

Divorce and Remarriage

Matthew 5:31-32; 19:1-12

Matthew 5:31-32, “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

As we have been moving through Matthew, we have seen Jesus declared to be the Promised One, the Messiah, the King who has come to rescue His people from sin and bring restoration to the earth. Today we are in the middle of the sermon on the mount, where Jesus, as the King, is acting as the new law-giver, showing us the way of the Kingdom. Who Christians are, what they are like, and how they should behave. In summary, they are to be holy as their heavenly father is holy, which gives them a unique place and purpose in the world, what Jesus calls the salt and light to the world. So there is a contrast that Christ sets up between His church and the world. They are to be different.

The text that we come to today deals with the very controversial, sensitive, and tragic subject of divorce. I’d like us first to hear the voice of our culture. A few years back an article appeared in the Wall Street Journal. *“Marital therapists and divorce attorneys say the breakup of long-term marriages is routine these days—for reasons of longevity, economics and cravings for happiness and self-expression that were less prevalent in previous generations. People are living longer, and they’re less willing to spend their last decades with someone who leaves them unfulfilled. At the same time, working wives are less dependent on husbands for financial support, and husbands have Viagra and other new incentives to find other romances.”*

There is so much wrong with that statement. Marriage, in our culture, is on the path of erosion. Marriage and Divorce are casual and flippant, and the evidence of extreme self-centeredness.

The church, however, has not shown itself to be much different. On this matter we are weak and impotent, and we’ve lost our witness in the world. You’ve probably heard that the church and the world both have a 50% divorce rate. In my research this week the stat for the church, for those who take their faith seriously, it’s closer to 30%. One article said this was good news. Good news? So it’s not 1 out of every 2 couples, it’s 1 out of every 3 couples. I get what they are saying, but that is not good news. 30% percent of all marriages within the church, if you give it enough time, will end in separation. It is clear that we have lost our compass and know not what we do. Our Lord, as He spoke this re-orienting message to the disciples 2000 years ago, must again, speak into our lives on this critical matter. And no we cannot skip this section of the Bible.

With today’s subject being the subject of divorce, I realize that pain is near. In one way or another, I’d imagine that every one of us in the room are in some way affected by divorce, whether the experience of going through one ourselves, or of our parents, or of someone we love. The pain and brokenness is real. C.S. Lewis calls it the magnaphone.

My goal this morning in bringing this up is not to make you feel pain, and neither is that the goal of the Scriptures. Our goal is biblical, God-honoring faithfulness in all aspects of life, knowing that faithfulness to God’s Word is where true freedom and lasting joy are found. God’s Word brings guidance, comfort, healing, wholeness, and restoration. That’s where we want to go today.

Let’s pray for God’s help.

To begin our discussion today we must be reminded of what is going on in our immediate context. If you are just joining us, in this section in Jesus’ sermon, We again see this phrase at the beginning of our section again, “It was also said... but I say to you.” He is arguing not against the law of Moses, He’s already told us He’s come to fulfill it, but He’s arguing against the Pharisees and Scribes interpretation. Jesus is arguing against their foolish, sinful interpretations, followed by His divine, authoritative interpretation.

What we are most concerned about and must submit to is what Jesus says, but to get there we need to consider these other voices in the discussion. Our path forward this morning will be to look at the voice of Moses, the Pharisees, and Jesus. And then we will make some practical applications.

1. Moses on Divorce

The first thing we need to see to orient ourselves to this passage, is to turn to what the Pharisees were interpreting. They were reading Moses. Deut. 24:1-4.

“24:1 “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, 2 and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife, 3 and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, 4 then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD.”

What we see here in this passage is that Moses, and by extension, God, takes marriage and divorce very seriously. It’s hard for us to see, but God through Moses is establishing a moral people within a world that was rampant of immorality. In the world culture marriage had little value and divorce was easy. God was forming the Israelites, calling them to be separate from the world.

And though it might look like Moses is opening the door for divorce, he’s actually tightening it considerably. First of all, adultery, was punishable by death (Lev. 20). Get caught cheating and you and your new acquaintance are done. And secondly, you couldn’t get divorced for any reason, there had to be “some indecency” in her from v.1. It’s unclear exactly what this refers to, but likely has the idea of being unclean according to the law. This shattered the ability for divorce to happen over trivial matters.

And this also shows Moses protection for women. If a divorce took place there had to be witnesses, and the woman would have to be given a certificate. What’s the point of that? The woman, once divorced, would be left vulnerable economically without a husband... in that regard the certificate is her right to remarry. The guy couldn’t just kick her out of the house. It also protected her dignity and life, literally. The certificate proved her innocence of adultery, so she wouldn’t be killed, again, allowing for somebody else to marry her.

The only limitation on her remarrying, that Moses makes clear, is that she cannot remarry the original husband.

All this had in effect that Moses was strengthening marriage, giving more value to it by limiting the circumstances of divorce and making it harder to divorce. The Israelites could stand out in the world to be God’s holy people.

So this is the passage upon which the Pharisees have built their teaching. Let’s now take a look at what they are teaching by the time of Jesus.

The Pharisees on Divorce

In Matthew 5:31, “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’” This “said” here is the Pharisees interpretation of Deut. 24. What can we pick up from this phrase. On the surface it doesn’t look like much, might even look like faithfulness to Deut. 24, but if you look carefully the focus is on divorce, it’s not on marriage. There’s no thought of under what circumstances divorce might be possible, it’s all about the certificate. Moses was trying to uphold marriage and prevent divorce. The Pharisees are making divorce the issue, and faithfulness is all about the certificate. To paraphrase their attitude here, “If you divorce, just make sure you give a certificate.”

Here we must jump over to Matthew 19:1-12 where this situation is more fully brought to light, which we will read fully in a minute. In this conversation the Pharisees are trying to trick Jesus, asking, “And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, **“Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?”** but all they do is show their true colors. It’s never wise to try to trick Jesus. Can we divorce for “any” cause? You see, again, the whole issue is how to get divorced, not what marriage is supposed to do and be about.

The Pharisees by this time had done so much twisting of the law of Moses that they not only allowed divorce for any reason, they were even commanding it. You see this in v.7 **They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?”**

It was not commanded, but allowed under certain circumstances, so they’ve added to God’s Word, and put the emphasis again on divorce. But they also expanded the reasons for it. The uncleanness of deuteronomy which was certainly an exceptional case, became anything they wanted it to be. Divorce was a casual deal, and you could divorce for any reason—because you no longer found her attractive, because you lost interest in her, somebody better came along, and even for the most trivial of cases—because she burnt your toast. The institution of marriage was all but gone.

The Pharisees created a religious system that de-emphasized marriage and emphasized divorce, as if that was the main thing. Their religious system fostered and cultivated their immorality, they built loopholes into the system so they could feel justified in their lustful and fleshly pursuits.

It’s like that game of telephone if you remember playing it as a kid, when the truth starts out and as it gets reinterpreted from kid to kid it gradually becomes something with no resemblance to the original. That’s what had happened here. I like how Lloyd Jones summarizes their tampering with God’s Word, “the result was that the ultimate object of the Mosaic legislation [was] entirely concealed and nullified.”

So we’ve looked at Moses and the Pharisees interpretation, and now let’s look at what Jesus says.

Jesus on Divorce

Let’s now read Matthew 19:1-6

Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. 2 And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

3 And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” 4 He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

Jesus answers their question by taking them back to the very beginning. Before there’s going to be any discussion on divorce, we must go back to the foundation, to the original intent. To talk divorce without understanding marriage is out of order. Jesus therefore affirms marriage as God’s design in creation, its sanctity and permanence.

In the beginning God creates the universe and creates man and woman, and they are brought together in holy marriage: one man and one woman for life, the two becoming one flesh. God’s intention is oneness, and that’s been his intention from the very beginning. Jesus emphatically states, “What God has joined together, let man not separate.” God is in the business of bringing people together. Marriage is good, holy, and pleasing to God. Division is not. Mal. 2:16, God hates divorce.

This would have sounded a bit strange to the Pharisees, who had Deut. 24 in their back pocket. So they respond...

They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

Because sin entered the human equation. Divorce comes from the destructive nature of sin, not the desire of God. Sin unleashes pain and suffering into the world, and because hard hearted people hurt each other and dishonor God, because of that, Moses allowed for you to divorce, but this is by way of concession. God’s hates divorce.

Then Jesus repeats says 19:9, **“And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”**

Jesus raises the bar on the Mosaic law another time, limiting the possibility (not command) of divorce to only one condition, sexual immorality. Why is this the case? Because of the one flesh union that God has already established. The two have become one, and sexuality plays a mysterious and central role in that. (Paul’s argument in 1 Cor. 6 do not have relations with a prostitute, do you not know you unite your members??). Sexual infidelity, therefore, destroys the union that is there. That is why Jesus says this is the exception, because the bond is apparently actually dissolved. You are no longer the one flesh.

And that is the logic for why Jesus can say, if you divorce without sexual immorality, you are actually still married. So if you go marry another, you’ve committed adultery. It’s the same as cheating on your wife.

This is the statement that we have in Chapter 5 from a different angle. **But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”**

So the same principle applied here to the divorced, no the man doing the divorcing. Same idea. Remarriage is assumed in the 1st century context. If a husband divorces his wife, the wife is forced to remarry. And you as the man, **make** her an adulterer, and whoever marries her is an adulterer. If a man marries a woman that has not been properly divorced, he’s marrying another man’s wife.

Why? Again, because the bond has not been legitimately dissolved. That’s the logic. She’s actually still married, regardless of her certificate, and regardless of what she or the husband say, or the government says. In the eyes of God, she’s still one flesh. Therefore, unless there is this exception, you aren’t really divorced. The divorce is not legitimate. The bond is not broken. The cord is not cut.

Sexual infidelity, on the other hand, is unique in that it dissolves the bond and so frees the woman and frees whoever marries the woman to form a new bond.

In the NT Jesus raises the bar on marriage. He expects divorce in the church to be extremely rare.

The disciples rightly pick up on the seriousness and gravity of Jesus’ teaching, and respond in 19:10, **“If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.”**

The disciples are thinking, why get married if you are stuck with that person. They were imagining the difficulty that would be present. Both marriage and singleness are good and holy. Jesus and John the Baptist were single, and Paul affirms the undivided devotion and missional incentive that is there in singleness. But Marriage is to be entered into with the greatest level of seriousness and commitment.

1. Marriage is about the glory of God, not your selfish gain
 1. Our orientation must be to glorify God, that is our primary orientation.
2. Marriage is a covenant, not a contract.
 1. A covenant says I am in this no matter what. A contract says, as long as you fulfill x I will fulfill Y.
Vows are a joke.
3. Pursue Marriage, not Divorce.
 1. We are not looking for reasons to divorce, we are looking for opportunities to display grace. Why? Because that's what we do as Christians who have received grace. "Chrysostom commented, "For he that is meek, and a peace-maker, and poor in spirit, and merciful, how shall he cast out his wife? He that is used to reconcile others, how shall he be at variance with her that is his own?"
 2. Divorce is a last resort, permissible only under certain circumstance. The scriptures I do believe hold out divorce and remarriage under three circumstances.
 1. Sexual immorality (Matthew 5,19)
 2. Unbelieving spouse separates (1 Cor. 7)
 - a. I would put abuse in this situation. Abusing spouse -> church discipline -> lack of repentance and rejection of faith.
 3. Spouse dies (1 Cor. 7)
4. What if you have divorced? Igeit or not.
 1. Unmarried and remarried.
 2. Both groups need to confess your sin, receive the forgiveness of the Lord, and repent.
 3. Repentance for the unmarried looks like returning to your true spouse.
 4. Repentance for the remarried means being faithful to God in your current marriage. You are not to repent by creating another divorce.

5. Worship the Faithful One

The Old Testament Scriptures refer to God's relationship with His people as a husband and bride. And over and over His people sin. God calls idolatry, the valuing of anything above God as spiritual adultery. It's as graphic and potent an image of sin as there is. And that is all of us. In our hearts, we have had sex with the world, and cheated on, not another sinner like us, but cheated on the Righteous One.

The glory of the gospel is the fact that this Righteous One Jesus, does not cast us out as we deserve. He pursues us and wins us back at the cost of His life on the cross for us. He dies to gain, not a holy bride, but a filthy, adulterous bride, to cleanse her and purify her that we may be His forever.

That is what marriage is about. And that is why divorce is so destructive, because it paints a picture of God that is not true. The gospel gives us a heart of flesh by which we are empowered to love one another in marriage. Christ has called His church to be set apart. Let us hold fast to our bridegroom, and let us hold fast to our spouses, to God be the glory.