



WHAT JESUS SAYS ABOUT DIVORCE

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1090

Matthew 5:31-32

Twelfth Message

Gary Vanderet

March 9, 1997

In the Sermon on the Mount, the transition from Jesus' words on adultery to his teaching on divorce is a natural progression, for in certain circumstances, Jesus will say, remarriage by or to a divorced person is tantamount to adultery. This third antithesis is essentially a call to fidelity in marriage.

I approach this topic with the same reluctance that I had in our last study on adultery and infidelity. That is because, for one thing, divorce is a controversial and complex matter, and people have honest differences in their interpretation of Jesus' words. But my greatest hesitation comes from knowing that divorce touches people's emotions at a very deep level. No unhappiness is so intense as that felt in an unhappy marriage. No tragedy is so great as the degeneration of a relationship which God designed for love and fulfillment descending into one of bitterness, discord and despair.

Although I believe that God's way in most instances is not through divorce, I want to approach this study with sensitivity. Many couples are suffering greatly, and I have no wish to add to their distress. Yet it is because I am convinced that the teaching of Jesus on this and every subject is good—intrinsically good, good for individuals and good for society—that I take my courage and preach on.

We find our Lord's word on divorce in Matthew 5:31:

"And it was said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of dismissal'; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." (Matt 5:31-32, NASB)

These two verses can hardly be taken to represent the sum total of Jesus' instruction about divorce. They appear to be an abbreviated summary of his teaching, of which indeed Matthew records a fuller version, in chapter 19 of his gospel. We would be wise to take the two passages together, and to interpret the shorter in the light of the longer.

This is how Jesus' later debate with the Pharisees went. Matthew 19:3:

And some Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?" And He answered and said, "Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ' For this cause a man shall leave his father

and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh'? Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." They *said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery." (Matt 19:3-9)

In Jesus' time, there were two conflicting views, held by the rival rabbinical schools of Hillel and Shammai, concerning divorce. The controversy centered on a phrase in Deuteronomy 24:1, which is the only passage in the Old Testament that talks about the grounds or procedure for a divorce.

Rabbi Shammai, who took a strict view, taught from Deuteronomy 24:1 that the sole ground for divorce was a grave matrimonial offense, something "indecent." Rabbi Hillel, on the other hand, held a very permissive view, which was the common attitude of the day. He interpreted the Mosaic provision to mean a man who "desires to be divorced from his wife for any cause whatsoever." Therefore, something that was unseemly or indecent was interpreted in the widest possible sense, even to include trivial things like burning the bagels. Rabbi Akiba went so far as to say that a man could divorce his wife if he found another woman who was more beautiful. The Pharisees seem to have been attracted by Rabbi Hillel's looseness, which may explain the form of their question: "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for *any cause*?" In other words, they wanted to know whose side Jesus was on in the contemporary debate.

I want to summarize in three statements Jesus' words on this matter, as his reply to the question raised by the Pharisees was given in three parts. It is revealing to consider these separately and in the order in which he spoke them. In each part he dissented from the Pharisees view.

I. The Pharisees were absorbed with the grounds for divorce; Jesus with the institution of marriage.

The Pharisees' question was framed so as to draw Jesus out on what he considered to be the legitimate grounds for divorce: For what cause might a man divorce his wife? For one cause, several causes or any cause?

Jesus does not answer their question. Instead, he asks a counter-question about their reading of Scripture. He refers them back to Genesis, to the creation of mankind as male and female (chapter 1), and to the institution of marriage (chapter 2), in which a man leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife and the two become one. This biblical definition implies that marriage is both exclusive (“a man...his wife”), and permanent (“cleave,” or “be joined to his wife”). It is these two aspects of marriage which Jesus selects for emphasis in his comments that follow: first, “So they are no longer two but one flesh”; and second, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.”

Marriage, therefore, according to our Lord’s exposition of its origins, is a divine institution which God makes permanent between two people who decisively and publicly leave their parents in order to form a new unit of society and then “become one flesh.” Marriage affords the deepest possible intimacy in earthly relationships, deeper by far than the relationship with the children that come from our bodies. I remember the moment each of my three sons was born. A wonderful, mystical bond was forged between us the moment I held them in my arms, a bond that has certainly grown stronger over the years. And yet, I am not one flesh with them. I am one flesh only with my wife.

God’s ideal for marriage is that it is a monogamous, intimate, enduring relationship.

II. The Pharisees called Moses’ provision for divorce a command; Jesus called it a concession to the hardness of human hearts.

The Pharisees had grossly misinterpreted an Old Testament passage, which does not include a statement along the lines of Jesus’ citation here: “Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” This is actually a rabbinical misinterpretation of an OT passage.

It would be helpful to look at the passage itself, from Deuteronomy 24:1-4:

“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 indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man’s {wife,} and if the latter husband turns against 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 husband dies who took her to be his wife, {then} her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since 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 gives you as an inheritance.

A careful reading of these verses makes it clear that God is not saying that a wife may be put away if she

displeases her husband. God, who knows the hearts of men, knows that there are some who would put their wives away for almost any cause. Furthermore, the term “some indecency” is ambiguous. No one knows precisely what Moses was referring to. But it doesn’t matter. He was not saying there might be an occasion when your wife does something indecent and that is cause to put her away.

The whole paragraph hinges on a series of conditional clauses. The thrust of the passage is a prohibition on the remarriage of one’s own divorced partner. This prohibition is the only command in the passage. Certainly there is no command to a husband to divorce his wife, nor is there any encouragement to do so. Moses is saying, using all these conditional clauses, “If a man puts his wife away for some cause, then he can’t have her back.”

The purpose of this law was to protect women from exploitation, because in those days, men treated women like junk. If a wife burned the bagels, she was out. A husband would give her a certificate of divorce, and that would satisfy the legal demands of divorce. The woman would go to another man, because in those days there was no place in society for a single woman. She would be married to someone else and he could possibly discard her. Moses is saying if that happens, her first husband could not have her back, because a woman should not be treated that way. That is the point. A wife was not to be treated like junk that is discarded. Even if it was done all legal-like, by granting her a bill of divorce, the man could not have her back. The Jews had completely misunderstood the point of the law.

Jesus responds to the Pharisees’ question about the regulation of Moses, saying that Moses permitted them to divorce their wives because their hearts were hard. Moses permitted divorce, but he did not command it. It was not a divine instruction, but merely a divine concession to human weakness. But then Jesus immediately refers once again to the original purpose of God, saying, “But from the beginning it was not so.” Thus, even the divine concession was, in principle, inconsistent with the divine institution.

III. The Pharisees regarded divorce lightly; Jesus took it so seriously that, with only one exception, he called all remarriage after divorce adultery.

Jesus assumes that a divorce would lead to the remarriage of the divorced parties. This explains the statement that a man divorcing his wife without cause “makes her an adulteress.” The man’s action could have that result only if she married again. A separation without a divorce, in legal terms, is a modern arrangement that was unknown in the ancient world.

Since God instituted marriage as an exclusive and permanent union which he makes and man must not break, Jesus draws the inevitable deduction that to divorce one’s partner and marry another, or to marry a di-

divorced person, is to enter a forbidden, adulterous relationship; for the person who may have secured a divorce in the eyes of human law is still, in the eyes of God, married to his or her first partner.

Only one exception is made to this principle: "except for the cause of unchastity or except for immorality."

Some reject the authenticity of the exception clause, because it is absent from the parallel passages in the Gospels of Mark and Luke. But its absence from their accounts is due not to their ignorance of it, but to their acceptance of it as something that was taken for granted. After all, under the Mosaic law, adultery was punishable by death (although the death penalty for this offense seems to have fallen into disuse by the time of Jesus), so nobody would have questioned that marital unfaithfulness was just grounds for divorce. Even the rival Rabbis Shammai and Hillel were agreed on this. Their dispute concerned how much more widely than this the expression "some indecency," from Deuteronomy 24:1, should be interpreted.

The Greek word for unchastity is *porneia*, from which we get our word pornography. It is a comprehensive word which refers to some act of physical sexual immorality. When it is used of a married person, it refers to any illicit sexual intercourse, which may include adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, etc. Here Jesus is saying that 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. (I believe there is a second situation, willful desertion, which is referred to by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7.)

The Pharisees' attitude was that if a man divorced his wife, it was important to divide the inheritance equally, that the alimony and child support, etc., be agreed to. But Jesus would not have a man treat his wife in this way. He would say that she is your wife until death separates you. So stick with her like glue, even if she is not particularly easy to live with, even if she is not exactly what you thought she was when you married her. The only thing that breaks that relationship is if she walks out and forms a relationship with another man." Jesus is not talking only about adultery. The wife may be adulterous and still she can be taken back. But if she determines in her heart that she is going to live with another man, and she commits adultery, then that breaks the marriage. Unless that happens, for better or worse, stick to her like glue and love her, like God loves Israel.

The Jews were saying, "As long as she is provided for financially, then it is OK." Jesus disagreed. God hates divorce, because it destroys people. Now it doesn't say that God hates divorcees. That is an important distinction. But he hates divorce, because it is so destructive. So don't divorce your wife. Love her! You may have to start loving her like your enemy, but start loving her. Then, in time, you can love her like your friend; and finally, you can love her like your wife. You can learn

how to love!

When we were in Ireland some years ago, we had tea one afternoon with a group of very proper elderly ladies. Somehow the topic of divorce came up. I could tell that my thoughts on the matter were not being well received. One of the ladies asked, incredulously, "How can you say that you can learn to love? Love is a feeling!"

If we can't learn to love we're in big trouble. Learning to love: this is the supreme lesson of life. That is why we are here on earth—to learn how to love. And the primary tool to teach us how to do this is the person whom God has placed in our life—for the rest of our life. This is how we learn just how selfish we are.

We can learn to love! That is the message of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. In doing so we will fulfill the intent of the law. These laws that seem to be so harsh are intended to teach us how to love people. That is the point of it all.

We must take our guidelines not from the world, but from the Word of God. And we must take our love to an extent that the world does not know. We must love more than the world.

Here is the world operates in this area, taken from the book, *Divorce: How And When To Let Go*:

Your marriage can wear out. People change their values and lifestyles. People want to experience new things. Change is a part of life. Change and personal growth are traits for you to be proud of, indicative of a vital, searching mind. You must accept the reality that in today's multifaceted world it is especially easy for two persons to grow apart. Letting go of your marriage—if it is no longer fulfilling—can be the most successful thing you have ever done. Getting a divorce can be a positive, problem-solving, growth-oriented step. It can be a personal triumph.

This is the philosophy of the world.

It is the love of Christ, not self effort, that gives us the power to love on another level. It comes from depending on him. And when we do that we will have the love that we need to fulfill the intent of the law.

One marriage counselor told me that in his opinion, the average husband or wife on the verge of a divorce has trouble in only about fifteen to twenty per cent of their marriage. Think through the implications of that. It is saying that, generally speaking, eighty to eighty-five per cent of the marriage is fine, so they are contemplating throwing all that away because they are having trouble with fifteen to twenty per cent. How foolish and shortsighted is this approach.

I want to end by challenging you to be an agent of change in this church.

Let me give you a couple of suggestions.

We have a great need to teach our young people

about love.

Most young people growing up today do not know the difference between love and lust, between love and infatuation. So they marry a body. When you do that, of course, every year that goes by puts you further out of business! What you marry is a person, not a body. Bodies deteriorate; persons develop. And that takes time. Young people need to learn that they are not going to get instant love the way they get instant sound on the television.

They also need to understand what marriage is all about. Isn't it interesting that in many churches, all you need to do to get married is to show up. In marriage, the most important of all human relationships, we spend more time and effort on the ceremony than on the marriage.

We have a great need for models.

Those of you who have been married for twenty, thirty, forty or fifty years need to share with young people so they can see that there are some couples who by the grace of God have held their marriages together. I had lunch with Bruce Beebe last week, and he told me that he and Sally have a heart for meeting with younger couples. Currently they are leading two separate groups of newly married couples. He asked me if I knew of other couples who have been married a long time who have the same heart and could share this important ministry.

We also need models of people who have been through divorce and have learned the grace of God through their experience. We must avoid the danger of becoming insensitive to the needs of divorced people. Some pastors know exactly what they believe about divorce, but they haven't got a clue as to what to do with divorced people. Very rarely will someone ask me the question, "Do I have a legitimate reason for divorce?" Most of the time they just get a divorce. Later, of course, they end up asking for help. That is the reality of today's world.

Divorce is devastating. Many of you listening to me who have been divorced could give testimonies that would drive this truth down our throats. The pain of divorce is excruciating, and not only for the couple, but for their children. Let us commit to doing everything in our power to restore relationships in our homes. That is what we need more than anything else. We are an affluent people, but we are dying inside. We have beautiful homes and luxury cars, but we are beset with divorce, disintegration, pain and hurt. The challenge before us is to make our homes refuges of light and love, healing and grace. This is what the world needs to see.

© 1997 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino