

HOLY STAGE

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



Catalog No. 20191020
Matthew 5:31-32
7th Message
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October 20, 2019

Matthew 5:31-32

It's no secret that we live in an individualistic culture in which the needs of the self take priority over other needs. What's it like to be married in such a culture?

Northwestern University sociologist Eli Finkel observes that since about 1965, "we have been living in the era of the self-expressive marriage. Americans now look to marriage increasingly for self-discovery, self-esteem, and personal growth."¹

Belinda Luscombe, in a story for Time magazine that reflects on Finkel's work, puts it this way:

Matrimony used to be an institution people entered out of custom, duty or a need to procreate. Now that it's become a technology-assisted endeavor that has been delayed until conditions are at their most optimal, it needs to deliver better-quality benefits. More of us think this one relationship should—and could—provide the full buffet of satisfaction: intimacy, support, stability, happiness and sexual exhilaration. And if it's not up to the task, it's quicker and cheaper than ever to unsubscribe.²

In Jesus' day, it was also easy to unsubscribe—at least for men. What does he have to say about marriage and divorce? What can we learn from him? To understand what Jesus is saying in Matthew 5:31-32, it is best to jump ahead to Matthew 19:3-9, then return to his words in the Sermon on the Mount.

Most people have been touched by divorce in some way, and each story is unique. We won't be able to address every question, much less answer every question, but Jesus' words, at least in a general way, will help us consider marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

What God has joined together

Matthew 19:3-9:

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 the two 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."

At issue is how to understand the Mosaic Law, particularly Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which allowed for divorce and remarriage, albeit indirectly. Jesus says that Moses allowed for divorce because of Israel's "hardness of heart."

God created humans to worship him, but they rebelled against him, falling victim to Satan, sin, and death. God then called Israel as his prototypical nation, but the Israelites, like the first humans, hardened their hearts against God.

The case law concerning divorce in Deuteronomy was a concession to the obstinacy of Israel. Moses was, in a sense, trouble-shooting until the day when God would renew the hearts of his people (Deuteronomy 30:6, Jeremiah 31:33, Ezekiel 36:26-27). From Jesus' perspective, the law that permitted divorce was part of a necessary but temporary phase in the story of Israel.

In the days before sin entered the world, in the days before God created Israel, God "made them male and female." In those days, there was no hardness of heart. What did Moses command? He commanded that a man leave his parents so that a man and a woman might become "one flesh" in marriage. The image of God is most fully reflected in both male and female (Genesis 1:27). Therefore, a marriage between a man and a woman uniquely reflects the image of God into the world.

Biblically, it goes without saying, but it needs saying these days, that any kind of marriage other than a marriage between a man and a woman does not reflect the image of God into the world the way God intends his image to be reflected in marriage.

Based on the creation account in Genesis 1-2, Jesus concludes, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." Jesus affirms what is only hinted at in the Genesis account: yes, a man joins himself to a woman in marriage, but God himself does the joining. If God fuses together a man and a woman in marriage, then it is not humanity's prerogative to separate the union.

In our part of the world today, marriage is not seen as a fusion; it's seen as an alliance. The unspoken purpose of many people who enter such an alliance is to give their partners the unprecedented opportunity to meet all their felt needs, providing them with "the full buffet of satisfaction."

Hardness of heart

The Mosaic Law allowed for divorce. However, by invoking Genesis 1-2 and by attributing divorce to a hardness of heart, Jesus in his day is looking to both the past and the future.

In the past, in Eden, there was no need for divorce laws because men and women had not yet hardened their hearts against God. Outside Eden, in the wilderness of Sinai, the hardness of heart threatened to destroy Israel. Therefore, God, in making his covenant with his people, gave them divorce laws. However, he also said he would make a new covenant with them to soften their hearts.

In the new covenant, the Holy Spirit writes the law of God on the hearts of his people, making a deeper obedience possible, in anticipation of his renewal of creation (Romans 8:18-25, 2 Corinthians 3:3, Hebrews 8:10).

As the kingdom of heaven was drawing near in Christ, the reason for divorce laws (hardness of heart) was fading away. In the new covenant, God not only restores his people, but he also restores his intention for them in marriage. He saves people; he also saves marriage.

God made them male and female "from the beginning" so that they might become one flesh in marriage. In the person of Jesus, a new beginning is in the offing, complete with a life-enhancing marriage

that reflects the image of God into the world. In the new covenant, as in the beginning, God fuses together a man and a woman in marriage, and it is not humanity's prerogative to separate the union.

Jesus upstages the law

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 not only allowed for divorce, but it also allowed for remarriage. Now, Jesus upstages the law and even equates the combination of divorce and remarriage with a violation of one of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). Jesus apparently links divorce with remarriage because divorce, as in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, all but implied remarriage.

Under the Mosaic Law, divorce and remarriage, though regrettable, are allowable. From Jesus' perspective, the combination of divorce and remarriage constitutes adultery. Divorce and remarriage are more serious matters for Jesus than for Moses. Who's right: Moses or Jesus? Well, both. Moses was right for his age, just as Jesus is right for his age.

The new covenant, mediated by Jesus, supersedes the old covenant, mediated by Moses. In equating divorce and remarriage with adultery, Jesus is restoring the dignity of marriage. If God is renewing both his people and their marriages, then divorce, particularly divorce with a view to remarriage, is quite clearly a more serious matter in the new covenant.

God says to his people in the new covenant, "I'm doing something new." Those who separate what God has joined are saying to him, "No you're not." To kill a marriage is to deny the power of the Holy Spirit to work at the deepest levels of the human heart.

The bride of Christ

Even in the old covenant, marriage represented God's love for his people. To worship other gods was to commit adultery. The divine husband watched his people spurn his love time and time again in favor of other gods. Finally, because of their recalcitrant idolatry, he sent them into exile, a sort of divorce, but with a view toward restoring them by renewing his covenant with them. The full extent of his love, therefore, remained unknown until he gave his Son, who through his shed blood enacted the new covenant.

Now, collectively, God's people are the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25-32, Revelation 19:7-9). Christ doesn't leave us, of course. He's bound himself to us for eternity.

The new covenant, therefore, enhances the significance of marriage. Marriage is now a holy stage in which God's people dramatize the story of his love for them in his Son. To separate what God has joined together is to deny a couple the holy privilege and responsibility of together representing God's love to the world, the angels, and the demons. No wonder Jesus says divorce and remarriage are tantamount to adultery.

Marriage is an opportunity for a couple to reflect God's love into the world. When husband and wife sacrifice for the sake of each other, as empowered by the Holy Spirit in the new covenant, they are preserving and enhancing marriage. Marriage in the new covenant is so sacred and so potent with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that divorce and remarriage are tantamount to adultery.

Jesus lessens the significance of divorce and remarriage if the divorce is for the cause of "immorality": sexual behavior that creates a new sexual union (1 Corinthians 5:1). Divorce for the cause of sexual immorality, unlike other causes, does not result in adultery when one remarries. It doesn't result in adultery not least because adultery ("immorality") has already been committed.

Now, let's return to the Sermon on the Mount to see how that fills out Jesus' understanding of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Jesus upholds marriage

Matthew 5:31-32:

"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."

Jesus doesn't say here whom he's quoting, but based on Matthew 19, the quote represents a Pharisaical interpretation of the Mosaic Law. The Pharisees misinterpreted Deuteronomy 24:1-4 in a way that made it easier for men to divorce their wives. In actuality, the case law in Deuteronomy, although it indirectly allowed for divorce and remarriage, protected women from capricious divorce and from being exploited.

In what sense can it be said that a man who divorces his wife "makes her commit adultery"? A divorced

woman in Jesus' time and place had limited options, the best of which was to remarry. The man who divorces his wife, therefore, forces remarriage, which amounts to adultery, on her.

Jesus is not saying that the divorced woman shouldn't remarry; he's saying that the man shouldn't divorce her, because divorce, which all but necessitates remarriage, constitutes adultery. Jesus' teaching, like the law in Deuteronomy 24, protected women from capricious divorce but in an even stronger way.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus speaks of divorce and remarriage in this way: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" (Mark 10:10-12). The significant addition in Mark is a divorce that's initiated by a woman. Again, Jesus is not prohibiting remarriage; he's upholding marriage. He's not prohibiting divorce; he's saying that marriage is a bigger deal in the new covenant and that divorce is, therefore, a bigger deal.

The problem is not adultery. The problem is not remarriage. The problem isn't even divorce. The problem is hardness of heart, and that's the problem Jesus is addressing in the new covenant.

Paul's views

Outside the gospels, the apostle Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 7 also come into play when divorce is discussed. However, Paul's singular focus is on marriage between a believer and an unbeliever, and he does not address the issue of remarriage.

Therefore, scholar Gordon Fee concludes, in reference to 1 Corinthians 7:10-16: "This issue [divorce and remarriage] is so complex, and the individual cases so diverse, that this text with its singular focus on maintaining mixed marriages (but allowing them to dissolve if the pagan initiates the action) does not offer much help."³

Nevertheless, we can derive from both 1 Corinthians 7 and Ephesians 5 that Paul's views concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage are consistent with those of Jesus.

What are the implications of Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce for today?

Marry someone who responds to the Spirit

If you're a believer in Jesus Christ, and you'd like to be married, make sure choose someone who not only professes belief in Christ but who also demonstrates responsiveness to the Holy Spirit. Responsiveness to the Spirit is not the only criterion, of course, but it is the most important one.

How can you tell whether a person is responsive to the Holy Spirit? First, watch for how he/she talks about Jesus. Second, watch for how he/she treats you and others. Third, watch if he/she confronts his/her hard-heartedness. Ask yourself, "Can I trust this person with my heart?" If the presence of the Holy Spirit is not detectable in a potential spouse, then that person is not yet a potential spouse. It doesn't matter whether you love each other.

David Wilcox sings of a woman who's on a date:

If he's rude to the waiter and it makes your heart confused

This is lesson number one . . . Run

Get up and run, don't walk, don't wait

Rule number one don't hesitate, your date is done . . . Run

For single folks whose desires for marriage have thus far been thwarted, my basic advice, coming from one who didn't get married until he was forty-two years old, is to walk through the furnace your desires with the Lord. Pursue Christ, the bridegroom of the church, with all you've got, cry out to him, and watch for what he does. Before meeting Karen, my wife, the Lord enabled me to draw closer to him. In fact, in the wake of a broken relationship, I sensed the Lord telling me to lay down my life for the church, the bride of Christ.

Pursue the Lord

In the new covenant, God has given our marriages a great gift: the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit nurtures relationship with God, working at the deepest level of the human heart, crying out for, and prompting us to cry out for, intimacy with God (Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6). If you believe in Jesus, then the Holy Spirit resides in you. If you listen carefully to your heart, you will hear its cry for intimacy—its cry to know and be known, to love and be loved.

What's your heart doing? It's crying for a relationship that can't be satisfied in the human realm, because no human fully knows and loves you, flaws and all, or fully

accepts your brave but feeble attempts to know and love. The Spirit helps us hear our heart's cry for intimacy, and he helps satisfy that cry in our relationship with God, albeit always in a partial way this side of the new creation. Don't expect your spouse to provide "the full buffet of satisfaction"; instead, draw near to the Lord.

C.S. Lewis, reflecting on his late-in-life marriage, writes that his wife and he "feasted on love; every mode of it—solemn and merry, romantic and realistic, sometimes as dramatic as a thunderstorm, sometimes as comfortable and unemphatic as putting on your soft slippers. No cranny of heart or body remained unsatisfied." Sounds great, right? Nevertheless, he also writes, "We both knew we wanted something besides one another—quite a different kind of something, a quite different kind of want."⁴

In premarital counseling, I always tell couples that the most important thing each of them can do for their marriage is to pursue the Lord. If you believe in Jesus, the Spirit is present in your life to empower you to pursue the Lord. As we do so, we will be better able to receive love, because Christ will be meeting our deepest needs, and we will be better able to give love, inspired by Christ, who loves us flaws and all.

In the context of our relationship with God, the Spirit softens our hearts toward God and others, especially—if we're married—toward our spouses. In order to soften our hearts, the Spirit, in concert with the Spirit-inspired Scriptures and the Spirit-indwelt people of God, first diagnoses hardness of heart: hardness toward God, hardness toward others, hardness toward a spouse. The Spirit diagnoses hardness of heart in order to soften a heart. He softens a heart not least by illuminating God's love for us in Christ, hard hearts and all.

If you are married, let the Spirit have his way with you. Let him speak to you through the Scriptures, through his people, and through the events of your life to diagnose hardness of heart, to soften your heart toward God and toward your spouse, and to lead you in the road less traveled by, the way of self-giving love, which in the end is the most satisfying way to live.

In our part of the world these days, we have learned to understand ourselves more as sinned against than sinning, more as victims than as victimizers. We desperately want to think that the other person is more to blame than we are. Who's to blame, however, isn't the issue.

Tim and Kathy Keller write that in marriage, it is essential to treat your own selfishness more seriously than you do your spouse's selfishness: "Only you have complete access to your own selfishness, and only you have complete responsibility for it. If two spouses each say, 'I'm going to treat my self-centeredness as the main problem in the marriage,' you have the prospect of a truly great marriage."⁵

What do you think would happen in a marriage if each of the partners, by the power of the Holy Spirit, made serving his or her spouse the highest priority in the relationship? Others might ask, "What are those people drinking?" Well, we're drinking in the love of God.

Consider the opportunity that God has given us in this individualistic culture, in which the needs of the self take priority over other needs. In marriage, we, as followers of Jesus, have the holy privilege and responsibility of representing God's love to the world. Most concretely, that love is expressed when a man and a woman each confront their own selfishness and practice self-giving love.

Transcendent perspective

A marriage relationship transcends the two people who are involved in it. It uniquely reflects God's image into the world, it anticipates the renewal of creation, and it builds a holy stage in which God's people dramatize the story of his love for them in his Son. When a husband lays down his life for his wife, as Christ laid down his life for the church, and when a wife receives the love of her husband, as the church receives the love of Christ, they are reflecting the greater love story into the world (Ephesians 5:22-31). To understand the transcendent nature of marriage is to be in awe. If you realize that marriage is so awesome that you can't begin to explain it, you begin to see the issues you encounter in it, whether they're pleasant, mundane, or tortuous, in a different light.

You're not just enjoying a romantic dinner together. You're not just doing the laundry. You're not just beating each other to an emotional pulp. You are connecting with something much larger than yourselves—something mysterious, something holy, something awesome. The transcendent perspective puts the bubbles in the champagne of marriage. Occasionally, when doing mundane tasks in the context of serving my wife, I consciously recognize that more is going on here than I can begin to know.

The sexual relationship illustrates the transcendent perspective. Physiologists can explain what happens in sexual intercourse. What happens emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually is the prerogative of poets, but even the best of them fall short. Words can't explain sex. The poetry of the Proverbs doesn't even try to explain the male-female relationship; it just marvels (Proverbs 30:18-19). Let us weep for how our world has cheapened sex, with all its potency, by removing it from the sacred exclusivity of marriage, God's transcendent stage.

When we recognize the transcendence of marriage, we can understand why Jesus treats marriage so seriously. His words challenge us, both as partners in a marriage and as those with influence over a marriage, to think once, twice—yea, verily, a thousand times—before pursuing a course of action that trivializes, injures, or kills a marriage.

How do I love?

The question, in the middle of a turbulent marriage—or any marriage, for that matter—is not "How do I not sin?" but "How do I love?" If you're in the middle of a turbulent marriage, you're probably sinning in spades. Yes, how do you love? That's the question. Don't ask whether you should get a divorce or not; ask how you can love.

The answer to the question "How do I love?" in the context of careful consideration of the Scriptures and wise counsel from the people of God, may—or may not—lead you in the end, probably after many dark nights, to divorce. As Paul Taylor, one of our pastors, says, "Divorce is a tragedy, but in some cases, it's the best tragedy."

If you camp on the question, "How can I get out of this?" you'll tangle yourself up in complicated legal codes in search of an escape clause. If, on the other hand, you camp on the question, "How do I love?" you're in the company of the Holy Spirit. After all, Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount believes we can even love our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

If you're married, don't go it alone. Get connected to some group within the church. The pastors and elders of our church are committed to listening to the individual stories of couples who need help. Our counsel varies from couple to couple because each story is unique. We have to listen to the stories. Also, we refer couples to local therapists. If you feel stuck in your marriage, and

especially if you're contemplating separation or divorce, get help. As Ed Woodhall, one of our elder emeriti, says, "Healthy couples get counseling." Jesus wants to save and enhance marriages, and we're here to help.

Putting a broken marriage back together

Consider the words of Abraham Lincoln in his second inaugural address, when he was trying to put together a broken union. At that point, it was clear that the North was going to win the Civil War. Lincoln could have celebrated the vindication of his side and bemoaned the evils of the other side, but his love of union, North and South together, was stronger than his love for his side.

Lincoln used the word "we," "all," and "both." He quoted from the Sermon on the Mount: "let us judge not, that we be not judged." Most famously, he concluded with these words: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

That's the way to put a broken nation back together. It's also the way to put a broken marriage back together.

Two women

If Jesus equates divorce and remarriage with adultery, we should also note how he treated those who were touched by divorce, remarriage, and adultery. In this light, his interactions with the woman at the well and with the woman caught in adultery are instructive.

First, by the time she met Jesus, the woman at the well had already had five husbands and was at that time involved with a man who wasn't her husband. Jesus addressed the sin and pain in her life by offering her living water, the Holy Spirit of the new covenant, and she brought the whole city out to meet him (John 4:1-30, 7:37-39). Second, Jesus observed that the accusers of the woman caught in adultery had faded away and told her, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more" (John 8:1-11). In one case involving divorce

and remarriage and in another case involving adultery, Jesus offered not condemnation but hope.

The kingdom of heaven has drawn near. The healing, loving power of God is available to everyone: whether you're single, married, widowed, divorced, or remarried. Am I leaving anyone out? If I am, be assured: the healing, loving power of God is available to you. If you are mourning, remember that Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes, which include these words:

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Endnotes

- 1 David Brooks, *The Second Mountain* (New York: Random House, 2019), 142.
- 2 Belinda Luscombe, "How to Stay Married," *Time* magazine (June 13, 2016), 36.
- 3 Gordon Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 306.
- 4 C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 6-7.
- 5 Brooks, 144.