

Divorce: Honoring the Marriage Covenant (Matt 5.31-32)

I. REVIEW

- A. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is inviting his disciples into a greater experience of the blessed life (whole, complete, fulfilled, satisfied). This is centered around the eight beatitudes (Matt 5.3-12), which are the most succinct portrait of the values of the kingdom of heaven. These presence and growth of these virtues are the mark of our discipleship (Matt 5.13-16) and the measure of true and lasting greatness (Matt 5.17-20).
- B. In Matthew 5.21-48, Jesus outlines six areas that must be **actively resisted** as we seek to walk in wholehearted obedience to his ways. His call is for us to be perfect (whole, complete) as the Father in heaven, and embody an internal righteousness that surpasses the outward righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees (5.20).
- C. These six commandments of Jesus are intended to **demonstrate the severity of sin** (like a spiritual cancer) and **maximize our joy** (what it means to be fully alive). To miss this important element of Jesus' words will distort our desire to pursue obedience in accordance with his grace.

II. SETTING THE STAGE FOR DISCUSSION ON DIVORCE

- A. Divorce is one of the most difficult pastoral subjects to discuss and navigate in our contemporary moment. Although there are many factors that lead to this, we must understand that any sermon on divorce is bound to raise just as many (if not more) questions than it answers.
- B. Jesus' teaching on divorce in Matthew 5.31-32 is not a comprehensive pastoral teaching on the subject. He does not work out all of the pastoral implications of walking through difficulty in marriage in a broken and fallen world. Rather, Jesus' teaching is intended to **elevate the marriage covenant** and situate it as an **expression of costly discipleship**.
- C. There are many reasons that this has become a remarkably difficult topic to address in our current moment. Each of these factors is at play when we seek to look at the issue of divorce and remarriage, and the sum of these realities charges the situation and raises emotions.
 - 1. **Fifty years of no-fault divorce:** Since the introduction of no-fault divorce in California in 1969, our society has lived under the cloudy and difficult reality of navigating our relationship with divorce. This has led to a widespread devaluing of marriage throughout our society and must be understood and rightly addressed Biblically in any discussion of divorce.
 - 2. **Near universal effect:** Because of the growing widespread nature of divorce, very few people in our contemporary world remain unaffected by it. This affects real people, real lives, and real families.
 - 3. **Destruction on families and generations:** We do not need statistics to understand the destructive nature of divorce on lives and on society. Many of us in the room have seen first-hand the effects of divorce not just in the lives of those who walk through it, but in the lives of children and future generations.
 - 4. **Misunderstanding of purpose of marriage:** At the same time that no-fault divorce was instituted in America, the changing tides of the sexual revolution came crashing in on society. For nearly sixty years the ideas of what constitutes a marriage and what is the purpose of marriage have been broken down and brought into confusion.
 - 5. **Misunderstanding of Biblical definition of love:** Through media and cultural shifting, the concept and value of love has been changed in our contemporary world. We have ingested concepts of love and happiness that shape and cloud all of our beliefs and emotions. We must ask God to confront and shape our concepts of love through his word.

- D. As in our day, the contemporary scene of Jesus' teaching had greatly devalued marital fidelity. The teaching in the Roman, Greek, and Jewish cultures had grown fairly accustomed to lax views on the covenant of marriage, and it is into this situation that Jesus is teaching.
- E. As with each of the previous statements (anger and lust), Jesus is here highlighting a particular temptation in the human heart (devaluing the marriage covenant) and inviting his followers into a greater pursuit of a life ordered around the things that he defines as blessed.
- F. In coming to such topics, we must ask God for greater grace to lay down our conceptions and our preconceived ideas and ask him to order our lives around the truth of this word. Jesus' commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5.3) and are invitations to more readily experience what it means to be fully alive.
- G. When all is said and done, we want to be a people who stand with Jesus. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus declares that there are times when testings, trials, and opposition will crash in against his people, and it is ultimately those who *hear* and *obey* his teachings who will have sure and steady foundations. We must therefore be willing to walk in the ways of Jesus, choosing to believe that they are the only way to experience true and lasting life, even if they are costly and walked out with great difficulty (Matt 7.13-14).

III. JESUS' TEACHING ON DIVORCE

- A. Jesus' third statement concerning the Law, the teaching of his day, and sin takes a slightly different (and shorter) form than many of the other statements. In this statement, Jesus addresses a common debate about the nature of divorce that would have been familiar to his hearers.
- B. At the heart of Jesus' teaching is an attack on a prevailing heart posture regarding marriage. At the time of Jesus' teaching, the Rabbis of the day had fell into two specific schools related to Moses' instructions related to divorce (see Deuteronomy 24.1-4). One school attempted to interpret Moses' teachings in a more literal manner, while the other sought to provide a wide range for permissible divorce within the instruction of Moses (e.g., being displeased with a wife because of mis-preparing food).
- C. To many of the religious leaders of Jesus' day, the injunction for divorce was often expanded to almost any reason *as long as* the man went through the legal process to provide a "certificate of divorce" (this is what Jesus is referencing in his saying).
- D. In other words, the prevailing teaching of the day became overly focused on the outward, legal aspect of the divorce certificate, and allowed men the freedom to divorce as long as they went through the correct process.
- E. However, Jesus is attempting to reconfigure the nature of sin before God (similar to anger and lust) and demonstrate an invitation to his disciples to embody a *greater righteousness* than was being taught by the religious leaders of the day (Matt 5.20).
- F. Jesus is elevating the marriage covenant in the minds of his hearers. Whereas they had become fixated with the legal justifications for divorce, Jesus wanted to reorient their thinking around the beauty and glory of marriage.
- G. Jesus is addressing the reality that a legal divorce (a "certificate of divorce") in the way that had been commonly held by the teachers of the day did not ultimately end the union (in the eyes of God).
- H. Jesus did not elevate marriage beyond where it should be. He is not teaching his disciples to exalt it to God-like status. He is not telling people to believe that their spouse (either present or future) will fulfill all of their desires, or complete them, or shore up all of their weaknesses.

IV. ELEVATING THE MARRIAGE COVENANT

- A. To rightly understand the nature of Jesus' teaching, we must first seek to situate and understand the high importance on the marriage covenant within the testimony of Scripture. The Biblical witness of marriage is that it is an institution given by God to be experienced between one man and one woman in a lifelong covenant together. We are often far too quick to run and try to discuss the exceptions without spending time unapologetically affirming God's ideal for one man and one woman to remain married until death parts them.
- B. Later in Matthew's gospel, Jesus again seeks to correct the prevailing attitudes toward marriage by demonstrating the solemn and holy nature of the marriage covenant.

³And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" ⁴He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? ⁶So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." (Matt 19.3-6)

- C. Here we see several realities that we need in order to *elevate* our understanding of the marriage covenant.
 - 1. Marriage is **God's idea**: Jesus declares that there was an intention built into the creation order. The institution of marriage is not created by people, but by God. Because of this, he gets to define what it is, who it is between, and how it functions.
 - 2. In marriage **two become one**: This is one of the mysterious and profound realities of marriage in the economy of God's creation. When a man and woman come together in marriage, there is a new reality that is created between them — where there used to be two, now there is one.
 - 3. This work is **accomplished by God**: Jesus declares that in the act of marriage *God himself* is creating something. As vows are made in the covenant of marriage, God acts to join together a man and woman. Jesus declares that this must not be separated by man.
- D. But beyond that, we know from elsewhere in Scripture that God determined marriage to serve as a *picture* of a greater reality — namely, as a tangible picture of the relationship between Christ and his church.

³¹"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

³²This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (Eph 5.31-32)

- E. The final picture of the Scripture is the image of a wedding feast. God, in his perfect and glorious sovereignty describes the moment when he will perfectly redeem and restore all things to the moment a prepared bride and a longing bridegroom come together.
- F. This is why we see in the Scripture that God does not delight in divorce. The traditional reading and understanding of Malachi 2.16 even demonstrates that God *hates* divorce.

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." (Mal 2.16, NASB)

- G. As in Jesus' day, we must ask God to confront our highly relaxed view of marriage and the standard of expectations for what it means to regain the high calling of marital fidelity as a vocation within the church.
- H. This requires that we seek to elevate and honor the sanctity of the marriage covenant in our midst. We must seek, by God's grace, to hold up (both in our weak discipleship and in our faithfulness to it) the glory of God's good design in marriage.

V. ALLOWANCES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

- A. In the teaching of the Scripture, and throughout the history of the Protestant church, there have been two explicit reasons given as *exceptions* to Jesus' high teaching on fidelity to the marriage covenant. These exceptions are granted as permissions (not commandments) by the Lord *because* he understands that there are situations in which people sin in consistent and unrepentant ways that violate and break the covenant.

⁷They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" ⁸He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed 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" (Matt 19.7-9)

- B. **Provision #1 — Sexual immorality:** The reason Jesus gave for the breaking of the marriage covenant was sexual infidelity. This breaks the covenant union and is permissible (again, not commanded) grounds for divorce. Sexual immorality does not necessitate divorce. In such cases people are able to choose to forgive and seek to restore the marriage if desired.
- C. **Provision #2 — Willful desertion:** Throughout much of Protestant church history there has been a second category derived from Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7. The range of *how* to interpret this provision has varied throughout different times in the church's life.

¹⁵But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved (i.e., bound to the marriage covenant). God has called you to peace. (1 Cor 7.15)

- D. It must again be noted that *all* divorce grieves the heart of God. To walk through situations that lead to divorce requires that we enter into a spirit of *mourning* as those who recognize and believe that this is not the way it should be.

VI. PURSUING FIDELITY: PRINCIPLES FOR PURSUING COSTLY DISCIPLESHIP

- A. **Honoring Biblical Marriage:** We must seek to hold a Biblical view of marriage in high regard and honor it before the Lord (Heb 13.4). This includes shaping our minds, affections, and hearts around what Jesus calls good and beautiful with regards to marriage and not be conformed to patterns of this world (Rom 12.2).
- B. **Pursue a Soft Heart in the Grace of God:** Jesus' teaching on marriage is about partnering with the grace of God with trust in keeping a soft heart. We must recognize the propensities toward hardness in our own hearts, and ask him to tenderize our hearts as we consistently come to him with a spirit of prayer and humble obedience (Matt 7.7-11).
- C. **A Testing Ground:** Marriage can be a primary testing ground and producer/cultivator of the beatitudes in the life of a believer. We are quickly brought face to face with the realities of our sin and desperate need (poverty of spirit), we mourn over our sins and the sins of others, and long for places of God's righteousness, mercy, and peace to abound.
- D. **God Loves Marriage:** This is the inverse of the declaration of Malachi 2.16. God's heart is for marriage and will bring peace, grace, and restoration to those who call upon his name.
- E. **God's Provision:** God will provide sufficient grace (sustaining strength) to walk in obedience to his commandments.
- F. **God's Forgiveness and Redemption:** God's grace is sufficient to forgive, redeem, restore, and beautify lives and families even in spite of our sin (either willful sin or sin done in ignorance). Divorce does not put someone outside the reach of God's forgiveness, mercy, and power of redemption!