

The Sermon On The Mount

The Beautiful Tune We Love So Well And Play So Poorly

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 5:3 ESV)*

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”
(Matthew 7:24–25 ESV)*

Marriage And Divorce

My 15th, 2022

Matthew 5:31-32

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! It is so good to be back here with you and it is so good to be getting back into our series on The Sermon on the Mount. We took an extended break with my Sabbatical and then with the Easter Season, so perhaps a little review here would be helpful. The Sermon on the Mount is not a sermon about how to get saved. The story of the Sermon on the Mount begins with these words:

¹ Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

² And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying... (Matthew 5:1–2 ESV)

That’s the preamble – and that tells us who the intended audience for this sermon was. It was not the crowds. Rather, seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain and his DISCIPLES came to him and he opened his mouth and taught THEM.

The Sermon on the Mount is a sermon that was given to DISCIPLES, so it is DOWNSTREAM from matters of conversion. That’s very important for us to see. If you read this sermon and try to

turn it into a WAY TO GET SAVED you will invent an entirely different religion – a much WORSE religion. A religion based on WORKS that you cannot possibly DO as a non-Christian, without the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

So it is not a sermon about how to get saved, rather it is a sermon about how saved people should live as the followers of Jesus Christ in this world. That's why we gave this series the subtitle: "the beautiful tune we love so well and play so poorly" – because the Sermon on the Mount is aspirational to some degree. The Sermon on the Mount tells us what Christianity is supposed to sound like – but of course, it doesn't often sound like this does it? We don't often turn the other cheek – usually we punch back. Hard. We don't often love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us – we usually hate our enemies and wish that we could run over them with our cars.

Truthfully.

And so we come back to the Sermon on the Mount again and again and again – like we come back to our piano tuner or our guitar tuner. We come back to be reminded of what the notes are supposed to sound like. We read the Sermon on the Mount – we hear sermons on it – and we immediately notice all the ways that our desires, our feelings, our attitudes and our behaviours are out of tune. And we repent. We ask God for mercy, we ask him for help, we ask for more of the Spirit and then we go out the front door and we try to play it again – and slowly but surely, by one degree of glory to the next – we get better. We begin to look and sound a little more like Jesus.

That's the goal.

Now, in terms of the structure of the Sermon on the Mount, it begins with the essential CHARACTER of the Christian in verses 1-12 of chapter 5. We refer to those as "the Beatitudes". Then in verses 13-16 we have the essential INFLUENCE of the Christian – that's the passage on Salt and Light. And then after that you have a long section of particular applications. Jesus corrects their understanding of a number of Biblical principles. "You have heard it said do not

murder but I tell you that if you hate and revile your brother you will be liable to the hell of fire.”
“You have heard it said do not commit adultery but I tell you that whoever looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Do you see what Jesus is doing there?

He is clarifying what they think they know about living as the people of God in this world.

Why?

Because he just told them to be salt and light!

Being SALT and LIGHT is about maintaining a distinctive Christian character so as to give a distinctive Christian witness in the world – so they need to know this stuff. And now here in this passage we see that they also need to have their thinking corrected with respect to the intended permanence and durability of covenant marriage because this too is intended by Jesus to be part and parcel of their distinctive Christian witness to the world.

So let’s get into that. If you have your Bible with you, please open it up now to Matthew chapter 5:31-33. Let me pray briefly before we begin:

Father, I know that this is a potentially devastating topic for many people in the church today. When we hit this note on the tuner many of us are immediately going to feel exposed as out of tune Lord, but the truth is that we ought to be feeling that way every week as we walk through this Sermon. None of us are playing this song perfectly. All of us are falling short in particular areas so, Lord, give us a spirit of grace and supplication today as we sit under your Word and as we confront our own weakness and frailty. Build us up in our most holy faith, we ask now in Jesus’ name, amen.

Amen. Hear now the reading of God’s Word:

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” (Matthew 5:31–32 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

I want to look at this passage today in terms of three basic divisions. I want to look first at the distinctive principle, and then secondly at the recognized exception and then finally we’ll spend some time talking about the potential witness.

First of all then, the distinctive principle:

The Distinctive Principle

Look again at verse 31.

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ (Matthew 5:31 ESV)

Jesus is referring there to a passage in the Old Testament – SORT OF. It’s originally from Deuteronomy 24:1-4 which says:

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then 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 of his house, and she departs out of his house,² and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife,³ and the latter man hates 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 man dies, who took her to be his wife,⁴ then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.” (Deuteronomy 24:1–4 ESV)

In this passage Moses is actually attempting to LIMIT and REGULATE the practice of divorce because the way that the people were doing it was HATEFUL to God – we see that in verse 4. Men were sending their wives away because they found them displeasing, then she would marry someone else, but then the original husband would calm down and he would realize he had acted rashly and so he would remarry her – so you had women going back and forth and being treated in a very cruel and undignified way and so Moses steps in to provide some regulation. Divorce can't be willy nilly. It can't be emotional. There needs to be legitimate grounds and there needs to be a JUST and deliberate process.

That's what Moses actually said – but what Jesus is doing here in Matthew 5 is quoting what people have been SAYING about what Moses said. Look again, he says:

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ (Matthew 5:31 ESV)

Do you see what the teachers of the day had done? They had kept the piece about process but had deleted the piece about legitimate grounds. And so this is Jesus sticking that back in. It is not enough to have your paperwork in order, he says, you have to maintain a HIGH BAR and a DEEP RESPECT for the intended permanence and durability of covenant marriage.

And so here is the bar that Jesus puts back in; look at verse 32:

“everyone who divorces his wife, **except on the ground of sexual immorality**, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” (Matthew 5:32 ESV)

Jesus says, you shouldn't consider divorce as an option unless there has been sexual immorality – sexual immorality constitutes legitimate grounds for divorce - we'll talk about what that means in just a minute, but for now, we just need to understand that this was seen by the disciples as an incredibly significant – even burdensome - adjustment. When Jesus gave this teaching again in Matthew 19 – with the same high bar and the same single exception clause:

The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” (Matthew 19:10 ESV)

If you can’t get out of a bad marriage, maybe it would be better never to marry in the first place!

Do you see that? The disciples thought the bar was too high – but that’s only because they had inherited from their culture a bar that was actually far too low. In the beginning God set the bar very high. Jesus reminds the disciples of that in Matthew 19, he says:

“Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female,⁵ and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’?⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Matthew 19:4–6 ESV)

So Jesus is not being an innovator here – he is being a reformer. God created marriage with the intention that it would be a lifelong, intimate relationship. It wasn’t supposed to be disposable. Moses regulated and limited divorce – but he didn’t advocate for divorce. He just tried to reign you in, which by the way, is all that the law is able to do, but as my disciples, Jesus is saying, I expect you to do significantly better.

Now let’s stop for a second.

Why shouldn’t Jesus expect his disciples to do significantly better?

If you are truly a disciple of Jesus Christ – if you are born again, if you have a new heart, if you have the Holy Spirit living inside you and the Word of God open in front of you – why shouldn’t he expect you to build an intimate relationship with your covenant partner that will LAST and actually IMPROVE over the course of your lifetime?

Listen, Christians are capable of two things that ought to be legitimate difference makers when it comes to lifelong covenant marriage. For one thing, Christians can FORGIVE and for another thing Christians can GROW.

And that changes everything.

So why would two real believers ever need to give up on each other? Why would they need to get divorced? Is your husband selfish and lazy? Well, good news sister! If he is truly saved then he can GROW! Husband, is your wife cold, critical and withholding? Well, good news! If she is truly saved then she can grow!! And by the grace that God supplies you can forgive each other for all the dozens and hundreds of times you have let each other down.

Isn't that wonderful?

And so of course Jesus expects more from his disciples! He is going to give them more help than the Law of Moses gave them and so he can set the bar higher than the Law of Moses did.

Thus, **the distinctive principle here** is that followers of Jesus are going to commit to a very high bar in terms of the permanence and durability of covenant marriage.

BUT the bar is not infinitely high – that's important for us to notice. Jesus does mention an exception here, so let's take a look at that.

The Recognized Exception(s)

In verse 32 Jesus says:

“But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, **except on the ground of sexual immorality**, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” (Matthew 5:32 ESV)

EXCEPT on the ground of sexual immorality – that’s the exception. Now, the word Jesus uses here is a broad word – it is a category word. We sometimes misremember this in our minds don’t we? We think Jesus said, “But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of ADULTERY, makes her commit adultery” – but that’s not what he says. The exception has to do with the broader category of sexual immorality. Well how do we define “sexual immorality” or more importantly, how would Jesus have define sexual immorality?

For that you have to go back into the Old Testament. In the Old Testament there is something called The Holiness Code. Scholars debate as to whether the Holiness Code runs from Leviticus 17-25 or just from 17-20 but that doesn’t really matter, the important thing is that the Old Testament contains a “chapters-long” definition of sexual immorality. It encompasses things like adultery, incest, bestiality and homosexuality. Those are things that are hateful to God – because they are against life. Remember God told Adam and Eve:

**“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion”
(Genesis 1:28 ESV)**

So God designed sexuality to function within an intimate covenant relationship between a man and a woman specifically for the purpose of having and raising little image bearers. There are other legitimate reasons to have sex within a covenant marriage – but that connection is PRIMARY in terms of the original stated design and thus anything that obscures or departs from that original design is hateful to God and destructive to human flourishing and therefore, if your covenant partner gives him or herself over to any of those things, then obviously, you shouldn’t be bound to that. You should be released and you should be free to remarry someone who is committed to God’s purposes and design for human life and sexuality. That was the function of the “certificate of divorce” mentioned in Matthew 5 and Deuteronomy 24. In that culture a woman had to present such a certificate in order to get remarried.

Now, you will notice that in the header I added a little “s” inside a set of brackets and that’s because Jesus only mentions ONE exception here, but the Apostle Paul adds another exception in 1 Corinthians 7. Now before we even look at that we should probably ask the question: is that

appropriate? If Jesus only mentions ONE exception, how dare the Apostle Paul add another?!

Except that, actually, Jesus himself authorized the Apostles to do this. In John 16 just before Jesus was crucified he said:

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (John 16:12–14 ESV)

So Jesus said that he had more to say, but not the time to say it, so he would say MORE by means of the Holy Spirit through his authorized Apostles – so YES – the Apostles are allowed to expand upon and add to the teachings of Jesus – WE ARE NOT – I AM NOT – but they were. That is the uniqueness of their call and authority.

Let’s do look then at what Paul adds in 1 Corinthians 7. In verses 10-11 Paul repeats the substance of Jesus’ teaching and then he ADDS to it in verses 12-15 – and he even FLAGS the fact that he is adding to it, so he is not trying to sneak that by them. Look at verse 12. He says:

To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³ If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. . . ¹⁵ But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.” (1 Corinthians 7:12–15 ESV)

So here Paul adds what we often refer to as “The Spiritual Abandonment Clause”. That is, if Bob and Susy were married when they were both unbelievers and Susy becomes a Christian and Bob doesn’t want to be married to a Christian, then if Bob initiates the divorce, Susy is free to go and is unbound – that is, she is free to remarry - but only in the Lord, Paul will add a few paragraphs later.

So we have a general principle; Christians are to have an incredibly high bar for divorce, and we have two exceptions; divorce will be permitted in the case of sexual immorality and in the case of spiritual abandonment, if you send your wife away for any reason other than those two YOU are causing HER to commit adultery – meaning if she gets remarried on the basis of a faulty divorce that’s YOUR RESPONSIBILITY. That sin goes into your account, not hers! You didn’t treat your marriage vow with the high regard that you ought to have as a follower of Jesus Christ.

Now we probably do have to say a quick word about physical abuse. Physical abuse is not specifically mentioned here as a legitimate cause for pursuing a divorce and so Christians may disagree as to whether it qualifies. Let me make a few things absolutely clear. Let me say first of all that if your spouse is physically abusing you then you should call the police. Now. Before leaving the building. Your second call, if you are a member of this church, should be to us – to either myself or to the Chairman of the Board so that we can immediately put your spouse under discipline. If your spouse does not repent of this behaviour we will publicly declare him – or her – to be an unbeliever in which case what Jesus is saying in the Sermon on the Mount does not directly apply to your marriage because it is not, strictly, a marriage of two disciples. Remember, this is Jesus WITHDRAWING FROM THE CROWDS and speaking TO HIS DISCIPLES about how they can live in such a way as to present a DISTINCTIVE CHRISTIAN WITNESS to the watching world. Well, if only one of you is a believer, then that isn’t an option for you, so we will need to proceed with wisdom and caution and we will want to consult other passages that we aren’t preaching on this morning. But for safety sake, I couldn’t afford NOT TO SAY THAT. It has to be said. It should be said.

If you are being abused you must call the police.

Romans 13 is in the Bible just as surely as the Sermon on the Mount and we thank God that the king does not bear the sword in vain.

Alright, we've talked about the distinctive principle – Christians have a very high bar for divorce and a very high commitment to the permanence and durability of covenant marriage; we've talked about the exception(s) and now we need to talk about the potential witness.

The Potential Witness

Remember, this entire section is about how the disciples of Jesus can live in the world in a **DISTINCTIVE – WITNESS BEARING** way. So the assumption is that a marriage like this – that presses through the ups and downs and the highs and lows – that passes through the valley of the shadow of death and comes out stronger on the other side – a marriage like THAT will communicate something to the watching world.

So what does a marriage like this communicate?

We're going to come back to this next week and I'll give you two more then, so if you think there are others that I'm not going to mention today, you are absolutely right – so come back next Sunday and hear about those, but for now, let me give you just one – but I think it's a very important one and a very timely one given the trajectory of our culture. Here it is; if Christians can maintain a remarkably high commitment to the permanence and durability of covenant marriage, it is going to say something to the watching world about the value and importance of children.

1. The value of children

Remember the original design for marriage was explicitly connected by God to the having and raising of children. God said to the first husband and wife:

“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion”
(Genesis 1:28 ESV)

So this is really where the rubber meets the road. What you believe here will determine what you believe about divorce. Think about it, why has there been a shift in the last 50 years toward no fault divorce in this country? The bar used to be very high for divorce but now it is very low – why? Because we’ve changed what marriage is about in this country. It used to be about kids. Grandma and Grandpa didn’t get divorced. Why? Because of the kids. But now lots of people are getting divorced. Why? Because it’s not about the kids anymore, it’s about personal fulfillment. It’s about you. Are you not getting the support and encouragement you want out of your partner? Then get divorced. Does your wife not light the fire for you like she used to do? Then get divorced!

It's all about YOU now.

So when Christians push through all of that – when they grow, repent, forgive, and improve over time and their marriages endure – people are going to wonder why we put in all that effort. Wouldn’t it be easier to just blow it all up and start over?

No!

Why?

Because of the kids! Children need a stable environment. They need to see people repenting, growing, changing and forgiving. They need MOMS and they need DADS.

And they need grandparents too.

I’m going to say something now that I think may be very important for some of you to hear today. Maybe you are sitting here thinking: “I’m not going to get divorced right now because of the kids. But once the kids are out of the house – once they are married themselves – then I will. I lived the first 50 years of my life for the kids, but the next 30 or 40 years are going to be about me.”

Listen, let me tell you something, the kids never stop needing the stable marriage of mom and dad. When your 30 year old kids are struggling in their marriage, how are you going to encourage them to forgive and grow and repent and change – if you didn't do that? Listen, your kids are going to need your healthy marriage more in the next 20 years than they did in the last 20 years. So work it out. Go to counselling. But you say, "Pastor I'm 70 years old and we've been married for 50 years, it's too late for us".

No it's not.

Go to counselling. Your grandkids need to see you working on your marriage. They need to see you forgiving. They need to see you growing. Because if you can't do it – how are they ever going to believe that they can do it?

An incredibly high commitment to the durability and permanence of covenant marriage communicates to the world and to our kids and grandkids the incredible value and inestimable worth of children in the eyes of the Lord. Blessed is the man and the woman whose quiver is filled with them. And blessed is the marriage that supports, nurtures, inspires and protects them – thanks be to God. Let's pray together.