
Matthew

Matthew 5:31-32, 19:3-9

Hard Marriage – Easy Divorce

It's interesting to see how the state of divorce has changed in this society. It used to be very difficult to get divorces throughout the country. In New York adultery was a requirement. In fact Woody Allen once noted, "God says 'Thou shalt not...' but New York says 'Thou shalt ...'" In fact Wikipedia notes:

"New York was notorious for its "collusive adultery", in which both sides deliberately agreed that the wife would come home at a certain time and discover her husband committing adultery with a "mistress" obtained for the occasion.... She would then swear to a carefully tailored version of these facts in court (committing perjury in the process), the husband would sheepishly admit to a similar version of the facts, the judge would convict the husband of adultery, and the couple would be divorced."

In most other states, especially California, the most popular grounds for divorce was cruelty (which was unavailable in New York). For example, by 1950, wives were pleading cruelty in 70 percent of divorce cases in San Francisco. ... In case after case, wives would testify to the same pitiful facts: their husbands swore at them, hit them, and generally treated them terribly.

This procedure was described by California Supreme Court justice Stanley Mosk in a passionate dissent:

Every day, in every superior court in the state, the same melancholy charade was played: the "innocent" spouse, generally the wife, would take the stand and, to the accompanying cacophony of sobbing and nose-blowing, testify under the deft guidance of an attorney to the spousal conduct that she deemed "cruel." ...

Needless to say, such empty procedures were appalling to both lawyers and judges, who felt that it made oaths meaningless and threatened to destroy the integrity of the American justice system (by making lying in court into a commonplace occurrence).¹

Sounds familiar? Jesus said:

"Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard" (Matthew 19:8).

Well the judicial system came up with an answer to the accepted use of the courts for perjured testimony for the purpose of getting divorces—"hardened hearts." And so was born the "No Fault" divorce. The benefits are obvious. People no longer "had to lie" in court. Now everything could be handled morally. Of course divorces rose to 50 percent of marriages. Oh, well.

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¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No-fault_divorce

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:25-32).

Introduction: Last week we talked about adultery and how Jesus, in that section of the “Sermon,” moved the issue from a question of behavior to the state of the heart. Not surprisingly, when discussing adultery the conversation frequently turns to the question of divorce. We already noted that, while adultery allows for divorce it doesn’t require it. So what are Christ’s views on marriage, divorce, and remarriage?

This morning we are going to discuss Christ’s teachings in this area. As I examined this passage I decided to bring in Matthew 19. I can do this because, considering how long it’s taking us to get through Chapter 5, by the time we get to 19 we’ll all have forgotten this session. So, first let’s talk about

a. Christ’s View of Marriage: Contextually, the Matthew 19 passage presents another example of the Pharisees’ attempt to create problems for Christ. They were trying to trip Him up and demonstrate He contradicted Moses. Keener notes:

“The Pharisees themselves debated the grounds for divorce implied in Deuteronomy 24:1-4: the school of Shammai, predominant in Jesus’ day, argued that the passage allowed divorce only if one’s spouse was unfaithful; the school of Hillel, which eventually won out, said that a man could divorce his wife if she burned the toast (a later rabbi of this school added, “Or if you find someone more attractive”!).²

“Suppose a man marries a woman and consummates the marriage but later finds her displeasing, because he has found her offensive in some respect. He writes her a divorce document, gives it to her and sends her away from his house. She leaves his house, goes and becomes another man’s wife; but the second husband dislikes her and writes her a get, gives it to her and sends her away from his house; or the second husband whom she married dies. In such a case her first husband, who sent her away, may not take her again as his wife, because she is now defiled. It would be detestable to ADONAI, and you are not to bring about sin in the land ADONAI your God is giving you as your inheritance” (Deuteronomy 24:1-4 CJB).

So the Pharisees obviously believed in the “No Fault” approach to divorce. Whether the Pharisees were actually interested in Jesus’ view or this was just another attack doesn’t matter because they asked and He answered. He goes back to creation to define God’s standard for marriage. It is monogamous, heterosexual, **and** permanent. His focus is on marriage not divorce. God’s intent is once married, always married. This was and still is a hard teaching for many. This is why people focus is on divorce rather than on strengthening marriages.

² Keener, Craig S., *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Downers Grove, IL, 1993.

Keep in mind the institution of marriage was established at the time of the creation of mankind, male and female. This means God's standards are applicable to all people, believers and unbelievers alike. We see this when we recognize that when couples follow God's standards they tend to have more successful marriages than those who ignore those standards. And the issue isn't simply whether they are believers or not.

The bonds of the marriage relationship are intended to end the bonds of the parent child relationship. Too often I've seen marriages in trouble because one or the other spouse is still bound up in an unhealthy relationship with a parent. This doesn't mean no connection to parents, just the responsibility is to one's spouse not one's parents. The bond between the couple is a complete one, physical, spiritual, emotional, etc. In other words

“... the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.”

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Genesis 2:21-24).

The marriage bond is in a very real sense the reuniting of the man out of which was taken make and female. Carson puts it this way:

“... the “one flesh” in every marriage between a man and a woman is a reenactment of and testimony to the very structure of humanity as God created it.”³

b. Christ's View of Divorce: Marriage is permanent. Even the Pharisees would agree. Of course they'd agree because, according to them, Moses gave a way out. He allowed for divorce, and as we already noted, the trend was to see this as pretty much allowing for any cause. Parenthetically, the system was loaded in favor males.

We can understand why this high standard is difficult to live with. People find themselves in very painful situations. We've all seen some very damaged marriages. When I find someone sitting across from me who is in real pain because of a truly intolerable situation I wish I could tell them they should get a divorce. But God doesn't allow this. He wants to see the marriage restored. He tells us we can be the husband/wife we need to be in dependency on and obedience to Him regardless of our spouse's behavior.

I do have to add another parenthetical remark here. While circumstances other than adultery don't allow for divorce, this doesn't mean someone has to physically stay in a violent and/or destructive situation. They may have to leave, though without a divorce.

Now, back to the text. The problem is, says Jesus, the only reason Moses even provided a divorce law was because of hardness of the people's hearts. If people are going to do what

³ Carson, D. A., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, “Matthew,” Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1990.

they want, then by providing a “legal remedy” there was some control over the situation. This is similar to the reasoning behind “No Fault” divorce laws. Again, quoting Keener:

*“ Jewish teachers of the law recognized a legal category called “concession”: something that was permitted only because it was better to regulate sin than to relinquish control over it altogether. Given God’s purpose in creation ..., divorce naturally fell into such a category (cf. Mal 2:14-16).”*⁴

“ You ask, “Why?” It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

Has not [the LORD] made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.

“I hate divorce,” says the LORD God of Israel, “and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,” says the LORD Almighty.

So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith” (Malachi 2:14-16).

Remember who Jesus is talking to here. He is speaking to His disciples and is demonstrating that God’s standards are higher than man’s. It is only in dependency on Him, and His Spirit that we have any hope of living up to these standards.

The lawyers of that day had made a mockery of God’s law. Jesus was telling them there really was only one justification for divorce and that was adultery. In fact He expanded on this by expressing concern over the consequences of divorce. It damages all involved.

God’s goal for marriage, even a marriage broken by adultery, is restoration. Because divorce is allowed isn’t the same thing as saying divorce is required. Most of us who have worked with marriage where adultery has occurred have seen these marriages not only restored but strengthened. But this only happens where there has been true repentance, forgiveness, and a lot of work.

While scripture speaks of a man divorcing a woman, the principles apply in both directions. Here the focus is only on the man because the laws of the day favored the man getting a divorce, not the woman. When speaking of the issue I’m assuming that what is true for the male is also true for the female in our society.

From God’s perspective, if someone divorces without scriptural cause the marriage relationship is not actually broken. For simplicity sake, I’m going to talk about a husband being the one getting the divorce. So when a husband divorces his wife without adultery being the reason the marriage hasn’t been broken. This is why Jesus says the husband makes his wife an adulteress, the assumption being she will remarry. Of course under OT Law there was an easy solution for the abandoned wife.

“ If a man is found sleeping with another man’s wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel” (Deuteronomy 22:22).

⁴ Keener.

But practice both in OT and NT shows this penalty, God's standard, appears not to have been carried out. Instead divorce was the solution of the day. But where adultery and then divorce occurred the marriage relationship was broken, whether the adulterer was stoned or not. Again, God hates divorce and desires to see individuals and marriages restored not destroyed. This is where are focuses need to be as individual believers and as a local church.

Conclusion: While scripture is clear on marriage, divorce, and God's standards, we still have to understand how we are to deal with its reality within the church, that is divorces which are unbiblical. Included in this is the question of remarriage. This is not always easily answered and godly people hold on different positions. How we answer requires we study scripture and seek out resources of those who have already struggled biblically with this issues, i.e.

The reality we find in the church is divorce without scriptural sanction does occur. How are we to treat those who have been divorced? Obviously any divorces that have occurred prior to salvation are paid for on the cross and need to be considered in that light. When a person is saved he needs to consider whether the marriage can be salvaged, but if not there is nothing left to be done.

Second, believers do divorce without cause. They are forgiven already in eternity, but they need to repent now. And they should try to restore their marriage, if possible, because if their spouse has not remarried then there is still hope for restoration.

Where remarriage has occurred other than admit to the sin of divorce there is nothing further to be done Clearly they cannot divorce their current spouse. We can't correct one sin by committing another.

In all these situations we must remember we are all sinners, all forgiven by the shed blood of Christ, and we maintain the quality of our walk with the Lord by an ongoing repentance of our sin. Repentance doesn't mean we will escape the consequences of our sin which includes the sin of a wrongful divorce. But we are to minister to one another as redeemed sinners.

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye” (Matthew 7:1-5).

Finally, when discussing divorce the question of remarriage always arises. Where there has been no case for divorce there is no case for remarriage. But going back to the husband wife example, even though the husband divorces without cause if at some point he marries, then the marriage is truly broken and the wife can remarry. I know some disagree with this, but keep in mind God's standard in the OT where adultery occurred the parties were to be put to death. This certainly would leave the widow free to remarry. Now, just because we don't stone the adulterer doesn't mean God's standards have changed. He considers the marriage truly broken and so I believe scripture teaches remarriage is acceptable.

Final Comments: I want to conclude with the final points.

- 1. Discipleship:** We all have sinned and have consequences of that sin in our lives. We all have to repent on an ongoing basis and deal with the consequences of sin. Therefore we are to care for, to encourage, to disciple one another, all with the intent of striving for spiritual maturity and cooperating with the ongoing process of conforming us to the image of Christ.

“See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Hebrews 3:12).

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Romans 8:28).

- 2. Marriage:** We need to support, strengthen, and divorce proof marriages. We must provide pre-marital counseling and not marry anyone who hasn’t had it. We must always reject any plans for a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever.

“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?” (2 Corinthians 6:14).

The church needs to be a hospital and school for the family so marriages are a testimony to God’s love and mercy. By emphasizing the seriousness of marriage we may begin to see a drop in the divorce rate, which today is higher than the society around us. Remember the Christian marriage is a witness to a fallen world. The only question is what kind of a witness will ours be? Again quoting Paul in Ephesians 5:32 as he speaks of marriage.

“This is a profound mystery — but I am talking about Christ and the church.”

- 3. Children:** Finally, it is vital we teach our children God’s view of the importance of marriage, that we live in a way so that our actions will support our words. We can strengthen future marriages by strengthening existing ones and teaching our children how to prepare for it and what to look for in a future spouse. Pray for your children and for their future spouses.

“Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 6:5-7).

So we can keep Christ’s high standard by dependency on His Spirit, a commitment to obedience, and a desire to please God more than we desire to please ourselves. When we do this as a couple, we will be blessed and will have a strong Christ centered marriage. So let us say with Joshua:

“But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15).

And with the Psalmist:

“Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain” (Psalm 127:1).

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Introduction:

(Matthew 19:8; Ephesians 5:25-32)

a. Christ's View of Marriage:

(Deuteronomy 24:1-4 cjb; Genesis 2:21-24)

b. Christ's View of Divorce:

(Malachi 2:14-16; Deuteronomy 22:22)

Conclusion:

(Matthew 7:1-5)

Final Comments:

1. Discipleship:

(Hebrews 3:12; Romans 8:28)

2. Marriage:

(2 Corinthians 6:14; Ephesians 5:32)

3. Children:

(Deuteronomy 6:5-7; Joshua 24:15; Psalm 127:1)

Personal Application: Look at ways you can strengthen your own marriage, teach your children, or encourage others.

Prayer for the Week: Lord, help us live in a way that brings You glory, through our lives, our marriages, and our families. Amen.