

Title: Jesus and Divorce
Text: Matthew 5.31-32
Theme: Reflecting the unity and faithfulness of God
Series: Matthew # 25
Prop Stmtnt: God is passionately committed to protecting marriage that he designed to reflect his very being.

Read Text:

I only have two verses to cover this morning. But, these verses speak to an issue that strikes right and the experience of many. I do not have to figure out a way to get your attention. Jesus has already done that. I also know that the potential for being misunderstood is very high. So, I want you to know from the beginning, what my goal is for this sermon. These two verses are part of a sermon that Jesus gave at the beginning of his public ministry. In order to understand them correctly, we have to understand the point of the sermon. We also need to stop and consider the audience and what they were thinking and feeling. It is helpful to understand the world that Jesus was preaching to and that Matthew was writing to. So, I am going to start with the Big Picture. Then, I am going to explain the text while I narrow the lens to 1st century life in Israel, so that you can hear the words of Christ and the heart of Christ. Finally, I want to go after your heart this morning. After all, that is what is so clear about this sermon and the entire life and ministry of Jesus. He goes after the heart. He is not impressed with the show. He is not impressed with your image. He is not impressed with your skills, gifts, talents, reputation, clothes, possessions, job, resume, title, money, pedigree, appearance, experience, academic accomplishments, degrees or the success of your children and grandchildren. It's all dust in the wind. He knows your heart and will settle for nothing less than for you to love him with your whole being because He is worth it.

Big Picture

- 1) The Golden Rule – He, who has the gold, makes the rules.
- 2) Rules are made to protect the positions of those in power.
- 3) Who is in power? Rulers (civil and religious) In Israel some were one in the same. In general, men.
- 4) Those who challenged the men in power were killed or discarded. People in power, did as they pleased. Even those who led a successful rebellion and ended up in power became like the very ones they rebelled against. By the way, this was true even of the Pharisees. I will explain this in greater detail when I get to chapters 12 or 13.

If you have ever been in a different cultural context you quickly discover that people do things differently than you do. Some of the things are inconsequential, while others are interesting, amusing and sometimes confusing. I love to ask questions about them. “Why is it offensive for a man to expose the bottom of his shoes to another person? Why don't people smile when a picture is taken?” Differences like that are not moral issues. Like the proverbial frog in a kettle, we become accustomed to things in our culture without

realizing how odd, or at times perverse something really is. It is helpful to speak with people from outside of your culture and attempt to explain things to them in order for you to get a fresh and more realistic perspective on life as you experience it.

Do you see now what was going on with the coming of Christ to this world? Christ not only comes to the world, he comes to Israel. He is not just bringing a fresh perspective on the cultural differences between what life in Israel was like and what life was like where he was from and comparing the two as some kind of cultural exchange project for the Discovery Channel. He is bringing THE authoritative perspective on what life is supposed to be like. He said, back in v.17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets (referring to the Old Testament); I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." Jesus is explaining to them that they are so far away from what God called them to be. And yet, they, Israel, the recipients of the OT, had become used to their culture. The way they lived was "the way things were." It was basically assumed. So, Jesus shows up and says that you have completely missed the boat. His language is forceful. It is shocking. He even uses dramatic language (5.29-30) to slap them into realizing the true reality of their condition. You are a mess! You have no basis to be arrogant. You are not spiritually and morally elite. You are offensive before God. You are guilty before God.

This sermon was designed to expose the hypocrisy, the blindness, the breakdown, and the complete and utter failure of the Jewish people to live as the people of God before their world. They needed a Savior. Life was broken on so many levels, and no one wants to admit it. So, you say, "I'm okay, it's not like I've murdered someone." And Jesus says, you missed the point. The anger that is in your heart is the same high-octane sin that fuels a murderer. You say, "I'm okay, it's not like I've actually had an affair, I just indulge in a little bit of porn. I just look. I'm not some sex-obsessed child-molester." And Jesus says, you missed the point. Your standing before God, your value before God, your acceptability before God is not based upon you finding someone who appears to be worse than you. Do you realize that every single person who has ever lived on planet earth can use that same line of thinking for personal justification? Even Hitler could argue, "Well, at least I didn't kill 7 million Jews." As if God is going to express gratitude and breath a sigh of relief.

I am so deeply concerned that you do not miss the point of what Jesus is saying here. We are full of self-justification. We are full of self-righteousness. We are drowning in it. We are so deeply flawed by self-justification and so blinded by it that we fail to see obvious problems in our lives. All that Jesus is doing in this sermon is peeling back the layers of self-righteousness and revealing the heart that is underneath. He talks about the heart of anger, the heart of lust, and now, the heart of divorce.

There are two matters that you must keep in mind. 1) This is not the last thing that Jesus said about divorce, nor is it the last thing that the rest of the New Testament says about it either. What Jesus says here is very important and is very helpful but remember that Jesus is speaking provocatively. He is shocking his audience into realizing how serious their problem is. I am not going too much beyond this text today. I will deal with this issue in

greater detail in chapter 19. If you cannot wait for the three years it will take to get that far, the Elders have written a statement on “What the Bible teaches about Divorce and Remarriage” that is available at the Guest Services, and can also be emailed to you as a PDF, if you contact the church office and request it. The reason I am not going to answer every question today about divorce is because I do not want you to lose sight of the big reason why Jesus brings this up. He is using the problem of divorce and their view of marriage to reveal to them that they were incredible hypocrites who had not only completely disregarded the Scriptures, but were claiming to follow the Law, even as they sinned. 2) Jesus is not stating, nor implying that divorce is the unpardonable sin. Divorce, like anger, like lust, like making deceitful promises, like seeking vengeance and hating your enemy is a sinful problem. These are all problems. There is hope for people who are struggling with these issues. But, you cannot get hope for your problem until you agree with God that it is indeed a problem. Christ is saying that if you think that divorcing your spouse is okay simply because you have filed all of the right forms, or you have figured out a way to call it an annulment, you have missed the entire point. Jesus is exposing the utter hypocrisy of a religious system that justifies sin on the basis of loopholes.

1st Century Life in Israel

“It was also said” (31a)

Let’s look at Deuteronomy 24.1-4

So, what does “some indecency” mean? Two Jewish rabbis weighed in on this. The one, Shammai, was more conservative. He said that “some indecency” was limited to matters of adultery or some other sexual impurity. The other rabbi, Hillel said that it was broader than that. You could divorce your wife if she spoiled the dinner, if she was difficult or argumentative, or spoke disrespectfully of her in-laws. So, what does this sound like to the average Jewish man? It sounds as if you have two different opinions. Two different options – right? So, what do you do? Who is right? After all, both are rabbis, so...pick the one that you like. And guess which one most guys liked?

I talked with a man who was attending here. He had been divorced and wanted to remarry and wanted to marry a member of our church. He had divorced his wife because, in his words, it was a mistake from the beginning. They should have never gotten married. She was impossible to live with. All of that may have been true, but none of that are grounds for divorce. When I pointed that out to him, he disagreed. He said that there are many different opinions about this, and if I refused to go along with this, he would simply leave and find a church that would.

The fact that there are different opinions does not make them all legitimate. Jesus is very clear. Hillel is wrong! And anyone who follows his teaching on this is wrong! Just because someone with the title of Rabbi or Rev or Dr. or Pastor says something, does not make it true. Jesus expects you to read and interpret the Bible correctly. Not only that, but God will hold you accountable for how you interpret the Bible. I know that I will stand before God and give an account for how I interpret and preach the Bible. It is frankly terrifying to consider the weight of this responsibility because it is so very important.

And we dare not form views based on what is culturally acceptable, or economically advantageous. We must humbly and carefully read and pray and read and pray and consider and not rashly or in a reaction, or arrogantly plant a flag and stake out a position without given careful thought to it.

Given the fact, that Hillel's view was the most convenient, divorce was very common in Israel. You can see what this did to the role and status of women. Since women were completely at the mercy of the men and had no real legal standing, this put women into a very difficult position. If a man decided to divorce his wife, all he had to do was make sure that the i's were dotted and the t's were crossed and he could hand her the certificate and put her out on the street, all in the name of "following the law." After all, that is what Moses told us to do. How could a woman support herself and her children if he sent them with her? If going back home to her parents was not an option, then she either found a man who would marry her, or she became an indentured servant, or she went into prostitution. Single women were extremely vulnerable. Think of that, the next time you read the book of Ruth.

3 questions that arise from the text:

1. Why does Jesus talk to the men?

In the 1st century world women were not equal to men. This was not unusual. Rodney Stark, distinguished prof at Baylor said, "*A survey of marriage contracts going all the way back to ancient Babylon found that they always contained a divorce clause specifying payments and divisions of property and the case of divorced need be nothing more than a husband's whim.*"¹ Greek culture had a major influence, though Roman life was a growing factor. In the Greek culture, women, in the upper classes lived in semi-seclusion. Roman women, not as much, but both Greek and Roman women lived in a completely male-dominated environment. Women had no say as to who they married. Most women were girls when they got married, often before puberty. Because most men wanted boys, it was common and acceptable to kill a baby, upon the command of the father, because the baby was a girl. So, not only was the ratio of boys to girls already in the favor of males, but given the reality that child-birth was a very dangerous event for women, resulting in many of them dying, the fact was, there were not many girls of marriageable age who were available. So, it was very common for a girl, at the age of 10, 11, or 12, to be sold by her father for marriage. Greek men and Roman men could divorce their wives without any stigma or for any reason. At least Roman husbands were not permitted to kill their wives. Comforting, eh?

Now, Jesus did not minister in Rome or Athens. He came to Israel. However, I tell you this, because in this sermon, Jesus is preaching to his disciples who will eventually go into the Greek and Roman cities with this radical message. But here, Jesus is preaching this sermon in Israel. His audience is Jewish. He is dealing with a Jewish context, influenced by a terrible interpretation of the Old Testament and he is dealing with the

¹ The Triumph of Christianity, p.128 (Harper One, 2011).

effect of some influential rabbis. Jewish girls were generally better off than Greek and Roman girls, but that varied. While Greek and Roman women had no legal avenue to divorce, a Jewish woman could appeal to the elders who could then demand that the husband divorce his wife. Jesus knows his audience. He knows what life is like for them and what they have become used to as being normal. They were used to religion as being a power play by a few who held it over the common people. Either you played their game or you were crushed by the system, i.e. the people who ruled.

This was not only true of the men who ruled in positions of power, but this was true of men who had any position of power. Every man who was married was in a position of power over his wife. Men, in general had power over women. When you read accounts of modern day life in India, China, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Dubai, Sudan, and Libya you realize that life has not changed. With a few exceptions, men can rape and fornicate at will, while it is always the fault of the woman. Marte Dalelv, a 24-year old interior designer from Norway has been living in Dubai for 2 years. She was sexually assaulted by a co-worker at a hotel and she ran to the hotel lobby and told the staff to call the police. They asked her if she was sure if she wanted to do that. (Now, stop the story right there. Imagine with me that you are a girl working at the hotel desk. This girl Marte comes to you in obvious distress and implores you to call the police. You know the laws and attitudes in your country. You know that no matter what Marte is going to be charged with being at fault. Why? Because she is a woman and the woman is always at fault. It's just the way that it is. And you, as a woman and a hotel desk clerk have no power to change it. You can't do a thing about it. It has been this way in your country for thousands of years and any woman who spoke out against it was made an example of. So, all you can do is ask Marte if she is sure that she really wants you to call the police.) And she was obviously stunned and said, "Of course I want to call the police." Well, she found out why the staff said that. After the investigation, Marte was arrested and charged with having extra-marital sex and was sentenced to 16-months in jail. She is appealing her decision. The man, who was involved, was sentenced to 13-months (not for rape, but for extra-marital sex), but his sentencing was probably due to the international attention that the story has received. If this is what men in public positions of authority do with their power then what do you think men in private positions of power do? Men used their positions no matter how lowly or lofty to do whatever they wanted to do. All that mattered was if they had filed the proper forms. Later in 1 Corinthians it becomes clear that both the husband and the wife are called to live according to the same standard, Jesus speaks to the men, because they were the only ones who, at that time, could actually get a divorce. Sadly, many of them did.

Now, as a historical footnote to this, it is nothing short of radical, absolutely radical to discover, that in contrast to the entire world around them, in defiance of thousands of years of cultural patterns, the early church despised and discarded this double standard. Instead of winking at the immorality of men while pretending to be shocked and so offended at the immorality of women, the early church stood for and upheld the beauty of sexual purity for all. If a husband broke faith with his wife, it was just as serious of a sin, as if his wife had done this.

2. What does Jesus mean when he says, “except on the ground of sexual immorality”?

He is saying that sexual purity is so important for a marriage, that for a spouse to engage in immorality (general word that is used for all sorts of sexual sin) brings about such damage that the one sinned against can (not must, but can) divorce. Again, this is not the final word that Jesus says on this. But he does state that sexual immorality is a legitimate basis for a divorce.

3. Why does Jesus appear to blame the woman who is divorced unfairly?

(32) *“Everyone who divorces his wife (assuming without grounds) makes her commit adultery and (not only that but) whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”*

Wow! Is Jesus saying that if a man divorces his wife without grounds and she remarries that she is committing adultery? Keep in mind that Jesus is speaking to the Jews who had the OT law and were missing the point of the law. When you realize that, then this statement makes sense. Here is the situation. A man and a woman in Israel are married. They are presumably living in accordance with the law that God gave to Moses. The man decides that he does not want to be married anymore. Jewish culture has accepted Hillel’s view on “something indecent.” So, the man files the proper paperwork, because Moses commanded the man to give her a written certificate of divorce. So, he does this and divorces his wife. Jesus is saying, that even though he files the paperwork and gives her a certificate, the certificate is not valid. You have no authority to divorce your wife except for immorality. So, not only have you sinned, but now, look at what you have done to her. You put her into a position where she basically must get remarried. (Either she gets remarried or she goes into prostitution.) But, since the divorce is not valid, then her remarriage is technically not valid. So, technically, her remarriage is not really remarriage, for her or for her new husband. They are now living as married, but in the eyes of God, their marriage is not a marriage. But, notice this in the text. The husband who divorced his wife without grounds is held accountable for what he forced her to do. The translation “makes her commit adultery” reflects the passive voice. The husband is the guilty one.

For your Heart

So, why does Jesus bring this up? Jesus is peeling back the layers of religious tradition, man-made laws, self-righteousness, image, status and reputation in order to reveal the putrid heart of arrogance that lay beneath. He is exposing hearts. He is exposing our hearts. He is exposing the fact that we all have an internal lawyer who functions like a prosecuting attorney who blames, condemns, accuses, finds fault, and justifies it! Nowhere is that more clearly displayed than in marriage. When God made us, he made us in his image. He made us to love. He placed Adam and Eve in a marriage so that they could express this love. But when they sinned, they did not stop loving. Love comes from being made in the image of God. But, instead of loving each other, they turned that love to loving themselves. We were made by God to love God and each other, but we turned

that to love ourselves, and our hearts now have a lawyer who defends our right to love ourselves and prosecutes anyone who threatens our right to do so. Are men the only ones guilty of this? Of course not. Back in those days, women did not have the legal standing to express this. Now they do. Every issue that Jesus addresses is designed to help us see that we are sinners who need a Savior. But Jesus is not focused on your external conformity to the rules. He goes after our hearts because the salvation and forgiveness that he offers by means of his death is so thorough and so deep that it rescues our entire being. That is why Christianity, rightly understood is so gratifying. But some of you do not know that. You are trapped in a rule-making and rule-enforcing view of God and others. Is that how you want to live? Do you really want to live constantly looking for how others consistently fail to measure up to your standards? Do you really want to be the lawgiver and the rule enforcer, and the judge, jury and executioner of everyone? Do you really want to presume the worst on others? Do you really think that the other person is incapable of changing? Because if that is true, if your prosecuting, condemning and damning accusations are true, then I have to throw away the Bible and believe you instead. Is that how you want to live? There is a better way. And that is why Jesus brought this up. This is the Sermon on the Mount. This is the manifesto of the Kingdom of Christ. This is a description of what life is like as a citizen in the Jesus Nation. Jesus lays out the path for authenticity, integrity and joy! Seriously, if your marriage is strained, you don't need an attorney. You need to go back to the beginning. (Beatitudes) Humble yourself. Ask God to change you.

Finally, what kind of a church do you want? Here is why I ask that. Through the years, there have been people who have left this church because of this issue. They wanted to get a divorce and did not have biblical grounds. And the elders said, "No." We said no because Jesus said no. And we are a church, a community of believers, people who have entered into a covenant relationship with each other based on a mutual commitment to the gospel and to the authority of God's Word. What kind of a church do you want? Do you want the elders to say, "Well, you really shouldn't but, we aren't going to say anything."? If we did that, then we would all be like the girl at the hotel desk. We would know that it is really not supposed to be that way, but hey, it's just the way it is, what are you going to do? Is that what Christianity is about? Is that the kind of church you want? We know it happens in business and politics. We know the rules are bent, ignored and overlooked in schools and society. Are we going to echo the world, or be a lighthouse?

Several years ago, the chaplain at Duke University said, to conservative, evangelical church leaders (and I am paraphrasing), "I know that I am a liberal. I know that I place fast and loose with the Bible. But somewhere in the back of my mind I had this idea, this ideal that there was a church, a group of people who believed it all from Genesis to Revelation. They believe it all without batting an eye. I still hoped that it was all true and that someone was willing to stake their life on it. He then said, do you know how discouraging it has been to go in church after church only to find out, that you are just like me?" Cornerstone, I know what kind of a church you want. I know that you treasure the gospel and are willing to stand, by God's grace, with the wind of the world in your face, knowing the grace of God and the promises of God have your back.