

Malachi 2:13-16; Mt. 19:1-9; Mt. 5:31,32  
The Mind of Christ on Divorce

We come now in vv. 31, 32 to another subject in which Christ endeavors to correct wrong thinking. This is a subject that can readily be related to in our modern culture because the practice has become quite common and quite acceptable. There's actually an electronic magazine called *Divorce.com* in which you can find a lot of statistical information pertaining to divorce.

According to this magazine 59% of the population in America is married as of the year 2005 and 10% of the entire population is divorced – that is up from 8% in 1990, 6% in 1980. This same source reports that when sociologists project future trends they predict that half of all marriages will end in divorce. That figure is disputed by some but even those that find a way to come up with a more conservative estimate still place the percentage between 41 to 43% - i.e. 41 to 43% of all marriages will end in divorce.

This means that such a phenomenon is known to us all one way or another – either in terms of personal experience or in terms of knowing others who have gone through the experience. I dare say that it would be impossible today for any adult to not know somebody who has undergone a divorce.

This makes our study this morning, therefore, a very timely one although, admittedly, it is a subject that one would like to skip over. Lloyd-Jones makes the remark in his sermon on this subject that the value of systematic study through a book or a section of scripture is valuable because it forces us to have to deal with matters that the preacher might just as soon forget and it prevents preachers from merely delving repeatedly into their favorite subjects in scripture.

If the word of God deals with every aspect of living, then it deals with this aspect also. The Bible does meet us where we are. It meets us in the mountain top experiences of life and it meets us in the deep valleys of humiliation and trials. And I can say that in my own limited experience of preaching or teaching on the subject the ones that say amen the loudest, so to speak, when it comes to preaching against divorce are the ones that have been there. They never envisioned such a thing could ever have happened to them and they would never wish such a thing on anyone.

The pain and hardship created by such a phenomenon defies calculation not only in terms of the ones that are the immediate subjects of divorce – but also in terms of others around them who are afflicted perhaps to a lesser degree, but afflicted nonetheless by the same hurt and heartbreak.

I can remember calling my parents when I lived in South Carolina and had just begun attending BJU. I was calling my parents to share with them the wonderful joy that their first grandchild had been born. My Mother shared with me in the same conversation the tragic news that she and my Dad were getting divorced. Now I was an adult when this news was broken to me. I had been married for nearly two years, I had been living away

from home for three to four years and yet I can recall so vividly the devastating effect that the news of my parent's divorce had on me. I all of a sudden realized that I had known a tremendous sense of security in my home. A sense of security that I had taken so completely for granted that I didn't even know it existed until that day when it was shattered by the news that my parents were getting a divorce.

It's important for us, then, to know the mind of Christ on this subject. The scriptures certainly make it plain that the phenomenon of divorce is nothing new. It was common enough even in the days of antiquity that it had to be regulated even among the people of God in Moses day. And as we come to Christ's dealing with this subject, now, in the sermon on the mount, it's important to keep in mind that in this section of the sermon on the mount Christ is correcting wrong thinking – wrong thinking about the law of God in particular. We must keep in mind the key verses in this section which are given to us in vv. 17,18 – *Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.*

And in the verses that follow throughout the rest of chp. 5 Christ addresses a number of areas in which wrong thinking had prevailed. Wrong thinking was prevalent with regard to the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment – *Thou shalt not kill*. And Christ corrects that wrong thinking by making known that the law did much more than weigh the deed. It also weighed the thoughts and intents of the heart so much so that whoever was angry with his brother unjustly was in danger of the judgment.

The same principle applies to the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment – *Thou shalt not commit adultery*. The law judges not merely the act but the lustful thoughts apart from the act so much so that *whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart* (5:28).

It's interesting to note that when we come to vv. 31,32 Christ is dealing with the subject of divorce in the context of the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment. He is still on the subject of adultery, in other words. And as we endeavor to understand His mind on divorce we must ever keep in mind the pattern of this section of the sermon on the mount. We've noted the formula that occurs 6 times – *ye have heard...but I say unto you*. And we've noted that in this formula Christ is not endeavoring to correct or amend the law of Moses – but what He's doing is correcting the misinterpretations of the laws of Moses which were commonplace at that time and were due in large measure to the way the Pharisees were misinterpreting and misapplying those laws.

## The Mind of Christ on Divorce

This is our subject and in dealing with the subject we'll find it necessary to refer to the other passages that have been read this morning from Deut. 24, Mt. 19, and Malachi 2.

What I would like to do in treating this subject today is to demonstrate the truth of 3 points which reveal to us the mind of Christ on divorce.

The first thing I would have you see is:

## I. Why Christ Hates Divorce

The fact that He hates it is plainly stated in Malachi 2:16 – *For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away.* Or as other English versions render it: *For I hate divorce, says the LORD, the God of Israel.*

I think this is the best place to start when it comes to the consideration of divorce – whether it's in preaching or in marriage counseling. It might not be the place where those that are interested in divorce who are pursuing divorce would want to start. Often times the starting point of one pursuing divorce is the allowance he or she perceives that is granted in the scripture for divorce. *I have a right to this* – becomes the prevailing mentality and the starting point. But as one author notes who addresses this issue in a book on marriage – having the right is not necessarily the same thing as being right. And in any case – whether there is a right or not the truth still stands that divorce is something that God hates.

And the reasons for such hatred from the Lord are not difficult to surmise.

Divorce, you see, is permeated with sin. It is sin that leads to it – in particular the sin of adultery which is the only allowance that Christ makes for it in Mt. 5 and Mt. 19. Were it not for sin – there would be no such thing as divorce. It's interesting to note that in Mt. 19 Christ makes reference to the beginning of time – the very dawn of creation where God Himself officiated the very first wedding between Adam and Eve. This is the very foundation for the family structure that God ordained before the fall of man.

This is why we say in marriage ceremonies – *The sacred relationship of marriage was established by God in creation, and our Lord Jesus Christ adorned marriage by His presence and first miracle at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. The apostle Paul chose marriage to symbolize the union between Christ and His church, and holy Scripture commends marriage to be honored among all people.*

And if you read the account of that first wedding back in Gen. 2:23 you find no provision being made for divorce. You don't find God counseling Adam and Eve in such a way as to say that if they or if any of their children decide that their spouse is incompatible with them then here is a provision that will allow for you to dissolve your marriage.

No. Because where there was no sin – there was no need for any provision for divorce. This is why I say that sin accounts for divorce. Divorce became necessary or allowable in certain circumstances on account of sin. And Christ was very aware of that when He corrected wrong thinking on divorce.

There's another reason that God hates divorce. He hates it because He views it as a violation of a covenantal oath. A marriage takes place, you see, where there has been a consummated union within the context of a covenantal oath. Doug Wilson makes an

interesting observation with regard to this covenantal union and the voiding of that union. He writes: *A marriage does not exist simply because a couple has become one flesh. Paul uses the term one flesh in describing a man's relationship with a prostitute (1Cor. 6:16), which is obviously not a marriage. A marriage exists when a heterosexual consummated relationship has been sanctified with an oath. So then, marriage requires that a couple become one flesh, but it also requires a covenantal oath.*

*This helps us understand why God hates divorce...divorce is a violation of the marriage covenant. God hates the falsehood involved. He is a covenant-keeping God, and He hates the slander of covenants which faithlessness in marriages involves.*

Whenever I have occasion to officiate at a wedding I like to emphasize the point that in a marriage vow you find the characteristics of a vow and of an oath. A vow is something that is spoken directly to God. In marriage you are not merely pledging yourself to your spouse but you're pledging to God Himself that you'll be faithful to your spouse. An oath, on the other hand, is a solemn pledge that is made to someone else which calls upon God to be a witness. The fact that elements of a vow and an oath can both be found in marriage vows adds all the more to the solemnity those pledges and thus magnifies all the more the breaking of those pledges. In divorce, then, we add to our sin by perjuring ourselves or by making liars out of ourselves – and not by merely entering into a little white lie as we sometimes call them – but we fly in the face of the most solemn pledges that can be found in all the earth.

We know how serious a matter perjury is. We know that there are stiff penalties and even imprisonment that can result when a man takes an oath to tell the truth and then fails to tell the truth. It makes you wonder how much divorce might be reduced if the crime of perjury that accompanies it was dealt with more seriously in our courts of law. Our courts may not take such perjury seriously when it comes to wedding vows but God certainly takes it seriously and for that reason He hates divorce.

You could argue that God hates divorce because it obscures the very picture that marriage was designed to portray. Marriage symbolizes the union between Christ and His Church. To suggest that the marriage union could be dissolved implies that the union between Christ and His Church could be dissolved as well. The picture of the intimacy and permanency of Christ with His people is obscured by the practice of divorce.

We could go on, I'm sure, thinking of reasons why God hates divorce. It exists on account of sin – it is sin that leads to it – in most instances it's sin that results from it and the whole thing is out of character for God. May Christ help us to share in His mind toward the practice of divorce.

So we see in some measure why Christ hates divorce. We must move on to consider:

## II. Why and Under What Condition Christ Allows Divorce

In His dispute with the Pharisees in Mt. 19 Christ refers to the original institution of marriage found in Gen. 2. The Pharisees in reply raised a question in v. 7 *Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?*

This question finds its roots in the portion that was read earlier this morning – Deut. 24:1-4. And if we're going to understand why Christ allows divorce and the condition upon which Christ allows divorce it's necessary for us to understand this portion of Deut. **{Deut. 24:1-4}**.

The thing that has proven to be the challenge throughout the ages regarding this passage has to do with a single word found in v. 1 which we find translated in our AV by the word *uncleanness*. Other English versions translate the word *indecent*. At the time of Christ and indeed in the ages that have followed the time of Christ the whole issue of what constitutes legitimate grounds for divorce has hinged on the definition given to this word.

There were two schools of thought at the time of Christ. One rabbinical school took a very narrow view of the term and restricted its meaning to the term *adultery*. The other rabbinical school applied the meaning of the term so broadly so as to include the most frivolous things that might move a husband to find no favor in his wife.

Christian linguistic experts have scratched their heads over the meaning of this term – so much so that John Murray in his book that treats the subject of divorce remarks that *It has to be admitted that it is exceedingly difficult if not precarious to be certain as to what the "unseemly thing" really was*. He goes on to state that the literal rendering of the word means *nakedness of a thing*. And then he goes on to explain the two rabbinical schools and their differing views. He sees one school as too restrictive, the other as too broad and comes to the conclusion that a balance must be struck between the two extremes of these rabbinical schools.

One of the reasons that is given for the term *uncleanness* not to mean *adultery* is because a couple of chapters earlier in Deuteronomy – Deut. 22 – the sin of adultery is dealt with and the penalty for adultery was death. The case is presented from Deut. 22:13-21 of a man who takes a wife and then discovers that she's not a virgin. An investigation was to take place and if in the course of that investigation the wife's virginity could be established – the husband was to be fined for slander and would not be allowed to divorce his wife all the days of his life (v. 19). But if the parents of the newly wed wife could not substantiate their daughter's virginity she was to be stoned with stones that she die because she hath wrought folly in Israel, to play the whore in her father's house (v. 21).

If the sin of adultery or fornication was punishable by death, therefore, then the provision for divorce by the term *uncleanness* in Deut. 24 must refer to something else. Lloyd-Jones gives what I think is a very poor explanation of what this uncleanness entailed. He takes the view that Moses was restricting divorce in this provision by narrowing it down to certain causes which would include some natural, moral, or physical defect discovered in

the wife. Lloyd-Jones, in my estimation, has given what appears to me to be a contradictory explanation of the term *uncleanness*. When you think about it – what could you not place under the category of uncleanness if it included natural, moral, or physical defects. It seems to me that this explanation leaves the door wide open for divorce under just about any pretence.

Lloyd-Jones then puts forward the notion that what Christ is saying in Mt. 5 and Mt. 19 is that on His own authority He is placing new restrictions to this provision by Moses narrowing it even further than Moses narrowed it so that from that point on divorce would not be allowed on any other grounds but that of marital infidelity.

I personally am not satisfied with this view of Lloyd-Jones. Remember what I said in the beginning of this study. The context of all of Christ's remarks that we find in this formulation *ye have heard...but I say unto you* is the context of Christ's statement that He had not come to destroy the law but to fulfil it. I don't believe that Christ came to amend the laws of Moses but to give the true interpretation of those laws.

And if Christ says that the only allowable ground for divorce is to be found in the sin of adultery – then I believe we have every reason to view his statements as being compatible with the statements made by Moses in Deut. 24. In fact, it makes good sense to me to view Moses as doing the very same thing that Lloyd-Jones attributes to Christ – i.e. after giving the mind of God in Deut. 22 that the sin of adultery deserves the death penalty we find Moses two chapters later suspending that death penalty by allowing divorce in its place. It has been suggested by some that this bill of divorcement referred to by Moses in Deut. 24 could have functioned as a substitute death certificate for the person who had been divorced.

This may not answer every difficulty that surrounds the issue of divorce, but in my mind, at least for the time being it appears the most satisfactory to me. Interestingly enough – although John Murray would not agree with my view that the uncleanness of Deut. 24 amounts to adultery – he includes a footnote in his work in which he quotes John Lightfoot as saying *When God had established that fatal law of punishing adultery by death (Deut. 22), for the terror of the people, and for their avoiding of that sin; the same merciful God foreseeing, also, how hard (occasion being taken from this law) the issue of this might be to the women, by reason of the roughness of the men, - lusting, perhaps after other women, and loathing their own wives, - he mere graciously provided against such kind of wife-killing by a law, mitigating the former, and allowed the putting away a wife in the same case, concerning which that fatal law was given, - namely, in the case of adultery.*

I believe this view of divorce would be consistent with the things Christ is doing in this section of the sermon on the mount. He is exposing and correcting what had been the loose practice of the Pharisees in allowing divorce for just about any reason.

And so we see the ground and the only ground upon which Christ makes this allowance. We still have to answer the question *why?* Why has Christ made such an allowance? One reason has been covered by the quote I just gave you by John Lightfoot – i.e. to guard

against the potential abuse of husbands having their wives put to death for just about any and every reason. Christ Himself gives a very specific reason as to why divorce was allowed in the case of adultery. It was *because of the hardness of your hearts* He says in Mt. 19:8.

Could I just pause here to make a very practical application of Christ's teaching that I would hope would give you all very simple and sound advice on how to avoid divorce? The best way to avoid divorce is to avoid hardness of heart. Hardness of heart is what takes place when the means of grace are neglected and worldliness ensues.

I dare say that where you find married couples engaged in the spiritual exercises of time in the word and time in prayer and time in worship both privately and as a family and corporately you will not find the practice of divorce springing out of these exercises. It is only where spiritual carelessness ensues that you begin to sow the seeds of discontentment and where the weeds grow from the seeds of discontentment you find the potential for the tragedy of divorce.

Christ hates it. He does allow it – I believe He allows it on the basis of marital infidelity because such a breach of trust is created by infidelity that it makes it most often impossible for the marriage to function.

There is certainly a better way, however. Indeed when you remember that the theme of this sermon is living in the kingdom of heaven then I think you can take our studies up to this point and say that from v. 21 on Christ is issuing a call for consistency between our inward thoughts and our outward actions. He's also issuing the call for purity in the remarks He makes regarding adultery in vv. 27-29. And now in vv. 30, 31 He is issuing the call for fidelity.

We have hardly, this morning, exhausted the subject of divorce. There are many things that could be said and perhaps will be said in a later study. There are so many different scenarios which would require several studies to cover.

For now – let's leave the issue with the underlying truth that Christ hates divorce – but that in His grace and mercy He has made a very narrow allowance for it – and that the subjects of the kingdom of heaven should strive against it. In our last study we noted the fervency with which Christ calls on His subjects to fight against sin. *Pluck out your right eye and cast it from you...cut off your right arm and throw it away.*

It is not by accident that following this call for great fervency in dealing with sin Christ then brings up the issue of divorce. May we exercise great fervency, then, in dealing with the causes that lead to it. May we so seek the Lord our God with all our hearts and minds and souls that we enable ourselves to maintain the spiritual sensitivity that's needed to avoid the kind of hardness of heart that invariably can be found behind every divorce.