Good morning Life Fellowship. I have a picture I want to show you of E-man. E-man is there in the center with the officers. He grew up in our church family. I saw this posted this week and it absolutely delighted me just to see his kingdom minded heart and to see him with our officers. I thought it was just such a great picture of what we want to see, a community and greatness. And I am so thankful for his passion. So I just want to pray right now for our city. We have a big game today, and I feel like we would be remiss to not pause and pray. So please join me.

Lord, I am so thankful for our city. I know that you love our city, you love our officers and you love our African American community. You love the whites and you love the Asians and you love the rich and you love the poor. You love all people regardless of their occupation, regardless of their skin color, and you are passionate for unity. I pray, God, that through all the anguish that is taking place that you would bring us to a beautiful, unifying place.

I pray you will protect our football players and those in the stadium today. I pray that if there are any protests taking place that it will be peaceful. Please help us as a church to continue to lift up our city in prayer. We thank you for this great city. We know that we are in the national spotlight right now and we just pray, God, that we here at Life Fellowship will get an opportunity to cast vision of what it would look like to really be city reachers, to make a difference in the city, to be godly examples and to stand up for what would please your heart. I just pray, God, that you will help us to be that kind of church.

I pray for our fellow churches as well. I am so thankful this church is amongst so many other great churches. Lord, I lift up these fellow churches that together we would really come together for the kingdom’s sake. I pray for Pastor Mike Moses at Lake Forest and Steve Furtick at Elevation. It is just incredible the growth that that they have been able to experience in such a short time.

I pray for Pastor Bobby Blanton over at Lake Norman Baptist that you would continue to use him. We lift up Naeem at Mosaic and ask that you will help him in his church to continue to do such a great job of reaching diversified people. I pray that you will be with Pastor Mike at The Cove and with Pastor Ferrell at Grace Covenant and give them great messages. I am thankful for their compassionate shepherding hearts and for all these pastors with their great leadership abilities and vision.

Lord, I just thank you for so much that we can learn. It takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people. And I am so thankful that we get the opportunity to just work together for the kingdom and to make a difference. Help us to live the kind of lives that if a non-believer sees us that they will be able to realize that this church and others
I loved the ‘Rocky’ movies so much when I was a kid. I can remember ‘The Eye of the Tiger’ when that came out and it was just great stuff. And I loved the Mickey speeches when Mickey would get with Rocky and he would say, ‘Get up, Rock,’ and he would challenge him. Mickey knew when to throw in the towel and when not to throw in the towel. And Mickey knew when he had the eye of the tiger. Mickey knew when Rocky had more in him, when Rocky was still able to stand up and fight. And Rocky would not throw in the towel because he believed that he could still stand up and fight. And I can remember that feeling. Rocky would stand up after being beaten to a pulp, after his jaw had been peppered with a barrage of jabs. He would stand up, and the audience in the theatre would just go nuts.

I remember watching ‘Karate Kid’ when I was younger, and afterwards I went out and got in a fight. I just kind of got moved by the movie which was stupid. But I loved seeing people who persevered, people standing up against all odds. And listen, here is what I believe I want to say today to us as a church family. And it relates to our marriages - don’t throw in the towel. I know it hurts to be down. I know you want to keep your eyes closed. I know you just want to give up. I know marriage can feel so painful, so difficult, but I feel as we come to this passage today that the message would be – don’t throw in the towel.

One of the benefits about teaching through books of the Bible is it keeps us honest. You end up coming across passages, and for myself as a pastor who teaches, I have to kind of go – ‘well, do I believe this?’ And I look at this passage, and I go, ‘Man, I look at what God is saying here, and yes, I do. I do.’ There are times that I have to wrestle through things, or it might be a while since I have visited a certain passage, and sometimes it feels a lot different to our culture compared to what we see in the word of God. But I think it is important for us to be able to go through His word and say again, ‘Yes, I believe this.’

I want to share with you today that it is important for us to not throw in the towel. And I want you to give this message a shot, a hearing, and to hear God’s heart. You know Rocky said this, “Boxing is a great sport as long as you can yell ‘cut’. When you are losing, when you are down you can say ‘cut.’” And I think many people look at marriage that way. Marriage sounds great as long as you can yell ‘cut.’

And the thing is we go into marriage, and we say this commitment to one another, these vows to one another, and the purpose of the vows are to help us when we are really struggling and want to give up - to not throw in the towel. But then the problem is when we really experience what we said in our vows – for better or worse – and we start having
a changed mind. ‘I really don’t want to love this person through sickness and health. I don’t know if I want to love this person who is acting like this.’ And we start to question things, but that is the purpose of those vows. That is the purpose of our commitment so that we can go back and remember what we said.

Like when I said, ‘I do’ to my wife before a group of people and before the Lord, I wasn’t saying those words just to say some tradition. I was saying those words that if and when, and more on the when, I get in these situations where I mentally want to escape, I will have Christians that love me enough to come alongside and help me to not throw in the towel. You see, my fear is that many in the church are capitulating and we are even telling people to throw in the towel now. We are changing the definition of marriage.

The divorce rate since 1960 has nearly doubled. In 1970, 89 percent of the babies that were born were born to married couples. Right now, that percentage is down to about 60 percent. In 1960, 72 percent of American adults were married. Today, about 50 percent of American adults are married. And why is that? It is because many people fear going into marriage. And I can understand that. So what do we do when we fear going into marriage? We start lowering the standards so that we don’t have to feel like a failure.

We start re-defining what marriage means. We start trying to figure out another way and that is what we are seeing a lot in our culture. We are re-defining marriage. We don’t value commitment and being people of our word. Those types of things don’t matter as much. What matters in America today is being happy. What matters in America is individualism. You know ‘You can have it all.’ ‘Do what you want to do.’ ‘Don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t.’ So we are anti-authority. We are anti-truth. We want relativism, individualism and happiness becomes our vision and not faithfulness. And we are paying a hefty price at the expense of what I would say is a faulty vision.

We are living now where we see all this confusion and people are saying, ‘You know what we need to do? We need to cohabitate. We need to live together before we get married. That is the way to go. We need to see if we are a good fit.’ In 1960 there was hardly any cohabitation, but guess what? Today, especially amongst the young, that is the norm, despite the fact that statistics show that couples that cohabitate have a higher chance of getting a divorce.

Now, don’t lose heart. I know this can be exhausting to think about, but the reality is that some will say, ‘Oh, but in the church the divorce rate is just as high,’ and I would say that those statistics have been proven to be false. We have said that amongst true believers that are committed core believers, the divorce rate is higher than we would
want it to be, but it is not 50 percent. Sadly, everyone can get lumped into one category and we have to realize that when you really look at it not everybody is a bonafide follower of Christ that is getting a divorce. Do bonafide followers of Christ get divorced? Sure, but it is not at 50 percent. It is not as high, and studies have since trumped those statements that had been saying that.

Now the good news is this, folks. If you get a high school diploma, if you don’t get married before the age of 18, and if you don’t have children out of wedlock, your chances of staying in a marriage that lasts is much greater. But the statistics of those who got married before 18, have a child out of wedlock, and who don’t get a high school education, those statistics go right through the roof. So that is why the church wants to be pro-education, why we want to encourage people to really think through things and understand the context of marriage. And so all of this background should begin to help us as we think about this.

In Malachi Chapter 2, in this series that we are doing called, ‘Return to the Lord,’ we come to a passage where the people are throwing in the towel in their marriages. And this grieves the heart of God, so today we are going to look at why. Now we need to step back and remember the context. God was working through the pre-exilic prophets telling these prophets to go and tell God’s people to live God’s way. But guess what? God’s people did not want to live God’s way. They wanted to be like the culture around them. So they softened God’s word up and they changed the definition of marriage.

So God allowed them to be taken into exile. And as they were in exile in Babylon, they were there as a consequence of rejecting God. They lived there, yet all along when we read the Bible we need to see that God’s desire was to bless. He wanted to bless Abraham and He wanted many nations to be blessed through him. And God, when He oversaw His people, Israel, He wanted them to live a certain way.

And He said, ‘Look, I want you to live a certain way. I want you to model marriage a certain way. I want you to model your finances a certain way. I want you to model your prayer life a certain way. And if you will model these things a certain way, then you can be a city on a hill. And then all the nations around you can be blessed through you. All of the nations around you can be blessed by your lives. And you can be a magnet.’

And that was the purpose, so that they could glorify God and be a magnet. But instead they rejected the ways of God and wanted to be like the surrounding cultures. They wanted to fit in, rather than stand out, so they adjusted things. And as a result God had to take care of His vision. If people were rejecting His vision, He had to do something about it.
In the same way I said last week if you oversaw a company and people weren’t working with you, and they started trying to change everything up, it would be inconceivable to not do something about it. And God had to show His people that He did not approve of their ways so they were taken into captivity. And where do you think we are as a nation? I think we are now in exile officially, folks. And now is the time for Daniels’ to rise up. We have ignored God’s word, we have not paid attention, we have sought to fit in, and we are in a time where we are in exile. That is us right now. And we are going to have to learn to live that way, and I am going to have to know how to preach and teach and lead in that kind of culture. That is where we are.

Daniel had great respect before kings and others we know because of the way the Bible tells us he lived. So I believe it is possible that we can still live exemplary lives in a culture. We can still keep our values, but nevertheless there will be problems. Daniel ended up in a lion’s den. Those things could be coming, folks, they are headed our way. I am not saying we are going to end up in a lion’s den, but you may end up behind bars.

We are living in great times as a church because it is said the darker the culture gets the more our light can shine. Right now the community is getting mixed signals, because people who really aren’t passionate about God, and those who aren’t really serious about following God, will go away. They are going to be shaved off, and they are going to go the way of the culture, because it is going to get more and more difficult to follow Jesus.

Now some would say I shouldn’t be scaring people about following Jesus. And it is kind of tempting not to do this. For instance, how many of you would like to stand up and give a message on this topic of divorce in today’s culture? Well, be my guest. God has asked us to be faithful, that is the passion of His heart, and He wants us to see His vision. So the goal of my message today, folks, is to encourage you not to throw in the towel. These people in Malachi were throwing in the towel and they were headed for divorce.

I have a six-fold purpose in this message today. The first would be I hope for those of you who are non-Christians, those of you who are exploring Christianity, that you would think about this even though you may think it is kind of weird that I am talking about divorce. But here is what I would hope that you will get - God’s passion for unity. I would hope that you can see that even though you can come up with a lot of reasons why the church isn’t a place where a lot of people want to be because of hypocrisy and such, that you will be able to look beyond that and see God’s heart.

And what we see when we see God’s heart is learning that God had a way that He wanted His people in the Old Testament to live, and He has a way that He wants us as the church to live. And what He tells us is when we live this way that the church can be a
city on a hill. That we can be the salt of the earth and that we can be the light of the
world. So in other words, God wants us to value marriage, He wants us to value unity.
Jesus said, “The world will know you are my disciples by your love for one another.”
Jesus prayed in John Chapter 17 that we would be one. And when we love each other,
when we are one, when we stay committed, what God wants us to do is to showcase what
it looks like to live according to His ways, to live loving Him. And then that would be an
attraction model for those who are seeking.

God said in the person of Jesus Christ, “The world will know you are my
disciples by your love for one another.” So what Jesus was saying was basically, ‘Hey,
if you see the church not loving each other, you have a reason to think that they are not
my disciples.’ And that is a pretty powerful statement. Our life is an apologetic. Our life
is to be a defense that this is the real deal, that the gospel has the power to re-shape our
lives, and to transform culture.

And so when you look at the church, God’s heart would be that you see couples
that struggle in their marriage, but they work it out. And people who hurt each other,
forgive each other. And people break addictions and experience life change and
transformations. So if you should be struggling in your marriage, or in a certain
situation, you will look and think the church is the place to go, that it is the place where
life change happens. That is what we are to be as a church. We need Jesus because we
can be a mess. But I would say we need to look beyond us to Jesus and see that His
passion and God’s passion is for us to be blessed through the church.

The second purpose of this message today would be that I want to say if you are
considering getting a divorce, I hope that you will reconsider. Third, if you are single
and you are fearful about marriage, I hope that you can see a pathway of hope for
marriage, and what it can look like so that you don’t have to be a statistic. Fourth, I want
to answer if there are any Biblical reasons for divorce, and I want to talk to you about
that. Fifth, I also want to do this message because I want to ask you as a church family to
not acquiesce in this time, but to be willing to rise up, to hold fast to what the word of
God says, to carry the cross, and to not compromise right now.

We are living in dark times and we need an army here. We need to be strong, we
need to walk with God, and we need to be faithful. And if you don’t want that, search
your hearts and get to the bottom of it, because you will not survive if you cannot get to
the core. We have to have God as our ultimate. If your ultimate is people pleasing, if
your ultimate is making a living, if your ultimate is your comfort, if your ultimate is your
job success, you are going down. Because the moment your job gets disturbed, the
moment your marriage gets off, the moment a relationship gets messed up, the moment
your bank account gets empty, you are going to vanish and be disillusioned. That is why
God must be our *summum bonum*, our greatest good, and our ultimate. We need to keep focused on God and His vision.

What does it look like for us then? We live in an area with many married couples. We cannot underestimate collectively the power of godly marriages in this community. Husbands loving their wives, and wives loving their husbands - we cannot underestimate in this community the vision of godly families making a difference in our culture right here and right now.

The sixth purpose of this message today is I would hope that if you have been through a divorce that you won’t feel beat up. That is not my goal. In fact I would hope that if you have been through a divorce you would stand here with me and say, *‘Man, I am with you, bro. I see the Scriptures, and that is not God’s way; that is not God’s plan.’* Know this, God absolutely loves you if you have been through a divorce. It is not about a love or not love thing. I mean there are things I do all the time that grieve God’s heart, right? I am flawed, I am messed up.

So I am not here to throw stones, but my goodness, it would be too much to ask for me not to teach this just because someone here has been through a certain situation, to ask or expect me to adjust the word of God now for them. I can’t do that. That is not my calling. If I did that I would be a pluralist, I would be a relativist, I wouldn’t be able to stand. And by the way, I used to be a drunk, but I don’t celebrate drunkenness. No, I realize it was wrong.

So now let’s come to Malachi Chapter 2 with this in mind and the vision set before us. And if you want to know what the theme of this passage is in Chapter 2 verses 10 through 16, it is - keep your commitments, be a person of your word, be a person of valor, that our words matter, that our commitments matter. That being that kind of a person means a lot. And you have an opportunity even if you have been through a divorce to help people to learn from the things that you have learned. So this is for all of us. We can all learn together.

In verse 10 we read, *“Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?”* We all have one God, a God who is faithful to us, a God who loves us, a God who cares about us; why don’t we do that with one another? Why don’t we care for each other? Why don’t we love one another?

The word ‘faithless’ that we see is the key word in these verses. It is going to appear five times, and it literally means ‘to act treacherously.’ And we are going to see a few areas where they were faithless. Number one, they were taking wives outside of their belief in Yahweh or God, and they were taking wives who believed in other gods.
And folks, some people who believed in some of these gods were actually sacrificing children to them. This was serious stuff.

So Malachi is shifting his message from the leaders to the individuals to everyone. And he started off addressing the leaders, and as the leaders go so goes the community. The leaders were apathetic, they weren’t following God, and when we start seeing leaders compromise on the word of God in our culture, and doing all that stuff, we will see others doing it as well. It becomes a domino effect that takes place, and it can be tragic.

So how were they faithless? Well, look at verse 11 where it says, “Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord, which He loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god.” So what has happened is God’s people have come out of exile, they are back in Jerusalem, and they had this opportunity to really showcase what it was to be that city on a hill. God wanted people to be able to look at Jerusalem and see God’s people and they would be drawn to it. Today it is the church that is supposed to go and reach out.

What was happening was they came back and instead of sitting things up according to God’s ways, they forgot why they went into captivity to begin with. They had become like Babylon, and they brought Babylon back to Jerusalem. And now they were compromising. It says they married daughters of foreign gods. What we are getting at here is this unequally yoked idea. When we remember God’s vision, He wanted them to be distinct, to be attractive, and to be unified. And when a believer goes into a relationship with somebody who is polytheistic, there is no way that they can build together the kind of community that God wants.

Now I have seen couples who are non-Christians that have had happy marriages, as well as Christians with non-Christians, that is not what I am saying. But you are not going to see a non-Christian fulfilling the purposes of God for marriage, and that is spreading the gospel and trying to raise a godly legacy. In the context of marriage it should be a missional marriage. God wanted these couples to be able to be in alignment, and if they married someone outside of their faith, they were going to be totally at odds. How were they going to present their offerings to God? How are they going to raise their kids? What was that vision going to be?

So God wasn’t trying to be cruel. This wasn’t like He had this ethnic issue; no, it was a spiritual issue, and that was the core. And they were marrying other people with different belief systems. God knew that was going to work directly against His vision of showing what it would look like to demonstrate powerfully through His people for a watching world the difference it can make to follow Him. But they weren’t concerned about that. And so that became a real problem.
In fact we see this in I Kings with Solomon. It says, “Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, You shall not enter into marriage with them; neither shall they with you. For surely they will turn away your heart after their gods.” But Solomon clung to those in love. We also saw what happened to Samson with the Philistine, Delilah, and how his heart went astray. And we know when we look at the Scriptures that there is already some compromising, like when we start this unequally yoked thing. It doesn’t mean that God can’t bring good out of things, that is not what I am saying. He is trying to be wise, He is trying to help us to understand how to be sure that we can build a marriage, a relationship that will be healthy.

Then we think about the New Testament in II Corinthians Chapter 6 and verse 14, where it says, “Do not be unequally yoked with non-believers.” Now maybe some of you are wondering if God even loves non-believers. Of course He does. I was once a non-believer, and I don’t look at this as a person who had never heard the gospel at 19 years of age and think, ‘Oh my goodness, what was God saying about me when I was 18?’ God was protecting people that were believers from adopting the values that I had at 18 years old. He wanted those people to have the values that belonged to His heart.

So what does it mean to be equally yoked? It means to be going in the same direction. So if I were to take a coyote and yoke him up with a Chihuahua they would obviously be unequally yoked. If you put a coyote and a Chihuahua together that is not going to be for the best. And as believers we make decisions every day, and our decisions flow from our worldview. And if we yoke up with someone who sees the world differently, we have entered into a contract with someone we are going to be at odds with if our Christian faith means something to us.

Zachariah Chapter 8 and verse 17 says, “Love no false oath.” Proverbs says, “It is a trap for a person to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider their vows.” So what ends up happening is people say these vows, they say these words, they struggle, and then get mad at people if they challenge them to keep their vows. But they were the ones that said the vows. They said they wanted to love their intended no matter what. And we are to help one another to hold fast, to hang in there together.

God knew that these marriages literally would undermine their spiritual life and that was important. Paul also knew that there would be issues even in a yoked marriage to fulfill God’s mission. He said that those who married would be more distracted. Why? It is because our purpose is to live missional, and in the context of marriage he said you are going to be distracted, even in a yoked marriage. So how much more would that be true in an unequally yoked kind of context? And we need to think about that in the light of Scriptures.
If you have read the last chapter of Nehemiah, Chapter 13, you will remember that Nehemiah shows up after the people have returned from Babylon and they are back in Jerusalem. And he speaks to these people that have been marrying foreign wives. And he literally goes a little Rocky on them. He starts getting in fights with them and he literally was pulling their facial hair out for what they are doing. Imagine if you had gotten unequally yoked and I came up to you and bam, I knocked you out. That was what Nehemiah was doing, he was literally taking marriage that seriously.

Ezra, the priest at this same time, he pulled out his own facial hair, because he was weeping and grieving. Now why was that? We would have to go back and get in the context to understand. Nehemiah and Ezra were passionate about God and they were appalled at what the people were doing. They were infuriated by the people’s actions, because they had been brought out of captivity with this opportunity to rebuild the temple and the nation that was to be a light for the world, and they were compromising and watering God’s word down. So Ezra was pulling out his own beard. And he told them they needed to divorce from their foreign wives.

Now you are probably thinking, ‘I thought we weren’t supposed to divorce.’ This was a unique transitional point in history where the people have come out of 70 years of captivity, and they knew that marriage with non-believers was a non-covenant marriage before God. It was a pagan type of relationship, so they were told to divorce. He was so desperate to start things off the right way for God’s glory that he wanted them to do whatever it took.

Listen, see how far we have come as a culture of tolerance. We read that passage and we are like, ‘What? They told them that?’ Some people would be thinking, ‘Be careful, Bobby, you are being too strong. You might offend some people.’ And here was Nehemiah pulling men’s beards out for crying out loud. So I don’t feel like I am being all that harsh. In fact I do not want to be harsh at all, but I really just want to inspire us. Let’s really be people of our word. That is what I am trying to do. But Nehemiah was serious. And Ezra’s pulling out his own beard was a sign of grief and remorse. So all this was going on because there were plastic promises that were being made.

As we think about these Scriptures, the consequences will now begin to crystalize for us. By the way the New Testament says if you are married to a non-believer, stay with that non-believer in the hope that they will be saved. Let’s read verse 12 where it says, “May the Lord cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the Lord of hosts! And this second thing you do. You cover the Lord’s altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand.”
So now God can see through their hypocrisy. What they are doing is adopting extra wives, they are picking up extra women, but they are still coming to church. Actually it was the temple, I am distinguishing here, but I am just trying to make it practical for understanding purposes. They were still going to the temple, they were still going and offering their offerings. But God is not accepting their offerings. Why? It is because He sees through them and they are not really wanting to follow Him. In other words they were blinded by wanting what they wanted so badly.

And you know that is the problem with hypocrisy. We don’t see our own hypocrisy. The Pharisees couldn’t see their hypocrisy. Jesus told them to take out the log in their eyes, because they couldn’t see themselves. And that is what hypocrisy does, it blinds us and we can’t see it in ourselves. And a lot of times we have to have someone come along beside us to help us to see ourselves. These people wanted to have God on their own terms, and to do so they were willing to compromise His word. And God was telling them they were not going to be able to redefine things here. So they were weeping and crying, but God saw through that and knew it was not genuine. Those weren’t tears of remorse.

This is like the parent who tells their child not to do something and they do it anyway. When they face the consequences, they begin to cry, and the parent knows they are just sorry because they are having to face the consequences, but not sorry because they disobeyed. That is kind of what is going on here. They are hypocritically engaged in this endeavor and God sees through it.

Verse 14, “But you say, Why does he not? Because the Lord was witness between you the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.” So what is the second thing they are doing? They are divorcing their covenant relationships with their wives from their youth. Now this would apply as well to women if they were leaving their husbands. So what are they doing? They are leaving their wives by covenant from their youth. So you can just picture this scene. ‘You know what, it is getting hard between my wife and I. I am tired and now is my chance for somebody new. I would like a new younger woman, a 2.0 model. I want to update my wife so I am going to get rid of my old wife.’ So they had become ‘lust directed.’

And we have to be careful. We see as we go out of that young marriage, that young love, and we head into a difficult season, the temptation can be for us around that mid-life crisis to start thinking about maybe checking out someone else. And some will do that at that age, and they often try to find someone younger the second time, someone who hasn’t been weathered as much by life. Instead of thinking how wonderful it is to be weathered together through faithfulness and commitment. Those lines are on our faces have come from working through the muck and mire of marriage.
But these people were just casting off their wives of their youth and finding some young ones from the nations around them. And this was shattering to God’s heart. Many are so quick to see God as the bad guy in all of this, instead of considering how wrong this was when they walked away from their wives and went after young non-believers. They were trying to re-design the nation to be something different, like in Babylon where they had been captives. And God didn’t want that. He wanted His people to be distinct. And that is what He desires for us.

Let’s read verse 14 again: “But you say, Why does he not? Because the Lord was witness between you the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did He not make them one, with a portion of the spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring.” Maybe you are wondering what is going on here. Well, in Genesis Chapter 2 and verse 24 we remember God said, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

When we come to the New Testament Jesus says this in Matthew Chapter 19 and verse 6, “So they are no longer two but one flesh. What God has joined together, let not man separate.” In other words, God set the parameters for marriage as this. But today we live in a culture that says you can leave your spouse for A,B,C,D or E. So man is separating what God has brought together when we are to hold fast in our marital situations. God wanted the nations to be blessed through Abraham. He wanted people to see godly offspring from couples who were united in their mission, raising their children with a tethered vision. And that would help be a magnetic vision for the world to see.

Continuing in verse 15 and 16 it says, “So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. For the man who does not love his wife, but divorces her, says the Lord the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit and do not be faithless.”

Here are a couple of things I want to bring out. Number one, why would God say He hates divorce? Well, He certainly doesn’t hate the ones who have been divorced. That is not the case at all. I wouldn’t want you to feel that whatsoever. But God hates the consequences of divorce. He hates the picture that it paints to the world that are watching His people. He hates what it portrays. He hates that it breaks down the faith in children of having a long lasting relationship with both parents. He hates the consequences that it means to a culture. That is what He hates. And you know what, I believe that no one goes into marriage looking for a divorce. And they will hate the fact that their marriage came to that place. And God hates when that happens, but He does not hate the people who have been divorced.
Notice that He talks about this garment being covered. Today we use a ring that we hand somebody when we propose. But in the ancient culture what they would do is uncover their garment and fold it over the individual when they proposed. Remember the story of Ruth before Boaz when she asks him to unfold the garment and put it over her. By the way that was pretty bold of Ruth proposing to Boaz. What was up with that? She was being pretty aggressive.

Now, let’s get practical. Are there any grounds for divorce Biblically speaking? Marriage is till death do us part; however we do see in the Scriptures when it comes to sexual immorality in Matthew Chapter 19 that Jesus said, “Whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” We would still encourage those who have experienced a marriage where adultery may have happened to work through that.

And I am so thankful for when it does. I have known people who have experienced forgiveness with each other and it was really beautiful and special. But there is this exception where the pain is so cutting, so deep, and so hard that someone can’t get through it that they can go, and marry again, and it doesn’t seem that there are consequences for that person who chose to leave because of the adultery that took place.

Now that is one issue. Another issue would be that we see this verse in the Scriptures. If you are married to a non-believer, if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such case the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. So if you are a believer and you are married to a non-believer, and the non-believer wants to leave, let the person go and that does not mean you could not go on and get married again. However, if you are married as a believer to a non-believer, you are not to leave. So those would be the reasons.

Now you may be thinking, ‘Well Bobby, there are lots of other reasons you could think of.’ And there are lots of reasons I can think of too. And after listening to some of the counseling I have, there have been times when I have wanted to be able to say, ‘Dude, run,’ or ‘Lady, run.’ I get it. But if I am looking at what I see in the Scriptures, as to what I can say based on them, that is it.

Now you may want to ask, ‘Well, what about physical abuse?’ Well, number one, if you are physically abusive to your spouse, knock it off. That is what I will say right off the bat. I will also say you need to certainly separate yourself from that and get some counseling and see if you can work through some things. But if the spouse continues to do something like that, you have to wonder if this is a genuine believer. I don’t know the person’s heart at the end of day, but I am saying if you are not willing to work on this, what in the world is going on here? So if you are abusing your spouse, keep your hands off of her, and go get some counseling.
Now, if that is happening I don’t see that there is this divorce opening, as much as I would love to be able to say that, probably like many of you would. But I think there is separation that leads to reconciliation, and there is separation that leads to divorce. And when there is separation there should be counsel taking place, there should be a pathway, a plan that would really be working toward reconciliation. But I rarely see reconciliation once separation happens. Honestly I don’t know if I have seen it two times in my entire ministry. That is how rare it is. So when you decide to move out, know how serious it is. But if there is physical abuse, I mean that is really a situation where you have to protect yourself from that.

With this in mind, let me share a closing thought to four groups of people here. First I have a thought for singles. If you are single – develop some guiding relational principles for the type of person that you want to marry someday. I would also say for the type of person that you want to be. Have some values, know what it is that you are looking for. You want to be aligned as much as possible with somebody on life philosophy, on doctrine, on values and on those types of things. So you want to figure that out and you need to want alignment. That will help you to find that unity with someone.

Second, a thought for those of you that are divorced – if you have experienced unbiblical divorce, realize that while God hates divorce, the consequences of it, He loves divorced people. And that means He loves you. And so if you have had an unbiblical divorce, just confess it to God, and embrace His extravagant grace. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. And I know plenty of great Christian people who have been through a divorce, and that does not change their identity in Christ, because you are still fearfully and wonderfully made, and God is still passionate about you. And you can be a great voice in helping people learn from some of the lessons that you have learned along the way. You can really be used in great ways. And if you have been through a divorce I would encourage you to go through like a divorce care ministry. I know Lake Norman Baptist has offered that, and in the future I hope we will be able to offer that as a church. I want us to be able to help those who are hurting with the aftermath of divorce.

Third, a thought for married couples – if you are struggling, don’t quit before the miracle happens. This is a statement that we would say in AA over and over and over again. How do you get sober? It is one day at a time. How do you put your marriage back together? It is one day at a time. Many times we get desperate in our marriages because we won’t rebuild it one day at a time. We are looking back to how we thought it would be and we are disillusioned. Or we are thinking about the future and we are thinking that this person will never change. We build a marriage one day at a time.
Michael McDowell, who is a Nascar racer in our church, recently won his first race and I texted him, ‘Congratulations.’ And here is what he replied: ‘Thank you, Bobby, it was awesome. God is good even when I don’t win, which has been 292 times.’ So Michael, wherever you are, bro, thanks for not throwing in the towel. We celebrate your win. Don’t give up. Marriage requires lots of forgiveness so forgive, forgive, forgive. That is the secret to a marriage that lasts. How many times should we forgive, Peter asked Jesus - seven times? No, seven times seventy. That is 490 times that we forgive, right? No, Jesus was saying to keep forgiving, to just keep forgiving.

Guess what? We can’t be like Jesus, folks, unless we forgive. And the greatest way we model being Christ-like is through forgiveness. And the context where we will have the opportunity to forgive the most is in our marriages and in our families. God will allow us then to be hurt so that we can forgive, so that we can be like Jesus, so that the world can see we can really make it after all. And when we forgive we forgive because He forgave us and we share that with others. And not only can they learn it through the way forward, but that there is a Jesus that forgives as well. And they see the picture unfolding before their eyes.

Timothy Keller in his book, ‘The Meaning of Marriage,’ said this: “All surveys tell us that the number of married people who say they are very happy in their marriages is high, about 61 to 62 percent. And there has been little decrease in this figure during the last decade. Most striking of all though are the longitudinal studies that demonstrate two thirds of those unhappy marriages out there will become happy within five years IF people stay married and do not get divorced. This led the University of Chicago Psychologist, Linda J. Waite to say, ‘The benefits of divorce have been oversold.’”

Not only that but studies show that typically people end up in the same context after they get married just a few years later because they end up seeing over time that they had a lot of issues too. We can live with our own issues a lot better than we can live with other people’s issues. But I am going to tell you something right now. My wife and I have known what it is like to want to go to Tahiti, to escape there, and not with each other. I have wanted to be in Tahiti with her, and I have wanted to be in Tahiti without her. And she has wanted to be in Tahiti without me.

I am telling you as a pastor, as a person who has spent nine years traveling the country speaking on Family Life Weekend Marriage Teams. I mean we have had some tough times. I couldn’t get her out of the car one time at the airport on the way to a marriage conference to speak on communication, because of the intense fellowship we were having on the way to the airport. She sat in the car and told me she was not getting out until I told her I was sorry.
Listen, I am not kidding, there have been times in my marriage with Heather when I thought I had no right to be pastoring a church, and that I had no right being on the Family Life speaking team. At times we have felt so far apart, yet if you are going to be a long term pastor you are going to go through some struggles, and you can’t just run away from them all. And while there have been times where I thought there was no way we could ever get our love back, there was no way our marriage could ever feel like it once did, I am standing up here today and telling you we are madly in love with each other. We are really, really doing great right now. It is a wonderful season right now, it is spring. But I know there will be more winters. And the key to making it through the winters is – don’t throw in the towel. Rather it has been said – wipe the sweat off your face with it.

So folks, I would encourage you to go to Roland Martinez’s ‘Two Becoming One’ marriage class that is offered in Life University. Over a hundred couples in our church have been through that class, and I would encourage you to go and listen to what this gifted couple, Roland and Tammy, can share about marriage and the benefits of it.

Now lastly a thought for each of us – in a culture that has not only redefined the meaning of marriage but also the importance of it, let us model the beauty of marital commitment and hold fast to marriage God’s way. The temptation is going to be to redefine what marriage means. The temptation is going to be to loosen up what it means, and I am asking us to be the kind of church that remembers the vision of God to model this – this forgiveness, this unconditional love and to show forth the beauty of a marriage built God’s way. Remember that marriage is a picture. In Ephesians Chapter 5 it says, “Husbands, love your wives as Christ does the church.” How did Christ love the church? It was unconditionally.

From the cross, Jesus, the great groom of Heaven was proposing to us, the church, the bride of Christ, to believe in Him, to say ‘I do’ to Him, and His love is one that is unconditional. He is not going to leave us or forsake us. He cares about us and He wants us to enter into that covenant love with Him, and then model that kind of marital love to the world around us. In that way our marriage is more than just something we go into for a good relational ride; rather it is a portrait of God and His love for His people. Let’s pray.

Lord, thank you for your word. If anyone here today doesn’t know you may they realize that you love them in spite of everything that they have ever done. I am thankful that you love people enough to provide the consequences that are needed to show that living outside of your way can lead to serious issues. But walking in your way leads to much blessing.
If you are that non-believer would you just say this in the quietness of your heart:

*Jesus, forgive me for where I have fallen short in my life, for all of my wrong doings. Thank you for paying for the consequences of my misconduct and the sins in my life.*

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The preceding transcript was completed using raw audio recordings. As much as possible, it includes the actual words of the message with minor grammatical changes and editorial clarifications to provide context. Hebrew and Greek words are spelled using Google Translator and the actual spelling may be different in some cases.