

Put a Ring On It
Beating the Odds
April 28, 2019

Good morning everyone ... and welcome, as Shannon said, to the beginning of our five-week series "Put a Ring On It."

And since it *is* the beginning, I thought it might be good to start out with a little bit of background that will help you understand where this is coming from and how it might be of help to you regardless of where you are "martially-speaking" ...

... because there's a wide diversity among the people in this room or watching online when it comes to marriage.

- Many of us are ... and many of us are not.

- Some of us have been married more than once ... some of us have never been married.
- Many who aren't married someday hope to be ...
- While others who are not are content with their status.

So, here's what you need to know – three things – as we begin this journey together.

1. If you're single, the fact that we're going to spend five weeks on this issue not meant to imply that it's God's will for everyone to be married and if you aren't, well then, you are a second-class citizen and something must be wrong with you.

Truth is, not everyone *should* be married. Jesus wasn't married and I don't think that

held Him back from making significant contributions to the world. In fact, one of his key followers, the Apostle Paul (who was also single), actually suggested that there are good and God-pleasing reasons to remain single.¹

So please don't take this series as denigrating you or your status. And it's not meant to pour salt into the wound (if there is one).

But we need to talk about these things because ... and this brings me to the second thing I want to share with you which is ...

2. The motivation for this series.

One of the most gut-wrenching parts of my job as a pastor (and I've been doing this for 25 years) has been ...

- Hearing the stories of people I care about who are stuck in an unhappy marriage.
- Watching marriages of people I care about break up.
- Observing the effects that the decline of marriage and family has had on the next generation – our kids and grandkids; our entire culture.
- Seeing people I care about “sliding instead of deciding” – that is, moving in together or getting married without any real understanding of what they’re doing and what it takes to be successful.

Truth is, we are just not very wise as a culture about marriage and relationships in general.

And I don’t say that to shame or blame

anyone who *has* been unwise in this area but to say that I am burdened by the need to be more proactive about these things ...

... which is why, whether you are single, single again, married, remarried, never-married, marriage-hopeful, marriage-agnostic, marriage-antagonistic, I want to influence how you think about this issue because *as our marriages and families go, so goes our nation and our culture.*

We all have a vested interest in getting this right whether that interest is intensely personal (as a married person) or from a distance (as a single person).

And that's why, over the next four weeks, we're going to be looking at four Christian principles that lead to great marriages.

And I know you're thinking, "wait, I thought

this series was *five* weeks.”

Yes, it is but on the fifth week I'm going to do a message based on questions that *you* turn in during the series.

Each week you can email me your questions about the message or anything related to marriage in general at pastor@northheartland.org and I'll try to answer them in that final week.

You can also post them on our Facebook page or use the response card in the seatback in front of you and give it to an usher or put it in one of the offering boxes on the way out.

OK, one more thing and then we'll get into today's topic.

Since we're going to be looking at four *Christian* principles – one per week – in this series, I want to say something about ...

3. How this all relates to Christianity.

If you were here last week for our Easter Sunday service, you heard me say that this series is a demonstration of how all the “Jesus stuff” is actually relevant to real life.

Most people don't know this; we're not taught this in school or through the media ... but as Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and eventually, all of Western Civilization, it fundamentally and radically changed the way that the family worked, especially the role and responsibilities of men to their wives and children.

Now, there's no question that the church and Christians have struggled to get that right throughout the centuries (even in our day) but the idea that women and children matter in a family as much as the man does – that's a

uniquely Christian idea.

We'll talk about that in greater detail in upcoming weeks but I felt like it needs to be pointed out at the very beginning because this is another area in which our culture takes for granted the Christian basis of what we all believe to be moral and just and good.

In fact, if you're not a Christian and you believe that marriage ought to last and that men ought to be responsible to their wives and children, you're actually believing in a Christian principle even though you may not know it.

Also, if you're not a Christian ... even though I'm going to be talking about "Christian principles" in this series, you don't have to be a believer in Jesus to try and apply them to your life. In fact, Jesus always invited people to follow Him first – to get to know Him and His

ways first – before believing in Him.

And this is one of the ways in which you can do that.

OK ... with all of that said by way of introduction ... would you pray with me before we get into it?

Old Way New Way

I'm sure you've noticed that every successive generation thinks it's smarter than the one that came before it. Every generation, at some point, questions what has been handed down from its forebears.

And every generation, at some point, decides to reject at least some of the practices and traditions of those who came before.

Sometimes that's just the cockiness of youth.

It's rebellion for rebellion's sake.

But sometimes it's not.

Sometimes, one generation messes things up so badly that the next generation comes along and rightly says, "no thanks. We're not doing *that*. We're going to come up with a better way" ... which, when it comes to marriage and family in our culture, is exactly what has happened.

My generation – the Baby Boomers – has been, collectively speaking, lousy at marriage.

1. We're the ones who created the 50% rule – you know, the rule that half of all marriages have to end in divorce. It's not quite that bad these days but it once was. And we did it.

2. We also invented “blended families” – where your kids and my kids from our previous marriages have to figure out how to get along.
3. And we were responsible for the spread of “weekend parenting” and “child visitation rights” – splitting our kids hearts and schedules between mom and dad.

And because many of the Gen-Xers and Millennials who came after us grew up experiencing all of that, many of them said, “no thanks. We’re not going to go through *that*.”

“We’re going to find a better way to do this marriage thing, including *not doing it at all*” (though that hasn’t worked out so much for them, as most of that age group still desires to be married at some point, even those who

are living together).

And so they rejected what might be called the Traditional Marriage Process ... which looks like this.

1. Dating/Courtship (attraction, love) ->
2. Engagement ->
3. Marriage ->
4. Sex & Cohabitation (living together)

This is how the Boomers and their parents and their parents did it – or at least tried to do it.

We weren't always successful at keeping the sex part down near the end of the process but, when it came to living together, we didn't do that until after marriage.

Anyway ... in far too many cases, after the honeymoon was over, the result of that process was ...

5. Unhappiness & Divorce

And because no one in their right mind wants that ... because no one in their right mind would willingly follow a strategy that produces misery and failure for half of those who follow it ...

Gen-Xers and Millennials wondered if maybe there is a way to beat the odds on this deal.

And because those generations are more scientifically-savvy than their parents and grandparents, they thought ...

- “You know, if we just had *more data* before we entered into a monumental

commitment like marriage, that would probably help.”

- “And what better way to collect data on someone than by *moving in with them* before you commit to marrying them?”

And that’s what they decided to do ... which is why what might be called the New & Improved Marriage Process – the one most everyone follows today – looks like this:

1. Dating/Courtship ->
2. Sex & Cohabitation ->
3. Engagement ->
4. Marriage

... which is why ...

- Cohabitation in the United States has

increased by more than 1,500 percent in the past half century. In 1960, about 450,000 unmarried couples lived together. Now the number is more than 7.5 million.

- It's why the majority of young adults now in their 20s will live with a romantic partner at least once.ⁱⁱ
- And why 70–75% of people will live together before they get married (including many divorced Boomers who are “attached” but wary of remarriage).ⁱⁱⁱ
- It's also part of the reason why people are getting married later in life. The average age of first marriages has gone up by about 7 years since 1960.

This New & Improved Process is now the

culturally accepted way to do things. No one questions it.

And it's actually been that way for a while.

For instance, one of the shows that Jetta and I have been binge-watching in recent days is *Chuck*. Maybe you've seen it.

Chuck is a goofy romantic spy dramedy which ran from about 2007 to 2012 on NBC. I won't give away the whole story for those who haven't seen it but much of the humor and tension revolves around Chuck – a computer geek – and his very attractive CIA handler, Sarah.

What's fascinating to me is how closely this show follows this New & Improved Marriage Process.

- The first two seasons are literally step

one in the process: will they ever date?
Will they fall in love?

- The third season is step two: will they ever have sex and move in together?
- The fourth season – which is where we are now – is step three: will they ever decide to get engaged and then married? (And if you know, please don't tell me!)

Now, *Chuck* is just one example of how widely accepted this process had already become even a dozen years ago and I'm sure there are many others you can think of.

But that brings up a really, really good question for those who belong to Generation Z – the generation that comes after the Millennials; those who are currently in middle school, high school and college up to about

age 25 ...

If you're part of Gen-Z ... because you are even *more* technologically and scientifically-savvy than all of the rest of us *combined*, I am certain that, right now, you are dying to ask, "since it's been around for 15 to 20 years now, is there any data on how this new and improved process is working out?"

I am dying to tell you – along with those in older generations who are not married but want to be and might someday be ... I'm dying to tell you that, *yes, there is data* – and a lot of it.

Researchers and social scientists – and I'm talking secular not religious – have spent the past decade or so following couples who are in the New Process and have made some surprising observations.

For example, Dr. Galena Rhoades and her colleague Dr. Scott Stanley put out a report in the summer of 2014 that was called “Before I Do.” It was sponsored by the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia and looked at the ways dating and commitment sequences have changed over the years, and how those sequences might be related to later marital quality.^{iv v}

I’ll post links to their research this week on my Twitter feed and on our FB page but, bottom line – they found (along with other researchers doing similar projects) that cohabitation before marriage is correlated with lower marital happiness and with a higher chance of divorce.

On average, couples who cohabit before marriage have a 33 percent higher chance of divorcing than couples who moved in together after getting married.

So why is that true? If you live with someone to figure out if you can live with someone, why don't you figure out that you really can't live with them before you marry them?

It's called "the cohabitation effect" and it comes down to three factors.^{vi}

1. The first is *inertia* and *lock-in*.

Inertia means that once a couple lives together, it's harder to end a relationship that should be ended.

Lock-in is the decreased likelihood to search for, or change to, another option once an investment in something has been made. The greater the setup costs, the less likely we are to move to another, even better, situation, especially when faced with switching costs, or the time, money and effort it requires to make a change.

2. The second factor that contributes to the cohabitation effect is “sliding vs. deciding.”

After living together for a period of time, marriage can start to seem like the logical next step, so couples tend to “slide” into marriage rather than deciding on it.

In addition, living together shifts the communication focus to more immediate and mundane issues like “who will take care of the dog?” and “who will pay what bill?” instead of long-term and important issues like “who are you, who am I and what do we each want out of life?”

Those things do eventually come up but, it’s typically after inertia and lock-in have become well-established.

3. The final factor that produces the negative cohabitation effect is “the escape clause.”

Even though the lock-in effect is present, when you live together there's always a built-in escape clause – you always know that if worst comes to worst, you can just move out even if it's difficult (and it usually is).

What researchers found is that, when cohabiting couples slide into marriage, this thought of “the possibility of escape” (rather than facing problems) *also* slides into the marriage, even if subconsciously. So, when things get tough, because the urge to escape is still there, divorce becomes a much more palatable option.

The ironic thing about that is that if a couple were to get married before living together, they'd be entering the marriage without even entertaining the idea of escaping it because that had never been an option in their relationship!

Now there's lots more that could be said on this and I've done a terribly inadequate job of presenting even just the basics of the research.

But the point is – and it's an overwhelming scientific data-driven conclusion and not a religious one – the point is that ...

The New & Improved Marriage Process is no better than the Traditional Process and maybe even has more of a downside.

And, I need to be clear that, in saying that, I am not intending to shame anyone in this room or watching online who has followed or is following that new but not-so-improved way.

- You were trying to be smart.

- You just doing what the culture tells you to do or what the person you love wants you to do.
- Unless you were being outright rebellious, you just slid into it like everyone else.

And maybe your marriage – if your cohabiting led to that – is OK and will be OK.

And maybe, if you're living together right now without being married, you'll be one of those who make it. Some people do.

But you are still at risk and more so than the couple who got married before moving in together.

A Better Way

Now, with all of that said – and I need this to be super-clear: the less-than-stellar results of the New & Improved Process do not imply that The Traditional Process is the answer. Those results have been in the bag for a long time and they speak for themselves ...

... which means, if you're part of Generation Z – or an older generation and not married but want to be and might someday be – you need to know that *there is another process* you could follow that's better than either of those others.

And if you want to give a label to this, I suppose you could call it *The Christian Process* because, as we'll see, it's based on a principle spelled out in the New Testament (which, as you know, includes letters from leaders of the first-century Jesus Movement

intended to help followers of Christ understand what it meant to live like Christians).

But again, as I said earlier, you don't actually need to be a believer in Jesus to try this – the principle is *that* wise and it's *that* good.

Of course, if you *are* a Christian, what we're going to read is what you're supposed to do. This is how you're supposed to live. This is how you will experience what Jesus wants you to experience as His follower.

So, let's look at it. The principle comes from just one sentence in a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians who were living in the city of Corinth. And even though it's only one sentence, I think you'll see it's a pretty powerful one.

Now, Corinth was a pretty crazy town. It was

Corinthians 6:14 (ESV)

Now, as you probably already know, a yoke is a wooden brace that farmers across the centuries have used to connect two oxen together in order to plow a field. They put the brace across the shoulders of the oxen and then tie them into it.

And it works amazingly well ... *assuming* ... that the two animals are equal in size and strength ... because if they're not – if they are *unequal*, the weaker or shorter ox will walk more slowly than the taller, stronger one, causing the load to go around in circles and possibly destroying the field.

Or the weaker one will get dragged along wherever the stronger one wants to go and maybe even injured in the process.

And through this metaphor, Paul is telling

Christians “look, you *have* to interact with people who are not believers; men and women who don’t live according to the ways of Jesus. You have to love them, even. It’s part of your calling.”

“But you *don’t* have to tie yourself to someone who is going to keep you from going where you’re supposed to go ... or lead you somewhere you’re not supposed to go ... or somewhere you don’t want to go. You don’t have to be in a situation that is destructive not only to you but to everyone around you.”

“So don’t do it. Don’t be unequally yoked.”

Now, again, Paul is speaking directly to followers of Jesus here about relationships with people who are not.

But I think you can see this is just good advice that would work for *anyone* in many areas of

life such as friendships and business partnerships. Why join up with someone who is not going where you are? Someone who doesn't value what you value and doesn't want to pull in the same direction you are?

But, we're talking about marriage so let's apply the principle to that – and for everyone, not just Christians.

Here's it is. Here's the principle.

An “equally-yoked” partner is the single best strategy to ensure marital success.

If you want to avoid unhappiness that results from either the Traditional Process or the New & Not-So-Improved one ... if you want to avoid divorce ... your best chance of beating the odds is to be with an equally-yoked partner ...

... which of course leads to two questions:

1. What does that look like?

2. How do I get there?

And let's start with that last one first.

If you're not married but want to be and someday might be (regardless of whether you're from Generation Z or you're older), how can you ensure that before you enter into a life-long commitment to someone, that person would be an equally-yoked partner?

Well, there are no guarantees and there is no failsafe method but, if you were wise you would add a step into the process so that it looks like this:

1. Dating/Courtship (attraction, love) ->

2. Education & Evaluation ->

3. Engagement ->

4. Marriage ->

5. Sex & Cohabitation

And, obviously, I'm modifying the Traditional Process in that picture but you could also make the case that it would work with the New & (Not So) Improved Process, where #5 (Sex & Cohabitation) moves up the third position – meaning you don't do those things until you've completed step two.

But two thoughts about that:

1. You don't really gain anything by cohabitation since you have already determined that this person is an equally-yoked partner.

"Well, we can save on expenses by sharing

everything in advance.”

You could also save on expenses by not having a \$20K wedding.

That’s not saying you shouldn’t have a big wedding. It just doesn’t have to be super-expensive. It doesn’t have to be a destination wedding.

In fact, if cost is an issue I have a solution for you ... and I’ll tell you about at the end of this service.

The second thing I want to say about keeping sex and cohabitation at the end of the line ... and this one is just for Christians ... if you’re not a Christian this one doesn’t apply to you (but you would be wise to do it anyway).

2. If you're a Christian that is the order that you're supposed to follow.

In fact, and I'm going to get really personal here – but I'm not trying to shame you with this – if you really are a Christian and you have that out of order, I'd bet money that you feel bad about it.

I say that because over the years, I've talked to many followers of Jesus who were having sex with or cohabiting with someone without being married to them and *not one* has said, "well, you know, Rick, I feel really good about this. I feel like this is God's will for me do be doing this right now."

Not one.

So, let's just be honest. If you're a Christian, you know that's where it goes in the list. You know that falls short of God's intention for

your life without me pointing it out to you because the Holy Spirit within you is telling you.

Again, I'm not saying that to shame anyone – and neither is the Spirit. I'm saying that to help you see truth and make changes ... like get married if your significant other truly is an equally-yoked partner. Or quit what you're doing.

Enough said.

Let's get back to The Christian Process and let me define what I mean by that new step of education and evaluation.

By education, I mean learning about yourself, your significant other and marriage.

Most people have very little idea of who they really are and what matters to them until they put themselves in an environment where

someone like a counselor or some kind of self-assessment process draws that out of them.

And most people know even less about the person they're considering moving in with or marrying.

And most people – especially men – know even less about how relationships work. Things like:

- How to communicate effectively.
- How to solve problems together
- How to deal with conflict constructively.
- How to handle friends and family
- How your past relationships affect your present one

So where do you learn about that kind of stuff? We have lots of resources here at NHCC and there are so many good ones

online and I'll post up a few this week ... but, today, we're also launching a short-term (five week) small group experience for anyone NOT currently married.

We're going to be using curriculum from our friends at North Point Church in Atlanta called *The New Rules for Love, Sex and Dating*.

So if you claim single on your tax forms, this small group is for you. We have several small group leaders prepared to facilitate groups based on the interest shown and demographics present. These groups will be open to those in high school and older.

If this group sounds like you're interested in, come down front after the service and meet our team. They'll get you information and help you get registered.

Once you learn about yourself, your significant other and marriage, you become educated which means you are now in a position to evaluate.

By evaluation, I mean assessing “are we equally yoked?”

... which is not the same thing as “are we compatible?” (which cohabitation and, honestly, sex reveals). It’s “are we going in the same direction?”

And obviously, if you’re a Christian, you’re not equally yoked unless you’re significant other challenges and encourages you in your faith and obedience to Christ.

And I know that when you’re in love with someone that is so hard to hear. But, as a pastor who has seen a lot of spiritually

mismatched marriages over the years, I have to tell you what I have seen.

You can minimize and compartmentalize your faith for the sake of a relationship but you can't do it forever. At some point, your faith will become a point of tension – not necessarily insurmountable tension but tension nonetheless.

But let's get more general – how do you determine a person's direction?

You observe and you answer questions like ...

1. How do they spend their free time?
2. How do they spend their money?
3. What do they worry about?

4. What do they do when confronted with their weaknesses?
5. Do they demonstrate humility and “teachability”?
6. Are they accountable to a “higher power” outside of themselves?
7. How do they treat their mother?
8. What emotional baggage are they carrying?
9. What about kids and family? Do you want the same things?
10. What about church?
11. Do they demonstrate initiative and resolve?
12. Is that initiative and resolve towards

something that you find valuable?

13. Is this person helping you become all God has called you to be?
14. Do they encourage you to do the right thing in your decisions and choices?
15. Can you name at least three qualities they have that you want to emulate?
16. Are they willing to read a book or go to a marriage small group with you?
17. Do they have a compatible understanding of roles in marriage?^{vii}

And the list could go on and on.

And I think you can see that's a lot deeper and more helpful than "who's taking out the trash this week?"

Conclusion

Now, I need to say one more thing about this “equally yoked” idea and then we’ll bring this to a close.

And this is something I have observed over the years ... and this is specifically for women.

The husband almost always determines the emotional and spiritual characteristic of the home and family.

Let me say that again. *The husband almost always determines the emotional and spiritual characteristic of the home and family.*

The Apostle Paul writes ...

*The husband is the head of the wife as
Christ is the head of the church, his
body, of which he is the Savior.*

Ephesians 5:23 (NIV)

And a lot of people think that means “the guy needs to step up and lead his wife and family.” And there’s some truth to that, I suppose.

But Paul doesn’t write “he should be the head.” He writes “the husband IS the head” meaning that whatever he does by example, wherever he goes with his life ... his wife and children will be impacted. He is the source of their life together just like Jesus is the source of our life together.

... which means that the stakes are almost always higher for the woman in this getting this “equally yoked” thing right.

The man they marry (or merely decide to live

with) *will* create one way or another the environment of their life going forward. He IS the head.

Now, that might like seem like I am talking down men but I'm really not. *I am one.*

I just feel like it needs to be really clear what we're dealing with here. And also to say that, "guys, if you're married or even living with someone, you have the power to change your marriage or relationship by changing yourself; allowing God to change you."

Because this is how it works spiritually and emotionally.

BLESSING

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal comfort

and a wonderful hope, comfort you and strengthen you in every good thing you do and say.

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 (NIV)

Endnotes

ⁱ See 1 Corinthians 7

ⁱⁱ The Downside of Cohabiting Before Marriage, New York Times, MEG JAY
APRIL 14, 2012

ⁱⁱⁱ Note that many more couples view cohabitation as a step toward marriage, not a rebellion against it. See

<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/03/the-science-of-cohabitation-a-step-toward-marriage-not-a-rebellion/284512/>

^{iv} Galena's summary is here:

<http://familyinamerica.org/journals/spring-2016/sliding-vs-deciding/>

^v Stanley's website is here: www.slidingvsdeciding.com

^{vi} This summary is based on one at

<https://medium.com/@writingsolo/sliding-vs-deciding-inertia-and-feeling-old-fashioned-c2716a4864db>

^{vii} This list is based on longer list @ <https://marriedandyoung.com/22-ways-know-partner-equally-yoked/>