

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW



Matthew 5:31-32 **Marriage Matters** **1/14/2024**

Good morning. We are continuing in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel today. We're doing a slow burn through each section of this sermon. Once we finish chapter 7, we'll continue through Matthew but put our foot on the gas again and start covering slightly longer sections.

But the Sermon on the Mount is worth steeping our church in for the 19 or 20 weeks we will spend here, because these are the words of Jesus, intended to form us into a true counterculture.

It's like we begin as a block of marble, and Jesus, in each section of this sermon, takes his chisel to a part of our lives that has yet to be affected by the Gospel we've believed, and He chops it away. It's painful for us - we have to repent frequently along the way, regularly praying, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," admitting we were wrong in thought and word and deed, but through it all He is carving us into the image of Jesus.

These passages, today's included, are sharp instruments, and there's a spark and noise when He hits his chisel with the hammer and lops away our old way of thinking.

So let's read the two verses He'll use in our lives and in our church today:

Matthew 5:31–32 [31] “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ [32] 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.

Yet again, it’s a passage that doesn’t land well in our culture, and a passage that is painful for us. Jesus lays out a high view here of the nature of marriage and calls us to live this way.

To pick this apart, In verse 31 again, Jesus says **[31] “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’**

So Jesus begins by quoting from Moses’ teaching on divorce. This is a quote taken from Deuteronomy 24:1 which begins by saying

Deuteronomy 24:1 “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...

So Moses taught that the way a divorce could be done was a man and woman marry, if he finds an indecency in her, then he can write a certificate of divorce and send her away. The certificate was there to make it official and legal.

Now this was better than the surrounding nations had to offer. In their day, women couldn’t earn much of an income easily, they were dependent on their fathers until they were dependent on their husbands, but husbands who had evil hearts might just kick her out, and nobody would marry her because they all thought she was married to that other guy. There was no resolution, so it could leave women destitute - unable to marry, but no longer welcome by their husbands.

So under Moses' law, you couldn't just do that. A certificate had to be written. There had to at least be closure so she could remarry.

Now by Jesus's time on earth, there were two major ways of interpreting what grounds for divorce were and what that word "indecency" meant. **Rabbi Shammai** taught that "indecency" had to be very serious, like an adultery or something of equivalent weight. **Rabbi Hillel** said indecency could basically be anything- and there were at least stories of men issuing a certificate of divorce to their wives because they burned the dinner they were cooking. So Hillel advocated for divorce for any reason. And Hillel's view - the permissive view - was the most popular one, the one held by the Pharisees.

And divorce was one way, a man could divorce his wife for any reason, but she couldn't divorce her husband for any reason.

And people might have expected Jesus to take a side - will he be strict like Shammai, or loose like Hillel. And maybe we might think Jesus would take a centrist opinion. We often hear it said that Jesus is too liberal for the conservatives and too conservative for the liberals.

And on some issues that's the case, but Jesus can't be pigeonholed as a centrist either. On some issues Jesus is too liberal for the liberals and on some He is too conservative for the conservatives. He's His own thing! He doesn't wait for us to establish categories and then jump into one of them. He's God - He makes the definitions.

So Jesus lays out His view (which is not just His view - He's God, so He's right, He's the king of the new kingdom we're part of, so His word is law.) And his law for us is this:

Matthew 5:[32] 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.

Jesus goes with a strict standard - you don't divorce your wife except for if there has been adultery.

From what we know, nobody in that day held this strict of a view on divorce and remarriage. But Jesus is the king of a new kingdom, the chief interpreter of the law, the ultimate ethicist for the people of God, and He stakes out a position on marriage that is way more strict than any of them held. Which He didn't do on every issue - they're shocked at how loose and liberal Jesus seems on sabbath laws and cleanliness and diet laws, for example.

Jesus isn't always strict just to be strict - His commands are for our good.

Jesus knows that the flourishing of humanity is strengthened by marriages being strong and not easy to dissolve. Marriages are meant to be clung to, fought for, stayed in when it gets hard - and they create the maximum flourishing for husbands, for wives, for kids, for society, and for humanity when done right.

For human community to thrive, marriages and families must thrive. So Jesus stakes out a position that is very pro-marriage and makes divorce far more rare.

The general way of things is that a community thrives only when, in general, marriages remain intact and thrive. This is true of the broader community and a church community.

(This doesn't mean singles are less a part of the community - but thriving marriages are an essential element. This also doesn't mean no person can thrive outside of a healthy family. Because God gives grace, and plenty of

people thrive in difficult and broken marriages, broken homes, after divorces that shouldn't have been. We don't want to pronounce doom over someone who grows up without an intact family at all. God is very gracious - and because He is plenty of children of divorced homes still thrive in their walk with Him and in life.)

Now before I go too far down the road on this message - let me tell you where we'll go from here. I'll spend some time first talking about the purpose and value and beauty of marriage and why it should be fought for. And then I'll talk about the exceptions - the grounds for divorce that Jesus gives in this passage.

So if you or people you love have gone through a divorce where there were biblical grounds, or you had no choice, or were abandoned, I know there's some risk that in this next section you'll feel a false sense of guilt for a situation that wasn't your fault, that you don't need to feel guilty for, and that's not the intent. But you might not feel the relief of that false guilt for a few minutes, so bear with me here.

When a man and a woman marry, that marriage is God's work. God has joined them together.

In **Matthew 19:6**, Jesus will say:

So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.

When a man and woman marry, they are united into a one flesh relationship. And that relationship is joined together by God.

And because God is doing something unique in joining a married couple together, we should see marriages as uniquely His work, just like Adam and

Eve's marriage was his work. And to treat them as easy-to-leave is to insult Him, and to miss out on what He is doing in marriage.

We have redefined what a marriage is supposed to be in our day. We believe that it is a union designed to fulfill the self. That it is only a romantic union. And romance is good and marriage *is* the only righteous place for sexual intimacy. But we have defined-down marriage as "what two people who are in love do with each other for as long as they are in love."

And then, when excitement, love and romance inevitably fade, when sickness, weakness, sin, and difficulties come in, we think we are justified in getting out. Because I no longer feel fulfilled and therefore marriage isn't fulfilling its purpose.

But its purpose is so much more than that.

Ephesians 5 31 Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

So marriage is not only a core unit for human flourishing, but the design of marriage is that it is a union that paints a picture of Christ and the church. And the whole passage that precedes this that we don't have time to dive into, calls husbands to love and lead like Jesus, it calls wives to respect and be led by godly husbands like the church is by Christ.

So marriage is a life-long covenant between a man and woman to reflect to their children, their community, their church, their world something of the love that Jesus has for his people.

And Jesus's love isn't just sentimental love and feeling. When we say Jesus loves you we don't just mean He feels warm and fuzzy when He thinks about you.

We mean the Gospel. We mean that He gave his life for you. We mean that He endures with you. He loves relentlessly. He is attentive to you, ever interceding to the Father for you. It's that gritty, active, sweating and bleeding kind of love that Jesus has and that is to be reflected in marriage.

Jesus looked at his bride the church and said, 'till death do us part,' and He meant it, going to the cross for the union with His church.

And marriage is a visual aid to show that kind of love to the world around us.

So staying married is important. For honoring the fact that the marriage was God's work and to divide it is to divide what he joined. Staying married for human flourishing is important. For kids thriving its important. For accomplishing side-by-side God's purposes for you in the world.

But far beyond that, it is important because marriage was designed to paint a picture of Christ's love for the church.

This means that because a marriage is designed to reflect Christ's love, you can expect that at times you will be loving a spouse that is unlovable (just like Jesus does for us). At times it won't be easy. At times you might be tempted to dream of the freedom that would come from being out of this. You will have to forgive.

And if you spend a lot of time on instagram, you might be tempted to think that your marriage is uniquely boring, uniquely hard, uniquely challenging. But, I do have a somewhat unique perspective on this: In the past I've counseled a lot of people with instagram-perfect marriages and families. And it is not often what it seems.

And remember that we, as the bride of Christ, have not been easy for Him to be married to. He has to be patient with us, His love is often not

reciprocated. The love of Christ can still be reflected in a difficult marriage. So don't treat the difficulties as any calling to get out.

In fact, it's the committed nature of a marriage that can enable repeated renewal and restoration to happen. We're in this till death do us part, so we need to forgive, to get counseling when necessary, to rekindle romance, to re-organize our lives in each new season of life so the marriage can be a priority.

We don't just stay married as long as we are happy, but knowing we are staying married can say, "We have to make sure we get happy in each other again."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, while imprisoned, wrote a wedding sermon for his niece. In it, he wrote, "It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love."

Marriage can't be sustained by love and excitement and romance. Love, and excitement, and romance are to be sustained by marriage. God made this, God joined you together, and within that permanent abiding context you can work on rekindling romance, clearing out relational clutter, forgiving wrongs by applying the gospel, pursuing intimacy. And by saying, "God joined us together, so that's all we will ever do when something is hard," you can find love rekindled again and again.

But if you expect to stay married only as long as you always feel totally in love, you will inevitably hit a hard time or a boring time or a time of sickness or poverty or strain and say, 'our marriage is no longer being sustained.'

There is a big difference between a covenant, which marriage is, and a contract. A covenant is a promise for the future – a promise of commitment. The stuff you say in your wedding vows. And it is interesting, traditional wedding vows contain a lot of covenant language, but I've found that when I

do a wedding for people who write their own vows, there is usually a declaration of present love, but not as much promise for the future.

Traditional vows usually go something like this: I, (name), take you (name), to be my (wife/husband), to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; from this day forward until death do us part.

There's a promise of love into the future that is made.

But listen to these contemporary vows:

*Because of you, I laugh, I smile, I dare to dream again.
I look forward with great joy to spending the rest of my
life with you, caring for you, nurturing you, being there for you in all life
has for us. I love you and I know that this love is from God.*

Notice there is a declaration of present love and hope, but no promise for the future. No commitment and covenant. Just I feel real good about you and I look forward doing life with you because I love you now.

But marriage is more than that. Marriage is not just affection for each other, because your dog has affection for you but you're not married to him. Marriage is not just a relationship for making babies, because rats make babies but are not married. It is not some human invention that we came up with 10,000 years ago to make societies work better and raise kids better.

It is a God-joined union designed to paint a picture of God's gospel.

So God made marriage, God joined you together with your spouse, therefore, Jesus says, to leave that union and pursue another is to commit adultery. This isn't the kind of thing you bail on because she burned the

toast or because he is a Chiefs fan. (You get him counseling - you don't leave him.)

So let's have that high view of marriage: in our marriage we have a story to tell, the story of the love of Christ for his sinful bride. We have a picture to paint, the picture of committed love and sacrificial love.

We want to do life among people who treat marriage this seriously - it isn't a temporary thing, it isn't a flimsy thing. This is a covenant designed to reflect the covenant of God's faithfulness that we are in if we are in Jesus.

Nothing is more discouraging than the stream of people who say they believe those things about marriage at the altar, but then when they hit usual road bumps, they bail quickly. It reveals that we don't believe. We don't want to participate in denegrating such an important union.

But there are other ways we degenerate the union besides divorcing.

When we are unfaithful through adultery, when we abandon a spouse (physically or through cruelty or abuse), even if a divorce never occurs, we are trampling on the institution of marriage.

And here's what can happen in our circles, among Bible believing people. A man cheats on or abuses his wife. She finally decides to forgive him, but to divorce him. And he then says, "She doesn't care about marriage, she's breaking our vows."

You broke them!

And sometimes they will say to their wives "you have to stay - and take abuse or tolerate my adultery, because divorce is wrong and we have to have a high view of marriage."

You have the low view of marriage!

In fact, to take something that God has designed for human flourishing and to use it to abuse or destroy, and then to take the Bible out of context to throw false guilt on the victim, is devilish.

There's a command in the Old Testament food laws for the Jews that said, "don't boil a young goat in its mother's milk,"¹ which is repeated three times. And the principle is that you don't take an instrument of life (like a mother's milk) and make it an instrument of death.

And when we use marriage to trap someone so we can commit adultery, or to abuse or harm or abandon, we are taking an instrument of life and making it an instrument of sorrow and pain and death. And it's really awful.

So because God knows of the kind of hardness that can come into the human heart, he does allow exceptions to the permanence of marriage.

So Jesus makes an exception for sexual immorality in our passage in Matthew 5, and the apostle Paul makes an exception for abandonment in 1 Corinthians 7.

In Matthew 5, Jesus says that divorce and remarriage is not allowed "except for sexual immorality," and that word is **porneia**, which is a broad term that includes a lot of forms of sexual sin, including adultery, but is easily applied to things like compulsive porn use, etc.

And Paul writes later to the situation of abandonment:

¹ Exodus 23:19 Exodus 34:26, and Deuteronomy 14:21.

1 Corinthians 7:12 To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. 13 If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 15 But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.

In verse 15, you have an unbelieving spouse leaving the other - abandoning them. In those cases, the abandoned party is not bound, and it seems can remarry.

It's important to see the contrast between between verse 15 and 13. In verse 15, one spouse is abandoning the other. **The opposite of abandoning in verse 13 is “consenting to live with her,” or literally being “pleased to dwell.”**

This can be translated “pleased to be together with.” Paul is saying that if an unbelieving spouse is pleased to keep on being married to a believing spouse, the believing spouse shouldn't leave. But if the unbelieving spouse leaves, the believer is free.

So in situations where one spouse is not pleased to be together with the other, and abandons them, remarriage seems allowed.

But “pleased to be together with” does imply that they are willing to live within the bounds of a biblical marriage. If they're going to be committing adultery, or being hostile within the home (staying there but not being pleased to be together with), abandonment has occurred. So abandonment can occur through leaving altogether, but also through abuse and blatant

disregard for what a marriage is for. A husband who physically abuses his wife is abandoning that union - that is not being pleased to dwell.

And God is a God who redeems and changes and I've seen him bring back marriages from the very edge of destruction, and even reunite them after a divorce - there is real power in the Gospel over sin and real power for forgiveness. But the scripture does allow these outs and does allow for remarriage after a marriage is severed on biblical grounds because God knows there is hardness in hearts and that not everything that is broken in this life can go together in this life.

The allowances don't mean divorce must occur when there's been adultery. We've seen lots of marriages put back together after adultery, after long processes of confession and forgiveness and rebuilding trust. There's often hope for a marriage even when it seems bleakest. But there are times that what has been broken by adultery can't be put back together, and divorce and remarriage is allowed. And the one who committed the adultery is guilty, not the one who filed the divorce.

And there are some different convictions here at Grace Road around the fringes of this issue, about whether remarriage should be allowed in what circumstances. At times, we might have some pastors that would be willing to officiate a wedding that others might not feel comfortable with, and that's part of being in community.

But certainly nobody should take any divorce lightly.

Keller says that it is not like changing your clothing to get divorced, it is more like an amputation. Amputations should be rare and avoided if possible. Doctors that are quick to amputate for small causes are bad doctors. But occasionally an amputation is necessary.

I think that as much as we want to honor the role of marriage by insisting on its permanence, we also can't go beyond the bible in what we require (and I believe it does allow some rare exceptions to permanence.)

Also by allowing divorce without guilt in those circumstances, we are preserving the meaning of marriage. When a spouse is committing adultery against the covenant or abandoning the covenant or being violent with a spouse as a form of abandonment, or has deserted a spouse, we don't honor the institution of marriage that was made for human flourishing by insisting that those marriages stay together.

We have a balance to strike as a church - we want to be a true counter-culture, which means that we want to have abnormal commitment to our marriages, even difficult ones, even hard ones. We want to offer hope to those whose marriage looks like it has no hope because we believe in the redemption the Gospel can bring.

And - we want to run counter to a religious or legalistic culture that might use the high view of marriage to harm true victims.

And we have to be careful, sometimes because we believe in the sanctity of marriage and we believe in God's power to redeem and change anything, we can go farther than Jesus goes in this passage and put pressure on people who have grounds for divorce, and who have after agony and tears and trying, have decided to go ahead with the amputation.

We can say, "You have to do the better thing," which in our eyes is staying married. Instead we can help each other discern when there are truly biblical grounds, provide support for radical forgiveness, grace and understanding for those who are discerning it is irreparably broken, safety for the abused. And it usually takes walking closely with people for a long time to be a discerning help - and we should avoid being the outside committee of judgment when those that are more remote from us are going through this.

So let's conclude with a few words for different types of people.

A word to the divorced -

If it is your sin that led to divorce, that sin is not unforgivable by Jesus.

If your divorce was a sin, Jesus forgives those who repent and turn to Him.

If you are grieving because you were abandoned or, without guilt, pursued a divorce with real grounds, Jesus is there for the weary. A lot of people might be trying to understand what happened and failing, you may not have words or energy to communicate it all, it may not be appropriate to air the laundry to lots of people, so you can feel utterly alone.

Jesus is near to the brokenhearted.

A word to the divorced and remarried

Some of you might be hearing this and realizing that the path to your new marriage involved some sin. I would encourage you to confess that to God and each other and not pretend that isn't the case. But God is a forgiving and gracious God who forgives sin. So you don't need to view your new marriage as not real, or as perpetual adultery. It is a real marriage, and with sin confessed you can know that it isn't cursed. It isn't less binding or less real, even if you look back and say "we sinned," or "we made some mistakes."

This is true of all of our marriages however we got to them. Promises that are made in confusion are no less binding. If a person goes out and gets drunk and then runs up a credit card charge, their debt is very real. That's not fake debt - just ask VISA. And even if you made all kinds of mistakes getting there, your marriage is not a fake marriage, your covenant no less binding if you took wrong steps to get into it. While the initial act of remarrying may have been adultery in some cases, the marriage can be

blessed by God because He is merciful. So God will be with you in making your marriage a good one that honors him.

A word to all the married

So much is at stake in doing everything possible to hold that together and to make your home healthy.

Don't feel any pressure to stay in an abusive home - physically harmed or radically demeaned or abandoned within the home. It doesn't honor the institution of marriage to be abused because of marriage. So use the tools available to you - call the police, don't feel you are honoring the abusive spouse by allowing abuse to continue.

But many are just in hard marriages - there's no abuse or adultery happening, but your home just isn't marked by joy. Get help soon. Be humble, be willing to confess sin, to listen, to not insist that you're always right. Clean out that relational clutter like people who believe the Gospel has real healing power for sin. There is hope - I know dozens of stories of marriages that seemed to be on the brink that are now happy and trusting and whole. That does happen.

A word to the single

Don't take marriage lightly or settle for less than a marriage to a Christian who follows Jesus if you decide to get married. If you want to be married, pursue that, and pursue Jesus first. Get outside counsel from older trusted Christians when you're considering someone, grow in humility and grace, and marry someone who's doing the same.

A word to all

Marriage refers to Christ and the church. God designed marriage to preach about an even more important relationship than marriage, a relationship you are invited in to today. Christ is pictured as the groom who came for his bride.

And it was common practice if a guy wanted to be married to go and prepare a place for his wife to be - to get a place to live, to get prepared for her to come in to Him.

And Jesus has promised that there is room prepared for all who will come to Him.

But for us, Jesus had to do more - He had to prepare us to be a worthy bride. But all of our sin is adultery - it's all cheating on God, breaking God's heart.

So Jesus came to prepare us as well - by going to the cross He paid for our sin, He was buried, and He rose again. And if we will acknowledge our need for forgiveness of sin, if we will see ourselves as unworthy, and if we will recognize we can only be with Him if He mercifully forgives - if we turn to Him with that kind of faith, He does forgive. And accepts us, not because we made ourselves worthy, but because He gives us His worthiness.

And that's the hope we express in the Lord's supper. The bread and wine represent the body and blood of Christ that were given for us. And we, in taking this, are making a profession: that I believe that Jesus died for me and that it was enough for me to have all the righteousness I need to be accepted by God and welcomed into his place.

IF you don't believe that - either you don't believe at all, or you don't believe it enough to have confessed and renounced your known sins and committed to reconcile with those you need to forgive, don't partake.

Prayer of Confession:

Prayer of Confession, portions adapted from a prayer entitled "Love One Another" on page 236 of Streams of Mercy, a prayer book written by Barbara Duguid.

Father, we confess that we often fail to love as we have been loved by Christ. We with spouses don't love our spouses as Christ has loved us. We in community become blinded by our own self-righteousness and are great at judging others in spite of having our own records of failure. Father, forgive us.

Jesus, we have received enough forgiveness from you that we should be the most loving and forgiving people on earth. We should be gracious, and kind and patient as you are with us - with our spouses, and with those in our community. You took our failure and became sin for us so we could be credited with your flawless record of love. Yet we confess our lack of love and self-righteousness.

Spirit, help us to repent of our lack of love, our lack of forgiveness, our quickness to leave marriages you've joined together without grounds, our quickness to assume the worst of others, and help us to run to your throne again and again for mercy. Help us to love and forgive with sincerity and a desire to restore, so that we might reflect Christ to those around us. Make us holy people who love sincerely in reflection of Christ.

Assurance:

Psalm 130:1-4

[1] Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

[2] O Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

**[3] If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?**

**[4] But with you there is forgiveness,
that you may be feared. (ESV)**

Sermon Discussion Questions:

1. Read **Genesis 2:18-25, Ephesians 5:22-33**. List the things marriage is designed to be according to these passages.

How can married couples better live out the high calling on their marriage?

What elements of these passages are hard for modern minds to accept?
Why?

2. Read **Matthew 5:31-32, 1 Corinthians 7:12-15**.

The popular teaching in Jesus' day allowed a man to divorce his wife for nearly any cause. How does our culture's thought about marriage and divorce compare?

Do we run the risk of thinking just like them?

Do we run the opposite risk of not allowing what God allows when marriage is being truly abused?

How might we wisely avoid extremes in our counsel to one another?