

illus: seven months after Naomi and I were married, her brother, Nathan, died. Nathan had been on a camping trip with some young adults from this church--he had been free diving in the lake, searching for lost treasure: loose change, watches, whatever had fallen out of people's pockets. Nathan dove down over and over again, and one time he didn't come back up.

In the week after Nathan's death, we did all the things that most families do: we cried, we told stories (the good ones and the hard ones), we laughed, and we cried some more. And we began to look through Nathan's things--his clothes, his pictures, the things that were precious to him--and that's when we found his Bible.

In his teenage age years and into his 20's, Nathan stopped following Jesus and began to chase after other things--it was a dark period in his life. But in the last year and half of his life, he returned to the Lord, his life began to change, and he began to read the Bible. When we found his Bible we discovered that Nathan was connecting with God through the Proverbs.

Proverbs is a book of wisdom, filled with hundreds of sayings that provide insight into life, relationships, money, work, and other subjects. As he read through Proverbs, Nathan had underlined dozens of verses and written comments in the margins. Some of his comments were reminders to himself--to trust God, to seek wisdom, to be a good friend. Beside other verses, where he felt the proverb accurately described himself, Nathan would write his own name.

But beside other Proverbs he would write other people's names--take for instance Proverbs 10:20. "When a good man speaks he is worth listening to, but the words of a fool are a dime a dozen." In the

margins, Nathan had written the initials "S.W." Proverbs 13:4 says, "*Lazy people want much but get little, while the diligent are prospering.*" Once again, the initials "S.W." appeared in the margin. In fact, every time a verse talked about a fool, a liar, or a lazy person, the initials "S.W." appears--I later learned that "S.W." stood for "Steve Watson," Nathan and Steve didn't get along too well. We all had a good laugh about that one.

But of all the Proverbs, Nathan's two favourites were found in chapter 21:9, 19, and he loved to quote them to his mother and sisters, much to their chagrin. "*Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.* (Prov. 21:9)" And "*Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and nagging wife.* (Prov. 21:19)"

Nathan loved to tease--he was a mastermind when it came to pushing other people's buttons--but he saw in these two proverbs what we all inherently recognize: *marriage can be wonderful, and it can be difficult.* There are many reasons why a good marriage is good, and many reasons why a difficult marriage is difficult. Throughout the centuries there have been both wives and husbands--because of difficult marriages--who have looked longingly at the desert, or the corner of the roof, despite living in a beautiful home.

This morning we come to the point in Jesus' Sermon On The Mount where he addresses the subject marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Matthew 5:31-32 offers a few brief words, and in Matthew 19:1-12, Jesus offers an extended teaching on the same subject. I'm going to read these words in just a moment, but first I'd like to make a few comments.

All of us have been personally affected by marriage, divorce, and remarriage. And, so, we cannot have a theoretical discussion about these subjects; it's personal, deeply personal--your story, your experiences, your pain is involved. Some of you lost your spouse to divorce and subsequently lost your children, your friends, and even your church family. I have friends and family members who have gone through divorce--some have divorced recklessly, and others reluctantly. Some have remarried and others have remained single. Some have experienced deep healing and others are still deeply wounded.

I grew up in the 70's and 80's on t.v. shows like the Brady Bunch and the Cosby show. No matter the conflict, turmoil, or relational breakdown, by the end of the episode all had been resolved, all, forgiven, everything restored. It isn't real. Life is not like that--my life, your life, is not like that.

This morning, I want to invite you to chew on Jesus' words--you may need to chew them because you may find them tough to digest. As we shall see, Jesus' words are no less radical today than they were in His own 1st century context. Please turn with me to Matthew 5:31-32; after I have read these words, I will carry on to read Matthew 19:1-9.

Mt. 5:31-32, "**31** *'It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'* **32** *But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.'*"

Mt. 19:1-9, "*When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. 2 Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. 3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?'*"

4 *'Haven't you read,' he replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' 5 and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'*"

7 *'Why then,' they asked, 'did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?'* **8** *Jesus replied, 'Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.'*"

As we think about marriage, divorce, and remarriage, I intend to organize my teaching around three simple questions: (1) *What issues was Jesus addressing?*; (2) *How did Jesus address the issue?*; and (3) *What issues do we face when it comes to marriage, divorce, and remarriage?*

1. What issue was Jesus addressing?

Does the fact that Jesus was living in 1st century Israel, raised by a Jewish mother and step-father, make any difference to the things He taught? Of course it does. Jesus grew up in a particular place, with a particular culture--He would have grown up with people who had

particular ideas, questions, and dreams. Israel's geography, culture, ideas, questions, and dreams were not unfamiliar to Jesus--Israel's history with God, was not unfamiliar to Jesus. Jesus took on flesh and blood so that He could enter into Israel's story--*the human story*--as an insider.

And so it shouldn't come as a surprise that when Jesus began to preach and teach, He didn't offer abstract ethical principles--He addressed the specific values, vision, questions, and the behaviour He saw around Him. Jesus didn't say all there is to say about marriage, divorce, and remarriage--He was responding to particular issues. Later on, in 1 Corinthians 7, we see the Apostle Paul doing the same thing--responding to particular issues.

So what issue was Jesus addressing? Let me elaborate on the context. Jesus grew up in the shadow of two great Jewish Rabbis, Hillel and Shammai. Rabbis Hillel and Shammai were both alive when Jesus was born, but they represented two opposing schools of thought--Hillel was theologically liberal, while Shammai was theologically conservative.

Dynamic teachers always draw followers and this was certainly true of Hillel and Shammai--their followers loved to demonstrate their "rightness" over against the "wrongness" of their counterpart. When religious leaders tested Jesus with theological questions, often, the question behind their question was, "*Do you favour Hillel's interpretation or Shammai's?*"

Nothing has changed. In the evangelical world, people continue to align themselves with dynamic teachers, all the while claiming that "their" teacher of preference has the "right," "best," or "only"

interpretation of the Scripture. Some prefer John MacArthur and others Bill Johnson; some swear by Mark Driscoll and others by Rob Bell.

One of the many areas in which Hillel and Shammai differed was on the subject of divorce and remarriage. Shammai taught that the only permissible grounds for divorce was adultery; Hillel taught that divorce could be pursued for any number of reasons, including trivial things such as a wife burning her husband's dinner. Shortly after Jesus' death and resurrection, a third great Rabbi appeared, Akiba--he taught that divorce was permissible if a man found a woman who was more attractive than his current wife.

Listen to the question presented to Jesus in Matthew 19:3, "*Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?'*" They were asking Jesus to take sides in the debate, to take their side, Hillel's side--*we can divorce our wives for any and every reason, isn't that right?*

Jesus' teaching was sparked by a pervasive issue in His culture. Divorces were much easier to get in His day, and less expensive too--alimony, child support weren't present like they are today; women were much more vulnerable. In a culture where divorce was taking place for "any and every reason," Jesus addressed the question of when divorce was permitted by God. That's the issue.

2. So how did Jesus address the issue?

- **first, Jesus corrected their misinterpretation.**

Look at Mt. 5:31-32, *“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32 But I tell you...”* Until this point, every time Jesus uses the words, *“you have heard it said,”* He goes on to quote an O.T. scripture. He doesn’t do that here, instead, He quotes the common misinterpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1.

“If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house”. This verse describes a situation in which a divorce has already taken place, and the following verses describe how to prevent a further dishonouring of the wife. *“Yes,”* Jesus says, *“God, through Moses, permitted divorce but this was a concession because of your stubbornness--divorce was never commanded, and certainly not commended.”*

- **second, Jesus commended the sanctity of marriage.**

Matthew 19:4-6 says, *“Haven’t you read,”* he replied, *“that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ 5 and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”*

Where we start frequently determines where we will finish. The Pharisees’ starting point was divorce--on what basis does God permit

divorce? Jesus rejects their starting point, and offers a different one--God’s design for marriage.¹

The first two chapters of Genesis outline His intention. God created humanity--male and female--and together--male and female--humanity bears God’s image. The first time Adam saw Eve he said, *you are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh;* in other words, *we were made for each other...we belong together!*

In marriage, the two become one, and it’s clear from Jesus’ words that He didn’t see this as a temporary arrangement. It’s also clear from Jesus’ words that He understood marriage, not as social convention, not as cultural ritual, but as God-given. Divorce is the opposite of God’s intention: it makes temporary what God intends to be permanent, and it attempts to dismantle what God--not human decision--has brought together. Dissolving a marriage is like “tearing apart a single body.”² That’s why divorce is so painful.

- **finally, Jesus narrowly defined “permissible” divorce (and remarriage).**

Mt. 5:32 says, *“But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”*

It’s from the Greek word, “porneia,” that we derive the English words, “sexual immorality.” Porneia is a catch-all phrase for any

¹ R.T. France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*, 208.

² France, 718.

number of things: premarital sex, extra-marital sex, etc. Jesus points to sexual immorality as the only permissible grounds for divorce. The question is, why?

John Stackhouse writes, “The second chapter of the Bible uses a pretty obvious metaphor for the first marriage: “the two become *one flesh*” (Genesis 2:24). Sex, that is, *marries* one person to another. Most cultures around the world recognize this fact (for fact it is). No matter how elaborate their wedding rituals, no matter the power of the vows they take and the pronouncements made over them, the couple isn’t truly married until they have sex. Sex *joins*.”³

In the biblical way of thinking, engaging in a ‘one-flesh’ relationship with someone other than your spouse destroys the original marriage covenant--this new ‘one-flesh’ relationship has taken its place; for this reason, divorce was permissible. But to divorce one’s spouse--apart from sexual immorality--put them in a position of becoming an adulterer. Since such a divorce was not legitimate, the original marriage, though “legally” dissolved, remained valid in God’s eyes.⁴

Just before I get to our final question this morning, allow me to summarize Jesus’ teaching. Jesus is against divorce because He is for marriage. He believes that marriage is a sacred, permanent, commitment, orchestrated by God, that takes a man and a woman and makes them “one.”

God dislikes divorce for all the same reasons we do. Any relationship that starts off with “*I promise to love you with all my heart’s affection--for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer,*” and ends with “*I’m taking the kids but you can keep the house,*” has missed the mark.

All divorce grieves God’s heart--and not necessarily in the sense of the “rightness” or “wrongness” of the divorce--but because a divorce pronounces “dead” something that God desired to bring life, blessing, and joy.

Now let’s turn our attention to the final question...

3. What issues do we face when it comes to marriage, divorce, and remarriage?

King Solomon, once wrote, “*Find a good spouse, you find a good life—and even more: the favor of God!* (Prov. 18:22)” A good marriage can be very good, but a difficult marriage can have one, or both, spouses looking longingly at the corner of the roof.

As I said earlier, where we start frequently determines where we will finish. John Stott, a British theologian and pastor once said, “whenever somebody asks to speak with me about divorce, I have

³ John Stackhouse, <http://stackblog.wordpress.com/2008/03/13/the-reality-of-sex/#more-122>

⁴ France, 210-212.

now for some years steadfastly refused to do so. I have the rule never to speak with anyone about divorce, until I've spoken with him (or her) about two other subjects, namely marriage and reconciliation."⁵

“There is no greater love than the love that holds on when there seems nothing left to hold on to.”⁶ In principle, God is for reconciliation and against divorce, but in practice, God permits divorce because broken, sinful people, are bound to relate to one another in broken, sinful ways.

Among those who seek to follow Jesus, and honor the Scriptures, there are three basic positions on divorce and remarriage: (a) the Bible permits divorce but never remarriage; (b) the Bible permits divorce and remarriage in the case of sexual immorality or desertion--I'll explain this in a moment; or (c) the Bible gives permission to divorce and remarry for justifiable reasons.⁷

From my own understanding of the Scriptures, and from my experience in pastoral ministry, if I were to align myself with one of these positions, it would be the third--let me tell you why.

Jesus taught that the only grounds for divorce is sexual infidelity on the part of one of the spouses, but in the early church, the Apostle Paul expanded this circle of permissible divorce. Was Paul deliberately disobeying Jesus' commands? No. Jesus didn't say all

there is to say about divorce and remarriage; He didn't address the issues that Paul faced in the early church.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul responded to a specific issue: some people were becoming followers of Jesus but their spouse took exception, to the point of deserting the believing spouse because of their newfound faith. In these circumstances, was the believing spouse permitted to remarry? Paul and the church had to seek the mind of Christ, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit they decided that the spouse was free to remarry.

What about in our day and time? What would God say when one spouse abuses the other--physically, sexually, emotionally? What would God say about addictions that have so overrun a marriage that desertion is an everyday reality, even if the spouse hasn't physically left? Don't these things also destroy the one-flesh union?

To put it another way, if I beat my wife, abuse my kids, and drink away every pay-check, but never commit adultery, does my wife need to stay in the marriage, or, divorce me and never remarry? Is this what the Scripture asks? I would say “no.”

The marriage covenant finds its foundation in God's covenant with us: He is with us, for us, and unto us--that is, actively working to conform us to Christ. Marriage is the commitment to be with your spouse, for your spouse, for the purpose of Christ being formed in

⁵ John Stott, *Message*, 98, as quoted by Scot McKnight, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: The Sermon On The Mount*, 105.

⁶ Amish proverb.

⁷ McKnight, 104.

your spouse...when one spouse turns against the other, “grounds for divorce may be present because the covenant is being destroyed.”⁸

There are justifiable grounds for divorce, but I would suggest that they are fewer than our culture would tell us. We live in a culture not unlike Jesus’, where divorce is sought for “any and every reason”. *So how do we know whether there are permissible grounds for divorce?* We do exactly what the early church did--we look to the Scriptures, and we prayerfully discern as a leadership community. Consider this: the marriage covenant between a bride and groom is first established at a wedding--vows are made before God and other witnesses. When a couple considers dissolving these vows, should not God and other witnesses be involved in this decision as well?

There is so much more that could be said, but there is nothing left for me to say today. Marriage, divorce, and remarriage is better talked about in a dialogue than a monologue, but I trust this morning has brought some measure of clarity.

God is for marriage, but God is not against divorced people--He loves them every bit as much as single and married people; we’re all His kids. Being divorced does not place you outside of God’s circle of blessing.

As followers of Jesus, we need hold both mercy and righteousness in tension. To be so “merciful” that divorce is permitted for “any and every reason” overlooks the sacred, permanent, God-given-quality of the marriage covenant. But to draw the line so sharply that abusive marital relationships are condoned makes the opposite error.

As I conclude, I want to draw your attention to the 4th Beatitude, Jesus said, “*Blessed are those that hunger and thirst for right relationship, for they will be filled.*” Being rightly related to God is both God’s work and ours--we need to align ourselves to His life.

In the same way, being rightly related to our spouse is both God’s work and ours. We need to align ourselves with God, receive His love, mercy, forgiveness, and power, so that we can align our life with our spouse and live out with them what we have first received from God.

If you find yourself in a difficult marriage, difficult but not unsafe, with God’s help there is a way through--your marriage is worth holding on to.

Pray

If you are in a troubled marriage, come and talk with us (pastoral staff)

Benediction

⁸ Ibid., 107.