

The Question of Divorce

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- [0 : 0 0] This is the AM service on October the 26th 1997. The preacher is Hilary Roth. The sermon is entitled The Question of Divorce and is from Matthew chapter 19 verses 1 to 12.
- I have yet to meet a Christian who when he or she stood before the minister, family and church to say I do, planned on divorce.
- I have yet to meet anyone who enjoyed divorce. For each person involved there is pain.
- There is worry about the children. There is uncertainty. There is sudden loneliness. There is financial hardship.
- And then there is the lingering and agonizing death of hoped for love and belonging. And for most Christians there is a sense of guilt. The awful realization that somehow they have failed.
- [1 : 2 2] Failed, falling dreadfully short of God's ideal of a permanent lifelong relationship. And even the innocent party feels guilt. What did they do wrong? What might they have done differently?
- What happened to destroy the marriage? Divorce is something none of us really wants to confront.
- Especially in church.
- Divorce is something none of us. Divorce is something none of us. Divorce is something none of us. Divorce is something none of us. Divorce is something none of us can escape the impact of those words.
- In our passage today, the Pharisees came to Jesus to ask a question to test him. Is it lawful, they said, for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?
- [2 : 5 5] And as was often the case, their motives were malicious. They were putting him to the test. This question of divorce was a dangerous one for Jesus to handle here.
- For he was still in the territory of Herod Antipas, who had divorced his own wife and married his brother's wife. And John the Baptist had been beheaded for criticizing this.
- Whichever way Jesus answered yes or no, the Pharisees thought, he would be in trouble. The Pharisees thought they had Jesus caught in a trap.
- A trap from which there was going to be no escape. But as always, they found that they were no match for Jesus.
- Jesus took them back to Genesis. Have you not read that the one who made them in the beginning made them male and female?
- [4 : 0 2] For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife. And the two shall become one flesh, so that they are no longer two, but one flesh.
- Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. The Pharisees looked to Moses as their highest authority.

And so they asked, why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her? It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives.

But from the beginning, it was not so. And we see here that divorce was already taking place amongst the Israelites.

And Moses was actually putting limitations on it by requiring a certificate of divorce to be made out. Which probably involved hiring a scribe.

[5 : 16] Moses was not encouraging divorce. He was trying to discourage it. Divorce was not in the original plan of God.

From the beginning, this was not so, says Jesus. The marriage of one man to one woman for life is God's plan.

In Genesis 2.24 we read, A man is to leave his parents.

And that Greek word means to leave behind, to forsake. Many marriages end up on the rocks because husbands or wives do not forsake their mother and father.

There has to be a leaving behind of parents before there can be a joining or a cleaving or a clinging to each other.

[6 : 18] And again that word, cleave or cling or join, is a strong one meaning shall be glued. And this is a very important point.

Because we are told here that marriage is more than a business contract. It is a physical and a spiritual union. As a husband and wife become one flesh, the marriage is consummated.

And because of this, because of this God-given union, the Pharisees' question could only have one answer.

Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. And joined here literally means yoked.

And just as a pair of oxen are yoked together to work and work in close unity, so should a husband and wife team. This is God's plan.

[7 : 27] But all churches have men and women members who have been divorced. And in many cases have been remarried. And yet we read today in Matthew 19 verses 46.

As we read this passage, it seems to nail down a no divorce position. So as we read what seems to be such clear biblical statements, How can any Christian consider divorce?

How can any minister hold that divorce and remarriage is possible for believers? There are two dangers to guard against here.

Two dangers if we are to come to any sort of satisfactory conclusion on this very, very sensitive issue of divorce and remarriage. First, we must guard against being so swayed by sympathy for hurting people that we ignore or we reject scripture.

Brenda has an abusive husband. For some ten years he has belittled, he's sworn at her, he's constantly ridiculing her.

[8 : 55] Her husband has been sexually abusing their six-year-old daughter. And when Brenda finally admitted this truth to herself, she didn't know what to do.

And like most child abusers, the man seemed unlikely to accept responsibility for his actions or even probably to admit them. The little girl in that home is in serious danger.

The damage has already been done. What would happen if that couple stayed together? And it's easy to be moved by compassion for people in such relationships.

And most people today would probably advise Brenda to divorce her husband. Why not leave a relationship which has become so destructive that God's intention for marriage to be a nurturing, up-building relationship is never going to be realized.

But Christians have to think hard here. If divorce isn't God's will ever, then we can't advise it.

[10 : 24] If divorce isn't God's will ever, we have to take the position that God is able to turn evil into good.

And if we hold this position, we cannot be swayed by sympathy, but are bound by the word of God.

But then this brings us to a second danger. Misunderstanding God's will. We must guard against using proof texts or turning biblical principles into inflexible rules.

And we must guard against drawing conclusions from scripture without understanding the whole counsel of God. We must guard against the logic which says, if this is A, then this equals B.

And to take, for instance, the passage in Malachi, chapter 2, verse 16, in which God says, I hate divorce. This passage seems to demand a no-divorce position.

[11 : 46] Logic seems to demand that if God hates divorce, then we must not permit divorce. But is this the right conclusion?

If it is, how then could God allow Moses to provide for divorce in the Old Testament? And if remarriage is never an option, how can those same verses from Deuteronomy speak of the divorced wife becoming the wife of another man?

And if A, I hate divorce, means B, no divorce can be permitted, how could God, through Ezra, actually demand the members of that generation to put away their foreign wives?

God's I hate divorce in Malachi simply does not mean no divorce.

It may be logical, but the logic is faulty. If we are to work faithfully with scripture, we must be willing to do more than pull out a proof text that seem to support our position.

[13 : 05] But we must also avoid arguing from human experience. Because it would be easy to list tragic case after tragic case.

Because as Christians, we do not find our moral guidance in human experience. We find our moral guidance in scripture.

And then we apply scripture to help us evaluate our experience. So any valid discussion on divorce and remarriage must begin with a study of the word of God.

So let's now return to Matthew chapter 19. Matthew chapter 19.

For a marriage relationship. Long before the law, God intended marriage to be a gift.

[14 : 35] Bonding two people together in a unity that would enable them to enrich each other's lives as they met life's trials and life's joys together.

But the Pharisees sensed that Jesus' answer was somehow cutting the ground from beneath their feet. And so they objected.

Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her? It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wife, said Jesus.

So what do Jesus' words mean? They mean simply that God, in his love for us, has taken in the fall of man and woman.

He's taken in the fall. He's taken it into account. He gave his permission in Moses' law for human beings to take a course of action which actually goes against his ideal.

[15 : 51] The law's provision for divorce is proof that the law in which the Pharisees had put their trust is in fact a lowered standard.

A lowered standard that shows God's willingness to accommodate himself to our weakness. The very existence of the law of provision for divorce should make us now think.

If God treated human weakness so lovingly at the time that the law was being written and permitted not only divorce but also remarriage, how can we in this day and age, this day and age of God's love and grace through the Holy Spirit, treat divorce and remarriage legalistically?

If God, sensitive to the fact that human hardness of heart would turn some marriages into destructive distortions of what they were really meant to be, announced through Moses that marriages could be ended, how can we deny divorce to those who are suffering, crying out that their marriages too should end?

If Jesus recognizes hardness of heart as the rationale for permitting divorce in Old Testament times, how can we insist that there is no rationale for divorce today, even when one's spouse persistently sins against their partner?

[17 : 43] But despite this, God's ideal remains. And Christians should wholeheartedly say amen to that ideal.

And everyone should strive in their marriages to reach it. And with God's help, it can be done. Now we move on to verse 6, to the end of verse 6, where Jesus says, Let no one separate.

And to understand this saying, it's important to remember again the context. The Pharisees came to Jesus and raised the issue, which would have been very much debated by the rabbis.

The rabbis dedicated their lives to the study of scripture and its traditional interpretation. So because of this, the rabbis had come to assume the role of judges in their society.

Questions of law were taken to them, and sitting as an ecclesiastical court, they would announce decisions that were considered then binding in Israel.

[19 : 06] And we read in Jesus' words in Matthew 23, verse 2, Jesus saying, The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat.

The Pharisees who raised the divorce issue had probably reached their own conclusion already.

And the question, Is it lawful? was raised by the Pharisees as an issue to be resolved in an ecclesiastical court.

Is it lawful? And it's against this background that Jesus said firmly, What God has joined together, let no one separate.

And what Jesus said to the Pharisees was, You are not confident to serve as judges on the issue of divorce.

[20 : 10] You have no right to say, This marriage can, or this marriage cannot be ended. In that Old Testament passage that provides for divorce, Moses outlines a situation in which a man divorces his wife.

He is, Moses said, to write her a certificate of divorce, to give it to her and to send her from his house. And the fascinating thing here is that the divorce action is taken by the couple, with no reference to outside courts, in spite of the fact that a system of courts did exist in Old Testament times.

The court systems were ignored, and the issue was decided by the couple involved, and by the couple alone.

If they chose to divorce, the husband simply made out a bill of divorce, and he gave it to his wife, and she left, and both were then free to marry others.

Jesus said, Jesus' words, Let no one separate, fixes the responsibility for divorce on husbands and wives alone.

[21 : 44] Jesus said, that God permitted divorce because of hard-heartedness. But this must never, ever be construed to suggest that divorce is not wrong.

Divorce is not to be undertaken lightly. And Jesus goes on and says very bluntly in verse 9, to those who would likely accept divorce, he says, whoever divorces his wife except for unchastity and marries another commits adultery.

God's standards are far higher than those expressed in the law. Laws that regulate behavior.

And God wants us to realize that any falling short of his standard is and must be acknowledged as sin. We are not to justify ourselves or to pretend that something terrible has not happened.

We not assume that divorce and remarriage are trivial things because they are not. And should divorce or remarriage come, we need to accept the reality of our failure.

[23 : 19] But then we should celebrate and rejoice in the wonder of God's forgiveness. Because God's love for us in Christ washes away the guilt and it frees us for a new start.

and Matthew 19 verse 9 does not mean that remarriage is an adulterous trait because there's no hint of this teaching in the Old Testament and there's no hint of this teaching in the New Testament.

Jesus is clear on the ideal and he is clear about sin and yet in no place does God suggest separation for those who have remarried.

The physical consummation of a new union may in reality be an adulterous act. If that is the case it must be acknowledged as a sin and it must be dealt with as a sin and it must be brought before the Lord in confession.

We need God's forgiveness. But at the same time another union is initiated.

[24 : 56] A new and valid marriage relationship has been established and within that relationship the sexual relationships once again take on the holy character of any valid marriage.

Let us sum up. I believe that God firstly God's plan for marriage is a lifelong union in which two people love one another and enrich one another's lives.

two that God accommodates our failure but permitting divorce and remarriage. Three the rationale for divorce is human hardness of heart which so distorts a marriage that its nature and purpose is broken beyond repair.

And four the decision for divorce is not a matter for ecclesiastical courts must be made by the people involved in the marriage themselves.

It is however the responsibility of spiritual leaders to give guidance. Fifthly people who divorce for any reason do have the right to remarry.

[26 : 22] And six people who have divorced and remarried have the right to be fully involved in the life of the local church. I'd like now to finish with a story.

It's a story of a little girl in primary school. She had a project to do for her science class and she decided that she would build a model of the world.

So she took her blue rubber ball and she carefully kept paper in the shape of all the continents and she glued them onto the ball so that they would be round like the world.

When she finished she put her project on the table and she went out to play. Then her little sister came in. Sally began to play with the globe.

She took Africa and she tore it off. She began to chew on China. She took a crayon and coloured all over Europe. Just then her older sister came back in.

[27 : 34] When she saw what had happened she began to scream at the little girl Sally what have you done? You have ruined everything.

The little girl was utterly crushed and she ran away in tears. And when her sister realised what she had done she ran she found the little girl she threw her arms around her and she hugged her close.

And she said Sally you have messed up my world but I still love you. And God says to us you have messed up my world but I still love you.

Amen.