

## What Jesus taught about divorce

Matthew 5:31-32

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Pastor Francis Bezzam

<sup>31</sup> *“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’* <sup>32</sup> *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.*

Imagine you are going on a plane for a trip. And you get on the plane and you are in your seat. And you hear an announcement from the captain. And he says, dear passengers, there is a small hole in the fuel tank and it is leaking fuel very slowly. Not to worry, we will take off soon and hope to arrive at the destination. There is a small chance, however, that we will run out of fuel in mid-flight. Would you stay in a plane like that?

Divorce has become a leak in the family and in the church.

In our day and age divorce has become all too common in the Western world. The sad part is that the rate of divorce among evangelicals is almost equal to the rate among non-evangelicals.

George Barna who studies faith and marriage in the U.S wrote this about divorce in America.

*“Government statistics and a wealth of other research data have shown that co-habitation increases the likelihood of divorce, yet cohabiting is growing in popularity. Studies showing the importance and value of preparing for marriage seem to fall on deaf ears. America has become an experimental, experience-driven culture. Rather than learn from objective information and teaching based on that information, people prefer to follow their instincts and let the chips fall where they may. Given that tendency, we can expect America to retain the highest divorce rate among all developed nations of the world.”* George Barna

Just a few days ago, I saw an article that reported this statistic about the Church of England. Over half of the clergy, not the attenders but the clergy, within the Church of England said that premarital and homosexual relations are ok. So the article said that the clergy - the people who are to be trusted with teaching the Bible, about 53.4% of the priests in the Anglican denomination favor “modernizing” church doctrine.

My guess is that they are able to come to such a position by simply skipping a passage like this.

And I ask why not skip the whole Sermon on the Mount or parts that may seem not popular? And who gave them the right to modify church doctrine?

For some people saying “love your neighbor” covers it all.

What if loving neighbor means teaching everything that Jesus taught and commanded his disciples? Jesus’ final command to his disciples is what? “Make disciples of all nations..teaching *all* that I have commanded you”.

All that Christ says we must say. All that Christ teaches we must teach.

We may struggle in perfectly practicing the teaching of Christ but no one has any right to change the standard of Christ.

So today we come to the passage in the Sermon on the Mount where our Lord Jesus Christ teaches about divorce and adultery.

And this teaching is refreshing for the disciples of Jesus Christ. And a disciple of Jesus Christ, you don’t need secular voices to tell you what marriage is or when divorce is permissible. We hear it straight from the mouth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In a very strict sense, our Lord’s teaching here is not really about divorce. Matthew chapter nineteen is where Jesus teaches about marriage and divorce.

So what is this passage about?

It’s about what amounts to adultery. This teaching is a continuation of the previous passage.

Let me read two verses from the previous passage and you’ll see Jesus’s line of thought flow from the previous passage to this one.

<sup>27</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit *adultery*.’ <sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed *adultery* with her in his heart.

<sup>31</sup> “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ <sup>32</sup> 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*.

Jesus uses the same word for adultery in all these verses. In the previous passage, our Lord taught that looking at someone with lust amounts to adultery.

And in this passage, Jesus teaches that divorce amounts to adultery as well. How is that?

Before unpacking this passage, let me give some background. The word adultery is marital unfaithfulness after marriage. So this is a word used specifically in the context of marriage. On the other

hand, the word immorality is a broad term. It could include indecency, immodesty, a desire for someone else other than your spouse, immoral behavior etc.

And notice, Jesus begins his teaching with “you have heard or it is said”. You see six of these statements in the Sermon on the Mount. We covered three of these statements by our Lord. This is fourth statement. When Jesus says, “it was said”, he was referring to the Law of God and its interpretation at that time. The Law of Moses permitted divorce under certain conditions. But the Pharisees distorted that teaching they made divorce possible for very petty reasons.

To understand the distortion, let’s look at the Law first and then understand how our Lord rightly interprets for us.

Jesus was referring to Deuteronomy chapter twenty-four when he talked about divorce in verse thirty one.

Deuteronomy chapter twenty-four verses one through four.

*“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, <sup>2</sup> and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, <sup>3</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> 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.”*

So here in the Law of Moses, the legitimate ground for divorce was indecency. Other translations say uncleanness for indecency. This is a broad term for some kind of immoral behavior.

What was the distortion of this teaching in Jesus’ day?

Well, the Pharisees had distorted the Law of Moses by reducing divorce to just issuing a certificate for very petty and trivial reasons. For example, not making a proper dinner or being quarrelsome could become a ground for divorce.

The Pharisees even asked Jesus about this subject even though their intent was to trap him in his words.

<sup>3</sup> *And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?”* <sup>4</sup> *He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, <sup>5</sup> 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’? <sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God*

*has joined together, let not man separate.”<sup>7</sup> They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?”<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”*

Matthew 19:3-9

Verse nine in Matthew nineteen almost parallels what Jesus teaches in Matthew five.

Let me read Matthew five verse thirty-two again.

*<sup>32</sup> 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 much can be said about what Jesus teaches on this subject. And I will not be able to cover areas like remarriage or marriage between a believer and non-believer. Lord willing, we'll cover those areas in a future message but let me point out *three* observations.

First observation:

See God's high view of marriage.

The first thing we ought to see is the two pronouns Jesus uses to define marriage. His and her. Christian marriage is between one man and one woman. Not two men, not two women, not a man and more than one woman, not a woman and more than one man. Jesus has a such high view of marriage that he says in Matthew nineteen that once a man and woman are joined in this covenant of marriage, it is not up to them to separate. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate. Verse six of Matthew nineteen.

And when the disciples heard Jesus' high standard about marriage, their reaction was this, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry”.

Christian marriage is based on the belief that it has a divine component than just a commitment between two people.

I love from John MacArthur says about marriage. *“Marriage is a symbol of the relation between Christ and His church. Marriage is not an end in itself. Marriage was not designed primarily for your happiness, it was not designed primarily for my happiness, marriage was designed primarily to be an illustration on a human level of a divine relationship. And when you lose that sense of priority in marriage and you make marriage a mundane thing that belongs only in the carnal world of the expression of personal preference, you have denuded marriage of its divine priority.”* - John MacArthur

Second observation:

Honor God with faithfulness in marriage

Why do employers or organizations celebrate the tenure of their employees? They see the value in faithfulness. So, if the fallen world appreciates faithfulness, how much more should a Christian marriage?

Sub-observation 1: Christian marriage is for a lifetime.

An Israelite man in Moses' day could petition for a divorce if he thought his wife was unfaithful.

However, if the accusation was false, he was fined and bound to his wife for life. Deuteronomy chapter twenty-two verses eighteen and nineteen. *"Then the elders of that city shall take the man and whip him, <sup>19</sup> and 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."* On the contrary, if the Israelite man or woman committed adultery, the punishment was death by stoning. *"the men of her city shall stone her to death with stones, because she has done an outrageous thing in Israel by whoring in her father's house."* *"If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman."*

Deuteronomy 22:20, 22

God takes faithfulness and trust seriously. And Jesus echoes the high view of marriage in Matthew nineteen in verse eight – *"from the beginning it was not so"*. What was not so from the beginning?

Divorce was not God's intention. Faithfulness and fidelity was God's intention.

*Marriage is also where the two greatest commandments are in display and will be tested.*

Sub-observation 2: Marriage is for posterity.

We know that Adam and Eve, through the consummation of their marriage had Cain and Abel. Even though sin had affected the first couple, God graciously allowed that his image be perpetuated through marriage. What a great opportunity to further God's image through marriage.

Third observation:

Adultery can be a legitimate ground for divorce but not a command to divorce.

Jesus does not say if a spouse is unfaithful then you must divorce. What does he say? He says that a husband can cause the wife to commit adultery if he divorces her for any reason other than immorality. And he himself commits adultery if he marries a divorced woman. Adultery is the only legitimate ground for divorce but that is not a command. It is permitted. It was a concession given by God. Why? Because of our sinful nature. Because of the hardness of the heart. The first thing would be to develop a heart of

forgiveness for the offending spouse. If that is not possible, divorce is permitted but not commanded. Reconciliation is the command not divorce.

The last part of Hebrews 13 verse 4 tells us “*God will judge sexually immoral people and adulterers*”. God had warned Adam about the consequences of disobedience. And his failure set the standard for all of us. Sin has been our standard from day one. We are born into a framework of sin and live with indwelling sin. But, when the Gospel came to us, we born again, we were washed, we were cleansed from sin, we have been made righteous by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Both the husband and wife have been baptized into the death of Jesus Christ.

So the husband or wife, even if they had been living in sin before they became disciples of Jesus, it’s as if they are brand new virgins when they are married as Christians. This is the wonderful thing about being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Paul writes to the Corinthian church this way.

*<sup>9</sup> Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, <sup>10</sup> nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>11</sup> And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11*

Jesus Christ is the perfect husband who *loved* his bride (the church) and *gave* himself for her. He *died* to save her and sustain her.

He *rose* again and *intercedes* for the church.

He will *come* again to claim his bride – the church. He wants to make his bride *holy* and *spotless*.

----- Discipleship Questions-----

MESSAGE SUMMARY: **Jesus on Divorce.** Matthew 5:31-32

HEAD: These questions help you examine the truth of God's Word.

1. According to the Bible, what is the significance of marriage and why does Jesus teach that divorce amounts to adultery? Genesis 2:24, Matthew 5:31-32, 19:5; Mark 10:8-9, Luke 16:18, Hebrews 13:4

HEART: These questions help you wrestle with what you believe.

2. Do you believe Christian marriage is for a lifetime? Could there be exceptions? Romans 7:1-3; 1 Corinthians 7:39, Matthew 5:32
3. What is God convicting you of and to believe in light of this message?

HANDS/HABITS: These questions help you bring the truth into your everyday life and develop behaviors that change your habits.

1. For personal reflection: In what way is marriage a picture of Gospel itself and discipleship?