

Apprenticed to Jesus: Marriage

Matthew 5:31-32

We're in the midst of a series on discipleship. We're studying the Sermon on the Mount as the core curriculum of discipleship – the core of what Jesus wants to teach us to obey. In the SoM Jesus is teaching a type of righteousness that was deeper and more substantive than commonly accepted in His day. We've already considered Jesus' teaching on anger and lust. Today we consider His teaching on marriage and divorce in Matthew 5:31 and 32.

One of the reasons that Brian and I typically teach through books of the Bible (or large blocks of Scripture) is because it forces us to address topics that we might not otherwise address. In this way we let the Scriptures set the agenda for our teaching and for the larger conversation within the church. That's certainly the case here today as we consider Jesus' teaching on divorce. We want to allow Him to speak into our lives about this difficult topic.

Divorce is a difficult topic to address for numerous reasons. This passage before us is notoriously difficult both in terms of interpretation and application. People tend to have strong convictions about divorce and remarriage. I want to acknowledge up front that there are other legitimate interpretations of this passage than the one I'll present; others have applications that differ from mine. But as always I'll present this passage as I understand it.

As well divorce is difficult to address because numerous people here today have experienced the heartache of divorce firsthand. As I've talked with people about their experience with divorce they've told me that it's more painful than you can really imagine. One person told me that "It's like a death, except that it's worse because there's not a body to mourn." With divorce being that painful, there's always the risk of saying things that are hurtful.

But I do trust that this is the topic that Jesus wants us to consider today. It was said of Jesus in John 1:14 that He was "full of grace and truth." Jesus always spoke truth; but every single person who asked Jesus for grace received it. The same is true today. We will examine the truth of what Jesus says about marriage and divorce in Matthew 5:31-32 *and* we will we will ask Him for grace in each of our circumstances.

"Surpassing righteousness" in relation to the marriage covenant. (Matthew 5:31-32) Jesus begins by quoting a common teaching in His day:

31 "It was said, 'WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE'; 32 but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for *the* reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

The statement Jesus quotes in verse 31 was based loosely on the verbiage of Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Deuteronomy 24 addresses the scenario of a woman being handed a certificate of divorce by her husband because he finds "some indecency in her" (a little-used term). The woman then marries a second man who also hands her a certificate of divorce. In such circumstances, Moses says that first husband is prohibited from marrying her again.

In light of Deuteronomy 24 people in Jesus' day taught, "Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce." This teaching simply assumes that men will send their wives away. But when they do, they must give their wives a certificate of divorce which gave her the legal status of an unmarried woman. In that culture, the men had all the power and authority, so the teaching is put in terms of the man giving this certificate of divorce.

The teaching was straightforward enough, but the real debate among the Pharisees centered upon the permissible reasons for divorce. Remember that Deuteronomy 24:1 mentioned a man finding "some indecency" (NIV uncleanness) in his wife. One school of thought (Shammai) was rather restrictive; adultery was the only legitimate reason for a man to divorce his wife. The other school of thought (Hillel) was very permissive; a man could divorce his wife for "any good cause" – such as serving a meal that was accidentally burned (Carson, SoM, p. 45).

Whereas the Pharisees wrangled over permissible reasons for divorce, Jesus stresses commitment in marriage. He primarily wanted to stress that marriage was a covenant that shouldn't be violated. Actually, Jesus talks about the fallout of divorce – both for the man who divorces his wife and for the woman who is divorced. Last week we discussed Jesus' teaching that lust is adultery in the heart. Here He says that divorce also brings about adultery:

32 but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for *the* reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

There's an entire biblical/OT theology of marriage behind Jesus' statement. The Scriptures teach that marriage is a life-long covenant. A covenant defines a relationship between two persons and binds them together. The "old covenant," for example, defined the relationship between Jehovah and the Jewish people; both God and the Jewish people had certain responsibilities in terms of how they would treat each other. The marriage covenant defines the relationship between a husband and a wife. It is meant to be a life-long commitment to love and care for each other.

The logic behind Jesus' statement here seems to be that just because a man decides to divorce his wife, that doesn't mean that the marriage covenant is dissolved. In the eyes of God the marriage covenant is still in tact. Most commentators think Jesus is assuming that the woman would get remarried. Thus, the man who divorces his wife "makes her commit adultery" because she would now have relations with another man while she was still bound to her first husband through their marriage covenant. I think that the NIV's translation is unfortunate; it changes a verb to a noun and reads, "causes her to become an adulteress." Jesus isn't saying that this woman has the permanent designation of "adulteress"; He says that she "commits adultery." Likewise the man who marries her "commits adultery" because he's now having relations with someone bound to another.

This is true, Jesus says, "except for the reason of unchastity" (NIV "uncleanness"). This is a general term for sexual immorality; most commentators take it to be referring to adultery. Permitting this exception for divorce makes sense biblically because the person who commits adultery has already broken the marriage covenant. Divorce is permissible when the marriage covenant has already been broken.

People disagree on this, but I don't believe that Jesus' statement here means that "immorality" is the one and only permissible reason for divorce. Paul didn't take Jesus' statement as the one permissible reason for divorce because he wrote in 1 Corinthians 7:15 that abandonment was also a permissible reason for divorce. There he was arguing that a believing husband or wife should remain married to an unbelieving spouse. But if the unbeliever leaves, the believer is no longer bound to the marriage. Since the marriage covenant has been broken through abandonment, divorce is permissible.

It seems to me that there are other circumstances in which the marriage covenant is so violated that divorce is permitted. My conviction is that physical and sexual abuse would fall into that category. We don't throw the doors wide open and say that divorce is permitted in any difficult circumstance. But it seems to me that we don't want to lock ourselves into a position that fails to take into account evil actions that violate the marriage covenant. Again, I readily agree that there are other valid ways to apply the Scriptures related to divorce; but these are my convictions. My understanding is that when divorce is permitted, remarriage is also.

Having said all of that, Jesus' emphasis in these verses is upon *not* about the exceptions, but about commitment in marriage - not breaking covenant with one's marriage partner. Those who are apprenticed to him should be faithful and committed in marriage.

In light of Jesus' teaching, I'd like to address three groups of people here today.

A word to those who have been divorced . . . You can't help but evaluate your own experience in light of Jesus' statement here in Matthew 5. Actually, if you haven't already, I would encourage you to do so. Sometimes you have to deal honestly with the past in order to move unencumbered into the future. If you have already dealt with the issues surrounding your divorce, that's fine. But if there are unresolved issues, I'd encourage you to listen to what God might say to you through Jesus' teaching here. The purpose of listening to Jesus' teaching is not to heap condemnation upon yourself; it's simply to be honest before God and learn everything He wants to teach you.

As mentioned earlier, Jesus is full of grace and truth. As you hear His truth, you will also experience His grace – His help in relation to what you need. The grace you need may be healing; your experience may still be like an open wound that just won't scar over and go away. Jesus can bind up the brokenhearted.

The grace you need may involve forgiveness; you may need to be forgiven or you may need to forgive. Horrendous offenses happen in marriages that demand a type of forgiveness that is humanly impossible. Through the grace of God giving and receiving forgiveness is possible. The grace you need might involve reconciliation. Often time reconciliation isn't possible (especially if there has been remarriage). But there are those rare occasions when the grace of God gives the desire and the opportunity for reconciliation.

I also feel compelled to say that there are no second-class citizens in the kingdom of God. It is just wrong if the church – either this local church or the body of Christ in general – has made you feel like a second class citizen because you've been divorced. There is absolutely nothing incompatible between upholding the sanctity of marriage and being full of compassion for those who've had tragic experiences with marriage. Such compassion expresses the heart of God.

As a matter of fact, those of you who have been divorced have a strategic role to play in the lives of others. You can minister to others in a unique way. You have a depth of understanding that is invaluable to people going through a divorce or through other types of heartache. This is one of the ways that God can redeem your pain and disappointment; He can use you powerfully in the lives of others.

A word to those who are married . . . Jesus' emphasis on commitment in marriage reflects a perspective on marriage that we need to recapture in our day. As followers of Christ we should not break the marriage covenant. When there are problems – and there will be problems – we should approach them with the conviction that there is much more at stake than our short-term happiness and comfort. As mentioned earlier, when the other person breaks the marriage covenant through adultery or abandonment or something equally egregious (such as physical/sexual abuse – in my opinion), divorce is permitted due to our hardness of heart (as Jesus says in Mt. 19). It's not commanded; it's permitted. But the norm among Jesus' disciples is commitment in marriage.

In his book *Sacred Marriage* Gary Thomas puts forth a perspective that helps us cultivate commitment in marriage. He basically reframes how we should look at marriage. So often – especially here in American Christianity – we elevate marriage to a place that it was never meant to occupy. Sometimes you almost get the impression that when you get married that the goal of your life is now to “have a great marriage.” Consequently, your relationship with God is seen as a resource to help you in your marriage. But with that mindset, your relationship with God is only a means to an end. And that mindset puts far too much pressure on the marriage.

A more biblical perspective is to see that when you get married, the goal of your life remains to honor God – to know Him and love Him and experience Him in every area of your life. Consequently, your ***marriage*** is a resource that can now help you honor God. Marriage will surface things in your heart that God wants to refine. For example, in marriage there is no place to hide from your own selfishness and your own pride. Whatever is in your heart will surface – both the good and the bad. And so if you are apprenticed to Jesus, it's a good thing to see what's in your heart. By God's grace selfishness and pride can be replaced by servanthood and humility.

Gary Thomas asks the question, “What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?” That perspective changes everything and fosters commitment in marriage.

If your marriage is in trouble, let me plead with you to get help sooner rather than later. Allow others to help you deal with the issues you face. The church should be a place where it's “okay to not be okay.” Marriage is often incredibly hard.

A Word to those considering marriage . . . It's been said that marriage is like a fly on the window: Many times those on the inside want to get out and those on the outside want to get in. In light of Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce, I would encourage you continue laying a strong foundation for marriage. You really don't know whether you'll be married or not. And so – as is the case with everything else that's outside of your control – you focus on the things that you can influence.

I'm suggesting that you focus on becoming the type of person who can live out the type of commitment in marriage taught in Scripture. For example, Paul made that amazing statement in Ephesians 5, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loves the church, giving Himself up for her. . ." Men who are considering marriage should consider, "Am I becoming the type of person who has the capacity and the will to love someone else that selflessly?" It's not so much about being "in love" as being "able to love." For that reason I'll repeat some advice I heard almost thirty years ago: It's better to be married ten fewer years to the right person than ten more years to the wrong person. The "right person" must be able to keep covenant and love sacrificially.

My encouragement is to focus on becoming the type of person who would thrive in marriage. Whether you get married or not, you will bring life to many.