

Title: Counting the Cost of Christian Marriage

Text: Mark 10:6-8; Luke 14:26-30

Jesus, when he said, "...the two shall become one. So they are no longer two but one," was not assuring his hearers that this oneness in marriage comes automatically, that it is somehow bound to happen. In this saying ^{Jesus} was not giving a guarantee; rather, he was proclaiming an ideal, ^{setting} a standard, making a demand.

Another of his sayings, which we should place alongside this one, gives us a right perspective on Christian marriage: "For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?" Jesus spoke those words one day to a crowd in order to underscore the costliness of discipleship, to show that those who would follow his way have a price to pay, but it does no violence to his intention when we use them in a more limited way and apply them specifically to marriage. Christian marriage has a cost that cannot be evaded: there is a price to be paid if, in fact, "the two shall become one."

I ask you, then, to think with me about three fundamentals of Christian marriage, about three principles that must be considered when the cost of marriage is being counted.

(1) Christian marriage is an unconditional commitment.

There is nothing ambiguous about the words, "till death us do part," in the traditional vows. When a man and a woman make that vow together, they are unconditionally committing themselves to a shared life for a lifetime. They are declaring that in their marriage "the two shall become one" and that the two shall continue to be one. Christian marriage is not a contract with an escape clause; Christian marriage is a commitment without conditions.

Some marriages established on Christian commitment do, of course, break up. But this is always to be looked upon as a tragic contradiction of ~~the~~ ^{God's} Christian ideal and standard. Divorce is sometimes justified, even between a man and a woman who have made a Christian commitment. ~~I~~ I believe there are situations in which it is right to advise divorce, ~~be~~ not because divorce is good but because the alternative is so bad. This is not a denial of the standards Christ gave us: it is a recognition that there will be some failures in maintaining that ideal among committed Christians.

In recent years a dangerous sentiment has become rather widespread in our society, especially among our young people. It is the sentiment that rejects the principle of the unconditionalness of marriage, that sees a marriage failure not as tragic but as merely awkward and inconvenient. It is the sentiment that would dismiss ~~the~~ ^{God's} Christian ideal as old-fashioned piety and would hamstring bright, modern, emancipated people. Margaret Mead, the well-known anthropologist, wrote this a few years ago: "The most serious ~~of~~ aspect of the divorce rate is not so much the number of divorces as the expectation of divorce.....It seems to me, as an anthropologist, that the most serious thing happening in the United States/ is that people enter marriage now with the idea that if it doesn't work they can always give the ring back."

I remember one young couple who came to see me about having me officiate at their wedding. In the course of the interview the young man said: "We thought we'd get married - and see how it works out." I asked: "And what if it doesn't work out?" They merely shrugged their shoulders and gave me those gently superior smiles that the super-sophisticated use on us "squares." Some people today seem to think that the marriage vow should be amended to read, "till death us do part or until circumstances do alter."

The explicit intention with which a ~~person~~ person enters marriage is the key to the whole tone and quality of their life together and determines how they handle the challenges, trials, and uncertainties of married life. A marriage built on the assumption that it is a contract with an escape clause is one thing; a quite different thing is a marriage founded on the conviction that it is a life together for a lifetime... "the two shall become one" - and the price is unconditional commitment. Of course, the results are a strong home, family ties that are more secure, a deeper binding love, and the joy of growing old together.

II. CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE IS FOUNDED IN REALISTIC LOVE.

Today there is a menacing air of unreality about so much popular thinking about love and its place in marriage. Doctors English and Pearson, discussing the emotional bases of marriage in their important book, Emotional Problems of Living, point out: "Probably no life event of equal importance is viewed with as little realism as marriage."

Many people today often have curious notions of "real love." These notions are formed by the movies, popular songs, and magazines such as: "True Love," "Real Romance" and of course "Playboy." They all lead to the dangerous idea that two imperfect people can somehow make a perfect marriage, providing that certain standard emotional conditions prevail. Much of our popular culture encourages people in ~~the~~ the belief that, when a young man and young woman experience that shattering complexity of emotions and sentiments known as "being in love with one another," it is only necessary for them to have the knot tied to ensure that for ever afterward everything will be simply wonderful. But perfect marriage, marriage without stress, strain, and problems, is a figment of an over active romantic imagination. As someone has put it: "Romantic love is good for getting people married, but not for keeping them married." Romantic love provides the initial impulse for happy marriage, but, after that impulse spends itself, something more is required.

Love does change in marriage. And when it does, one of two things happen. In some marriages the love on which they are founded becomes rather flabby and there is little else to keep the relationship strong. Many marriages fall apart because they run out of emotional steam. The other thing that can happen is that the love, although losing some of its intensity and excitement, becomes deeper and stronger. ^{and becomes realistic} But this happens only when it is a love centered in Christ. Only when we have experience the love of God in our lives - the forgiving love of God which over looks our sin - can we then love our partner with the kind of love that over looks their faults.

What does a girl have in her ^{mind} when she marries a ~~very young~~ young man? What is her vision of this new husband? Well, it has something to do with her father and whether she liked him or rebelled against him. It has a little bit of Gary Grant mixed up in it, and perhaps a little of James Bond.

And what is the vision of the husband? ~~Well, I believe that my vision was probably a combination of Mother, Elizabeth Taylor and Betty Crocker.~~

Now what happens when a girl with a vision of ~~James Bond~~ James Bond and a man with a vision of Elizabeth Taylor get married and begin to find out that the other person is not much like their vision? One of two things. They may center their minds on the difference between the ideal and what they are finding the other person to be like, and then try, either openly or subversively to push the other partner into that image. Or, by the grace of God, they can increasingly come to accept the other person as he or she is -- including ~~his~~ his or her standards of how they themselves should be -- and then under God seek to conform to the best and most uplifting of those standards. This is realistic, maturing, christ-centered love. It is a love that is outgoing, not a selfish, ingrown love.

III. CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE REQUIRES SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE FOR ITS MAINTENANCE.

A Christ-centered marriage is sustained by the practice of the Christian faith. And this involves much more than starting off with a church wedding and all the trimmings; it involves active participation in the life of the church and the taking of our faith in Christ seriously in the whole realm of life.

Recent sociological studies have demonstrated a significant positive relationship between church participation and marriage stability. One investigation showed that the divorce rate among couples with active church relationships is about one-tenth of that for society as a whole. But you might say, "Preacher, I know many marriages that are stable and happy and these people have nothing to do with the church." This may be true. But the fact remains, explain it how you will, that there is a high, positive correlation between church participation and stable marriage in this highly explosive culture of ours. Of course I believe the answer is very plain. If you are participating in the church, it means that you are serving Christ. And when you are serving Christ, you "are seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" ~~and his righteousness~~ *So keep*

But we should also keep in mind that there are in the practices of of faith resources that make for stability and happiness in marriage. But faith cannot be used as a mere gimmick in marriage. Faith is not a magic cure-all for marriage ~~stiff~~ distress which can be used as a wonder drug when the going becomes a bit rough. Faith is not very helpful if it is neglected until a marriage is falling apart .

