

Marriage and Divorce

Matthew 5:31-32 & 19:3-9 ~ October 16, 2016 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church

Late one evening in 1973, when I was a sophomore at Dana College in Blair Nebraska, I received a call from my parents. They had called to tell me that my beloved uncle and aunt, who had spent summers with us and were almost a second set of parents, were getting a divorce. This news shocked and traumatized me in ways that I can still feel today. I know little about the actual circumstances. There was a third party involved, but I don't know beyond that. Whenever I come to the subject of divorce I think about that call from my parents and the heartbreak I experienced.

And yet my own experience with my uncle and aunt's divorce is a minor thing compared to the agony endured by people who go through divorce first hand. I wouldn't even pretend to understand the nature of what they suffer. I think that divorce and marriage difficulties may be a chief cause of misery for God's people. In fact it may be the most consistent source of pain. There is nothing that throws one's life out of balance, darkening every aspect of living, like being estranged from our life's partner. And so because of that pain, it is vital that we approach Jesus words about divorce and remarriage very, very carefully. Frequently Jesus teachings here have been used dogmatically in a way that ignores their original context. This way of thinking about divorce is extremely unhelpful and often has undermined the true message of Jesus' teachings.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus deals with the subject of divorce in two separate places. In Matthew 5:31-32 and again in Matthew 19:3-10. However both times he is primarily dealing with a false teaching of the scribes and the Pharisees not talking about divorce in general. It is impossible to gauge what Jesus words mean about divorce in general without careful consideration of the context in which he speaks. In Matthew 19:3 we read:

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"

As during the Sermon on the Mount, the context for Jesus' remarks is a bitter controversy between Jesus and the ruling Jewish powers. The true problem from Jesus' perspective is not the matter of divorce; it is the matter of marriage. The scribes and

the Pharisees had manipulated the religious legal code in a way that made a mockery of marriage. The custodians of Jewish law taught that marriage was primarily a way for a man to bond a female servant for his convenience. If she displeased him in any way or if he found another that he liked better, then the law codes allowed him to divorce as a way to dismiss or fire a wife. This was the callous, cynical, and corrupt understanding of marriage that Jesus detested!

Can you see what a perverted view of marriage was prevalent in ancient Israel at Jesus time? It is no wonder that Jesus' stand against casual divorce caused such an outburst from the Scribes and Pharisees that they tried to nail him on this very issue. But when the representatives of the Pharisees attempted to get Jesus to address the technicality in Moses prescription for divorce, Jesus addresses them with the plan and purpose God has for marriage by quoting from Genesis 2.

He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 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'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

Jesus makes the point that God established marriage as a fundamental building block of human society. God is the one who makes marriage what it is, not humans. Marriage is never only about the feelings of the two married partners. It is God's work to build his world. He does everything in his power to make marriage strong, including adding his blessing to lifelong marriage and his warning that ending marriage prior to death is against his will.

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This is a healthy understanding of marriage. This understanding is what Christ teaches his Christians to affirm. And whether our marriages remain intact or have ended in divorce we can affirm the truth of God's plan and his desire for marriage. The very pain and misery that those who have endured divorce should be evidence enough to support Jesus teaching here.

However, it is another false teaching to suggest that in order to be right with God divorce is an unacceptable option in all cases. This is a legalism that rivals the arrogance of the scribes and the Pharisees. Please listen carefully to what I am saying. There are

people who as a matter of faith dedicate themselves to remaining married through some very horrendous circumstances. This is commendable and it does reflect what God is teaching us about the sanctity of marriage. But it does not cover every situation or circumstance. Sometimes the nature of infidelity, spouse abuse, and long term addiction may be so destructive that divorce is the only kind of spiritual surgery that can enable people to survive. This is what Jesus means when he says that Moses allowed for divorce. This means that, as written, God's legal code reluctantly allows for divorce because of the nature of sin itself. Sin grips the heart so firmly that the required changes to make continued marriage possible are, in effect, impossible.

Even Jesus himself recognizes adultery as a legitimate cause for divorce. This is because adultery actually breaks the marriage permanently. It is true that many marriages have survived adultery, but in truth, the original marriage is gone. It cannot be recovered. Instead a new marriage needs to be built from the bottom up. Not everyone is able to undertake the level of risk required to build a new marriage after adultery. And the decision to undertake such a new beginning is difficult and complicated. Only the people involved can make that choice. By no means should they be subjected to legalistic pronouncements. Jesus certainly didn't intend his teaching to be used in that way.

This brings us to the subject of remarriage after divorce. We read in today's text,

And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.

The legalistically minded will say, "That settles it, you can't remarry after being divorced." But they are wrong when they say that. They are making a common mistake of taking a small part of Scripture out of context. The reason Jesus says this, in the way he does, actually has very little to do with remarriage, and everything to do with the false teaching of the scribes and Pharisees about marriage and divorce. Some famous Pharisees actually taught that if you saw someone you liked better than your current wife it was no problem. Simply divorce your current wife and marry the new woman. Their interpretation of Moses law allowed them to do that. Think about it. If it were possible for you to quickly and easily divorce your current spouse and marry someone else, how is that different from adultery? As Jesus says, it is in fact very adulterous.

This is the kind of remarriage that Jesus calls adulterous. And even though many people in our culture practice this kind of divorce, there are others who remarry for good reasons and by the leading of God's Holy Spirit. Consider this. We know that God loves marriage. It is foundational to his plan for human society. When sin breaks a marriage beyond recovery, do you think God's response is to say, "Well you had your chance, you now must never marry again?"

I don't believe that a gracious God would ever do that. Scripture itself promotes marriage as a good move for people who find themselves desiring such companionship. My friends, this is a matter of courage for Christians. Do we have the courage to stand on our faith in God's grace or not. Will we cower behind some kind of legal code that people have made up on the basis of scripture texts taken out of context? When people flatly say, "Divorce is a sin." Or "No one should marry again after divorce." OR "Divorced people must step back from leadership in a congregation." Then they are simply being legalistic cowards. This is not the "Christianity" Jesus calls us to. Our faith in the Work of the Holy Spirit needs to be the guide to our life, not legal codes.

I can affirm for you that within my experience the Holy Spirit has led some people into divorce. It is always sad and difficult...but it can stand within the parameters of a Spirit lead life. It can resonate with the Word of God in Scripture itself. In the same way the Spirit can lead people into remarriage. When the Spirit leads, these marriages are rich and blessed in exactly the way God promises in his Word. The key here is to understand the power and efficacy of the Spirit's work in our lives. Boiling Christianity down to nothing more than stale rules is to go over to the camp of the scribes and Pharisees. And on the great day that Jesus raises all the dead, I don't think we want to be grouped with them.

But someone will say, "If we are soft on divorce or remarriage then our culture's problem with divorce will only get worse." To the people who say those things, we must ask, "Do you blame the cause of a war on the casualties of that war?" That is ludicrous. Satan attacks marriage with every weapon at his disposal. Should we wonder that one of God's greatest gifts to us, marriage, should suffer losses? If we respond with legalistic platitudes, we give Satan exactly what he wants; more guilt, more shame, and more brokenness. Please, let us stand up and be counted on the side of grace. The difference between a divorce of convenience that the Pharisees advocated, and a Spirit led ending of a marriage to save the people involved will be revealed to us. Let us live

this life by the Spirit, not by the dead letter of the law. Let us look to love and care for people who are victims of war in the Kingdom of God.

This is the nature of our new life in Christ. You are adults now, no longer under the tutelage of childish rules. You follow the real Jesus of Scripture. He speaks directly into your hearts through Spirit's revelation in the Bible and the community of saints. His purpose is that you hear his teachings as he taught them and for their true purpose. That purpose is to make you children of God who walk each day by the power of the Holy Spirit alive in your lives. In this way, marriage, human community, and the Kingdom are all blessed and enriched for the glory of God. You have ceased to be humans awaiting death. You have become eternal beings walking now in the light of God.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.