

“Kingdom Living – Commitment in Marriage”

Matthew 5:31-32

December 9, 2001

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She came to see me because she wanted to know if she would be disobedient to God if she divorced her husband.

For five years she had done everything she knew to do in attempting to reconcile the marriage.

Over five years before he had moved to the basement.

He refused to work, refused to participate in any way with the family, refused to contribute any financial support, and even refused to talk.

She did not believe he had ever committed adultery and he had taken no action to divorce her.

If we were to have an open debate in this room right now on what the best counsel to this woman would be, I dare say we would have a donnybrook – the differences would be pronounced and the emotional heat intense.

Consider another scenario.

The elders of a church are so concerned about the number of divorces among the members that they decide they need a policy regarding marriage, divorce and remarriage and church discipline.

One elder quotes Malachi wherein God says he hates divorce.

Another cites Jesus from the Gospel of Mark wherein divorce and remarriage constitute adultery.

Still another remembers that Jesus made an exception in Matthew when he said no divorce unless there had been marital unfaithfulness.

And yet another elder reminded everyone of one more exception that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians wherein divorce was allowed when an unbelieving spouse deserted the marriage.

The debate became even livelier when one elder said **divorce** might be permitted under limited circumstances but **never** remarriage.

The debate continued and months later there still was no policy.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:31-32 "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

This is a sermon that may offend some people.

It will be too legal for libertarians and too much liberty for legalists.

It will frighten those who need law not liberty to control themselves and others.

It will anger some because it threatens their cherished views.

It will anger others because it indicts their actions.

And in the middle of it all are those who have or are actually experiencing divorce.

There is probably no greater unhappiness than the unhappiness of a marriage that is failing.

And no greater disappointment than the disappointment of a love that failed.

We cannot speak of divorce in a coldly clinical manner.

Divorce touches real people in the deepest and most painful ways.

And so I am reminded as I remind all of you that Jesus' words are spoken in the context of good news.

He speaks not to wound but to heal.

He speaks not to condemn but to give life.

As we have seen over the past few weeks, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is his description of a new kind of life – "Kingdom life".

He came announcing that the Kingdom of heaven was near.

He was **not** saying the end had come but that a new beginning was now possible.

The presence and authority of God that would one day, in the age to come, reign over all creation had reached back into this age.

It is possible for us to become citizens of the kingdom of God and live under his sovereign authority and in his loving presence NOW!

We become citizens of the kingdom of heaven when we trust in Jesus Christ as saving-Lord.

When we humbly acknowledge our need for forgiveness by God, and rely only and fully on his grace through Jesus' death and resurrection for us, we become then and there an adopted member of the king's family.

The apostle Paul said it this way to the Colossians 1:13 "For he has rescued us from the dominion (kingdom) of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves..."

We don't earn it, we don't become good enough for it, and it is not even a reward for our good sense to believe it.

Because we can't, we aren't, and we don't, apart from God's grace.

It is all of grace.

In the opening words of Jesus' sermon, in what we call the "Beatitudes", Jesus makes it clear that to those who are desperate he comes with his grace to forgive, redeem, and make part of his kingdom.

What He **then** proceeds to do is describe what life as a citizen of the Kingdom is like.

To do this Jesus contrasts our old way of thinking about life and relationships with a new way of thinking – kingdom thinking.

As I have shown you the last couple of weeks, in the balance of Matthew 5 Jesus demonstrates this contrast by speaking of specific situations.

In the first he said it is not just a matter of not murdering, but not even carrying resentment because kingdom people are called to forgiveness and reconciliation.

In the second, last week, he said it is not just a matter of not committing physical adultery, but not even lusting because kingdom people are called to real love.

Now this week, he says it is not just a matter of a **correct** divorce, kingdom people are called to committed marriage.

This sermon will be unsatisfying to some if we don't declare some position on when or if divorce and or remarriage is biblically legitimate.

But the text we look at today is not about the technical grounds for divorce – that is not Jesus' concern.

Oh, but it is ours.

We are so prone to “old” thinking that our greatest concern in passages like this is to find out where the line is so we can know when divorce is “permissible” and when it isn't.

We want to find the legal loopholes that will allow us to get out of our commitment to marriage or we want to find the fine point of the law that will help us know how to judge another person's actions.

By Jesus' day, and certainly in our day, the “letter” of the law was sought so that they could find out exactly how far they could go without crossing the line into sin.

If divorce happened for one reason it would be wrong but if for another reason, then it was okay.

That is precisely what Jesus is here rejecting!

His call is to a wholly different way of thinking.

Look again at what he says in Matthew 5:31-32 and see the contrast: "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

When Jesus said, “It has been said” he was referring to Deuteronomy 24:1-4 where we read, “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD.”

Three things this law declared:

1. Divorce was only allowed if “something indecent” was found out.
2. If something “indecent” was found, and he wished to divorce her, then he had to give her a “certificate of divorce” making the divorce legal and possible for another to marry her.
3. A man could not take his twice-divorced wife back.

The OT law didn’t **demand** divorce but clearly the law **controlled** it. Moses understood that divorce and remarriage would happen but it was severely restricted.

Now in Jesus’ day the religious leaders were divided into two schools of interpretation regarding the legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage based on this passage in the law.

One school of thought said it was permissible only in the case of adultery while the other school said it was for **any** good cause (which practically meant any reason).

One school emphasized one word in the law and the other school another word to arrive at their interpretations.

Based on the word “indecent” in Deuteronomy 24, the rabbis of one sect wrote: A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her, for it is written, ‘Because he has found in her **indecency** in something’. This school in fact **required** divorce in cases of sexual indecencies.

Based on the word “something” in Deuteronomy 24, the rabbis of another sect wrote: ‘He may divorce her even if she spoiled a dish for him, for it is written, ‘Because he has found in her indecency in **something** (interpreted to mean “anything”).

Still a third group picked up on different words in the law that allowed for even a more lenient interpretation.

R. Akiba says, Divorce is permitted, “even if he found another fairer than she, for it is written, If a man marries “a woman who becomes displeasing to him ...” (Gittin 9:10) from the Mishna London:Oxford 1933 p321)

But Jesus rejects this kind of legalistic nitpicking.

The King doesn’t want his people focused on the technicalities of when a divorce is or isn’t warranted.

He wants them to stop divorcing.

A kingdom mind doesn’t focus on the legal limitations of divorce but on a commitment in marriage.

Matthew 5:31-32 "It has been said, `Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' ³² **But I tell you** that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.”

Yes, Jesus mentions an exception but that is not his point.

His point is that instead of obsessing about when divorce is appropriate; understand that divorce is not the “kingdom” way.

Now I must be very careful here.

I’m not saying divorced people can’t be part of the kingdom – Jesus makes it very clear that they can and are.

I’m simply trying to make the same emphasis Jesus does – just like resentment and lust (the first two situations he mentions) do not fit in the kingdom, so neither does divorce.

But because we **do** obsess about the technicalities of when a divorce and/or remarriage is appropriate I need to spend a little time on what Jesus is not saying in this verse before going back to what he is saying.

1. He is not saying divorce is **never** appropriate.

Under certain circumstances divorce may well be the right thing.

Between the words of Jesus in Matthew, here and in chapter 19, and Paul in 1 Corinthians, exceptions to “no divorce” clearly exist.

2. He is not saying that any woman whose husband divorces her is a literal adulteress.

The words “causes her to become an adulteress” are difficult words to understand at first.

Isn't this just adding insult to injury?

He divorces her and she is called an adulteress?

Some try to explain this by suggesting that Jesus means she (the innocent party) commits adultery **if she remarries**.

But it is not certain that remarriage would occur and Jesus does not even mention remarriage as the issue here, just divorce.

Some expositors make note of the passive voice used in the original language and would translate the phrase this way: “the divorcing husband makes the wife suffer adultery, or the wife is exposed to adultery”.

She has become the victim of an adulterous act – the breaking of faith in the marriage.

This, I believe, is correct and is confirmed when Jesus lays the blame not on the wife but on the divorcing husband when he says that the husband “causes” this.

3. A third thing Jesus is not saying is that physical adultery is the only “ground” for divorce.

It is at least **interesting**, and I think instructive, that he didn't use the specific word for physical adultery that he had just been using.

When discussing the exception when divorce may legitimately occur, he uses the term that is translated “marital unfaithfulness.”

This is a phrase that translates a word that includes an unspecified, but broad range of sexual sin.

The range includes:

1. An act of physical adultery.
2. Unfaithfulness during the engagement or betrothal.
3. Incest – husband and wife were later discovered to be blood relatives.
4. Repeated and unrepented unfaithfulness.

Frankly good and godly Bible scholars differ greatly on what is meant by “marital unfaithfulness”.

But they at least agree that it means some sexual sin that violates the covenant relationship of marriage.

But I think it is **incorrect** to try to limit it to physical adultery.

We must at least remember that Paul, writing with the authority of Jesus, indicates another exception in 1 Corinthians 7.

Therefore it is reasonable to understand that both Jesus and Paul knew there were exceptions to “no divorce”.

Jesus is not saying that divorce is never appropriate, he is not saying that when a man divorces his wife she literally becomes an adulteress, and he is not saying that physical adultery is the only ground for divorce.

Dr. Craig Blomberg, known to many of us and a recognized evangelical scholar, has written: “Jesus forbids divorce and remarriage, except when sexual sin intrudes. Then both divorce and remarriage are permitted, though neither is ever required. Restoration always remains preferable. Infidelity does not, in and of itself, dissolve the marriage covenant, but it does introduce so serious a breach that sometimes relationships prove irreparable.” (Blomberg in Trinity Journal No.11 1990 p 181-2)

CEB Cranfield writes, “For the church rigidly to refuse to solemnize the remarriage of a divorced person who has accepted God’s forgiveness and at the same time God’s judgment upon his or her life, who is sincerely penitent...and sincerely desirous...to order his or her

life as nearly as possible to God's will, would seem to me to involve a denial of the reality of the forgiveness of sins and therefore of the gospel of Jesus Christ itself." CEB Cranfield The Bible and Christian Life 1985 223f

Is not the Scripture in such passages as Luke 7, John 8, John 4, and others declaring the forgiveness of just such sins as we are so prone to find unforgivable?

Fredrick Bruner wrote, "Forgiveness of sins operates only in the repentant and nowhere else. But in the repentant, forgiveness of sins does operate and mightily so." (Bruner The Church Book 685)

You and I both stake our eternal future on that truth!

I have noted what I believe Jesus is not saying but what is he saying?

Again Jesus is calling "kingdom" people to a higher standard.

In Matthew 19, the much longer passage on the same subject, Jesus does the same thing he does in chapter 5.

Matthew 19:1-10

"Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" (Quite obviously referring again to the passage in Deuteronomy 24.)

"Haven't you read," Jesus replied, "that at the beginning the Creator `made them male and female,' and said, `For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

"Why then," they asked, "did Moses **command** that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

Jesus replied, "Moses **permitted** you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

Here as in Matthew 5 Jesus concern is not with divorce but with marriage.

I think the disciples' response is our best key to understanding Jesus' intent.

Jesus was calling them to a much higher standard that they thought possible to live.

In essence they said, "If we can't divorce our wives, how could we ever dare to get married?"

The disciples had been reared in the same culture as the Pharisees who asked Jesus the question about divorce.

They thought that divorce was the way you handled disagreement and hard times in a marriage.

They quite obviously heard Jesus to be saying that "kingdom people" didn't do that.

Kingdom people didn't get divorced.

Again Jesus notes the exception but his point is that a committed marriage is what he calls us to and divorce is the last resort.

He makes it clear that marriage was instituted by God ("God made them male and female") and monitored by God ("What God has joined together let man not separate").

Haddon Robinson wrote, "Society did not invent marriage, they received it." (Robinson 148)

Marriage is not a business partnership that can be broken when either party thinks the arrangement is unfair or unsatisfying.

God said marriage is a union that creates one out of two.

It is not our love that keeps a marriage alive but God's institution of marriage that keeps love alive.

It is not until "lack of love do us part" but "until death do us part".

Jesus does not want his kingdom people to become legalists about when divorce is legitimate, he wants them to see and experience the possibilities of a committed marriage.

Listen to one author's description of that kind of marriage:

“That there should exist one other person in the world toward whom all openness of exchange should establish itself, from whom there should be no concealment; whose body should be as dear to one, in every part, as one's own; with whom there should be no sense of mine or thine, in property or possession; into whose mind one's thoughts should naturally flow, as it were to know themselves and receive a new illumination; and between whom and oneself there should be a spontaneous rebound of sympathy in all the joys and sorrows and experiences of life; such is perhaps one of the dearest wishes of the soul.” (Edward Carpenter quoted in Mace, Whom God hath joined p26-27)

And God knows such a relationship exists only in the context of commitment for life.

Jesus wants his people to stop looking at divorce and look instead at marriage.

He calls them full commitment.

A superb writer, Elizabeth Actemeier has written: “Christian marriage is a committed marriage – an unreserved dedication of one's whole self to the relationship. When Christians marry they say to each other, in effect, ‘We are going to maintain this marital union, no matter what.’ They promise each other: ‘I will be with you no matter what happens to us and between us. If you should become blind tomorrow, I will be there. If you achieve no success and attain no status in our society, I will be there. When we argue and are angry, as we inevitably will, I will work to bring us together... When our marriage seems utterly sterile and going nowhere at all, I will believe that it can work and I will want it to work, and I will do my part to make it work. And when all is wonderful and we are happy, I will rejoice over our life together, and continue to strive to keep our relationship strong and growing.” (Elizabeth Actemeier *The Committed Marriage* 41)

That is what a “Kingdom” commitment is marriage is about.

I think the disciples' response indicates another crucial matter in this kind of kingdom living.

They thought it would be impossible to live in such a way.

But as we have noted over and over again in this series, Jesus calls his people to a lifestyle made possible **by his grace.**

Such a commitment in marriage maintained through financial failures, sickness and even unfaithfulness, as well as the accumulation of daily irritations, **is possible** when we look to God's Spirit to give us the will and the ability.

I'm not at liberty to tell the rest of you about some of the powerful ways I have seen God work in the marriages of some of you.

Impossible situations turned around by grace.

Rock-stubborn hearts made soft by God's Spirit.

"No-hope" marriages restored.

All, as men (especially men) and women respond to God's grace.

It's all of grace.

A conscious reliance on God's Spirit in us is the way of "kingdom" living:

Last week a member of our church wrote the following to me:

"I'm so excited about this series on Kingdom living. In each sermon certain phrases have leapt into my mind, or my spirit, and have brought light and joy. One I keep saying over and over to myself is, "Obedience does not earn grace. Grace empowers obedience." And "It doesn't require some standard of behavior for Jesus to accept us. He accepts us just as we are. He gives us His grace just as we are."

And my thought is, "Yes, if He withheld his grace until we reached a certain standard, then how in the world do we REACH the standard in the first place? Especially since it is his grace that enables us to change. I'd never seen that before. Lights have been going on in my heart and mind. It is all becoming clearer.

When I get mad at God because it all has seemed so hard to do, then I walk away in agony of heart saying, "Forget You!" What I really mean is, "Please want me for your kingdom. Don't throw me away. Because deep down I do want You, God. I need you. I can't

do anything without You. Please don't give up on me. I'll do better next time.

Oh, but those last words are dangerous – “I'll do better next time”?

I won't do it better next time. I can't. I need his grace. I need to admit my helplessness, so that he can impart his strength, his grace to me.... He says to me, “Hey, it's okay. I know you can't do it. I know all about that. I know all the times you've tried and failed. I know that you think you are a failure at this point. It's okay to be a failure. / Now come and sit by me and let me give you my strength and ability. Let me put my law into your heart so that walking in love, the law of the kingdom, is your desire.”

The possibilities of “kingdom” living in marriage rise far above the technicalities of when divorce is permissible.

Jesus calls us to committed marriage.

And by his Spirit he will enable us.