

Divorce

Matthew 5:31-32

Intro

Today we come to the section of the Sermon on the Mount that I have been dreading for quite some time...

- And it seems to me that this is the right response...

Because **divorce** is not something to be taken lightly...

- Divorce is something to be avoided *if possible*, because it always leaves at least two people wounded — and usually many more become collateral damage...

CS Lewis — Mere Christianity

“[Churches] all regard divorce as something like cutting up a living body, as a kind of surgical operation. Some of them think the operation so violent that it cannot be done at all; others admit it as a desperate remedy in extreme cases. They are all agreed that it is more like having both your legs cut off than it is like dissolving a business partnership or even deserting a regiment.”

This is a radical picture but it makes sense to us as it seems likely that most of us have been negatively affected by divorce...

So, today we consider this incredibly difficult topic...

Now, divorce a volatile subject of debate, you may find yourself disagreeing with some of my conclusions...

- And I understand — often I do not agree with me either...

And while I am **confident** regarding my conclusions, I cannot be **certain** that I am correct...

- With that said, I will do my best to share what I believe to be the truth on this subject...

And please know that I fully expect to answer to the Lord Jesus for all the things that I teach — I fully expect a stricter judgment...

- So, I teach what I teach in the full assurance that the Lord Jesus is listening — and that He will hold me accountable for what I say and for how I lead...

So, without further ado, let's read the verses that we will focusing on this morning...

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.

Alright — before we move any further, we would be wise to go back to the beginning and understand why marriage was created in the first place...

So please turn to...

Genesis 2:15-25 (NKJV)

15 Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.

16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat;

17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

[expand & explain...]

18 And the LORD God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him."

This is the first time in the Creation account that God proclaims that something is not good — *and the Fall hasn't even happened yet...*

- What is not good is that man is alone — man doesn't have someone comparable to him — someone who is a match for him...

And this is very interesting — because God is with Him — and God still says that the man's situation is *not good*...

19 Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name.

20 So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him.

Adam is unable to find true companionship in any of the animals — he needs a human partner — someone who is complimentary to him — someone who is similar but different...

21 And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place.

22 Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man.

**23 And Adam said:
"This is now bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called Woman,
Because she was taken out of Man."**

24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

25 And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

[expand — leaving and cleaving / naked and unashamed / one flesh relationship that results in children who are the literal representation of that relationship — half the DNA of each parent...]

As beautiful as this picture of marriage is — it didn't last...

In Genesis 3 we have the Fall — the curse soon follows — and everything is different...

To see this, please turn to...

Genesis 3:16-19 (NKJV)

16 To the woman He said:

**"I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception;
In pain you shall bring forth children;
Your desire shall be for your husband,
And he shall rule over you."**

17 Then to Adam He said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it':

**"Cursed is the ground for your sake;
In toil you shall eat of it
All the days of your life.**

**18 Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you,
And you shall eat the herb of the field.**

**19 In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread
Till you return to the ground,
For out of it you were taken;
For dust you are,
And to dust you shall return."**

Paradise was lost — and as a result, there is ***no such thing as the perfect marriage*** because there is ***no such thing as perfect people...***

We must understand this reality...

- And though marriages are ***imperfect***, they can still be ***fruitful***...

Marriage is a place where we learn to ***die to ourselves*** and ***serve one another***...

- If children come into the marriage then more dying to self is learned and an understanding of the love of God for ***His children*** is experienced (if only in part)...

With that said, please turn to Matthew 5 as we turn our attention to vs 31...

Now, in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus has been addressing the externalism of the Scribes and Pharisees...

He is teaching that murder, adultery, divorce, etc. are not merely things that occur outwardly but are matters of the heart...

That it is not enough to outwardly conform to an external standard — true heart change is needed...

- The Lord Jesus wants the inside of the cup to be cleaned and then the outside of the cup will be cleaned as well...

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

Now, as we seek to understand Jesus' teaching, it is vital that we understand the context...

So, the first thing that we need to do is ask, **“*what is this certificate of divorce*”?**

To answer that question, please turn to...

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (NKJV)

1 "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 uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house,

uncleanness — *shame, disgrace, indecency...(vague term)*

certificate of divorce — *formal document dissolving breaking the covenant of marriage...*

2 when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's wife,

3 if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife,

4 then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

From these verses we see that a husband presenting his wife with a certificate of divorce was a very serious matter...

With this in mind, would you please turn to...

Matthew 19:3-8 (NKJV)

3 The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?"

This is the debate that was raging at the time — and it gives the background for what the Lord Jesus teaches on marriage and divorce in the gospels...

Basically, there were two schools of thought on the subject of divorce at that time...

Rabbi Hillel taught that you could divorce your wife for any reason at all (no-fault divorce) and remarry at will...

Rabbi Shammai taught that divorce was permissible only in response to a major offense such as adultery...

So, Jesus responds to the question of divorce...

4 And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,'

5 and said, For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?

6 So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.”

- [expand — marriage is a ***vertical*** and ***horizontal covenant***...]

Maybe its best to imagine a triangle — you are connected to your spouse on the horizontal plane and both individually connected to God at the apex of the triangle...

- Now, the Lord Jesus makes it clear here in Matthew 19 that man should not seek to break this covenant — God has joined the two and they should not be separated...

The Pharisees respond to this in...

7 They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?"

Once again, the Pharisees are seeking to create conflict between Moses and the Lord Jesus...[ex. woman caught in adultery]

8 He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so."

In other words, divorce is a concession due to the sinfulness of mankind...

- Ideally, no marriage would end in divorce, but because of hardness of heart — because of the sinfulness of human beings — divorce was permitted...

PRINCIPLE — There is no such thing as a no-fault divorce — it is always the fault of at least one of the spouses...

It could be ***both of their faults*** but it cannot be ***neither of their faults...***

- In a divorce, at least one spouse is refusing to fulfill the covenant made to God and to their spouse...

Now, let's turn back to Matthew 5...

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.

Now, I believe that both in Matthew 5 and in Matthew 19 the Lord Jesus is addressing *the issue of men divorcing their wives for any reason...*

- And it seems that the Lord Jesus is siding with Rabbi Shammai and is going against Rabbi Hillel...

The Lord Jesus is upholding the covenant of marriage as an institution of God that is only to be broken under extreme circumstances...

Let's look again at vs 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.

- [expand — what does it mean that he causes her to commit adultery and whoever marries her commits adultery?...]

Dallas Willard — Renovation of the Heart

‘In the Jewish society of Jesus’ day, as for most times and places in human history, the consequences of divorce were devastating for the woman. Except for some highly unlikely circumstances, her life was, simply, ruined. No harm was done to the man, by contrast, except from time to time a small financial loss and perhaps bitter relationships with the ex-wife’s family members.

For the woman, however, there were only three realistic possibilities in Jesus’ day. She might find a place in the home of a generous relative, but usually on grudging terms and as little more than a servant. She might find a man who would marry her, but always as “damaged goods” and sustained in a degraded relationship. Or she might, finally, make a place in the community as a prostitute. Society simply would not then, as ours does today, support a divorced woman to any degree or allow her to support herself in a decent fashion.

These circumstances explain why Jesus says that to divorce a woman causes her to commit adultery and to marry a divorced woman is to commit adultery. To not marry again was a terrible prospect for the woman. It meant, in nearly every case, to grow old with no children as well as with no social position, a

perpetual failure as a human being. But to marry was to live in a degraded sexual relationship the rest of her life, and precious few husbands would allow her to forget it. As in the phrase “adultery in the heart,” Jesus speaks of being forced into “adultery” to point out the degraded sexual condition that was, then if not now, sure to be the result of divorce.’

Now, with that said, I believe that the language that the Lord Jesus uses in Matthew 5 and Matthew 19 shows that He is specifically addressing the debate of His day and that He is not necessarily covering every circumstance which might lead to divorce...

For an example of another biblical justification for divorce, please turn to...

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.

- [expand — general rule — stay married — live together — seek reconciliation if separated — 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.

- [expand — believing husband & unbelieving wife...]

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.

- [expand — believing wife & unbelieving husband...]

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.

- [expand — benefit to the unbelieving spouse and to the kids because of the presence of the believing spouse...]

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.

This is what has been referred to as the *abandonment exception*...

- [expand — physical abandonment / physically leaving the marriage...]

But I would also argue that there are other forms of abandonment — emotional abandonment, sexual abandonment, financial abandonment / also forms of physical and emotional abuse...

- While divorce is not **commanded** in these circumstances, I would argue that divorce is **biblically justified** if a spouse continually refuses to fulfill their wedding vows through some form of unrepentant abandonment...

And as we consider this argument, I think it would be a good reminder to hear those vows again — to remember what was promised in the wedding ceremony...

The wedding officiant asks the groom...

Now, do you Adam, take Eve to be your lawfully-wedded, God-given wife?

- ***Do you promise to love her, honor her, and forsaking all others, cleave only unto her for as long as you both shall live?***

Adam, do you take Eve to be your lawfully-wedded Wife - to live together after God's ordinances in the holiest state of matrimony...

...for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health...

...to love and to cherish till death do you part?

“Wear this ring, Eve as a pledge of my love for you — for with this ring — I thee wed — in the name of the Father — the Son — and the Holy Spirit.”

Now, when either the husband or the wife chooses to willfully and continually break these vows — refuses to fulfill the promises that were entered into willingly — then ***repentance*** and ***reconciliation*** should be sought...

To see how this is to be done, please turn to...

Matthew 18:15-17 (NKJV)

15 "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.

- ex. wife confronts her husband about an issue that is negatively affecting the marriage...

16 But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.'

This is where it usually breaks down — the husband refuses to listen to his wife and is unwilling to meet with the two or three witness (church elders)...

- [expand — marriages among professing Christians break down because one or both of the spouses refuses the intervention of church elders...]

17 And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church.

I believe that this speaks of getting others from the church involved to help work out this issue — others from the church reaching out to him and encouraging him to reconcile...

But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

If the husband refuses to listen to anyone then he is to be considered just like a heathen and a tax collector...

- In other words, he is not showing any of the signs of being a true Christian so fellowship with him should be broken...

And at this point, it seems clear to me that the abandonment exception of 1 Corinthians 7 is applicable...[expand]

Now, as we begin to wrap up our time together, I want to give a special exhortation to husbands and wives by having us turn to...

Ephesians 5:22-33 (NKJV)

22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.

23 For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body.

24 Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.

- [expand — wives being led by their husbands (unless it is being led into sin)...]

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her,

26 that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word,

27 that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.

- [expand — husbands loving their wives *just as* Christ loved the church — self-sacrificing, others-centered love...]

28 So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.

29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church.

30 For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones.

31 "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

- [expand — as husbands rightly love their wives they are rightly loving themselves — they are doing what is best for the wife and what is best for themselves...]

32 This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.

- [expand — the marriage of a husband and wife is a picture of Christ and the church...]

33 Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

If ***both*** husband and wife choose to submit to the Lord and do what He has called them to — the marriage will work out though there will be many challenges along the way...

Conclusion

- 1) Marriage is a vertical and horizontal covenant — covenant with God and with each other...***
- 2) Divorce, as a general rule, is wrong and shouldn't be done...***
- 3) There are biblical grounds for divorce but every divorce damages not only the husband and the wife but those who love them...***
- 4) Divorce, even if unjustified, is not the unforgivable sin...***
- 5) Whatever your past, serve the Lord where you are right now and trust Him to work it together for the good...***