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Divorce

Matthew 5:31-32

Matthew 5:31-32, *“Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’³² But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.*

Divorce

I would feel safe in saying there is not one person in this room this morning who has not, in some way, been touched by the shadow of divorce.

For some, divorce was a painful reality you personally endured. Others of you are children of divorce. Still others of us have watched from the side-lines as a member of our family, or a good friend, or a co-worker, dealt with divorce.

While still others of us, struggling through a dysfunctional marriage, might even be considering divorce as an option. All of us have been affected in some way.

And though sad, the reach of divorce's shadow is not surprising in light of the prevalence of divorce.

Did you know that based on contemporary rates, if you attended a wedding a month for the last ten months, odds are that 4 or 5 of those new marriages will not last?

They will end in divorce. That's not necessarily a statistic you want to talk loosely about at all those wedding receptions, but it is sobering.

However, divorce has touched your life, I also feel safe in saying that shadow has affected your thinking.

The prevalence of divorce, and our personal connection with divorce, has shaped the way we think about divorce.

This morning we will consider the way we think about divorce, it's critical we ultimately understand how God thinks about divorce.

Why is that important?

Because what you believe about divorce reveals what you believe about marriage.

God is the creator, the inventor, the designer of marriage. Therefore, only God can help us understand whether our thinking is healthy or unhealthy when it comes to both marriage and divorce.

Whoever Divorces His Wife.

In the sermon on the mount since Jesus came to fulfil God's law, he's been unpacking the fullness of several of the Old Testament commands.

The first two OT commands Jesus touched on were straight out of the Ten Commandments.

V 21, Jesus referenced the OT Law's prohibition against murder, **V 27**, Jesus quoted the commandment prohibiting adultery.

V 31, "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'"

Now, if you know the Ten Commandments, you know that there is no commandment on divorce.

Jesus is referencing a different Old Testament passage, **Deuteronomy 24:1-4**.

To be clear, Jesus is not quoting that passage. Instead, he is giving a popular understanding of that passage. Jesus is talking in verse 31 about that passage was commonly understood in his own day.

1. When Divorce is Unexceptional.

Unexceptional means ordinary, right? As it is today, in Jesus' time, it seems divorce was fairly prevalent. Yes, there were some different perspectives on divorce in Jesus' time some more restrictive, others more permissive.

But what these perspectives had in common is their understanding that, in light of Deuteronomy 24, if you wanted to divorce your wife, you simply gave her a “certificate of divorce” and that was that.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4, *When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour 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, and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, 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, 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. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.

You will notice that the command of Deuteronomy 24 was not a license or allowance to divorce, but a command not to remarry the defiled person who had been divorced.

The Jews took this law to mean that a man could divorce his wife for any reason (which we explicitly read in Matthew 19:3).

This was the common teaching. Josephus, who lived in the first century AD, records that divorce was permitted “for any causes whatsoever”.

The apocryphal book **Ecclesiasticus**, which is not inspired but was written around **150 BC**, stated, “If she will not do as you tell her, get rid of her” (25:26).

The Mishnah (which was the authoritative collection of the oral traditions of Jewish law) which was composed around **200 AD** stated all kinds of ridiculous grounds for divorce.

- If she was barren,

- If she had a physical defect,
- If she had poor posture or thinning hair,
- If she ate something he forbid her to eat,
- If she danced in the public,
- If she burned his meal, or
- If he simply found someone that he thought was prettier.

From reading ancient Jewish sources the impression is that divorce was relatively easy and was not considered a grave misdeed.

Unfortunately, our world also believes that divorce can be for any reason. If you do not want to be married anymore, you do not need any cause at all to get a divorce today.

People divorce and remarry for all kinds of reasons including no reason at all except wanting to be with someone else.

Even the Christian world has moved with our culture in the same direction and does not uphold the sanctity of marriage. The only test for a reasonable divorce today is if the person is going to be happy by divorcing. There truly is no other concern.

Is this what God taught?

Is this what the Law said?

Could a person divorce for any reason?

Jesus now states what God's law regarding marriage has always been.

So that's the mindset Jesus is addressing here in verse 31. Now, remember, what you believe about divorce is a reflection of what you believe about marriage.

And we can't miss that about Jesus' teaching here. Even though the word is nowhere to be found, this passage is really about marriage.

What Jesus has done in the last two passages?

When speaking about murder, He pointed His listeners to the anger-poisoned heart from which murder springs.

When speaking about adultery, He pointed His listeners to the lust-corrupted heart from which adultery springs.

In both cases, he pointed them and us back to the heart and demonstrated how all of us are guilty, even if we haven't committed murder or adultery.

But in doing this, Jesus is doing more than showing us how guilty we are.

Jesus showing us where real change takes place?

In the heart.

So, in light of that pattern, I think we can say that what we're seeing here is Jesus confronting our heart-posture toward marriage.

How does Jesus do this?

By moving on from the popular perspectives of his day to the word of God.

2. When Divorce is Unacceptable.

Notice how different the actual law of God was in contrast to what the Pharisees and scribes taught.

What the people taught was that you could divorce for any reason.

God taught that everyone who divorces his wife commits adultery (**Matthew 19:9**) and makes her commit adultery (**Matthew 5:32**), unless the divorce was for the cause of sexual immorality.

The Old Testament ideal for marriage was not changed by Jesus. The marriage law of Genesis 2 is maintained by **Moses, Jesus, and Paul.**

The message is that you do not get out of marriage. Marriage is for life.

Marriage must not be entered into flippantly but covenantally. You are married for life.

Can you divorce for any reason?

The answer Jesus gives is no.

But this is not a new command but was the intent of God when he blessed humanity with the gift of marriage in Genesis 2.

Genesis 2:23-24, *And Adam said: "This is now bone of my bones*

And flesh of my flesh She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man." ²⁴Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

"The two shall become one flesh" means that they are not to separate from each other because they are now one.

This is how every marriage must be entered.

This is a covenant made between the man and the woman, joined together by God for life. People are not to divorce and certainly God's people are not to divorce.

You will notice that there is only reason allowed by God for divorce and that is for marital unfaithfulness.

We have studied this word translated “sexual immorality” in our other studies, like **1 Corinthians 7**. Just to remind you that the Greek word is *porneia* which is a broad word used for any kind of physical sexual activity. This was not given as a way out of marriage, but the only ground given for divorce that is not sin.

The divorce is to occur because of the sexual immorality committed has destroyed the marriage.

- Sexual immorality is not the escape hatch but is the reason that the marriage has splintered. God recognized that this was the effect of sexual immorality.
- Sexual immorality destroys the trust that was built in the marriage.
- Sexual immorality damages the relationship that may not be able to be repaired.

Jesus is not saying that one has to divorce. But the option is given when sexual immorality occurs within marriage.

When divorce unacceptable according to Jesus?

That stood in stark contrast to their thinking, and in stands in stark contrast to how most of our society today thinks about divorce.

For many today, there are lots of acceptable reasons to get divorced. According to one relationship website, here are some of the reasons people today give for getting divorced.

1. Falling out of love (just drifted apart)
2. Values have changed over time, and we no longer agree on important things
3. Lack of support emotionally through life's changes
4. Disrespectful/demeaning behaviour
5. Lack of sex and emotional connection
6. Unbalanced roles especially housework and looking after children
7. Fallouts with family members
8. Arguing over money
9. Stressful working hours/feeling second in line to the other person's career
10. Having an affair

So how can Jesus, the Son of God, God in human flesh, say that divorce is almost always unacceptable?

Look again at what he says in verse 32.

Divorce is almost always unacceptable because in getting remarried, the wife who is sent away is committing adultery.

The man who marries such a woman is also committing adultery.

What in the world is Jesus talking about?

By definition, adultery is marital unfaithfulness.

By definition, only someone who is married can commit adultery.

Jesus is telling his listeners that even though you men write certificates of divorce and send away your wives and think that the marriage bond is still intact.

Now to better understand how Jesus thinks about marriage, we need to look at another passage from Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew 19:3-9, *The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?"* ⁴*And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,'* ⁵*and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?* ⁶*So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."*

⁷*They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?"* ⁸*He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts,*

permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”

This passage is nothing more than the expansion of what He spoke in the sermon on the mount.

Matthew 19 gives us a much clearer window into what Jesus thought about marriage. In fulfilling the Law and the Prophets, Jesus is bringing His listeners (and us) back to the fullness of God's original design for marriage.

Why did Moses allow the certificates of divorce mentions in Deuteronomy 24?

Jesus says in **V 8**, *“because of your hardness of heart”*.

But as with anger and lust, Jesus wanted to bring them back the root issue.

What was this root issue?

It was an unhealthy heart-posture toward marriage.

They saw marriage through a self-centred lens.

This attitude, as reflected in so many of the items on that website list about divorce, this attitude might say that

something like, “marriage is great... as long as things are going my way”.

What Jesus wanted to them to understand is that every marriage is an act of God.

It is a God-forged union, where two become one. So, God's design for marriage always has been and always will be about merger,
not moving on about uniting,
not untying about closeness,
not closure about addition,
not division about being intertwined,
not independent about devotion, and
not divorce.

Jesus is bringing them back to God's ideal that is back to the heart of God.

Think for a minute about how the first three of these “*but I say to you*” statements fit together.

If Jesus is calling His followers, beginning in 5:21, to address the anger-poisoned and lust-corrupted heart, it shouldn't be surprising that he's also calling them to address how those very things affect their heart-posture toward marriage.

So, what is Jesus doing in Matthew 5:31-32?

He is confronting a heart-posture toward divorce that is totally disconnected from God's heart for marriage.

Jesus is doing that by sobering them about the corrupting consequences of divorce for the women they send away and the men who marry them. As with anger and lust, he is revealing the reality of their guilt.

3. When Divorce is Unavoidable.

Both Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 include a very short exception clause related to this issue of divorce.

Did you see that exception?

“except on the ground of sexual immorality”.

Notice it does not say, “except on the ground of adultery”. The word translated “sexual immorality” here is the Greek word *porneia*. We hear that same word at the beginning of our word “porno-graphy”. What is *porneia* and why is Jesus saying it's an exception to the rule?

Well, if in stating (in chapters 5 and 19) that divorce is almost always unacceptable in light of God's heart for marriage, then Jesus needs to remind them when and why divorce was acceptable for God himself.

God warns the southern kingdom of Judah by reminding them of what happened to the northern kingdom of Israel.

Jeremiah 3:8, *Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also.*

If we look at the Greek translation of the Old Testament, a translation produced before the time of Jesus, guess which Greek word we find all over Jeremiah 3?

Porneia. In fact, the verbal form of that word is right there at the end of 3:8... “she too went and played the whore”.

Since God had a covenant relationship with his people, He often used marriage as an idea, as an image to describe that relationship.

He was a husband to His people Israel. But Israel was unfaithful when she ran around worshiping false gods.

So, what did God do?

He sent prophets to warn his people.

He did that repeatedly.

But eventually, God did the very thing He promised He would do when God gave the Law to Moses.

Like a husband sending away his unrepentant, whoring wife, God sent His people away by using a foreign army to carry them into exile.

But as we know from Jeremiah and the other prophets, He never gave up on them. His decree of divorce did not mean the end of their relationship. It was a condemnation of her sin, but not a termination of His love for her.

So, in speaking against divorce in light of God's design for marriage, Jesus does not want to speak against a husband who, like God, eventually has to send his wife away because she is flagrant and unyielding in her sexual sin.

The longer his appeals go unheeded, the longer she stays in the home, the more it appears he is condoning her behaviour. That's why we find an exception in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9.

Conclusion:

The Persevering Heart

Brothers and sisters, friends, clearly that is a lot to take in. Not only are there a number of things happening here that

connect us to other parts of the Bible, but all of this is very foreign to how we think about both marriage and divorce.

Clearly, all this raises lots of questions about both hypothetical and actual situations. Unfortunately, we simply don't have the time to explore all the questions, implications, and arguments that might be raised.

To learn more, I would encourage you to watch our series of messages on marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

If in 5:21-26 Jesus was calling his followers to peace instead of anger,
if in 5:27-30 he was calling them to purity instead of lust,
then what we find here is Jesus calling them (and us) to perseverance instead of desertion and giving up.

The hard words of Jesus in 5:32 were not spoken to heap guilt and shame and regret and those who had already left their marriages.

As is clear from Jesus' words, He's speaking to those who are married and contemplating divorce. His warning is given in love.

He wanted to keep them.

He wants to keep us from sin. Considering the divine reality of marriage, do you understand the destructive reality of divorce?

This should sober both the married and those who want to be married. Remember, this about more than divorce. It's really about marriage specifically, your view of marriage in light of God's view of marriage.

Did you know the Bible tells us God wants to give you His heart for marriage?

God sent Christ to make that possible!

Think about your own heart!

Real peace is possible now because of Jesus.

Real purity is possible now because of Jesus.

Real perseverance (in marriage) is possible now because of Jesus.

God wants to take that self-centred lens and give you his eyes instead.

Ephesians 5:22–28, *Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Saviour of the body. ²⁴Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.*

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, ²⁶that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. ²⁸So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.

As in the Old Testament, the relationship between God and His people is described here in terms of a marriage.

If this morning, your faith is in Jesus Christ as your only hope, for this life and the next, then you belong to the church and the church is his bride.

What did Jesus do for His bride?

He “gave himself up for her” on the cross, that He might cleanse her and cling to her that he might redeem and receive her that He might make her new.

New life, with a new heart, that we can persevere in marriage.

Through faith in Christ, living not for myself, but for God.

Yes, living each day in light of my marriage vow: “I do”.
But also committed with an ongoing vow: “I will”.

How is all this possible?

By God's grace alone.

Because of His vow, His promise, promises to us in Jesus.
He can give us new eyes to see the truth about divorce in light
of the truth about marriage.

God can give us a new heart to walk in that truth.