

Matthew 5:31-32 (NKJV)

³¹ "Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'

³² But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.

Who of us had any idea what we were entering into when we **came to Christ**? Most of us were probably focused on something **we wanted or needed** when we came to Christ. But we had no idea how **comprehensive** that relationship was to become. And we didn't grasp all the implications.

Well, much the same was probably true in our marriages. 40 years ago today Carla and I got married. At that time I knew I **wanted** to be married. I wanted the **privileges** that came with a married relationship. I had come to like that woman in the balcony. And I knew it was a lifetime commitment before God. I am not sure how much more I knew.

Our passage this morning is re-emphasizing just **what a big deal** marriage is. While we may have entered marriage flippantly or seriously, God takes it very seriously. And while we may have looked at it as a **good idea**, to God it has way more importance than that.

The Pharisees had ideas about marriage. And their ideas focused on what was **in their best interest**. They approached marriage with a mind to what was advantageous to the Pharisee. The woman was to serve at **his pleasure** and if she displeased him, she was expendable. This would have been very helpful in providing incentive for a woman's good behavior. But I doubt it did much to make a woman feel very special or secure.

What Jesus said was **revolutionary** to the pharisees. We can know that because when He repeats it in Matt 19, the disciples said that **maybe it is better not to get married**. Obviously what Christ said presented a change in their way of thinking. They concluded, essentially, if it isn't all about us, if we cannot control this thing, maybe it is better to not take this risk. When they thought they could **get out of it** if their wives did not treat them well, well that is worth entering. But if their wives could treat them horribly, but did not commit a sexual sin, now they are stuck. There is no exit ramp but death.

We can know that we are getting the point if our response is similar to the disciples. If we read this and think, man, what a spot I will be in if this woman I marry is lazy, or nasty, or not pleasant. That could make for a long life.

If that is our response, then we are understanding what Christ was saying. The more I studied this, the clearer it became. The only legitimate divorce for a man is caused by the actions of the woman. In essence, a man cannot initiate the end of the marriage. A woman does that by her sexual decisions. It is she who really ends the marriage by her actions. A man only has the option of responding to her sin by divorcing her, or keeping her.

This is my understanding.

A marriage is created when a man and a woman **commit** their lives to each other and seal it with **sexual intimacy**. Somehow in that process God has brought those two together and made them mystically one.

There is something mysterious about that sexual union. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that sexual union, even with prostitutes, involves a oneness. And that oneness is totally unfitting for a non-committed, non-vowed relationship. It is a **desecration** of that oneness and what it was intended by God to be. It takes what God has made and makes a mockery of it.

I believe that the reason that a man can legitimately divorce his wife for **sexual sin** is because she has already **broken** the marriage. When she has sex with another man, she breaks the bond. So the man bears no guilt for ending the marriage at that point. The woman already ended the marriage by her infidelity. He is simply responding to what she has done.

At that point, he is not causing **his wife** to commit adultery, or causing the man **who marries her** to commit adultery. Adultery has already been committed.

That is not on the husband's shoulders. That is squarely on the wife's.

But if the husband initiates a divorce when that is **not** the result of sexual sin, that man is putting a married woman on the street. And anything he does to seal that deal makes him guilty. If he **replaces** that woman with a marriage replacement, signifying usually that **he will not** take that first woman back, he is committing adultery. If he marries a **wrongly divorced** woman, he is committing adultery. He is **committing** adultery by **causing** adultery. All of the adultery that will happen as a result of his decision is on his shoulders.

Now keep in mind that when we hear "**adultery**" we might think of an unfortunate sin. Our hearts are heavy. When the **Jews** heard adultery they thought "**stoning offense**". Divorce was the pharisee's slight of hand to **avoid** committing adultery. Jesus is telling them that that divorce was actually their **means** of committing adultery. By divorcing and remarrying the way they were doing it, they were **forcing** adultery. And by **forcing** it, they were **committing** it.

Most of what Jesus had to say about divorce was directed toward **men**. I suspect that is because men held more power in those relationships. So they were more likely to **take advantage** of their situation to do harm to the wife and children. But Mark lets us in on that women also had the capacity to initiate divorces. This is said in the same context as in Matt 19.

Mark 10:11-12 (NKJV)

¹¹ **So He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her.**

¹² **And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."**

Here we see that the woman also commits adultery if she wrongly divorces her husband and then has sex with another man. But this time it is **solely** on her shoulders.

All through scripture we get the idea that when a man marries a woman, he accepts the obligation for providing for her until he dies. The privilege of being intimate with her has a steep price. That is how God intends it. In other places we learn that this has more to do with than just **the woman**. God's protection of **marriage** is God's protection of **the family**. Children are supposed to have mothers and fathers in a stable safe environment. Marriage is the **lynch pin** for that structure. God wants that **protected**. He takes that gate seriously.

Our enemy does a good job at portraying God as being **mean and overly demanding** by requiring sex to be done only in the bonds of marriage. How mean God is by Him saying "**no**" to all this fun we could have. What an archaic idea... But look carefully at the state of our world today and you will see that it is **we** who **do harm** by having it **our way**. The number one predictor of poverty is to be unwed with a child. Take away marriage, and the sacredness of sex, and that is what you get. Many emotional, mental, or behavioral problems stem from children not having mothers AND fathers in the household. Even the humanistic scientific studies all back that. Sexual diseases would go away after a generation if we simply did what God said. The practice of abortion, and all of its following psychological harm, would be nearly removed if all sex was kept inside marriages. No, it is not **God** who is cruel. Our **enemy** is just **hateful**. He promotes sex like he created it. But naturally he has never **made** anything. And he certainly never made anything as wonderful as sex. He just repackages it and distorts it. He wants to turn a beautiful creation into a **weapon** to harm the creation. And he is very good at it.

Jesus is taking the Pharisees to task because they have twisted the law to use it as a tool to **destroy** something that God wants **protected**. And Jesus was not going to let them get away with that evil.

Now let's take a look at what Paul says about marriage when he encounters things that Jesus was not addressing.

1 Corinthians 7:10-16 (NKJV)

¹⁰ Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from *her* husband.

¹¹ But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to *her* husband. And a husband is not to divorce *his* wife.

¹² But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her.

¹³ And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him.

¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.

¹⁵ But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such *cases*. But God has called us to peace.

¹⁶ For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save *your* husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save *your* wife?

OK, So we start with what Jesus said and how Paul applies it.

¹⁰ Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from *her* husband.

¹¹ But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to *her* husband. And a husband is not to divorce *his* wife.

Paul is telling us how to apply what Jesus said. Look who he is addressing. He starts with addressing believers. And Paul lets us know that this, too, was who Jesus was addressing. This is extremely helpful in helping us understand Christ's words. When Paul says, "yet not I but the Lord" we know what Paul says next is what Christ said previously.

Now why does he start by addressing the women's behavior? He is addressing the woman because she is the one who **determines** what happens. He will finish with the fact that a man cannot just divorce his wife. The wife must do something to earn it. And there is only one thing she can do.

A man not divorcing his wife assumes that the woman has not committed the sin of infidelity. This woman is living obediently to Christ, at least as far as the

marriage boundaries. So Paul tells her **what to do** and what **not** to do. If things are getting rough, maybe really rough, with a fellow believer, Paul gives Jesus's instructions. Don't leave your husband. But what if the situation is abusive or impossible? Well, at last resort, maybe leaving will help things. But look what he says. No divorce. Believers are **not to divorce**. Wives are not to divorce their husbands. They may have to separate. But they have to provide opportunity for reconciliation by keeping themselves from other sexual relationships. That means they cannot break the bond of their marriage for anyone or anything. They must remain physically true to their husband, waiting for God to do His work on that man.

This is between believers. This pretty well tells us that Christian men and women are both likely to have trouble living with each other. There is no real surprise there. Under extreme circumstances, separation may be a useful tool for reconciliation and repentance. But that is all that it can be used for. Divorce is not an option between believers who remain true sexually to the marriage.

But what about if one of them decides they do not like doing thing Jesus's way? What if they decide they want to live in a state of rebellion toward God?

¹² But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her.

¹³ And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him.

¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.

¹⁵ But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace.

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Paul is telling us that Jesus addressed believers married to believers. But that is not always the case. What do you do when a believer is married to a non believer. Paul is addressing this in the Spirit of Christ even though Christ did not address it. Paul is addressing different circumstances than Christ was addressing. **If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her.**

¹³ And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him.

Now think about that.

Here is a person who **just wants to serve Christ**. Here is a person **living for Christ** and wanting to **please Christ**. And here is this person closest to him. And she hates Christ. She wants nothing to do with Him. Maybe she blasphemes Him. Maybe she mocks Him and the husband for following Christ.

Surely the rule will be that you can **cut ties** with this person. Surely you can find yourself someone who loves Christ and just wants to follow Him. Surely.

We need to stop here and grasp this. This is how big of a deal **marriage** is to God. This is how big of a deal that bond created by sexual union is. It is so big that a man and a woman must accept that bond as **binding them to people** who might **despise** them for Christ's sake. That bond cannot be released just because that person came to Christ. That bond cannot be released even when it binds us to a person who loves the enemy more than they love Christ.

Do you see how this applies to what Jesus says in our text? These pharisees were awful. And anyone who views divorce so **frivolously** is in their ranks. Divorce is not only not allowed with the wife or husband just because they are not stellar. It is not allowed to be used with the spouse who is godless. Being married to a non believer is a way worse thing than being married to someone who might burn your supper, which is what the Pharisees had reduced divorce grounds to. No. If your spouse is a child of the devil, marriage is so important to God that you must **stay true to it**.

That really is what this is saying. These are the implications.

I do believe that this is still referring to a marriage that is still intact by the bonds of sexual intimacy not being broken. But still. This is a lot to ask. We might easily think that **my spiritual welfare** should supersede some marriage union I made before knowing Christ. But Christ does not agree. Our spiritual welfare must be found in the **environment of the marriage** we have committed to. This really is a huge endorsement of marriage. If a person will stick with us, and remain faithful sexually to us, we are required to remain in that relationship, even if that person is committed to going to hell. That is huge.

But, what if by our faithfulness to Christ we promote hatred in them or disregard in them to the degree that they are no longer willing to put up with us?

This is the second reason we can get divorced. And again notice that it is not **our** fault. Essentially divorce is not allowed unless there is a situation beyond our control that has **robbed** us of marriage. In a marriage of believers it is the faithlessness of the wife. In the marriage of non believers it is the lack of willingness of the non-believer to remain.

There is no way that we can construe that a believing husband or wife is free to choose a better alternative than what they initially chose. That is not an option. They are not allowed to undo what God has joined together. And that is exactly what the Pharisees promoted. I think we are getting what Christ had in mind. Marriage is a big deal.

Paul goes on-

¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.

¹⁵ But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace.

¹⁶ For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save *your* husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save *your* wife?

Paul leads us into understanding why the marriage remains important. And it has to do with **our** benefit to **the family**, not the **family's** benefit to **us**. So the argument for divorce that says, "I am not getting what I want in this relationship. I don't feel I am getting what I need". That argument doesn't hold any weight to a believer. At this point we are in the relationship to **provide** a benefit for the **rest of the family**.

The hope in remaining is that we will have a spiritual influence to the spouse and children. The expectation is that we will live a life that is different than before we came to Christ. The expectation is that we will be living a faithful life that will be **noticed** by those in close proximity to us. And that will either have a **drawing effect** or a **repelling effect**. It may be that the children will be saved. It might be that the spouse will be saved. But no matter what, the children will not be able to blame the saved spouse for the division of the family. It will be clear that the **saved spouse** was the one trying to **hold the family together**. It will be the saved spouse that was **committed** to the family. Christ should not be blamed for a lack of willingness in a spouse to remain committed to the family.

We see more of God's heart in Malachi.

Malachi 2:13-15 (NKJV)

¹³ And this is the second thing you do: You cover the altar of the LORD with tears, With weeping and crying; So He does not regard the offering anymore, Nor receive *it* with goodwill from your hands.

¹⁴ Yet you say, "For what reason?" Because the LORD has been witness Between you and the wife of your youth, With whom you have dealt treacherously; Yet she is your companion And your wife by covenant.

15 But did He not make *them* one, Having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, And let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth.

Women, this should be a great encouragement to you. God is protecting your interests. There is a price to pay with God when a man deals treacherously with the companion of his youth. There is a heavy price to pay for trading you in for a newer model.

And look at the reasoning.

It is **God** who has made the **two one**. The husband and wife may have thought to be doing all the making, but they are wrong. God did the most important making. And God did the making that should not be unmade.

But why? There are lots of things where God does not reveal why. But here He does.

Why does God create this bond that is not to be broken?

Godly offspring.

God wants family. First, human godly families seem to be where the lion's share of the children of the Kingdom of God come from. If you look around this morning, the majority of believers here are from Christian families. So as Jesus is picking His children, He seems to prefer to use the Christian family to prepare them.

Second God is always for **women and children to be protected** and provided for. God has concern for the offspring. We see that in how God regards the widows and orphans. He is always against their oppression. In Biblical times, widows and orphans were in the weakest positions and the easiest to exploit. The last thing God wants is for people to make **selfish decisions** that in effect **create** widows and orphans. They aren't technical widows and orphans. No one has died. But these husbands may just as well have died. They were as good as dead to their families.

In Malachi these men are crying out to God like they really want to **please Him**. But they are doing those things that God absolutely abhors. They are abandoning those who depend upon them for provision and protection and love.

And they are using the law to do it. They are using divorce technicalities to create artificial widows and orphans. It is bad enough that **death** would do this. But it is horrible that **selfish decisions** would do it as well.

It is clear that God loves family and that a believer should represent God's interests here. Oh, human family is not the highest priority. But to the degree we are able, we should carry through on our obligations. We have obligations to our

parents. Obligations to our spouses. Obligations to our children. We should carry those out. That is God's will for our lives. There will be more than that, but not less than that.

Now, what about remarriage?

I think the simplest way to understand it is that if a person divorces for a legitimate reason, they are free to remarry. For instance, if a wife were to break the bond of marriage by being unfaithful, that man is free to remarry without causing that woman to sin. She already sinned. She already ended the marriage by breaking the bond.

If a non believing spouse will not live with the believer, that believer too is able to remarry. It is not they who broke the marriage.

Those are the only two reasons for divorce.

But if it is a marriage where a believing woman leaves a believing man, that marriage bond cannot be broken by divorce and remarriage. And that makes perfect sense. God joined that couple together. Nothing has happened to unjoin them. That is not a decision that is a human's to make. So a man must remain in a position where he can remain married to this woman. And a woman has to remain in a state where she can be reconciled to her husband. And a husband cannot divorce this woman who has left him until she breaks the bond that God has made. Then she has, in effect, divorced **him**.

What we have seen again this morning is how important it is what we do with our bodies. We see the importance of keeping our vows and protecting our marriages and our families. We see that this is something God is deeply interested in. And He has given us clear guidelines to follow.

I doubt that any of this was new to us this morning, but it has definitely been another reminder of how important our marriage and family obligations truly are. Since God is so committed to this relationship, we should pay particular attention to the instructions the Holy Spirit has provided for this relationship. We should read our mail as if it is the only mail that is important.

Husbands, read how Christ told **you** to treat your wives. Focus on that. Let that be the lion's share of your mental activity toward marriage. You do not deserve a perfect wife and if you had one you would surely ruin her. Don't waste time in constant evaluation. Love her. Trust God.

Wives, read **your** mail. Focus on that. I don't think you will find a verse that encourages you to continually evaluate how well your husband is doing **his** job. The truth is, if you **knew how** you were to be **best loved**, you probably would not

need a husband. Trust God. Do what He says. He knows what He is doing. We don't.