

Week 8 – Divorce: Narrowly Permitted – Matthew 5:31-32 (19:3-9)

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 24:1-4

Introduction

Here at Brick Church we are committed to expository preaching where we expose and explain what the biblical text says. And we try to determine what the author of a passage was communicating to his original audience in that time and place and to set aside our own ideas and cultural norms as we interpret the text.

In other words, we seek to be informed by the text under consideration and not to impose our thoughts upon it.

As your pastor, I am also a proponent of a varied diet when it comes to presenting God's Word so I tend to preach using a mixture of sermon styles all while remaining expository –

Whether the style is a verse-by-verse look at a book or passage of the Bible like we're doing now or topical or biographical or historical or whatever form a sermon might take it will always be expository in nature –

That's to say I will always try to show you what the text meant when it was written because I believe a passage from the Bible, while having unlimited application, can only mean one thing and its meaning is whatever the author intended.

While I believe it's well to switch things up from time-to-time with sermon styles there are times when I am very glad to be going through a verse-by-verse study because of the protection and the prodding it provides.

Prodding in that it's hard to legitimately skip a difficult passage and protection in that no one can accuse me of preaching a sermon pointed at them or their situation because it's simply the next passage we encounter.

I tell you all of that because this morning we come to a passage that contains a topic that many pastors would rather not talk about – as Tammy Wynette sang in her 1968 hit country record our topic is D-I-V-O-R-C-E.

To be more specific, in the verses before us, Jesus teaches what makes a divorce legitimate so as to allow a believer to remarry.

Times have certainly changed since Tammy Wynette recorded her hit song and people no longer feel the need to hide their divorces.

In fact, people are more prone to celebrate their divorce with a party complete with all the trimmings as they look forward to what they see as the wonderful personal opportunities offered by their newfound freedom.

But, just as we saw last week when we considered the topic of adultery, divorce is actually destructive and for many people even the mention of divorce causes them pain.

We know that the world at large isn't exactly open to what the Bible has to say about marriage.

And when you consider that the church hasn't been immune to the phenomenon of broken marriages and remarriages and the fact that there are numerous opinions as to what the Bible actually teaches about divorce, is it any wonder that pastors are reluctant to address the topic?

But here we are this morning as we have worked our way down to **Matthew 5:31-32** where Jesus taught on the subject and we either have to consider it or skip over it – so consider it we will.

And as we do we will look for answers to the questions that naturally arise in our minds such as:

What should the Christian's attitude be regarding divorce?

Is divorce always forbidden and, if not, when is it permitted?

Is it ever acceptable for a divorced Christian to remarry?

If you are taking notes we will first look at the **Common Teaching** of Jesus' day.

Then we will look at what Jesus taught, or **Jesus' Teaching**, and lastly we will consider how to apply the passage today, what I'm calling the **"What abouts"?**

If you haven't already done so, I encourage you to open your Bible to Matthew 5 so you can follow along as I read verses 31-32 [**Matthew 5:31-32**] – Jesus had just taught on adultery of the heart when he continued:

It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 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.

To fully understand what Jesus was saying about divorce we first have to understand the controversy that existed at the time because it informed the common teaching that the religious leaders were promoting

I. The Common Teaching

And to do that effectively we are going to need to look at another passage in Matthew's gospel where Jesus addresses the divorce issue in a bit more depth

So keep your finger in Matthew 5 but turn with me to Matthew 19 and look with me at verse three [**Matthew 19:3**]

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"

Notice first that the Pharisees were "testing" Jesus – that is to say they were trying to trap him

There were two schools of thought going around that centered on the interpretation of a phrase found in the first verse of our Scripture reading this morning, **Deuteronomy 24:1** where Moses spoke of the basis for a divorce –

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house

The controversial phrase is that the woman's husband found "some indecency" in her and the burning question of Jesus' day was what exactly how broadly to interpret what Moses meant by "some indecency"

A rabbi named **Shammai** taught that "indecency" meant sexual immorality and said that was the only valid reason for divorce whereas another rabbi named **Hillel** believed that "indecency" should be interpreted much more broadly

In fact, according to the Hillel school of thought, if the wife accidentally burned her husband's meal; that was a legitimate reason for her husband to divorce her

Hillel's interpretation ultimately became the dominant view and some 200 years later legitimate reasons for divorce included such things as having a misshapen head, having eyebrows that were missing or too bushy, having a pug nose, ears that were either too small or too floppy, even having swollen feet could result in the woman being divorced!

Rabbi Akiba, who was of the school of Hillel, even went so far as to say the phrase "finds no favor in his eyes" from **Deuteronomy 24:1** meant that a man could divorce his wife if he found another woman he liked better

Things hadn't quite gotten to that point yet but the controversy over which was the correct view was still a hot one and the liberal view was winning out when the Pharisees approached Jesus and tried to draw him into the debate

That was the cultural backdrop that existed when Jesus sat down to deliver his Sermon on the Mount and what his hearers would have understood when he spoke about giving one's wife a certificate of divorce

The question had become not whether it was proper to divorce but under what conditions one could legitimately give his wife a certificate of divorce

And the teaching of the day was trending toward any reason at all being sufficient which is evident in the question asked by the Pharisees in **Matthew 19:3** – "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" meaning of course, any cause at all

We tend to laugh at all the reasons for divorce the Jews came up with because, of course, we are much more enlightened and sophisticated today and we don't need any reason at all to end a marriage by divorce and with our invention of "no fault divorce" marriage has become the weakest and easiest to dissolve contract there is

It's easier in some ways to get out of a marriage than it is to get out of a cell-phone contract

But let's turn our attention next to what Jesus had to say about divorce

II. Jesus' Teaching

Let's look first at Jesus' response to the Pharisees who tested him in Matthew 19

Let's begin with verse 4 and read through verse 6 [**Matthew 19:4-6**]

[Jesus] answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

Notice that Jesus didn't directly answer the question posed by the Pharisees

Instead, he went back to the beginning, when God created mankind and quoted from Genesis 2 and the account of when God instituted marriage

Initially, the dissolution of marriage was unthinkable – when God made men and women he made absolutely no allowance for divorce

And that's because marriage is a special bond unlike any other in its intimacy

A. The special bond of marriage

Again, Jesus was quoting from **Genesis 2:24** when he said *"the two shall become one flesh"*

Marriage is the deepest human relationship there is and no other relationship is like it

Even the bond between parent and child pales in comparison to the "one flesh" bond that exists between husband and wife

Remembering how Eve was taken from Adam is illustrative of how men and women are designed to complement one another and to come together to make a unified whole

And that helps us to understand the destructive nature of divorce as any attempt to divide the one flesh into two again causes damage and pain whether the separation is surgical or a savage tearing apart; divorce naturally leaves a wound

B. The permanence of marriage

But Jesus doesn't stop there and after he reminds the Pharisees of the intimacy of marriage he turns his attention to its God-intended permanence

He says, "What God has joined together, let not man separate"

God's ideal was, is, and always has been intimate and enduring marriage made up of one man and one woman who join together in monogamous union becoming one flesh

That is what has God's stamp of approval and anything else is a departure from the divine model and something less

Well, the Pharisees were nothing if not masters of nuance and debate so rather than accept what Jesus was showing them from Scripture they came back at him with another question in verse 7 [**Matthew 19:7**] –

"Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?"

In other words they were again trying to trap Jesus to see if he would go against Moses

But Jesus didn't come to abolish the Law and in verse 8 [**Matthew 19:8**] we read Jesus' answer that Moses only permitted them to divorce because of the hardness of their hearts

Moses only commanded that a certificate of divorce had to be provided in order to protect the woman involved

In those days, women pretty much had to be attached to a man in order to survive so God, through Moses, saw to it that the women couldn't be exploited

In other words, God made an allowance in order to prevent further harm

But he only did so as a concession to human wickedness and weakness on the part of the men of Israel

Now, with the background of marriage and divorce established, we come to the heart of Jesus' teaching as to when and why divorce is permitted for the believer

And in both Matthew 19:9 and Matthew 5:32 we see that God permits divorce for one reason alone

C. God permits divorce for one reason alone

And in both of those verses we see the only reason acceptable to God for divorce is "*sexual immorality*"

So everything rests on the interpretation of that phrase which is the English translation of the Greek word *porneia* which, at its root means "fornication" but is a term that is used widely to mean various forms of sexual sin

Porneia is an inclusive term that can refer generally to every kind of unlawful or unnatural sexual activity such as prostitution, looseness, lewdness, and so forth

And, in the context of married persons, it means to engage in any kind of marital unfaithfulness

Now, we should take note that under the Mosaic Law, those were crimes that carried the death penalty

So marriages were ended under the Law for those things all along but they were ended by death and not divorce

However, in Jesus' day the Jews were under Roman occupation and any death penalty had to be sanctioned by Rome which made carrying them out quite difficult so divorce had taken the place of death

Therefore the debate wasn't over the lawfulness of divorce, which had long been established, the debate was over the *reasons* for which one could lawfully divorce and remarry – that was what Hillel and Shammai were arguing about

And Jesus proved to be far stricter than either of them when he revealed that the only valid reason for divorce that allows one to marry someone else was marital unfaithfulness

No other reason for divorce is valid in God's eyes and Jesus goes on to say that anyone who divorces for any other reason and remarries is guilty of adultery [**Matthew 19:9**] because God still considers the original couple to be married

But I want you to make note of something very important – write this down

God permits divorce when marital unfaithfulness is present but he doesn't command it and dissolution of the marriage is not mandated, inevitable, or preferred

Sadly, many people look at this concession on God's part and see it as an escape clause and rather than finding a way through the difficulty they see their spouse's unfaithfulness as a way out

But God is a God of reconciliation and just because you discover that your mate has been unfaithful, it doesn't automatically follow that God has given you license to get a divorce

I want to be careful not to minimize the trauma and pain that infidelity causes – unfaithfulness of any kind is a terrible betrayal and not one that is easily overcome

But as we have seen God's design for marriage is one of permanence and we must not be too quick to pull the divorce trigger just because God permits it

As Paul writes in **1Corinthians 10:23** – not everything that is permitted is actually profitable for us and God often causes great things to grow out of terrible situations so just because God has made a concession that doesn't mean we have to use it

As I alluded to a bit earlier, marriage has become a very weak thing today that is based more on sappy sentimentality and sexual desire than it is on true, life-long commitment

And marriages are often entered into with the knowledge that they can be legally exited without any reason and very little effort and when the sentimental feelings wane or things get tough, the marriage is walked away from

As Johnny **Cash** and his wife June put it in their hit single, Jackson, about an ill-advised marriage – "We got married in a fever; hotter than a pepper sprout. We've been talkin' 'bout Jackson, ever since the fire went out..."

Remember, God's view of marriage is that two people become one flesh that should never be cleaved asunder
And a righteous person, a citizen of the kingdom of heaven, must approach marriage as a vow made before God and man to live together and love one another and to nurture one another in spite of circumstances

Anyone who has been married any length of time learns that marriage means work and often it means hard work

It's impossible to join two sinners together and have a storybook union that doesn't require any effort at all

There may even be times when the only thing that keeps a marriage together is remembering the promise one has made coupled with the desire to be faithful to it in order to please God

What Jesus teaches here is not obscure and it's easy to understand but not always easy to accept and we tend to want to cloud it by saying, "Okay, but what about..." as we try to bring up exceptions to broaden his restriction and make it more palatable to our sensibilities

And that really reveals a great deal about us but let's take a couple of moments to consider a few of those "what abouts"

III. What About the "What abouts"?

As we begin, let's be sure to acknowledge that Jesus is not teaching here about the legitimacy of divorce in general but specifically as it affects remarriage

We see that both in Matthew 5:32 and in Matthew 19:9 where he says to divorce for reasons other than marital infidelity and then to remarry is to commit adultery

I see only three legitimate allowances for remarriage after divorce in Scripture

1. The issue we are looking at today where one's spouse is unfaithful and unwilling to repent and live faithfully within the bounds of marriage
2. When a believing spouse is divorced by an unbelieving spouse
3. When the divorce occurred before a person was saved – they were married and divorced before becoming a believer

We've already considered number one this morning so let's look quickly at numbers two and three on the list

For number two we need to consider Paul's teaching in **1Corinthians 7:12-16** where he addresses the issue of one unsaved spouse and one spouse who is a believer

This situation was likely commonplace in Corinth and is not all that unusual today when two unbelievers are married and one is subsequently saved

In that case, Paul says the believing spouse must remain with the unbelieving as long as they will have them

But, should the unbelieving spouse decide to divorce the believing spouse then the believer is no longer married in God's sight and, since they are blameless in the matter, they are free to remarry should they choose to do so

Paul's exact words are "*in such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved*" [**1Corinthians 7:15**]

For the third case, we need to look to **2Corinthians 5:17** which tells us that anyone who is in Christ is a new creation and that the old has passed away

All our past sins are forgiven when we accept Christ and that has to include unrighteous divorce

Otherwise, we would have to face the fact that Jesus didn't atone for divorce and that would be unthinkable

So, on that basis I would have to conclude that the person who was married and divorced prior to being saved is free to remarry as a believer without offending God – of course, God requires they marry a fellow believer but that's another topic for another day

At this point, it's not unusual for someone to bring up the matter of **abuse** and state that physical and emotional abuse should be legitimate grounds for divorce

Let me be clear – I would never counsel anyone to stay in an unsafe situation or an abusive relationship and a separation might well be in order until the danger or abuse is removed

The marriage may even need to be ended through procuring a divorce for legal reasons

But looking at Jesus' plain teaching we must acknowledge that, in God's sight, the couple is still married and remarriage is out of the question because it would result in adultery

Therefore, those involved would need to remain single for as long as they or their spouse lives because, in the event of death of one of the partners, the marriage would rightfully end

That may not be what we want to hear but that's what God's Word says – we don't make the rules we can only choose whether we will be obedient to God's rules

Conclusion

As we wrap up this morning we need to be careful that we don't come away from this teaching with a misunderstanding

Divorce in any circumstance is a gross departure from God's design for marriage

God doesn't say divorce for infidelity is good or proper – God hates divorce – all divorce – even the divorce he permits
And while there are cases when divorce and remarriage don't result in sin it remains that all divorce is a product of sin so we must truly seek to avoid it in our marriages and mourn every marriage that ends in divorce

When Jesus revealed what God requires of marriage his disciples were stunned

His teaching was a radical departure from what was commonly believed and practiced and it caught even those who were close to him off guard

And I find their reaction to it to be a bit comical although it is appropriate simply because it was they who reacted this way and not the Pharisees who were testing Jesus

Look with me at **Matthew 19:10** to see their reaction – they said, *"If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry."*

Obviously, they were blown away but what they blurted out is true – marriage is serious and shouldn't be entered into lightly because God intends for it to last a lifetime

And there are certain things we must do:

We must plug our ears against the siren-song of our culture that seeks to lull us into having a casual view of marriage

We must take seriously God's prohibition against divorce and remarriage except in the narrowest of circumstances recognizing that even then it doesn't equal God's ideal

Then we must do away with self-righteously looking down on those who have failed in this area – remember, we are all guilty of adultery of the heart as we saw last week

People err in many areas of life and when recognition and repentance are present we must forgive as we have been forgiven – failure in the area of marriage is not an unpardonable sin so we dare not treat it as one

We must remove any man-made barriers to those who seek to remarry according to God's standard concerning biblical divorce and remarriage

And we must support and encourage every married couple regardless of their circumstance knowing that every marriage is meant by God to last a lifetime even if it was entered into unwisely or contrary to his perfect standard

Let's pray