

CHRIST COVENANT CHURCH

Sermon Transcript

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Ezra 9:1-5

Why Christians Must Marry Only in the Lord

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Father, we come now to the reading and the preaching of your word, asking sincerely that you would help us to listen. It's a narrow word, but it's a word for all of us. May our hearts not be hard to it. Pray that you would, especially for those who are on the cusp of dating or marriage or looking ahead sometime in the future and hoping to be married, that this word in particular might steer them on the right path. For any who providentially are in a place less than ideal, use this word to also correct and to form us into Christ. And for those who by your grace have good things in place, may we rejoice and yet grow ever more together and strongly in our union with you. We pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Our text this morning is from Ezra chapter 9. These two chapters, 9 and 10 – can see the headings in your Bible – deal with a major problem that Ezra encounters on his arrival. And one way to approach them is to deal with the two chapters together, present the problem, confess the problem, repent of the problem, or perhaps to do, as we've been mostly doing, just one chapter at a time. But I want to deal with just the first five verses, and Pastor Tom will be preaching next week on the confession that Ezra prays, and then Lord willing in two weeks we'll finish up the book with their repentance. But I want to spend this morning on one single, simple point that can be drawn from these first five verses. Ezra chapter 9:

“After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, “The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the land, with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness, the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost. As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. And at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my fasting with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord my God.”

I'm going to give you the conclusion up front, because this sermon is, in some ways, all application. There is one simple, perhaps life-altering, point to this sermon, and it's right there in the title printed in the bulletin, and the point is this: Christians should marry only Christians. Or to put it negatively, the word of God does not allow Christians to marry non-Christians. Now, if this lands on you uncomfortably, you find yourself bristling, I urge you to keep yourself open to God's word in this message. Do not think, well what ultimately does my pastor have to say, but what does the Bible say, and what is God saying through him? Perhaps you have frustrations in your own life – be

wanting to be married and not, maybe thinking that this is simply good, ideal counsel, but impossible in the long run, or you think, perhaps, it's not really worth it, and God has another way. And if I just pretend and close my ears to this message and continue along the path that I'm on, a path of disobedience, yet he'll rescue me in the end. Now, before I explain the reasons for this biblical injunction that Christians marry only in the Lord, let me try to think of some different groups of people who may be hearing this message.

First, there are those here who are already married to non-Christians. You may be in this situation for a number of reasons. Perhaps you knew this already, but you chose a path against God's word and married a non-Christian, and now you are married. Or perhaps you were both non-Christians, and one of you became a Christian. Or as often happens, maybe both of you went through the motions of saying you were a Christian, and you really weren't, but now you're really excited and on fire, and you want to go to church, and your spouse does not. This sermon is not meant to make you feel like a second-class citizen. Paul's instructions tell you to remain as you are. Now, I'll warn you, we have to explain how that fits from Paul in 1 Corinthians with what we will see in two weeks in chapter 10, which is mass divorce. So, I understand that is a problem that we need to explain in two weeks. But this is not a sermon that's trying to do everything. This is not a sermon trying to help you to live in a mixed marriage – mixed marriage meaning a Christian and a non-Christian. That's an important topic. That's what this sermon is not about. 1 Corinthians 7:12-13 says, "If any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. Now Paul is dealing with the case where people – one of them becomes a Christian and the other remains not a Christian, and he says if they don't abandon you, if they stay with you, you should stay married. So that's one group that may be listening to this.

Second, you may be here and you say, "Whoa, I am married, and we're both Christians. Let me see what I can do for the next 35-40 minutes." Listen. This sermon will still have import and influence for you, so don't tune out.

Third, there may be those here – you are single – and yet, and you hope to be married, but that's a long way's off. You're 12. Your parents really hope marriage is a long way off. Or maybe you're 18, and it's hopefully a little closer, but still not immediately there. I urge you to still listen to this. You may not remember the three points that I'm coming to. You may not remember much, other than one time when I was growing up at Christ Covenant, I remember the pastor preached a sermon that said I should marry a Christian. And if you remember that one thing, that would be of the Lord to remember that.

A final group that may feel most awkward right now: those who are dating or pursuing a non-Christian. Perhaps you are flirting with the idea, literally flirting with the idea. Perhaps you're thinking now – why did I invite them to come to this Sunday? Been trying to say here is my church, and now they come to this Sunday of all Sundays. Well, that's in the Lord's providence, and I urge you to listen. What better thing for both of you to hear. You may be wondering, also, at the very

outset – as this sermon is about marriage – you may say, "Well, yeah, but what does the Bible say about dating a non-Christian?" You said don't marry a non-Christian. What about dating? Well, the Bible does not know dating as we know dating. If by dating you mean that your parents – and parents, you can decide this for yourselves – if your parents allow you to go to a one-off homecoming dance with a friend, I would say that that does not constitute dating on the way to marriage. If, however, as most people use dating in our culture, you could say courtship, you could say something else, but moving, in a relationship exclusively committed to each other, heading somewhere. If it's not heading somewhere, it's heading nowhere, and you're wasting your time. Dating, as we usually mean it, is an exclusive relationship that is heading somewhere, and it would be unwise and inappropriate for that somewhere to end in disobedience. And so, if dating is to end in marriage, and you know that this is a marriage that the Bible would not allow, then you ought not to be in a dating relationship moving towards something which the scriptures tell you you ought not to do. And lest you think to yourself, well, he's not a Christian now, and I wouldn't marry him unless he becomes a Christian – do not think that the human head is quite so rational. We are not, as you've often heard me say, rational, as much as we are rationalizing. And when two people fall in love, the head will find all sorts of reasons to do what the heart wants to do. So do not think, well, we're just exploring this for a while. Trust me, we're going to do this for a couple years, and if he doesn't or she doesn't become a Christian, we won't get married. By that time, your lives are intertwined, and you love each other. Better to save yourself the heartache at the end of that road and not set out on it in the first place.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me make the case from this text and a couple of other texts – so it'll be a little bit topical – why Christians must marry only in the Lord. Three reasons from three texts. We'll start with, and spend most of our time in, this text from Ezra 9. So, here's the first reason, because this is not just a bit of archaic tradition, but what the Bible says. Mixed marriages – and you understand I'm not talking about mixed ethnicity or mixed race – we're going to talk about that. That's very good if they're married in the Lord. But mixed religiously – mixed marriages lead to religious compromise. Religious compromise. That's the point here in Ezra chapter 9. Look at verse 1. Soon after Ezra arrives – remember, they get things counted, they have all the money and the animals and the goods, and they've arrived. He gets word almost immediately of a crisis and a controversy. The people of Israel have not separated themselves from the people of the land. Gives a familiar list of the nations – six of the seven nations Moses commanded the people to drive out of the Promised Land. He also mentions the Moabites and the Ammonites, who were familiar foes of Israel. He also mentions Egypt, another pagan nation nearby. Verse 2: they're not separating. In fact, they're intermarrying. And to make matters worse, this sin is the people, but not just from the people, but the priests and the Levites. And look at the end of verse 2: the faithlessness in this, the hand of the officials and chief men, has been foremost. This is not a few people. This is a great multitude of people, and the worst offenders are the people who should know best. It's their leaders, the priests, the Levites, the elders of clans and tribes. They've intermarried with them. This is a shocking disappointment to Ezra.

Ezra – remember, he's a scribe, he's an expert in the law. And so, he knows what the law requires. He knows what a tremendous, terrible mistake the people have made. Remember, they just have come back from Babylon – now the Persian Empire. And why were they sent in exile in the first place? Because they had proven to be covenant breakers. They had proved to be idolatrous compromisers with the nations around them. This is the sort of thing that led them to Babylon in the first place, so you can understand this great expression of consternation from Ezra – tears his hair, his beard, his cloak, his garment. These are traditional signs of mourning. He sits down, and he weeps. He fasts and prays, and some of the other people join him. They're trembling under conviction. Now, the question for us is whether the issue here is simply the Jews had married non-Jews. Some people think this is just about a kind of ethnic superiority or a racial prejudice or xenophobia. But just a moment's reflection shows us that this is not about race. This is about religion. In Ezra's day, remember they were not unwilling to mix with other peoples provided they followed the ways of God. Remember that, back in chapter 6 verse 21, when they celebrate the Passover finally, and it says it was eaten by the people of Israel, who had returned from exile, and also by everyone who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the God of Israel. So we already saw in chapter 6, it wasn't as if this was an ethnic thing and only pure Jews. Some people distanced themselves from the compromise of the land, from that idolatry, those whorings, that abomination, and they were welcomed in. That's why I say this is not about race or ethnicity. It's about religion.

It was not unlawful, in itself, to marry a non-Israelite. Think about some famous examples. Miriam and Aaron objected to Moses marrying a Cushite woman. So this was a North African woman, and they were punished, not Moses. Tzipporah – that's her name – was a worshiper of Yahweh. She even did better than her husband, Moses – circumcised their son when Moses had neglected that. So he married a Cushite, and Aaron and Miriam say, "Tsk, tsk tsk! You shouldn't be marrying a Cushite." But that wasn't the issue, that he married somebody who wasn't an ethnic Jew, because she was a worshiper of Yahweh.

Or Ruth, she was a Moabitess. Now here, we read, they married some Moabites and Amorites, but we're to understand it's not so much that they are ethnically a Moabite, but what that normally would represent: different gods, different religion. Ruth, however – remember she swore allegiance to Naomi, her mother-in-law: "where you go, I will go. Your God will be my God." And then she marries Boaz, and she's in the line of David and ultimately in the line of Jesus, the Messiah. So, you could marry a Moabite, if it was one who would be a follower of Yahweh. The issue is the religion. Mixed religious marriages were sinful because they inevitably involved religious compromise. Let me read – here's from the law – Exodus 34:

"Observe what I command you this day. (Verse 11, Exodus 34) Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, the Jebusites. Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars, break their pillars, cut down their asherim, for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord whose name is jealous is a jealous god, lest you

make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land. And when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods.”

Ezra is an expert in the law, and he knew what was required of God's people. Notice the language “covenant.” They were not to make a covenant with the people of the land, a formal binding agreement. And if they were not to do that corporately, they were not to do that individually. What does Malachi tell us, but that marriage is a covenant relationship. They could not covenant as a people with those who worshiped other gods. And they were not to covenant individually with those who worshiped other gods. And you see the reasons spelled out very clearly in Exodus, because inevitably, though you may have the purest of intentions, the noblest of heart, and you say, “Well, I am a worshiper of Yahweh, and I know you're a worshipper of the asherim. You're a worshipper of Baal. I'm a worshiper the God of Israel. Yet we love each other deeply.” They know that inevitably it will involve compromise. You will do things that you did not set out to do. It is impossible to maintain total integrity when you choose to make your closest relationship with someone who does not share what is most important to you.

Now, here's another little jab for us: the reality is when Christians marry non-Christians is often an indicator that Christ may not actually be the most important thing to us. You say that it is, but it actually proves not to be. It inevitably involves compromise. You do the things you didn't want to do. You obey the precepts you said you wouldn't obey. Those of you who are married, all of you know the longer you're married, the more you get shaped, one another, by your spouse. How often have you said, look, they even dress alike. You find some equilibrium. Now, you may be even opposites attract, but you find a restaurant that you both like. My wife has learned a little bit to watch sports. There are 11 people – football. Football – she grew up with it. Her dad watched football. Football her whole her life, and football – there's just a lot of rules. You got to really be locked in. She has learned to like it some. She prefers watching basketball. I have learned to watch many British period dramas, and I like them – many of them. It is absolutely true. People will ask me sometimes, what's the most important book in your life or give me some of your influences. And if I'm honest – this isn't usually what they mean, but it's absolutely true. No one has influenced Kevin DeYoung more in the last 25 years than Trisha Bebee. Trisha DeYoung.

Same with your spouse. When you marry outside the faith, you will inevitably add to or subtract from your faith until both sides can reach some sort of equilibrium. Even in a bad marriage, there is some desire even simply to get along, to please your husband or wife. You will face all sorts of questions. What will you do on Sunday? How will you raise your kids? How will you celebrate Christian holidays? Will you celebrate them at all? What will you do with your money? Will you give to the church or not? What will you tell your kids about God, about sin, about heaven and hell, about the Bible? Inevitably, you will give a little to get a little, and you will compromise. There are really three options that happen when you're married to a non-Christian. One: constant fighting, stress, tension, negotiation. Two: your faith becomes marginalized. You're not as invested in the

church as you otherwise would be, you don't give as much money, you're not as involved. You don't think about inviting hospitality, having people over to your house, because you know your husband or wife won't like it. You wouldn't have a small group. Your faith becomes marginalized. Or the third option: your spouse becomes marginalized, because the most important thing in your life does not involve the most important person in your life. You see? You marginalize the most important thing in your life or the most important person in your life. If your goal in marriage is – as it ought to be, Christian – to reflect Christ in the church, to raise a family that will be saturated in the Word, will function like a little church that worships God in all that they do – if that's your goal, you think that's my dream for marriage, because that is God's dream for marriage, to reflect Christ in the church, to do everything to the glory of God, to raise our children in the fear and admonition of the Lord, to be a little church in our home. If that's your goal, there is not a married person on the planet who can honestly tell you that the best way to reach that goal is to marry a non-Christian. Listen, because some of you are married to non-Christians. It's not that they cannot be very nice people. We all know some non-Christians who are nicer than some of the Christians that we know. At best, your non-Christian spouse may even agree to let you do your thing. That often happens. Sort of the best case in a bad case situation. I see this is important to you. It's not my thing, but I support you in it. I see it's meaningful, and I love you, and you do it. But even in that best case of a worst case, it is not what God designed the Christian family to be. And that is not aiding your growth in godliness but is merely not restricting it as much as one might. Women in particular, because it can be harder for women, it seems, to find Christian men, though if the studies are to be believed that we see now, young men are becoming more conservative and more Christian, and young women are moving in an opposite direction, so this may not be the case so much. But women – if you want to have non-Christian children, if you would like to have a higher likelihood of non-Christian grandchildren, convince yourself it is okay to lower your standards and marry a non-Christian husband. Now, by God's grace, it doesn't always work that way. But if you think, I want non-Christian children, non-Christian grandchildren – no one really wants that. And yet, you are setting yourself up for that very likelihood.

Saw some statistic years ago, something like predicting whether a child will go on to make Christian faith his or her own. And if it was the mother who was a Christian and taking them to church, the mother alone, it was something like 45-50%. If it was the father who was a Christian, it was something like 80-85%. It's very hard when the example in the home is of a father who does not take Christ nearly as seriously as his wife or does not love Christ at all. Mixed marriages lead to religious compromise.

Here's the second point: mixed marriages lead to relational opposition. Now, here we're going to turn to two other passages. Go to 2 Corinthians, chapter 6, because we want to see not just what Ezra, tells us which is mainly about the compromise piece, but I want you to see two other reasons. So first, in 2 Corinthians chapter 6, we read in verse 14 these famous words:

“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers, for what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? What fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or

what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols?"

The issue here is not directly about marriage. It's about participating in meals where sacrifice to the gods would take place. This was very common – much as you might enter a home, and we're going to have a meal, and somebody says grace, so in the ancient world, before a meal, they would conduct a sacrifice to the gods. Or if you were part of a guild – think a trade union or an organization, a society, a conference – they would often have their own pagan deity, and there would be very perfunctory rituals that would take place. It was hard to avoid association with pagan idolatry. And that's why this text says so radically, you must not be yoked with unbelievers. Now, it doesn't mean you can't have non-Christian friends. He's talking about life in the church, idolatry. And Christians have always understood this passage, also, to be applicable to marriage, because if it is true in the life in the body of Christ, so it must be just as true, if not more so, dealing with Christ and the church in the covenant of marriage.

We must be diligent not to join together what God has put asunder. You understand the metaphor there in verse 14: "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers." Animals plowing the field – get two oxen. There's more strength when they work together, and so you'd put a wooden or an iron yoke on them, that they might plow and move in the same direction. Now, you wouldn't yoke a bull and a chicken. You wouldn't try to, you know, harness a mule and a squirrel, a fiery stallion and a lame pony. It doesn't work. You need two animals of similar stature, strength, moving in the same direction. This is the point: that mixed marriages lead to relational opposition, because marriage is to put upon a yoke on both of your necks.

And it is true, a Christian and a non-Christian may truly love each other. And they may genuinely love many of the same things and get along and have many of the same interests, but by definition, a Christian and a non-Christian do not love the same ultimate things. The end goal of their lives cannot be the same. Again, the challenge may be there's a whole lot of people who say they're Christians, and the end goal of their life is not really any different than non-Christians. It's to have a nice career. It's to have the American dream. It's to have all of those nice things. It's really not to live and die in the joy of the comfort of the Lord and glorify God in all that you do. A non-Christian and a Christian, by definition, the purpose in their life is not the same. They do not understand the purpose of the whole universe the same. And I think we can fairly extend this metaphor of being unequally yoked – if you think about it's not the same breed of animal. So think about a Christian and a nominal Christian. You've convinced yourself. They've convinced your parents. He said, "Yeah, I'm a Christian. Yeah, I was baptized one time. I belong to this church." But if you're honest, you know, he is 1/100th as serious about being a Christian as you are. That's unequally yoked. Protestants and Catholics can be friends, can have many things in common, but you have immediately all sorts of decisions where you cannot both agree. Or a Bible-believing Christian and a liberal Christian who does not really believe the Bible. The closer theological agreement you can have, the better.

Now, there are things that people will work out, and you know a Baptist and a Presbyterian get married, and you have to work through the issue of baptism. So it isn't that you only can marry someone from the PCA. Oh, there's worse ideas, I suppose. But no, there are other – praise God, this isn't the only part of the kingdom of God. But think about – if the yoke imagery doesn't work for you – think about a boat. You ever get two of you in a rowboat? It seems so easy. Just grab an oar, grab an oar. And it takes some work to be together, and you end up just going in circles. This person's paddling this way. This one's going this way. You need to find someone who is really, truly, honestly rowing in the same direction with you. And not just telling you what you want to hear, but actually rowing in the same direction. You are setting yourself up, when you marry unequally, for a lifetime of conflict and difficulty and pain and loneliness. There was a very powerful essay in 2012 written by Kathy Keller, Tim's wife. It's in The Gospel Coalition. You can find it. It's called “Don't Take It From Me: Reasons You Should Not Marry an Unbeliever.” And the Kellers weren't, you know, they were very winsome. And so, to say some of these things as strong as she does is worth noting. I'll just read a few paragraphs from Kathy Keller:

“Over the course of our ministry, the most common pastoral issue that Tim and I have confronted is probably marriages, either actual or proposed, between Christians and non-Christians. I have often thought about how much simpler it would be if I could remove myself from the conversation and invite those already married to unbelievers to do the talking to singles who are desperately trying to find a loophole that would allow them to marry someone who does not share their faith. (And she then mentioned some of these passages we're talking about.) You can find those passages in abundance. But when someone has already allowed his or her heart to become engaged with a person outside the faith, I find that the Bible has already been devalued as the non-negotiable rule of faith and practice. Instead, variants of the serpent's question to Eve, “did God really say?” are floated, as if somehow this case, my situation, might be eligible for an exemption, considering how much they love each other, how much the unbeliever supports and understands the Christian faith, how much they are soulmates, despite the absence of a shared soul faith. Having grown weary and impatient, I want to snap and say it won't work. Marriage is hard enough when you have two believers who are completely in harmony spiritually. Spare yourself the heartache, and get over it. Yet such harshness is neither in line with the gentleness of Christ nor convincing. (Just a few more sentences.) If only I could pair those sadder and wiser women and men who have found themselves in unequal marriages, either by their foolishness or due to one person finding Christ after the marriage had already occurred, with the blithely optimistic singles who are convinced that their passion and commitment will overcome all obstacles – even the obstacle of bald disobedience need not apply to them - only 10 minutes of conversation, one minute if the person is really succinct, would be necessary. In the words of one woman who was married to a perfectly nice man who did not share her faith: ‘If you think you are lonely before you get married, it's nothing compared to how lonely you can be after you are married.’”

When you marry a non-Christian, you set yourself up for religious compromise, for relational opposition, and ultimately – point three – spiritual contradiction. 1 Corinthians chapter 7 – it's about marriage, singleness, widows – and in the midst of Paul's instructions for widows remarrying,

he says in verse 39 of 1 Corinthians 7, the wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives, but if her husband dies she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. Only in the Lord. Now, he's speaking to widows. But don't think he means, well, widows have to marry in the Lord. Other Christians, you can marry whoever you want. It works the opposite way. He's assuming every Christian must be married in the Lord. And what he has in his mind is, well, but what if you're a widow? Might that be an exception? Maybe you're older. Maybe you don't have very many options. You know, you're already mature in your faith, and your husband dies, or you're a widower and your wife dies, and you get remarried. Surely now, maybe you've already raised your kids. They're not in the equation. If ever there was an exception to the rule, it would be with widows. And that's why Paul underlines, nope, not even for widows. You, too, must marry in the Lord. And that phrase "in the Lord" doesn't mean you just have a Christian wedding. It's not throwaway jargon. It is the richest, deepest theology. It speaks to our union with Christ. One of the reasons in 1 Corinthians 6 that sexual sin is so serious – Paul said you wouldn't join Christ to a prostitute, would you? It's blasphemous. It's unthinkable to consider Jesus Christ with a prostitute. You're meant to experience revulsion. He says, well, you are in Christ. Christ is in you. And so you, Christian, if you join yourself with a prostitute, if you join yourself in sexual sin, if you engage in pornographic material, you are bringing Christ there, because Christ is in you. It's meant to bring to bear the best news of all, that by faith and the power of the Holy Spirit in your life, you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to you, and you are in him, and he is in you. You are in Christ. And so to marry in the Lord means that two people who are both in Christ marry each other.

Marriage is, of course, a creation ordinance. Non-Christians can get married. They do get married. We want people to be married. But to be married in the Lord is to join together two people who are both in their most fundamental, foundational identity in Christ. The Bible teaches over and over, especially in Genesis 2, sex is when the two become one. Heard me say this before. Why "one"? Not just that you're close. You know, if you hug someone doesn't make you married, thankfully. You're saying, that's why you Dutch people don't hug. I get it. If you hold someone's hand, you're not married. Why "one"? It's oneness, not just closeness, not just a physical closeness, but a oneness of biological function. To be one, male and female, is – if no effects of the fall are present, or old age, or infirmity – that relationship is the relationship from which children can be born. By definition, a man and a man coming together, or a woman and a woman coming together, cannot enter into a one-flesh union. They can have a sexual experience, but one flesh is not just people take off their clothes and they do something. It is one flesh in that there is one singular, unitive, generative biological function, namely procreation, that comes out of marriage between a man and a woman, which is why so-called same-sex marriage is not actual marriage. Not simply by a religious definition, but by a physical definition.

Mixed marriages – now you can be really married to a non-Christian, but you cannot be one spiritually. And the disconnect, the contradiction, is that you would be one physically, biologically, organically one with someone with whom you are not one spiritually. Joining in Christ to someone who is in Adam in the most intimate, vulnerable physical experience possible. To marry a non-Christian is to be engaged in a spiritual contradiction. It is to bring Christ back in to Adam. Why

then ought we to marry only Christians? I've given you three reasons, and I want to finish now, briefly, with three simple points of application.

One: single people, whatever age, do not start out on a journey that you should not finish. Don't toy around. Don't lead on. Don't entertain temptation. Don't think that you are somehow stronger than the whole human race that has gone before you. Emotions and hormones are powerful things. And once you are enticed, and once you feel in love, you will be able to convince yourself of almost anything. Yes, he seems like a terrible, terribly abusive relationship, but I love him. Yes, I know she's not a Christian, but I love her. Those who are single, hoping to be married, there are many, many things you may have on your list that don't actually need to be on the list, but the one unbending standard, which you must not compromise on, is that you marry only in the Lord. Do not set out on path that you cannot bring to completion. Do not stoop down. You remember in Willy Wonka, Augustus Gloop, who bends down to drink from the chocolate river, and he falls in? Don't be Augustus Gloop. Don't think that, well, I alone – I know I can bend down to drink this delicious chocolate. I'll never fall into the river. I will get up before I fall into the river. It will not be so. Now has it happened before that a Christian and a non-Christian date and one becomes converted? Yes. Are there stories by God's grace? I've heard many of them. We had no business being together, but God saved her, saved him. Yes, it happens. The Lord is better to us than we deserve. And we all know stories like that. But the goal is not flirt and convert. No missionary dating. Just because God is kind and he does it, doesn't mean he lays it out as a model. Yes, Joseph being sold into slavery ended up with the salvation of God's people, but that doesn't mean you help starving nations by chucking colorful boys into wells. Doesn't work that way. God is gracious. It's not a model. Do not start on a journey that you should not finish.

Second: if you are in a relationship right now – call it hanging out, dating, maybe even so far as engaged – you ought to take an honest look at the yoke that you are wearing or presuming to wear and get others to help you in the evaluation. You will not see things clearly. Ask those most benighted, ignorant people in your lives, your parents, what they think. Now, there are complicating factors. Sometimes people are not married, and they've already had children together. That is a complicating factor. If you're older, you're Christians, you made a mistake, you repented, you get married, it's good. You want the children to be raised by a biological mother and father, if at all possible. That's one scenario. Relatively simple. More complicated is if the man and the woman are very very young and they shouldn't be married yet, very immature, or if one is a Christian and one is not a Christian, but there's a child involved. In that case, it is best to work hard to not alienate one another and pray and hope that one might be converted, and yet do not add to one sin another sin. And if you are in a relationship and one person is not a Christian, the other person is, and the person who's not a Christian says, well I'm really serious about becoming a Christian. You say, well that's really exciting. You should say, you need to go about that even apart from me. You need to – you can come to church with me, but we're not heading down this road together. I'd like to see you read the Bible on your own, get in a small group on your own, seek out mentors on your own. You want to see, is this person really being led to the Lord by your good example, or are they thinking of a box to check? Because in their mind they think, "Well, I love this person. How hard can it be? I don't

mind. I'll say I'm a Christian, and then we'll get married, and maybe we got to go to church Christmas and Easter and a few times. I can live with it." You want to see if this person is really serious about making the Lord the absolute treasure in their life. Trust God that he only wants what is good for you. He gives us these rules not to punish us, but because he wants what is good for you and the flourishing of your life and your marriage.

And then here's a final word: in whatever state you are in, seek that deep communion that comes only through our union with Christ. And here's where you have to first ask yourself, is that really me? Okay, I'm in church this morning. That's good. A lot of people aren't. Am I really a Christian? Am I really joined to Christ? Can I really say this is the most important thing in my life? If so, what are you doing, based on that union with Christ, to foster a rich communion with Christ in your private life, in your public life, in your single life, in your married life, in all of life? And if you find yourself this morning in a troubled marriage, you ought to ask yourself first, before you start thinking where your mind wants to go – all of the problems that she has, all of the ways that he is an absolute pain – first, think to yourself, am I in Christ? Am I in Christ? If yes, then I have the Holy Spirit in me, to help me. If I am truly in Christ, then what might it look like for me to do my part to plow in the same direction as my spouse? Maybe, husbands, it means that you have not been taking leadership as the lead ox in the relationship. Maybe, wives, you've not been willing to follow your husband's lead. Maybe every time you metaphorically try to wear the ox together, you just want to bite and gnaw at each other. You're not actually moving anywhere. I'm stretching the analogy a bit, but if two cows just stare at each other all the time, the goal is to be moving. Mooving. Wow, that even sounded good. Ask yourself, in whatever relationship, single or married, is my first goal truly, truly to show how precious Christ is? Is that what you want? You set out on your dating relationship. You think about marriage. You're in a marriage that's good, troubled, broken, almost gone. Don't think about the other. Think about yourself. Can I honestly say my first goal is to show how precious Christ is? Because if you are in Christ, you bear his name, you have his strength, you live according to his word, and your ultimate goal is to do everything for his glory. Let's pray.

Father in heaven, would you help apply this word in just the way? Let it be an encouragement to many married couples who are walking, plowing in the same direction. And let it be a word of warning and remembrance, and perhaps healing and hope, for those who are struggling. Lord, all of your commands are good. They are a light unto our path. You never lead us into darkness. You only mean to lead us in life and light and blessing. And we trust you in Jesus' name. Amen.