

Matthew 5:31-32 (NKJV)

31 "Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'

32 But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.

To get a full perspective on what the Pharisees and Scribes really **thought** and **taught** about divorce we should look at another passage as well.

Matthew 19:3-10 (NKJV)

3 The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?"

4 And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made *them* at the beginning '*made them male and female,*'

5 and said, '*For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh*'?

6 So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

7 They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?"

8 He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted 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; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."

10 His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with *his* wife, it is better not to marry."

We are going to try to answer these questions this morning.

What did the law teach

What did the Scribes and Pharisees teach

What did Christ teach

Let's start with what the law said about divorce. This is what the Pharisees twisted.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (NKJV)

1 "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 uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts *it* in her hand, and sends

her out of his house,

² when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's wife,

³ if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts *it* in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife,

⁴ then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after 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 is giving you *as* an inheritance.

The word for uncleanness which is a divorceable offense is only used one other place. It is in Deut 23:13-14 and it is talking about how to arrange bathroom functions in the Israelite camp. It talks about covering up one's excrement because the Lord walks in the midst of your camp and He must not see anything indecent among you.

So it is difficult to know exactly what this uncleanness refers to. That is what the Pharisees used to their full advantage.

Now, we need to remember something. What was the punishment in the law of God for adultery? Death. So the law does not repeat this in Deut 24.

Divorce here must be something other than a married woman having sex with another man. That was already covered by stoning.

Prior to the law of Moses it is likely that men were divorcing or abandoning their wives at will, for **no good reason**. This would have been terrible for women and children. It is likely that the Mosaic law actually required a divorce to only be done for a **legitimate reason**, which must be proven before witnesses.

So **FIRST** the divorce law was **limiting** what a man could destroy a marriage for. It was not an **encouragement** to commit divorce, but an **allowance** only under special situations to do so. It was limited to finding "**some natural, moral or physical defect**" in the wife. This would have kicked many of the prior reasons for divorce out of the court. This would have been seen by women as a **protection**. The law was coming to their defense. It was protecting women and children from frivolous selfish-nesses of men.

Secondly, the law protected a woman in that it provided an **explanation** of her current state. It would say that **this** woman had been released by her prior husband and for **this** reason. The reason might be disgraceful, but it would not have been worthy of stoning. It was something big. But it was not that big.

This paper would protect the woman. It would **not** protect her from the **truth** of what was wrong with her, but it would protect her from having **no recourse** going forward.

This divorce paper was to be presented to her in the presence of two witnesses so that she could always appeal to those two people in the future if her status was brought into question.

And **THIRDLY**, the man could not change his mind once he divorced the woman. Even if the woman was divorced a second time and became available for marriage, the first husband did not have the option of marrying her again. It is likely that this is because the importance of marriage is being stressed. Divorce is not to be decided **frivolously**. And once decided it cannot be rescinded. This is not something you do in a fit of anger to hurt your wife. There is no undoing this.

So the divorce law was in scripture to protect women and children from arbitrary decisions of men. The divorce law was a good way to deal with a bad situation.

OK so that is what the law taught. Now what did the Pharisees teach?

We get the inside scoop from Matt 19 where they said this.

³ The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for *just* any reason?"

and then this

⁷ They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?"

⁸ He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

Look at how the Pharisees had twisted the law around. The law was created to keep women from being divorced due to frivolous reasons. But that is not at all how the Pharisees were using it. The way the Pharisees word it, it seems like they think the divorce law **requires** them to commit divorce. It **commands** them. Sorry wife but you crossed this line and now I must get rid of you because the divorce law says so.

In reality no one was ever **required** by the law to **divorce** anyone. Joseph thought he had a right to divorce Mary for a bit, and he planned to. But even if his suspicions had been correct, he was not **commanded** to commit divorce. But he was **enabled** to do so.

In fact the Pharisees were teaching that this idea of uncleanness can be expanded out to almost anything that a husband did not like about his wife.

Essentially, by **their** definitions, they had removed the protection for women and children that God had placed it there for.

The divorce law allowed for a man who finds himself in an unfortunate spot of finding something about his wife that he didn't know before he married her, it allows him to get out of that relationship. Or something might happen during a marriage that puts him in the same spot. Here is a way that is **fair to him** and deals with the wrong his wife had done in the best way possible.

The Pharisees had twisted it to the place where they could end a marriage because his wife burnt his supper. They had destroyed the benefit for women and children that the law was put into place for.

OK now what does Jesus teach?

We will mostly look at Jesus's expanded teaching in Matt 19. I think it is safe to assume, based on the other Gospels, that Jesus repeated His teachings on many of these topics at many locations. So what He teaches at one place is going to be the **same idea** as what He preached at another.

Let's read this again with an eye to what Jesus taught.

Matthew 19:3-10 (NKJV)

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4 And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made *them* at the beginning '*made them male and female,*'

5 and said, '*For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh*'?

6 So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

7 They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?"

8 He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted 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; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."

10 His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with *his* wife, it is better not to marry."

So the first teaching Jesus gives is that marriage is intended to be a "**till death do you part**" vow and relationship. In the garden of Eden, a man and women were created to complement each other. That was the first designed marriage

of a man and woman living together. And that powerful sexual desire that God **built into His creation** would assure men and women will **want** to be together. And if they are going to be together, it will require a man starting up his own family by, in some way, breaking with the dependence he had in his family in order to be depended upon in this new family.

Somehow these two who get married, when they become one physically, or by the marriage vow or both, I am not sure how that works, but in some way **God joins together**. God actually takes the credit for putting the two together in some way that is more than just the man and woman can decide to do. The joining becomes more than something God **recognizes**. It becomes something God **DOES**. So now it is **more** than just a physical union backed by a promise. It becomes a union created by God. Now **He** has joined them together. He has created a union intended for life in that couple. And that is how **He** regards it. The logic is that, once it is **bound together** it is never to be **unbound** except at death. And those who trifle with **frivolously** unbinding that bond are rebelling against God.

This is **God's** view of marriage. This is marriage as God created it. It is intended to be dissoluble.

It is good for us to ponder that this morning. I believe that we might all believe this. But it is still important to consider.

Our marriage relationships are way more important in God's sight than might be sensed or perceived or imagined. Doesn't getting married sometimes seem like a decision I made so it is a decision I can unmake? Isn't it something like buying a house? Yeah it is a big deal to buy a house, but I can always sell it if I want to.

According to Jesus, marriage is not like that. In our cases, men, we were not required by law to marry the person we married. But once we did, as long as they don't violate the single condition of divorce, they are ours and we are to love them as Christ loved the church. Divorce is not an option to us.

Paul in 1 Corinthians allows for a second option. If an unbelieving spouse refuses to stay with us, we can accept their divorce as well. But those are the only conditions mentioned.

Marriage really is that big of a deal, that big of a commitment. Till death do us part really is an **accurate description** of the strength of a marriage bond. There may be drastic measures needed in marriages to deal with sin issues. Maybe a separation for safety may be required at times. But the bond is not to be trifled with.

We cannot afford to play with our lusts. If we play with that cat we are going to get scratched. Relational flirting and trying to get positive sexual oriented

strokes can turn into a fire far too quickly. Scripture warns us to stay away from all of that sin. If you are a believer and you are married, I can pretty well guaranty you what the devil's will for your marriage is. He wants it violated. That is his will for your life. And all sexually oriented sins are just precursors and preparations.

Now what is the condition for divorce? What does Jesus teach?

³² **But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery**

So the only reason that a believer is allowed to divorce another believer is this: sexual immorality. This is the Greek word "pornea" which is the root word for our word pornography. It means fornication and points to all sexual sins of the mind or body. It's most primary meaning is illicit sexual intercourse. But it can be more than that.

Now my question then is, why did Jesus not pick the word for **adultery**, which is a **very specific word** and would let us know that the only reason for a man to divorce a woman is if she has sex with another man? Why did Jesus not limit it to that?

Well, in our world it is not hard at all to figure out why Jesus did not use that word. With all the sexual craziness in our world, the sin a wife might be guilty of could be homosexual sin. It could involve all matters of sexual craziness and perversity. So Jesus did not limit it by using the word **adultery**.

I think the safest way to define Jesus's use of pornea in this passage is to define it like this. Pornea is any sexual sin in the old testament that held the death penalty for the person doing it. That is safest. And that is grounds for divorce.

How many Christian divorces would **not have happened** this year if this was the only grounds for which a Christian would divorce? How many marriages would not have been destroyed this year if Christ's people would just go by His rules?

Now could there be a woman who was committed to being with men or women in ways that she shouldn't be, but did not cross certain lines? Could that be a form of pornea that is divorceable? Maybe. Those are the kind of things church leadership might need to help discern. But it is very clear that the only divorceable offense is sexual in nature. It is doing something with someone sexually that should not be done.

Now why is that the only grounds for divorce? I believe it is because sexual intimacy is the greatest difference between the marriage relationship and every other relationship. Sexual intimacy is part of **the basis** that the

marriage relationship is based on. It is at **the root** of a marriage relationship. So the violation of the sexual union it is the **destruction** of marriage.

The physical union is part of what creates the bond.

We tend to view a marriage being broken when the divorce is announced and decided upon. But it is more likely that the marriage is destroyed when the **sexual act** outside the marriage is **committed**. It is **then** that the bond is broken. It is **then** that what God brought together has been broken. And that is why divorce is then allowed. Divorce then simply reflects what has already happened. The man, in this case, is not initiating a destruction of the marriage. He is simply announcing it. The man is the victim in this case, not the woman. He did not sign up for this kind of relationship and by divorce he is given some recourse accordingly.

I believe that is why Jesus allows divorce. It allows a man to reflect the reality of what was done to him.

Now, we need to answer one more question.

If there are legitimate grounds for divorce, what are the implications if a person takes them?

Well in this case if the marriage has been violated by adultery or something closely akin to adultery, the man has every right to remarry. The marriage has already been broken. He did not do the breaking of it. And the man is given the option here to divorce his wife. Divorce, by its very nature, is the pronouncement of the end of a marriage. When rightfully divorced a man can remarry.

The problem the Pharisees had is they were divorcing for all kinds of reasons. And they were wrong reasons. So they were announcing the end of marriages that God still recognized as legitimate. And that could only result in adultery being committed, in some sense, by both parties.

If you look at the texts where Jesus talks about divorce, divorce is normally wrongfully done in the bigger context of coveting. So Jesus reveals that a large part of what He says about divorce is inspired by the revelation that coveting is the lions share of incentive for divorce.

I think we can understand Matthew 19 in the context of coveting causing a man to want to replace his wife and looking for a reason to do so.

In Matthew 19 Jesus says this:

⁹ And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."

I believe this is essentially what is being said here. There is no way to cover this **illegitimate** act with **legitimacy**. There is no way to cover having destroyed a marriage **on paper** that was not already destroyed by a **sexual violation**. This wrongful divorce is destined to result in adultery by all parties. It has to. Because the divorce itself has caused a married woman to act as if she is not. The husband has forced that woman to commit adultery in order to have a marriage, which in those days she may have needed for survival. Even when he marries her and commits to her, the bond with her husband had not been broken. When the man marries this wrongly divorced woman, the act is adultery. She is still a married woman. It does not matter what the paper says. And it is his adultery with her breaks that initial bond.

And even if the man who does the wrongful divorcing goes out and pretends to be doing something legitimate by **taking the second wife** in the first wife's place, him bringing that second wife to replace the first is complicit in the **first wife's adultery**. Had he not replaced his first wife, there would be no adultery. But since he has, the whole thing is just a huge ball of adultery. And when a man commits a divorce that is not simply announcing a bond that has **already been** broken, the man is guilty for all the adultery that happens. I think that is what Jesus is saying.

By being forced to **find another marriage**, the wronged **woman** commits adultery. By coveting a second wife and forcing the first one out in order to marry the second, the divorcing man **commits adultery**.

The Pharisees would have seen that second marriage as being perfectly legitimate. They would have thought they were doing something that **fit into** God's law. They were doing something **God would honor**, just like the first wife's marriage. But Jesus is letting them know what He thinks of their shenanigans. He does not see that **second relationship** as legitimate at all. It is just a ball of adultery. The relationship is conceived in the **violation** of marriage. It is in the framework of destroying marriage. And it is because of the violence done by the divorce of the first woman. The Pharisees thought adultery was very bad. Jesus is telling their way of divorcing IS the committing of adultery. That is its essence. I believe that is Jesus's message to the Pharisees. It doesn't conform to the law of God. It is an absolute violation of it.

Now what should a Christian do about it if they are in a marriage situation like this? That is a different sermon. But repentance should be the place to start.

Then normally carrying out that marriage, no matter how badly it started, would be the faithful thing to do. But again, that is a different sermon.

I don't know that we learned much new this morning, but I hope we get the point. God thinks marriage is a big deal. Divorce is not an option between believers except for sexual immorality which has already violated the marriage. If you are prone to playing with those ideas I think it is safe to say you should stop. And we would do well to honor that commitment as well as we possibly can. Maybe a thought for this week should be- If the Lord has created this bond between myself and my spouse, what choices can I make to honor that which God has done.