

Marriage and Family

Preacher's Toolkit



Summary

While many believe that marriage is outdated or worthless, it remains the best foundation for lifelong relationships, for sexual intimacy, and for families to thrive. As Christians, we believe that marriage is part of God's good design, and a stable family unit has been clearly linked with positive outcomes for children.

A Clash of Worldviews

A better story

Marriage is part of God's good design for human flourishing. Marriage is given by God from the beginning of creation and, although affected by the Fall, it continues to be a good gift. Jesus repeated the pattern of marriage from creation of a public, lifelong commitment between one man and one woman, which is the appropriate place for sexual intimacy and family life. Marriage is a symbol of God's love for his people, and the Bible story climaxes with the wedding between Christ and His Church.

Points of difference

In today's world, young people are experimenting with different types of relationships, from one-night-stands to open relationships. The only condition of these is consent, and many believe that marriage is restrictive. However, the lack of commitment has left many people feeling unfulfilled and upset. God defines marriage as an exclusive covenant commitment between one man and one woman, and the correct place for sexual expression. We

are to 'forsake all others' and to even look at another woman lustfully is to commit adultery in our heart.

The Sexual Revolution has led a generation to believe that they can have romantic relationships without the piece of paper that denotes marriage.

However, the statistics are clear: cohabiting partners are far less likely to stay together. God's design is that marriage is to be for life, unless one party breaks the marriage covenant (such as through unfaithfulness). Experiencing difficulties in marriage is normal in a fallen world, but these are to be worked on within a lifelong covenant that provides safety and security.

It is increasingly common that children are being raised in single-parent families, and politicians are reluctant to talk about the benefits of marriage for risk of offence.

God lays out his blueprint for family life in Genesis 2, in which children are born, and raised, within the context of marriage between one man and one woman. Although individual parents can do an excellent job, the data is clear: overall, family breakdown is more likely to lead to more negative outcomes for children.

Politics

Despite the statistics clearly showing that children who grow up in stable families are more likely to experience positive outcomes in later life, politicians are often reticent to talk about marriage, in case they offend people in different living situations. A 2018 poll from ComRes found that 21% of MPs disagreed with the statement that 'the life chances of children with married parents are significantly better than those of children whose parents are not married'.

In 2022, the law around divorce in England and Wales underwent its biggest shake-up in half a

century with the introduction of 'no-fault divorce', which meant that couples would not have to give grounds for the divorce, such as adultery or unreasonable behaviour, or experience 2 years separation if both parties agreed to the divorce or 5 years if only one party did. Northern Ireland still operates under the previous system. In Scotland, there are two grounds for divorce: irretrievable breakdown or gender reassignment.

The UK introduced civil partnerships in 2005, which provided legal protection to same-sex couples, and is contractually very similar. Same-sex

marriage came into effect in England and Wales, and in Scotland, in 2014, and in 2020 in Northern Ireland after the Westminster Parliament overrode the principle of devolution. Civil partnerships were extended to include opposite-sex couples in 2019/20, after the Supreme Court ruled that restricting civil partnerships to same-sex couples was incompatible with the European Court of Human Rights.

Until 1990, a married woman's income was seen (and taxed) as an extension of her husband's income. In 1990 the system changed, and all individuals have been taxed as separate persons. Initially, a new tax allowance (the Married Couple's

Allowance, MCA) was introduced, which could be claimed by all married couples. However, in April 2000 the MCA was withdrawn from all couples, except where at least one partner had already reached the age of 65 or over.

In September 2013, David Cameron announced the introduction of a new transferable tax allowance for married couples and civil partners. Spouses and partners are allowed to transfer 10% of their personal tax allowance (currently £12,750) to their partner, provided neither of them are higher rate tax payers. This currently provides a tax break of £252.

Glossary

CIVIL MARRIAGE

A non-religious wedding that takes place at a register office or other approved building. For a civil marriage, both partners must give a formal notice of their intention to marry to the superintendent registrar of the district where they have lived for the previous seven days.

OPEN RELATIONSHIP/MARRIAGE

A set-up in which a couple mutually agrees to 'open' their relationship or marriage, where they can meet other people (either romantically or sexually) while still being primarily in a relationship with one another.

POLYAMORY

Non-monogamous, multiple-partner relationships. These are often sexual and have the consent of all the people involved. Sometimes these relationships are restricted to a fixed group (of three or four say), while other relationships might have no fixed boundaries. This is distinct from POLYGAMY, which is marriage to multiple spouses.

COHABITATION

A situation where two people who are in a romantic relationship live together in the same unit, but are not married.

MARRIAGE TAX ALLOWANCE

This allows someone to transfer £1,260 of their personal tax allowance to their spouse or civil partner, reducing their tax by up to £252 in a tax year. To benefit, the lower earner must normally have an income lower than their Personal Allowance (usually £12,570)

'NO FAULT' DIVORCE

This was introduced for England and Wales in 2020 and came into law in 2022. It removes the need to assign a fault in applying for a divorce; instead partners can claim that the relationship has irretrievably broken down, and they can apply for divorce together or solo. Prior to this law a divorce could only be granted for one of five faults: adultery, unreasonable behaviour, separation with consent, separation without consent, and desertion.

Key Bible Passages

GENESIS 2:24

"That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh."

GENESIS 3:16

"To the woman he said, 'I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.'"

PSALM 68:5-6

"A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families."

PROVERBS 22:6

"Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it."

MATTHEW 12:48-50

“He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

MATTHEW 19:9

“I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

MARK 10:9

“Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

1 CORINTHIANS 7:10-13

“To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.”

EPHESIANS 5:31-32

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.”

HEBREWS 13:4

“Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.”

REVELATION 21:2

“I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.”

Quotes

“My husband and I have never considered divorce. Murder sometimes, but never divorce.”

JOYCE BROTHERS, Psychologist and advice columnist

“In every marriage more than a week old, there are grounds for divorce. The trick is to find, and continue to find, grounds for marriage.”

ROBERT ANDERSON, Playwright and screenwriter

“The family is the first economy. If the family breaks down, well, the government gets bigger because of the consequences of family breakdown. We see in the neighbourhoods where there are no marriages and there are no two-parent families.”

RICK SANTORUM, U.S. Politician

“[We] need a technology that discourages short-termism in male sexual behavior, protects the economic interests of mothers, and creates a stable environment for the raising of children. And we do already have such a technology, even if it is old, clunky, and prone to periodic failure. It's called monogamous marriage.”

LOUISE PERRY, Journalist and author

“If any other issue had such a pivotal role to play in the life and wellbeing of the people of this country, government would throw resources at it. Yet when it comes to family policy and the growing

level of fatherlessness in some of our communities, blighting young children's lives, successive governments tip toe around it more concerned with offending people than trying to see what helps mend the breakdown.”

IAIN DUNCAN SMITH, Politician and former Conservative leader

“The prophets of this present age would have us believe marriage should exist solely for the benefit of the people in it, for their emotional, psychological, and carnal empowerment, as though matrimony is merely an extended couple's spa experience featuring orgies and explosive self-actualizations that you can exit whenever your heart desires. What if the prophets are wrong? Are we not freer than ever in human history, and sadder, and more anxious, more wretched? What if marriage, at its very best, exists to remake us into beautiful new creatures we scarcely recognize? What if, in some cosmically weird way, escaping a hard marriage is not how you change? What if staying married is?”

HARRISON SCOTT KEY, Author

“Destructive to marriage is the self-fulfillment ethic that assumes marriage and the family are primarily institutions of personal fulfillment, necessary for us to become “whole” and happy. The assumption is that there is someone just right for us to marry and that if we look closely enough we

will find the right person. This moral assumption overlooks a crucial aspect to marriage. It fails to appreciate the fact that we always marry the wrong person. We never know who we marry; we just think we do. Or even if we first marry the right person, just give it a while and he or she will change. For marriage, being [the enormous thing it is] means we are not the same person after we have entered it. The primary problem is...learning to love and care for the stranger to whom you find yourself married."

STANLEY HAUERWAS, Theologian

"In any relationship, there will be frightening spells in which your feelings of love dry up. And when that happens you must remember that the essence of marriage is that it is a covenant, a commitment, a promise of future love. So what do you do? You do the acts of love, despite your lack of feeling. You may not feel tender, sympathetic, and eager to please, but in your actions you must BE tender, understanding, forgiving and helpful. And, if you do that, as time goes on you will not only get through the dry spells, but they will become less frequent and deep, and you will become more constant in your feelings. This is what can happen if you decide to love."

TIM KELLER, Pastor and author

"When over the years someone has seen you at your worst, and knows you with all your strengths and flaws, yet commits him- or herself to you wholly, it is a consummate experience. To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretence, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us."

TIM KELLER, Pastor and author

"I, N, take you, N, to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward; for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part; according to God's holy law. In the presence of God I make this vow...N, I give you this ring as a sign of our marriage. With my body I honour you, all that I am I give to you, and all that I have I share with you, within the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

MARRIAGE VOWS AND THE GIVING OF RINGS from Church of England Marriage Service

"Being in love is a good thing, but it is not the best thing. There are many things below it, but there are also things above it. You cannot make it the basis of a whole life. It is a noble feeling, but it is still a feeling. Now no feeling can be relied on to last in its full intensity, or even to last at all. Knowledge can last, principles can last, habits can last but feelings come and go. And in fact, whatever people

For Further Research

CARE's Topic Page (care.org.uk/cause/marriage-and-family)

Care for the Family (www.careforthefamily.org.uk/)

Focus on the Family (www.focusonthefamily.com/)

The Marriage Course (htb.org/marriage-online)
Marriage Foundation (marriagefoundation.org.uk/)

Centre for Social Justice: 'Why Family matters', 2019

Christopher Ash: Married for God: making your marriage the best it can be, 1999

Glynn Harrison: A better story: God, sex and human flourishing, 2017

Tim Keller: On Birth, 2021

Tim Keller: The meaning of marriage, 2013

C.S. Lewis: The four loves, 1960

Rob Parsons: The sixty-minute family, 2010

Louise Perry: The case against the sexual revolution, 2022

Paul David Tripp: What did you expect? Redeeming the realities of marriage, 2010

Justin Whitmel Earley: Habits of the Household, 2021

say, the state called 'being in love' usually does not last. If the old fairy-tale ending 'They lived happily ever after' is taken to mean 'They felt for the next fifty years exactly as they felt the day before they were married,' then it says what probably never was nor ever would be true, and would be highly undesirable if it were. Who could bear to live in that excitement for even five years? What would become of your work, your appetite, your sleep, your friendships? But, of course, ceasing to be 'in love' need not mean ceasing to love. Love in this second sense – love as distinct from 'being in love' – is not merely a feeling. It is a deep unity, maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habit; reinforced by (in Christian marriages) the grace which both partners ask, and receive, from God. They can have this love for each other even at those moments when they do not like each other; as you love yourself even when you do not like yourself. They can retain this love even when each would easily, if they allowed themselves, be 'in love' with someone else. 'Being in love' first moved them to promise fidelity: this quieter love enables them to keep the promise. It is on this love that the engine of marriage is run: being in love was the explosion that started it."

C.S. LEWIS, Scholar and author

Key Stats

Marriage rates

- Marriage rates in the UK are falling. In 2021, adults were 44% more likely to have never been married than was the case in 1991. Back then, amongst women aged 20-39, 37% had never been married: this had risen to 58.6% in 2011 and 65.7% by 2021.
- In 2023, the number of adults who were married or in a civil partnership at any one time fell below 50% for the first time ever.
- Same-sex marriage was introduced in 2014, and in 2022 there was a record number of same-sex marriages, making up 3.2% of all marriages that year.
- More than 9 in 10 couples who married in 2021 or 2022 were cohabitating prior to marriage; cohabitation prior to opposite-sex marriages was the highest since records began in 1994.
- Civil partnership is uncommon (whether same-sex or opposite-sex), making up just 2.7% of all legal partnership formations in 2022.
- In 2022, 17% of marriages were religious services and 83% were civil ceremonies.
- Marriage rates (and divorce rates) are not consistent across the UK. The lowest marriage rate is amongst Black Caribbean Brits (only 27%). 43.5% of White Brits are married, and the figure rises to more than 60% among Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi individuals.
- Religious individuals are 24% far more likely to be married than secular individuals and 21% less likely to be divorced. Christians account for 55.5% of married couples, despite only making up 46.2% of the population.
- In removing marriage from the tax system in 2000, Britain became the only OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) economy of its size not to do so. A one-earner married couple with two children on average wages pays 70% more tax than a comparable French family, more than twice as much as a comparable US family and 15 times as much as that on a comparable German family.
- Two thirds (66%) of British adults who are single agree that people do not have enough money to get married.

- The proportion of people who live in a couple that are cohabiting has increased from 20.6% in 2011 to 24.3% in 2021, an increase across all age groups. Cohabiting couple families accounted for 18% of all families in 2023. Six years after they started cohabitating, 54% of couples had broken up and only 33% had married.

Divorce and family breakdown rates

- The UK is now among the worst countries in the western world when ranked by family breakdown. In other OECD countries, 84% of children under 15 are living with both parents. In the UK it is around 66%.
- Six in ten (61%) adults who experienced family breakdown themselves say this occurred when they were aged 18 or younger.
- Divorce rates are still high but are falling. A 2019 report found that 35% of people who were married that year were predicted to divorce, down from the divorce rate of 44% among couples who married in the late 1980s and early 1990s. For under-40s, the rate of divorce fell by two-thirds from 1991 to 2021, and the median length of marriage at divorce has risen from less than 9 years in the 1980s to more than 12 years today.
- Early indications are that the divorce rate is higher for same-sex couples (making up 1.4% of divorces in 2021).
- Five in six (83%) British adults say that stronger families are important in addressing Britain's social problems. Nine in ten (89%) British adults who are in their second marriage or more agree that the government is right to say the stability of a family matters for children. Nearly two thirds (63%) of British adults who are in their second marriage or more agree it is too easy to get a divorce today.
- As of 2018, the UK spent around £51 billion/year on family breakdown (more than it did at the time on Defence).

Causes of family breakdown

- When family breakdown occurred, people affected said that the most common contributing factors were: growing apart (45%), lack of commitment (32%), infidelity (30%), and financial issues (30%). Growing apart is more

common among older age groups.

- Family breakdown is far more common among unmarried couples: research from the Policy Exchange suggested that almost 1 in 2 cohabiting parents split up before a child's fifth birthday; the comparable figure for married parents was 1 in 12.
- Lone parenthood is at its highest in poorer parts of the UK: it is at its highest in the London boroughs of Southwark, Lambeth and Islington, where more than 40% children live in single-parent families. In affluent areas like St Albans, Guildford and Wokingham, that figure is less than 17%. A teenager growing up in the poorest 20% of households is two thirds more likely to experience family breakdown than a teenager in the top 20% of households.
- 'No fault' divorces now make up the majority (74%) of divorce applications, and of those, 73% were sole applications for divorce.

Benefits of marriage

- The CSJ found in 2019 that children in broken families are more than twice as likely to experience poverty. They are:
 - 2.3 times more likely to experience homelessness
 - 2.0 times more likely to have trouble with the police
 - 1.9 times more likely to experience educational under-achievement
 - 1.8 times more likely to experience alcoholism
 - 1.7 times more likely to experience teenage pregnancy
 - 1.7 times more likely to experience mental health issues
 - 1.6 times more likely to experience debt.

- The consequence of divorce has been shown to have a greater impact on children's education than parental death. They were also themselves 1.9 times less likely to remain together with the other parent of their own children.
- Good relationships with family members are important for children. A 2022 report from the Children's Commissioner found that getting on well with either of your parents at age 13 is linked with 2% higher wages at age 25. Average life satisfaction for girls who were close to their mother was 7.9/10, compared to 4.4/10 for those who were not.

The future of marriage

- By 2050, it is predicted that only about 3 in 10 people will be married.
- Given the current rate of decline, the annual number of marriages could fall below 200,000 in the coming years. The total number of marriages in the UK is expected to continue its downward trend, falling to around 175,000 by 2050. This represents a 28% decline from 2019.
- By 2050, it is anticipated that about 35% of marriages will end in divorce, a slight decrease from the current rate.

Stories

In 'The Meaning of Marriage', Tim Keller writes about the couple **Rob and Jessica**. Rob struggled with empathy, and sometimes hurt people around him, but Jessica thought he was a great conversationalist, and when he said something hurtful, she simply told him off (which Rob didn't mind). After they got married, Rob became gradually more insensitive. Although Jessica was resilient, she could see that Rob could hurt people around him, became disillusioned with him, and within a year of marriage, imagined being single again. Together they sought counseling with a pastor; this helped Jessica to see that - being a strong woman - she could help him to see how damaging his words could be, and to work with him to transform him. Rob was amazed that someone could love him like this, and did not want to hurt her; gradually he began to change. Jessica also found herself becoming more patient and gracious. Within a couple of years, they both found that they had grown significantly.

Olivia, an author, was married with children, but embarked on an open relationship with her husband Adam. She wrote about the experience: “The problem with open relationships is that even if you can dismiss sex pretty easily, you cannot dismiss the space around a lover. And one day, when we had three small children, Adam met a woman who had a large, empty, quiet, clean house. She might have had music playing. Maybe there were candles at dinner. Meanwhile, home life was an exhausting effort from beginning to end...I don't think the sex was so brilliant; I think it was the haven, the quiet place where he could think and talk. A lover with whom you can be free – free of the encumbrance of being human and responsible. I lost everything. I adored his family and, when Adam left, I lost not just him but the whole package that he had given me.”

In his book *How to Stay Married*, **Harrison Scott Key** details the breakdown of his marriage to his wife Lauren, and how their marriage was saved. After 20 years together it seemed like their marriage was over when Lauren had an affair with their next-door neighbour and moved out. Harrison writes about how he struggled but chose not to quit, taking responsibility for his shortcomings and working through the issues with the help of his Christian faith. “The idea of you forgive your brother not seven times, but 70 times seven times. Like, that's a joke in the Bible,” he writes, “It's a hyperbole. And the joke is, you will have to forgive so many times it will feel ridiculous.” Harrison details how they put their marriage back together with honesty, and includes a chapter from Lauren's point of view. “He was welcoming me back,” she writes, “This is our marriage. This is our story.” She adds, “No one really talks about marriage struggles... You'd think they would. Christians love to talk about sin and struggle, but we look past the many nightmares of marriage like an army of the blind.” Harrison concludes: “What if marriage, at its very best, exists to remake us into beautiful new creatures we scarcely recognize? What if, in some cosmically weird way, escaping a hard marriage is not how you change? What if staying married is?”

Pastoral Issues

Those considering living together

- Cohabitation before (or instead of) marriage is very common, even among Christians. There may well be couples living together, or contemplating it, among those to whom you are speaking.
- God has given the public commitment of marriage as the place for sex and family life. Even a Christian couple who choose to co-habit for a short time before marriage for financial reasons put themselves in the path of temptation.
- People often co-habit to ‘test their relationship’. But studies show that couples who co-habit are less likely to stay together, even if they eventually get married, while parents who are married before they have children are far more likely to stay together.

Those who have experienced family breakdown

- A very high proportion of a congregation will have experienced family breakdown, whether that is through having experienced a divorce themselves, or seeing their parents divorce. Others will be experiencing marriage difficulties at the time you speak.
- It is important to be extremely sensitive around what is likely to have been a highly painful time of life. Jesus did not use his teaching as a stick to beat people with, and we are not seeking to judge those for whom marriages have broken down. Although God's design for marriage is that it is life-long, ‘there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’.
- It is worth saying that marriages can break down for all kinds of reasons, and there are some occasions - such as domestic violence - where it is actually right that the marriage should come to an end.

Those who are not in two-parent families

- Although God's design, and the statistics, are clear about the benefits of marriage for children, some parents (and perhaps, children) might easily become defensive about the implication that their relationship might negatively impact their children.
- Make clear that teaching about the benefits of marriage does not mean that single parents cannot do an excellent job in raising children; we are talking in general terms, and there will be counter-examples.

Singleness

- For others, it will be a source of great sadness that they have not got married themselves, or not been able to have children of their own. God's design for the church is for it to be a family, where no one is left behind.
- Marriage is rightfully presented as a good thing, but singleness is also good. Jesus was single, and Paul encouraged Christians to remain single if they could. Spiritual maturity does not depend on either marriage or singleness.
- Remind single people that they are genuinely loved and valued, recognise the pain or conflicted emotions which some will have experienced, and seek to encourage others in the church to be proactive in including single people into their homes (and families, such as as honorary aunts and uncles, or godfathers and godmothers).