

Genesis 2:18-24
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12
Mark 10:2-16

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Two of today's Scripture Lessons focus on the marriage relationship between a man and woman. First is the Creation account from Genesis, asserting we are made for each other, being suitable companions, described in traditional versions of the Bible as a helpmate for one another. Husband and wife are to think of one another so intimately as to say: "You are flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone." It sounds like a description of the physical nature in a parent-child relationship. In the Gospel Lesson, Jesus reaffirms this understanding of marriage when a group of Pharisees try to test him by discussing the legitimacy of divorce.

From the very beginning, God declares we need to keep our priorities straight. He is our first priority, to keep ourselves spiritually intimate with our Father Creator. The next priority, if married, is to the marriage and your partner. Even though we are to honor our parents, Genesis reminds us when we marry how the needs and opinions of both sets of in-laws are secondary to the new marriage. It's hard for the newlyweds and their parents to adapt, so mistakes happen.

If marriage partners become parents, another common mistake is to make the child more important than one's marriage. The best gift you can give your child is to provide a healthy role-model of a husband and wife team. In spite of our differences, each of us needs to demonstrate respect, support, communication, forgiveness and affection toward others, especially one's spouse. We learned how to respond to marriage from our own parents, as children will from us.

Young parents sometimes tell me they didn't have good role-models, and they struggle with those patterns. It may seem impossible to intentionally do things differently. But there are resources for us ... in Scripture, and the witness of other couples. Do we seek this guidance?

We are challenged by everyday temptations, such as other relationships which seem less demanding or more interesting. There is the seduction of our employment to make one's job top priority. We may justify it, saying we're doing it for the sake of our family. But your spouse and children can recognize selfishness. Another temptation is when drugs and alcohol become more important than our families. Any recreational diversion could create such imbalance. We might be tempted to give up on our marriage partner, and to even give up on ourselves.

Divorce is far too common in our society. We're grateful when their lives experience healing. There are usually some permanent scars. Unfortunately, a divorced person can be more bitter and disillusioned than when still married. It's tempting to blame the imperfections of one's ex rather than acknowledge our own shortcomings. If the goal of marriage had been self-fulfillment, did they both become frustrated and disappointed at what they didn't get, while ignoring what each needed to give? Perhaps neither was willing to make the personal changes and sacrifices necessary to be a team as marriage partners.

None of us are perfect. Every husband and wife has sinned against the other. But when these failures are not confessed, when abuses are not confronted, when there is the refusal to

forgive, then we begin planting seeds of divorce. Healthy marriages recognize and pluck out those seeds, doing whatever it takes to mutually discover how to renew their love. And they remember marriage is a 3-way partnership which includes God. Faith asks: What would God want me to do? Then instead of conforming themselves to the world's way of handling problems, they start the accountability process of personal transformation in Christ.

I've seen it happen, couples who have survived financial disasters, extra-marital affairs, fights about the children, communication problems, alcoholism. When the husband and wife begin the confession process, not only to each other, but to Jesus, admitting their personal failures and desire to change, then marriage vows come alive.

Jesus came to earth, not to condemn us, but to bring us reconciliation. To the woman at the well, he confronted her with the truth about herself, and then revealed the way to nurture her life and faith with living water. To the crowd ready to stone an adulterous woman, Jesus dismissed them all by confronting each one with their own sinful nature. And to the adulterous woman, Jesus gave her the opportunity for a new way of living, saying: "Go and sin no more."

We are all too ready to condemn others and not examine our own sin. I've been in homes to arbitrate as marriage counselor, when it's become very apparent the only intention the husband and wife had was to hurl verbal stones at one another and do as much emotional damage as possible. They weren't interested in focusing on their personal failings, but wanted to point the finger. I'm still haunted by the faces of their children, filled with fear and confusion, and worse yet, with hate. Jesus says: "Do not prevent little children from coming to Me, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

What are you doing to share His kingdom? Will it be seen in your home, and in your family? These are to be signs of Christ's kingdom among us. For those of you who are single, will you pray for those who are married? For those of you who have taken marriage vows, are you personally committed to be a blessing to others, at home as well as to neighbors in the name of our Lord? To be a suitable companion and friend, it takes time, attention, patience, forgiveness, and the commitment to grow in love and faith. How are you doing? Ask your helpmate.

Amen.