

Matt 5.31-32 God's Righteousness and Divorce Part B WWC 3.24.19

Our sermon this morning is a continuation of the sermon we began last week. Considering the context in which we found this message, we could ask the question, “how is God’s standard of righteousness seen in marriage?” We remember that Jesus Christ, mercifully, is concerned with helping us understand our need of Him. Consequently, He helps us understand our great need of repentance. It is no surprise that His words hit us with such weight. **But we must also bear in mind that repentance makes no sense unless it is a means of restoration and forgiveness.** So as we consider the issue of divorce further, please understand that if you find yourself in sin on this issue, either through a divorce that doesn’t align with what Jesus Christ reveals is an acceptable reason for divorce, or because your life pattern was the consequence of divorce, there is forgiveness and forgiveness always leads to restoration. I am not saying that grace is license to sin. Sin hurts us. Sin scars us. But grace is the only means of restoration with God. Grace is the only balm that actually heals. As such, please understand as well, that our church is here to help you succeed in your Christian life. We want to help you out of your pain, even if it was your sin that led you there. We want to lift you out of the struggle. We will not condemn you. We will point you to Christ’s truth, and Christ’s grace.

So, then, this week I want to give a quick review to refresh our memories on this text of divorce, and then I want to give you the well-worn interpretive path of faithful Christian people on this topic of divorce. In doing this, **I hope that your conscience will be properly bound by God’s Word, and rightly freed by God’s word.** Further, attached to this manuscript on line are several resources through which you can delve deeper into this topic.

.I. Review. I encourage you to listen to last week’s message again so that you can understand a fuller view of the discussion. There are **six main passages** of scripture that deal with this topic of divorce directly. The six main passages are as follows, **Mt 5:31-32**, which deals with the issue of divorce as outlined in **Deut. 24.1-4**, **Mt 19:3-11**, **Mk 10:1-12**, **Lk 16:17-18**, and **1 Cor. 7:1-16**, which is underscored by Paul. These passages are not passages that deal with every possible scenario that may be present, **but they answer the one foundational question, what actually destroys the union God performs in marriage.** There are **two things that can dissolve that union**; they are **adultery and abandonment**; **there is one thing that can save that union, repentance and forgiveness.**

The immoral sin communicates at least an **actual physically sexually violation** of the marriage covenant. The context of **Matt 5** seems to distinguish this from just an adulterous heart. Although, some people might take a broader view of this, like seeing the viewing of pornography as a violation of the covenant, and therefore grounds for divorce. It may very well be applicatory. I believe, however, that this is speaking about the act of adultery with an actual person, although with the debauchery of robots being created now in our culture to satisfy the previsions of people, I would have trouble counseling a person away from divorce if their spouse was caught up in that wickedness. With respect to abandonment, meaning my spouse has left me, it has the sense of **leaving with the intent of walking away from the marriage.** It would not include something like being alone because of your spouse’s work, or some other extended absence that was unintended, like being shipped off to war. The key is intentional absence for the purpose of abandoning your spouse. **It is my belief** from my understanding of the Word of God, that sinful choices can cause abandonment that would be considered biblical. For example, I rob a bank. I get caught and am imprisoned for a period of time. Though the absence was unintentional, my sin caused this abandonment. It is a consequence of my sin. In all this we cannot forget that we are always charged to forgive, especially since God in Christ has forgiven us so much.

.II. **Historical considerations.** Here I want to highlight the major interpretations of the Bible’s teaching which are held by Christian people. These interpretational perspectives have been around in the Christian perspective at least as far back as Augustine (400 AD). I give these views in hopes of providing a foothold in learning how to maneuver through the issues divorce raises. I am borrowing heavily from two resources, Norman Geisler’s **Christian Ethics**, and John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg’s **Ethics for a Brave New World**. Both discussions begin with argumentation underscoring what marriage is, as understood from **Genesis 1-2**. Marriage is the cellular institution from which spring society, culture, and the basis for human flourishing. Marriage is good. It reflects something of the image of God that can only be seen within the structure of marriage between one man and one woman. It is preordained to be blessed by God respecting the union that it creates, and that irrespective of religion or irreligious worldviews, as marriage is part of the created structure. As Christians we learn later that ultimately, marriage reflects the glorious union of Christ with His people. Paul makes this clear in **Ephesians 5**.

The Christians positions on divorce have **agreement and disagreement**. Here Geisler is exceptionally clear and helpful. He notes that we all agree that divorce is not commended in the scriptures. God says in **Malachi 2:16** that He hates divorce. **Matthew 5** and **19** underscore that divorce is not part of God's design. Further, divorce is not permissible for any cause. In **Matthew 19:3** Jesus is asked this question, "**Is divorce acceptable for any cause?**" Jesus' response is clear, do not separate what God has joined together. Essentially, Jesus gives the answer and the reason. No is the answer. Because you are breaking God's design, is the reason. Further, the scriptures make clear in showing us the chaotic lives of divorced people, and people who lived unconscionably in their married relationships, and scripture does so by showing us how problematic the lives were of these people as a **consequence** of living in a way that didn't coincide with what God had revealed as right. But after these three points of agreement, Christians start to part ways on understanding divorce. **There are three main views on divorce**, and these are: there are **no grounds for divorce**, there is only **one ground for divorce**, and there are **many (2) grounds for divorce**.

Here are the arguments for the no ground position. **1)** It is not God's design and therefore never justified. **Mat 19:6**, "**what God has joined let no man separate**," and **Rom 7:2** which highlights death as the unbinding aspect of the marriage covenant, are held up as verses for this point. **2)** Divorce breaks vows made before God. (**Prov 2:17, Mal 2:14**) **3)** Jesus condemned all divorce. **4)** The apostle Paul condemned divorce. (**1 Cor 7**) **5)** Divorce disqualifies an elder. (**1 Tim 3:2**) **6)** Christ's conversation with the woman at the well (**Jn 4**) implies that the first husband or wife is the true spouse. **7)** Divorce destroys the picture of Christ's relationship with the church. (**Eph 5**) For clarity, the people who hold the "no grounds" view, interpret Christ's exception of adultery as being a reference to premarital sexual experiences, not adultery after marriage.

The **second** common position is that divorce is permissible **only in the event of adultery**. It is the one ground for divorce view. The arguments for this position are as follows: **1)** Jesus Christ explicitly states that adultery or immorality is a ground for divorce in **Matt 19**. These are considered one because the words are at times used interchangeably. **2)** Jesus repeats this exception in **Matt 5**, which underscores how the synoptic Gospels are to be understood which repeat this passage. **3)** Paul confirms this view in **1 Cor 7**, and acknowledged the legitimacy of divorce if the unbelieving spouse leaves, under this view presumably because of an adulterous relationship.

The **third** common position is that **there are many grounds for divorce**. But within the many grounds view some hold "many" to be only two, adultery and abandonment, and others hold a plethora like abuse, infectious disease, and neglect as grounds for divorce. The argumentation for this position starts with **1)** Jesus' teaching regarding adultery within marriage, and Paul's teaching in **1 Cor 7** concerning divorce make room for divorce. **2)** The recognition of human frailty. God didn't design divorce, but knowing how people would sin, God governed the brokenness. **3)** God says in the O.T. that He divorced Israel because of their spiritual unfaithfulness. (**Jer. 3:8; Isa 50:1**) **4)** Marriage is a mutual vow, not an unconditional vow. In other words, it is a covenant between two people. When one person breaks the vow by walking away, it is impossible for the other to keep it. **5)** Failing to allow divorce is legalistic. Jesus condemned this legalism in the Pharisees when He said He could heal on the Sabbath because the Sabbath was made for man. Therefore, the needs of the person are made primary, not simply prescriptive. **6)** Repentance changes the situation. For example, Israel was asked to return to God often even though Israel was "divorced" by God. Therefore, repentance can change the status of those that are guilty.

Those are the views that are represented in some form or another. You may have found yourself leaning towards one or the other, or a combination of the three. I personally hold a position between number 2 and number 3. The reason for that is that I see in scripture that God does restore people's brokenness to a whole state. I have seen people who have experienced unbiblical divorce repent, and find a person with whom they can live honorably before God. Further, though God makes clear that He hates improper union between a man and a woman, I see Him redeem the circumstances in a way that only God can. For instance, Bathsheba is always spoken of as "the wife of Uriah," even after Uriah's death. But God brought great grace into that situation, and He did not tell David to put Bathsheba away. The key factor in this is to understand that repentance is God's provision for renewal and restoration. We live in a broken world where we are surrounded by sin. We will be affected by it. I agree with Norman Geisler's statement when he says, "**God intends marriage to be a lifetime commitment between one male and one female. While the marriage relationship does not extend into eternity, it is meant to be for all our time together on earth. Divorce as such is never justifiable as such, even for adultery. Adultery is a sin, and God neither approves of sin nor the dissolution of marriage. What he has joined together, he does not want man to put asunder (Matt 19:6). However, while divorce is never justifiable, it is sometimes permissible and always forgivable. Hence, those who recognize the sin of the**

divorce, and their responsibility for it, should be allowed to remarry. But their remarriage should be for life.” (291-292) As your pastor I will add this as well. Obviously, this is a very hard topic. It is hard not just because of the emotions involved, but because it meddles with created order, and a mystical union that distinguishes something of God’s nature unlike any other relationship. Secondly, your conscience needs to be informed by the truth of God’s word, not our culture, not our feelings. Further, neither I, nor anyone else can be your conscience, and therefore you are ultimately left with the choice of divorce and the ramifications of divorce. The Word of God must guide you, and you must be willing to submit to it. If you are not free in your conscience to get divorced, then you must not do so. If you are counseling someone to get divorced when their conscience is not biblically free to do so, then you are sinning against that person. You are causing this person to stumble. Let us be, therefore, restorative in perspective, and careful in our counsel. Amen.