

“Till Death Do Us Part”

Matthew 5:31-32, Matthew 19:3-9

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The summer of 1981, the big event was the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana in a grand royal ceremony. The wedding was on July 29, and it was amazing, a glamorous fairy tale filled with pomp and glory. According to the BBC there were thousands of flower pots lining the wedding route. 600,000 people lined the streets to watch the carriage go by. The audience included important European royalty and heads of state, church officials; a congregation of 3,500 in St. Paul's Cathedral, and an estimated worldwide television audience of 750 million.

But look what happened to Charles and Diana—sadly, it didn't work out; they were separated in 1992, and divorced in 1996. Great weddings don't make great marriages. We all know that.

Today we're going to talk about divorce, and I'm especially talking to you if you have ever been divorced; if you are married to someone who's been divorced; if someone in your immediate family has been divorced: your parents, brothers and sisters, children, grandchildren. If any of those is true for you, would you please raise your hand?

Take a minute and look around. Divorce affects us all.

Half of all marriages end in divorce.ⁱ There's hardly a family in this country that hasn't been touched by divorce at some time or another. In fact, the number of American children growing up with both biological parents is now the lowest in the Western world.ⁱⁱ

Divorce is common, but it still hurts.

Marriage empowers individuals, and it strengthens society, but divorce does the opposite. It hurts our sense that the world is secure, of stability, of confidence, and of self-value. Divorce not only brings emotional pain from rejection, but it often also leads to anger and bitterness. It hurts people's financial status. People who have been divorced often feel overwhelmed with guilt—even when they're not at fault.

That's why the Bible is concerned with divorce, because God wants to protect people. In fact, one of his complaints about the faithlessness of his people in the Old Testament concerned people being hurt when marriage wasn't honored. The prophet Malachi told Israel,

The LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.

"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel. (Malachi 2:14-16)

Now, it's not that we follow the rules or we don't get into heaven.

Instead, Jesus is inviting us to live in his way because we're already citizens of the kingdom and members of the family of God, and we trust him to tell us the way to wholeness. He knows what's best for us and wants to spare us from the pain that sin produces. In light of that, what is Jesus saying about divorce?

God says divorce is sometimes morally permissible.

Even though God hates divorce, he loves people, there are times he allows it.

Jesus says,

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' (Matthew 5:31-32)

He's quoting Moses in the second giving of the Law in the book of Deuteronomy from the Old Testament. In the Matthew 19 passage we read, Jesus explains the meaning of the passage. He's saying, Moses intended divorce as a concession to human sin. Sometimes it's the lesser of two evils.

So what infraction in a marriage means divorce is morally permissible? There was a debate going on in Jesus' time about what that might have been. Some rabbis were insisting a man could divorce his wife for any reason, including "if she no longer seemed beautiful to him" or if another woman seemed more beautiful. Others read the Deuteronomy text more strictly. So they asked Jesus,

"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. (Matthew 19:7-8)

That is to say, God permits divorce in an imperfect world to protect people, but it isn't his intention, and it's a sign of our brokenness. Jesus says only divorce for reason of marital infidelity is morally permissible. Otherwise, you cause your spouse to commit adultery.

But 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 5:32)

Jesus says God allows for divorce, but not for any reason. He's providing boundaries that protect us even in an imperfect world. Paul does the same thing in his letter to the Corinthians when he wrote,

A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. (1 Corinthians 7:10-11)

Paul goes on,

If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her...And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him...But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances. (1 Corinthians 7:12-13, 15)

In a sense, it's like the follower of Jesus doesn't so much divorce an unfaithful husband or wife; it's more that the divorce simply recognizes the marriage is already over. The divorce in that case is simply legalizing what has already taken place. I think that would apply to desertion and abuse as well, as Paul says,

If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (1 Timothy 5:8)

That applies to everything we're supposed to supply in the covenant of marriage: shelter, faithfulness, safety. And remember from the first chapter of Matthew's gospel, when Joseph heard his fiancé had become pregnant? He didn't yet understand it was a miracle of the Holy Spirit, and Matthew writes,

Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. (Matthew 1:19)

Matthew's gospel challenges us to take marriage very seriously. And yet, even though this isn't what Matthew is explicitly teaching there, still I think he's subtly suggesting it's possible to be righteous and to divorce. In a sinful world, sometimes it's morally permissible, and sometimes it's even necessary for the protection of the innocent.

About a week ago the news reported that a man was arrested in Buffalo for beheading his wife. It's suspected that he murdered her because she had filed for divorce. There's a debate taking place as to whether it is a case of domestic abuse, or a Muslim honor killing. Whatever the reason, it's a shocking reminder of why God allows divorce. God's concerned with protecting the innocent, and he doesn't say everyone who's married must stay married no matter what the circumstances. There's never an excuse for abuse. And if it was going on for some time as the media reported, then even before divorce papers were filed, that marriage had been broken for a long time.

Sometimes God allows divorce, just not for just any reason. But Jesus doesn't leave the issue there. In Matthew 19, he turned the conversation around to a positive vision of marriage.

God Has a Positive Plan for Marriage

Jesus wants to turn the attention away from what you can get by with in a broken world, to what God intended in the first place: a relationship with the equal honoring and dignity of both the man and the woman in a permanent union.

Have you noticed that out of six commands Jesus gives in the “kingdom code” of the Sermon on the Mount, two of them are for protecting marriage. That tells us how important marriage is in his kingdom priorities. Jesus’ goal is more than simply condemning divorce. He wants to lift up a grand positive, the value of marriage. Encouraging strong marriages ought to be a concern for married people and single alike. Jesus wants married couples to learn to love their spouses deeply. That’s what he expressed in Matthew 19:4-6:

"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.” (Matthew 19:4-6)

That tells us something very important. Marriage was a part of God’s original plan for creation, the coming together of one man and one woman to form a union in God’s eyes, because “God has joined [them] together.” It’s supposed to be a life-long commitment that people should “not separate.” That means faithfulness is at the heart of it, and we work out our problems, as Paul says in Colossians,

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Colossians 3:12-14)

By the way, that passage is a part of the great chapter 3 of Colossians, and it’s written to the whole church, married and single alike. But it certainly applies deeply to couples; it’s Evelyne’s and my wedding text. This encouragement is more than simply good advice. It’s good news, because by God’s power you can grow in that description.

Indeed, in the book of Ephesians, Paul uses marriage as a picture of a greater reality than a man and a woman coming together as one flesh. Marriage is a symbol for the union between Christ and the church. You could say that’s the deepest significance of marriage, because it’s a living picture of how Jesus relates to his church. Paul says,

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. (Ephesians 5:31-32)

Marriage is never perfect. It doesn’t have to be to be good and rich and life-giving. It’s God’s model for creation. It’s given for the ordering of society, the birth and nurture of children. It’s one of life’s great blessings for those to whom God gives it, but it involves human beings, and so, and it’s never perfect.

Sometimes in our broken world, divorce is a tragic necessity. But divorce is never good. That's why Jesus draws a boundary around married people, and says "Protect it." It's precious.

And God is full of grace. When we see how deep Jesus takes these commands not to murder, not to lust, not to divorce, not to swear falsely, we see how imperfect we are, and how much in need of God's help. Jesus' purpose in these important but humanly impossible directives is to help us, encourage us, give us a positive vision of what God intends, warn of the terrible cost of sin, and shower us with grace when we repent and turn to him.

Have you been through a divorce? Is your marriage hurting today? Jesus says there's only *one* thing that can ultimately keep you from God's love. It's not divorce. It's to ultimately say no to his offer of love.

Do you want to be washed in the goodness of his healing and mercy and forgiveness and love? Whether you're married or widowed or divorced or never married, that's his offer for you, today.

ⁱ Divorce Rate. 21 February, 2009. According to Jennifer Baker of the Forest Institute of Professional Psychology in Springfield, Missouri, 50% percent of first marriages, 67% of second and 74% of third marriages end in divorce. <<http://www.divorcerate.org/>>

ⁱⁱ National Marriage Project Report 2006, Rutgers University, 21 February 2009. <<http://74.125.95.132/search?q=cache:r-JP2DTcMuMJ:marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/SOOU/SOOU2006.pdf+%22National+Marriage+Project+Report%22+%2B+%22Rutgers+University%22&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us>>