

## CHRIST'S TEACHING ON DIVORCE

MATTHEW 5:31-32

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ONE ADVANTAGE OF TAKING A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH to preaching is that it forces us to deal with subjects during our Sunday worship service that are not often heard from the pulpit. Last week we dealt with the difficult subject of waging war on sin. This week we deal with yet another difficult subject; namely, the topic of divorce.

The way I have chosen to deal with the subject of divorce is to first define what the law of Moses teaches concerning this matter. After that we will consider the Pharisees teaching on divorce. Then finally we will consider what Jesus taught.

First then, what does the law of Moses really teach about divorce? The main passage from the Old Testament that we must use to answer this question comes from DEUTERONOMY 24:1-4. I will read this passage.

*If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.*

The situation described in this passage is one where a man writes a certificate of divorce for a specific reason or reasons, and it is very important that we understand the reasons. Notice, first of all, that there is no mention of adultery in this passage. The Mosaic law did not say that a man could write a certificate of divorce and put away his wife if she had committed adultery. The reason why adultery is not stated as a ground for divorce is easy to understand. Under Mosaic law, the penalty for adultery was death. After the guilty party had been executed, there would be no need to issue a certificate of divorce. The bond of marriage would be broken in the death of the guilty party.

So, if adultery was not the reason for writing a certificate of divorce, then what was the reason? What does DEUTERONOMY 24:1 mean when it talks about a man being displeased with his wife because he finds something indecent about her? The word "indecent" here must be defined in the

context of rest of the Old Testament. The Old Testament specifically lists the things that make people unclean in the sense having some kind of moral or physical defect. For instance, a person would become morally unclean if they engaged in idol worship. And, they would become physically unclean if they contracted a disease such as leprosy.

Civil laws are written to bring order to society. When Moses defined the conditions for divorce, he was writing civil law that was needed to bring order to a society that had lost order. Jesus himself said that Moses wrote this law; because the people who lived during that time had become hardened in their hearts. In other words, men were divorcing their wives for any and every reason under the sun. The civil law about divorce recorded in DEUTERONOMY does not condone divorce. It simply defines what the process should be if a person is bound and determined to do it. Morally speaking, divorce remains something that is detestable in the eyes of God, causing irreparable damage to husband, wife, children, family, and society. MALACHI 2:16 reveals God's attitude toward divorce better than any other passage. "I hate divorce," says the Lord God of Israel." Morally speaking, divorce is wrong. It is a sin. It is something that God hates.

But, people do things that are morally wrong. And, when they sin, there must be civil law that will force order in a society; otherwise, the situation will become entirely chaotic. This was why the civil law was written. It was written because the hearts of the people had become hard, and they were bound and determined to do the thing God hates.

The civil law of Moses did three things. First of all, it limited the reasons for obtaining a legal divorce to the things that would make a woman indecent in the eyes of her husband. The husband actually had to prove that his wife had become unclean in a physical or moral sense. And he had to have two witnesses to prove it.

I know that this seems extremely unfair to the woman, and according to our standards, it was. But, we must realize that, during the time in question, a woman had no rights whatsoever. Prior to this civil law, a man could do away with his wife for any reason at all, while a woman had no right whatsoever to do away with her husband. Now the civil law of Moses actually made the situation better for the woman. Although she continued to have no legal right to divorce her husband, this law put new restrictions

on the husband. Many of the various excuses men had been using could no longer be used. The man now had to establish that there was some special cause described under the title of uncleanness.

*Another (the second)* advantage it brought to the Israeli woman was to protect her life. Prior to this civil law, a man could say he no longer wanted his wife and turn her out of his house. She would then be at the mercy of the whole world. She might be charged with unfaithfulness and be stoned to death. But this legislation protected the woman by giving her an actual certificate proving that the reason for being kicked out of the home was not unfaithfulness; rather, it was some other reason.

The *third* thing the Mosaic law did was to entitle the woman to marry someone else. But, if the second husband also gives her a bill of divorcement, even though she could marry a third time, she must not marry her first husband. The people of Israel needed to realize that marriage was not something you could walk in and out of at will. The law of Moses tells the first husband that, if he gives his wife a certificate of divorce, it is a permanent thing.

All this still seems very unfair to the woman. However, when you compare Israeli law and society as defined by the Old Testament to the rest of the world at that time, the Israeli wives were better off than wives from other nations who had no protection whatsoever. In the Greek world for instance, wives were used solely for the purpose of bearing and rearing children. Men were encouraged and expected to have other women for pleasure and for cohabitation. For the nation of Israel, such behavior was prohibited. So the main purpose of the Old Testament teaching on divorce is twofold: first, to condemn divorce; and second, to provide stability to society and protection to the wife in cases where people decided to violate the moral law.

Now we have to turn our attention to the Pharisees and Scribes's teaching on divorce. *"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'"* These are the words of Jesus as he quotes what the Scribes and Pharisees taught about divorce. MATTHEW 19:7 also helps us to understand the teaching of the Scribes and Pharisees. That verse records a question that the Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce. They asked, *"Why did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce."* So the Pharisees interpretation of DEUTERONOMY 24:1-4 was that Moses commanded divorce.

Now the law of Moses did no such thing. The Old Testament never commanded a man to divorce his wife. God hates divorce. What the Old Testament did was to provide civil laws for those bent on doing the thing that was wrong. So the interpretation of the Pharisees was incorrect.

Building on this false interpretation, the Pharisees went on to define the kinds of indecencies that would constitute a reason for a man to demand a divorce from his wife. Their interpretation of indecency was extremely liberal, going far beyond what the Old Testament defined as unclean. According to the school of Hillel, a man could divorce his wife if she spoiled his dinner by putting too much salt in his food or if she went in public with her head uncovered or if she talked with men in the streets or if she was a brawling woman or if she spoke disrespectfully of her husband's parents in his presence or if she was troublesome or quarrelsome. One Rabbi by the name of Akiba said that the words "if she finds no favor in his eyes," recorded in DEUTERONOMY, meant that a man might divorce his wife if he found a woman whom he considered to be more attractive than she.

The Pharisees were very strict on teaching the necessity of writing out the certificate of divorce; however, during the time Christ preached the Sermon on the Mount, it was no longer important to state the reason for divorce. Listen again as Jesus quotes the Pharisees in MATTHEW 5:31: *"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'"* From these words, we can see that the emphasis of the Pharisees' teaching on divorce was not on the reason for divorce. Almost any reason would do. All the emphasis was placed on the mandate to issue a certificate of divorce. That seemed to be the only important thing to the Pharisees.

Now, Jesus knew that the teaching of the Pharisees and Scribes was out of harmony with the civil law written by Moses, and it was also out of harmony with the moral law. The civil law severely limited the reasons a man could use to get a certificate of divorce. The Pharisees lifted those restrictions. The moral law declares that divorce is something God hates. The Pharisees encouraged divorce on demand. Their teaching left the strong impression that God favored and even demanded divorce when the reasons for divorce existed. That is a summary of the Pharisee's teaching on divorce.

Now, let's note carefully how Jesus corrected the teaching of the Scribes and Pharisees. First of all, let's look at what Jesus had to say about the moral law of God concerning divorce. Then, let's consider what Jesus did to change the civil law written by Moses.

Using one short sentence to explain what Jesus taught about the moral law on divorce, I say that *Jesus did nothing to change the moral law.* Jesus never changed any of the moral laws written in the Old Testament. He, being God, was the author of those laws, and those laws were created for eternity. God still hates divorce just as much now as He did when He spoke through the prophet Malachi. To make this point,

Jesus tried to help the Pharisees understand the Biblical meaning of marriage. He quoted from GENESIS 1:27 which states that when God created people, *"He created them in His own image, male and female He created them."* And then, Jesus quoted from GENESIS 2:24 and said, *"For this reason a man shall leave His father and mother, and the two shall become one flesh."*

A man and a woman unite to become one flesh for the expressed purpose of reflecting the image of God—that is the Biblical definition of marriage. And, Jesus said, when two people become one flesh for this reason, then there is no reason why they should be separated. There is no moral reason under heaven for either husband or wife to break such a bond. Only God can create such a bond, and what God has put together, no man should ever separate. God hates divorce. God hates it when people break the sacred bond.

But, men and women are weak and prone to sin. People do break the bond, even though they are not supposed to. And when that happens, order must be established. People have not evolved out of their need for order in society. There is still a need for law and order just as there was in Moses' time.

Jesus did not deny the need for civil law, but he did change the law. Jesus canceled the civil law of Moses regarding divorce as He did with all the civil laws. The nation of Israel would no longer be the one nation to represent law and order to all the nations of the world. That privilege would now be handed over to the church. And Jesus established new rules of law and order for the church, different from those established in the law of Moses.

Unfaithfulness would no longer be a crime punishable by death. People would no longer be stoned for committing adultery. And when a wife came down with a dreaded disease or worshipped an idol, that would no longer be grounds for a husband to write a certificate of divorce. And, according to Jesus, men and women would now stand on equal ground when it comes to laws governing divorce.

Basically, what Jesus taught is this: It is never right for a person to break the sacred bond of marriage; but when people insist on doing so, there is only one reason for going through with the process of obtaining a certificate of divorce. And that is in the case of unfaithfulness. This does not mean that a person has to file for a divorce if he has found his spouse to be unfaithful. We are not commanded to divorce, even if there is reason to do so.

In the case of one couple I married, the husband became unfaithful to his wife. He not only ran off to live with and sleep with another woman, when he returned home, he would beat his wife. Biblically speaking, she had every right to file for

a divorce, but she chose not to. The Bible never demands that we file for divorce, it only leaves it open as an option, and then only in the case of marital unfaithfulness, only in the case when either husband or wife become one flesh with another person.

I am sure it broke the heart of our Lord to even have to list fornication as the only ground for filing for divorce. Divorce is never right in the eyes of God. He hates it. It is always hardness of the hearts of men and women that make it necessary for God to establish such rules. God does not take pleasure in having to create these rules.

What would happen if there were no rules? That is not a hard question to answer. We can see the answer to that question all around us. Chaos happens, and society breaks down. As the civil laws relating to divorce become more and more relaxed, allowing people to file for divorce for any reason or even for no reason at all, our civilization becomes more and more chaotic. The one reason Jesus gave for divorce was even more restrictive than what was written in the Old Testament, and it runs completely contrary to flow of the culture of our present day. This is why it is now so very difficult to live the Christian life.

Today many people who profess to be Christian contemplate divorce for reasons other than marital unfaithfulness. This obviously is contrary to the teaching of Christ. But peer pressure in our society leads us to believe that incompatibility is a valid reason to file for divorce. We can't stand the thought of living with a person who, in our estimation, is making our life miserable. We fail to realize that a lifelong commitment to help another person know God and work with that person to help others know God is not easy. We listen to the voices around us that tell us not to suffer. 'File for divorce,' they say, 'before it is too late and while you are still young enough to enjoy life.' And so we ignore the teaching of Christ and listen to our peers.

But perhaps the most difficult question is for those Christians who did not initiate the divorce process. There are some Christians who never filed for divorce, but their spouse did and the divorce has been made legal. According to the teaching of Jesus, what are these people supposed to do? This question is not easy to answer.

Some Bible teachers will say that these people must never marry again, while other Bible teachers will say that they are free to get married. The majority of Bible teachers will say that, in the case where the one who filed for divorce was unfaithful and has become one in flesh with another person, then the divorce has ended the marriage. The Christian man or woman who was divorced is now free from the original bond and can marry another person. I personally take this stand and will so advise people who come to me.

However, in the case where the person who has filed for divorce has not become physically one with another person, it is much more difficult to give advice. The plain meaning of Christ's teaching seems to be that fornication is the only thing that can break the sacred bond between a husband and wife. So, Jesus implies, when a man divorces his wife for any other reason than fornication, the sacred bond is still there, even though the legal document of divorce is in tact. This is why, in the time of Christ, it placed the wife in an impossible position. In the time of Christ, it was next to impossible for a woman to survive without being married. So the divorced woman would be forced to get married and thus be forced to break the bond by becoming physically one with another person. For all practical purposes, she would be forced to commit adultery.

The implication for us is this: *As Christians who are married, we are obliged to spend the rest of our lives helping our mates know God.* That is an unconditional obligation that we must fulfill regardless of how we are treated by our marriage partners. Even if they file for divorce and get it, we are still bound to our obligation and must not enter into a sacred marriage union with another person as long as we are still morally bound to the original union. The only thing that breaks the original bond is when one of the people in the union becomes physically one with another person, and by doing so creates a new union.

I personally believe this more conservative interpretation of Christ's teaching on divorce is the most accurate one. It is also the toughest position to take in our society. It is a position that seems to punish the innocent person who professes to be a Christian. It is a position that requires a tremendous determination on the part of a person not to give up on their spouse even though their spouse has given up on them. I know one person who has been legally divorced for some years. She has refused to remarry and continues to do everything in her power to help her ex-husband grow in his relationship with Christ. This is very hard to do, but I admire her greatly for her vision of marriage that few people nowadays have. Even very few people who profess to be Christian have this vision of marriage.

Although I take the conservative position that marital unfaithfulness is the only ground for divorce and that, if a legal divorce takes place for other reasons, then the bond has not really been broken, I must admit that there are people whom I respect who take a more liberal position. Their position is based on one verse recorded in 1 CORINTHIANS 7:15. That verse reads like this, *"But if the unbeliever leaves (that is walks out on the marriage), let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace."* Some people say that the

words, "not bound" that appear in this sentence mean that they are not obliged to provide physical support for the other person. But other Bible teachers contend that the words "not bound" mean that the marriage may be dissolved and the believer is then free to marry another person. A lot of words have been said in favor of both arguments. I hope none of us ever have to face this question in our own marriage. Those of us who are involved in counseling will most likely have to face it and take a stand one way or the other.

But there is one final thing I must say about Christ's teaching on divorce, and it is the most important thing I have to say. It is that divorce is not the unpardonable sin that we often make it out to be. It is a sin to be sure, but like all other sins, it is not beyond God's ability to forgive. Those who have been divorced can be forgiven. Those who have divorced their spouse in the past for reasons other than marital unfaithfulness can be forgiven. Those who have remarried or who have become physically one with another person even when their original spouse was not unfaithful can be forgiven. We come to the cross just as we are, and we leave the cross as new creations in Christ. We must no longer live in the past. If unfaithfulness has been part of our past, then we must ask forgiveness and go on with our lives. We must not allow the guilt and shame from the past to drag us down.

I find no Biblical reason for stopping a person or a couple who has been divorced in the past but has now found forgiveness in Christ from using their spiritual gifts in the church to serve, even on a leadership level. I believe the qualification of a leader to serve should be based on his or her present condition, not on something that has happened in the past.

There are many churches where well over 50% of the people attending have been divorced in the past. To make a rule forbidding those people from serving would, in affect, kill the ministry.

Most of us will not go through life without being affected by the sin of divorce. If it does not happen to you personally, then it will probably happen to your parents or one of your close relatives. If not a relative, then it will happen to a close friend. Statistically speaking, it is almost impossible to avoid coming into close contact with this sin. So it is important for us to understand Christ's teaching on the subject of divorce. And it is important for us to forgive and to feel forgiven. May God grant us the grace we need to obey Christ's teachings. And may God help us to experience his grace and share His grace with others who need to experience it.