

## **The Way of Jesus: What God Has Joined Together** **Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-9**

### **Introduction – God Hates Divorce**

I count myself very fortunate. I have escaped the flood-tide of divorce that inundated our culture during my lifetime. My parents had a far-from-perfect marriage. There was no abuse or unfaithfulness but there were a lot of misunderstandings and heated arguments. My dad became an expert in dodging flying Tupperware. They had, without doubt, irreconcilable differences. To their credit, nevertheless, my mom and dad never considered divorce. My siblings and I never felt the insecurity of a broken home. And, until recently, none of my siblings had felt the sting of divorce. Diane, too, is very fortunate. Her parents had a healthy and affectionate relationship. None of her siblings have experienced divorce either.

But in the landscape of family relationships across this land, our experience is more the exception than the norm. We are, indeed, very fortunate. A couple of weeks ago, in a short article published on [www.crosswalk.com](http://www.crosswalk.com), author Laura Petherbridge reflected on her experience:

Thirty years ago...I got divorced. So far I've lived fifty-nine years, and without a doubt divorce was the worst season of my life.

Nothing I've suffered since that time even comes close. Not a wayward child, not a stroke, not the betrayal of a close friend, not job loss, not watching the collapse of a ministry, not the death of a parent, not a root canal when the Novocain didn't work—absolutely nothing compares to the horrific pain of having a spouse decide, “I Don't” after saying “I Do.”<sup>1</sup>

Divorce is a tornado. It rips a path of destruction through the lives of the people who have to live through it. It leaves, in its wake, scars and devastation that can last a lifetime. God hates it. But the Pharisees of Jesus' day were cavalier in their attitude regarding divorce. To them, it was just another legal and theological question to haggle over. The victims of that day,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.crosswalk.com/family/marriage/divorce-and-remarriage/this-is-the-reason-god-actually-hates-divorce.html> Accessed May 13, 2015.

overwhelmingly mostly women, were tossed aside on the trash-heap of broken and shamed people. But for those who would follow the Jesus, however, divorce is not taken lightly. He took the issue head-on:

### **Text – Matthew 5:31-32**

“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.

### **Prayer**

### **An Adventure in Missing the Point**

There were two Jewish schools of thought regarding divorce in Jesus’ day. The controversy arose around a particular phrase in the instructions Moses gave regarding divorce in Deuteronomy 24:

“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...”

Deuteronomy 24:1

One group interpreted the meaning of “some indecency” or “uncleanness” as some translations put it, as sexual immorality. The other group was much more liberal in their interpretation. They asserted that the meaning of “some indecency” simply meant that the wife was displeasing to her husband in any way. If she burnt your steak she was out. Or if the woman in the tent next door was more pleasing to your eyes you could send you wife away with a certificate of divorce. And so they debated back and forth what would be proper grounds for divorce according to the Law. That was the focus of their minds and heart regarding the devastation of divorce and the dissolution of a marriage.

And I wonder: have we been so different? In my ministry experience, I've had to deal with the question of divorce a number of times. A particular person on my musical team might be going through divorce and the whole question that absorbed us was whether or not the divorce is biblically justified. I understand the question. But it seems to me that trying to find justification for divorce is a lot like arguing about the color of paint we should use on a barn that is falling down.



We're completely missing the point. Later on, in the book of Matthew, Jesus addressed the very same question:

*And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" [Jesus doesn't answer their question. It's the wrong question. Instead, he redirects them to what is most important.]*

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."

Matthew 19:3-9

### **Biblical Marriage is the Point!**

The issue wasn't and isn't what are the biblical justifications for divorce. The truth of the matter was that they had lessened the value of marriage. Through haggling over the reasons for divorce, the religious leaders had totally missed the sacredness and the glory of the institution of marriage. Jesus redirected them and brought them back to God's wonderful intention for marriage.

In marriage, two people have become one. Jesus states it clearly. Through the interweaving of their feelings for each other, their experiences together, and, most profoundly, their sexual union, they have become one entity. I have found this to be very true when I go to visit people in the hospital. If they are married, their spouse joins in their suffering as well. Perhaps not a sharing of the physical pain, but there is a unique suffering that they share together in their souls. For that reason, when I pray for a sick person, if they are married, I always also pray for their spouse. Just as they vowed, they share sickness and health, riches and poverty until the day they are separated by death. God's original design for marriage is lofty and glorious. In marriage, the two have become one.

But in our culture, we have greatly diminished the value of marriage. There has been a constant onslaught on the institution. We've thumbed our nose at God and what he has said in his Word. We don't even know what marriage is anymore. In our cultural mindset, it is two people who love each and arrange to live together. If it doesn't work out, we move on to someone else...just so long as we're happy. The ease in which a couple can secure a divorce with minimal legal consequence through our modern laws has weakened marriage. Perseverance and personal change is no longer a cost worth considering for a glorious marriage. We just want to be happy. Another Christian tradition has it right. They call marriage a *sacrament* – a physical means of God's grace. There is no other experience – no job, no academic degree, no other relationship – that has more positively changed my life than marriage. God has powerfully used my marriage to Diane to change me and make me more like Christ.

The very foundation of marriage has been shaken by the explosion of sex outside of the covenant of marriage in the last fifty years. Sex outside of marriage is so common today, even among Christians, that it is far and away the exception for the bride and groom to be virgins at the wedding altar. Most of the people who ask me to perform their wedding are already living together. Christians are either ignorant or rebellious against God's prohibitions against sex outside of marriage. *We are destroying the sacredness and glory of marriage as God intended it.* Sex knits your soul to the other. For that reason, it should not be engaged in outside of the safety and covenant of marriage. To do so is to risk having your soul torn apart if and when the

relationship fails – and without vows and a covenant together, it eventually will fail. The people who have had multiple sexual partners are to be most pitied. Their souls have been knit together to other people and torn apart so many times that they have great difficulty ever becoming one with another person in the bonds of a healthy marriage. God’s grace can heal. But the wounds are deep. This is a great tragedy. Do not have sex outside of marriage. If you are living together and are not married, get married or separate. Do not make a mockery of God’s Word by claiming to follow Jesus.

Marriage means so little in our culture today. We do not hold it in honor. Is it any wonder that homosexuals are demanding the right to become married? And we are surprised? And we are incensed? We have brought this on ourselves through the diminishing of marriage through easy divorce and promiscuous sex.

#### **Biblically justifiable grounds for divorce:**

Are there biblical justifications for divorce? There are. But remember, divorce is never God’s will. He grants it as a concession to us because human hearts are hard. *No two Christians who are truly following Jesus should ever get divorced.* This passage is in the same sermon where Jesus taught the Beatitudes. John Chrysostom, the greatest preacher of the Fourth Century wrote, “How can one who is meek and a peacemaker and poor in spirit and merciful cast out his wife? How can one who reconciles be alienated from her that is his own?”<sup>2</sup> That’s why I teach in my premarital counseling that the marriage relationship is a triangle between husband, wife, and God – with God at the center.

But God did provide the concession of divorce because he knew that some people will not grow, will not change, and that their hearts are hard. He provided divorce as a way of protection for the injured spouse. What are the biblically justifiable reasons for divorce then? I can find two, perhaps three.

The first is very clear in the passages that we read: sexual immorality – unfaithfulness to the marriage bond and covenant. Because sex bonds you to another person, to engage in it with

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<sup>2</sup> *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, Vol. 1a*, p. 112.

another person is to break the covenant. I can only imagine the heartache and wound that such unfaithfulness causes. God allows, but does not require divorce in that case. In fact, God models healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the case of unfaithfulness. Throughout Scripture, God uses marriage to illustrate his relationship with his people. For example, the Church is the Bride of Christ. How many times have God's people been unfaithful to him and yet he brought them back to himself and forgave them. Through God's grace, a marriage that has been deeply wounded by unfaithfulness can be healed. Unfaithfulness does not need to end in divorce.

A second reason for divorce would be abandonment. In I Corinthians 7, the Apostle Paul allows for an unbelieving spouse to leave the marriage relationship through divorce. Any husband or wife that would willingly abandon their spouse demonstrates that they are not following Jesus – they are not Christians. Scripture allows for divorce on the grounds of abandonment. Economic survival for the abandoned spouse nearly requires it.

Finally, I believe abuse can lead to justifiable grounds for divorce. Scripture does not specifically cite abuse as grounds for divorce, but it soundly condemns domestic violence. Psalm 11:5 declares: “the wicked, those who love violence, [God] hates with a passion.” Abuse distorts God's plan for marriage. God does not require a person to remain in an abusive relationship. Remember, even David ran from King Saul's court when his physical safety was threatened. When a spouse is being abusive, the marriage covenant is being broken. Separation announces that the covenant has been broken and points the finger straight at the abuser. Separation because of abuse does not need to lead to divorce, but reconciliation is very hard. It is difficult to restore trust when it has been broken by abuse. And the safety of the abused must always be a first consideration. It is my observation that separation because of abuse often leads to sexual unfaithfulness by the abuser if they are unwilling or unable to change their violent ways. It just seems to be the nature of a controlling relationship. In that case, divorce, on biblical grounds, becomes much clearer. But in no case, should a victim of abuse ever feel that she or he needs to remain with their spouse.

Divorce, without biblical justification, leads to adultery, just as Jesus taught. We must recognize it for what it is. “Irreconcilable differences” is not a biblical justification for divorce. A lack of warmth and passion in the marriage is not justification. Divorce without biblical grounds is an assault on God’s wonderful plan for marriage.

### **Transition...**

I could never imagine being divorced from Diane. Our marriage isn’t perfect. After thirty-five years we have trouble agreeing on the design of a closet door. But our souls have been knit together. The threads of our two separate lives have been woven into one. During the excitement and challenges of our courtship, our hopes and dreams were brought together at the deepest level. Waiting to conceive our first child knit us together in godly patience. And when we lost one child in birth and nearly the other our souls were bound together in the deepest place. We experienced the thrill of buying our first home together and the financial devastation of losing it all when we had to move during an economic downturn. The fabric of our marriage was severely tested and strengthened as we watched our daughter run from God and then return with a fierce passion. We’ve shared the excitement and turmoil that comes with moving and new jobs. Our marriage has been soiled and cleaned and pressed and folded by the many experiences that we have shared. And through it all, God has been weaving a beautiful tapestry that we would have never imagined decades ago. I could not imagine the pain of having that all torn apart. (Tear fabric.)

### **The Tragedy of Divorce**

Some of you have had your soul ripped apart by the trauma of divorce. God hates it. Some of you have been the victim of biblically unjustified divorce. Some of you even initiated biblically unjustified divorce. What should the church do? Paint your forehead with a big “D?”

All too often, the church has shunned divorced people. We have added pain upon pain. How dare we! Yes, divorce is either the result of adultery or leads to it. Do we shun all men who ever had a lustful thought? Sorry. We’re all guilty. Do we condemn women who use their charm to verbally manipulate others? (That’s next week’s sermon.)

You see, the Sermon on the Mount shows us that we all fall short of God's design for us. We are all sinners. We all need God's grace. Jesus didn't shun broken people. He shared the gospel with a woman he met at a well who had five husbands and was living with a man she wasn't married to. He spoke tender forgiveness to the woman who was caught in the act of adultery. He went to parties that were given by money-loving cheaters by the name of Zacchaeus and Matthew. Jesus makes broken people whole. Matthew was the man who wrote this gospel.

With divorced people, church, we need to show a better way. The wounds are deep. I don't want to make them worse. We must deal faithfully with the issues as Scripture does – with holiness, mercy and grace. Let me suggest two very practical things that we can do in following Jesus in this area.

First, we must champion biblical marriage. We need to teach the vision that God has given us for marriage. We will do that through pre-marital counseling and through special classes or seminars. We can't decry what is happening to marriage in our culture without holding up God's standard. We will do that. And we stand firm that sex outside of marriage is damaging to the people who engage in it and to the institution of marriage. We are so careless about this issue. We can't call ourselves Christians and flaunt our disobedience to the whole world. Put away the ways of the world. We must champion biblical marriage.

Second, we need to be a place of healing for those whose lives have been shattered by divorce. One very practical way to do that is to offer DivorceCare classes for people. DivorceCare is a Christ-centered series of sessions in a small group that helps people heal through the aftermath of divorce. There is one church in Aberdeen that offers the program. In a city our size, surely there is room for one more place of healing. DivorceCare would be a wonderful way to fulfill our mission of helping people find and follow Jesus in one of the most difficult trials one could face. But we need a team of people to be trained and lead DivorceCare. Some of you have gone through it and the lessons you've learned would be of great help to others. Don't waste those sorrows. God can redeem them as you help others through it in his name. God may be calling you to help others through the trauma of divorce. If that is the case, please contact me directly or use a yellow response card.



This is the way of Jesus.

We will honor and celebrate biblical marriage.

We will bring healing to those who have known divorce through the grace and mercy that we have known in Jesus Christ.