

## THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE - Part eighteen - Teaching #1405

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### DIVORCE, REMARRIAGE AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

**Matthew 19:3-12** - "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 they shall become one flesh'? [6] So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." [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." [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."

This is the final message in the series of teachings "*The Meaning of Marriage*." I saved it to the end, perhaps because it is by far the most controversial and difficult, but also because the whole subject of divorce and remarriage can't be isolated from the first sixteen or seventeen teachings on *why* God created the institution in the first place.

Remember, *first* God planned redemption for fallen mankind. Then, *second*, He designed marriage so there would be a visible model of the relationship He wanted to establish through redemption between Christ and His bride, the church. So marriage exists because redemption exists, and not the other way around. The roles and responsibilities of husbands and wives are God given and recognizable because we know how Christ redeemed His bride. This is the essence of Paul's thinking in **Ephesians 5:31-33** - "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." [32] This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. [33] However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband."

We've covered all of this already. My only point of reminder here is that Paul, in three verses, outlines basic responsibilities for both husbands and wives and sandwiches between them the reason for their existence. Marriage is a mystery based on Christ's relationship to His bride, the church.

So before we ventured anywhere near the subject of divorce and remarriage we planted our minds deeply into the soil of the Biblical teaching on marriage. The pattern for this is Jesus Himself. It's the Pharisees who come with the question about *divorce*. Jesus answers them referring to *marriage*.

The second thing I want to say is the view that has come to make a lot of sense to me is nowhere near the majority view of the evangelical church today. I am inclined increasingly to a view that is a definite minority view among evangelicals. I think it's a view that is both narrower and broader in different ways. It's narrower in terms of any Scriptural allowance for divorce. And it's broader in terms of where God's grace picks people up after the sins of divorce and also remarriage.

And that creates huge problems when proclaiming God's Word in a large church like ours. It creates problems because there are people who have just experienced the tragic termination of a marriage and are very inclined to feel *condemnation* when the Biblical warnings about divorce are preached. And it creates equally serious problems when people who, with steadfast determination, are pushing headlong into divorce proceedings and only hear a message of grace for the sinner and so feel reinforced by the church to just go ahead and get God's forgiveness afterward.

Remember, the Devil goes to church with us all every Sunday. So, in essence, each group hears the wrong message. Each group tends to take to heart the message intended for the other group. Those who are already divorced and need God's cleansing, healing grace can hear only the strong prohibitions against divorce. Those who are rushing into divorce can hear only the message of grace, and receive no warning from God's Word whatsoever. That's what makes this such a difficult pastoral message in a church like ours.

Let me start with what I consider to be the narrowness of the Biblical teaching regarding divorce and remarriage. But remember, please hear me out on this subject in the entirety of this whole teaching.

1) **I DON'T THINK THERE ARE ANY SCRIPTURAL GROUNDS FOR A CHRISTIAN TO DIVORCE HIS OR HER SPOUSE AND MARRY ANOTHER**

The text, of course, that immediately springs to mind is our opening text. In what has now famously become known as the **exception clause** Jesus utters these words - **Matthew 19:8-9** - "**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."**

Now, I agree that there is an exception mentioned here, but it's not, to my mind, the exception most people think. And here we come to the two considerations that have swayed my thinking on the whole subject on divorce and remarriage and the Christian.

First, it's become very significant to me that Jesus never even hinted at any exceptions for divorce or remarriage on any of the other recorded occasions. And there were several:

He mentions no exception whatsoever in Mark's gospel - **Mark 10:5-12** - "**And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. [6] But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' [7] 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, [8] and they shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. [9] What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." [10] And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. [11] And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, [12] and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."**

Luke records no exception in Jesus' words - **Luke 16:18** - "**Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery."**

It seems important to me that we have a common thread of teaching from Jesus until we come to Matthew's account. And that leads into the second observation that has affected my thinking:

The exception Jesus mentions in this text isn't **adultery**, but **sexual immorality**. The word Jesus uses is universally acknowledged to refer to sexual immorality rather than one limited to adultery. Scholars have always noted and debated this. What's interesting is we know Jesus **could** have used the specific term for adultery if He intended because He used it so clearly in other places: **Matthew 15:19** - "**For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander."** So Jesus recognizes and distinguishes between the sins of sexual immorality and adultery in the human heart.

The Pharisees also recognized the distinction between sexual immorality and adultery - **John 8:39-41** - "**They answered him, 'Abraham is our father.' Jesus said to them, 'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, [40] but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. [41] You are doing what your father did.' They said to him, 'We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.'"**

The Pharisees were furious with Jesus. Jesus had just questioned their spiritual pedigree with Abraham. In their rage they spue out this veiled insult, inferring that Jesus was illegitimate - conceived by Mary and fathered by Joseph before they were married. Hence, He was the product, not of adultery, but of "**sexual immorality.**"

So what is going on with this exception clause in Matthew nineteen? We know that Jesus nowhere else mentions any exception for divorce and remarriage. And we know he makes the exception in this one case sexual immorality, not adultery.

But where does this take us? Here's a view I lean toward. It's almost universally recognized that Matthew is by far the most Jewish of all the gospels. Also, Matthew is the only gospel to make much of the story of Joseph and his secret intention to "divorce" Mary when he found she was pregnant with the Messiah. In the Jewish context the whole process of preparation for marriage - that state of being "**betrothed**" - was a much more extended and official period than our modern "**engagement.**" It was viewed as a part of the marriage commitment itself.

I think the details of Mary and Joseph are highly relevant to our opening text - **Matthew 1:18-19** - "**Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they**

came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. [19] And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.”

Notice that there was nothing sinful in Joseph’s plan to “divorce” his betrothed Mary. The text says he was “**just**” in his intentions. But the divorce being discussed by Jesus in Matthew 19 *isn’t* just. It’s **sinful**.

Here’s how I think this can be explained. I think there is good evidence that Matthew’s very Jewish audience would have easily understood Jesus’ exception clause about sexual immorality to mean he was not including the break-up of a “**betrothed**” couple in His prohibition against divorce and remarriage. Hence the reason Jesus’ exception clause uses the term for **sexual immorality** rather than **adultery** because, as in any case like betrothed Mary and Joseph, sexual immorality would be possible, but adultery impossible until after the couple was married.

So Jesus is saying, “When I’m saying no remarriage after divorce I’m **not** talking about a situation like Mary and Joseph’s. The prohibition doesn’t apply in those situations.” This interpretation unites the teaching of Jesus in all the gospel accounts and fits with His remarks to the Pharisees that God’s original intention for permanence in marriage still stands.

Remember what marriage **is**. It’s an earthly model - a living **demonstration** - of the kind of relationship that exists between Christ and His bride, the church. And here’s what we know to be true of that ultimate reality of which marriage is just the picture. Jesus reclaimed **all** of us when we were **covenant breakers**. That’s how the Fall happened. We broke faithfulness with God and He came after us. And our marriages should be the most **obvious** manifestation of that kind of redeeming grace. Don’t divorce. At all.

There is another situation dealt with in the New Testament that covers those marriages where one partner is a Christian and one isn’t. Paul deals with this situation:

**1 Corinthians 7:10-16** - “**To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband [11] (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.**[So the options are two - fix the marriage or stay single. But there were to be no other relationships. Where did Paul get that idea? From Jesus - “....from the Lord....”]

Then Paul continues with a situation so unlike this situation that he feels compelled to remind us up front that what he’s about to say, he didn’t get from “**the Lord**.”

**[12] “To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. [13] If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. [14] For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. [15] But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. [16] Wife, how do you know whether you will save your husband? Husband, how do you know whether you will save your wife?”**

It seems to me a key to interpreting these words lies in the emphasis Paul clearly makes between what he knows **Jesus** said - “**To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord)....**”(7:10) - and what **he (Paul)** was dealing with - “**To the rest I say (I, not the Lord)....**”(7:12).

Of course, in doing this Paul *isn’t* contradicting Jesus. He’s not **undoing** anything Jesus taught. What he’s saying is he’s going to deal with the **same** situation Jesus taught about in the first case and a totally **different** situation from what Jesus mentioned in the second. In the first situation (a marriage between two Christians) Paul has the same instruction that we’ve been unpacking in this teaching. Christians mustn’t divorce. Period. And Paul simply echos what he knew Jesus said about this.

But then he says he’s going to deal with a situation that is **different** from what Jesus dealt with, though he’s still going to say **Christians** shouldn’t divorce. As the church became established difficult situations arose. One spouse would become a believer. The other wouldn’t - at least not right away. So tensions and strong religious opposition would arise right in the home. Perhaps the unbeliever would insist his partner renounce Christ completely.

So how should a Christian live in such a situation? Paul's rules are simple. The Christian must not break up the marriage. He or she must not divorce. Paul lists several reasons we don't have time to analyze here, but the bottom line is the Christian must do everything in his or her power to keep the marriage going.

But one partner can't stop the other from divorcing if the other insists on doing so. If the unbelieving partner divorces, the Christian, to use Paul's words, isn't "**enslaved**"(15). And people debate what Paul meant by that term. In my view (and no one is wise to be overly dogmatic) Paul means that if the unbeliever partner divorces the believer, the believer is free to remarry.

But Paul, consistent with Jesus, still maintains the core idea that the Christian mustn't divorce his or her partner. I don't think there are any exceptions. Of course, this tightens the teaching of Jesus on the whole subject of divorce and remarriage. It means it is never His will for a Christian to divorce his or her spouse and marry another. Does that mean it also takes away hope and grace for those who have been divorced and remarried? What does the gospel bring into those situations?

2) **IN ALL OF OUR LIVES, IN COUNTLESS WAYS, GOD'S REDEEMING GRACE CUTS INTO EXISTING SINS AND RECLAIMS OUR LIVES FOR THE GLORY OF GOD**

I think you can see why we need to deal with this issue. If, as Jesus said, we mustn't divorce and if, when we divorce and remarry, we commit adultery, where does that leave millions of Christians? What does God's grace in Christ Jesus **do** when it reaches a divorced and remarried person?

And I'll tell you what it does. It does the same thing it does when it reaches into the heart of any sinner. It does the same thing it did when it reached **me**. And, especially when we're dealing with such a controversial issue, we need to be **sure** of where we stand.

I know there are people right in this church who try to tell divorced and remarried people that they are now locked into an adulterous relationship. And I want to ring it out as clearly as I can from this pulpit that such is not the case. God's grace encounters all of us **where we are**. It redeems the circumstances we're presently in. Jesus doesn't come to us in an **ideal** world, but in this **fallen, broken** one. And He makes all things new.

If you are sincerely, repentantly, whole-heartedly following Jesus, whatever marriage you are in is a **redeemed** marriage. God wants the marriage you are presently in to last the rest of your life. And Jesus wants to be Lord of it. Everyone please hear me. Whatever marriage you are in - as long as you are legally married - is a **legitimate marriage** in God's eyes. Repent of past sins. Commit to the Lordship of Jesus right where you are. The triune God **recognizes** your marriage and wants you to honor Him in it.

I get this idea from **John 4:16-19** - "**Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." [17] The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; [18] for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." [19] The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet."**

Notice the way Jesus recognized the validity of all the previous marriages. True, it's technically **possible** that all of her former husbands had died before she remarried. But it's not likely. And Jesus recognized the validity of each of those marriages. True, they were adulterous to **enter into** (if what Jesus said about divorce and remarriage was true), but they were genuine marriages none the less. Jesus didn't say this woman had **one** real marriage (the first one) and four or five adulterous relationships. All of her husbands were **husbands** according to Jesus.

But there's something even deeper than that. What happens when Jesus encounters us with His redeeming, restoring grace in our marriage? That's what we need to know. **All** marriages are made holy by the grace of Jesus coming into them. Yours. Mine. First marriages. Second marriages. Third marriages. God's grace, for **all** of us, slices into our lives where they are and as they are. Not one of us has any other starting place with Jesus but a sinful starting place:

**1 Corinthians 6:9-11** - "**Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, [10] nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. [11] And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were**

justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

The premise that God can remake the idolater, the homosexual, the swindler, and the drunkard, but **not** the divorced and remarried is totally unacceptable to me. That’s what I’m trying to say in this point. Don’t let anyone or any church lock you into some perpetual unreachable state because you’re divorced and or remarried.

But having said all that, there’s one more word of strong caution that needs to be lovingly pronounced:

3) **THE RICHNESS OF DIVINE GRACE CAN NEVER BE USED AS A LICENSE TO PLAN FUTURE SIN**

I hope you remember that I said there are two different groups of people who need to hear two different sides of Biblical truth, and that each group tends to hear the wrong emphasis. I’ve highlighted two thoughts today. **First**, I believe it is absolutely against God’s will for people to divorce and also to remarry. **Second**, God’s grace reaches into all of our lives magnificently right where we are and redeems our lives in their present situations. Whatever is debatable, of this I am certain, none of us receives God’s redeeming grace where we **aren’t**. We can only receive grace where we **are**. He makes things new.

People who **are** divorced and remarried need to hear the **second** truth. People who are **planning** to get divorced need to hear the **first** truth. People who **are** divorced and remarried need not live in condemnation. They, like the rest of us sinners, have been made new and unbelievably graced beyond measure. We grow where we are relying on mercy and enjoying God’s blessing and favor.

But people who are married and **planning** to get divorced and remarried must never reinforce their sinful desires by **planning** on getting God’s grace **after** they finish their own agenda against God’s revealed will. Grace only comes to the genuinely **repentant**.

And here’s something else I know for certain. Cherishing your **intention** to sin **more** than you cherish immediate **obedience** reveals a heart that is **hard** to God and not likely to ever truly repent. This is the surest way to **close** your heart to God’s **future** grace.

The desire you have - the **pretend** desire you have to please God in the future **after** you’ve sinned - would, if it were a **genuine** desire to please God, manifest itself **immediately** - right now - in the middle of your plan to divorce your present spouse. If it doesn’t manifest itself right now, it won’t manifest itself in the future either.

So I am both more **closed** and more **open** on this difficult issue. I’m absolutely closed minded about the option of the Christian planning to divorce his or her spouse. But I’m also more open to the power of God’s grace for those who bring the pieces of their lives - with whatever sins they entail - to the power of new beginnings in Christ Jesus. So the safest and strongest way to live - for all of us - single, first time married, divorced, or remarried - for **all** of us, is to cling to the cross of Christ Jesus, rest in His grace for **past** sins, and immediately **obey** His will right now, even when it seems impossibly hard, in our present circumstances. This will keep us all authentic, holy, and yes, ultimately, if we only had eyes to see it, happy.

This is the only path of Biblical truth on this difficult subject that I know how to offer as a pastor. Cherish and grow in God’s renewing, sustaining grace in your **present** marriage. And never use the presumption of **future** grace to willfully, stubbornly plan future sin.

God help us all to hear His healing, protecting Word today.