

Exceeding Righteousness: Marriage & Covenant

Matthew 5, 31 and 32. 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. Let's pray together. Father, we stand under the authority of your word.

Lord, as your people, we, Lord, not only desire to hear your word and obey your word, Lord, but we desperately desire to understand your heart in your word, your heart for your people, your heart for your church. And Lord, we recognize that, Lord, this passage hits everyone in this room differently. Lord, we recognize that this passage has often been used to wound rather than to bring healing.

But God, we trust that your word is always loving, is always true, is always good, and that it always leads your people, Lord, not only to righteousness and holiness, but that it leads us to your heart. And so, Jesus, show us your heart today. We pray that you would give us courage to hear and to respond appropriately for your glory, for the good of your people.

In Jesus' name, amen. You may be seated. Now, when we talk about marriage, divorce, and remarriage, we need to recognize that these words are not spoken into a vacuum.

These topics and conversations are not merely abstract ideas or theological hypotheticals. They land in real families. They land in real stories, real histories, real vows, and real wounds from vows that have been broken.

And often, it's in these places, often it's in the places of wounds and sorrow where many people will come to God's word and look for wisdom and comfort and counsel. And they'll turn to this passage and experience Christ's words as being cold and even sometimes condemning. But before we even get into this, it is critical that we understand something important.

Jesus, in this passage, is not speaking to wounded spouses. Throughout the Gospels, when broken people come to Jesus personally experiencing shame and grief or entangled in sin, he is consistently loving and compassionate. Think of the Samaritan woman at the well, married five times, living with a man who was not then currently her husband.

And Jesus meets her with truth and with love. And she goes away rejoicing, having experienced an invitation into healing and into eternal life. Or the woman caught in adultery in John chapter 8. Jesus says, neither do I condemn you.

He rescues her, he restores her, and he calls her into a new righteousness. And so if you've ever had these passages used as a weapon against you or to silence you or to shame you, I need you to hear this clearly that Jesus is never harsh with wounded people. A bruised reed he does

not break.

A smoldering wick he will not snuff out. His words are always loving. They are always truthful.

And they are always aimed at healing and calling us toward holiness. And so Jesus is not counseling married couples here. He's not sitting across from a struggling marriage or sitting down with a wounded spouse or even a straying spouse.

Jesus is speaking into a culture that had abandoned God's design for marriage. It's a culture that had created legal and theological loopholes in order to justify breaking covenant vows. It's important that we understand that context.

And so in order to understand that a little better, would you turn with me in your Bibles just a few pages to the right to Matthew chapter 19. If you don't have a Bible, it'll be on the screen as well. But this is an important passage for our conversation today because it gives a little deeper insight into what conversation the culture was having and what Christ's heart is in the midst of this.

Matthew 19 verses 3 through 9 say this, and Pharisees came to him and tested him by asking. Now really quickly, that's important. The Pharisees are coming and they're testing him.

They're trying to trap him. Their motives are not sincere. Okay, they've come to test him by asking, is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause? He 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. They said to him, why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away? He said to them, because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives.

But from the beginning, it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality and marries another commits adultery. Now let's understand what's going on here.

The Pharisees and the religious leaders had great debates over what were legitimate grounds for divorce. And the key biblical passage at the center of this debate is Deuteronomy 24 verse 1, which says that a man could give his wife a certificate of divorce if he had found some indecency in her. Now the problem with this in both the English and the Hebrew is this phrase some indecency is incredibly vague.

In the original language, it literally means the nakedness of a thing. So a man could divorce his wife if in her he found the nakedness of a thing. I can't tell you what that means.

And neither could the Pharisees and neither can most scholars now tell you what was intended by that phrase. And so because of that ambiguity, there were two dominant schools of thought that began to develop. One was led by Rabbi Shammai.

And the school of Shammai focused on that word nakedness and said that divorce is always tragic. It's never desirable, but it is permitted only in the cases of adultery. On the other hand, Rabbi Hillel and the school of Hillel focused on that word a thing.

And they taught a man could divorce his wife for any reason at all, including something as trivial as burning a meal or finding someone prettier. Jesus is confronted with this debate directly and yet he doesn't play their game. Jesus doesn't respond by parsing Hebrew grammar or arguing about definitions.

Instead, he goes back to the opening pages of scripture to remind them of God's design and intent. They're worried about words and Jesus says, 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. Now notice what the Pharisees want to know and what many people in our culture want to know is, what are the reasons that someone may leave a marriage? What are the reasons that someone may leave a marriage? And Jesus says, in effect, it's the wrong question. You're asking the wrong question.

The better question is not what allows me to leave, but what did God intend when he joined us together? Rather than addressing the things that may or may not violate a covenant of marriage, he wants to point us to the covenant ideal. See, Jesus is restoring a vision for marriage that had been lost. And many of us today need to have our own vision for marriage restored.

Theologian Scott McKnight says that the reason that divorce and remarriage has historically confused the church is because marriage has confused the church. And so let's untangle marriage a bit. First of all, marriage is a covenant.

If you didn't grow up in Christian circles, that word covenant may sound foreign. But in the Bible, a covenant is a sacred lifelong commitment between two parties. It begins with promises, is sealed with a sacrifice, and is designed to reflect God's unbreakable love for his people.

Marriage is not just the final destination of a relationship progression, right? We all know that there's many stages to a romantic relationship, okay? You got your meet cute, right? And then there's coffee, right? If you're a Christian, right? It's the, you go to coffee. No, you meet one another. You get to know each other.

You start dating. You decide that you don't want to date other people. You want to focus on this relationship and get to know this person.

And so you're exclusively dating. And after a while, you start contemplating marriage, but you've got to ask the serious questions. And so you start seriously dating, right? And then once you finally decide like, yes, this is the person that I want to spend the rest of my life with, you get engaged.

And marriage is not just the step after engagement. Marriage is a completely different kind of relationship. Okay, like flying a plane is not the next step after learning to drive a car.

It is an entirely different kind of vehicle with entirely different sets of rules and regulations. Marriage is not just the next step in the relationship progression. Until marriage, your relationship is defined by varying levels of individual commitment.

And at any time, any one of the two may walk away from the relationship for any reason at all. And there doesn't need to be any accountability to that relationship. But that's not the case with marriage.

Prior to marriage, a relationship is about two individuals and their independent enjoyment of one another. But marriage is about God making one life out of the two. Jesus says the two have become one flesh, literally one life.

And this is far more important than just a poetic way of referring to physical intimacy. It includes every aspect of one's life with their spouse. It includes emotional oneness and spiritual oneness, financial oneness, intimacy at every level.

And this oneness is something that is promised in a wedding ceremony, but is expressed over a lifetime of mutual self-giving. Listen, when both spouses give up their right to seek their own good from the other and instead invest in the good for the other, both people receive what they need and neither is diminished or taken advantage of. They operate as one life as they sacrifice themselves for the good of the other person.

Wounds in marriage form when one person or both people begin living for themselves at the expense of the union, whether intentionally or not. And so then divorce is an attempt to undo that one flesh reality that God has formed, which is why it is always brutal, it is always painful, and it always leaves scars. Growing up in Lompoc, there's a walnut orchard on the outside of town.

And as a kid, I always thought that it was curious that every one of these trees in this acres and acres and acres of walnut orchard, every one of these trees had a brown barked stump at the bottom up until about yea high. And then out of that brown barked stump became a smooth white tree trunk. And I learned that there are two kinds of walnut trees.

There is a black walnut tree and there is a white walnut tree. And black walnut trees grow better in this part of the world, but white walnuts are more desirable. They taste better.

And so what these growers would do is they would plant the black walnut tree, and when it

grew its roots down, then a white walnut tree would get grafted in, and then the two species of tree would grow as one. And the roots of the one tree would nourish the fruits of the other tree, and the two lives became one. And after growing together like this, it would absolutely destroy both trees if you were to try to remove them from one another.

And this is why divorce is not just painful, but it's a tearing apart of something that God has grown together. And so by returning to this creation ideal for marriage, Jesus is making something unmistakably clear. He says that divorce is never God's desire.

Divorce is never God's desire. But Jesus is not an idiot, and He knows that divorce happens. He's not blind to the world, or uncaring or uncompassionate toward those who are suffering, those who have been wounded, those who have experienced a violation of their vows, those who are experiencing life on the other side of the wounds.

He knows that it happens, and He says that the reason it happens is because of hardness of heart. That sin can creep into a heart and into a marriage, and do such damage that trust has been irreparably harmed. And so Jesus gives the single concession here in both of the passages that we read regarding sexual immorality.

But Scripture does give a few more concessions that permit divorce when reconciliation is not possible. Now, we're going to talk about these, but listen, before we get into them, I do want to read to you the best marriage advice I've ever received. Okay, I was in college, and I was in Greek, and I found in this weird random section of a Greek textbook the best marriage advice I have ever read.

To this day, I've written it down, I've remembered it, I've saved it, but I cannot tell you why this was in a Greek textbook, but here it is. Theologian Craig Blomberg wrote, there may be extreme instances in which divorce is biblically legitimate, but if you go into marriage looking for a way out, you will almost surely find it. Far better to commit to each other that you will never divorce, even if those extreme circumstances were to occur.

Then you will have to turn to God, to Christian friends, and to each other to see you through the difficult times, and God will prove faithful. Listen, I stand by this advice. I remember I was engaged at the time of taking this class, and my wife Katie and I talked about this, and we said, really, is this something that we really want to consider? We're going to agree that divorce is never an option, even though we know what happens in this world, and I am telling you beyond a shadow of a doubt, the greatest thing she and I ever did in preparation for marriage is agreeing that, yes, we're not going to be ignorant to what may happen, what happens in this world, but we're not going to be ignorant of God's power either, and so we are going to agree to this, and I'll tell you this, to this day, I will not officiate a wedding for any couple who does not agree to the same, because if you go into marriage knowing that there is a door open to leave it, you will never put in the work to stay, but that work will require repentance and forgiveness, and so what happens when someone in a marriage refuses to repent of the sin that destroys the marriage? This is why there are concessions, and the first is sexual immorality.

Jesus says whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality and marries another commits adultery. That phrase sexual immorality is the Greek word porneia. It's where we get the word pornography, and it refers to any sexual activity outside of a marriage covenant between one man and one woman.

Any sexual activity outside of the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman is referred to as porneia in the ancient world, and porneia is always a sin. It's serious covenant violating sexual sin, and Jesus says when that occurs in a marriage, especially when the spouse is unrepentant and does not desire fidelity, then divorce is not desirable but understandable. In addition, the apostle Paul addresses another tragic situation in 1 Corinthians 7. He speaks to believers married to unbelievers and says, if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so.

In such cases, the brother or sister is not enslaved. Paul is naming abandonment, the desertion of the marriage, as another form of covenant violation. Whether the abandoning spouse professes to be a believer or not, if your spouse leaves without just cause, and the church confronts them, the pastors confront them and call them back to fidelity to the marriage, and they refuse to return to the marriage, the church must treat that individual as one refusing to live under Christ's lordship, and then you are free from your marriage obligation.

You have, in effect, been abandoned by an unbeliever. And it's by using that logic of abandonment, along with God's protection for the oppressed, that we also recognize a third concession, abuse. Abuse is not a marital difficulty.

It's not a rough patch. It's not marriage hiccups, okay? It is a violation of covenant love. When a spouse uses violence, they are not merely failing at the marriage.

They're not just dropping the ball. They are functionally abandoning the love and safety that they promised to provide. And scripture does not require someone to endure harm in order to prove devotion to marriage.

Okay, please hear me as we talk about these concessions, as we think about these things. Just because divorce is allowable in some situations, it does not mean that divorce is ever desirable. Divorce is never the goal.

Reconciliation is always God's heart when repentance is present. At the same time, scripture does not trap the innocent person in bondage when covenant has been destroyed. Pastor Timothy Keller wrote concerning this, sometimes betrayal and cruelty can damage the fabric of a marriage so that its continuance would be a greater evil than divorce.

All this is implied by the idea that God, through Moses, granted divorce against his ideal design as a merciful adjustment to our sinful condition. Now listen, again, this is not theoretical for many in this room. These are not hypothetical situations.

These are not even just people that you know about. These are roads that you have walked. These are tears that you have shed.

And if you're walking through something like this, whether that's contemplating how to navigate a broken marriage or navigating what to do now that divorce has happened, I need you to know and I need you to hear this. Please ask for help. Please ask for help.

Your pastors are here to walk with you, to provide counsel, to comfort, to pray for you, to call, to repentance, to encourage forgiveness. Your pastors are here to help fight for your marriage. Your marriage is one of the most important things our church has.

Your marriage is one of the most important things our society and our culture has. Marriage is the foundation of family. Family is the building block of a society.

Your marriage, your husband, your wife, your commitment to one another is one of the most important things about our church. And as one of your pastors, I speak on behalf of all of our pastors. If you are navigating these tumultuous waters, please reach out.

You are not an inconvenience. You are not interrupting something. You are our priority.

This is that important. Please ask for help. No one should ever get married apart from inviting pastoral counsel and receiving pastoral blessing.

And no one should ever walk away from a marriage without the same. Asking for help is not weakness, it's wisdom. And so please do not go it alone.

But what if you're in a situation and the damage is done? What if the wounds are too deep? The covenant is already broken. You've already walked away from the marriage, not only relationally, but legally. Will God still meet us there? Will God still love us if we have been unfaithful to our promises? Yes, absolutely.

Divorce is never God's desire. And yet God himself knows the pain of broken vows. In Jeremiah 3, God speaks of himself as a heartbroken and divorced spouse.

He says, I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. So God is speaking into our condition, not as a distant judge, but as a wounded covenant partner. God knows the grief of betrayal.

He knows the cost of broken vows. And yet the story of Scripture does not end with divorce, but with redemption. The ultimate covenant in Scripture is not between a husband and a wife, but it's between Christ and his people.

The church is called the Bride of Christ because we are in covenant with God. And yet all of us, every last one of us in our covenant with God has been unfaithful to that covenant. Whether married or single, whether divorced or never married, we have all chased lesser loves.

We have all sought safety and comfort and protection and status in things other than God. And yet Jesus, in our infidelity, does not abandon us. Jesus, in our broken vows to him, does not condemn us or send us away.

2 Timothy 2.13 says, If we are faithless, he still remains faithful for he cannot deny himself. If you have put your trust in Jesus, the Holy Spirit resides in you and unites you to Christ, and you are made a new creation so that Christ's own faithfulness to you is referred to as faithfulness to himself. He cannot deny himself.

He will not leave you or forsake you. When covenant was broken, when we violated our promises to God, God does not issue a certificate of divorce, but Jesus absorbs the cost of breaking that covenant of marriage to him. He absorbs the cost by going to the cross.

Which means that the deepest question today is not, have I kept my covenant perfectly? But is there mercy for covenant breakers like me? It's not, Lord, I'm good, right? Like I have been faithful, right? I'm not the one who violated my covenant, right? The biggest question is not, have I kept covenant perfectly? But the question is, is there mercy for covenant breakers like me? And the answer is yes, because of Jesus. He doesn't abandon his bride. He lays his life down to make her whole, to wash her clean, to make her new.

And so wherever you find yourself this morning, if you're married and struggling, Jesus is faithful to you. Or if you are divorced and wounded, Jesus is still faithful to you. And if you're single and contemplating your future and wondering whether or not marriage even works anymore today, Jesus is faithful to you.

He will be faithful. He will always be faithful. He will never leave you or forsake you.

This is the righteousness that Jesus has been calling us to. The righteousness that exceeds the scribes and the Pharisees. It's not a righteousness that never fails.

You'll fail. You have. You will again.

So will I. But the righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is a righteousness that clings to a faithful Savior even when we do fail. And because Jesus is faithful, his faithfulness doesn't just bring comfort to us in our wounds, but it forms us. And if we're going to be the kind of church that takes marriage seriously, if we're going to be the kind of church that takes people seriously, if we're going to pursue an exceeding righteousness without becoming Pharisees ourselves, then we are going to need three things as a community moving forward.

First thing is we're going to need courage. Listen, it will take courage for some of us to tell the truth about our marriages, to tell the truth about our patterns, to tell the truth about our sin, about our fears, to tell the truth about the condition of our current covenants. It's going to take courage to be honest about where we're at.

And some people will avoid a doctor because they're afraid of the diagnosis, but ignoring the problem does not heal it. It only gives it more time to grow. And so marriages do not fall apart overnight.

Okay, they don't fall apart when something tragic finally happens. There is a road that leads there, and that road is often paved by silence and avoidance and trying to keep up appearances. And so some of us today need to stop, and we need to look at the things that we've been ignoring, the things that we've been explaining away, the things that we've been hiding, and we are going to need courage to choose to tell the truth about these things, because we trust Jesus more than we trust our own ability to hold things together.

And so we are going to need courage. Because without courage, we'll never be able to take conviction seriously, and we will also need conviction. And for some of you, maybe that's what you're feeling today.

Christ is not primarily providing comfort, but right now your experience is conviction. You're experiencing that feeling in the pit of your stomach when you know the eyes of the Lord are upon you, and you've been found out. If you've been looking for an exit, instead of pursuing your spouse with self-sacrificial love, if you've not been the husband or the wife that you know that Jesus wants you to be, you've been breaking trust, whether in secret or out in the open.

Jesus does not say this to shame you. He doesn't say it to condemn you and to cast you away from himself. He says this to rescue you, to confess your sin today.

To receive healing and to return to the love of the covenant to which you have been called and to which you have promised yourself. Confess your sin, acknowledge that things are not as they should be, and receive healing. We need courage.

We need conviction. And finally, we need compassion. Because some of you, even hearing the word divorce, feel that nerve triggered.

Some people hear God hates divorce, and what they feel is God hates me. But God hates divorce the way a surgeon hates cancer. He hates what it does.

He hates what it destroys. He hates what it does to the people that he loves. God grieves what broken covenants do to people, to families, and to our souls.

And so if you are walking through a difficult or broken marriage, know that you are not alone. God's not waiting for you to fix things before he comes and blesses things. Okay, he knows where you're at.

He sees it, and he grieves where you grieve. He hurts that you hurt. And he desires something more beautiful for you and for your spouse, for your marriage, than you could possibly imagine.

And if you're here today and you're carrying the scars of divorce, know that your story with God is not over. He has not abandoned you. He has not left you.

He's not done with you. Your story is not over. Even wrongful divorce, even divorce without just

cause, is not an unforgivable sin.

Even if you have divorced and remarried apart from biblical justification, that is not the unforgivable sin. There is forgiveness in Christ. There is healing in Christ.

And there is wisdom for next steps. And as a church, we need to be the kind of people who bring the compassion of Christ into the lives of our brothers and sisters who are wounded and grieving and struggling. As a church, we don't meet them with gossip or with judgment.

We don't meet them with advice. When people are going through hard times, we don't distance ourselves from them. But we meet them with truth and with love, with gospel power and gospel presence.

And so I want to close our time with a question for us all. Listen, regardless of your marital status, regardless of where you are at today, I want to ask a question. A question that is at the heart of all of this.

A question that's at the heart of the entire Sermon on the Mount. Everything that Jesus has been teaching. A question that's at the heart of the exceeding righteousness that Jesus is calling us to.

What kind of love is God calling you to pursue today? What kind of love is God calling you to bring into all of your relationships? What kind of love is God calling you to come into your marriage with? To come to your children with? What kind of love is God calling you to come to your friends with? To come into church with? What kind of love is God calling you to go out into the world with? What kind of love is God calling you to engage in difficult conversations with? In political conversations. In difficult, painful conversations where you have been sinned against. What kind of love is God calling you to enter this world with? Jesus does not call us to a love that we have not been shown.

He's not called us to a faithfulness that we ourselves have not been shown. All of the love and the faithfulness that we could ever have, that we could ever receive, Jesus has given us freely and completely so that our cups overflow. And so ask yourself, does my love for my spouse, does my love for my kids, does my love for my friends, does my love for my political enemies, does my love for my brothers and sisters in Christ, does my love look like Jesus? Does my love look like the cross? Does your love look like life poured out? Or does it look like your life trying to be protected? Your good trying to be protected? Are you going to others with their good in mind? Or are you going to others trying to use them for your good? Because listen, whether you are married or not, if the love that you are pursuing in this life is self-serving, then you are creating a trajectory that will destroy any marriage you have or any marriage you might have in the future.

If you are not learning to put others first as Christ has put others first, then in any relationship, in any conversation, that is the trajectory that you're creating. That is the muscle that you're

flexing, that you are building. And so if you're here and you're not married, maybe you're dating someone, does your love, does your relationship for that person look like a love that is sacrificial, declining your desire to pursue a sexual relationship with that person? Because listen, a sexual relationship with someone who is not your spouse is a sexual relationship with someone who's not your spouse.

And if you are not married and you are pursuing a sexual relationship with someone who's not your spouse, by the way, that falls under the category of porneia. It is sin. You are also creating a trajectory where you are not fighting against a sexual relationship with someone who's not your spouse.

And what does that look like once you're married? So build that faithfulness, that covenant trajectory of faithfulness to pursue fidelity today by denying yourself your right to take from someone what you want and give to them what the Lord wants for them, which is love and faithfulness and honesty and integrity. Pursue the kind of love that Christ has shown you when His body was broken for you, His blood was poured out for the forgiveness of your sins, the love that Christ has shown you when He went to the cross. Because Christ's love is not something just to be received or just to be admired, but it is power for transformation.

It is power to pursue covenant love even when it costs you. Amen? Let's pray together. Father, Lord, right now, as You are calling us to respond with courage and with conviction and compassion, Lord, we pray that as we respond, as we come to Your throne of grace, Lord, that You would meet us in this place, that we would find Your presence, Lord, strong among us, that we would find Your love readily available where we are feeling under the weight of guilt and brokenness.

Lord, I pray that if there's anyone in here experiencing any shame, whether it's in their marriage or in any other way, Lord, that You would remind us that You would come near and that You would remind us, Lord, that there need not be any shame for those who are in Christ. Lord, You took our shame, You nailed it to the cross, You've set us free from it. But, God, where there is conviction, Lord, that You would give us courage to face it with You, to hold it in open hands, to bring that to the cross, to know that there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, but that in Your presence there is freedom from sin and freedom from guilt and freedom from condemnation and freedom from shame.

And so, Lord, we pray that You would meet us in this place, we don't pray as in like some wishful thinking, Lord, we know that You are present among us. We know, we believe that when the body of Christ gathers together for worship that You are here. And, Lord, we know that You see our condition, Lord, You see our sin, You see our struggles for righteousness, Lord, You see our desires to be the men and women that You have called us to be and You see that we know we've failed, that we know where we fail.

And so, Lord, I pray that today for all of us, Lord, would You meet us in our brokenness, would You meet us in our fear, would You call us forward in faith into the life that You have purchased

for us by Your blood. God, if You did not spare Your own Son, then why would we ever be afraid that You would leave us in our sinful state? You have done everything to rescue us, everything to bring us into freedom and wholeness. And so, Lord, we trust You with that today.

Come, Holy Spirit, and bind up wounds. Come, Holy Spirit, and give courage and faith. Come, Holy Spirit, and show us the love of Christ, that we would not only see it and rejoice in it, but that we would walk in it and be those who love like Christ loves.

For Your glory and the good of Your people, in Jesus' name, amen. Amen.