

Jesus and Divorce

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Introduction.

- A. As just about all of us are aware, America right now is in a time of crisis. However, perhaps the most serious problem that we face is not the plunging stock market or the skyrocketing unemployment rate, but the continuing epidemic of divorce. The most recent statistics that I've seen tell us that 40% of first marriages in the US today end in divorce, and for second and third marriages, the divorce rate is even higher.
- B. This divorce epidemic leads to a number of devastating consequences in the physical realm alone. Economists say that the single biggest financial disaster an American can undergo is not losing his job or suffering a serious illness, but divorcing his spouse. Divorce will impoverish us faster than anything else. Divorce also takes a tremendous emotional toll on the family that is torn apart by it. Husbands, wives, and children will all bear the scars from that divorce for decades to come. When the parties involved remarry, the so-called blended families that result often cause new disasters. Just to cite one example, for those of you who are fathers of daughters, how many of you would be happy with the thought of your teenage girl living under the same roof with a man who is not her father? In short, the earthly damage done by divorce is incalculable.
- C. Worst of all, though, is the damage that divorce does to our relationship with God. The Bible is quite clear. Unless a divorce is caused by the adultery of an unfaithful spouse, that divorce is a sin, and any remarriage after that is an adulterous relationship. This uncompromising stance has not proven popular with many in the denominational world and even within our own brotherhood. They try to muddy the waters and confuse the issue so that divorce in many other circumstances becomes OK. In such a setting, we must return to the word of God and see what it says. Let's look this morning at the Bible's message about Jesus and divorce.

I. Early Discussion.

- A. We see the fullest account of Jesus' teaching on divorce in Matthew 19:3-8. Logically speaking, this account divides up into five main chunks, and the first chunk consists of **THE PHARISEES' QUESTION**. It appears in Matthew 19:3. On the surface, this might seem like a perfectly innocent question that anyone might ask of a teacher of God's word. However, there's more than that going on here, and it's evident from the Scriptural description of the Pharisees' question as a test. A little bit later in Jesus' ministry, the Pharisees ask Jesus whether they should pay taxes to Caesar or not, and they think that question about taxes is a lose-lose for Jesus. If He says they should pay taxes, He offends the Jewish patriots. If He says they shouldn't pay taxes, then He offends the Herodians, the pro-Roman faction in Jewish politics. They're trying to trap Him.
- B. Although it's not as immediately apparent, this question in Matthew 19 about divorce is also a trap. Just like the Jews divided into political parties, so too they were divided on the question of divorce. Rabbi Shammai taught restrictions on divorce similar to what we believe, that only a man who caught his wife in infidelity was justified in divorcing her. On the other hand, Rabbi Hillel taught that a man could divorce his wife for whatever reason he saw fit, that if she burned the soup, he could put the certificate of divorce in her hand and send her away. The Pharisees hoped that they could trap Jesus in these competing claims and diminish His influence.
- C. Of course, Jesus, as He had a way of doing, ignored the competing legal arguments and cut straight to the heart of the matter. We see His overall thoughts on marriage and divorce in **HIS ANSWER** in Matthew 19:4-6. The two competing Jewish schools of thought on the matter spent their time arguing about the meaning of two Hebrew words in Deuteronomy 24. Here, Jesus takes them to task for zeroing in on those two words and ignoring the overall message of God's word. "Have you not read?" He asks incredulously. Before I go on, brethren, let me note here that we can be guilty of the same thing. It's important for us to pay attention to every word of Scripture, but we must be careful never to spend so much time on those tiny, subtle arguments that we miss the forest for the trees. We must interpret each part of the Bible in light of its overall message.
- D. Jesus brings the Pharisees back to the overall message by going back to the beginning. He quotes Genesis 1 to remind His audience that the institution of marriage did not arise by accident. We see this in the act of creation itself. The reason why man and woman can be husband and wife at all is that God created them male and female. The way in which a man and a woman are a physical match for one another shows God's intent that they should be a spiritual match for one another as well. Now, it's almost ridiculous that I should have to say this from the pulpit, but in this day and age, we must acknowledge that the text does NOT say that God created them male and male, or female and female. Homosexual marriage is not part of God's plan for mankind, nor has it ever been. Regardless of what man says, such a union cannot be valid in God's eyes.
- E. Second, Jesus tells us that God's obvious intent in creation is underscored by the words that He speaks in establishing the covenant of marriage. Jesus here quotes from Genesis 2. God's words there tell us that because man and woman were created to be joined together, they will yearn for that joining. They will leave their families behind to become part of a new family. They will become "one flesh" in a physical, mental,

emotional, and spiritual sense. When we human beings pair off and get married, we think it's our own idea, but it's really God's idea. He's the One who designed us to do that, predicted that our joining would occur, and blessed it by emphasizing the profundity of that union. In marriage, two are made one flesh by God.

- F. From this, Jesus draws the only possible conclusion. As the creations of our heavenly Creator, we do not have the right to defy Him or undo His work. If it is God who has joined us together, any breaking of those bonds of marriage is against His will. All other things being equal, man does not have the right to divorce his wife, nor woman her husband. The words of Jesus show that those who divorce anyway are engaging in sin.

II. Later Discussion.

- A. The Pharisees have never heard anything like this before. None of their great rabbinical scholars had ever made such a sweeping and powerful pronouncement on the issue. Now that Jesus has shown them the forest, they realize that they don't like the forest, and they do their best to get Jesus back looking at the trees. That's why they make **THE RESPONSE** that they do in Matthew 19:7. One of the most noticeable things about this is how strongly that response is worded. They claim that Moses **COMMANDED** them to get divorced, as though Moses said, "Hey! You married folks! God wants you to quit being married and take up with other people!"
- B. Of course, that's not what the Law of Moses actually says. The Pharisees are referring to Deuteronomy 24:1, 4. Whatever else this is, it's clearly not a command to get divorced. In fact, divorce isn't even the point of the context. The point is that a man who divorces his wife is not allowed to remarry her if she's married somebody else in between. In reality, this text doesn't provide any particular sanction for divorce at all. The divorce is just a part of the circumstances that lead to the necessity for the law. We see a similar text in Deuteronomy 21:18-19. Arguing that Deuteronomy 24 gives permission to divorce is like arguing that Deuteronomy 21 gives permission to be a stubborn, rebellious son. It's more a comment on human wickedness than God's will. However, this is the best argument the Pharisees have left, so they demand that Jesus deal with it.
- C. We see **JESUS' REPLY** to this argument in Matthew 19:8. One of the first things that we see in this verse is that Jesus is acknowledging that the Pharisees have a point, kind of. One of my own personal challenges in dealing with Matthew 19 is that I want divorce to be wrong under the Law of Moses too. I want to see the same adultery-only exception there that we see in the New Testament. However, that's not something that the text lets us do. It attributes the laxity of the Law to the hardness of the Israelites' hearts, but Jesus does say that Moses permitted—not endorsed, not condoned, but permitted—divorce. The meaning of this text in Matthew becomes clearer when we consider it in light of the parallel passage in Mark 10:5. Moses, and so by extension the God who inspired him, knew that the Israelites would not adhere to God's original plan for marriage, and so gave them a halfhearted loophole that they promptly drove a truck through.
- D. To be quite honest, brethren, I'm not thrilled with that reading of the text, but before we start turning Scripture inside out looking for another interpretation, we need to remember that divorce is not the only nor even the worst departure in the Old Testament from God's original plan for marriage. Consider, for instance, 2 Samuel 11:7-8. This quote occurs, of course, in the context of David's sin with Bathsheba. God appears to be outraged that David pursued another man's wife when God had already given him numerous wives of his own.
- E. I suppose, brethren, that if I can be baffled by God's toleration of polygamy in the Old Testament, then I can be baffled by His toleration of divorce in the Old Testament too. The passage in the New Testament that perhaps best explains these and other weirdnesses is Galatians 3:24. In the time of the Law, God did not reveal His full will to mankind for the same reason that we don't reveal calculus to a kindergartener: they're not ready to understand it yet. God was never pleased with polygamy. God was never pleased with divorce. Instead, those were things He endured until the fullness of the time came, when Jesus would set us straight.
- F. Jesus finishes that process when He explains **THE FINAL CONCLUSION** of His logic in Matthew 19:8-9. Sure, the Israelites and then the Jews spent 1500 years divorcing and being divorced, but that was never God's plan for their lives. Instead, the true plan was revealed in the beginning, in the first two chapters of the book of Genesis. That's what God requires from our marriages: one man, one wife, joined for life.
- G. Jesus then explains what some of the implications of this rule are. First of all, He describes the general pattern. If a man divorces his wife and marries another, he is committing adultery. He cannot be in fellowship with God as long as that adulterous relationship continues. This is not one of the most popular passages of Scripture in the entire Bible. I daresay every one of us knows somebody who is in an adulterous marriage because of a previous divorce. What we need to realize, though, is that Jesus' teaching wasn't any more popular when He first said it. Divorce was just as epidemic in the Roman Empire of 2,000 years ago as it is in the United States of today. It's not ours to teach what is popular. It's ours to teach what is right.
- H. Of course, there is an exception to that rule. As Jesus says, if a marriage has already been defiled by adultery, the innocent spouse is allowed to divorce the adulterous spouse and remarry. He is not required to do so, but he may, if he wishes. Even that, though, is the exception and not the plan. All of us have heard a hundred different crazy scenarios people get themselves into in their marriages and remarriages. Rather than focusing on what can go wrong, let's focus on preserving what's right. Let's work toward marriages that please God.

Conclusion. If your marriage or your life isn't pleasing to God, repent and return to Him today.