

## Jesus On Divorce

*Sermon on the Mount, Vol. 15*

HBC 11/1/20

Matthew 5:31-32

Our text brings us to a subject I have preached on, taught about and counseled about many times. It's constantly relevant to our world and to our church. If you are divorced or remarried, I understand that talking about this in church might make you uncomfortable, but it's necessary. I'm not here to judge your past, and I understand it's irretrievable. God's grace is sufficient and wonderful to make anyone willing into a productive servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. Every one of us in Christ lives ***in this grace in which we stand*** (Romans 5:2).

In the flow of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus used divorce as another example in to point out the difference between the letter of the Law as the Pharisees' applied it (in a twisted manner) and the true meaning of the Law of God as it should affect your heart.

### I. **The Letter of the Law** (31)

Matthew 5:31: *It was said, 'WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE'; . . .*

We need to put ourselves in historical context to see what Jesus was doing in this section of His great sermon. Let's start with the ***Bible's clearest statement*** on divorce.

Malachi 2:16: *"For I hate divorce," says the LORD, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the LORD of hosts.*

God hates divorce because He created marriage to be one man and one woman for life. To break that covenant relationship is to sully what God created. But since Adam fell and took the whole human race into sin, divorce is something we need to deal with. In the thoroughness of His law, God gave instructions for how it was to be handled. Jesus was citing the gist of the main passage in the Hebrew Scriptures on divorce.

Deuteronomy 24:1–4: *When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that 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 from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife, and if the latter husband turns against 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 husband dies who took her to be his wife, then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.*

Here are six observations:

1. ***It is not a command to secure a divorce in any circumstances.***
2. ***God's word assumes divorce is a reality.***

Matthew 19:7-8: They \*said to Him, "Why then did Moses **command** to GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND her AWAY?" He \*said to them, "**Because of your hardness of heart** Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.

3. **The grounds.**

The ground for divorce in the Old Testament was something less than adultery. Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22-27 prescribe the **death penalty** for adultery. Divorce is irrelevant when a person is dead.

4. ***The certificate of divorce*** was a key feature of this regulation.

Sample Certificate of Divorce

"On the \_\_\_\_ day . . . in the month \_\_\_\_ in the year \_\_\_\_ from the beginning of the world, according to the common computation in the province of \_\_\_\_ . I \_\_\_\_ . . . of the town of \_\_\_\_ with entire consent of mind, and without any constraint, have divorced, dismissed and expelled you \_\_\_\_ daughter of \_\_\_\_ . . . of the town \_\_\_\_ who has been my wife hitherto; [CLICK] But now I have dismissed you . . . so as to be free at your own disposal, to marry whomsoever you please, without hindrance from anyone, from this day for ever. You are therefore free for any one who would marry you. Let this be your bill of divorce from me, a writing of separation and expulsion, according to the Law of Moses and Israel." [signed by two witnesses]

5. ***Remarriage was assumed in the case of divorce.***
6. ***Divorce actually dissolved the marriage union.***

## II. The Application of the Law (32)

Matthew 5:32: . . . *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.*

Three observations:

### 1. ***The context.***

### 2. **Jesus modified the Old Testament teaching on divorce in two ways.**

***First***, unlawful intercourse by a married person is no longer to be punished by death.

***Second***, only something that smashes the marriage covenant, like *porneia*, is legitimate grounds for divorce.

Jesus' teaching on divorce involved a ***more gracious position on adultery*** (revoking the death penalty) and a ***stricter position on divorce***.

### 3. ***No statement is made here about remarriage.***

Divorce for a Christian on grounds less drastic than adultery does not dissolve a marriage in God's eyes, and therefore any new relationship is adulterous. The statement of an exception ("*except for the cause of unchastity*") proves there was a rule ("*for no other reason*") intended by Jesus for the Jews of His day. If Christians get a divorce on illegitimate grounds, they are not free to remarry.

Matthew 19:3-12 is the other passage in Matthew where Jesus addressed divorce. It was a different setting, and Jesus was responding to a devious and sinister question, rather than preaching as He was in the Sermon on the Mount.

***Rabbi Shammai*** and his followers emphasized the word "*uncleanness*" (Deuteronomy 24) and said it could be nothing less than the equivalent of *porneia*—a sexual relationship. ***Rabbi Hillel*** and his followers emphasized the phrase "*find no favor in his eyes*" (Deuteronomy 24) and they allowed divorce for nearly any reason. ***Which view do you think was the most popular?***

Jesus emphasized that divorce is a deviation from the ideal, and that it is permitted only because of the sinfulness of man, which He calls ***hardness of heart***. As with the other

passages, remarriage is assumed to be the normal course of events when a divorce takes place. As with the Sermon on the Mount passage, Jesus says again that adultery is the only allowable reason for dissolution of a marriage, because it trashes the marriage covenant.

The Bible does allow another reason. 1 Corinthians 7 addresses the issue of an “unbelieving” spouse being unwilling to continue a marriage to a believer. Jesus did not give the fullness of New Testament teaching on divorce in either Matthew 5 or 19 and their parallels. God used Paul to reveal what else damages the marriage covenant so badly that divorce (which He hates) becomes a provision of His grace to keep one spouse from holding the other captive.

After hearing what Jesus said in Matthew 19, His disciples got a strong message that ***marriage is an extremely serious commitment***. Rabbi Shammai was at least partially right. In conjunction with this observation, you might also notice that again Jesus taught that divorce was never ***commanded***, only that it is ***permitted*** in extreme cases.

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### Applications

***Are you contemplating marriage?*** If so, you stand on the brink of the most wonderful relationship on earth.

***Are you contemplating divorce?*** If so, I beg you to ***contemplate marriage instead***.

God's provision for divorce is ***an expression of His grace***, designed to prevent one spouse being continually victimized by the recalcitrance of the other.

***What if you are already divorced?***

***Survivors of divorce mustn't be ignored*** by the church.

#### **Genesis 1:27**

God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him;  
male and female He created them.

#### **Genesis 2:24**

For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother,  
and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.