

WHY YOU REALLY DON'T WANT A DIVORCE (IF YOU CAN HELP IT)  
MATTHEW 5:31-32

INTRODUCTION:

- A. *One cloudless, unforgettable Sunday afternoon, my ex-husband and I walked through our Victorian farmhouse where, for 25 years, we had raised our five children. Our task was to divide our possessions before we sold the house....*  
*Determined to get through the day without any tears or arguments, I geared myself with a clipboard and legal pad on which I had drawn two columns: "his" and "mine." As we moved from room to room, I suddenly felt I was in a house owned by strangers. (Barbara Mathias-Riegel, "To Have and To Hold," Modern Maturity, July-August 2000, 30)*
- B. This has become a very typically American experience. As a nation, Americans lead the world in divorce rates. Defoe writes that *By the 1990s divorce had become as American as the Fourth of July.* (Barbara Defoe, *The Divorce Culture*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997, 106) And what happens in American culture, sooner or later, bleeds into many Christian homes. Most Israelites living next door to Amorites eventually adopted their idolatry. Many Christians living next door to divorce eventually adopt divorce. We uncritically buy the deception that divorce is the answer; that divorce is the best solution for our marriage problems.
- C. Well, I'm here to say that it's not. For the next thirty minutes or so, I'm going to rub the American fur the wrong way. And like Billy Sunday once said, *If the cat doesn't like it, let it turn around.*
- D. My hope is that, by the time I'm done, you're going to say, "You know. That's right!" Because God's Word always makes sense and the principles of the Word of God really work.
- E. To those of you here today who have a divorce in your background, relax. It's not my agenda to bash divorcees. I suspect that most of you in this church who are divorced were rejected by your former spouse and never wanted a divorce. And if the divorce *was* your own fault, you have already come to place of personal repentance and peace with God. If not, I hope you get to that place of repentance this morning. And I'll bet that since you've gone through the pain of a divorce, that's the last thing you would want to happen to one of your married kids or friends.
- F. So, why do you really not want a divorce?

I. BECAUSE DIVORCE SMASHES GOD'S IDEAL

**(Verses 31-32, It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, **and** anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.)**

- A. Can You Keep a Promise?
1. When Jesus addresses the subject of divorce, He's talking about broken promises. Some Jewish man asked a Jewish woman to become his wife. She said yes and they pledged their fidelity to one another. Now, for some unspecified reason, the Jewish husband wants to try another woman, so he gives his wife a written certificate of divorce. It's OK, he says. I've got chapter and verse for this one: Deuteronomy 24:1, *If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, etc.* The problem was that Jewish men interpreted the words, "something indecent" to cover just about anything, including discovering that his wife was not as attractive as the new woman who moved in next door. Jesus says, "Unh, unh." That's just serial monogamy, in other words, adultery. Jesus takes the words "something indecent" in the narrowest of meanings, which is sexual

unfaithfulness. Except for that, Jesus says, you had better keep your marriage promise. Period.

2. *A human promise is an awesome reality. When a woman makes a promise, she thrusts her hand into the unpredictable circumstances of her tomorrow and creates an enclave of predictable reality. When a man makes a promise, he creates an island of certainty in a heaving ocean of uncertainty. Can any other act, other than the act of forgiving, be more divine?* (Lewis B. Smedes, "Controlling the Unpredictable: The Power of Promising," *Christianity Today*, January 21, 1983, 16)
3. Every marriage starts with a promise...something like, *Do you promise, to love and cherish him/her, in sickness and in health, for richer for poorer, for better for worse, and forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him/her, so long as you both shall live?*
4. That's a lot like my beloved Psalm 15:4, [He] *keeps his oath even when it hurts...*
5. **Numbers 30:2** *When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.*
6. Did God apply that command to the marriage vow? Indeed He did. That's why in **Malachi 2** the prophet thunders, *[T]he Lord is acting as witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant....So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.* (Malachi 2:14 and 15)
7. In *A Man for All Seasons*, daughter Meg urges Sir Thomas Moore to take an oath he doesn't mean to save his life. He won't do it. Here's why, *When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. (He cups his hands) And if he opens his fingers then – he needn't hope to find himself again.* (Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons*, 140)

B. Can You Keep a Principle?

1. Turn in your Bibles to **Matthew 19**. Here Jesus speaks again to the subject of marriage and divorce and here He gives a little more background to God's prohibition of divorce.

*3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"*

*4 "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,'*

*5 and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'?*

*6 So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."*
2. Jewish culture was just about as permissive as ours when it came to divorce. The only difference was that it was one-sided. Men could divorce their wives, but women didn't have the privilege. The Greeks were more egalitarian, just like Americans. That's why Mark's record of the words of Jesus in 10:12 includes Jesus' further explanation that divorce and remarriage at the initiative of the wife is adulterous also.
3. The Pharisees' question in verse 3 was designed to back Jesus into a corner over a hot political debate between the followers of the great Jewish rabbis, Shammai and Hillel. The first was conservative about grounds for divorce and the second was very liberal, like scorching dinner was grounds for divorce. Jesus refuses to simply take sides, although his position pretty much agreed with Shammai who had it right. But Jesus goes deeper and explains that marriage is more than a human arrangement. He said that marriage is a God-thing. He goes right back to their divine design principle in Genesis 1:27 and 2:24.
  - The preacher solemnized it.
  - The state authorized it.

- The county recorded it.
- The friends all clapped.

But beyond all that, something changed in the universe. Two human beings became one by the unalterable decree of God. I don't understand it. Even the Bible calls it a mystery. But in the eyes of God a wedding results in something so revolutionary that it is called "one flesh." How can two people be called "one flesh"? Nevertheless, what we can't explain, we must respect. God has revealed that marriage is God joining two people together and nobody has any right to unravel what God has woven.

4. Tony Evans makes a great point: *How interesting that we want God to marry us, but men to separate us. We want God to bless the marriage, but when trouble strikes, we call the lawyers and head downtown.* ("Divorce and Remarriage," The Urban Alternative, 1993, 2)
5. That's the principle. But will we keep it? *What God has joined together, let not man separate.*

## II. BECAUSE DIVORCE CREATES MORE SINS

### A. More Sins for You

1. It's bad enough to break a promise.
2. It's bad enough to break a divine principle.
3. But beyond that, divorce almost always spins off into other sins. Jesus says that the courts may say the marriage is over and you're a free agent again: an eligible bachelor or bachelorette. But in this court case, God writes the dissenting opinion. God says, *This marriage is still writ large in the books of heaven.* The Bible says that remarriage after divorce, except in cases of infidelity, is adultery. That's not my opinion. It's the direct pronouncement of Jesus in **Matthew 19:9**, *I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."*

### B. More Sins for Him/Her/Them

1. Our Matthew 5 passage emphasizes the adulterous sin your divorce can cause to others. Maybe you choose never to remarry, but when your ex does, God says, you're implicated in adulterous sin: for your former wife or husband and for the person he or she marries.
2. It's the old stumbling block principle. If I do something that causes someone else to sin, God lays part of the responsibility on my doorstep. That's why Paul had said in **I Corinthians 8:13**, *if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.*
3. In Jewish culture, a divorced woman was lost. The culture had no safety net for a single woman unless her family took her back and provided for her. Otherwise her options were prostitution or begging, or, much more preferably, remarriage. So the urgency to remarry for a Jewish divorced woman was intense. Even today, when a husband leaves a young wife with kids, the need and hope for her to remarry is strong.
4. Similarly, when a woman divorces her husband, the loneliness drives most men to remarry. And by the way, the majority of divorces today are instituted by women, not men.

### C. And Don't Forget the Kids

1. *The woman was crying and yelling at her husband....I stepped from my patrol car. As I walked towards the two I could hear the woman yelling at her husband to fix whatever he had done to the car so she could leave. He made no reply, but only laughed at her with a contemptuous laugh. She turned to me and asked me to make him fix the car. I began talking to the husband who said that his wife was having an affair and she was leaving. I asked him if they had gone for counseling and he said he was not interested....*

*I noticed two little girls standing in the doorway, watching the drama unfold. They were about eight and ten years old. Both wore dresses and clung*

to a Cabbage Patch doll. At their feet were two small suitcases. My eyes couldn't leave their faces as they watched the two people they loved most tear each other apart.

The woman emerged with [her] VCR in her arms and went to the car where she put it into the crowded back seat....Then as I stood in unbelief, I watched the husband point to the two little girls and say to the wife, "Well, which one do you want?" Without any apparent emotion, the mother chose the older one. The girls looked at each other as the oldest one picked up her suitcase and then climbed into her mother's car. I had to stand and watch as the littlest girl, still clutching her Cabbage Patch doll in one hand and her suitcase in the other, watched her big sister and her mother drive off.....There I stood, the unwilling witness to the death of a family. (Dave Johnson, *The Light Behind the Star*, Questar, Sisters, OR 1989, 13; Quoted in Steve Farrar, *Point Man*, Multnomah Publishers, 1990, 21-23)

2. Most divorces are not quite that dramatic and traumatic for the children. But every divorce *is* traumatic for the kids and every divorce *is* the death of a family.
3. Anybody who cares about the kids and is contemplating divorce should read Barbara Defoe's hard-hitting book, *The Divorce Culture* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1997). Her research evidence for the damage that divorce does to the kids ought to send every troubled spouse back home intent on working ten times as hard to keep the marriage and the family together.

- A million kids a year see their parents get divorced, (83)
- 45% of children born to married parents will experience parental divorce before age 18 (83)
- They have lower expectations for college and future employment (158)
- Parents are less available to the children physically and emotionally (160)
- Children often find that they have to hide their feelings of love for the estranged parent (161)

Colson's views resonate with Barbara's.

- *Children in single-parent families are six times more likely to be poor*
- *Children of divorce suffer intense grief, which often lasts many years.*
- *Children of divorce are more prone to illness, accidents and suicide*
- *In fact, most of the social pathologies disrupting American life today can be traced to fatherlessness.* (Charles Colson, *How Now Shall We Live*, Tyndale Publishers, 1999, 323)

4. In the closing scene of "*Mrs. Doubtfire*," the central character reassures a young girl after her parents' breakup that after divorce some parents "get along much better...and they can become better people and much better mommies and daddies." (Charles Colson, *How Now Shall We Live*, Tyndale Publishers, 1999, 323)

That is a malicious and tragic fantasy.

5. Exodus 20:5 talks about the multi-generational effect of the sin of the fathers. If you ever wondered what that meant, the effect of divorce on kids is one documentable example.
6. Michael McManus, founder of Marriage Savers reports that two-fifths of American children live in homes without a father. *No civilization in the history of the world has seen such a massive abandonment by fathers of their responsibilities to their children.* (from a *Current Thoughts and Trends* (June 2000, 14) review of *The Faith Factor in Fatherhood* by Don Eberly, ed., Lexington Books, 1999)

PS: Friends Matter, Too!

1. When you throw a rock in a pond, that one little splash creates dozens of ripples that radiate out and distort the surface of the whole pond. Such a tiny action with such large results!

2. A divorce is not just a little private unraveling of a relationship that affects only the partners and the kids.
3. It afflicts the extended family with pain. It confuses your parents and in-laws.
  - Whose side are they supposed to land on?
  - Will they ever see the grandkids again?
  - What happens to the traditional Christmas family gathering this year?
  - Does their will need to be altered?
  - Do they take your name off their Rolodex?
  - Will you answer their phone calls any more?
4. It compromises your relationships with friends.
  - Your couple-to-couple friends kiss your marriage friendship goodbye with an ache of sorrow.
  - No longer are you a credible witness to your friends who are struggling with marriage problems. You may see exactly what the solution is for their struggle, but your own history silences your lips. You are afraid that if you speak, they will say, "Who are you to give me advice?"
  - And your non-Christian friends wonder just how real your Christianity is if you couldn't be faithful to your spouse.
  - Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales* 600 years ago diagnosed the problem: *If gold should rust, what will iron do? For if a priest be foul in whom we trust, no wonder that the common man should rust.* Yes, Christian, priests we all are to the world that doesn't know Jesus. And it's true that you and I are most likely the only Bible they will ever read. Are we a trustworthy translation?

### III. BECAUSE DIVORCE REVEALS A HARD HEART

#### A. There Is Always One Hard Heart

1. **Matthew 19:7** "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"  
 8 Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because **your hearts were hard**. But it was not this way from the beginning.  
 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."
2. [A] young mother of two told me she had recently divorced her husband of seven years in order to marry a wonderful Christian man she met at her office.  
 "I'm curious," I asked. "How did you work this whole thing out in your thinking? You've told me you knew divorce was sin. You said your first husband was also a Christian. He didn't abuse you and wasn't unfaithful to you. So, how did you justify leaving him to marry another man?"  
 "That's a good question," she said. (I felt affirmed – briefly.)  
 "Certainly, I don't have to tell you about the grace of God."  
 It was apparent that I was in for more postgraduate instruction. Then, she said something that I've often suspected but never actually heard a Christian admit.  
 "I intended to ask for forgiveness and come back to the Lord even before I began the affair. It was unthinkable to live my life without Ken. I know my divorce was wrong in God's eyes, but it seemed like the best decision at the time. And I haven't committed the unpardonable sin, you know. Besides, I'm so-o-o happy with my new husband. He's turning out to be a real man of God. We pray and read the Word together every night, and we just love your church!" (Jan Hettinga, *Follow Me*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 1996, 115)
3. That scares me. It scares me because it is a cold, calculating presumption on the grace of God. It scares me because a Christian is loving something that God hates. God hasn't chosen to comment very frequently on things He hates. But

He says that about divorce in **Malachi 2:16**, "*I hate divorce,*" says the *LORD God of Israel*,

B. But There's Not Always Two

1. Years ago I heard a seasoned pastor state emphatically that in the 50 years of his ministry he had never seen an innocent party in a divorce. I disagreed with him then and I disagree with him now.
2. Of course, there are no perfect human beings. So there never was a perfect husband and there never was a perfect wife. In any divorce, even the innocent party may not feel innocent. He or she may wonder if they could have prevented the divorce if they had been more giving or hadn't had that argument or whatever. BUT, in most of the divorces I have witnessed, one of the partners had done nothing more to hurt the marriage than you or I have done in our marriages. They were not flawless, but they didn't do anything to deserve being divorced and they didn't want it. In almost every divorce, there is one spouse who is the unwilling and tragic victim of a spouse who is guilty of a hard heart.
3. The one ground that Jesus permits for the innocent party to initiate a divorce is when the partner has committed adultery. That's why Jesus says "except." Since immorality strikes at the core of the one-flesh mystery of marriage, God fingers the act of adultery as the de facto divorce. What happens after that in court is simply the paperwork.
4. However, note that Jesus does not here recommend divorce in the case of adultery. He simply allows it. Many wounded spouses have successfully forgiven their repentant partners and rebuilt godly and effective marriages. In Hosea 1-3 God told the prophet to forgive and restore his adulterous wife. God forgave the adulterous sin of King David. Reconciliation of a betrayed marriage involves a careful and deliberate process, but it is possible when there is a truly repentant spouse on the one hand and a genuinely forgiving spouse on the other hand.
5. As a pastor, I have never told anyone that they should get a divorce. I've come close. Jesus never recommended divorce. But He allows it for the treachery of immorality.
6. Some teachers will admit grounds for divorce here but protest against any Christian ever being able to remarry. But remarriage is exactly what Jesus is talking about here. If there is a ground for divorce, there is a ground for remarriage.
7. What if you are divorced and remarried and you now know that your divorce was not on biblical grounds. Where does that leave you? Are you living in a persistent state of adultery? Should you break your second marriage?
8. Here's my recommendation: If you were the hard-hearted one in your divorce...
  - Humble yourself before God in repentance and ask His forgiveness. There is no sin bigger than the grace of God.
  - Confess your sin to and ask for forgiveness from your former spouse and any other people who were implicated in your divorce.
  - Recommit yourself to building a strong and permanent Christian marriage with your current spouse.

CONCLUSION:

- A. Jesus said that *the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. (Luke 16:8)* The typical millionaire couple in America has been married for twenty-eight years. One in four have been married for thirty-eight or more years. Considering the divorce rate in contemporary America, millionaires as a group can teach us all something about finding the right mate for life. (Thomas J. Stanley, *The Millionaire Mind*, Andrews McMeel Publishing, Kansas City, 2000, 240)
- E. When Judge Judy thinks one of her courtroom contenders is trying to snow her with a foolish argument she uses a trademark gesture, *pointing a finger at the side of her head*

*and asking a litigant, "Does it say stupid here?"... (Patricia Burnstein, "Judging Judy," Modern Maturity, July-August 2000, 57)*

- F. I'll bet God feels that way whenever his children offer their thin arguments to Him about why they shouldn't have to keep their marriage vows. Let's be done with self-serving, self-destructive, family destroying rationalizations. Let us honor God by doing it His way whether it feels good or not. In this case, Father really does know best.

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