

Keeping Pure

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[0 : 00] Andrew and I have this little conflict between PC and Mac.

I'm a Mac person, he's a PC person. One up for me. Well, last night we had some dinner with some friends and we got talking about our wedding days and they asked us what our anniversary date was and I very quickly turned to Michelle, my wife, and said, oh, you can answer that one.

I had forgotten at that particular point in time. But I do remember that making promises on my wedding day and the essence of those promises is faithfulness.

And that's what stands behind our passage today. But I'm also acutely aware that these topics of adultery and divorce are painful topics because we all know people who have gone through this and perhaps have experienced it ourselves.

And the hurt created by adultery and divorce is more deeply felt than almost anything else because we have been created for relationships, all sorts of relationships.

[1 : 23] And so when any relationship breaks, especially an intimate one like marriage, then the pain runs deep. And speaking about faithfulness, in this context where I know people have lost their faithful spouse can also be hard.

There are also people who have never been married for whom this topic can be hard as well. So in light of all that, let me pray for us this morning. Let's pray.

Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word, which speaks into our lives in a very real way and addresses issues that we face living in a fallen world.

Father, we pray that you would help us to understand what you are saying. Father, help us to heed what you are saying, that we might live lives that are faithful in our relationships with you and with one another.

Father, we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, before we get to the text, we need to remember the context. So if you look in your Bibles at chapter 5, verse 20, remember Jesus said that our righteousness is to surpass that of the Pharisees.

[2 : 43] See there, chapter 5, verse 20, In other words, we are to obey God's law even more so than the Pharisees, who were regarded as the best law keepers of their day.

And so how could we possibly surpass their righteousness? Well, a couple of weeks ago, I suggested that we surpass them by obeying the heart behind the law rather than just the letter of the law.

As I mentioned, behind every Old Testament law is love. Love for God and love for our neighbour. That's what Jesus said. And it's how we know which Old Testament commands are still applicable today.

If they help us to love God or love our neighbour, then they are applicable. And if not, well, they are not. But it's by loving God and our neighbour that we not only fulfil all the laws, but also surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees.

Because when we love, we will seek to do the maximum application of the law rather than just doing the letter of the law as they did. So we saw last week that the law, do not murder, means not just avoiding physical murder, but doing the maximum application, like avoiding mental murder, you know, with our minds and hearts, and instead seek reconciliation.

[4 : 08] Fulfilling the heart of the law means doing the maximum application, you see, not just the minimum requirement, not just the letter of the law like the Pharisees. And it's in this way that our righteousness surpasses theirs.

That's the context. And the second thing I need to do is to point out the structure. In your Bibles there, at verse 27, our translators have put the heading adultery. And then at verse 31, they've given us another heading called divorce.

But these two topics actually belong together. And you can see this, by the way Jesus introduces each new topic in this part of his sermon. Each time he introduces a new topic, he says, you have heard that it was said.

And so in your Bibles, or maybe on the slide, I'm not sure. Yeah, there we are. Okay, there's the phrase. So you can see it in your Bibles as well.

Verse 21, when he introduced the idea of, or the law of no murder, he says, you have heard that it was said. Same phrase for the law of no adultery. Same phrase in verse 33 for the law of not breaking oaths.

[5 : 11] Again, same phrase, the law of retribution. Verse 38, and verse 48, the law of love, same phrase. Okay, it's the same phrase all the way through. But when you get to verse 31 on divorce, it's different.

In fact, the word also there links it with adultery. So, in other words, Jesus is not starting a new topic at verse 31. It still falls under the discussion about the law of no adultery.

And in case you're not convinced by that, then notice that Jesus starts talking about adultery in verse 27, and he's still talking about it in verse 32, isn't he? So, again, the topic of divorce is joined together under the main discussion about not committing adultery.

Now, why does all this matter? Well, because what Jesus says here on divorce is in a particular context, and it's not all there is to say about the topic. After all, it's only two verses.

And we need to remember this because I want to suggest to you that verse 32 does not say what you think it says. But I'll explain more later. We'll come back to that later.

[6 : 16] But for now, Jesus begins by maximizing the law of you shall not commit adultery. So, point one, verse 27, he reads the Old Testament law, you have heard that it was said, you shall not commit adultery, which, of course, is one of the Ten Commandments, number seven, actually.

And the commandment in the original Hebrew is just two words, no adultery. It's pretty clear, isn't it? Now, technically, adultery is sleeping with someone who's not your wife, but is someone else's wife. So, it's sleeping with the spouse of another person. And so, the Pharisee would say, well, I can sleep with someone else other than my wife or husband, as long as that other person is not married.

Because technically, that's not adultery. Or the Pharisee will say, well, I can be, you know, romantic and flirtatious with someone else who is not my wife, as long as I don't sleep with them, because that's technically not adultery.

You see, the Pharisee looks to obey the letter of the law, the technicalities, the minimum requirement. The classic modern day Pharisee is this man on the next slide. You remember him?

[7 : 23] He said he did not commit adultery, according to the letter of the law. His infamous words were, I did not have sexual relations with that woman, even though he was clearly unfaithful to his wife.

But you see, that's what the Pharisee does. He seeks to do the minimum the law required, the letter of the law, and say, well, technically, I've not broken it. But Jesus gets to the heart behind the law, and he maximizes the application in verse 28.

He says, but I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. You see, Jesus goes straight to the heart, behind the law, and that's faithfulness.

The law is all about being faithful to your spouse or future spouse. It's about being faithful as God is faithful. And so Jesus says, you can commit adultery with your mind as well as your body, because in both cases, you are being unfaithful to your spouse or future spouse.

Unfaithfulness is adultery, you see. Now, I need to point out here that Jesus is not against normal attraction. We were created to be attracted to the opposite gender. That's normal.

[8 : 38] I mean, if we were not attracted to the opposite gender, then people might not get married, and the next generation might not exist. There's a TV show, actually, on at the moment called My Kitchen Rules. I don't know if you've seen it advertised yet.

And on the show, there's this guest judge called Colin. I think here he is there. And we were talking about it. I was talking about it with a lady from church who's married, and she said, yeah, I think he's cute.

Now, is she committing adultery? No. Of course not. It's just, you know, she finds him attractive. That's it. I didn't see it myself. But that was just a comment.

But you see, sin twists everything good, including our natural attractions. And so what Jesus is against in verse 28 is the desire to have what is not yours. In fact, the original Greek that this passage was written in can be translated as the following.

Everyone who looks at a woman in order to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Actually, it's a bit tricky. The Greek actually says, everyone who looks at a woman in order for her to desire has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

[9 : 49] That second way, it refers to a man who causes the woman to desire him. He flirts with her or gives her the intimacy that her husband is not giving and so entices her to desire him.

Either way, the man is lusting after someone who is not his. It's not normal attraction that is adultery. It's this desire to be intimate with someone who is not yours. Because when you desire someone who is not your own spouse to be intimate with them, you are being unfaithful to the one who is your spouse or future spouse.

And that's going against God's very character. So for most men then, it's the second glance, the prolonged look, the flirtatious behaviour, watching TV shows or going online to find some sort of sexual satisfaction rather than being faithful with your wife.

And for guys in particular, we need to make sure we're careful about what we watch on TV and the computer. I need to say that the pornography culture is growing even in churches.

Someone told me the other day that one out of every ten people, even in church, will have viewed pornographic material in the last year. That's a horrific statistic.

[11 : 07] And the only way to get rid of this kind of lust is to starve it. For lust is like an animal inside you and the more you feed it, the stronger it becomes. So don't feed it.

Starve it. Otherwise, it will grow so strong it will devour us and it can eventually lead us away from Jesus. For women, it's going from thinking Chef Colin is cute to going on and on and on about him. Or it's wishing for intimacy with another man who is not your husband or finding intimacy in those fictional romance novels instead of finding it in your husband. Or perhaps it's spending too much time with one person who is not your husband because you're enjoying it more and more.

Whatever form it takes, if it involves desiring someone else, having those intimate feelings for someone else, even a fictional character who is not your spouse, then that's adultery, says Jesus. Because it's being unfaithful to the one who is your spouse or will be your spouse. Well, Jesus not only maximises the law to include lustful thoughts and desires, he also maximises the punishment and suggests that we may need radical surgery.

[12 : 20] So point to verse 29. He says, if your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It's better for you to lose one part of your body than your whole body to be thrown into hell.

And if your right hand causes you to sin or stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. Now, on the next slide, we read the punishment in the Old Testament for adultery, which was death.

But here, Jesus maximises it to include eternal death, doesn't he? Now, the mention of the eye and the hand here suggests that Jesus has sexual sin particularly in mind, but he'll repeat this saying later on in Matthew's Gospel for sin in general.

In other words, sin is very serious. That's what he's saying. And left unchecked, then it can take us away from Christ and straight into hell. I know of a couple who were at Bible college where the wife actually lusted after another man.

It started off with just chatting and flirting and, of course, at that point it was already adultery. But then they committed it physically too. And then she walked out on her husband and her two children and no longer calls herself a Christian as instead headed for hell.

[13 : 37] I've heard of guys who have done the same thing to their wives. Now, theologically, she may never have been a true Christian in the first place because God promises to keep those who are his safe from hell.

But this is part of how he does it. Through warnings like this to take sin seriously. I mean, what would you give for your right hand? I asked people in Bible study this past week how much money someone would have to pay them to give up their right hand and not get it back.

and people said, no amount. Too valuable. And so if that's how valuable your hands are, yet Jesus says you're better off losing them than going to hell, then how bad do you think hell must be?

Now, if you're sitting here thinking that this sermon's not all that applicable to you, well, it is at this point. Because we all need to take sin seriously. And for some of us, we may need to perform radical surgery, not on our limbs, but on the things that cause us to sin in life.

Whether it be that book or that TV show or spending too much time alone with that person who is not your spouse. We're to cut those things from our life. For one man I know, instead of walking past the news agent on his way to work with the magazines out the front with the barely clothed women, you know what I mean?

[14:57] Instead of walking past the news agent on the way to work, he would stop before he got to the news agent, cross the road, pass the news agent on the other side of the road, cross back, and keep going on his way to work.

Now, you might be thinking, oh, that's a bit excessive, isn't it? But you see, that's having a righteousness that exceeds the Pharisees. That's what makes you stand out as different, as a city on a hill.

That's what obeying this law of no adultery to the maximum means. Of course, it might look different for us here, but whatever it is, we are to take sin seriously and perform radical surgery on the things in our life that cause us to be unfaithful.

Not just unfaithful to God, but to our spouse or future spouse as well. But we also need to remember the good news of the gospel, that Jesus experienced hell for us on the cross, didn't he? So that we can find forgiveness, slates wiped clean, fresh start, which is brilliant. So if we have not been faithful, then we are not only to get rid of those things that cause us to sin, but we are also to flee to Jesus for forgiveness.

[16:04] And with God's help, we are to work at being faithful to both God, our spouse, our future spouse, and obey this law of no adultery. And that includes not divorcing in order to remarry, which is point three, verse 31.

Here Jesus recalls a law from the Old Testament. He says, it has been said, or it has, there should be an also there, it has also been said, anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.

Now what Jesus is referring to is a command that was mentioned in our first reading from Deuteronomy 24. So turn back there, keep your hand in Matthew chapter 5, and turn back to Deuteronomy 24, and let me show you again.

It's page 199. It's 199 in the Pew Bibles.

So Deuteronomy 24, top left hand corner of the page there. It says, 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, there it is, the certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house and she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband who divorced her is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled.

[17:38] That would be detestable in the eyes of the law. Now, this is a little confusing, so let me show you on the next slide what's happening here. Verse 1, if we can get the next slide, just following your Bible.

Verse 1, she marries man number one and then gets divorced. In verse 2 and 3, she marries a second man and gets divorced or he dies. Then in verse 4, here comes the command, she cannot marry man number one again, the first husband.

That's what the law's about because in some way or other, her first divorce has defiled her with that particular husband. And so, what I want you to do here is notice three things.

At first, it seems like women get the raw end of the deal here, don't they? And they often did. But you'll notice in a moment that Jesus shows his concern for women by highlighting the fact that adultery makes women the victim.

The second thing I want you to notice is what is being forbidden here is not remarriage per se. Some Christians will say once you divorce that, you never remarry again. That's not what's being forbidden here.

[18:48] After all, she's able to marry the second husband, isn't she? Rather, what is being forbidden is in verse 4, she's not allowed to marry man number one again, the first husband because her first divorce with him has in some way defiled her with that husband.

It didn't defile her with the second one. No, she was afraid to marry him. It was just the first one. In fact, it seems she could have married a third time as long as it wasn't the same husband as the first one.

I'm hoping you're still with me. It's a bit bizarre, but it does have a point. I'll come to it in a moment. The third thing I want you to note is that while not explicitly commanded, this certificate of divorce here seems to be required.

It seems to be part of the process so that the woman could remarry in order to be provided for, especially in those days where that's what she needed to be provided for. In fact, in the Jewish mind, divorce and remarriage went together.

Now, all this means then that divorce actually does end marriage, even in God's sight, and that remarriage can be an option. Now, some Christians will disagree with me, but that seems to be what Deuteronomy is saying.

[20 : 03] They say that, some Christians say that once you're married, then even if you get divorced, you're still married in God's eyes. But Deuteronomy seems to suggest that divorce really does, sadly, end a marriage, even in God's sight.

We see it elsewhere in the Bible. For example, Paul talks about a married person no longer being bound to her marriage if their non-Christian spouse leaves and divorces.

Jesus himself, when he spoke to the woman at the well in John chapter 4, says to the woman, you've had five husbands and the man you are living with is not yet your husband or is not your husband. In other words, Jesus acknowledges five different marriages.

He doesn't think it's a good thing, but it shows us that divorce does sadly end a marriage even in God's sight. Of course, divorce ought not to happen. In fact, God hates divorce.

But sometimes it does happen because of sinfulness. And when it does, it ends a marriage in God's sight and allows for the possibility of marrying again, I think. And so with that in mind, turn with me back to Matthew chapter 5.

[21 : 07] Turn back to chapter 5. So what Jesus is doing here is he's quoting that law about a certificate of divorce from Deuteronomy 24. But what he's doing is he's having a go at the Pharisees who used this command to satisfy their lust.

You see, if they wanted to marry another woman, they would find anything they didn't like about their current wife, write a certificate of divorce, and then move on to the next one. They'd use that law in Deuteronomy 24 to kind of have, you know, serialized polygamy, to legalize their lust.

And Jesus is saying that type of divorce is adultery. You may be obeying the letter of the law in Deuteronomy, but you're missing the heart of the law completely. In fact, Jesus says elsewhere that this law about giving a certificate of divorce was only because of their hardness of heart.

There's stubbornness to be faithful. On the next slide, just let me read something from Mark 10 where Jesus talks about this again. The Pharisees said, Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.

It was because of your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law, Jesus replied. But at the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two shall become one flesh so they are no longer two but one.

[22 : 26] Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate. See, God's desire is clear for couples, isn't it? It's to remain married and this law about giving a certificate of divorce was only to make the best of a bad situation, only because of stubborn hearts.

But here, the Pharisees are using it to legalize their lust, to divorce one wife in order to get someone else. And Jesus is saying that type of divorce is adultery. And so he continues in verse 32, but I tell you that if anyone who divorces his wife except for sexual immorality makes her the victim of adultery and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Notice there, by the way, that Jesus acknowledges the effect of divorce. Instead of saying he who divorces his wife commits adultery, he says he who divorces his wife makes her the victim of adultery.

He wants to acknowledge that it does cause hurt and make people suffer. I should also add that other translations say that it makes her an adulteress, but what we have in front of us is the correct translation, just in case you're following something else.

It makes her the victim because her husband in divorcing her in order to marry someone else is being unfaithful to his first spouse. And the only time she isn't the victim is if she's already

committed adultery herself.

[23 : 48] And in that case, Jesus suggests divorce is possible, though elsewhere we read it's not preferable. A reconciliation is always the preference, though it's not always possible.

And then in the rest of verse 32, we have a different scenario. It's a different woman and this time Jesus says anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Now here's where the rubber hits the road.

Does this mean no divorced man or woman can ever remarry? Because some Christians, a lot of Christians, say yes, that's what it means. And they point to this verse.

And they think that because they suggest even if you are divorced, you're still married to your first husband or wife in God's eyes. So anyone who marries a divorced person is committing adultery because that person is still married in God's sight, they say.

But as I've tried to show you, I don't think the Bible teaches this. Sadly, divorce does end marriage even in God's sight. So I don't think Jesus is saying divorced men or women can never remarry.

[24 : 53] Rather, Jesus is condemning the man who entices the woman to divorce her husband in order to marry him. It's like that translation of verse 28 on the next slide that I showed you.

Remember, everyone who looks at a woman in order for her to desire has already committed adultery with her in his heart. That's what's going on here in verse 32. You see, we need to remember the context.

Jesus is maximising the law of no adultery to include the heart. And so what Jesus is condemning here is the way the Pharisees would use the letter of the law about a certificate of divorce to legalise their lustful hearts and marry others.

They would either divorce their wife so they could marry another person or they would entice another person to divorce their husband so they could marry them. Either way, whether you divorce your wife to marry another or get the other person to divorce their spouse to marry you, either way, Jesus is condemning that sort of divorce as adultery.

And we need to remember also that this is not a full discussion of divorce here. In fact, the Bible gives other reasons for divorce which Jesus doesn't mention here. So does that mean Jesus got it wrong?

[26 : 03] Of course not. It's just not a full discussion of the topic. Rather, what Jesus is doing is trying to maximise that law of no adultery. It's not about the letter of the law he's saying, it's about the heart.

And if you divorce simply so you can remarry another, then that's adultery. And sadly, that is what most divorces are these days. Sick of being faithful, I want someone else divorce.

And Jesus says that's adultery. But there may be occasions when despite your best efforts, your spouse divorces you. And then sometime later you remarry. I don't think Jesus is condemning that. Rather, he's condemning those who forsake faithfulness because they give up on their spouse and simply want another one who is not theirs. That's adultery. But what he's really on about is faithfulness, maximum faithfulness, which brings us to the final point more briefly.

You see, God wants us to be faithful, full stop. No matter what type of relationship we have, we ought to be faithful. And so we ought to do everything we can with our heart, our head, our hands to be faithful to God, to our spouse or future spouse.

[27 : 14] And that means doing all we can to be faithful to our spouses even if they are not faithful to us. Now that can be extraordinarily difficult, but that's being like God. It also means not even thinking of divorce as an option.

If you can. For God hates divorce and as Jesus said, what God has joined together, let no one separate. Divorce should not happen. But sometimes what shouldn't happen does happen.

And if you have been the victim of adultery or divorce here, as I know some in our church have been, then my heart breaks for you. And my prayer is that you will cling to Christ who is always faithful to you and that you might find reconciliation which is better than divorce, but it may be out of your control.

Either way though, we need to pray for you and support you in any way we can. And for the rest of us, we need to cut out the sin in our life that causes us to be unfaithful, whether unfaithful to God or to our spouse.

And if we have been unfaithful, then we need to flee to Jesus for forgiveness and to the person we have sinned. And we need to do everything we can to be faithful for those who are married.

[28 : 32] That includes open and honest communication with our spouse about how we can be a better husband or a better wife, even about topics like sex and intimacy and life. And whether we are married or single, it means not lasting after those who are not ours.

But being faithful to those who are and faithful to God who has been faithful to us. For being faithful to the maximum is how we fulfil this law of no adultery and surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees.

Let me close with a video clip about Bill and Gladys. It doesn't mention the word faithfulness but it demonstrates Bill's faithfulness to the maximum.

I don't count it a burden whatever to have to care for her.

I need to do everything from the moment she gets up to the moment she goes to bed. I do absolutely everything. Clean her teeth, shower, dress, everything. But it's a privilege.

[29 : 47] I count it a great privilege to care for this one that I've loved all of these years and continue to love. This is the year when we'll celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary.

Our stories have been a lovely story. I first saw her when she was 8 years old and her brother became my best friend. We grew up together and as we grew up yeah, she was there and I knew that she used to stare at me when I was playing footy with her brother and another friend and when we used to ride bikes and she kept staring at me but I wasn't interested.

I was 17. She was 16. I saw her dolled up, dressed up and she had an A-line dress on and boom, it was gone. She was the one for me then.

Absolutely. When we first started dating I used to ride my bike from where I lived to where she was and that was about 5km on a Saturday afternoon because it was the only chance we had to get together.

and it was hair wash day for her and she used a special cream in her hair for a shampoo and I can still smell it because that smell was so particular, so nice.

[31 : 05] It was just absolutely special. We had a bike. I used to ride everywhere on my bike and then Glad had a bike as well and we put a baby chair on the front of her bike and so we carried our babies around on the bike with her as well.

We said, yeah, a bike's been part of our lives and I guess that has something to do with us now.

Around about 2004, 2005 I began to notice that there were things going wrong.

She was finally diagnosed with the horrible disease of Alzheimer's. Having lived overseas I knew that with a bike you can do lots of things so I had a bike made, a bike chair made.

We take it to the beach and ride along beside the beach and as we do that we see lots of people, a lot of people come talk to us because it's a unique thing. Nobody else has got a bike chair quite like that.

I am determined to care for her every need, every need. You see, God has loved us so unconditionally and I understand that God has put his love in my heart and because I realize how much God has loved me that's how I too can love my lovely wife.

[32 : 18] She has done so much for me over all of these years. Now she can't but I can't and I can return her love and it's a love that well to me means I can do everything for her.

She's my princess, I'm her William and I wouldn't have it any other way. Would you have it any other way? No, not at all. We love each other. It's beautiful, isn't it?

Love the tiara. Let me pray. Father, we thank you for your word and even difficult parts of your word like what we've seen this morning but we thank you for the reminder it is to be faithful.

To be faithful to the maximum and so surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees. Help us, we pray, to be faithful in Jesus' name. Amen.