

Sermon Title: Jesus On Divorce

Speaker: Jim Harris

Scripture Text: Matt. 5:31-32 (Sermon on the Mount #15)

Date: 11-1-20

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We are continuing in the Sermon on the Mount. I don't think that's a surprise to any of you that have been here lately. Our next text is only two verses long. It brings us to a subject that I have preached on and taught on and counseled in regard to, many times over the years. It is *constantly* relevant, even if it isn't something that we particularly look forward to talking about.

I like to make a point of just how relevant this is. I've done this a number of times, but I want you to get all your gumption revved up here, and be ready to raise your hand. I will not call on anyone. We will not take names. You will get in no trouble whatsoever, but you'll help me make a point. Be ready to raise your hand if this describes you: Neither your or your parents or grandparents, or your children or your grandchildren, or your brothers or sisters, have ever been divorced; raise your hand. Do you think it's relevant that we understand what the Bible says about divorce? I mean, that was *maybe* four percent of the people who are here.

Now, if you are divorced or remarried, or maybe you're trying to help someone walk through those turbulent waters, I understand talking about this in church might not be the most comfortable thing to do, but it *is* necessary; it is part of God's Word, and we're not excused from teaching any part of God's Word (Acts 20:20, 27; cf. Jer. 26:2).

But I'm not here to judge anyone's past; I understand that things are irretrievable. God's "grace," however, is "sufficient" (2 Cor. 12:9). God's grace is wonderful to make anyone who is willing into a productive servant of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:10; 2 Cor. 9:8), and a precious, useful member of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 6:11; Eph. 4:7; cf. Col. 1:24). Every one of us in Christ lives in "this grace in which we stand" (Rom. 5:2). Stand there (1 Pet. 5:12)—this is where we belong!

Our goal is to make certain that we know what God has said; we need to pursue His will in every way that we possibly can (Eph. 5:10, 17), and make the most of whatever situation we find ourselves in (Eph. 6:6).

In the flow of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus did not suddenly catch Himself and say, "Oh, yeah, where were those notes...I wanted to throw in something about divorce!" That's not what He's doing. Remember, He is telling you what "surpassing righteousness" is: "I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20; NASB-1995, and throughout, unless otherwise noted). In that culture, "the scribes and Pharisees" were considered to be *the* most righteous people; and He said, "*They're not even close!* You need something that *greatly* surpasses their righteousness!"

And so, He's using this in the flow of a series of illustrations in which He points out the difference between the "letter of the law"—as read and interpreted and applied by the Pharisees—and the genuine, true meaning of the Law of God as it should be: in your heart. And as you'll see, they twisted what the Scripture said about divorce, just as much as they did just about everything else.

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Well, it's pretty easy to outline a two-verse text. Verse 31—we'll call that The Letter Of The Law, as it was being taught in His day. Verse 32—The Application Of The Law; and Jesus will expound on what it actually means.

So jump right in with me: In Matthew Chapter 5, Verse 31, Jesus says: "It was said..." Now, in other places, He said, "You have heard that the ancients were told..."; He's just abbreviating this time. "It was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' " That's from the Old Testament. If you're familiar with the New American Standard—the translation that we use—when you see all-caps in the text, it doesn't mean *read it really loud*; it means, that's an Old Testament quote; that's an excerpt from a verse in the Old Testament, which I'll show you soon.

Now, we need to put ourselves in the historical context to see what Jesus was doing in this section of the great sermon. That's going to be the bulk of our work this morning—to see it as He intended it to be.

But let's start with the Bible's clearest statement on divorce. It's Malachi Chapter 2, Verse 16—" 'For I hate divorce,' says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'and him who covers his garment with wrong,' says the Lord of hosts." You can't get more clear than that: "I hate divorce!" The subject is "I"; the verb is "hate"; the object is "divorce"; and you could put a period at the end of that, even though it's in the middle of a sentence here. That is the Word of God about divorce. That is how He *feels* about divorce.

Now, understand: That has a context, too. In the days of Malachi, in post-exilic Israel, there were people who were divorcing for eternally-flippant reasons, and He calls that: "covering his garment with wrong"; and He's saying, "Look—you're doing something God hates." That's a pretty clear statement.

God hates divorce. Why? Because He hates divorced people? No! He hates divorce because He created marriage to be one man and one woman *for life!* (see Gen. 2:24; cf. Rom. 7:2) It's an assault on His design, for people to break that "covenant" relationship (Mal. 2:14); that insults the design of God. But since Adam fell, and he took the whole human race into sin (Rom. 5:12), divorce is something that we need to deal with. And indeed, divorce has been around nearly as long as marriage. And in the thoroughness of His Law that He gave to Israel, to regulate their worship and their walk with Him, God gave instructions for how divorce was to be handled.

What Jesus quotes there in Verse 31 is the gist of the main passage in the Hebrew Scriptures on divorce, so let me take you there; and this will help you understand what He was saying and why He was saying it. It's Deuteronomy 24, Verses 1 through 4. "Deuteronomy" means "Second Law"; it was the reiteration of some of the key elements from the Law, as in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers—mainly Exodus and Leviticus; and this was given to Israel just before they entered the [Promised] Land. And in this case, here's something that *isn't* recorded earlier in the Law; so this is fresh to Israel in the latter days of Moses.

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Here's what it says: "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that 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 from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife, and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance."

That's what it says, and you can see the words that Jesus excerpted from it. Let me make six observations about that passage:

Number 1—It is *not* a command to secure a divorce. In *any* circumstances, there is *never* a command to divorce. Because the King James Version of the Bible is the one book in the English language that has had the greatest influence, the wording there has misled some people on that point, because the King James says: "Let him write her a bill of divorcement."

"Let him write" is a hortatory subjunctive made into English; that means it's an exhortation—it is a mild command. It's *as if* to say that divorce is required in some circumstances. But the Hebrew is clear—it's merely *regulating* what must happen *when* the reality of divorce comes to pass. It is *not* a command to divorce.

Secondly, notice—God's Word *assumes* that divorce is a reality. By the days of Deuteronomy, it was common enough that there needed to be a regulation. In Matthew 19, which we're going to see a little bit this morning, Jesus explains that this provision of divorce is a provision that God made for one specific purpose: because of sin, because of "hardness of heart," Jesus calls it (vs. 8).

The Pharisees tried to get Jesus tangled up into their legalistic, nitpicky arguments over divorce and remarriage; but Jesus brought them back to God's design for marriage. I'll touch on Matthew 19 here, and we'll say a little bit more later. In Verses 4 through 6, Jesus said: "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no person is to separate"—it's supposed to be permanent.

In response to that, "They said to Him, 'Why, then, did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?' He said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart Moses *permitted* you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way" (vss. 7-8). So understand: The Pharisees—the main targets of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount—misstated the whole issue by phrasing it as: "Why, then, did Moses *command* to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?" But it's never commanded.

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Third observation—What about the *grounds* for divorce?

Long ago, I was told of a pastor who had a man come into his office and say, "I have to get a divorce." And the pastor said, "Well, do you have *grounds*?" He said, "Yeah, we have a couple of acres in the mountains...What's that about?" The pastor said, "No, no, no. Does she beat you up?" "No, I always get up earlier than her." "Okay...Well, does she whine too much?" "No, pastor, she's a teetotaler." "Well, okay—does she give you the third degree?" He said, "No, she can't—she never finished college. The problem is, pastor, we just don't seem to understand each other, and we can't communicate." Alright—that's the *lightest* it's going to get this morning. There's going to be some heavy stuff, but you can take that one and go have fun with it.

Another one I heard this week. There's this "election" thing I'm hearing about that's going to happen pretty soon. Somebody brought this up, and this is actually kind of pithy: So, if this was the days of Judges, and you said, "We have *such* a rotten leader! Who should we vote for—the Philistines or Samson?" Now, the way I can stretch and connect that here is: A lot of times, things aren't perfect, and something that God *hates* can even happen. Now, what is He going to do with the wreckage left behind, after what He hates has been done?

So, what are the grounds, according to Deuteronomy 24? It is "indecency" (vs. 1). The King James says "uncleanness." That word literally means "shamelessness" or "nakedness"; so it seems to imply some kind of lewd behavior, some kind of moral and ceremonial impurity, but short of the act of adultery—and you would expect that, because the penalty under the Law for the act of adultery was death (Lev. 20:10), so you would expect people to dabble short of what would bring the death penalty.

So, the Jews in Jesus's day went to great lengths, twisting and debating the legitimate grounds for divorce, based on the fact that the word "indecency" is a little bit ambiguous, and it isn't spelled out in the text. As a matter of fact, some of the rabbis didn't even bother with that word; they went to the phrase "if she finds no favor in his eyes" (vs. 1), the other phrase in Deuteronomy 24. The Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) translates that word "indecency" as "an ugly thing." Boy, *that* clears it up! "Anything I consider ugly."

Something else to observe about this—In this regulation on divorce, the "certificate of divorce" was a key feature of it. Apparently, it would be given to guard the reputations of the parties involved. It would be given to clarify a person's standing. And since there was a public, legal recognition of marriage—even in that society—there was a public, legal recognition of *dissolving* a marriage. I really think the primary purpose of this was to protect a divorced person—especially the woman who had been sent away by her husband—to keep her from ending up on the societal trash-heap when her husband sent her away, to show that she had a standing that she could remarry, etc.

Here's a sample of a certificate of divorce that has been found among historical documents. I'm sure there were other versions of this, but here's how it goes:

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"On the certain day in the month of such-and-such, in the year so-and-so from the beginning of the world, according to the common computation in the province of wherever"—so, it's a legal document—"I, so-and-so, of the town of such-and-such, with entire consent of mind, and without any constraint, have divorced, dismissed, and expelled you, so-and-so, daughter of so-and-so, of the town of such-and-such, who has been my wife hitherto; but now, I have dismissed you, so as to be free, at your own disposal, to marry whomsoever you please, without hindrance from anyone, from this day, forever. You are therefore free for anyone who would marry you. Let this be your bill of divorce from me, a writing of separation and expulsion, according to the Law of Moses and Israel." And it had to be signed by two witnesses. It was a legal document, stating someone's formerly-married status.

Here's another observation—Notice that remarriage was *assumed* in the case of divorce. That doesn't mean you *have* to get remarried, any more than it's a command to get divorced; it's not. But what is prevented in Deuteronomy 24—something that *you've* probably not encountered in your friends and family: going back to Spouse #1 after a second divorce was prohibited (cf. Jer. 3:1). Why? That was to prevent abusing the regulation of divorce, and turning it into legalized wife-swapping, or some sort of means for serial adultery enabled by means of easy divorce.

This is an important point because there are some people today who read the same Bible that you and I do, who love the Lord as much as we do, who mean well, but who *completely* deny the right to remarry. There are some pastors who will *never* marry *anyone* who has ever been divorced—and I have some friends in that camp. But even here in the Old Testament, under the theocracy of Israel—when the standards were stricter—it was assumed that a normal course of events for a divorced person was to remarry; and when they applied that instruction that there had to be a "certificate of divorce," it specified that the reason for the certificate is to validate: You're free to remarry...and, by implication, so am I.

Final observation here—Divorce actually dissolved the union. If that were not true, further marriage *would always* be wrong, and would be punishable by death. Last time, we saw Jesus talk about it in the terms of how you've committed adultery already in your heart, even if you haven't committed the act yet (Matt. 5:28); and He is going to talk about the "except for the reason of unchastity" clause. What He's saying is: If you actually really are united to a person and you're living with somebody else, that is an adulterous act, and you don't want to do that. But divorce actually did legally dissolve the union; *no matter why*, the divorce dissolved the union. If that wasn't true, you couldn't have any further marriage.

That's important for the same reason as the previous observation. There are some people today who say that, "Not only will I not remarry anyone who has ever been married before, but God does not recognize *any divorce at all*. So, marriage is a one-shot, get-it-right-or-you're-done." And divorce is an unforgivable sin, in the eyes of many. There *is* no possibility to be restored if you have been divorced...so, tough luck. But God *does* recognize divorce, and He always has. He doesn't *want it*, but He recognizes it.

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Now, that's really the extent of the Old Testament teaching on divorce. It's used as an illustration in a few other places. There's that comment in Malachi 2:16. There is never a time that it is blessed or condoned. There are several places that it is rebuked. It's even used as an illustration of God divorcing Israel for her unfaithfulness (Jer. 3:8). So, divorce is a reality, and there is a regulation—that's the main point.

Jesus stepped into human history at a time when, in the culture of the Jewish people, they were adrift in a sea of controversy and inconsistency and hypocrisy on the issue of divorce.

Well, that's The Letter Of The Law. You must give your wife a "certificate of divorce" if you're going to divorce her. Now, let's see Jesus's Application Of That Law. In Verse 32, He said: "But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." Again, let's make some observations:

Number 1—The context. Understand: This is *not* a treatise on the subject of divorce. This is *not the definitive theology of divorce*. This is two verses, it's all one sentence for the two verses, and it's in a series of elaborations on the true meaning of the Old Testament Law, as opposed to the legalistic manipulation and machinations of the Law by the scribes and the Pharisees. And Jesus is again explaining God's *moral intent* behind that Law, in contrast to their failure to teach the real impact of the Law (1 Tim. 1:8; cf. Rom. 3:20; Gal. 3:24; Ps. 19:11; 119:1-2, 24).

Now, notice: Jesus modified the Old Testament teaching on divorce in two ways. He *did not say* what was said through Moses was wrong—but this is a different era; Israel was given Deuteronomy 24 before they entered the Land, when they were going to be *the* entity—it was a theocracy. [At the time Jesus is speaking], Israel is *not* a theocracy; they do not have autonomy; they cannot enforce all of the moral aspects of the Law of God. So He is stating something that implies some different applications, if you will, without changing God's basic statement: "I hate divorce!"

Here's what He's doing—two ways that He modifies—or, maybe, "updates"—the teaching on divorce:

First—Unlawful intercourse by a married person is no longer punishable by death. Now, the truth is, *that aspect* of the Law—concerning adultery—had *rarely* been enforced. Yes, it's a disputed passage, but we have John 8:1-11, where the woman was caught in adultery; and that whole situation was a charade.

And, by the way, Israel could not have enforced the death penalty for divorce because they didn't have the authority to put *anyone* to death for breaking a law or violating a commandment. Remember, that was the problem the Sadducees and Pharisees had when they wanted to murder Jesus—they weren't allowed to (Jn. 18:31); they had to trick the Romans into doing it for them. They would have had to do that every time somebody was caught in adultery, because *not* the same as the law among the Romans.

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That word "unchastity" that Jesus used in Verse 32—"I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity"—what's translated "unchastity" there is that word I've mentioned to you several times; it's the Greek word *porneia*. It's translated "unchastity" here; sometimes in the New American Standard, it's translated "sexual immorality" (1 Thess. 4:3), [or just "immorality" (1 Cor. 5:1; 6:13, 18; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3; etc.)] The King James Version uses the word "fornication." The NIV says "marital unfaithfulness." It doesn't have to be *marital*; you don't have to be married to commit that sin, but He *is* talking about married people here. This is the word that means *any* illicit sexual activity. It comes from the root *pornē*—a female prostitute; or  *pornos*—a male prostitute. This word refers to *any* kind of sexual activity involving *anyone*—male or female, married or single, homosexual or heterosexual, or however many letters you want to add to "LGBTQ+" and all the other things (1 Cor. 6:9).

There is *one kind* of sexual relationship that God designed, that God blesses—and it's a "good thing" (Prov. 18:22): husband and wife, married to each other (1 Cor. 7:2). *Everything else* falls into the category of *porneia*.

This gets a little confusing, but the *other* word is "adultery." That's not the word *porneia*, that's the word *moicheia*. The *sin* is exactly the same, but you can't commit "adultery" unless you're married. You can commit *porneia* with somebody who is married, and they get a different label for that sin. Same sin—two different words, depending on marital status (see Heb. 13:4b).

*Moicheia* is the word Jesus used in the previous paragraph, where He said that to look with the purpose of lust is to commit "adultery" already in your heart; because if it isn't permitted by God, and if a marriage is not in place or a marriage is not dissolved, the next union would be adulterous—not within the bounds of God.

The second way that Jesus clarified, modified, or updated the Old Testament teaching on divorce—Notice that He is saying that only something as *radical* as sexual activity with someone you're not married to—something like *porneia*—only something that radical, that *smashes* the covenant of marriage, is legitimate reason for divorce.

Divorcing your wife because you don't like something she says in general—that was not permitted. If you look at your phone and it says you're qualified for an upgrade, it's not talking about your spouse!

If you put these two changes side-by-side, you can summarize Jesus's teachings on divorce. He never sat down and said, "Now, I want to explain to you everything about divorce..." It was always in a certain context—here, it's an illustration within the Sermon on the Mount; in Matthew 19, it's a response to a challenging question. But putting those together from the lips of Jesus, you see that He announced a more gracious position on adultery—the death penalty is not in play; it wasn't even *possible*—and, in a sense, He's taking a *stricter* position on divorce, because whatever "uncleanness" *was* (Deut. 24:1, NKJV), it *had* to be something short of adultery; because if your partner has been put to death, you don't need to divorce them in order to be unmarried.

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Notice also that in our text, there is no statement made *here* about remarriage. However, there's a *presumption* that remarriage follows divorce in most cases, because that's what the people He was speaking to would have known to be the content of a "certificate of divorce." The fact that He mentioned *wrong remarriages* indicates He assumed there was such a thing as a *legitimate* remarriage, and that would be consistent with the teaching of the Old Testament.

So, divorce for a Christian, from a Christian, on grounds less drastic than adultery, does not dissolve a marriage in God's eyes. Therefore, to *do that*, and to become legally-freed from that person, and to pursue another relationship is, in essence, *committing adultery*. The statement of an *exception*—"except for the reason of *porneia*"—proves that there's a rule: for no *other* reason. So, if you put it together, it's not hard to figure out: Divorce ends the marriage; but God always hates it, and God views it differently than man does.

Over the years, I have walked through a number of situations with a number of people. Just about the time you think you've heard every permutation and combination and reason and rationalization, somebody comes up with a new one; so I'm not going to be foolish enough to say, "I've heard them all!"—but I've heard a lot. And I'll tell you, I *have* supported individuals ending a marriage in which there is physical abuse, there is fear for safety, there has been total abandonment—something like that.

But I see those situations as a lesser of two evils in a situation in which the compassion of God provides protection for people who are being victimized by the willful ongoing sin of a spouse. I've seen some people who have all but said it in words: "Aha! You're a Christian—you *can't* divorce me, so I can do whatever I want, and you *can't* divorce me!" I've seen that attitude, although not stated in those words. God's compassion does not let one person be systematically, continually victimized by the "hardness of heart" of a totally recalcitrant person; and He hates *every* such situation.

It's hard to preach on Matthew 5 without mentioning Matthew 19, or vice versa; so if you look at Matthew 19:3-12, it's the other passage where Jesus most thoroughly said anything about divorce. That was a different setting; and again, it was not Jesus setting out to teach about marriage—it was His *enemies* trying to draw Him into *their* arguments about divorce and remarriage; and He was responding to a devious question, and He did it very skillfully. They tried to draw Him in—"Why can you get a divorce?"—and He said, "Well, how about you go back and read what God said?" And in Verse 4, He told them: "He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife...' "—He never answered about divorce, because He said, "Why don't you talk about marriage?"

The historical background to that question—and *why* they chose that subject for their question to try to trick Jesus—is significant. There was a rabbi named Shammai. He and his followers emphasized that word "uncleanness" in Deuteronomy 24:1; and so they said the *only* cause for divorce would be nothing less than the equivalent of *porneia*—even though, if it actually was *porneia*, they should have been executed. So it had to be some kind of a sexual relationship. That was the teaching of Shammai and his followers.



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There was a rabbi named Hillel; he and his followers just kind of skimmed over the word "uncleanness"—because after all, that's kind of ambiguous; they camped on the phrase "finds no favor in his eyes." "If she finds no favor in his eyes, *let him* give her a certificate of divorce." So, *they* allowed divorce for *nearly any reason*. Stated among Hillel's examples—and rabbis who followed in his footsteps—reasons you could get a divorce were: burning a meal (how many marriages would last past the first six months?); careless seasoning of food; finding a woman the husband liked better, or who was more beautiful; if she violated the Law of Moses; if she caused her husband to eat food that she had not tithed upon; breaking a vow; going into the street with her hair loose; conversing with any other man; or, being a noisy woman—which was defined as speaking in he own house loudly enough for the neighbors to hear.

Now, which of those two views do you think was more popular? It's pretty obvious! But, the scribes and the Pharisees—boy, they were the *tough* ones! They were probably Shammai-followers. But, they were trying to suck Jesus into saying something where *anything* He said about divorce would have *angered half the crowd*; it was diabolically-brilliant of them to choose this subject, but it was *marvelous* of Jesus to answer it the way He did. He said, "Why don't you go back and talk about marriage?" He came at it in a *completely* different way. *They* were arguing over ways to get out of marriage; and Jesus said: "When that subject comes up, *change the subject!* Go back to the *sanctity* of marriage! Go back to what God designed." There's a *big difference* between debating divorce, and calling people to do a marriage the right way.

Now, the same principle is true today. If you worry about whether or not you can get a divorce, rather than working on your marriage wholeheartedly, you're not going to succeed in your marriage! When you don't focus on positive obedience to God's standards, and you leave your mind open to thinking that you can "bail out," you won't have the commitment to solve problems.

When I talk to someone who wants to get married, if there is a divorce in their background, before I commit to it, I want to hear a really solid, thought-out, thoroughly-discussed answer to the question: How do you know neither of you is going to bail out? What have you put in place that's going to make you stand on the sanctity of marriage, rather than looking for the loopholes for divorce?

Jesus emphasized that divorce is a *deviation* from the ideal, and He said it is "permitted" only because of the sinfulness of man—which He calls "hardness of heart."

Now, as with other passages—in Matthew 19, remarriage is assumed to be the normal course of events. And as with the Sermon on the Mount passage, Jesus says again in Matthew 19 that adultery is the only allowable reason for the dissolution of a marriage *because* that trashes the marriage covenant. When you stand before God and say, "I will do this, and I will be committed to all 16 of my spouses—for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer..."—when someone *trashes* that covenant in the sight of God, *God hates that!* But, lest one person be systematically, permanently victimized by that—under certain circumstances, God allows divorce.

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Now, don't worry—I've also read First Corinthians Chapter 7. Also, don't worry—I'm not going to take you through 40 verses of First Corinthians 7. But God *does* state *another* reason for divorce. First Corinthians 7 addresses the issue of a spouse—described as an "unbelieving" one—being unwilling to continue a marriage to a believer (vs. 15). Now, the clearest example of that is: Two people get married; and then, one of them gets saved, and changes; and the other one says, "That's not what I signed up for—I'm *outta here!*" In that case, let them go. But it also says: Do not send your spouse away (vs. 12-13). The responsibility of *any* Christian is: Do not drive that other person away; remain committed to that marriage (cf. Ac. 16:1 with 2 Tim. 1:5; 1 Pet. 3:1).

So, understand: Jesus *in no place* gave the full New Testament teaching on divorce. God used Paul to *supplement* what Jesus said, but *Paul* never gave the full New Testament teaching on divorce. There's no place in the Bible that you could file under the heading: "All About Divorce and Remarriage." That can be frustrating, but don't let that bother you. That's why we have to do Systematic Theology—you have to put together *everything* that God says in *all* of those contexts (2 Tim. 3:16; cf. Ps. 119:128, 160). There is no place in the Bible that says: "Here is all about the Trinity." But we understand the Trinity is taught in Scripture, right? There's no place in the Bible that tells you *everything* about the person and work of Jesus Christ. There's no place in Scripture that tells you *everything* about the Doctrine of the Church. We have to put it all together.

Now, after hearing what Jesus said in Matthew 19, His disciples got the very strong message. Remember: They were under the teaching of the Pharisees, and I'm sure they had heard about all the ways that you can find the loopholes and get out of your marriage. And they heard what Jesus said, and they said, "Wow! Marriage is an *extremely serious commitment!* Don't go *there!*" (cf. 1 Cor. 7:28b) And then, Jesus said, famously: "Well, you understand, it's not for everybody." (1 Cor. 7:7) Most people *are* going to get married, and God does want us to continue the human race.

So, in a sense, you would say Rabbi Shammai was at least partially right; he was certainly a lot closer to "Biblical" than was Rabbi Hillel. And you might also notice that, again, Jesus taught that divorce was *never* commanded, only "permitted" in certain cases because of "hardness of heart."

One other comment about the teaching of Jesus on marriage—not from either of those passages, but in Mark 10, Verses 1 through 12, Mark records the same event that is recorded in Matthew 19; it's a parallel passage, but in Mark's passage, the pronouns he includes are different, and they indicate the woman has *exactly* the same obligations and exactly the same rights as a man, when it comes to maintaining a marriage. Now, *that's* something unique about Christianity. In most cultures prior to Christianity—and even many today, other than where Christianity has had an impact—women don't have that equality; but they do, Biblically-speaking.

Now, is that heavy enough for you? Anybody got spiritual goosebumps? Anybody just want to shout, "Hallelujah!?" I don't think so. Like I said: This isn't *fun* to talk about. But let's make some applications, because this *is* practical.

Sermon Title: Jesus On Divorce

Speaker: Jim Harris

Scripture Text: Matt. 5:31-32 (Sermon on the Mount #15)

Date: 11-1-20

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Let me ask you, first of all: Are you contemplating marriage? You're not married, but you hope to be married sometime. If so, and if you're to the point where it's actually potentially real for you, I want to tell you: You stand on the brink of the most wonderful relationship on Earth! (Prov. 18:22; Ecc. 9:9; 1 Pet. 3:7) And I say that with 48 years of experience, personally, to back that up.

But if you are planning to enter that with the thought that it's kind of like buying a car—you mean well, but if you get a lemon, you can get rid of it...what if you marry a "lemon"? I promise you: *She's* getting a lemon, if you don't think she's one! Any marriage you enter into is going to start with two big problems: *the boy and the girl!* So, if you enter that relationship thinking, "Well, if it doesn't work, I can get out," *I beg you:* Stay single! You are *not ready* for God's beautiful creation of marriage! And you don't have what it takes to face life's realities if you don't have an *unblinking* commitment to the sanctity of marriage!

I love it when I get the "young ones." You know, we have to deal these days with people who have been divorced and remarried, and stepchildren and blended families—and God's grace can wash over all of that, and turn pain into beautiful things; I understand that. But I *love* getting the young ones! Nobody's been divorced; nobody's remarried; there are no kids involved. And they're sitting there, looking all googly-eyed at each other, and it's just *fun* to see them interacting! And I like to build a rapport with them, and I talk about their plans and all that they're going to do.

And eventually, I bring them to the place where I tell them: "You understand, I'm going to ask you to stand in front of me, in the presence of God, with the eyes of your family and friends watching you, and you're going to say: 'For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.' Think about that! You have plans for 'better'; you have plans for 'richer'—you have plans for plenty, not want. But, what if, not long after you get married, one of you becomes seriously handicapped? Some awful illness? Some awful accident? Some criminal activity? Are you ready to take on 40 or 50 years of caring for someone who is *severely* handicapped? I don't usually mention that *in the wedding ceremony*, but do you get it? Are you 'in' with both feet, full heart, total commitment, *forever?*"

Now, let me ask another question. This could be somebody's secret; and I have no idea if it is. Are you contemplating divorce? Well, let me go all "Jesus" on you: *Stop* trying to figure out if you have grounds for a divorce. *You probably do*—maybe you do. Your *spouse* probably does! *Stop thinking that way!* Contemplate *marriage* instead! Let somebody come alongside you and help you bring God's Word to bear, to bring you two together to face *whatever* issue and issues there are in your relationship!

There is *no such thing* as an unsolvable problem for *two Christians* in a marriage, if they are willing to give up their "own personal interests" and seek the best "interests of others" (Phil. 2:4). Don't look out for just your own personal interests—that's a way to *ruin* a marriage—but look out for the interests of the other one.

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And would you understand: As we come down on this, it's *kind of easy* for us to become Pharisees; and we draw up the flowchart of, "What if this? Then this," and, "What if that? Then that, and maybe this over here," and "What if this happens?" and, "Here's the formula," and, "It's possible that sometimes, the light will turn green; and sometimes the light will turn red..." It's possible to get really wound up in being the *arbiters* of everything.

I want to say two things about divorce: *God hates it!* Do you understand that? *There's no exception!* There is *no time ever* that God puts something together and says, "Oh, I'm so glad you shattered that!" And look: If two *unbelievers* get married, *God put them together!* "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matt. 19:6). That is God's design! So, He hates divorce.

But would you understand: God's provision for divorce is an expression of His *grace*. It is so that people who have gone *way astray* can be reinstated, forgiven, restored—why, *blessed!* (Is. 50:2-3; Jer. 32:27) The way some people treat divorce, it is the unforgivable sin. You can get mad, you can commit manslaughter, you pay your debt to society, you can come back in, you can give your testimony in church, and you can be a *spiritual superstar*...but, if you're divorced—"You're out! You're not welcome here! You're second-class." No, this is an expression of God's mercy and His grace and His omniscience—and "He *cares*" (1 Pet. 5:7).

One more thing, by way of application, that I want to ask: What if you're already divorced? Are you hoping a hole opens up in the floor, so you can just *vanish*? I hope not. But what do you do now? Well, I want to ask you kindly, and pastorally: Have you confessed your sin—including what *you* contributed to that divorce?

Or, if it was completely in ignorance on your part—if it maybe even wasn't *willful* on your part...I mean, have you realized: "I've been involved in something that *God hates*"? Now, maybe *you* hated it, too. Good for you, for having the right perspective. But understand: Grace and forgiveness are *favorite subjects* of God! (see Mic. 7:18)

Now, if you're divorced and you are not remarried, and the other party is not remarried, I have to ask you: Is there *any chance* of reconciliation? Have you given it your *very best effort*, honestly, before God? Have you used *every* resource available to you? It's going to be hard for you to rest, unless you can answer: "Yes. I've done everything I can."

I *also* want to say, if you're divorced: Don't rush into another marriage, or any relationship that might lead to marriage. Give yourself plenty of time—and I know the follow-up question: "*How much time?* I'm really lonely! There are a *lot* of dating sites out there!" Hey, when you've been through divorce, it's roughly like getting hit by a freight train, or a steamroller, or something like that—*it hurts*. You need time to heal, and I say: Give yourself plenty of time—*whatever* that is. But I'll tell you—it's not *all weekend*, or a week, or a month...Give yourself *plenty* of time to adjust to new ways, to learn to walk with the Lord on your own, to become an ever-better member of the Body of Christ. And He *will* lead you. He *will* take care of you.

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Thank God for His grace (2 Cor. 9:15), and understand: It is sufficient for every day of your life (Ps. 23:6; 37:24; 2 Cor. 12:9; 2 Tim. 4:18). Don't play "what if" games in your mind—it's *so easy* to question what happened and what you could have said and what you might have said or what you could have done. *Learn lessons* from the past, but don't open up shop and *move in* to the past and stay there. Move on (Phil. 3:13-14).

And I want to add one more thing: One of the most productive and fruitful ministries of the Church in America in the 21st Century—one of the most productive things we could have is a ministry to single parents and to divorced people, in general. Survivors of divorce *must not* be ignored by the Church! All of us who couldn't raise our hand—that means we're *related* to somebody who has been through a divorce, and we *know* how that hurts. Does God have compassion for them? *Of course* He does!

And single parents? Oh, man—talk about *superstars*! They are among the most overworked, underappreciated, most needy segments of this society. They're doing the *impossible*, and they're doing it the best they can. They deserve love. They deserve help. And that's an unreached ministry target-group that maybe some of you might be called to.

I'm done. I'm worn out. I have nothing more to say, except: Remember that marriage, in Ephesians Chapter 5, is a picture of the relationship between Christ and His Church. Does that give you an idea why God *hates* divorce?

So, do you want to get it right—even if you've already gotten it wrong? Come to Christ. He wants you, and He wants to use you. And if you've never come to Him before, and this brings up just a *jumble* of stuff—come and see me or Dirk or Pastor Scott, or one of the Elders, your friend—anybody that can help you. We will open up God's Word, and do our best to help you.

Let's pray:

*Father, thank You for caring so much to send Your Son to die for our sins. And for some people, Your Son even died for the sin of divorce. For all of us, He died for the sin of that adulterous thought, that angry intent—all of these things that so grieve You. So thank You for Your marvelous, majestic grace in Christ. And please don't let a person leave this gathering this morning, apart from walking with Him. Have Your way with us to that end, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.*