

# Marriage, Divorce, and the Gospel

**Preached by:** Matthew S. Black

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

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**Series:** King of Kings! (Book of Matthew)

**Introduction:** Open your Bible to **Matthew 5:31-32**. We're also going to take a look at **Matthew 19:3-9**. This morning we are talking about "Marriage, Divorce and the Gospel".

Yesterday we had an unusual thing happen. We had a wedding. Of course, that's not that unusual. What struck me was when I said, "You may kiss the bride". Now there are kisses, and then there are kisses! And this was a kiss!

That was unusual because Nick and Angela reserved their first kiss for the altar. They took their single lives very seriously, which gives me great confidence that they will now take their married lives seriously.

That's something we need to hear, because in my opinion, **not too many people** take their marriages seriously. Too many of us who are married here this morning, take marriage for granted.

Too many **single** people don't seriously consider marriage. Chastity and selflessness is vital before marriage because there is a lot of self-control and selflessness after the marriage altar.

## Broken Home

How many of us here this morning are from a broken home? Divorce affects all of us. Many of us grew up with the bitterness of fighting and shouting in the home. Some of you grew up with outright abuse in the home. Many of us grew up with the devastation of not having a father in our lives. This has to stop. In our text this morning Jesus elevates marriage to a place that only a Christian with the help of God can truly have the understanding and motivation to carry out his command.

## The Underlying Problem with Divorce: Lust

Let's remind ourselves of the previous text. **Matthew 5:27-30**, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell."

It's not surprising that the subject of marriage and divorce follows the subject of lust. Essentially what Jesus is saying is the way you live your life shows whether or not you truly know God. People who live in the presence of God first of all are careful with the thoughts they think in their heart.

## **Your Marriage / or Singleness Reveals Your Heart**

Men, how do you view women? Do you esteem them as sisters, or view them as objects for your pleasure? That's a crass sounding question, but it is an honest one.

In Jesus' day, surprisingly, the view of marriage was very low. You could legally divorce your wife for almost any cause. Husbands were filled with lust, but they would blame it on their wife. They could divorce their wife for arguing back, bad cooking, or simply embarrassing her husband, or insulting her in-laws. Let's read how Jesus' exposes their lawless hearts.

**Matthew 5:31-32**, "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."

## **Only God Can Make us Happy**

Are you looking for another human being to make you happy? It's not going to happen. God has rigged it so that whether you are single or married, there is a lack of complete satisfaction in any human being for any long period of time. God wants us to worship Him, not our singleness, and not any human being.

## **The Pharisees Concerned w/ what is Legal**

The Pharisees were concerned about what was legal. How can I do the bare minimum to make God happy and still do what I want? Jesus is concerned about what is righteous. He wants us to love what God loves and want what God wants! Remember he says that those who truly know Him, who are part of His Kingdom – have "a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees" (Matthew 5:20).

Jesus continues His elevation of the Law beyond mere **legalism** and **moralism** to a deep **heart-cutting righteousness** that impacts how we deal with anger, lust, and now today, we see, marriage. Jesus elevates the marriage relationship to one we need to continually work on and never take for granted.

This morning four things grab out attention in this passage. We're going to see:

- The **Prevalence** of Divorce.
- God's **Plan** for Marriage at Creation.
- The **Practice** of Moses.
- The **Possibility** of Adultery.

### **I. Consider the Prevalence of Divorce (5:31-32; 19:3)**

**Matthew 5:31-32a**, "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..."

Look over to Matthew 19 for further insight.

**Matthew 19:3-9**, "And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, 'Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?' 4 He answered, '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.” 7 They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” 8 He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

Divorce was prevalent in Jesus’ day just as it is in our day. If Jesus were here today, we’d ask him about it. So let’s ask Jesus this question and hear his answer **in Matthew 5 and 19**. We just heard the Lord’s answer. The Pharisees bring this very controversial question to Jesus. Divorce was very, very prevalent in Jesus’ day.

### **The Divorce Controversy**

This question was asked because divorce was quite prevalent in Jesus’ day. Divorce was a controversial issue in Jesus’ day. The Jews divorced and remarried in Jesus’ day as much or more than our own culture.

### **Two Schools of Thought**

There were two schools of thought in Jesus’ day. Rabbi **Shammai** taught you could only divorce if the woman was found to be immoral during the betrothal period. Rabbi **Hillel**, which was the prevalent view, taught that you could divorce for any reason.

### **Trapping Jesus / Herod Antipas**

This was a controversial issue. In Matthew 19, we have a more extensive passage because Jesus is entering realm of Herod Antipas on his way to Jerusalem. He’s no longer in northern Israel, but headed to Jerusalem where Herod is. Remember Herod **Antipas had beheaded John** for John’s views on divorce and remarriage. Perhaps the Pharisees wanted to use this to incriminate Jesus. I’m telling you divorce was a **controversial issue** in Jesus day, as it is in our day.

### **Divorce is Controversial in Our Day**

Divorce is controversial in our day. Our culture does not take marriage seriously. Consider that around five out of ten marriages in our culture today will end in divorce. Divorce devastates families and children. It is the cause of years of bitterness and distress. It tears children apart.

### **Personal Testimony of Divorce**

I am from a family that decided to divorce. My mother divorced my father after 24 years of marriage for a love affair. The love affair lasted about six weeks, and then my mother lived another six years and died at the age of 49. Each member of my family has suffered because of it. Without Christ, divorce becomes the norm for many who don’t want to deal with the difficulties of marriage.

We want to present the teaching of Jesus today on divorce and remarriage. What does Jesus say to the Pharisees? He tells them to go back to Moses.

## II. Consider God's **Plan** for Marriage at Creation (19:4-6; Gen. 2:24).

**Matthew 19:3-6**, "And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, 'Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?'" 4 He answered, "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.**"

In other words, divorce is not part of God's original plan. He's quoting from **Genesis 2:24**, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

The leaving of father and mother and the cleaving to each other to form a new family unit, is God's design and idea which is rooted in the way He created and designed us as male and female.

God put the desire for marriage in most of us. Most want to leave our parents and cleave to a spouse. This is the desire for marriage, and this was God's design. Jesus goes back to the beginning again and quotes **Genesis 2:24** to prove this.

God's blueprint was that man and wife would be together "till death". They were not to do violence to God's institution of marriage.

### **Marriage a Picture of the Gospel**

Why? Ultimately **Ephesians 5:32-33** says that marriage is a picture of Christ and His church. **Ephesians 5:32-33**, "This mystery [of marriage] is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. 33 However, let each one of you [as husbands] love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband."

### **Marriage is Something God Puts Together**

Based on this, Jesus makes a powerful **declaration**. Man is not to separate what God has joined. A marriage is something God ultimately creates, not man. So Jesus in communicating this, gives one of the most important and powerful declarations and commands in the Bible. In verse 6 he says, "Therefore **what God has joined together** [the declaration], let no man separate [the command]." The declaration is that **marriage is the work of God**. Marriage is that which "God has joined together..."

**The union of marriage is something that God creates. It is not just a human decision. Or a human tradition.** This is true even for people who don't believe in God. Marriage is something God does, not just man. Therefore we see that God designed it in Genesis and God joined you together with your spouse the day you got married. Therefore, I say, marriage is a work of God and gets its meaning from God.

### **Death Alone Ends a Marriage**

**Death** alone separates a marriage. Therefore, Jesus ends his answer to the Pharisees, with the powerful command, "Let no man separate [what God joined]." **Since it is God's joining, only God can separate, and that separation is by death!**

**Romans 7** as well, among other places, tells us that there is only one thing that ought to separate a marriage—it is an act of God in death. God brings death to a spouse, and

you are free to remarry. **Romans 7:2-3**, “For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. 3 Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.”

Jesus and Paul give two exceptions to this that we are going to see **in a moment**. But first let's look at what Moses taught. Let's look back in **Matthew 19:7**.

### III. Consider the **Practice** of Moses (19:7-9).

**Matthew 19:7-9**, “They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” 8 He said to them, **“Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.** 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

#### **What Moses Said, A Concession**

What Moses gave was a concession to the hardness of men's hearts. Divorce exists only because of the pride and stubbornness of our hearts.

Jesus is saying that divorce was NEVER part of God's original plan. It was a concession! It was because of the hardness of men's hearts God permitted it. But from the beginning it was not so!

In order to preserve the structure and order of society, God permitted divorce in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy. But it was NOT a command as the Pharisees said, like they were just “following what God wanted”. No! **Deuteronomy 24:1-4**, “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.”

#### **Divorce Not God's Design**

It wasn't a command to divorce, but the exact opposite. It was in order to take marriage seriously. It was to govern man's heart. That if he in his pride and stubbornness divorce his wife, **he could not remarry her**.

You see, **Deuteronomy 24** was not the **desire of God's heart**, nor his design. This exception testified to the **hardness of the Jews' own hearts**. God tolerated and regulated the hardness of their hearts in his Law. He does this with other things as well. He regulated slavery and polygamy. Listen, these things are wrong, but so the culture and society would not get out of control, God regulated these things.

## **The Practice of Divorce in Jesus' Day**

There was a controversy in Jesus' day over two schools of rabbis. The two views over divorce really revolved around the interpretation of this phrase "some indecency".

### **The School of Hillel**

The school of **Hillel** had a very lenient interpretation of this. A man could divorce his wife for any reason –

- even the burning of food
- a wife walking around with her hair down,
- or speaking to other men on the street,
- or speaking disrespectfully of her husband's parents in her husband's presence
- Rabbi Akiba, who was of Hillel's school, went even further - he believed the phrase here in Deuteronomy 24, "she finds no favor in his eyes", meant that a man could divorce his wife if he found another woman more beautiful than her - imagine it!

### **The School of Shammai**

Then you had the school of **Shammai** who taught a couple could only divorce if the woman was found not to be a virgin during the betrothal period. Engagement in the ancient Jewish culture was considered marriage. If one was found to be immoral during that time, the marriage was ended. Shammai said this is the only reason a person was permitted to have a divorce.

### **Back to the Beginning, not Deut. but Genesis!**

So these were the two schools – one was lenient, and one was strict. It all hinged on the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24. But when Jesus asked, "What did Moses say?" He was not referring to Deut. 24. He was referring to Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. He brought them back to the beginning.

## **IV. Finally let's consider the Possibility of Adultery.**

**Matthew 5:31-32a**, "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..."

**Matthew 19:8-9**, "He said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.'"

This is such a powerful statement that the disciples are astounded. **Matthew 19:10**, "The disciples said to him, If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." It was shocking!

First he addresses the man who is thinking about leaving his wife to marry another woman: **Matthew 5:32**, "I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery...".

Whoa. Jesus takes divorce seriously. What's Jesus' point? Why does Jesus say this? Doesn't he know that in his audience and this audience are people who are divorced and remarried? Leaving your marriage is serious!

Tom Hovestall writes in his book "Extreme Righteousness":

"We live in a culture in which promises and commitments, even solemnly made ones, are routinely broken. Our wedding ceremonies, baptism rituals, infant dedications, and church membership covenants, to varying degrees, include pious oaths which we cavalierly break. Every divorce', he says, 'is a major violation of the promise 'Till death us do part'. However, we spend most of our theological energy debating when it is OK to break our promises."

Tom Hovestall writes in his book "Extreme Righteousness":

### **Called to be Salt and Light**

Remember Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount calls us to be "salt" to a rotten world and "light" to a dark world.

We as the church need to be different than our culture. **Many people today treat marriage like a backyard swimming pool for lounging around as long as we feel like it.**

### **Hard Questions**

Let me answer some hard questions about divorce and remarriage, and then challenge you and tell you ultimately why faithfulness in marriage is so important.

**1. Does God ever permit divorce?** There is not perfect agreement on this, but most Bible teachers agree that divorce is permitted for two reasons: unrepentant adultery and desertion by an unbeliever.

### **Unrepentant Adultery**

**Matthew 19:9**, "whoever divorces his wife, except for **sexual immorality**, and marries another, commits adultery."

The key is the interpretation of the word "sexual immorality" which is the Greek word *pornea*. Most agree that it is more than just adultery, because he could have said "adultery", but it is at minimum unrepentant adultery and includes devious sexual sins.

Again, this does not mean a person should divorce their spouse if they commit adultery. Consider the story of the Prophet Hosea in the Old Testament. He married a woman who became a prostitute and remained faithful to her. Faithful, gracious love is amazing. God's love is like that toward us. It's not a cheap love. It's not a love where God puts His head in the sand. Remember, "while we were yet sinners" God sent His Son to "die for us" (Romans 5:8).

### **Desertion by an Unbeliever**

1 Cor. 7 speaks to another exception, that of an unbelieving spouse abandoning the marriage. **1 Corinthians 7:10-16**, "To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband 11 (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his

wife. 12 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. 14 For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 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.** 16 Wife, how do you know whether you will save your husband? Husband, how do you know whether you will save your wife?"

**If remarriage in any other circumstance is adultery, what about those that have remarried without biblical grounds? What should they do?**

I do not think that a person who remarries against God's will, and thus commits adultery in this way, should later break the second marriage.

**Deuteronomy 24:1-4** forbids one who is remarried to go back and marry his first wife. This tells us that God recognizes the second marriage.

In other words, the marriage should not have been done, but now that it is done, it should not be undone by man. It is a real marriage. Real vows have been made and sexual union has happened. And that real covenant of marriage may be purified by the blood of Jesus and set apart for God.

### **Such Were Some of You!**

What does Jesus say about those who have failed in this way?

**1 Corinthians 6:9-11**, "do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, 10 nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

I don't think that a couple who repents and seeks God's forgiveness, and receives his cleansing, should think of their lives as ongoing adultery, even though, in the eyes of Jesus, that's how the relationship started.

A. Application.

1. To the **married**.

### **Picture of Christ and His Church**

You are a picture of Christ and the church. Demonstrate how Jesus will never forsake his church.

**Ephesians 5:25-32**, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 "Therefore



a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”

## **Hosea**

What should you do if your spouse strays? Read the book of Hosea. Consider the story of the Prophet Hosea in the Old Testament. He married a woman who became a prostitute and remained faithful to her. Faithful, gracious love is amazing. God’s love is like that toward us. If your spouse repents and turns and recommits to you, forgive them. It’s hard. You need to heal. But God has forgiven you.

### 2. To the **single**.

You are betrothed to Christ. Be a chaste virgin until the Bridegroom comes! Paul says to the church at **2 Corinthians 11:2**, “I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” Demonstrate the holiness of Christ’s church!

Be ready because God may call you to be married. But in the meantime, realize that contentment comes not from marriage or singleness, but from your relationship with Christ.

Is it hard at times? Yes, but God is going to squeeze all His children to conform them to Christ’s image. What can you do?

Get busy with your “forever family”. All of us, single and married, need to adopt each other into our families! Let’s spend time together, do life together, love God together!

**Conclusion:** Let me close with good news. Though in our sinfulness, we may divorce and remarry, Jesus will never commit adultery on us. He will never leave us or forsake us.

## **Jesus Never Divorces His Bride**

Jesus says, Don’t divorce your spouse and marry someone else. If you do, you’ve committed adultery. Why is it adultery? *Ultimately*, it is adultery because it betrays the truth about Christ that marriage is meant to display. Jesus never, never, never does that to his Bride, the church. He never forsakes her. He never abandons her. He never abuses her. He always loves her. He always takes her back when she wanders. He always is patient with her. He always cares for her and provides for her and protects her and, wonder of wonders, delights in her. And you—you who are married once, married five times, married never—if you repent and trust Christ—receive him as the treasure who bore your punishment and became your righteousness—you are in the bride. And that is how he relates to you. “Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).

## **Marriage Supper of the Lamb**

Remember there is coming a day when we will all get ready for the marriage supper of the Lamb!