

The King's Sermon

Getting to the Heart of Divorce (Matthew 5:31-32)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on June 11, 2017

Introduction

- ❖ One of the reasons we choose to preach through whole books or at least whole sections of a book is because it keeps preachers like me from sitting on hobby horses and only tackling passages and topics that I want to cover. If I'm going from section to section in a book of the Bible, then eventually I'll come across a passage or topic that I wouldn't have chosen myself.
 - ▶ Like today. **It's not my preference to talk about divorce.** It's a very personal and sensitive subject that's affected all of us to some degree. All of us probably have seen someone we care about go through a messy divorce. For some this hits really close to home. So I understand if you don't want to hear about it.
 - But if you don't want to hear about it and I don't want to preach on it, then we'll never hear God's Word on this subject. And we'll miss his wisdom and his grace. So this is why we keep topical sermons and series to a minimum. **At HCC, we preach through books or sections of books and submit to whatever God wants to teach and whatever subject he wants to bring up.**

- ❖ So this morning we're going to tackle the subject of divorce and remarriage because Jesus brings it up in the Sermon on the Mount. And I trust we need to hear it. We live in a divorce culture where it's totally commonplace. Most people treat marriage as a negotiable arrangement that individuals will enter and remain in so long as the union serves our individual quests for happiness. **The idea of marriage as a life-long covenant, for better or worse, has been replaced by a contractual view.** Marriage can be dissolved if either party is dissatisfied and feel like their needs are no longer being met.
 - ▶ **But our culture's treatment of marriage – though very different from recent generations in the past – is actually similar to the culture of Jesus's day.** We're going to see that divorce was common in Jesus's day and marriages ended over the pettiest of reasons. But Jesus had the courage to claim that the bulk of divorces in his day were illegitimate and at odds with God's creational purpose for marriage.

- ❖ Now as we cover Jesus's teaching on **divorce and remarriage**, make sure you read this in the context of the larger emphasis on the Christian's righteousness being a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees (cf. Mt. 5:20). In this section, Jesus is giving us six illustrations of how our righteousness ought to contrast with the religious leaders of his day.
 - ▶ To make this contrast, our Lord begins each illustration with the same introductory formula, "*You have heard it was said . . . but I say to you*". The "what was said" is referring to the way the scribes and Pharisees interpreted the Law of Moses. **It's their interpretation of the Law that Jesus is opposing – not the Law itself.**

- ❖ As we saw earlier in vv17-18, Jesus has great respect for the Law of Moses and has no intention of abolishing a single OT verse. But he has come to correct false interpretations of the Law and to fulfill it and draw out its intended meaning. To get to the heart of the Law.
 - ▶ So for us to understand **the heart of God's law on divorce and remarriage**, let's ask three related questions: 1) What did Moses actually teach on divorce and remarriage?, 2) What did the scribes and Pharisees teach?, and 3) What did Jesus teach?

What did Moses Teach?

- ❖ So if Jesus is contrasting his interpretation of Moses against that of the scribes and Pharisees, then it makes sense to go back to the source and find out where in the Old Testament did Moses teach on the subject. And that's going to take us to **Deuteronomy 24:1-4**.
 - ▶ *“¹When 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, ²and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, ³and 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, ⁴then 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.”*
- ❖ So here we see Moses saying that if a man intends to divorce his wife, he has to provide her a certificate of divorce. He has to give her official documentation. And then he's prohibited from remarrying her again. That would be “*an abomination before the LORD*”. So those are serious words.
 - ▶ Now there are at least four good reasons behind his legislation. **First, Moses restricts the legitimate grounds for divorce.** According to the Law, divorce is only legitimate if “*some indecency*” is found in the wife. I know it sounds vague (and as we're going to see, rabbis in Jesus's day will debate the meaning of the phrase), but some limitation is better than none. Unlike their neighboring nations, the covenant people of Israel had some limitations in place to deter against frivolous and unjust divorces.
- ❖ So the Mosaic Law restricts the legitimate grounds for divorce. **Second, it discourages husbands from too quickly dismissing their wives in the heat of anger.** There's a formal process involved. You have to go and get yourself a certificate. And hopefully as you're walking over to wherever they pass them out, you'll cool down and calmer heads will prevail. There's wisdom to that. God knows how impulsive we can be and how decisions made in anger are usually regretted later.
 - ▶ **Third, that certificate of divorce serves as legal protection for the divorced wife.** If she didn't have a certificate, then it could be assumed by her community that she was sent away because she cheated on her husband. She could be stigmatized as an adulteress and maybe liable to be stoned to death, since that was the punishment for adultery according to Leviticus 20:10.
- ❖ There's a fourth reason behind this teaching that has to do with the prohibition against remarrying your former wife (after she's been through another marriage). I think Moses is trying to stress the seriousness and finality of divorce – really as a warning to any careless husband who might treat marriage and divorce lightly.

- ▶ So even though I realize a lot of this might seem one-sided since it's only coming from the husband's perspective. But you've got to see how compared to the way wives were treated in antiquity (usually like a man's possession) – the Mosaic Law was affirming the dignity of women and offering them legal recourse against the volatile whim of a husband. The Law is good and for the good of God's people.
- ❖ **Many of us read the Old Testament today, and at times it seems regressive or just very cold and rule-based.** And we don't see how it's good like the good news of the gospel found in the New Testament. But you have to put yourself in the shoes of these people. Before God gave his people the Law through his Moses, no nation, no tribe, no people on the earth could claim that their God has spoken clearly and decisively with instructions on how to live under his blessing and how to avoid his curse.
 - ▶ **Israel's neighbors had to live with ambiguity and uncertainty if they have sufficiently appeased their gods by their actions.** Have we lived righteously? Have we pleased our gods? No one knows for sure so we'll keep at it and we'll be sacrificing more and more animals (and sometimes even each other) in hopes that we've secured the gods' blessings and avoided their curses.
- ❖ Imagine if you were neighbors to an ancient Israelite. And he says to you, "I notice you're anxious all the time about pleasing your god and doing his will since he hasn't written it down for you to study and meditate on. You know my God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, wrote down his will for us. It was written in stone by our prophet Moses. If you worship our God you'll now know exactly how to live under his blessing and avoid his curse.
 - ▶ Now actually living it out is a different matter. **We've come to realize that we can't live out his Law faithfully because of our inherent sinfulness.** That's why God included in his Law an entire sacrificial system for dealing with our sin. But we know these animal sacrifices are insufficient, and they only point to a future day when God will send a special sacrifice (a Lamb of God) to fully and finally take away our sin. And when that day comes, everyone who trusts in that Sacrifice of sacrifices will receive God's very Spirit to give you the desire and strength to obey his will."
- ❖ **If you were a man or woman of antiquity and you heard *that* – then you're going to think the Mosaic Law is the greatest news you've ever heard.** It'll sound like gospel to you. So I know it's tempting for us to draw a sharp distinction between the Law and the Gospel, but I hope you're starting to see how the OT – even when it touches on the issue of divorce and remarriage – is actually good and for the good of God's people.

What did the Scribes and Pharisees Teach?

- ❖ But even though the Law itself is good, man's interpretation of the Law can be very misguided and unhealthy, leading not to greater flourishing but greater condemnation. That leads to our second question: *What did the scribes and Pharisees teach about what Moses taught?* Because, as we said, that's what Jesus is speaking out against in v31.

- ❖ **The primary mistake of the scribes and Pharisees is that they interpreted Deuteronomy 24 as an endorsement of divorce in certain cases.** As if that's the suggested recourse if a husband ever discovers "*some indecency*" in his wife. But as Jesus makes clear later in chapter 19:8 – when Pharisees try to test him and his views on divorce – he says Moses wasn't endorsing divorce but simply regulating it. **They thought Moses was commanding divorce, when in reality he was only permitting the practice in certain situations due to the hardness of human hearts.**
 - ▶ So much like with other parts of the Law, the scribes and Pharisees totally missed the point of Deuteronomy 24, which was to uphold the sanctity and seriousness of marriage. Instead they concerned themselves with making sure you provide the proper paperwork with the proper self-justifying reasons to get out of a marriage you don't want anymore.

- ❖ Now another issue has to do with the way the scribes and Pharisees interprets that phrase "*some indecency*" (literally in Hebrew, "a thing of nakedness"). Since the legitimacy of the divorce hung on whether or not the husband found "*some indecency*" in the wife, the interpretation was hotly debated, particularly among the two most prominent rabbinic schools of Jesus' day – the school of Hillel versus the school of Shammai.
 - ▶ **The more liberal school of Rabbi Hillel emphasized the word "*some*" and played fast and loose with the word "*indecency*".** So within their view, a husband could divorce his wife for "any" indecency, as trivial as burning the pot roast or if he simply found someone younger or prettier. Such divorces were known as "any cause" divorces. It's really no different than the no-fault divorces of our day.
 - On the other hand, the more conservative school of Rabbi Shammai emphasized the word "indecency" and interpreted it more narrowly. They only allowed for divorce in cases of unchastity or immodest behavior on the part of the wife. They would've opposed "any cause" divorces.

- ❖ When you learn about this first-century rabbinic debate, you understand the true intention behind the Pharisees' question in Matthew 19:3. Turn with me there. "*And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, 'Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?'*"
 - ▶ They're trying to lure Jesus into their debate. They're essentially asking him, "Is it lawful to claim an "any cause" divorce?" They want to know which school he sides with. Is Jesus in the liberal camp or the conservative? But as we were going to see next, Jesus says he's not in either camp. He says his teaching – which is same as the teaching of Moses – exceeds the righteousness of both.

What did Jesus Teach?

- ❖ So let's look at that. This is our third question: What did Jesus teach about divorce and remarriage? Look at text again, "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.*"

- ❖ So even though divorce and remarriage and the issues at hand, be careful not to miss the main thrust of Jesus's argument, which is about the sanctity and permanence of marriage. Now I think it's going to help for us to look back at chapter 19 because there Jesus gives a fuller explanation of his position on divorce.
 - ▶ Remember he's responding to the Pharisees' question about the legitimacy of "any cause" divorces. **Notice though how Jesus goes past Moses and Mt. Sinai all the way back to God and the Garden of Eden where the Lord instituted marriage.** Let me read Matthew 19:4-6, *"⁴He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh' ⁶So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.""*
- ❖ **Jesus is arguing that marriage is not a contract between two partners but a spiritual one-flesh union established by God between a male and female.** And since God is the one who created the union, we're not free to dissolve it. So while religious leaders of his day were debating how you can legitimately end a marriage, Jesus focused on its permanence. And he was implying that the bulk of divorces in his day – even those that followed proper procedure and paperwork – were at odds with God's creational purpose for marriage.
- ❖ **Now even though he's not as explicit as in Matthew 19, here in our passage Jesus is still rejecting the school of Hillel's position advocating "any cause" divorce.** He only gives one cause for divorce, and that's in the case of sexual immorality (v32; 19:9). Of course, we're going to have to look at that more carefully, but Jesus is definitely opposed to an expansive interpretation of the "some indecency" phrase in Deuteronomy 24.
 - ▶ But it's not like he's siding with the school of Shammai. **His teaching exceeds the righteousness of both schools.** Hillel and Shammai would've pushed for divorce in cases where "some indecency" was found, but notice how, in such cases, Jesus only gave permission. He never endorsed the practice of divorce, much less required it.
- ❖ You have to consider the context of the whole Sermon where he taught his followers to love their enemies (5:44) and to forgive your debtors (6:12). **In light of such teachings, it's clear that Jesus would push for marital reconciliation – even in cases where divorce is a legitimate option.** Love and forgiveness are the main thrust of his teaching. It's not about finding legal loopholes to get out of an unhappy marriage.
- ❖ **Now concerning the issue of remarriage after divorce, Jesus taught in v32 that a second marriage after divorce (barring the one exception) is equivalent to committing adultery.** When he says divorcing your wife makes her commit adultery, he's safely assuming that a divorced woman in his day would quickly remarry since she would not have been able to survive on her own. **But then her and her second husband would be committing adultery because in God's eyes she's still one flesh with her first husband.** A human-authorized certificate of divorce doesn't change the God-established reality of a one-flesh union.

- ❖ Jesus's point is that the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees is only concerned with doing what's right in the eyes of human authorities. Doing whatever is deemed legal. **But what matters are the eyes of God and what he has deemed to be right and true.** So in our day, divorce is legally and culturally recognized. If you fill out the paperwork and go through the legal process, you are no longer considered husband and wife and you're free to remarry.
 - ▶ **But it comes down to the question of whose eyes you care about.** Who are you trying to please? Who are you trying to do right by? If legal permission is all you're looking for, then just like the scribes and Pharisees I'm sure you'll find it. But if you're seeking the righteousness that exceeds, then you'll need to do what's right in God's eyes. And in God's eyes, when he makes you one flesh with someone, that's permanent until death do you part.

- ❖ But there is one exception, and even though it's not the point of the passage, we can't ignore it. In v32 he says divorce is illegitimate in God's eyes "*except of the ground of sexual immorality*". **The Greek for "sexual immorality" is the word *porneia*.** It's root behind words like pornography or prostitution. In the Greek version of the OT, *porneia* is used for the act of prostitution committed by Hosea's wife (Hos. 1:2), which is subsequently used to describe Israel's spiritual unfaithfulness to the LORD.
 - ▶ So based on usage, *porneia* definitely includes the act of adultery. But commentators would all agree that it's a rather broad term that covers a range of sexually illicit behaviors. So there's debate over the meaning of Jesus's one exception clause.

- ❖ It comes down to differing views on how to interpret *porneia*. **Some would want to restrict it only to the sexual sin of incest.** The main reason is because *porneia* was used to refer specifically to incest in 1 Corinthians 5:1. And because the specific Greek word for adultery is *moicheia*, which is used alongside *porneia* in v32. So it's argued that *porneia* must have a distinct meaning besides adultery or Jesus would've used the same word *moicheia*. So some would argue that incest is the only grounds for divorce. It's very narrow grounds.

- ❖ **And then there's another view that says that *porneia* refers even more narrowly to fornication (premarital sex) during a betrothal period** (which is like engagement but more legally binding). The main argument here is that only Matthew includes this exception clause in Jesus's teaching on divorce. It's missing in Mark and Luke.
 - ▶ So it's argued that only Matthew include it because he's the only Gospel writer to include Joseph's consideration to divorce Mary when he discovered her with child during their betrothal period (Mt. 1:19). Breaking a betrothal was equivalent to divorce. **Matthew included this exception clause to validate Joseph as a just man.**

- ❖ **Now even though respectable teachers hold to the incest view or betrothal view, they're still minority positions in the history of Protestant interpretation.** The majority view still holds that the word *porneia* was intentionally broad enough to include all sorts of sexual sins, and when any of it is committed in the context of marriage we're dealing with a sexual sin against a spouse. So in the end, we're dealing with adultery.

- ▶ By the way, notice how with the coming of Christ to fulfill the Law, adultery is no longer punishable by death. That's why it can even be considered a grounds for divorce. Under the Old Covenant it would've been the grounds for death. But now under the New Covenant, your marriage might end – but at least you won't.

- ❖ **Now I think the best explanation for why Jesus didn't use the specific word for adultery (*moicheia*) is because *porneia* best captures the vagueness of the phrase “some indecency” in Deuteronomy 24.** It's supposed to be a broad term that includes adultery in the traditional sense, but it can also refer to a range of sexual sins that you commit with someone you're not married to.
 - ▶ **What Jesus is teaching with this exception clause is that divorce is permitted in such cases – not because adultery is heinous – but because a divorce (a dividing of one flesh) has already occurred.** The permanence of marriage is predicated on a one-flesh union consecrated by the act of sex between husband and wife. But in adultery, that one-flesh union has already been violated. It's been torn asunder.
 - **A divorce has already occurred in reality (*de facto*), so the innocent party is given permission to initiate a legal divorce (*de jure*) that recognizes the tragic reality.** It's only permission – not a requirement or even an expectation. But it is a permission nonetheless.

- ❖ **When it comes to remarriage, the majority Protestant view is that it's permitted for the aggrieved party in the case of adultery.** But the guilty one is to remain unmarried – even if there is eventual repentance. And that's not a punishment. Christians don't see remaining unmarried (singleness) as punishment.
 - ▶ **But the fact that the adulterer shouldn't remarry reinforces the reality that sin has earthly consequences.** The eternal consequences can be forgiven. An illegitimate divorce won't keep you out of heaven if you repent and believe in the gospel. But it will keep you out of a subsequent marriage. That's a warning to treat marriage with the utmost sanctity.

- ❖ **But I realize we all know people who have remarried after getting a divorce that God doesn't recognize.** Maybe that describes you. I want to be clear: God still expects you to repent, but he doesn't expect you to end another marriage. Repentance doesn't mean you get another divorce. But it does mean you confess how you've broken your covenant, how you've hurt others, and how you've spurned God's and his Word. Repentance means you now submit under God's authority to guide how you keep the vows of your new marriage.
 - ▶ You're going to face earthly consequences for your decisions. It's going to be tough. But know that you can be forgiven. Divorce and remarriage are not unforgivable. The blood of Jesus can cover them. **So Church, don't let your friends think their divorce and subsequent remarriage has pushed them beyond the reach of God's grace.** Preach them the gospel of grace.

- ❖ And if you have **Christian friends whose marriage is on the rocks** perhaps because one of them was unfaithful – help them see the heart behind this passage. If we're trying to parse out these words to figure out what one spouse has to do to cross the line and give the other permission to divorce – we're asking the wrong question. And we're thinking not like Christians but like the scribes and Pharisees.
- ❖ Remember what Jesus said back in Matthew 19. The OT permitted divorce because of the hardness of heart. It's the heart that matters. That means Jesus is not suggesting you should divorce after a single act of *porneia* committed by your spouse. **It's really about assessing whether the guilty party has a hardened heart – whether we're dealing with an unrepentant sexual sin.**
 - ▶ When we're thinking about the grounds for divorce, don't picture a solid red line that you better not cross but rather picture a continuum of heart-hardening sexual sin. It's about whether the heart has hardened. If the heart is still soft and repentant, then there's room for grace. There's room for forgiveness and reconciliation.
- ❖ I'm not dismissing the sinfulness of adultery or the damage it inflicts, especially on children. Adultery is betrayal of trust. God hates it. We should too. **But the exception clause should not be seen as a free license to divorce.** It might be permitted, but it should never be the first recourse, especially if the unfaithful spouse is repentant and seeking reconciliation.
 - ▶ At the depths of God's heart is the desire to be reconciled to sinners and to create a people reconciled to one another. **So if we're going to be a people after God's own heart, then we've got to get behind couples with failed marriages and point them to the gospel of reconciliation.**
 - The journey ahead is going to be hard. It's going to take sweat and tears, and not just by the couple but by all of us loving them and caring for them. There might be a need for a separation between the couple for a season. There's sin that'll need to be confronted and encouragement that'll need to be given. But that's how the Church functions as the Church in a divorce culture like ours.