



Infidelity in the Heart

St. Matthew 5:31-32

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Today I want to look with you at the thirty-first and thirty-second verses of the fifth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel. These are confrontational verses. I'm not sure that there's any other subject that the modern preacher would want to avoid more than divorce. It's not a fun thing to preach on, not just because divorce is a bad thing, but because it's a subject that touches our emotions at such a deep level. It's a subject that, these days, sadly touches almost everyone, even in the church. There aren't very many things as sad as an unhappy marriage foundering on the rocks. There's hardly a tragedy as great as the degeneration of what God meant for love and fulfillment and which starts so happily, into a non-relationship of bitterness, discord, and often despair. It's not fun to have to hear about and it's not a fun subject to preach about either. But the job of the preacher is to systematically preach the Word of God, not ignoring the parts we don't like, but allowing its light to shine into our sinful hearts and turn us to God. This subject was important enough for Jesus to address and important enough for the Holy Spirit to cause to be recorded in Holy Scripture. And so if God thinks it's important, we have an *obligation* to listen – and not just to listen, but to *obey* when he speaks.

I'll tell you up-front that I believe very firmly, based on Holy Scripture, that God's way in every case for two Christians is not divorce. That said, I want to do my best to preach compassionately. I know the pain that many Christians suffer because of unhappy marriages and because of divorce and my desire is *not* to add that to that pain. Remember, though, that God's desire for us is the good – and if you understand Jesus' teaching here, I think you'll see that, so look with me at Matthew 5:31-32 where we read:

It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone

who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

By now Jesus' pattern should be familiar. Here again he says, "It was also said... , but I say to you..." He takes the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees that twisted and distorted God's Law and compares it to what God really intended. In this case I think it helps if we look at another exchange that Jesus had with the Pharisees on the same subject. Flip over to Matthew 19:3-9:

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" 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." They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."

You see in Jesus' day there was a debate raging between the schools of two different rabbis when it came to just causes for divorce. Both sides of the debate were appealing to Deuteronomy 24:1, where it talks about a man divorcing his wife for something "unseemly" or "indecent." One school – the unpopular one and the minority – taught that the offence had to be something really significant. The other, and more popular school with the Pharisees, held that a man could divorce his wife for any shortcoming. She could burn dinner and he had a right to divorce her. He could find a younger and prettier woman and choose to divorce his wife. And so the question the Pharisees ask in Matthew 19:3 was intended to find out which side of the debate Jesus was on. It really illustrates well Jesus' point in the Sermon on the Mount.

I want to focus on his answer to the question in Chapter 19, because it fills out what he said earlier in the Sermon. His answer has three parts that I want to look at. Notice how in each case, Jesus directs the attention of the Pharisees away from their focus on the *letter* of the Law and to the spirit, reason, and motives behind it.

First, the very nature of the question shows the difference between the Pharisees and Jesus. They were preoccupied with the grounds for divorce. Jesus was preoccupied with marriage as instituted by God. They essentially asked Jesus, "Can a man divorce his wife for only one reason – like adultery – or can he divorce her for any reason?"

Jesus' response ignores their actual question. He asks them a question instead: "Haven't you read what God decreed when he made Adam and Eve and brought them together? Didn't he say, '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 is saying, "You guys don't get it. You aren't even asking the right question! Before you start asking about divorce you have to understand marriage." So he goes back to the first two chapters of Genesis and makes two main points from that passage: that marriage is both exclusive and permanent. They ask when it's okay to divorce your wife and Jesus responds by telling them that marriage is a divine institution that God uses to permanently make one two people who have decided to leave their parents in order to form a new family unit and "become one flesh." Jesus doesn't answer their question, because their question shows that from the start, the Pharisees are utterly on the wrong foundation. They ask, "Under what circumstances can I leave my wife?" And Jesus answers essentially, "You aren't supposed to want to leave your wife in the first place!" If you're asking that question, you've missed out on the very nature of what marriage is.

Now the Pharisees got Jesus' point. So they asked him another question: "If marriage is exclusive and permanent, why did Moses command a man to give a certificate of divorce and to put his wife away?" This is exactly what Jesus addressed in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, "It was also said, 'Whoever

divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.”

You see, just as they did with the commandments about murder and adultery, here the Pharisees again garbled the Law. They took a portion of the Law that *allowed* a man to divorce his wife and twisted it into a *command*. They called Deuteronomy 24:1-4 a command, and Jesus says, “No. It’s not a command. God introduced marriage in the beginning as a permanent state. Man is the one who introduced divorce because of his sinfulness and God allowed this one provision because of your hardness of heart. Under a specific and very limited condition God *allows* divorce – but he *never* commands it!”

Turn back in your Bibles to Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and follow along with me – and notice the “if’s” and the “then.”

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife, and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

The point of the verse is to prohibit the remarriage of one’s own divorced spouse if she or he has gone on to marry someone else who has then either died or divorced him or her. When God spoke through Moses he was trying to curb precisely what the Pharisees taught: Man had introduced divorce and was going hog-wild with it. In most middle-eastern cultures all you had to do was say to your wife, “I divorce you,” and throw her out the door. That was it. And so God said to the Israelites, “No. If you divorce your wife for something “indecent,” you have to go through the legal process of drafting up a divorce certificate, you have to have

witnesses sign it, you have to deliver it to her in person, and you have to pack up her things and put her out of your house.” God did away with *easy* divorce and spur of the moment decisions made out of anger. We need to note that the only command in the entire passage is this prohibition against the man taking his wife back after she had been married to another. There is no command for a husband to divorce his wife and nothing that would encourage him to do so. The passage just outlines the process that needs to happen *if* there is to be a divorce. At the very most the Law *implies* reluctant permission and tolerates a practice that man, not God, introduced.

And that’s how Jesus explains the passage to the Pharisees. He says that God gave this regulation through Moses because of the hardness of men’s hearts. He doesn’t deny that the regulation came from God, but he also makes it clear that there’s no divine command for divorce here – only a divine *concession* to human weakness and sinfulness. He says that it was for this reason that “Moses allowed you to divorce...” But then he immediately says, “but from the beginning it was not so.” Divorce is always tied to sin. There are a very few exceptions where divorce *itself* is not sinful, but in every case divorce is the result of human sin. God makes a concession to us because of our sin, but Jesus also makes it clear that even that concession is inconsistent with the divine institution of marriage.

The third part of Jesus response to the Pharisees contrasts just how lightly they took divorce and just how seriously Jesus takes it. In fact, Jesus takes it so seriously that with only one exception, divorce *always* sets you up for adultery should you remarry.

In the Sermon on the Mount, in verse 32, he says:

But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

And in 19:9 he says:

Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.

Why is remarriage after divorce adulterous? Here’s the problem. Divorce ends a marriage. Period. Just like death does. There are those that might say that a divorced couple might be separated in the eyes of the law, but are still married in the sight of God. That’s not biblical. If you examine the Scriptures that deal with divorce, it’s clear that God sees divorce as putting an end to a marriage. The reason why Jesus equates remarriage with adultery is that God *always* requires us to reconcile. Remember Jesus’ first example about murder in the heart? If you come to the altar and remember that your brother has something against you, go and reconcile with him *first*, then come back to the altar. When we talk about human relationships, marital or otherwise, God’s desire – his *expectation* and his *command* – is *always* for reconciliation. A divorced couple may have sinfully put an end to their marriage vows, but they still have an obligation before God to reconcile, make up, and renew the vows that they sinfully terminated. If one or both then go on to marry another, they commit themselves to their new spouse and make it impossible to reconcile with the first, thus disobeying God and violating one of the most foundational principles of our faith. God loved us enough to sacrifice his own Son so that he could reconcile us to himself. If we claim to follow Christ we can do no less than seek reconciliation. St. John gives us some sobering words in his First Epistle: “If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother [or his sister or his wife], he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). If we are unwilling to forgive the wrongs done to us, if we are unwilling to love, and if we are unwilling to reconcile, our very love of God is called into question – we are not bearing the fruit of the Spirit!

For this reason the idea of “separation” is dangerous. Many people today take a very Pharisaical stance and choose to live apart while not actually divorcing. My grandparents were “separated” for almost forty years. They believed divorce was a sin so they didn’t go there – they just “separated.” Lots of Christians do this, but it’s profoundly unbiblical and is even worse than divorce in some ways. When a relationship breaks down, God’s will is for those involved to be reconciled and be

restored to each other. All a separation does is split up two people and make reconciliation all the more difficult. It's awfully hard to put together what has been taken apart. The modern practice of separation is the easy way out. It may temporarily solve the immediate problem. Everyone feels better because the conflict is gone. But all it does is leave loose ends – and God never leaves loose ends. At the very least, a divorce granted on biblical grounds of infidelity provides closure for both the man and woman and allows the offended spouse a fresh start. Separation leaves an unresolved mess that typically only makes it more difficult to follow God's principles.

Jesus only gives one exception to the rule: divorce is permissible on the grounds of adultery. The Greek word used is *porneia* which should sound familiar. It's where we get our word *pornography*. It's a word that originally had to do with prostitution, but came to cover pretty much every kind of sexual immorality. Jesus uses it here in connection with his reminder to the Pharisees that a husband and wife are "one flesh." Adulterous sexual immorality breaks that "one flesh" relationship, because one party has become "one flesh" with someone outside of the marriage.

So I'll summarise what Jesus teaches here. He says, "You've heard it said by the teachers of the Law that Deuteronomy 24:1 allows a husband to freely divorce his wife at his pleasure. All he has to do is provide her with a certificate of divorce. But I say to you, that this kind of irresponsible behaviour on the part of a husband will lead him, his wife, and their second partners into unions that are ultimately adulterous. There's only one exception. The only situation in which divorce and remarriage are possible without breaking the Seventh Commandment is when it has already been broken by some serious sexual sin." St. Paul, in 1 Corinthians extrapolates one further situation in which it is okay to divorce and remarry: if your husband or wife is not a Christian you are called to witness your faith to them. It's an opportunity for evangelism like no other, but Paul says that if your unbelieving spouse desires a divorce you aren't to dispute it and that you are then free to remarry.

But we have to be careful not to just leave the discussion there. An awful lot of people seem to look at this as a blanket "okay" to divorce their wife or husband for sexual immorality. But think about the principles behind all of this. Jesus' one exception has to be seen for what it is: just like Moses' exception, it's an accommodation for the hardness of our sinful and fallen hearts. We need to understand it within the context of Jesus' statement on the permanence of marriage in God's purpose and also in the larger context of the Sermon on the Mount (and for that matter all of Holy Scripture which proclaims a gospel of *reconciliation*). Is it not of significance that God, the Divine Lover, was willing to woo back even his adulterous wife, Israel? Jesus point is that if we start our discussion off on this subject by asking about the legitimacy of divorce, we're being like the Pharisees – we're concerned about the letter of the Law, not the spirit.

Jesus' whole emphasis in debating with the rabbis was positive. It focused on God's original institution of marriage as an exclusive and permanent relationship – he focused on God's "yoking" of two people into a union that man *must never break*. He also focused on his call to his followers – to us – to love and forgive one another, and to be peacemakers in every situation of strife and discord. I like what St. John Chrysostom, one of the great preachers of the Early Church, had to say. He links this directly to the Beatitudes and says, "For he that is meek, and a peacemaker, and poor in spirit, and merciful, how shall he cast out his wife? He that is used to reconcile others, how shall he be at variance with her that is his own?" Divorce is just plain incompatible with the people Jesus calls us to be, even in the worst of marital situations.

In conclusion I want to tell you what this means to me as your pastor – as a man who is called to shepherd God's flock. It is my rule never to talk to anybody about divorce until I've first talked with them about two other subjects: marriage and reconciliation. You see, that's what a good shepherd does. God calls us to care for the sheep and caring for the sheep means guiding them in the way that God has commanded. Sometimes that means standing up here Sunday after Sunday, preaching and applying God's Word and sometimes it means meeting with

individuals or with couples and apply God's Word to a specific situation or problem. Either way, that's the chief calling and duty of the pastor.

And so if a person or a couple comes to me and wants to talk about divorce, my job is to talk instead about marriage and reconciliation – about the very nature of what it means to be a Christian – how we are called to live out precisely what God had done for us. Our expectation should be, that as redeemed people who have received the grace of God and who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, reconciliation is *always* not only just a possibility, but should be seen as the norm. Remember that Jesus says, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." If God has joined two Christian people together, he has given them everything they need to stay together and his promise is that even when things get tough, he will give whatever it takes not only for them to reconcile and love each other again, but his promise is that if his ways are followed, he will make the marriage even better than it was before. That's what grace is all about.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, again we are reminded that we are called to lives of humility, peacemaking, and love. In the person of Jesus Christ, you humbled yourself, you loved us, and you made peace with us through his death. That peace was not something we deserved, but you loved us enough to make it possible. Remind us always that we are called to share that love and peace with everyone around us, be it our husband, wife, parents, children, friends, co-workers, or neighbours. Remind us that your call is for us to be salt and light and that we do that by being humble, loving, and peacemaking in every aspect of life. Put the image of Christ ever before our eye to be our example. We ask this in his name. Amen.