

Extreme MAKEOVER

Divorce and the Kingdom Heart: Matthew 5:31-32, 19:3-12

Today we are going to talk about a very personal and sensitive subject in the church, one that can bring up a lot of pain. Having grown up in a home where divorce was a reality, I empathize with those who have gone through one, it is a very painful and soul-searching experience. In many cases, it changes your life completely.

So as we explore the kind of heart Jesus wants his followers to have, I just want to emphasize that I am aware we have folks have gone through this process and I will do my best to be very sensitive.

With that stated sincerely up front, I want to begin by looking what Jesus has to say about divorce. Anyone who has gone through one, or know someone that has, knows how heartbreaking it can be in life. It also becomes apparent how hearts change among these couples. Very rarely does a divorce happen with integrity, there is usually the reality of hearts that have grown cold, in some cases, ice cold. We are going to look at two passages, first, what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:31-32, then his follow up in chapter 19:3-12

Matthew 5:31-32

31 "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 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.

Jesus begins by stating that what they have heard about divorce and what he teaches are two different things. What he is saying here is that the concept of "easy divorce" is not true, and that ultimately divorcing someone without biblical parameters, forces them to commit adultery (also the one they marry). Now that is a hard teaching and it really requires more explanation. Let me establish the contextual foundation.

There were two rabbinic schools of thought on the issue of divorce. One side (Hillel) taught that divorce was permissible for any reason; the other school (Shammai) taught that divorce is only permissible if one of the spouses is unfaithful, which has been traditionally been known as the *exception clause* for divorce. Jesus, sides with the latter and then even ups the ante by stating that anyone who divorces for any other reason, forces their spouse to be an adulterer when they remarry. Back in that day and even in ours, this is a very hard teaching.

Now sometime after Jesus taught this to his followers, the Pharisees, a religious sect, heard of his interpretation and they challenged it, just as many challenge it today. We find this challenge in chapter 19:3-12. Here is where things really become heated.

Matthew 19:3-12

3 And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" 4 He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 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'? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

Notice the question in verse, 3. Is it permissible to divorce for any cause? Again, one rabbinic school taught that men could divorce for any reason. In fact, if you study a Jewish commentary called the Mishnah, this becomes evident when you learn they believe you can divorce your wife if you find someone more pleasing to the eye. The Jewish historian, Josephus, clarified the predominant cultural view by stating you can divorce a wife "for any cause," which can include of all things, burning your food. Can you imagine that? "Honey, I am filing for a divorce because you are a "toast burner."

Jesus responds by going back to the garden, back to creation when the institution of marriage was first established. Here, he teaches that God created marriage, and the purpose was for two people to become "one flesh (Genesis 2:24)." This is a process that begins at the honeymoon, sexual consummation, where husband and wife cease to be independent of each other and move toward *oneness*. Jesus sternly reiterates what the marriage historical context is binding, "Let no man separate what God has joined together."

This is an intriguing phrase for several reasons. First, no person is supposed to come between a husband and spouse. No one, family members, co-workers, ex-boyfriends and girlfriends, counselors, best friends, for whatever reason, is to force or encourage severing another's marriage.

Secondly, the marriage union is not just something that the couple **alone** has consummated; it is something God has a hand in as well. The Scriptures teach (verse 6), that God joins two people together. It is almost like saying; God places the final stamp of approval on the couple. This reality, of course, takes marriage to another level because it is divinely sanctioned.

Objection 1: Now some people might think does God really bring two people together that are incompatible. No, He wants you to exercise godly wisdom and discernment, but if one ultimately "pulls the trigger," He is involved in the "joining process." Consequently, you can be certain that God does not want anyone trying to tear it apart. When a person says, "I do," God, joins them together, despite whether one thinks they are compatible.

Now for some of us this does not set well, and it did not set well with the Pharisees. Here is where they challenged him from the Law of Moses.

7 They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" 8 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. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."

This is an important interaction here. The Pharisees challenge Jesus by using the Law of Moses against him (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). They even insist that Moses commanded this, a clear example in their eyes of a man trying to separate what God joined. In the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 24:1-4, we discover that men were allowed to divorce their wife for any "detestable matter." The issue between the two schools of thought revolved around what was considered detestable. For the Pharisees it did not matter, for the other group, detestable involved sexual sin like adultery.

Jesus responds by stating that Moses did not command divorce, but he "allowed" it because of their hardness of heart. To comprehend the severity of this hardness, remember an entire generation died in the wilderness because of disobedience toward God. Things became so bad for some spouses, that Moses allowed it probably because when you are married to someone with a hardened heart, life can become sheer hell for the other spouse. Regardless, the Hebrews were doing the very thing God forbid, they were mimicking the Canaanite culture.

Yet, Jesus emphasizes it was not that way from the beginning. Moses lived approximately 1500 years *after* God first set up the parameters for marriage. As I mentioned, God sanctioned marriage and did not want people to get divorced. It is at this point where Jesus repeats what he said earlier, the only exception to divorce is when a spouse is unfaithful, otherwise, both parties commit adultery if they marry someone else. Again, we cannot sugarcoat this because it is a hard teaching. Check out the response of Jesus' disciples, they understood the implications.

10 The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." 11 But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 12 For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."

I love the brutal innocence of honesty here. If we have to abide by those rules, then it seems foolish to get married his disciples conclude. What this suggests is that the disciples preferred the "easy divorce" teachings of the Pharisees. They preferred the "toaster divorces." Ultimately, the teachings of Jesus drive home an important point, consider the cost before you get married. Marriage is not for everyone, not everyone can receive the biblical teachings on marriage and divorce. This is an honest statement and if one chooses not to marry because of the parameters that Jesus sets, that is perfectly acceptable. However, that does not give one a license to sleep with other people; the Bible teaches if you burn with passion for another, get married (1 Corinthians 7: 36). Sexuality is a very sacred thing in God's eyes and reserved for those who get married.

Jesus ends his teaching by talking about three types of eunuchs. Here is his point. Some people don't marry because they were born celibate; others were made celibate by men (castration), still others chose to remain celibate for the kingdom of God. In other words, they followed the Apostle Paul's advice and choose not to get married in order to devote themselves completely to God (1 Corinthians 7:29-34).

Practical Implications

Okay, we just gone over some hard teachings, some that make us very uncomfortable. There are probably many questions, even some objections. Let me first start by saying, this is the heart of God when it comes to marriage. Easy divorce is unbiblical. Unfortunately, our culture specializes in easy divorce. Yesterday on-line I read that you can get an easy divorce in the state of Oregon for 155 bucks and it will be finished in 2-5 days. It was described as a no-fault divorce. The Bible does not teach that one can divorce mutually without fault. According to Jesus, these no fault divorces are a condition of a hard heart.

It is also worth mentioning that term Jesus uses here for sexual immorality is the Greek word, *pornea*, which is a junk-drawer term that refers to sexual unfaithfulness, which includes adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, incest and so forth. Any of these sins constitute unfaithfulness to the marriage partner and are grounds for divorce. Now this does not mean you have to divorce, it just means it is permissible. I have seen people make it through adultery and I have seen marriages end because of homosexuality. God's heart is that you can work it out, but the reality is sometimes the pain is too deep.

The word, *pornea* is where we get the word pornography from and this is another sin that promotes what Jesus refers to as adultery in the heart. Men and women whose spouses are addicted to pornography feel the same degree of unfaithfulness, even if it is not physical. It is a sexual sin that promotes unfaithfulness. Ultimately, steps should be taken to address this problem; but one must also set serious parameters.

Abandonment

The apostle Paul provides a second exception on divorce that is permissible. In this instance, a Christian is married to an unbeliever and the non-Christian abandons the marriage. In such cases, Paul says that one is not obligated to remain in the marriage (1 Corinthians 7:15). Again, the believing spouse should do everything they can to remain in the marriage, but ultimately if the other spouse leaves, he or she is free.

So when it comes to our stance and Northside, divorce is permissible when one is sexually unfaithful or if an unbelieving spouse abandons the believer.

Objection 2: What if a spouse is being physically abused? Again, marriage can get messy if one's heart is not right. I believe the abused spouse should do everything they can to work it out, even if that means separating for a year so the other spouse can get help. But ultimately, there comes a point where a spouse's life may be threatened, not to mention children if applicable. Consequently, if a spouse has such a hardened heart that they physically abuse on a repeated basis, this becomes a life issue and a divorce then is permissible. Personally, I would rather err on the side of grace here. Unfortunately, this is a result of a deeply hardened heart. However, once again it is worth repeating, this is not God's heart for marriage. Ultimately, that is why we must do everything we can in marriage to guard against a hardened heart.

What if my Divorce is not biblical?

Here is the reality of the situation. Many people in the church have been divorced for unbiblical reasons. Many people who fit this category have also remarried. In the passage we are studying Jesus said that if one is divorced for any other reason than sexual immorality, then both parties become adulterers in God's eyes, even those they marry. What should we do if our divorce was not because of sexual unfaithfulness or abandonment by an unbeliever?

Here is where the kingdom heart comes into play. We need to be honest with ourselves and with God. If our divorce is unbiblical, we need to confess it to God. We need to confess that our hearts were hardened to the point where we did not seek God's will in marriage and fell short. Divorce is not an unforgivable sin; the most important thing is to be honest with God and even your current spouse. When you make the commitment to do this, do not forget to ask God to bless your current marriage. Commit to learning from your mistakes and consecrate your marriage to God. Enjoy your spouse in complete freedom, no guilt. God loves you, forgives you, and wants to bless you.

If your heart is right, He will use you and your spouse for His glory. Ultimately, Jesus' teachings on heart and character are hard, but they are also freeing. We should follow hard after God and seek to always have this kingdom heart Jesus demands.

One final thought to those who are single. Enjoy your singleness and make sure you do not forget to use it to glorify God. Spend some Friday nights, serving others, not just yourself. Eventually, when God brings someone in your life that may be marriage material, choose prayerfully and carefully. Make sure that person's heart is right before God. Make sure your dating life is not blurred by deceitful physical affection, but strive to follow God in areas of purity.

I just married a young couple yesterday and they are in love and looking forward to spending the rest of their lives together. They said they do not believe in divorce and I believe them. In fact, no one believes in divorce when initially marrying. However, the reality is that the divorce rate is above fifty percent for Christians. In the end, most of these divorces, occurred because the spouses had the opposite of a kingdom heart, they developed a hardened one. Take the teachings of Jesus seriously and make sure you really know whom you are considering marrying. In the end, a marriage that is committed to living the way God intends is a beautiful thing. In the words of King Solomon, just make sure you do not rush love before its time.

Divorce is painful and you do not want any part of it.