



Jesus, Marriage and Divorce

Matthew 5:31-32

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We have been in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5 through 7, and one of the signature verses that we will eventually get to in this sermon is found in Matthew 6:33, and I want you to look at that with me as I read it to you. A signature verse of this entire sermon reflecting what it means to live out a life of repentance when Jesus said:

Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Now in all of the different subject matters that we cover in the Sermon on the Mount, or more accurately, that Jesus covered in the Sermon on the Mount, the first priority for the disciple of Jesus Christ is not your personal happiness. Your first priority, the thing that you seek first is God's kingdom and living out His righteousness in your life. In the midst of the conflicts and the discouragements and the happiness and the joys that come, through all of that, your guiding principle, the guiding fundamental beacon of your heart, is to seek the righteousness of God lived out in your daily life.

As a true Christian, you start with a primary commitment to living out daily righteousness as a grateful response to the fact that Jesus Christ died in your place, died as your substitute and rose again to save you from your sins. You want to conform every area of your life to please Him since no claim that He could make would ever be too great when you contemplate the fact that He had rescued you from eternal damnation through His shed blood. Nothing is too great – no sacrifice would be too much in comparison to that.

Well, that's the overarching principle, and included within that all encompassing commitment to Christ is the part of your life called marriage. Last time, among other passages, we looked at Genesis 2 and Matthew 19 and saw some of the things that God has established about marriage. Remembering that God established the institution of marriage before the fall of man into sin – and even continuing on after sin and through the days of Israel and into the church age – God's plan for marriage, for a man and a woman to join together, was that marriage would be first of all a permanent union, an exclusive union between that man and woman, an intimate union, and a loving union. There is a bond in marriage, an indissoluble bond in marriage that is unlike anything else in a human relationship. And so that was the divine plan from the beginning—I'm assuming everything I said two weeks ago as I speak here this morning. But just by way of reminder, marriage was God's idea, He planned it for good, and He planned it for

companionship; and those principles have a lot of implications for our approach to marriage.

Your marriage, if you are currently married or if you are simply anticipating marriage as a single person, your marriage is a priority to God, and therefore, it is to be a priority in your pursuit of righteousness. Do you see the connection? This is really important. You have an overarching, compelling desire to live out righteousness in your life because of your grateful response to the Lord's salvation. As part of your life, marriage is part of that commitment to righteousness. The two are joined together, they are linked together – you cannot separate them. And so the way you approach marriage, the way that you live out your commitment to your spouse, regardless of how your spouse responds to you, is an important indicator of the quality of your spiritual life. You can't set your marriage aside and say, "That's just too much trouble, but I'll serve God in these other areas" – it does not work that way.

Now you hear it all the time – you say, "But you don't know what it is like to live with that witch." "You don't understand how much trouble my husband has caused me." "If you knew what I go through every day, you would cut me some slack." It's not the matter of the preacher cutting you any slack – it's the matter of what God's word says.

If you are in a difficult marriage relationship, you have to remember that God intended marriage to be permanent, to call forth your heart commitment to it no matter what. And get this – and so you commit yourself to that relationship; you commit yourself to pouring your heart into that relationship in sincerity and in humility. You commit yourself to that relationship for the sake of the Lord, apart from your spouse in one sense. And what I mean by that is that you carry out that commitment to your marriage, you live out the biblical principles that apply to you in that marriage because your eyes are first of all focused on the vertical relationship of your relationship with Jesus Christ. And that becomes the driving motive for you to be a godly spouse in your marriage no matter how your spouse is responding to you.

In a sense, the primary motive is independent of what your spouse does. And when you understand that, it gives you the power and the ability to live it out even in the midst of discouragement and a bad response from your husband or your wife, as the case may be – that's the way it works, you do this for the Lord's sake, not for what you are getting out of it. If you get good out of it, then you are thankful to the Lord, and you work to protect that all the more.

But if it is just an occasional dribble of pleasing response and you are in that situation, I do have sympathy for you. I don't know what that's like. My wife has been too good to me for the past 18 years. But the biblical principle is that you take that discouragement and that sadness and it drives you all the more to the Lord Jesus Christ and you find your sufficiency in Him – that's the way that it works. And you say, "Even though my spouse may disappoint me, I find all that I need in the Lord Jesus Christ" – that's the idea, that's how it works. That's what God intends for you in marriage, be it good or bad, that you

would be approaching it, pursuing His plan for marriage first of all as a carrying out of your commitment to personal righteousness in your own walk with Him.

Now with that said, the other thing that we looked at last time was sin's perversion of marriage. I just want to touch on one point that I raised last time, to set the context for what's coming up here. Because God places such a premium on marriage, because God places such a high sanctity on marriage and wants to preserve that institution and uphold the grandeur of it, the importance of it, what He did in the Old Testament as part of the way that He protected that institution was that He commanded the death penalty for people who committed adultery – we looked at this last time. In Leviticus 20:10 for example we read:

If there is a man who commits adultery with another man's wife, one who commits adultery with his friend's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.

We looked at another passage from Deuteronomy 22 as well. And to our sin-impacted, sin-dulled senses, that may seem like an extreme overreaction on the part of Almighty God. We are so accustomed to sexual sin in the culture and the environment around which we live. For some of you – in the way that you approach your heart desires and what you do in front of the computer screen and all of that – it no longer seems like such a great big deal. Well you have to come back to the word of God and start and say, “What does God think about this kind of sexual sin?” And when you see it from God's perspective, you step back with a holy hush and say, “Oh my goodness, this is really bad.” God hates adultery, and the New Testament reinforces that as it says that: “Fornicators and adulterers God will judge.” “Fornicators and adulterers will not inherit the kingdom of God.” We have got to take this a whole lot more seriously than what we do if we are going to approach it from a perspective of God's view of righteousness.

And as we saw when we looked at a few verses earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:27-30, that God is driving at not only the physical act but at your very heart desires and where your eyes go and where your heart goes. And all of us feel a little bit condemned by that standard as well we should. That sense of condemnation is the first step, the first motion toward genuine repentance.

But in the context of marriage, we need to recognize this as we prepare to move into Jesus' words that we are going to study here today from verses 31 to 32. Understanding that God set the death penalty upon adulterers in the Old Testament, we need to keep in mind that the act of adultery violates the one-flesh intimacy and the permanent exclusivity that God designed to be at the very heart of the institution of marriage – it is an act of treason. It is so serious that God said you shall die for this.

Now as we think about that, that would thin out the population in our country if that was still the operative penalty. That standard would probably put Hollywood out of business (laughter). And the fact that so much of that goes seemingly unchecked should just be cause for us to fall on our face in grief before God and in humble repentance, crying out

with Isaiah, “Lord, I am a man of unclean lips and I live among the people of unclean lips.”

Now, let’s just carry those simple points on this – the sanctity of marriage, God’s plan for marriage; and the perversion of sin in marriage, the sin of adultery and God’s punishment up on it – let’s carry those two thoughts into our consideration of our passage this morning, which is Matthew 5:31-32 – look at it with me if you would – Matthew 5:31-32, where the Lord Jesus Himself said:

It was said, “Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

There is a contrast that is built into these two verses from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. What we are going to look at is we are going to evaluate God’s plan for your marriage by looking at the contrast between the views on marriage and divorce that were held up by the Pharisees on the one hand and Jesus on the other. As we look at the contrast between what the Pharisees said about marriage and divorce and what Jesus said in correcting them, you are going to see the plan of God for your marriage flow out as we understand that contrast.

First of all, let’s look at what the Pharisees said on marriage and divorce:

1. The Pharisees on Marriage and Divorce

If you are new to the New Testament, new to the Bible, this may seem like a little bit of an unusual statement to make: “It was said, ‘Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’” What is He talking about here? What is He trying to establish?

Remember that throughout this passage, verses 21-48, Jesus is giving a number of illustrations in which the righteousness of His followers must exceed that of the Pharisees if they wish to enter the kingdom of heaven. Look at Matthew 5:20 just briefly:

For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

And then in the following verses through the rest of chapter 5, Jesus is illustrating different ways in which your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. And here in verse 31, He is setting forth what the Pharisees, at least some of the Pharisees, taught about divorce. And the Pharisees had developed their philosophy of divorce off of an Old Testament passage that we looked at last time in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. This is where the Pharisees in Jesus’ day developed their philosophy of divorce. This passage reads:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife, and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hands and sends her out of his house... then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife.

We looked at the rest of that passage last time. This is the fundamental passage that the Pharisees relied upon in their approach to divorce. And as I'm going to explain, let me just give you a summary statement about this and then we'll unpack it in the time to come. The Pharisees' view on divorce, their view on marriage, let's state it this way: Many Pharisees treated marriage lightly and had liberal views toward divorce. This is just the starting point that is going to give us something to hang our points on here.

Many Pharisees treated marriage lightly and had liberal views toward divorce. As we look at this passage from Deuteronomy chapter 24, we see that even by the time of Moses, many Jews had developed a loose and careless attitude toward divorce. They were not honoring God's design for marriage. This bill of divorcement, the certificate of divorce that is described there, was simply a measure to bring some order out of the chaos to this random approach to divorce that had developed in Israel. It was a means to provide some protection to the wife who was being sent away. The prohibition against remarrying her first husband – get this – kept the husband from walking in and out of the marriage: “I divorce you... now I bring you back... I divorce you... and I bring you back.” God forbade that so that the husband couldn't treat his wife like a yoyo and she just goes back and forth depending on his whims. It brings an element of seriousness to it, saying that if you are going to send your wife away, realize that it is permanent; you can't go back to her once she has been joined to another man.

Now, with that little summary in mind, and we discussed it more two weeks ago, flash forward to New Testament times. Flash forward to Jesus in the midst of the Pharisees. And we find these Pharisees who viewed themselves as the keepers of the Mosaic Law. They prided themselves on being in the line of descent of the authority of Moses. They viewed themselves as sitting on the chair of Moses, Jesus says in Matthew chapter 23. And the Pharisees at this time had a little bit of an internal dispute going on over what constituted adequate grounds for divorce. There were two basic camps. One followed the teachings of a rabbi named Shamai who said that divorce was required in the case of adultery, but not allowed otherwise. The second camp took a more liberal position. They followed the teachings of a rabbi named Hillel. He taught – get this – he taught that a man could pursue a divorce through any reason at all. That kind of indecency that Deuteronomy 24 talked about was interpreted broadly according to the subjective views of the husband. So if your wife burned your food, you had grounds for divorce. If you found a more attractive woman and your wife was looking kind of plain to you in comparison, you had grounds for divorce.

So you had one camp giving this narrow basis for divorce; the other allowed divorce for essentially any reason that the husband wanted. And here in verse 31, Jesus is attacking this liberal camp of the Pharisees in His rebuke, in His judgment upon them. And so, looking again at verse 31: “It was said, ‘Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’” Notice where the focus is on that – the Pharisees, this band of Pharisees, appealed to Deuteronomy 24 to justify their approach, and they made the central matter the question that you gave your wife the proper paperwork as you divorced her. And they said, “Well, after all, this is what Moses commanded.” The main thing, they said, was to give her the certificate of divorce and you would have no guilt before God for pursuing the divorce.

Now, that was an utter perversion of what Moses taught. Moses gave permission for divorce and regulated a process that was outside the will of God. But the grounds for divorce – get this – the grounds for divorce were not important to this group of Pharisees – they just made up whatever they wanted to. And even less important to them was the whole nature of marriage and what God intended marriage to be from the start. They turned marriage and divorce into an utter travesty. They had so trivialized the institution of marriage and the seriousness of divorce that they turned it into a little transaction of paperwork and then they could go on and pursue their lust with another woman – that is utterly despicable, and that’s what Jesus was facing.

Their teaching was subtle, their approach was subtle; it was wicked, it was only designed to serve their own fleshly lust. Look at it – they were baptizing random divorce in the name of following what Moses commanded. And it had the obvious affect of undermining God’s plan for a permanent, exclusive, intimate, loving relationship, all under the guise of pretending concern for the commandments of God. This was just one more way that the Pharisees showed their lack of righteousness. It gave a perfect illustration for Jesus to show His followers how their righteousness and therefore your righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees. The bond of marriage was irrelevant to the Pharisees, and that’s why they could break it so easily.

Now, before you get settled into your seats and start thumbing your nose at the Pharisees – which is really easy to do, I mean, all of them are dead; who is going to come up and speak on their behalf, especially after the way I’ve portrayed them? – before you get too settled into that, remember Jesus’ point in this section of the Sermon on the Mount: “Your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.” So that has implications for you. And what you need to understand, beloved – this is just really practical and really important – what you need to understand is that the philosophical point of failure for the Pharisees is the same risk of failure for you.

Divorce in our society, in our legal system, is easy, and some of you have pursued it and sinned greatly against God in the process. Some of you would do it if you had the guts to, if you weren’t afraid of church discipline. And what I want you to see is that your mental approach to that avenue is the very heart of what Jesus is addressing here. You cannot take it so callously and so easily, even if you are just tossing the idea around in your mind.

Some of you have gone through divorce and remarried and repented of that, and you are now living a life to the glory of God, and I praise Him for His grace that He has shown to you. But we need to come back to a fundamental understanding and see this through Jesus' eyes not through the perspective of our own experience.

But let me say this: even for those of you that are staying together in your marriage, you need to see something crucial here. The Pharisees established their standard for marriage and they set it way too low. And I wouldn't be a good pastor to you if I didn't point out that some of you are doing the same thing by maintaining the outer appearance of staying together, but failing to fulfill God's plan for companionship to your mate. Surpassing righteousness in marriage requires relational closeness; it requires exclusivity in the physical realm, the mental realm, and the emotional realm. Surpassing righteousness in marriage requires a sacrificial love to one another – that is the standard, that is what God's standard of righteousness is. And if you claim to be a Christian and you say, "I desire to pursue righteousness above all else," then you realize that this has massive implications for your moment-by-moment walk with your spouse – you can't see it any other way; it's just too obvious, it's right there on the plain pages of scripture if you just read it with an unbiased eye.

And so beloved, and I say this for your upbuilding, you are a spiritual Pharisee if you are hard-hearted and indifferent and isolated in your communication and in your whole approach to marriage. If you just turn your back on your spouse and walk away with indifference to what they are thinking or what they want to say, you are a spiritual Pharisee. You are closer to the Pharisees than what Jesus describes marriage to be. Beloved, you are a spiritual Pharisee treating marriage far too lightly if you have flirtatious relationships with someone, even if it has never gotten actually physical. I won't even get into physical adultery – that's just too obvious in light of the other things that we have said.

Beloved, in your heart of hearts, you are a spiritual Pharisee if you even *daydream* about someone else, even daydream about what it would be like to be apart from your spouse and free from that marriage bond. This is all really serious and it just goes right to the inner man. That doesn't surprise us; this is what Jesus started out talking about in the Sermon on the Mount and the beatitudes – it is all about inner righteousness. And most of you probably have, when you looked at this passage, you just thought about "What does this say about what the adequate grounds for divorce are?" That's an entirely inadequate way to approach this passage. Jesus is talking about righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus is talking about marriage here and protecting it from a perversion that had been foisted upon it through 600 years of Jewish tradition. We have to scrape away all of that crud.

You say, "Okay, what does marriage supposed to look like? That's what I'm supposed to conform my life to, not just outwardly, but inwardly." It is very searching. God's standard is a permanent, exclusive, intimate, and loving companionship in marriage. And the true Christian, the true citizen of the kingdom of heaven, pursues that righteousness because it exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees and goes to the standard that God

intended all along, even back into the Garden of Eden. You say, “God, this is what You want from me, that’s what I will pursue.”

So, the Pharisees had perverted it all with their approach and Jesus comes in and sets the record straight. So how does He do that? We saw Pharisees on marriage and divorce and we saw how inadequate it was. Now we are going to see Jesus’ view in verse 32:

2. Jesus on Marriage and Divorce

I have been eager to share this with you. Let me introduce the overarching statement here, and then we will flesh it out like we did the first one. Jesus took marriage seriously and had strict views toward divorce.

A. Marriage is serious

We are going to get into verse 32 here in just a second. Because marriage is serious, because it is God’s institution, because as a Christian, I want to pursue the righteousness of God with all of my heart – and that should be your desire too if you name the name of Christ – because of that, the true Christian will not treat his marriage lightly or with contempt. This area of marriage and divorce is a crucial area where surpassing righteousness has to manifest itself. Look at verse 32 with me where Jesus says:

But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Here in this verse, what Jesus is doing is He is sweeping away all of the false approaches to marriage and divorce that the Pharisees had foisted upon their listeners. Jesus sweeps it all away, and notice what He does right at the very start of verse 32. He just said, “This is what the Pharisees say,” in verse 31, and look at verse 32 – He says, “But I say to you...” Jesus here speaks from His own authority, the authority that is inherently His as the second person of the Triune God, the authority that is His as Lord over all, the authority that is uniquely His as Lord over His people. As He speaks – through His words to us today – He speaks with an utter authority that we can only bend our knee to in glad adoration and submission. So what does Jesus say about this?

Well, He establishes this presumption that governs the whole of biblical teaching about divorce and remarriage. The working assumption, the fundamental starting point as we approach divorce and contemplate marriage, is that divorce and remarriage are wrong and sinful. Look at what He says. I’m going to leave out the exception clause as I read through this just to establish what His general point is. He says: “But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife makes her commit adultery and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

In light of all the flimsy excuses that the Pharisees had given for divorce, Jesus comes in and sweeps all of that away and says all that that is is just a whole bunch of self-justifying

adultery. He says that is under the condemnation of God. This whole matter of adultery is such that the way you treat divorce under Old Testament law would subject you to the death penalty – that clears the air, doesn't it? He is restoring a high view of the sanctity of marriage and rescuing it from the destruction that the Pharisees had foisted upon it.

As an aside, divorce in those days precipitated adultery. He assumes adultery and talks about marriage and the divorced woman because women in those days needed to be married in order to sustain themselves. There weren't many women on a career path like we are used to today; they were dependent on the men to support them. And so Jesus assumes that remarriage will occur in this verse. Even though it is sinful, even though it is adulterous, He assumes that it will occur and what He is saying is that a man who puts his wife in that situation has responsibility for her adultery. When you divorce your wife, you make her commit adultery, is what Jesus says here.

And so, keeping in mind that we are establishing the standard of righteousness for our own lives as we contemplate this, not merely looking at 2000-year-old legal codes, Jesus here is declaring judgment on trumped-up excuses and easy divorce. Get this beloved, and I say this as softly as I can while still being clear and authoritative, but some of you need to hear this: Incompatibility, unhappiness, and discouragement in your marriage relationship are not sufficient grounds to break the bond that was established when you and your spouse entered into the covenant relationship of marriage – they are not.

Your happiness is secondary to pursuit of righteousness. Your happiness is secondary to what God's standard for that is, for what that relationship is supposed to be. And that's why I say, it doesn't matter if your wife is a witch. It doesn't matter if your husband is unkind and indifferent to your emotional needs. That bond of marriage is intended to be permanent and exclusive. And so the easy excuses are not available to the Christian.

As a corollary to that here in verse 32, Jesus goes on and says that remarriage after an unbiblical divorce constitutes adultery and the reason that He can say that is because the original marriage bond is still in effect – that's the standard. It's radically different from what we have grown accustomed to in our culture – speaking as one who was in the legal profession and I saw it at first hand – radically different. But that's what we would expect from the sinless Son of God, isn't it? Wouldn't we expect something that was radically countercultural from the holy God as He speaks to a creation that has rebelled against Him? Of course that's what we would expect. The fact that it is so different doesn't mean that it's wrong. The fact that it's so different means we're the ones that have been wrong – speaking collectively as a society.

Now, stay with me here. Some teachers will stop right there and they will simply declare all divorce without exception to be wrong and sinful; they will declare all remarriage to be sinful. Some will say, "Well, divorce is okay, but all remarriage is wrong as well." The only question that matters in all of that discussion is, what does Jesus say about it? And with that, we come to our second sub-point here. Jesus says marriage is serious and He says:

B. Divorce is restrictive

Now, follow me on this. I'll never get through all my notes here, but I'll do my best. With the principle of the seriousness of marriage and God's plan for marriage firmly established in our minds, go back again to verse 32 so that we can deal with the rest of this verse, Jesus says:

*I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, **except for the reason of unchastity**, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

"There is an exception," Jesus says, "to this overarching principle that I have announced to you that marriage should never be dissolved." There is an exception for what the NASB translators have chosen to say is "unchastity." What is this unchastity? Well, you can probably read through 500 pages of dispute over it, but let me just try to distill it down to a couple of simple points for you.

The Greek term here is the word "pornea" that Jesus refers to. It is related to the word from which we get our English word "pornography." Everywhere else in the NASB translation except for this verse, it is exclusively translated with the words "fornication" or "immorality" or "sexual immorality." This term is a broad term that is used for various kinds of sexual immorality, it can include adultery, contrary to what some say, it can include adultery but it extends beyond that. It covers matters of things like prostitution and incest and other things not proper to mention. It is a broader term, but it can include adultery even though there is a different, more precise Greek word that also refers to adultery – there is semantic overlap between the words. To help you understand this, if you knew a woman of ill-repute, you might say, "That woman is an immoral woman." If she was married, you would understand that the implication of that was that she was someone who committed adultery and may have had other sins that characterized her as well. Immorality includes adultery, but it goes beyond adultery; it's the same word with the Greek word "pornea" that we are looking at here.

And so, listen to me, what Jesus is saying here is that the only time that the absolute prohibition against divorce does not apply is when there is the presence of this sexual immorality.

In 1 Corinthians 7 – I need to say this – Paul addresses another matter of divorce that Jesus doesn't cover here; it isn't within the scope of Jesus' thinking – I'm not going to address that, I'm just going to focus on what Jesus is saying here.

Now, listen, a minority of commentators see this exception as only applying to sexual misconduct on the part of a Jewish betrothed woman before the consummation of her marriage – that's a popular view even with some friends of ours. But I reject that view, categorically reject it. Advocates of this view rely on an unsustainable limitation of the meaning of *pornea*. Biblical usage, every significant lexicon, and extrabiblical literature are against them when they try to limit it to that definition. Besides, and more pertinently

as you are just reading the text, Jewish betrothal does not fit the context here – that’s not what Jesus is talking about. He is talking about divorce and remarriage, it’s not that hard. He is dealing with how the Pharisees treated marriage and divorce. And so that view, although it is popular in some circles is one that we are not going to agree with; it’s not one that we are going to spend any more time on. What we want to see for our purposes is what Jesus is teaching us here and why He would make an exception for sexual sin on the part of the spouse. All of this goes to formulating in your mind a better understanding of what God’s plan for marriage is.

Now, remember, and finally I’m getting to the point that caused me to focus on the Old Testament treatment of adultery for so long over the past couple of weeks – this is persuasive to me. Remember that sexual immorality, adultery in marriage, called forth the death penalty under Old Testament law – that is very significant here. In verses 17 and 18, Jesus said, “I did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill...” He came to fulfill the law. There is a consistency between the Old Testament and what Jesus is teaching and that’s really important for us to remember here. Those who want to exclude adultery as grounds for divorce cannot handle that passage.

Now, listen to me, I need to throw in some history here. By the time of Jesus’ day, the Jews did not have the authority to carry out the death penalty. They were living under the authority of Rome and Rome didn’t give them that right. But get this: God’s hatred of adultery was the same because He is immutable, unchanging God and His attitudes toward sin do not rise and fall and change with shifting winds. And so, with this exception, divorce became the way in which God upheld the sanctity of marriage in the face of the horrible sin of adultery or other sexual immorality. God is defending the institution of marriage by allowing this exception to the general prohibition against divorce.

In the words of one commentator – he said this:

Nothing is to dissolve this indissoluble bond save this one thing, but I emphasize it again that this one thing does. Our Lord Himself says that this is a cause and a legitimate one for divorce... and the reason for this is surely obvious... The person who is guilty of adultery has broken the bond and has become united to another. The link has gone, the one flesh no longer obtains and therefore divorce is legitimate. Let me emphasize again, it is not a commandment, but it is a ground for divorce, and a man who finds himself in that position is entitled to divorce his wife, and the wife is entitled to divorce the husband.

So the force of the passage is this: since divorce on the grounds of sexual immorality is not sin, then remarriage after a divorce based on that ground is not sin either.

Sinclair Fergusson puts it this way:

Jesus' teaching seems to suggest the rightness of acting as if the [death] penalty had been carried out. In this case, the wronged partner would be free to marry again. There was no contradiction of the Old Testament law in this... Although that death penalty is no longer used, its effect is still relevant.

The Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 says this: "In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce and after the divorce to marry another, as if the offending party were dead." I agree with that statement.

Now, with that exception established, notice this – and I'm going to go over just a minute or two here. Jesus, even here, is not commanding divorce. If a spouse wants to forgive, he or she can do so. In fact, beloved, the true person of the Sermon on the Mount, the true citizen of the kingdom of heaven – that would be his first inclination to do so. Look at Matthew 5:7. These are fundamental character traits that mark the person being described throughout the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said:

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Verse 9:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Chapter 6, verse 14-15:

If you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

Part of the character of the true Christian is a merciful, forgiving disposition. And based on that context, based on that description of the true Christian, it would seem that even in cases of adultery, the innocent spouse would first make the effort to seek repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation – and only after those efforts have proven fruitless to pursue divorce as a reluctant last option.

So that is Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce. Marriage is serious; it must be honored at all cost. But adultery so strikes at the heart of marriage that it becomes a legitimate ground for divorce if reconciliation proves impossible. And in that case, the one who is innocent of adultery is free to remarry in the Lord.

We covered a lot of ground here. There is one other thing that I need to say here. You say, "Don, I am that adulterer. I'm the cause of breaking up my marriage. I'm the cause of another marriage being broken up because of my sexual immorality. I have made shipwreck of my life. I understand that I am under the judgment of God – what about me?" The words of Martyn Lloyd-Jones cannot be improved upon when he says:

Even adultery is not the unforgivable sin. It is a terrible sin, but God forbid that there should be anyone who feels that he has sinned himself outside the love of God because of adultery. No, beloved, if you truly repent and realize the enormity of your sin and cast yourself upon the boundless love and mercy and grace of God [found in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ], you can be forgiven and I assure you of pardon. But, hear the words of our blessed Lord, 'Go, and sin no more.'"

Let's pray:

Our Father, these words have searched us and we have covered so many important things in such a short amount of time. But we would affirm before You, Father, as believers in Christ, our primary commitment to pursue Your kingdom and Your righteousness as the first priority in our lives. We would affirm and uphold the institution of marriage and thank You for it. Those of us that are married would pray for grace to live out what You would have us to do. Father, I would pray with all compassion for those who are suffering in a difficult marriage. Father, may they find Your grace and find Your sustaining grace in the midst of that. Would You help them, Father, through the grace that is found in our Lord Jesus Christ and in His sufficiency. May that human deficiency cause them to know a fuller measure of Your grace and sufficiency as they seek Your face on their knees before You.

Father, for those who have sinned in this way, sinned with adultery, sinned with divorce, sinned in remarriage even – Father, for those we pray for a genuine repentance if they have not already come to that point. And then, having received Your forgiveness through the Lord Jesus Christ, may the commitment of their heart be a humble and a sobered commitment to "go and sin no more."

We thank You, Father, for the grace that transcends all of our sins. We thank You for the Lord Jesus Christ who alone has borne our sins and carried them away as far as the east is from the west. And so, even as we are convicted by these things, we see Your grace and find reason for hope and encouraged to move forward in the week to come.

We pray in great thanksgiving to You. In Jesus' name, amen.

This transcript was prepared by Shari Main.