

A Proper Marriage

Matthew 5:31-32

INTRODUCTION

- A. Three weeks after her wedding day, Joanna called her minister.
1. “Brother,” she wailed, “John & I had our FIRST fight together! What am I going to do?”
 2. “Calm down,” said the preacher, “it’s not half as bad as you think. EVERY marriage has to have its first fight! In fact, you’ll have many more fights throughout your marriage!”
 3. “I know, I know,” said Joanna, “but what am I going to do with the BODY?”
- B. There can be no doubt but that marriage is difficult work.
1. Because marriage is so difficult, divorce is a way of life in the United States.
 - a. Only 63% of American children grow up with both biological parents, the lowest percentage in the Western World.
 - b. 10% of the American population is divorced, up from 6% in 1980.
 - c. Only 33% of married couples reach their 25th anniversary & only 20% reach their 35th anniversary.
 - 1) While some couples do not reach those milestones because of death, certainly many do not reach them because of divorce.
 - 2) When my parents celebrated their 25th anniversary several years ago, my brother Aaron went to get them a 25th anniversary topper for a cake. When Aaron inquired about them at one store, the gentleman said, “Sir, we don’t sell enough of them to make selling them worthwhile.” We never found one.
 2. Although divorce is a way of life in this country, Malachi writes: “‘I hate divorce,’ says the LORD God of Israel, ‘and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,’ says the LORD Almighty” (Mal 2:16, NIV).
 - a. Even if one is completely innocent in a divorce, the LORD God hates that divorce.
 - 1) He hates what the divorce does to that innocent party.
 - 2) The LORD hates the adultery that precipitated the divorce.
 - 3) The LORD hates that the guilty party would think so lightly of his/her solemn vows to break them so readily.
 - b. Because God hates divorce, Jesus speaks the words of our text this morning.
 - 1) READ TEXT.
 - 2) I really would rather not preach from this text this morning.
 - a) Obeying these is difficult & affect so many.
 - b) But, if we’re to be faithful to the Lord Jesus, we must hear ***all*** of his words, not matter how uncomfortable they may make us.
 - i. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that his words are vitally important.
 - i) “Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (5:19). While those words apply specifically to the Law of Moses, as we argued a few weeks ago, God hasn’t changed his will regarding obedience to his Word—not one little bit.

- ii) Furthermore, Jesus likened the one who obeyed his words spoken in this Sermon to a wise man: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock” (7:24-25).
 - ii. Additionally, we spoke last Sunday about “adultery in the heart,” & this teaching is an extension of those words.
 - i) Most English translations don’t bring this out with the full force they should, but the Greek makes clear that Jesus is still addressing the same subject he did when he spoke about looking at a woman with lustful intent.
 - ii) The people of Jesus’ day apparently thought of adultery only in physical terms, but Jesus redefines adultery. Adultery is a) Looking at a woman in order to lust after her & b) Marrying a woman who has been improperly divorced.
3. This morning, we’ll look at these words of Jesus, and we’ll see AN EASY DIVORCE & A HARD DECREE.

AN EASY DIVORCE, v 31

- A. “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’”
- B. Jesus quotes from Deut 24.
 1. READ DEUTERONOMY 24:1-4.
 2. A great debate in Jesus’ day was what Moses meant by “some indecency in” the wife.
 - a. One school of thought took “some indecency” to mean sexual immorality.
 - b. The other school of thought took “some indecency” to mean just about anything the husband didn’t like—if the woman burned bread, the husband could divorce her; if she embarrassed him in public, the husband could divorce her; if the husband found a young woman he liked better, he could divorce his wife.
 - c. Many Jews had basically made this passage into a pretext for “an easy divorce.”
 - 1) All a husband had to do, after all, was write a note that declared this woman was no longer his wife.
 - 2) In first-century Judaism, a woman had only a limited right of divorce, but she could divorce her husband, for example, if he had leprosy or if he were going to be away from her for an extended period of time.
- C. While the Jews often made this text a basis for “an easy divorce,” God ***never*** intended this text to be so abused.
 1. Jesus makes that clear, when again speaking on divorce & remarriage, he says, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so” (Mt 19:8).
 - a. Jesus says that it’s only because human hearts tend to be so hard did Moses allow divorce.
 - b. Divorce was permissible under the Old Testament—as it is in our own day—but that was never God’s intention.
 - c. Jesus says, “From the beginning it was not so.” Since the Creation, God’s intention has been, as we commonly say in marriage vows, “Til death do us part.”
 2. Honestly, any honest reading of Deuteronomy 24, makes clear that God, through Moses, was simply regulating divorce.
 - a. It wasn’t God’s design, but since man has so often destroyed God’s design, God saw fit to

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regulate how one should go about divorcing his wife.

- b. The text says, in essence, “***if*** you are going to divorce, here’s how you shall do it.”
 - c. Notice additionally that God says that a woman who enters into a second marriage is “defiled” & he calls a second marriage to the original husband “an abomination.”
 - a) The purpose for such language seems to have been the protection of women.
 - b) A husband couldn’t just force his wife to flee from his house without means of support, but he had to give her a certificate of divorce whereby she could remarry. The husband who had wrongly divorced her would then have no right to her again.
- D. Yet, that was lost on so many in Jesus’ day.
1. Under Roman law, divorce & remarriage were quite easy, and, among the upper classes, both were quite common.
 2. In our own day, divorce is far too easy.
 - a. Forty-nine states now have “no-fault” divorces, where neither party needs to demonstrate any “bad behavior” on the part of the other.
 - b. Married adults now divorce at two-and-a-half times what they did 20 years ago & four times what they did 50 years ago. Between 40 & 60% of all new marriages end in divorce.
 3. Brethren, let us commit to the sanctity of marriage!
 - a. Let us seek to fulfill our marriage vows, because, in fact, they are vows we made before God.
 - b. Let us commit to ***never*** ending a marriage, ***UNLESS*** that marriage is severed according to the words Jesus speaks next as he speaks of a

A HARD DECREE, v 32

- A. “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.”
- B. For many, these are hard words!
1. Pages & pages have been written to make them more palatable for modern ears.
 2. But, the disciples understood the full import of these words. After Jesus speaks similar words in Matthew 19, the disciples say, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry” (Mt 19:10).
- C. What did Jesus mean when he spoke these words?
1. Anyone who divorces his wife, except for fornication, makes his wife commit adultery.
 - a. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus holds up a very high view of marriage.
 - 1) It was at a wedding in Cana where he performed his first miracle.
 - 2) The Lord also says, “What . . . God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mt 19:6).
 - b. Jesus regards marriage so highly that he only provides ***ONE*** exception to the permanence of marriage: fornication.
 - c. “Fornication” is a broad term that refers to any kind of improper sexual relationship.
 - 1) The Greek term is *porneia*, from which we get the English *pornography*.
 - 2) That it refers broadly to any kind of improper sexual relationship is evident from 1 Cor 5:1.
 - a) “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a ***kind*** that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife.”
 - b) Paul speaks of the specific kind of immorality found in Corinth; therefore, there are different types of immorality.
 - 3) Jesus here doesn’t require that the sexual immorality of the “guilty party” be one type or another; marriages may biblically be severed for any kind of improper sexual activity.

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2. Unless one divorces his wife for fornication, he makes his wife commit adultery.
 - a. How can a husband “make” his wife commit adultery?
 - 1) When one of my boys says that his brother “made” him do something, I always say, “You can’t be made to do anything.”
 - 2) But, Jesus does say here that a wrongly divorced woman can be “made” to commit adultery.
 - a) I believe that Jesus is speaking directly at the culture of his day.
 - b) We do have a few examples of wealthy women in the New Testament, but they were—by far—the exception, rather than the rule.
 - i. Most women had no means of supporting themselves & were totally dependent upon their husbands for food, shelter, etc.
 - ii. Thus, in Jesus’ day, if a divorced woman & her children were going to eat, she might have no choice but to enter into a second marriage.
 - b. Jesus does ***not*** approve of a woman’s entering into a second marriage out of necessity.
 - 1) In fact, Jesus is strongly saying exactly the opposite.
 - 2) He is saying, “You married her. You take care of her. ***Don’t*** you dare divorce her for some trivial cause, because if you do, you are putting her in a terrible situation.”
 3. What’s the impact of these words for us?
 - a. If I were simply to become tired of Tammy & throw her out, she’d be able to support herself without even thinking of entering into a second, unbiblical marriage.
 - b. So, how do Jesus’ words impact us in a time when women can easily take care of themselves?
 - 1) We men must take our marriage vows ***seriously***.
 - a) We must never contemplate a breach of our commitment to love our wives as ourselves.
 - b) Granted, if our wife severs that sacred honor through fornication, we are free to put her away. But, barring such an affront to marriage, we are to remain committed to our wives.
 - 2) If Jesus is indeed protecting women from a male-oriented society, the Lord is instructing husbands to take care of their wives.
 - a) “Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body” (Eph 5:28-30).
 - b) Paul is here instructing husbands to take care of their wives. Are we taking care of our wives?
- D. Whoever marries a woman wrongly divorced commits adultery.
1. Why is such a marriage “adultery”?
 - a. Simply because the woman is still married to her first husband in God’s eyes.
 - b. Jesus says, “What . . . God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mt 19:6).
 - 1) It is God who joins in marriage; therefore, it’s God—and God alone—who can determine when marriages are no longer valid.
 - 2) No state legislature has a right to allow either marriages or divorces that God has not allowed.
 2. Entering an improper marriage—just like looking at a woman for the purpose of lust—is adultery.
 - a. The Greek grammar states this as a general truth: “If you do this, then you are really doing this.”
 - b. What Jesus seems to mean is: “You are taking another man’s wife; you are taking a woman who has no right to be your wife; it can be nothing but adultery.”
 3. There are a multitude of questions that are invariably raised whenever this subject is addressed.

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- a. "If I have sinned regarding marriage, can I find forgiveness?"
 - 1) I have heard people jokingly say, "I'd rather kill my wife than divorce her, because I can find forgiveness for killing but not for divorce."
 - 2) God's mercy is great.
 - a) Writing of his former life as a persecutor of Christians, Paul writes, "The grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Tm 1:14-15).
 - b) When a woman was caught in the very act of adultery, Jesus says to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more" (Jn 8:11).
 - 3) God's mercy is great regardless of what we have done.
- b. "What if I'm unbiblically divorced?"
 - 1) Paul writes: "To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife" (1 Cor 7:10-11).
 - 2) The inspired counsel is that one must remain unmarried.
- c. "What if I didn't remain unmarried—as Paul instructs—but I've remarried after an unbiblical divorce? What then?"
 - 1) That's a question I've been asked on more than one occasion, and the only way I know to answer it is from Scripture.
 - 2) Herod Antipas had **married** his brother Philip's wife. We read: "It was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife'" (Mk 6:17-18).
 - a) John told Herod that it was "not lawful" for him to have an improper wife.
 - b) What was the only way Herod could have rectified the situation?
 - 3) When Ezra & other Jews had returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian Captivity, the people confessed to having married foreign wives in violation of God's will.
 - a) They then declare: "Let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the Law" (Ezra 10:3).
 - b) While that's Old Testament, these Jews understood that repentance for marrying women God said they had no right to marry involved putting away those wives.

CONCLUSION

- A. Without a doubt, we could, in our human reasoning, come up with a myriad of reasons Jesus' words don't quite mean what they say.
- B. But, we must understand exactly how serious Jesus' words are.
 1. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mt 24:35).
 2. "The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day" (Jn 12:48).
 3. "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (Jn 6:63).
- C. Have we lived in a way that we are ready to be judged by every word Jesus has spoken? Have we received life through his words?