

The Authority of the King: Jesus and Divorce

Matthew 5:31-32

by Pastor Steve Weaver (04/15/12 at Farmdale Baptist Church)

We live in a day in which the definition of marriage is being redefined. The traditional and biblical view that marriage is the union of one man and one woman for a lifetime is under attack by those promoting same-sex marriage. However, I would like to suggest this morning that the greatest threat to marriage in America today is not the push for homosexual marriage, but rather the current ease with which a married couple can get a divorce. The greatest attack on marriage was not the decision of the Massachusetts Supreme Court in 2003 that the state's law banning same-sex marriages was unconstitutional. Instead the greatest attack on marriage as instituted and legislated by God was in 1969 when then California Governor Ronald Reagan signed the nation's first no-fault divorce law. These laws are now on the books in all fifty states. This law opened the door for the dissolution of marriage which we are seeing today.

Robert L. Plunker, a practicing attorney who is vice dean of the Southern California Institute of Law and an adjunct professor of the University of LaVerne School of Law, wrote about the harmful effects caused by the rise of "no-fault" divorce laws:

This was the abolition of marriage. Whatever words were used in the ceremony, weddings ceased to be occasions where a man and woman mutually engaged to live their whole lives together as husband and wife. They became occasions where a man and woman agreed to call themselves husband and wife until one of them decided otherwise. . . .

The wedding vow had devolved from being the most serious and solemn oath a typical person ever made into being less than a contract. An oral contract made with a 2-year-old is more binding than the contract of marriage; it at least binds one party, the adult. A marriage contract is binding on no one. If [a Hollywood actress] says "OK" when asked by a producer if she will star in a movie and then backs out, she has made herself liable for millions of dollars in damages. If she solemnly swears in church to love, honor, and, forsaking all others, keep only unto that producer till death them do part, she is free to break that promise at any time without penalty. *National Review*, "Vow for Now" May 29, 1995

Our nation's divorce laws are a clear example, along with legalized abortion, that just because something is legal does not mean that it is biblical!

In this morning's text, Jesus follows up His authoritative teaching on lust with an equally authoritative teaching on divorce. Here Jesus stakes his position in a current debate of His day and exalts the definition of marriage.

Scripture Reading and Prayer for Illumination.

A First Century Debate

Jesus begins in verse 31 by reminding His hearers of what others are saying about the issue of divorce. The statement "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." was the accepted interpretation of Moses' instructions found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. There Moses states,

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 point here is clearly to protect the rights of the woman who could be put away easily. Moses does not condone divorce but offers protection to those who might be involved in a divorce. This legislation is actually a discouragement to a man's divorcing of his wife because it basically says, "You had better think twice before you send your wife away, because you can't take her back!" Thus, we see that in this text divorce is neither commanded nor condemned, only controlled.

But a very different interpretation of these verses held sway among first century Jews. They viewed Moses as here commanding men to divorce their wives if they found "some uncleanness in her." The

only debate was in regard to the meaning of “some uncleanness in her.” In the first century there was a debate between two schools of thought in regard to the meaning of this phrase. Some Pharisees, called “the school of Hillel,” interpreted the phrase to mean “any good cause” which included the burning of food or seeing a prettier woman than your wife. This was the majority view in Jesus’ day. Other Pharisees, “the school of Shammai,” interpreted the phrase as only referring to marital infidelity. Both schools of thought believed that remarriage was permitted if a person was divorced.

This debate provides the context for not only Matthew 5:31-32, but also for the most extended teaching by Jesus on the topic of marriage and divorce found in Matthew 19:3-12. This teaching opportunity came as a response to the Pharisees’ question: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?” (Matthew 19:3). Jesus began his answer with a reference to the Genesis account of creation. The institution of marriage is grounded in the act of the Creator Himself. See Genesis 2:21-24.

And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. 22 Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. 23 And Adam said: "This is now bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man." 24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

After establishing this high view of marriage, Jesus (in response to another question) explains the allowance contained in the Mosaic law for divorce. Moses “permitted” (Matt 19:8), but did not “command” (Matt 19:7) divorce. Here Jesus is correcting the Pharisees misreading of Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Moses did not command you to divorce your wives, but permitted you to do so because of the hardness of your hearts. Scripture nowhere commands divorce. As we’ll see, there are places where it is allowed, but it is never commanded. Instead, Scripture recognizes that divorce exists in a fallen world, and provides legislation to regulate it. That’s all that Moses was doing in Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

After correcting the Pharisees misreading of Moses, Jesus is now ready to address their wrong interpretation of the phrase “some uncleanness in her.” According to Jesus, this phrase does not refer to any and everything unpleasant, but specifically to an act of sexual immorality (*porneia*). In other words, Jesus agreed with the Shammai school which acknowledged only infidelity as the proper ground for divorce.

This brings us back to Matthew 5:31-32. Now we can understand Jesus’ teaching in these verses in light of the debate of His day. Jesus plainly states here that divorce equals adultery. Therefore, the one who divorces, or marries a divorcee, is guilty in God’s eyes of the sin of adultery. That’s plain speak, but it is what the King has said.

An Exception

There is however, an exception. Where an act of sexual immorality has been committed by one of the marriage partners, divorce and remarriage are permitted without the penalty of the sin of adultery. Bible commentator Craig Blomberg has written,

Ancient Jews (like Greeks and Romans) almost universally agreed that lawful divorce granted a person the right to remarry. So Jesus’ words would almost certainly have been taken as permission for remarriage when divorce was permitted, i.e., after marital unfaithfulness. In other cases divorce causes adultery. (Matthew, NAC)

Thus, the exception clause applies to both divorce and remarriage of the innocent party in a marriage in which the other party was guilty of infidelity. There are some who allow for no remarriage, but they have a stricter view than Jesus who permits it, if the divorce was obtained for the reason of infidelity.

Are There Other Exceptions?

Jesus is responding to a specific issue in His day in Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-12. The apostle Paul responds to a different issue in 1 Corinthians 7. Paul follows the teaching of Jesus in regard to divorce. In verse seven, a direct reference is made to the teaching of Jesus: “Let not the wife depart from her husband.” This mirrors the statements found in both Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 where Jesus

condemns all divorce as adultery, except that which is the result of “sexual immorality.” Paul’s view is clearly dependent upon the teaching of Jesus in this regard.

The apostle, however, goes beyond the teaching of Jesus by adding a second exception to the general law prohibiting divorce. Jesus prohibited divorce except when sexual immorality had occurred. Paul must contend with a new dilemma, believers who have unbelieving spouses. This was clearly not an issue before the establishment of the church. But with the rise of Christianity among the Gentiles, this situation does become an issue. The apostle is clear that he is speaking, but not Jesus. In other words, Paul is no longer referring to the explicit teaching of Jesus. John MacArthur comments, “This is not a denial of inspiration or an indication that Paul is only giving his own human opinion. It is only to say that God had not given any previous revelation on the subject, but Paul was now setting it forth” (*1 Corinthians*, 166). Paul’s new revelation is found in *1 Corinthians* 7:15, “But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases.” This second exception allows divorce in cases where an unbelieving spouse departs from his/her believing spouse.

This begs the question, does the Scripture allow remarriage in the two cases where divorce is permitted? Not only does the apostle Paul argue that a woman is “free” from the law of marriage when her husband dies in *Romans* 7:3, he also encourages remarriage in the case of the younger widows in *1 Timothy* 5:14. The same terminology of being bound and free found in *Romans* 7:1-3 is also found in Paul’s discussion of those believers from whom unbelievers have departed. The deserted believer is said to be “not under bondage in such cases” (*1 Cor* 7:15). If the widow is not only free but encouraged to remarry, is the deserted believer any less free to remarry since the same terminology is used to refer to the status of each? The teaching of both Jesus and Paul appear to be clear. Where divorce is permitted, remarriage is assumed. The terminology “not under bondage” (*1 Cor* 7:15) “alludes to the wording of Jewish divorce documents, which told the woman, ‘You are free to remarry

any man.” To be “bound” meant one was still married by law, to be “free” meant one was able to remarry legally. Another clue that this is Paul’s meaning in 1 Corinthians 7 is the fact that a “loosed” person is classified in the same category as a virgin who has never married in verses 27 and 28. Neither person has sinned if they marry. Therefore, remarriage is permitted in three cases: death of spouse, sexual immorality by spouse, and desertion by an unbeliever. I would also include a physically abusive spouse in the category of desertion. But there are no biblical categories for incompatibility, unhappiness, or no longer being “in love.” Those are not biblical grounds for divorce and all such divorces are viewed by God as an act of adultery and the marriage of one divorced for such reasons is also viewed as an act of adultery.

Three Points of Summary

Let me first summarize the Bible’s teaching on divorce and then provide some closing words of application.

1. No Divorce is Natural

God’s original design of marriage is for one man and one woman for one lifetime. Anything other than that is less than ideal. Although not every divorce is sinful (for the innocent party), all divorces are a result of sin being in the world.

2. Some Divorces are Allowable

I believe Scripture is clear that in cases of infidelity and desertion by an unbeliever, the innocent part is free to divorce and remarry. These exception clauses are not excuses to get out of a difficult marriage, but rather refer to a person whose marriage has ended through no fault of their own and against their will.

3. All Divorce is Forgivable

Divorce and remarriage are not unpardonable sins. There is no sin that cannot be forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ, not even the sin of adultery! If you have experienced an unbiblical divorce, there is forgiveness for you. Confess yourself to be a sinner to God. Trust in what Christ has accomplished for you by dying on the cross and

rising from the dead. Be encouraged by the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11,

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor *adulterers*, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. *And such were some of you.* But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

And in the words of Jesus to the woman caught in adultery in John 8:11, “Go and sin no more.”

Three Points of Application:

1. To those who have never married

Marriage is a serious matter and should be approached as such. When you marry you are making a lifelong commitment that cannot be broken without violating God’s holy law. No matter what our society says, you don’t have the option of trying out a few until you find the “right one.” Nor, is the more common “living together” acceptable.

2. To the previously married

If you are the innocent party in a divorce that occurred for the biblical grounds discussed already, then you are free to remarry, “but only in the Lord.” That is only to a believer. “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers.” (2 Corinthians 6:14)

If you are one who was divorced for unbiblical reasons, or were the guilty party in a biblical divorce, your sins can be forgiven, but you are not free to remarry. That would constitute an additional act of adultery. Remember the words of Hebrews 10:26-27,

For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

3. To the currently married (both undivorced & previously divorced)

Stay married! Work out your difficulties. Get counsel from a godly person who will tell you the truth of God's Word. Don't allow divorce to ever become an option. One survey a few years ago stated that Baptists have the highest divorce rate of any Christian denomination and are more likely to get a divorce than atheists and agnostics. Brothers and Sisters, this should not be so! The world will never listen to the church on the issue of same sex marriage, when we have such obvious lack of reverence for the institution of marriage ourselves. In Matthew 5:31-32, Jesus is the enemy of divorce. If we are to be faithful followers of Him today, we must be too!

Why it matters

The marriage issue matters, not only because God designed marriage to be between one man and one woman for one lifetime. It also matters because the marriage relationship is meant to illustrate Christ's love for the church.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 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. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (Eph 5:25-32)

As believers in Christ, our marriages are to depict this relationship between Christ and the church! Aren't you glad that divorce is not an option for Christ?!?! He has certainly had grounds! We've been unfaithful to Him time and again. Yet, He remains faithful. He is our example, not some Hollywood actor. Let's look to Christ as our role model regarding our faithfulness to our spouses. May God grant that the churches of Jesus Christ become known, not only for their opposition to gay marriage, but also for their demonstration of marital faithfulness in a world where this is increasingly the

exception and not the rule.