

Divorce and Marriage

Matthew 5:31-32

Rev. John Pennylegion

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Good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here. And friends, it is great to be with you. If you are a guest or a visitor, welcome. We're glad that you would join us. And maybe this is your first Sunday, or maybe you've been coming for a few weeks now, and you kind of wonder, what are these people like? What are they about? What should I know about them? And I would say, one thing you should know about us is that we are not perfect. That we make mistakes. We err. We sin against one another, against ourselves, against the Lord. And we feel the burden of that. We feel the burden of our own sin. We feel the burden of our own failures. But we also feel the burden of the sin of the world.

And so, that's something you should know about us. But even more important than that is that we also know where it is that we look to relieve us of that burden, the burden of our sin. And that's our Lord Jesus. You see, that is the most important thing about what it means to be the people of God. And that is that we are resting in his grace, his work, his provision for us. And not just for us, but for the world, right? Because Jesus is the only answer that we can give to a world that is burdened by sin, that is feeling the weight of the fall. We turn to this one who has given his life that we might have life. And so, that is ultimately what we're about. That we are people who are looking to Jesus, the one who forgives and gives grace and directs us into true life.

And that true life is what we've been talking about over the last number of weeks as we've been going through the Sermon on the Mount. Because the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' instructions, his teaching to his people about what life in the kingdom is to look like. And this is important for us to see because there are all sorts of kingdoms around us, competing kingdoms, right? There are kingdoms out there, there are kingdoms in our hearts, there are kingdoms in our minds, all vying for our affections and all calling us to live in a particular way. And so, it's right, it's good for us to receive from Jesus this teaching that informs us of what the kingdom should look like. And so, we're going to look this morning at Matthew 5, and we're going to look at verses 31 through 32. So, just two verses. And in these two verses, Jesus is shaping a true and proper understanding of marriage and divorce. Now, I imagine for some of you, if you're here and you're single, you might be thinking, okay, this is about marriage, it's about divorce, so now I can check out, right? I can spend the next, you know, 25 to 30 minutes or so kind of planning out my week, you know, putting together my grocery list, getting ready for work tomorrow. I can just, you know, check out for a little bit.

Well, I'm going to encourage you, don't do that, okay? Don't do that. And for a number of reasons. One is, the truth is, we believe that God's Word is good for us regardless of our circumstance. So, whether we are single or whether we're married, whether we've experienced divorce and remarriage, whether we're widowed or a widower, whatever we might be, God's Word is applicable to us. It is good for us. So, that's the first thing. The second thing is, if you are single and maybe you want to be married one day, then to understand what God's expectation for marriage is before entering into that relationship is quite helpful. And then finally, the truth is, and maybe the most important truth, is that God uses marriage as a picture not only to describe our relationships with one another, like our married relationships, but actually His relationship with us. And we're going to talk about that

later in the sermon. But for now, let's go ahead and read Matthew 5, beginning in verse 31. Jesus says,

“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.” (ESV)

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word and ask that You would lead and guide us now, that You would direct our ways, that as we come to this difficult and sensitive topic, that You would give us wisdom, that You would give us eyes to see, and that You would give us ears to hear Your truth, so that we would walk with You, we would live as Your people. And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

Correcting

Well, the last three weeks, I've had the opportunity to preside over two different weddings, and it's a really great privilege as a pastor. It's one of the great privileges of being a pastor, to preside over a wedding, to be able to speak God's intention of marriage before a group of people, to pray over a couple, and to lead them through their vows. It is a beautiful privilege, and whenever I do a wedding, at some point in the homily, the little short sermon that I give, I'll recite the vows to the couple that they're about to say to one another, and I invite them to simply listen to what they're about to say, to listen again with fresh ears what they're going to say to one another. And so I tell them, you know, this is what you'll say, I, you know, fill in the blank, you know, take you, again, fill in the blank, to be your husband or wife, and I do promise and covenant with you and with God before these witnesses, to be your loving husband or wife, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and health, as long as we both shall live. I recite these vows to them, and then I remind them that these vows are vows of endurance.

That's what these vows are, that when you say these vows, you are declaring to your soon-to-be spouse, you are declaring to them that no matter what comes, no matter what arises, I will be there. That's what these vows are saying. I mean, think about it, right? They say in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and health, as long as we both shall live. Like, is there any experience that we will encounter that isn't covered by one of those things, right? Everything that we could experience in our lives is covered. That's why I actually make couples take these vows, because there is nothing that you would encounter that you can say, I didn't sign up for this. You sure did. Plenty and want, joy and sorrow, sickness, health, until we die, I'm going to be here. That's what you're saying. And it's a wonderful thing to declare, right? It's a wonderful thing to say to one another.

And at every wedding that I have ever done, I have never had someone challenge me on that, right? I've never had someone in all my years of doing a wedding come up to me and go, you know, I sure hope this works out. Or I love him, but we'll see what happens. Right? Like, no one does that at a wedding, because a wedding is a time of hope. A wedding is a time of hope. It's a time of expectation. It's a time of joy and celebration. No one thinks about what might come. But we know that sometimes something does come. Because after the food has

been eaten, and the bouquet is wilted, and everyone returns home, the joy of the day, maybe weeks, months, years later, can turn to sadness.

And celebration can turn to silence, and those promises that were spoken can be forgotten. Y'all know this. I don't need to cite statistics about divorce. Y'all have experienced it. Every one of us has felt the effects of divorce. Every one of us. It might be because we're children of divorce. Our parents are divorced. It might be because our siblings or friends of ours have gone through a divorce. It might be that we ourselves are divorced. Regardless of where we are, we've all experienced the ramifications of it. And we've seen how maybe people, others, and maybe even ourselves, have tried to rationalize why a divorce is to be pursued, right? We say things like, well, they'll be happier, or I'll be happier, or we're not in love anymore, or our desires have changed, or they've changed, or we're simply not compatible. And let's be honest. I mean, who's really compatible, especially initially, right? I mean, in the immortal words of the great philosopher Rocky Balboa, "she's got gaps, I got gaps," right? I bet you didn't have Rocky Balboa on your sermon bingo card this morning, but there you go.

But the point is, is that we constantly, we are looking for ways to get out of difficult situations, of trying to leave those hard times, right? We're looking for better times, and so we look for ways to justify ourselves. And this isn't new. This isn't just a modern convention. No, the people in Jesus's day, they were looking to justify divorce as well. And they weren't invoking a lack of love, or growing apart, or gaps. They had other reasons. And Jesus is correcting that understanding of divorce. We hear it in our opening verses: "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." Now, Jesus here is citing Deuteronomy 24. And in Deuteronomy 24, Moses is giving instruction about divorce and marriage. And this is what he writes. He says, "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 it goes on to then describe what's supposed to happen.

And y'all, there's no debate that Moses is giving instruction about divorce here. But there is debate about that little word indecency. There's a great deal of debate. In fact, amongst the Jewish interpreters of the law, there was great debate. There were primarily two camps who understood this word indecency very differently. You see, there was the one camp who saw indecency as being simply infidelity or failure to observe the law. So that's what indecency means. But then there was a whole other camp that thought indecency basically meant anything improper. And anything improper meant anything. It was very broad. So it included things like this. If a wife failed to grind the flour or to nurse the baby, if her head was turnip-shaped or sunken in or flat on the back, if she had no eyebrows or one eyebrow or bushy eyebrows, if her ears were too little or too floppy, if she had swelling of the big toe or was ambidextrous. And y'all, that's just a little bit. Like the list goes on and on and on. This was in the Jewish interpretation of the law.

So basically, those who held this understanding of indecency, indecency was anything a husband doesn't like. And Jesus is correcting that. He's remedying that. Look what he says. "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 so we see Jesus is regulating divorce. He's saying that divorce is allowable, but not for any reason. For a very specific one. So a divorceable offense isn't the appearance of your spouse or the burning of a meal or the hours of playing video games that maybe your husband does or too much time with friends or growing apart or simply changing. I've heard that before,

right? I've changed. They've changed. That's why we need to pursue a divorce. Of course your spouse has changed, right?

I was talking to a man in St. Louis when I was still in St. Louis. He was part of our church, and he had been married for roughly about five years, so it was still pretty new in their marriage. And so we're having a conversation. It was just lunch. And like I do with most people when I'm having lunch with them or getting time, I say, "well, how's your wife? How's your marriage? How's your family? How's your home," right? And he started sharing, and he started talking about all the ways his wife was starting to change. And he was talking about how she wasn't her same self and how even her appearance was starting to change in just these five years. And when he finally stopped talking, I remember reaching around, and I grabbed his side right here, and I went, you know what? I bet that's a little bit bigger than it was five years ago, wasn't it? And he smiled very sheepishly at me and laughed and understood my point. Has she changed? Of course she has, and so have you.

Tim Keller quoting the Christian ethicist Louis Smead says, "my wife has been married to five men, and they're all me." And he's right. We change physically and behaviorally and spiritually. We've got gaps, and some of those gaps get filled in, and sometimes new gaps form. We change because of one another. We change because of children. We change because of professions, right? We're shaped by one another. And sometimes the Lord uses this woman or this man in our life to change us, and sometimes in our sin we change for not the good but for the ill. We change. We grow and change and mature in new gaps, and Jesus is saying that is no reason to divorce. Instead, the only allowance Jesus gives us here is sexual immorality.

Now, we know from other passages of Scripture, like 1 Corinthians 7, that there actually is more than simply sexual immorality. Paul allows for divorce in the case of abandonment. So, in the case where one spouse basically says, "I'm out - I know you want to stay married, but I'm leaving", that there the innocent party can enter into divorce. And the church has historically put under the umbrella of abandonment abuse, whether it be sexual or physical or spiritual or verbal abuse, that that is a form of abandonment. And the reason why we have these allowances of abandonment or adultery is because these acts are breaking the marriage covenant. Those other things, you know, floppy ears, like that's just ridiculous, right? Floppy ears, whatever it might be, not grinding the flour, right? Whatever, that's not breaking the covenant. But these, they are.

You see, in Matthew 19, Jesus is asked by the Pharisees about divorce. Maybe they got wind about his teaching here and how it was challenging their interpretations, and so they ask him. And Jesus invoked creation when he talked about it. And he said that, "therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate." You see, what Jesus was doing was he was invoking the covenantal bond in relationship that has taken place between a man and a woman in marriage. And what he's saying is that that bond, that covenant relationship, is not to be severed. It is not to be severed. That it is the most important human relationship that we will have. That all others take a back seat, right? Our relationship with our parents, with our friends, with even our children, they take a back seat to the relationship we have with our spouse, because it is only our spouse that we are entering into a covenant with.

But when a spouse commits adultery, or abandons the marriage, or is abusive, they are breaking that covenant. That is why there's an allowance for divorce. That's why it's permitted. But y'all, that doesn't mean it's required. Permitted doesn't mean required. I'm sure many of you have seen marriages that were on the rocks. Many of you maybe have seen marriages where there was adultery, and yet the offended spouse didn't leave, and didn't give up, but instead pursued their spouse. And they chose to seek reconciliation, and they had years of difficulty, and struggle, and tears, and working through broken trust, and yet the marriage was restored. Some of us have seen that. Now, I'm not saying every case will end in that way, but we have seen that, and it is beautiful. That when the covenant is broken, it doesn't mean we have to pursue divorce. We're allowed, but we don't have to. Instead, actually, we should seek reconciliation, if we can, and restoration. Jesus is telling us it's allowed, but not required.

Reflecting

Now, I do feel like I need to say something about that last clause that Jesus speaks, because it can be very confusing. He says that unless there is adultery, that you are not to divorce, and he says because that would make her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. And some have interpreted this to mean that if there is ever a divorce, then both parties are to live in perpetual singleness. Maybe some of you have heard this teaching. I don't think that's actually what Jesus is saying here. I think what Jesus is speaking about is divorce apart from the biblical allowance. When there's an unbiblical divorce, that's what he's talking about here, but when there is the allowance for it, he's saying the innocent party is, they're free to remarry. That has been the historic understanding of the church. Now, I realize that that might be inviting all sorts of questions in our minds and questions that we maybe can't answer all right now, so let me just commend two things to you, if that is introducing questions. The first is, I would commend to you our denominations position paper on divorce and marriage. We're Presbyterians. We like to write papers. This is what we do.

A number of years ago, there was a position paper about divorce and marriage, and it's many, many pages long. It gets into more detail than we can in just a sermon. I would commend that to you, and in the next few days, I'm going to post a PDF of that on Realm, so if you'd like to download it and look at it. So that's the first thing I would do, but then the second thing is that if you still have questions or if you're thinking about your marriage or your relationships or future relationships or past ones, I would simply say come talk to us. Come talk to us. Spend time with Tobias or myself. Get coffee. Get a meal. Come meet with our elders.

We would love to talk with you. We'd love to wrestle through the questions and wrestle over the scriptures and pray with and for you, but for now, I hope what we are walking away with is that Jesus is correcting a misconception that was in his day as well as ours, and the misconception is that marriage can be easily put aside for whatever reason or for whatever change of heart we might have, and he's saying no. It's not to be that way. He's calling us to see marriage not as something that can be easily broken, but instead something that we are to hold on to and we are to treasure and we are to pursue, and we're to see marriage this way because marriage, our marriage relationships, are to be a reflection of the relationship that the Lord has with us. Do you remember what Paul says in Ephesians chapter 5? When he's talking about the relationship a husband has with his wife, he says "this mystery is profound, and I'm saying it refers to Christ and the church." You see, marriage is this beautiful analogy of our relationship with the Lord. In fact, we heard it in our Old Testament reading today,

didn't we? From Hosea: "In that day, declares the Lord, you will call me my husband and I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness."

Y'all, that's what God says about us. You see, whether we are married or single, whether we long to be married or have been married in the past, if you are trusting in Christ, then he has betrothed himself to you. He is our bridegroom and we are his bride. And what does he do for his bride? Well, Ephesians tells us he loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Y'all, isn't that beautiful? That we don't present ourselves as holy and without blemish, but he presents us that way. That this is what Christ is doing for you and for me, that he betroths himself to us, that our bridegroom makes us pure. He washes us clean. That is what he does.

Jesus doesn't look at our failings and our sins and our giving of our hearts to others and decide to put us aside or to turn his back on us or to divorce us or to abandon us. No, he is committed to pursuing his bride and making us pure. And we know this commitment is sure because he gave his life to do it. He went to the cross to make us his bride. And y'all, there is a day coming when he will return. And like every good wedding, there will be a celebration. And there will be joy and there will be eating. For the Apostle John, looking forward to that day in Revelation 19, says, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and exalt and give him the glory. For the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. It was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure. Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."

That is what awaits us. This beautiful supper where we will see our bridegroom and us, his bride, will be presented to him. And we will be with him forever. That is why that we pursue marriage. That is why we seek to hold fast to our spouse because Christ, our bridegroom, has held fast to us. Our marriages, our weddings, they are to be modeled after Christ's marriage to his church. And though we fail and falter and stumble and sin, he will not abandon his bride. He will not abandon you, no. He is the bridegroom who has committed himself to us. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that Christ has come and he has made us his bride. And so we pray, Lord, that as we live in this life, as we go about our days, as we live with our spouses, that we would be mindful of Christ's love for us. That the way that he has given of himself for us, that that is how we would live with our spouses. That we would sit in his goodness. That we would rest in his care. And that his life with us would be a model for our life with others. And so, Father, I pray that you would deepen our marriages. That you would strengthen them. That you would be near to those who are not married and who long to, or those who grieve the loss of marriage. And that we would all take comfort in knowing that you are our bridegroom. And that we are the bride that you are making pure. And we pray all this in Christ's name and God's people said together, Amen.