

Christ's Teaching on Divorce

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Matthew 5:31-32

GOD'S DIVINE PLAN

There are many confused and conflicting ideas floating around today concerning the biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage. This isn't as result of a lack of clarity in God's Word, but rather a cloudiness of understanding in the minds of men when they view the biblical teaching through the lens of their own desires and preconceptions. Divorce is hurtful to children, parents, families, and society as a whole, but more than that, it is a violation of God's Word.

The Bible's teaching o divorce cannot be rightly understood apart from its teaching on marriage. Right on the heels of God creating man and woman in His own image (Genesis 1:27), He declared, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast (cleave) to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" Genesis 2:24. Marriage was and is God plan. The inescapable reality is that every married couple, whether believers or unbelievers, have entered into a union that was established by the Creator Himself.

From the beginning, God intended that the marriage be a monogamous, life-long relationship between one man and one woman. Genesis 2:24 emphasized (1) the intimacy of the marriage relationship – "one flesh", and (2) the permanence of the marriage relationship – "cleave to one another". The idea behind "cleaving" to one another is that of a permanent attachment. Of all of the relationships in this world, even those as close as parent and child are never given the preeminence or referred to as a "one flesh" union. Marriage, as designed by God, is the welding together of two individuals into one unit. There is a blending of two minds, two will, two sets of emotions, two spirits, etc. And God's desire has always been that this newly formed union would be indissoluble as long as both partners live.

But in a world cursed by sin and marred by the fall, this is unfortunately not always the case – not because God's plan has changed, but because of man's rebelliousness to God's will and His ways. The whole of Scripture affirms that God's heart is grieved by man's departure from His divine plan for marriage. The prophet Malachi communicated these words to Israel in Malachi 2:13-16:

And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. But you say,

“Why does he not?” Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. “For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.”

The Pharisees, as we will see in our text this morning, applied a selfish, man-centered interpretation to Moses’ words in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 to falsely defend their desire for divorce. Instead of understanding Moses’ words as a divine consideration (reality) due to the sinfulness and hard heartedness of man, the Pharisees interpreted the Old Testament Scriptures as an individual prerogative to be exercised at will. In other words, they interpreted Moses’ words as their loophole or way of escape for any undesirable marriage. Far from encouraging divorce, the Old Testament Scriptures restrict it. Let’s look at our text for this morning:

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. Matthew 5:31-32

MARRIAGE, ADULTERY, AND DIVORCE

Adultery is an awful word – it’s the betrayal of trust, the betrayal of a sacred covenant before God. So antithetical is adultery to God’s intended design for marriage, that Christ condemned not only the physical act but also the lustful thoughts of our imaginations. Last week we saw the need for us to deal with the temptations of our flesh aggressively. We treat sensual sins like gangrene and refuse to cozy up next to the kitty. Jesus exhorted us to have a “whatever it takes mentality” when it comes to the pursuit of sexual purity – even at the expense of an eye or a hand!

In the text before us Jesus takes another step – what about divorce? The Pharisees had conveniently worked out a neat and tidy way of getting out of marriage – or so they thought. But Jesus blew the whistle on their erroneous interpretation of the Law. We need to hear that whistle today! In a culture that sees marriages crumbling regularly and the sacred vows of marriage so easily dishonored, God’s people need to be immovable in our convictions regarding the sacredness of the marriage relationship. Like a concrete pillar in the midst of turbulent waters, we need to commit to the permanence of marriage, regardless of our own personal experiences. When does pre-marriage counseling begin? Pre-marriage counseling begins at birth and continues right through the teen years. A great goal of any Bible church is to so teach and disciple God’s people to help them stay out of the statistics and to build marriages that are strong, built on the foundation of Christ. A wise

man once said, "It takes three for the two to become one." We need to learn to communicate and humbly solve problems by grace, and bring honor to God.

A SENSITIVE ISSUE

For those who have gone through divorce, are divorced and remarried, or are in a marriage that is very difficult, Jesus' words here can be very difficult. Remember several things before proceeding. Good men have differed in how they understand the Scriptures about divorce and remarriage. And, there is law and grace. Christ interprets the law for us and says this is the divine standard: God ordained marriage (Genesis 2). God hates divorce (Malachi 2). But then Christ went to Calvary and took the punishment for breaking God's standards. Where sin abounds, grace superabounds (Romans 5:20). Neither adultery or divorce and remarriage are unpardonable sins. But, at the same time, we cannot lower God's standards because of our own personal experiences or to accommodate the moral relativism of our culture.

THE DIVORCE CONTROVERSY OF JESUS' DAY

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 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'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." 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. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." His disciples said to him, "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. Matthew 19:3-11

Two views of the rabbis, based on Deuteronomy 24:1, the "indecent" problem.

"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, 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. Deuteronomy 24:1-4

1. The Shammai school (Conservative) - Divorce was acceptable only in case of adultery.
2. The Hillel school (Liberal) - Divorce was acceptable for any reason, almost. (A poorly prepared meal or embarrassing her husband)

What does Jesus say in verses 4-6? He says, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 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'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

Notice the Pharisees' question in verse 7. They ask, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" Look at Jesus' answer in verse 8. He says, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so." Jesus indicts the Pharisees for adultery because they were guilty of it by putting their wives away and remarrying and teaching that others could do the same. The Pharisees thought that only a little paperwork was required to legalize their lusts – Jesus says, "Not so."

THE DISSOLUTION OF A MARRIAGE IS CONSIDERED ADULTERY

If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man's wife, will he return to her? Would not that land be greatly polluted? You have played the whore with many lovers; and would you return to me? declares the LORD. Jeremiah 3:1

[If a man falsely] accuses [his wife / betrothed] of misconduct (shameful deeds) and brings a bad name upon her, saying, "I took this woman, and when I came near her, I did not find in her evidence of virginity," they shall fine him a hundred shekels of silver and give them to the father of the young woman, because he has brought a bad name upon a virgin of Israel. And she shall be his wife. He may not divorce her all his days. Deuteronomy 22:19, 24

If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are found, then the man who lay with her shall give to the father of the young woman fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife, because he has violated her. He may not divorce her all his days. Deuteronomy 22:28-29

ALL CHRIST'S WORDS CONCERNING DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

*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.
Matthew 5:32*

And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” Matthew 19:9

And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” Mark 10:11-12

Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery. Luke 16:18

What is Jesus saying here? Marriage is intended to be PERMANENT. Paul adds to this biblical counsel:

To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. 1 Corinthians 7:10-11

Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned, 1 Corinthians 7:27-28a

A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. 1 Corinthians 7:39

BELIEVERS MUST BE COMMITTED TO THE SACREDNESS OF MARRIAGE

The attitude we should come away with here is one of humility. We ought to be left saying, “Wow, marriage holy ground, it’s not something to be messed around with.” Regardless of our cultural relativism, or the opinions of our social and therapeutic experts, marriage is a sacred, permanent covenant only to be dissolved by death.

You might be asking yourself the question, “What if I’ve already broken God’s standard here? What if I’m divorced? What if I’m remarried? What do I do?” Many believers are in this situation. As in every sin, we confess our sin and repent of where we have failed to meet God’s righteous standards,

and then we commit to upholding them from this day forward! We want to be very careful not to try and defend or justify what God hates – that is exactly what the Pharisees were doing.

COMMON VIEWS ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

1. Divorce is OK if two people just can't get along. Few teach this, but many follow it practically.
2. Divorce is OK in cases of desertion or marital infidelity.

But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. 1 Corinthians 7:15

3. Divorce is never OK.
4. Divorce may not be avoidable, but remarriage is never approved by Christ.
5. Divorce is sin; if someone is remarried, divorce and return to the first spouse. (Sin to correct sin...)

Good men have differed on this subject. One thing is sure, however. Marriage is a sacred covenant intended by God to be permanent until death. As believers, we need to do all we can to honor what God honors. Jesus says that the real issue in all marital breakdown is hardness of heart. Somebody isn't getting what they want. Jesus Christ can bring grace and beauty to any marriage when two people are submitted to Him and willing to work at their relationship!