*.
11. I began to look at myself as needing change to be able to love, no matter what. I became aware that I needed to change, became willing to change, learned *what & how* to change, and began to change with God's help.
12. I made an examination of my *role* in our marriage according to God's Word and changed accordingly with God's help.
13. I accepted change in my mate.

E. Trust

14. Through Christ, I began trusting enough to increasingly put my whole self in the care of my mate.
15. I learned to communicate honestly, truthfully and openly, in love.
16. I learned to put God and mate ahead of myself (became humble before the Lord).

F. The Process

17. We are still in the process and realize we must share what we have found with others.

"The seven couples who created the Marriage Ministry at St. David's met over the next five years with 40 marriages in crisis. Some were referred by Father Dick. Others were couples the team members knew were in trouble. Result: 38 of those marriages were saved – a 95% success rate! Couples who have been wounded, can become powerful healers of marriage. For

example, if one couple healed their marriage after adultery, their story equipped them to mentor another couple in crisis over infidelity. They could say to that couple, 'This is what we did to restore trust.' That is exactly what that couple needs to hear, not a pastor repeating the commandment, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.'

"To learn more about this ministry, you might want to read Chapter 10 of a book by Mike McManus entitled, ***Marriage Savers: Helping Your Friends and Family Avoid Divorce***, which is available by calling 301 469-5873. Mike and his wife created a national ministry called Marriage Savers, which you can read about by going to the website [www.marriagesavers.org](http://www.marriagesavers.org).