

# The Will To Fidelity

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[ 0 : 00 ] As we continue making our way through the collection of Jesus' sayings we call the Sermon on the Mount, we come to a text I would just as soon avoid. The fact is, although I have been preaching nearly 25 years now, this will be the first time that I have ever tried to preach this text in a worship setting.

I have grappled with it many times in private conversation, and I have tried to open up dialogue about it in seminar settings where people are free to raise all the but what if kinds of concerns, but I have never preached it in a worship setting before.

Each time I have led a congregation through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, I have conveniently skipped over this text, and surprisingly, no one has taken me to task for doing so.

But as I said last Sunday, when I was ordained to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament, I promised to preach the whole counsel of God. The text which the church likes and understands, and the text which the church does not like and does not understand.

Our text today is Matthew chapter 5, verses 31 to 32. It is the third of six. The third of six, you have heard it was said, but I say unto you text.

[ 1 : 18 ] A fact which will become important to us by the conclusion of our study this morning. Along with this text from the Sermon on the Mount, we also need to read Matthew 19, verses 3 through 9, where Jesus addresses these issues raised in the Sermon on the Mount, but now raised in a more confrontational setting.

If you are able, will you please stand for the reading of the gospel? Jesus is speaking. And it was said, whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce.

But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. And some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing him, saying, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all? He answered and said, Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?

Consequently, they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no one separate. They said to him, Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?

[ 2 : 40 ] He said to them, Because of your hardness of heart. Moses permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it has not been this way. And I say to you, Whoever divorces his wife except for immorality, and marries another woman, commits adultery.

Spirit of the living God, We believe that you inspired Matthew the tax collector long ago to write down these words, and now I pray in your mercy and grace, you would cause these words to come alive in us as never before, for we pray it in Jesus' name.

Amen. You may be seated. On an emotional level, I want to skip over this text. On an intellectual level, I know I need to preach it.

I believe that it would bring tremendous healing to our society. But on an emotional level, I am very reluctant. That's because this text takes us right into the middle of enormous pain.

John R. W. Stott says it best, There is almost no unhappiness so poignant as the unhappiness of an unhappy marriage. And there is almost no tragedy so great as the degeneration of what God meant for love and fulfillment into a non-relationship of bitterness, discord, and despair.

[ 4 : 08 ] I dare say there isn't a family among us today in this room that has not been touched by the pain of divorce. No one I know who has gone through divorce would wish the experience on anyone.

It's excruciatingly painful, even when thought to be the only right thing to do. Painful for the one being divorced. Faithful for the one divorcing. Painful for the children involved. Children blaming themselves. Children feeling abandoned. Children filled with anger but not knowing where to aim it. And painful for parents involved. I can still remember holding my dad in my arms as he wept over my brother's divorce, crying over and over again, What did I do? How did I fail as a father? How did I fail my son and my daughter-in-law? Is it any wonder that God says through the prophet Malachi, I hate divorce? Not that God hates divorced persons. [ 5 : 10 ] Not at all. It's just that God hates all of what happens to everybody involved. Everyone I know who has gone through the pain of divorce calls it a living death.

So on an emotional level, I want to skip over this part of the Sermon on the Mount. You don't know how close I came to actually doing so. I do not want to open up anyone's wounds. And I certainly do not want to inflict any more pain in those wounds. In preaching a text like this, I have to walk a fine line. A very fine line. The line between grace and truth. A line between faithfulness to God's law on the one hand and faithfulness to God's mercy on the other hand. How do I or you teach God's clear commands without crushing people's spirits? And how do I or you proclaim God's mercy without diluting the call to obedience? [ 6 : 15 ] Truth and grace. Grace and truth. Giving up on neither. Giving no room on either one. Holding them both together. How do I or you offer God's grace in all of its fullness?

Without thereby seeming to undermine his call to truth. Well, here's how I would like to proceed with this text today. I want to ask four questions.

Along the way, I'm going to ask many more questions. But these four questions can be the kind of organizing outline for what I want to share out of these texts.

You might want to write these questions down so that you can stay with me through this. Question one. What were the issues to which Jesus was speaking in this text?

He said what he said because of some particular issue or issues. What were they? Question two. What convictions did Jesus lay out in that context?

[ 7 : 18 ] What did he reveal about his heart's desire for human relationships in that particular context? Question three. What are the issues to which we in this era want Jesus to speak?

Are they the same as those in the first century? If not, how are they different? And question four. What convictions does Jesus lay out in our context?

I will, by necessity, at that point, have to go beyond the Matthew text to the rest of the New Testament where Jesus, by the agency of his Holy Spirit, speaks through his apostles. So question one.

What were the issues to which Jesus was speaking in this text? Question two. What convictions did Jesus lay out in that context? Question three. What are the issues to which we in this era wish Jesus would speak?

And question four. What convictions does Jesus lay out in our context? Question one. What were the issues to which Jesus was speaking in this text?

[ 8 : 24 ] What was going on that called forth this particular teaching? You've heard it was said, whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce.

Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce. Jesus here is working with a paraphrase, not an accurate one at that, a paraphrase of teaching recorded in Deuteronomy 24, verses 1 through 4, where Moses addresses this whole matter of divorce and remarriage.

And Jesus here is working within a controversy that was brewing in the first century about Moses' instruction. What was it that Moses really meant?

So just for a moment, let us go back to Deuteronomy chapter 24. Moses says, listen, verse 1, when a man takes a wife and marries her.

And it happens that 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 from his house and it goes on.

[ 9 : 32 ] Here's the situation. It's a very chaotic situation. At that time, men exercised almost total control over women.

At that time, in a strict legal sense, women were not persons. They were property. A woman's identity was a function of the man to whom she was related at the time, either her father, her brother, or her husband.

At that time, men felt they had the right to divorce their wives at any time for any reason. And at that time, men were exercising this so-called right willy-nilly at the slightest whim, bringing about great social chaos.

Moses then speaks the Deuteronomy 24 text. And he does so for two reasons. First, not to sanction divorce, but to bring about some order in the chaos.

His instructions are similar to the so-called lex talionis, the eye-for-eye, tooth-for-tooth passage.

That law was not spoken to encourage retaliation, but to curb it.

[10:44] If you are going to retaliate, at least be civil, eye-for-eye, not head-for-eye, or body-for-eye. So Moses' instruction on divorce, it was not spoken to encourage it, but to curb it, to call men back from this reckless, impulsive whim.

Moses speaks what he does in order to bring order into the chaos. But secondly, he speaks what he does to protect the dignity of women. At that time, it would be assumed by the community that if a man sent a woman away, it was because she had been unfaithful.

She had committed adultery. And remember, at that time, adultery was punished by stoning to death. So to protect this woman's reputation and her life, the man who sends her away was obligated to give a certificate of divorce.

And on this certificate of divorce, he was obligated to write down the reasons for sending her away.

And in particular, he was obligated to say on this certificate that she had not committed adultery.

She would then be free to marry another without bringing a stigma of adultery onto the next marriage. Now, in Jesus' time, the brewing controversy was about Moses' phrase, some indecency.

[12:04] Moses said, because he has found some indecency in her. What does Moses mean by this, some indecency? There were basically two schools of thought on this.

One conservative, one liberal. Anything new. Rabbi Shammai and his disciples took the conservative position, arguing that a man may not divorce his wife for just any reason, but only for the grave reason of some kind of sexual immorality.

This word that's translated indecency in Deuteronomy 24 literally means nakedness. On the other hand, Rabbi Hillel and his disciples took a more liberal position, arguing that the emphasis is not on the word indecency, but on the word some, and argued then that a man can send his wife away for any some reason at all.

If she burnt the toast, or if she didn't do the laundry well enough, or if she hadn't lit the lamps on time, anything at all. Rabbi Aqaba later argued that this sum included finding another woman more attractive.

A man could dump his wife on a whim to marry a more beautiful person. Now, where do you think the Pharisees came out in the midst of this controversy?

[13:23] You would think that given their hyper-conservatism on everything else that they would identify with Rabbi Shammai and hold that men cannot divorce their wives for just any reason, but they didn't.

The Pharisees lined up with Rabbi Hillel in his more liberal moral laxity. Imagine that. Pharisees, who were rigidly uptight about how to wash hands, rigidly uptight about what constitutes work on the Sabbath, let it all go, when it came to this matter of integrity of marriage, and thereby cause great injustice to women and great social chaos.

You know that story in John 4, where Jesus meets the woman at the well? Remember that story? Towards the end of that conversation, it comes out that she was married to five different men, had five different husbands, and is now with a man with whom she's not married.

Remember that scene? As I was doing more research this week, I discovered that that probably was not an exception. I know as I've approached that text before, I've assumed that she was some kind of immoral person.

I'm probably going to change that the next time I go. She was probably the victim of this whimness of men, dumped at least five times by a man simply because he wanted to. It is the Pharisees to whom Jesus is speaking then in this text.

[14:48] Is it lawful, they ask, for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all? They are being deliberately confrontational here. They are bringing Jesus into this controversy, and they are asking him to take sides in it.

Okay? So that's the context in which Jesus teaches this text. Question two then. What convictions does Jesus lay out in that context?

I find three basic convictions. There are probably more, but these are the three that we can work in this morning. First, he comes to the aid of women. How?

In that time, it was thought that men only committed adultery against men. Men never committed adultery against their wives in their thinking.

If a woman committed adultery, it was against her husband. If a man committed adultery, it was adultery against the husband of the other woman, but not against his wife. Husbands, in other words, were the only victims of adultery.

[15:52] Jesus comes to the aid of women here. In the Sermon on the Mount text, he says that if a man divorces his wife except for the cause of unchastity, he makes her commit adultery.

Jesus is making men for the first time in civilized history face the fact that their choices and their actions adversely affect women. First time in history anyone called men to do this.

Women are not pieces of property to be thrown about at will. They are persons of equal worth and stature as a man. Second conviction he lays out, God's creation will supersedes God's concession will.

In Matthew 19, the text there says that Jesus does not answer the Pharisees' question. Rather, he poses a counter question. Have you not read?

He who created them from the beginning made them male and female and said, for this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. Have you not read, he said.

[16:57] Jesus takes the Pharisees beyond Deuteronomy 24 to Genesis 1 and 2. He takes the Pharisees back beyond Moses' instruction. Jesus is not thereby negating Deuteronomy 24, it's just that he's saying there's something more prior than the discussion of some indecency.

Jesus takes them back to God's creation will, Matthew 19, 6. Consequently, they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together let no one take apart.

Jesus is forcing the Pharisees to grapple again with the mystery of sexual union, with the mystery of what takes place between a man and a woman.

Another way to say this is Jesus is saying there is no such thing as casual sex. Ultimate oxymoron of our time. Casual sex. There is no such thing as that.

There is nothing casual about a man and a woman connecting sexually. One flesh, he says. The two become one at a profoundly deep level.

[18:05] Physical union is not just physical, it is metaphysical. And a new reality is created. One flesh. Jesus' point, why are you debating the question of grounds for divorce?

Why are you not contemplating the mystery of the one flesh union? Dale Bruner, as he does, puts it so powerfully. The logic of Jesus' twice-repeated one flesh equation, where one plus one equals a new one, he calls it the new math of creation, is this.

How do you divide one without making fractions? You Pharisees are debating about burnt toast and about needing more excitement in your life, and you're missing the mystery.

Which leads us to the third conviction Jesus lays out in that first century context. There's really only one ground for divorce. Matthew 5, 32, except for unchastity.

Matthew 19, 9, except for immorality. In both of those texts, it's the same Greek word that is used and it's the word pornea, from which we get pornography. Pornea means some sort of physical sexual misconduct, some sort of illicit sexual intercourse.

[19:26] Divorce is not God's first-line will, but in cases of pornea, in cases of sexual infidelity, it is allowed. Not commanded, but allowed.

Why? Because sexual infidelity strikes at the one flesh mystery. Sexual infidelity breaks the bond by one partner now joining him or herself to another.

The act of sexual intercourse with another shatters the one flesh union. Which means, then, that the exception clause, as it is called in this text, except for the cause of pornea, is really not an exception.

It is a painful acknowledgement that a divorce has already taken place. A couple need not go through now and make this legal. Perhaps by the grace of God, there can be forgiveness, there can be healing, there can be reunion.

Jesus' point, though, is that sexual infidelity is a divorce. It's a rupture of the one flesh union.

Question three, what are the issues to which we, in this era, want Jesus to speak?

[ 20 : 37 ] Does he speak the same word in our context? Now, I need to ask another question, and that is, is it even right to ask that question? And I think it is.

For we know that after Jesus preached his sermon on the mount, the church began to face new situations. And issues began to surface which were not present when Jesus preached his sermon. The church, then, had to seek the mind of Christ about these new situations. I am, of course, thinking about the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In the seventh chapter of that letter, Paul wrestles with one of those new issues.

Namely, what happens when one spouse comes to saving faith in Jesus Christ and the other is turned off by or threatened by that faith and wants to leave the marriage?

What does this do to the one flesh union? If the unbelieving spouse leaves, is the believing spouse then destined to life without a partner? Now, not being married is not the end of life.

[ 21 : 49 ] In fact, not being married can actually free us to be more unencumbered and more intentional in our work for the kingdom. But does the desertion by the unbelieving spouse leave the believer in the place where the remarriage would constitute some kind of adultery?

No, says Paul. And since Paul is an apostle of Jesus Christ, that is, since Paul has been sent by Jesus Christ and authorized to speak for Jesus Christ, Paul's no is Jesus no.

Although, at that time, Paul is humble enough to say, I'm speaking out of my best Christian wisdom. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7, 15, if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave.

The brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. If the unbelieving wants to stay, the believer is to remain in the union. With the good news that somehow the unbeliever is sanctified by the believing one.

The point I'm raising with this is, is that the new circumstance called forth an additional word. So, it is right to ask whether or not our context raises issues which need an additional word from Jesus.

[ 23 : 05 ] What about the other ways that sin affects marriages in our time? What about physical abuse? I'm sure there was abuse in the first century, but I'm also sure it was nothing like it is today.

If there was in that first century culture, the rest of the village would come down very hard on whoever was abusing a spouse or a child. What about emotional abuse?

Which is even worse than physical abuse at times. Does not such abuse strike at the one flesh union? What about gross irresponsibility?

What about one spouse not being willing for a long period of time to care enough to consider carrying any of the responsibility in the relationship? What about addictions to alcohol or drugs or pornography or gambling?

What about the situation where one spouse gambles away the whole week's allowance for food at the cart table? So question four, what convictions does Jesus lay out in this new context?

[ 24 : 15 ] Of course now, this new context must include the context for all of Jesus' teaching, namely the gospel context, the context of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God.

What is Jesus' response in our context? I believe in light of everything else he says and does, he responds on three levels. There is, first of all, the creation level.

He reiterates his original creation will. One flesh, one man, one woman, until death do us part. He calls us to that exclusive permanent union.

I believe he says, do everything you can to make it work. I will empower you. I'll give you what you need to see this through. But secondly, I believe, he responds to us on what I will call the concession to the reality of sin level.

The concession to the reality of sin level. Jesus knows the reality and power of sin. That is, after all, why he came into the world. And he recognizes that there are times when one or both partners chooses the path of sin.

[ 25 : 27 ] Clearly, sexual infidelity is sin. Not just a mistake, it's sin. But so is physical abuse. Are we to just stay there and accept that? I believe, he says, to anyone in such circumstances, get help.

And if the other will not join you, get away. Especially if there are children involved. And I believe that's where the body of Christ really comes into the picture.

That if we're aware of any abusive situations, we need to volunteer to be the safe place. Addiction is sin. I believe, he says, to anyone in such circumstances, get help.

And if the other will not join you, get protection. addiction. The addiction pattern is eating away at the one flesh mystery. For better or for worse.

But when the worse is destroying the people involved, I don't believe he calls us to stand there and take it. If the other is not willing to get help, is he or she not in fact violating the oaths taken at the wedding?

[ 26 : 37 ] I'm not suggesting here to take the step of divorce, but I am suggesting that some severe radical step is in order. And third, I believe he responds on what I will call the compassion for the sinner level.

Or as I should say, compassion for the repentant sinner level. I'm thinking here of those who have chosen a divorce for all the wrong reasons.

Are they forever destined to a life of guilt and shame and loneliness? No. No. Not if there is genuine contrition.

Adultery is sin, but it is no more horrible in the eyes of God than any other sin. Divorce for the wrong reasons is sin, but it is no more horrible in the eyes of God than any other sin.

Would you agree with that? Jesus has come to forgive and restore sinners. In fact, he hasn't come for anyone else. Once you say, Jesus, come, you've already admitted a whole bunch about yourself.

[ 27 : 44 ] He doesn't come for anyone else but real sinners. Are there any sinners outside the reach of Jesus' grace?

is there any sin Calvary does not cover? If we own up to our sin, if we come clean with God and acknowledge that it was sin and then seek his mercy to live a new way, there is forgiveness and there is restoration.

Life will never be the same again, but there will be mercy. Go back to the John 4 passage. This woman who had been victimized in all of that.

Two amazing things happen in that passage. One is that Jesus offers her living water. Presumably, it's the first person ever offered that by him. And the second is Jesus makes that woman his first evangelist.

The first evangelist in Scripture was that woman. out of his compassion for us real sinners will, he then calls us back to his creation will, to the one flesh union in fidelity and joy.

[ 29 : 04 ] I think the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it best, summarizes it best. This was written in the 1500s. Listen carefully. It is the divine intention that persons entering the marriage covenant become inseparably united, thus allowing for no dissolution save that caused by the death of either husband or wife.

However, the weakness of one or both partners may lead to gross and persistent denial of the marriage vows so that marriage dies at the heart and the union becomes intolerable.

Yet only in cases of extreme, unrepentant of, and irremediable unfaithfulness, physical or spiritual, should separation or divorce be considered. Such separation or divorce is accepted as permissible only because of the failure of one or both of the partners and does not lessen in any way the divine intention for indissoluble union.

The remarriage of divorced persons can be sanctioned by the church in keeping with the redemptive gospel of Christ when sufficient penitence for sin and failure is evident and a firm purpose of and endeavor after Christian marriage is manifested.

The confession is walking that line. Grace and truth, truth and grace, giving up on neither. Allow me just a few more minutes if I may to ask the question how.

[ 30 : 32 ] How do we endeavor to stay on this high road of the one flesh mystery? The answer is by taking the context of the text seriously.

I would suggest to you that in the context around the divorce text, Jesus shows us how to move toward relational wholeness. I said earlier that there were six, you have heard it was said but I say unto you sayings.

Six. I submit to you that the other five around this text help us get at relational wholeness. This applies to marriage and it applies to any other relationship.

Jesus says, you have heard it was said that you shall not commit murder but I say to you whoever is angry. There Jesus is saying that unresolved anger eats away at this one flesh mystery and he's calling us to find a way to deal with anger.

You have heard it was said you shall not commit adultery but I say to you whoever looks at a woman to lust for her. Jesus here is saying that undisciplined lust eats away at the mystery of the one flesh union and he's calling us to find ways to deal with that lust.

[ 31 : 50 ] By the way, for men, anger and lust usually come together. Lust usually is a way of wrongly dealing with anger. You have heard that the ancients were told you shall not make false vows but you shall fulfill your vows to the Lord but I say to you make no oath at all.

Let your yes be yes and your no be no. Jesus is saying here that lack of integrity in our speech eats away at the one flesh mystery and he's calling us to find ways to say what we mean and mean what we say.

If we promise to be home at 630, only promise that if we can do it. If we promise to meet one another at another place at 4, only promise it if we can do it. Otherwise it starts to eat away. You've heard that it was said eye for eye, tooth for tooth, but I say to you and then goes on to call us to active non-retaliation. Jesus is saying here that if we begin to play the tit for tat game, it will eat away at relational wholeness.

And he's calling us to find a way to respond to each other other than in kind for kind, hurt for hurt, wound for wound, insult for insult.

[ 33 : 03 ] He's calling us to learn to not be an echo of another person's sin. You've heard it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Jesus is saying here that the only way to finally be free is to choose to respond to the person who has hurt me by willing the best for that person.

Bless the one who hurt you. Bless and do not curse. And I think Jesus is saying that do it for your own soul's sake, for your own soul's sake, so that the cursing does not eat your own soul.

Find a way to entrust the other to the healing mercy of God. Too idealistic? Too great of an expectation? No, because of the context of Jesus saying, the context is the kingdom of God is breaking into the world.

Heaven is invading earth. There are new resources of power. Let's do this. Let me just take us back through those five areas surrounding this difficult text and just have an opportunity to pray for a few moments on each of those texts.

[ 34 : 21 ] What I will do is just call to your attention a matter and then invite you, and you can do this with your hands. I do this. I find it very helpful. You don't have to. Just open up that area.

See how we do it with your hands? You just open that area up and for a moment allow Jesus to touch it. Okay?

Okay? Are you angry with anyone today? Spouse, children, parents, workers, friends.

Are you angry? Will you open up that anger space and let Jesus touch you?

Are you struggling with any kind of lust today? Any kind of inappropriate desire or fantasy? Will you open that space up?

[ 35 : 25 ] Don't hide it. And let Jesus touch you there. Has there been a breakdown in communication?

Is there suspicion about words? Have you misconstrued something? Have you put a spin on something that has misled the other person?

Will you just take that space now? Open it up. And let Jesus touch you. Has someone hurt you in such a way that what you just want to do is you just want to suck them or even worse?

Will you just open that space up? and let Jesus touch you. Can you see that person who hurt you?

Let's not even get into whether it was justifiable or not. Did they just hurt you? That's all that matters. Can you see that person in that space there?

[ 37 : 00 ] Will you now speak a word of blessing to that person?