

STUDY ON THE TEACHING OF JESUS

MARRIAGE & DIVORCE

Read Matthew 5:31-32 & Matthew 19:1-12

It is difficult to teach on divorce because it seems to bring to the surface all the pain that people of our generation carry. And when there is pain, there is sensitivity, extreme sensitivity to anything that might be construed as judgmental. If Jesus were to speak publicly today about divorce he would be lambasted as being politically incorrect, judgmental, harsh, and unbending. He would be silenced because his words would be too painful to a generation so liberal in its views.

But perhaps Jesus' teaching carries with it the seeds of truth that we need to heal us. Perhaps if we embrace Jesus' teaching despite our pain, and pass his words on to the next generation, they will do better than we.

“Furthermore, it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 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.” (Matthew 5:31-32)

It is difficult to deal with so complex a subject with these two verses alone. Why does Jesus say this? What is behind it? Jesus offers a more extended teaching on divorce in Matthew 19:1-12, so this study will consider carefully what Jesus teaches there.

Historical View

In Matthew 19:1-12, the Pharisees are asking their question about divorce "to test him," trying to put Jesus on the spot, to force him to take a controversial stand that would alienate people. The Pharisees themselves did not even agree on the answer. They thought irrespective of how Jesus answers this question, there will be those who will be unhappy with His answer.

In the Middle East in ancient times divorce was common and taken for granted. This already widespread practice was regulated and therefore limited by Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The key verse reads:

"When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favour 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, when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's wife, 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, 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." (Deuteronomy 24:1-4)

The Mosaic Law provided that a husband could not just send his wife away casually. There was the requirement that the husband must write out a legal document called a "certificate of divorce" and give it to his wife (and then forfeit his wife's dowry, which made divorce too expensive for most husbands).

The allowable cause for the divorce, "*because he has found some uncleanness in her*" was hotly debated - in Jesus' day and in ours.

In the Beginning

In answering the Pharisees, Jesus goes back to God's original intention for marriage as found in two passages in Genesis:

"So, God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female he created them." (**Genesis 1:27**)

"For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." (**Genesis 2:24**)

Then Jesus goes on to interpret these verses (19:6):

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

In other words, God has made the man and woman one. God has joined them, and it is not for man to sever the union.

What God Has Joined (19:6)

One question I am commonly asked is framed something like this: "My first wife and I were not married in a church, so we were never married in the eyes of God, were we?" My answer goes back to the beginning, too. God instituted marriage and made a man and his wife one flesh. It had nothing specially to do with church or religion. It had to do with God's institution of marriage, a kind of "natural law" based on God's intention for marriage and the way he made human beings.

The Apostle Paul draws on this natural law when he says, "Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, 'The two will become one flesh'" (1 Corinthians 6:16). Even an illicit union involves this essential unity or "one flesh" relationship between a man and a woman.

Men and women can be "just friends," but when they have sex, the relationship changes significantly. They view each other differently. They have shared something that unites them. Pulling that bond apart is wrenching and damaging.

Homosexuality

Jesus does not discuss homosexuality in Matthew 19, but his teaching on God joining a man and a woman in marriage is relevant to a subject under consideration. Homosexuality is a perversion of God's intention for the one flesh relationship between a man and a woman. Women can have strong and deep friendships with other women. Men can have strong and deep friendships with other men. That is good and healthy. But these should not be confused with sexual relationships. Sexual relationships are something else entirely and involve spiritual and social relationships that cannot be perverted without serious consequences to the individual, the family, and the society.

So, in his teaching, Jesus does not appeal to one rabbi or another. He goes back to God's original intention for marriage "in the beginning." And he concludes that God's intention for marriage is that the man and woman be joined in an indissoluble union, "one flesh."

Certificate of Divorce (19:7)

The Pharisees are not happy with this answer, however, since their purpose is to test Jesus' in this topic of controversy. What are the allowable causes for divorce? they want to know. So, they ask another question.

"Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" (**v7**)

Notice the spin the Pharisees put on the question. "Why did Moses command...?" Moses did not command divorce. What he did command is that if a man wanted to divorce his wife, he could not just

turn her out of her house. It had to be a formal and legal severing of the marriage, with financial implications as well as the ability to remarry. Without a certificate of divorce, the wife would not be able to remarry. This, of course, is one of the big questions we ask. Can a divorced person remarry? In the society of Jesus' day, the answer was Yes. Divorce and the right to remarry went hand in hand with each other. Divorce was usually performed by saying, "You are free to marry any man."

But I Tell You (19:9)

Jesus contrasts what the religious leaders were saying about Moses and a certificate of divorce with his own pronouncement:

"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." (19:9).

What Jesus said to the Pharisees was radical indeed. They were arguing about how big the escape door was. But Jesus was saying, in essence, that there is no escape door from God's intention of lifelong marriage. And to divorce and remarry was to commit adultery.

Wow! Just like each of the elements of the Sermon on the Mount, he contrasts, "You have heard it said ..." with "but I say to you." The legalism is contrasted with the spirit of the law.

There are a lot of adulterers out there. It takes the shape of looking on a woman with adulterous intent or divorcing one woman and marrying another. But Jesus says that the heart of the problem is desiring someone who does not belong to you. God's intent is treating people with love not lust, and with faithfulness not selfishness. The fulfilment of the Law is love.

The Apostle Paul echoes this understanding of Jesus' words:

"To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife." (1 Corinthians 7:10-11)

For Jesus and Paul, the spirit of marriage and its one-flesh unity forbid divorce. But even in Paul's command, there is room for man's hardness of heart. "A wife must not separate from her husband," he says. "But if she does" Sometimes separation is necessary -- for safety of a spouse and children, for example. The "separation" in verse 10 apparently refers to divorce since Paul speaks of remaining unmarried. But it is divorce without the freedom to remarry, since that would preclude reconciliation, which is at the heart of God's intention for husband and wife.

Better Not to Marry (19:10-11)

Jesus' disciples got the point loud and clear.

"His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry." (19:10).

They were saying, "If there's no escape hatch allowed at all, then we'd better not marry at all."

Jesus' reply is interesting. He says,

"All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given." (19:11)

The key issue for interpreting this verse is whether "saying" refers to what precedes it about divorce, or what comes after it, about being a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven. Which is the teaching that everyone cannot accept? The no divorce part or the eunuch part? In fact, people have trouble accepting

either. I expect, however, that Jesus was referring to marriage in general -- that many could not accept Jesus' teaching about God's intention for marriage.

Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven (19:12)

Jesus concludes this teaching on marriage by noting that some people give up marriage entirely to better serve the Kingdom of Heaven. This, too, was radical. The Judaism of Jesus' day saw marriage as the only way to fulfil the command to "be fruitful and multiply," and those who did not marry were looked down upon.

So, Jesus introduces the concept that some people forgo marriage to carry out God plan for their lives. Not all, but some. Jesus, surely, was one of those people. Nothing is wrong with marriage, but it would have hindered him in his ministry. The Apostle Paul instructed disciples about the mutual responsibilities of the conjugal relationship, but then says,

"I say this as a concession, not as a command. I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that." (1 Corinthians 7:6-7)

At this point in time, at least, Paul was not married. What wife would have put up with a husband who was gone for years at a time and was willing to live at a poverty level when necessary to advance the Gospel? Not many.

Some Christians tend to be suspect of those who embrace voluntary celibacy. But there has been a strong movement towards religious celibacy of Christian workers in the Roman Catholic movement since the Third or Fourth Century. I disagree with my Catholic friends that priests must be unmarried (see 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6), and female Christian workers must take vows of celibacy. It should not be forced but should be according to the gift of celibacy.

Except for Marital Unfaithfulness ... (19:9)

Even in Jesus' sayings in Matthew's gospel we see an exception, "except for marital unfaithfulness," both in the Sermon on the Mount (5:32) and in his more extended teaching in 19:9. The word translated "fornication" (KJV) or "marital unfaithfulness" (NIV) is Greek *pornea*, which refers to "unlawful sexual intercourse, prostitution, unchastity, fornication." We get our word "pornography" from this root. It is a broad word, covering all kinds of sexual misbehaviour.

Some people deny that it could include adultery, since one was subject to the death penalty for that. But in Jesus' day, punishment by stoning for adultery was probably rare. A righteous person would divorce a spouse who was guilty of adultery (see, for example, Joseph, in Matthew 1:19).

