

Marriage, Divorce, & the Heart

Matthew 5:31-32

Introduction

What is the consensus about marriage in America? Is it still considered sacred? In some ways, the answer is still “yes.” It would especially seem sacred by the average American in light of the 2019 Real Weddings Study that revealed the average wedding costs is \$33,900 (engagement ring include). Rest assured those of you who are not yet married, for the average cost of a wedding in Wyoming is about \$19,800 (engagement ring not included).

Statistically speaking the divorce rate in America is at a record low; in 2021 it was at 45% and 2022 is on track to be about 44.2%. I am not sure if the drop in divorces is due to the pandemic, but some researchers suspect that the pandemic caused some to appreciate their spouse more as a result. Some factors that can make divorce more likely for a married couple is living together before marrying each other, something that 70% of all couples do before marriage, while decades of research have shown that those who did not cohabit before their wedding day had less likelihood of divorce. Another help in aiding the success of a marriage according to research is the role faith has in sustaining a marriage when the husband and wife are actively involved in their faith together by reducing the probability of divorce by an additional 14%.

The surprising thing about all the available research is that the percentage of Americans who now believe divorce is “morally acceptable” is at 73%. And while most Evangelical Christians believe divorce is not morally acceptable, just over 30% of marriages among Christians end in divorce. Perhaps the number of divorcees among Christians is in part due to the 58% of evangelicals who believe cohabiting before marriage is acceptable so long as that couple plans to marry.¹ Maybe it is due to the 62% of American pastors who no longer hold to a biblical worldview but instead embrace a syncretistic worldview that no doubt finds its way through their preaching.² Whatever the reasons are, they are complex and heartbreaking. Here is what is clear: It takes two people to make a marriage work, and most marriages end in divorce because the other party was not willing to work at least as hard as the other spouse to save their marriage.

I have looked over a number of blog posts and articles on the reasons for why people get divorced, here are seven that are on almost every list I have read:

1. Infidelity
2. Trouble with finances
3. Poor communication/arguing
4. Unrealistic expectations
5. A lack of intimacy

¹ David J. Ayers, *Institute for Family Studies*. “Cohabitation Among Evangelicals: A New Norm?”; April 19, 2021

² Arizona Christian University, *American Worldview Inventory 2022*: “Shocking Results Concerning the Worldview of Christian Pastors”; May 10, 2022.

6. Little to no preparation for marriage, before marriage
7. Physical/emotional abuse

What Jesus said about divorce in Matthew 5:31-32 is not only connected to his statement on lust, but addressed the popular teaching of his day that a man could divorce his wife for just about any reason. Here is what Jesus said: **“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”** (Matthew 5:31–32).

So here is what I would like to do with the time that we have left. There are two passages I want to look at: the primary passage is the one we find in the Sermon on the Mount, and the second passage is found in Matthew 19:1-12. Here are my two points: 1) What did Jesus really believe about divorce? And 2) How should we, as followers of Jesus, live in light of what he thought about divorce?

What Did Jesus Really Think About Divorce?

When Jesus said, **“It was said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce...’”** he was referencing Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Before I go any further, it will help if you know what Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 24,

“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 puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife, and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.”
(Deuteronomy 24:1–4)

In Jesus’ day there were two schools of thought concerning divorce that was based on what it was Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The first school of thought was the more conservative group known as the School of Shammai; they understood Deuteronomy 24:1-4 to only permit a man to divorce his wife in the case of “indecency” that involved shameful exposure of her body most likely in a sexual nature with another person other than her husband. The more popular and widely held interpretation of Deuteronomy 24 came from the School of Hillel, which understood that Deuteronomy 24 allow for a divorce for “indecency” that included acts like walking around with one’s hair down in public, speaking to other men in the streets, or even if he considered her cooking to be spoiled.

This brings us to Matthew 19 where Jesus was asked by a group of Pharisees the following question: **“Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause”** (v.3)? Although many of the Pharisees agreed with the school of Hillel concerning divorce, what they really wanted was to get Jesus so wrapped up in the controversy of divorce between the schools of Hillel and Shammai and those who sided with each of the schools of thought. What Jesus did instead was take the

Pharisees to an authority that superseded both schools by going back to Genesis. Notice how Jesus answered their question: **“Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 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’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate”** (Matthew 19:4–6).

What is so fantastic about what Jesus does with his answer is twofold! First, he showed the Pharisees the design and purpose of marriage has always been the same from the beginning: **“A man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”** (Gen. 2:24). The second thing that Jesus did with his answer was to point out that divorce is just as unnatural in the created order as death is. For Adam and Eve, the divorce was inconceivable because marriage was so binding, so intimate, that it was a covenant with permanent lifegiving implications. This is the way God designed marriage and it is a covenant that preceded sin and it remains the same amid a world under the curse of sin. This is why Jesus concluded his answer: **“What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate”** (Matt. 19:6).

So, in response, the Pharisees asked a legitimate question: **“Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?”** Command? Who said anything about a command? Listen to Jesus’ answer: **“Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so”** (v. 8). Moses permitted divorce under very specific circumstances, but what Moses permitted was not for the benefit of the man, but for the protection of his wife. In a culture where women were treated like cattle, without a certificate of divorce, a woman could be subject to the exploitation of other men. It was also permitted by Moses in Deuteronomy 24 to make it more difficult to walk out of a marriage. Kent Hughes, in his commentary on Matthew observes what Moses wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in Deuteronomy was much different than what the Pharisees assumed: **“The reason God allowed divorce was the hardness of heart to which the men of Israel had succumbed. It was a divine concession to human weakness—reluctant permission at best!”**³

Jesus did not end his answer with an explanation for Moses’ intent in permitting a man to write a certificate of divorce, he raised the bar to where it belonged and put the Pharisees and all who would treat marriage as common in their place: **“And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery”** (Matt. 19:9). The same is true for the wife by the way. Jesus said the same thing in his Sermon on the Mount, but warns that illegitimate divorce will also make the wife guilty of adultery; consider his words again: **“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”** (Matthew 5:32). In case you are confused by what Jesus is saying here, what we read in Mark 10:11-12 could not be any more clear: **“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery”** (Mark 10:11–12).

³ Hughes, R. K. (2001). [*The sermon on the mount: the message of the kingdom*](#) (p. 116). Crossway Books.

There is no sugarcoating Jesus' words here. Do not make Jesus say something he did not say because you do not like the tone and force of what he said. To legally end your marriage covenant for any other reason than for the case of sexual immorality, and then enter into another marriage, is still adultery. The word Jesus used for "immorality" is the Greek word *porneia*, which means adultery, fornication, and any other sin; Jesus chose this word deliberately and intentionally. I say this not to make those of you who are divorced feel bad, but to warn anyone who is tempted to treat marriage as common.

The only legitimate reason a person is permitted to pursue a divorce according to Jesus is in the case of sexual immorality.

How Should We Live in Light of What Jesus Said About Divorce?

So, what now? What do we do with Jesus' statement about divorce? Is every Christian in this room who has been married, divorced, and then remarried guilty of adultery and in ongoing, unrepentant sin without even being aware of it? What about the person who has not been married and engaged in sex outside of marriage? Did not the apostle Paul write of that person too in 1 Corinthians 6:16, "**Do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, 'The two will become one flesh.'**" Does that mean that every person who has had sex outside of marriage has become one flesh with another person?

In light of Jesus' teaching concerning lust, adultery, and marriage, when you die will you be turned away from inheriting the kingdom of God only to face the wrath of a holy God? Is 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 talking about you, which states: "**Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God**" (1 Cor. 6:9-10, NIV).

What I am about to say, I say with great care mixed with a bit of fear and trepidation; I want you to listen to me very carefully with the little time that we have left. As you have seen in this sermon and last week's sermon on Matthew 5:27-30, in the eyes of God, sexual sin in any form is devastatingly serious. There are whole chapters in the Old Testament and New Testament dedicated to addressing sexual sin⁴ and the warnings against those sins are many,⁵ and the purpose that those warning are there is that we would flee from such sins (1 Cor. 6:18-20).

To those who have sinned:

All of us are guilty of sin, and your sin will either lead you to hell or your sorrow over it will lead you to the cross of Jesus Christ. Godly sorrow over your sin will make it impossible for you to remain indifferent to your sin. The good news is that Jesus died on the cross for your sins and he did not just die for some of it, but all of it. Listen very carefully to Romans 3:23-26,

...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His

⁴ See Leviticus 18; 1 Corinthians 5; 7.

⁵ See Rom. 13:13-14; 1 Cor. 6:18-20; Gal. 5:19-21; 1 Thess. 4:3-5; Jude 1:7.

righteousness, because in God’s merciful restraint He let the sins previously committed go unpunished; for the demonstration, that is, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:23–26, NASB 2020)

If you are a Christian, let the 2 Corinthians 5:17 wash over your wounded soul: **“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”** So, what does it mean that the “old has passed away...”? Here is what it means through the words of God almighty: **“I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins”** (Isa. 43:25).

The righteousness that you need is the righteousness of Christ who died so that all of your guilt could be cancelled, just as we are promised in Colossians 2:13-14, **“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross”** (Col. 2:13–14).

To those who continue to sin:

Now, what about those of you who have gone through a divorce as a Christian? What about those of you who have engaged in sex outside of marriage? What about those of you who have sinned against your spouse through adultery? It is possible to be a Christian and at the same time engage in sexual sin. You need and you must turn away from your sin. To you, I want you to hear Hebrews 10:26-31 very carefully:

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:26–31)

To engage in sin deliberately and cavalierly is not safe, and it could be an indication that you have never been a Christian in the first place. Turn away from your sin and find the forgiveness of your sins through Jesus Christ.

To those who feel shame over their past sins:

What about those of you who divorced your spouse or engaged in sex outside of marriage while a Christian? Even though you have turned from those sins and repented of them, will they still be held against you by God? Although we must live with the consequences of our sins, Jesus died not just for your past and present sins, but he died for those sins you have not committed yet.

What is in the past is in the past. The enemy, the devil, wants nothing more than for you to be paralyzed by your shame so that you can never progress forward in your faith and love for Jesus.

It is possible that you are here, and you are on your second, third, or even fourth marriage. You may be here as a single adult who is unmarried and have engaged in sex as a Christian. To both of you, the cycle of sin must come to an end and decide this day to never sin in that way again. Covenant with your current wife that divorce is no longer an option. If you are single, pledge to remain sexually pure.

For those of you who have repented and grieve over past failures, I want to leave you with two very powerful assurances given to us by God himself:

“Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me. I will bear the indignation of the Lord because I have sinned against him, until he pleads my cause and executes judgment for me. He will bring me out to the light; I shall look upon his vindication.” (Micah 7:8–9)

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:8–9)

Finally, I recognize that there may be some who are in an abusive relationship where you are the victim. You may be married to someone whose mistress may not be a person but substance abuse, a porn addiction, or something else. You may be wondering what hope there is for your marriage. I promise you that I will take time next time we meet to address those issues. What you need to hear today is God sees your pain and he is not indifferent to your pain. In conclusion I leave you with a word from the LORD to strengthen you:

“The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry. The face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth. When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.” (Psalm 34:15–18)

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28–30)

Discussion Questions:

1. Read Ephesians 5:25-33 and Revelation 19:7-9. According to these scripture passages, what is marriage a picture of?
2. How does the above scripture passages help us understand Jesus’ teaching concerning marriage and divorce better?
3. Why do you think the Bible uses such strong language concerning sexual sin? How does sexual sin and divorce diminish the institution of marriage?

4. Pastor Keith said in his sermon: “Sin will either lead you to hell or your sorrow over it will lead you to the cross.” In what ways does sin lead a person to hell? In what ways has your sorrow over sin led you to the cross of Christ?
5. Read 2 Corinthians 5:17, Isaiah 43:25, Colossians 2:13-14, and Romans 8:1, 31-39. In light to these scripture passages, how much of your sin has been forgiven if you are a really a Christian?
6. Pastor Keith cited Hebrews 10:26-31 (have someone in the group read this passage again); how does this passage frighten or surprise you? How can you reconcile this passage with the once you read in question #5?
7. Regarding past sins, Pastor Keith referenced Micah 7:8-9 and 1 John 1:8-9. How can these verses help you fight against the kind of shame that can keep you from moving forward into the mission Jesus calls all his followers into (Matt. 28:18-20)?