

Matthew: The Life & Teaching of Jesus the Messiah

Lakewood Presbyterian Church

Key Idea: *Jesus focus was on preserving the God ordained institution of marriage. The scribes and Pharisees focused on all the ways they hoped to legally dissolve marriage.*

Lesson 24 Matt. 5:31-32 Divorce and Remarriage (4-26-26)

This week we resume our discussion of the sort of righteousness Christ's disciples display in sexual matters, focusing today on the problem of divorce. For the cold, hard fact of living in a fallen world is the brokenness of this world; and though the Old Testament Law erects many fences about the marriage institution for its preservation, and though believers today enjoy the benefits of Pentecost's great outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon God's people to a degree never known by Old Testament saints, we would be foolish to suppose adultery "can't happen to me." Pride goeth before a fall. For this reason, God has *permitted* divorce under certain narrow circumstances on account of fallenness or "hardness of heart," but **divorce is at best a concession, never a command of God.** And in certain circumstances, remarriage by or to a divorced person is tantamount to adultery, hence the reason for Matthew 5:31-32 to follow Jesus' remarks on adultery.

Although here we cannot survey the somewhat different views of divorce prominent within Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and other communions (see take home handout), it may be worthwhile to state the obvious: Humanistic, "no fault" divorce is crippling our society, destroying lives and families. In the evangelical church, we have been no less immune to the 1960s divorce revolution than has the larger culture. Our divorce rates largely mirror those of the secular world; and for this, we are reaping a whirlwind of ineffective witness, bitterness, and perhaps two generations of lost children. Is it any wonder where we are as a culture when Christ's church is no different from the culture?

I want to be as pastoral as I can in unpacking the teaching of Scripture here, for no doubt I will be speaking to many of you personally. If you are divorced, Jesus heals. If you are contemplating divorce, Jesus *never* commands it. If you are the child of a broken home, God is the protector of the widow and Father of the fatherless (Deuteronomy 10:18). May the Lord of mercy have mercy upon our families and homes.

I. Stott's Discussion Expanded:

³¹"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'
³²But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, *except for marital unfaithfulness*, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

Matthew 5:31-32 is a summary of Jesus' more expansive remarks in Matthew 19:3-12. In fact, these two verses summarize the relevant teaching of both Old and New Testaments. For the Law (Deuteronomy 24:1-4), the Prophets (Malachi 2:13-16), and Paul (I Corinthians 7:10-16) all speak with Jesus in one voice; and to fully understand the biblical view on divorce, we really need to look at all five passages.

A. Some Background Information:

Jesus' remarks come against the backdrop of both the ancient world's generally chauvinistic, no fault view of divorce and the role of women and the prominent rabbinical dispute between the schools of Shammai and Hillel over Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and the only biblically permissible grounds for divorce. We may summarize these points here:

- **Roman and Jewish law**
 - i. Divorce was not a civil matter.
 - ii. In Jewish society, the man alone could initiate divorce.
 - iii. In Roman society, either husband or wife could initiate divorce simply by withdrawing consent from the marriage.
 - iv. Jewish women were expected to live either as wives or in their father's house. There was no such thing as separation.
- **Hillel vs. Shammai**
 - i. Their dispute was over the interpretation of "some indecency" in Deuteronomy 24:1.
 - ii. Shammai's view was **strict**: adultery alone.
 - iii. Hillel's was **lax**: practically any reason.
 - iv. Hillel's view had come to prevail in 1st century Judaism.

Jesus' response to this situation is radical for his day, surprising even the disciples (10:10) who had become so used to the contemporary status quo.

Matthew 19:3-6: Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?' 'So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.'"

B. The Pharisees were preoccupied with the grounds for divorce; Jesus with the institution of marriage.

It is remarkable that Jesus refuses initially to answer the Pharisees' question but refers them to God's original will for marriage. Jesus' response suggests that the Pharisees should already have known the answer to their question (19:4), that answer being grounded in the Law; for from the beginning, God had taken a strict view of marriage:

- Genesis 1:27: "Created male and female" implies that marriage is *exclusive*. Jesus confirms this when he says "they are no longer two but one."
- Genesis 2:24: "Be united to his wife" similarly implies that marriage is *permanent*. This, too, Jesus confirms with "what God has joined together, let man not separate."

Obviously, then, the answer to the Pharisee's question is **No!** It is not lawful to divorce for "any and every reason."

Matthew 19:7-9: "Why then," they asked, "did Moses *command* that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" ⁸"Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. ⁹I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, *except for marital unfaithfulness*, and marries another woman commits adultery."

C. The Pharisees called Moses' provision for divorce a command; Jesus called it a concession to the hardness of human hearts.

The Pharisees' response in 19:7 shows that either they have missed Jesus' point or would prefer to set Moses against Moses rather than concede Jesus' point. In fact, by alluding to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, they insinuate that Jesus is contradicting the instructions given by Moses. But if we look more closely at the Pharisaic summary of Moses' teaching (Matthew 5:31 and 19:7), we start to notice some curious additions and subtractions.

What is the only command given in Deuteronomy 24:1-4? _____

Upon what do the Pharisees focus as the most important aspect of Moses' provision?

In forbidding the practice of remarriage to one's divorced spouse, what does Deuteronomy 24:1-4 seek to restrain? _____

Does the passage prescribe biblical grounds for divorce or merely state divorce practice in OT Israel? Some hints:

- What is the Law's attitude toward divorce in Leviticus 21:14; 22:13; and Numbers 30:9?

- Under OT Israel's civil government, did the state become involved in divorce proceedings (see background information)? Why is this significant? _____
- What is the significance of the several conditional statements given in Deuteronomy 24:1-3? _____

The debate between the schools of Hillel and Shammai was, therefore, wrongheaded to begin with, the thrust of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 never being to set forth the legitimate grounds for divorce. *So once again, we find Jesus not abrogating or setting aside the standards of Moses' Law, but restoring its full intent and authority.*

D. The Further Testimony of the Prophets:

Jesus explains the occasion of Moses' regulation as a concession to "hardness of heart." This same moral judgement against capricious divorce is underscored elsewhere in the Old Testament, even among the Prophets--yet another example of Old Testament ethics which the Pharisees had sought to suppress. For instance, the last Old Testament prophet Malachi declares the Lord's judgement upon post-exilic Judah for its casual divorce practice (Malachi 2:13-16). In this case, divorce is described as a breaking of the **marriage covenant**, and the very same grounds for which the second husband of Deuteronomy 24 put away his wife--"disliking" her (literally "hating")--is described as the basis for God's judgement upon Judah.

The 2nd century B.C. Greek translation of the Old Testament--the Septuagint--helps to bring out this idea more clearly than the NIV:

But if you should hate your wife and put her away, says the Lord God of Israel, then wickedness covers your innermost thoughts...therefore do not break faith. (Malachi 2:16)

E. The Pharisees regarded divorce lightly; Jesus took it so seriously that, with only one exception, he calls all remarriage after divorce adultery.

In the ancient world, it was assumed divorce would be followed in short order by remarriage, for a woman's survival depended upon that of a spouse. So it logically follows that adultery is the result of remarriage when marriage is held to be a permanent and exclusive union. *Jesus' dominant concern, however, is to guard his disciples against divorce by preserving marriages rather than aiming to prevent remarriage.* So his focus is by no means upon all the possible situations under which divorce might be permitted; thus, he names only one condition: *porneia* or what the NIV translates as "marital unfaithfulness."

The Key Issue: The meaning of *porneia*:

Jesus probably uses this term to explain Deuteronomy 24:1's similarly broad term "some indecency" (literally: *nakedness of a thing*). Both terms include the idea of adultery, but are not limited to it. In fact *porneia*, from which we get "pornography," is used in the New Testament to denote most any biblically condemned variety of sexual immorality, including but not limited to:

- adultery
- prostitution
- homosexuality
- exhibitionism
- the act of rape

Paul adds a further important category: **Desertion** by an unbelieving spouse (I Corinthians 7:10-16). Likewise, the Septuagint uses the term metaphorically in describing apostasy and witchcraft.

Given the covenantal character of marriage, we must be careful to exclude any idea that mere "incompatibility" is permitted by Scripture. Scripture views divorce as *permissible--never commanded--*only for willful and radical violation of the marriage covenant. Anything less is adulterous. We must also guard against sitting down to compile a list of how many plausible--let alone remotely possible--grounds may be brought under the umbrella of *porneia*. That was the Pharisee's approach; and given the human penchant for selfishness and autonomy, it is wrongheaded from the start. We do better to take the biblical view that suffering for righteousness sake is often preferable to demanding one's rights.

Suggested Reading: Stott, John R. W. Marriage and Divorce (pamphlet). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985.

Points to Ponder:

1. How should divorce be treated as a public policy issue?
2. Do we discipline unbiblical divorce within the church?
3. How would you counsel a brother or sister who is contemplating divorce?

NEXT WEEK: Honesty in Speech: Matthew 5:33-37