

Discipleship: The Art of Living - Divorce

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

- [0 : 0 0] Well, we're into the third week of our series on discipleship, the art of living, where we're focusing on what it means to know and to follow Jesus and how to help others to follow him.
- The hope is, I guess, that it's a series that's grounded in reality, a series which connects with the everyday issues we face in life. And so today we're going to be looking at divorce.
- Not perhaps the cheeriest of subjects, I grant you, but with what some 42% we're told of marriages in this country ending in divorce. It's something which affects us all, either because we've been through divorce ourselves or because it's affected those we're closest to.
- And yet, despite this reality, divorce has unfortunately been a bit of a taboo subject in church over the years.
- It's not something that we seem to talk about much from the front. In fact, if I'm honest, I can't remember divorce ever being the main topic for a talk or a sermon in all of my years of going to church.
- [1 : 1 7] In contrast, when it comes to newspapers and gossip websites, divorce is one subject that seems guaranteed to pull in the readers.
- So even over the last couple of weeks, we've got the Master Day footballer presenter Guy Gary Lineker and Daniel Bucks. Their divorce has made headline news and been the talk of Twitter.
- So we've had articles like this one from the Daily Mirror, where Gary Lineker is snapped, we're told, for the first time since the divorce, and is described as being stony-faced.
- And yet, later that same day, the same newspaper runs another photo story of him. Only this time they reveal that he appears to be in good spirits as he's spotted outside his home.
- A divorce, it seems, can therefore be seen either as a really taboo subject, or is something to be trivialised to the extent, I don't know, that a celebrity's facial expression is meant to reveal all about their state of mind.
- [2 : 3 4] I guess the hope is this morning that we can get past these taboo or trivialising approaches and see where divorce fits in to us knowing and following Jesus.
- And so to get us going, really, it's always a good place to start. Our Bible reading for today is from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 19, verses 3-9, where Jesus is questioned by some Pharisees about divorce.
- It says this, Some Pharisees came and tried to trap Jesus with this question. Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife for any cause?
- Haven't you read the scriptures? Jesus replied. They record that from the beginning God made them male and female. And said, This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.

Since they are no longer two but one, let no one split apart what God has joined together. Then they asked, Why did Moses say in the law that a man could give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?

[3 : 50] Jesus replied, Moses permitted divorce only as a concession to your hard hearts. But it was not what God had originally intended. And I tell you this, Whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery, unless his wife has been unfaithful.

So, Jesus is quizzed by some Pharisees, the hardcore religious types of the day, quizzed by them about divorce and when it should be allowed.

But rather than answer their question directly, Jesus initially quotes some words from the book of Genesis about the importance of marriage.

Since marriage, says Jesus, is about two people becoming one, that unity is a done deal which no one should mess with.

Now, not content with that response, the Pharisees quote another passage back to him, this time from the book of Deuteronomy.

[5 : 03] Hang on a minute, they say, if two become one and they should never be separated, why does Moses talk about the need to issue a certificate if you do get divorced?

So again, Jesus comes back to them, replying that just because Moses explained the way to get divorced, legally, that didn't mean that he was in favour of it happening.

But then, Jesus does get round to answering their initial question about when divorce is allowed. He says, In other words, says Jesus, the only acceptable grounds for divorce is adultery.

Now, over the centuries, these words of Jesus have become for many people the final word on divorce. Because Jesus seems to say that unless it's triggered by the husband or wife having an affair, then divorce is always wrong.

And yet, for most people, if this is what Jesus meant, it doesn't seem to stack up with the realities of life.

[6 : 31] I mean, what about victims of domestic violence? Is Jesus saying that being physically attacked is not grounds to divorce someone?

What about abandonment when a husband or wife just walks out? Is Jesus saying the abandoned partner can't get a divorce? What about neglect when a husband or wife is treated so badly that their mental, physical or emotional state is severely damaged?

Is that not legitimate grounds for divorce? Now, most of us, I imagine, would say, no, of course divorce is not just allowable in those circumstances.

It's probably necessary for a person's own safety or well-being. And yet, if that's the case, why doesn't Jesus say that abuse, abandonment or neglect are all legitimate grounds for divorce?

Well, in our attempts to answer that question, I guess we might find ourselves saying something like, well, I'm sure Jesus did say those things. It's just that they weren't written down in Matthew's Gospel.

[7 : 53] Or perhaps we might make an excuse for his apparent silence by speculating that Jesus simply can't have been aware of abuse or abandonment or neglect.

Or else if he had been, he'd surely have said they were also valid reasons for divorce. And yet, I think actually, actually, we're probably on dodgy ground if we start putting words in Jesus's mouth or explaining his apparent silence on an issue by suggesting he was just being naive or ignorant or a product of his time.

I mean, if we do go down that route, who's to say that his teachings about loving our neighbour or giving to the needy or practising hospitality are not also naive or ignorant or only right for his time?

So if we can't explain it away, what are we to do with Jesus's statement that divorce is only allowed in cases of adultery?

Well, one option, I guess, is just to ignore it. As clearly it seems that Jesus is teaching on divorce, he's just not relevant for us these days.

[9 : 14] And if we're honest, I guess that's what many people, perhaps ourselves, have done over the years. You know, you just get a sharpie pen and cross out the bits that we don't really agree with.

But if we're serious about knowing and following Jesus, I think we probably need to have a different response to some of the trickier things he seems to say than us simply ignoring them.

Instead, the better option, I think, is for us to take a deeper look at what Jesus says and see if there's anything we might have missed or misunderstood.

And indeed, when we do look at this passage again, I think there is something significant in it which totally changes our understanding of what Jesus is saying.

So take the opening verse of this little passage again. Some Pharisees came and tried to trap Jesus with this question.

[10 : 19] Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife for any cause? Now, it's worth noting that the question the Pharisees ask, it says here it's designed to be a trap.

It's designed to catch Jesus out in some way. What might the trap be? Well, a clue, I think, is in this phrase, any cause.

Because if we know a little bit about the life of Jewish people in the first century, this phrase, any cause, would actually have been understood in a very specific way.

We know, for example, from other historical accounts written in the decades before Jesus arrived on the scene, that there'd been this ongoing, long-running debate about divorce between all sorts of Jewish rabbis and religious experts.

Now, the bunch of experts whose opinion won most support were those who followed the teachings of a rabbi who lived just before Jesus called Hillel.

[11 : 30] Now, Hillel had his own disciples, he had his own followers, and those who followed his teachings were known as Hillelites. And after years, I'm talking decades of debating between themselves, actually, they'd settled on a new form of divorce called any cause divorce.

And this any cause divorce was based on a particular interpretation of a verse from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy.

Incidentally, the same verse which the Pharisees later referred to in their conversation with Jesus. In this verse from Deuteronomy chapter 24, verse 1, in it we read that Moses allowed divorce for a cause of immorality.

Now, for centuries, most people, most readers recognised that Moses was talking about immorality, in other words, adultery, as being an allowable cause for divorce.

But then the Hillelite experts and rabbis came along, and they wondered why Moses had chosen to phrase it in this particular way.

[12 : 47] Why talk about a cause of immorality, instead of just simply saying immorality? And so after umpteen debates on the precise meaning, the Hillelite experts, they concluded that surely what Moses really meant was that divorce was allowable, not just for immorality, but for a whole range of other causes as well.

Indeed, these Hillelite rabbis, these Hillelite experts, they proceeded to argue, wait for it, that anything from a wife burning her husband's toast to her developing wrinkles on her face after she's married, anything could be a legitimate cause for her husband to demand a divorce.

Deuteronomy 24, verse 1, they said, taught that divorce was allowed not just for adultery, but for any cause. And so when the Pharisees asked Jesus, should a man be allowed to divorce his wife for any cause, they were actually asking Jesus, are you a Hillelite?

Do you think it's lawful for us to use this any cause reason to get a divorce? Indeed, if that's the question actually that they're asking, then all of a sudden Jesus' response makes much more sense.

The first thing he says, he goes, haven't you read the scriptures? I mean, for him, marriage is far more important than something which can be ended over burnt toast or wrinkles.

[14 : 40] You know, you're mistaken, says Jesus, if you think Moses had this any cause divorce in mind, because Moses was simply saying that divorce is allowed when there's been unfaithfulness.

In fact, says Jesus, if you get divorced thinking this any cause interpretation gives you permission to do so, and then you marry someone else, you'll actually be committing adultery in God's eyes, because God would say, actually, no, you're still married to your first wife.

Her burning the toast or whatever is not any cause to divorce her at all. Perhaps, therefore, the best way to understand Jesus' response is to hear it like this.

Whoever divorces his wife for any cause and marries someone else commits adultery unless his wife has been unfaithful.

So Jesus, it seems, I think, rejects the idea that divorce is allowable for any cause, but at the same time, he does affirm, Moses' view, that divorce is allowable for unfaithfulness.

[16 : 02] I guess we might then ask, are there any other grounds which the Bible talks about that are legitimate reasons for seeking a divorce?

And yes, I think there are. If we turn to Exodus chapter 21, verses 10 and 11, here, I think we'll actually see that divorce is allowed for other reasons other than adultery.

It says this, Exodus 21. If a man marries a woman, he must not deprive her of her food, clothing and marital rights. If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free without any payment of money.

What's interesting in this example is that there seems to be three things, food, clothing and marital rights.

In other words, sexual relations, which if either person deprives their partner of, well, they can be legitimate reasons for choosing to walk away from a marriage.

[17 : 17] How might we summarise these three things? Well, I guess the provision of food is in many ways a promise to keep someone. The provision of clothing is a promise to honour someone, to not let them be shamed in public by being naked.

And the provision of sex is a promise, ultimately, to love someone. Now, if any of these are deprived, if there is deliberate neglect of the promise to keep honour and love, then, says Exodus, the one who is deprived is free to leave.

Now, whilst it's important that we don't put words into Jesus's mouth, it's worth asking, would Jesus, do we think, have affirmed these principles alongside unfaithfulness as being legitimate grounds for divorce as well?

Well, I think for me, in light of the way Jesus stuck to a straight interpretation of Deuteronomy, I believe he would. And what's interesting is that these principles to keep honour and love, along with being faithful, actually, they're still at the heart of the marriage ceremony that we use to this day.

I mean, when people get married, the vicar will ask them, Phil, will you take Jane to be your wife? Will you love her, comfort her, honour and protect her?

[18 : 56] And forsaking all others, be faithful to her as long as you both shall live. If one partner chooses, though, to neglect these promises to love, comfort, honour, protect and be faithful and so on, if one partner consistently deprives the other of these things, or if one partner chooses to abuse the other, then that can be legitimate, biblical grounds for divorce.

Indeed, the vows people make when they marry, I think, correspond directly to the biblical grounds for divorce. Now, there's one other specific biblical grounds for divorce, which comes a lot later in the Bible, which the Apostle Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians chapter 7.

He says this, if any believer has a wife who is not a believer, and she's willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who's not a believer, and he's willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.

But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The believer is not bound in such circumstances. God has called us to live in peace.

So here, Paul, I think, seems to be saying that if a Christian is married to a non-Christian, and they're happy to stay together, great, carry on. But if the non-Christian wants to leave, then that's allowable, and a divorce can be granted.

[20 : 38] I guess it's on grounds of abandonment. Now, if we were to put all of the things we've been looking at together, I think, actually, we're able to conclude that the Bible allows for divorce in cases of unfaithfulness, abuse, neglect, or abandonment.

And it follows, therefore, that if the divorce is allowable for any of these four reasons, then the chance to remarry in the future is equally allowable.

If you recall, at the top, I wanted us to go beyond the idea that divorce is either a taboo or a trivial thing. As I hope we've seen, divorce is not a taboo that can't be talked about.

I mean, Jesus talks about it, therefore, so can we. And indeed, the Bible outlines four good reasons why divorce may well be the best way forward for someone.

And yet, divorce is also anything but trivial. Because as we've seen, Jesus came down firmly against the idea that any cause could be a legitimate grounds for divorce.

[21 : 55] Indeed, I think we'd do well not to dilute Jesus' passion in wanting to uphold the value and integrity of marriage.

You know, two do indeed become one. And it's therefore vital that a decision to end any relationship is only taken as a very last resort when every avenue for working difficulties out has been exhausted.

You know, I think one of the very best prayers anyone can pray is to ask God to help them to grow in their love for the person next to them.

if your relationship therefore, if who you're with is in trouble, not through unfaithfulness or abuse, not neglect or abandonment, but because in some way or other the love you once felt is no longer what it was.

then my encouragement is to be honest with God about that and perhaps start where you're at by asking God to help that love to grow once again.

[23 : 12] And yeah, I guess that leads us onto one final question which I think needs asking. Just because people may have a legitimate biblical reason to file for divorce.

Should they always do so? And for me this is the question concerning divorce which is at the heart of what it means to know and follow Jesus.

And I say that because if the way of Jesus is about anything it's a way which is infused with the possibility of forgiveness and with the hope of redemption.

Now, on the one hand it may well be that getting divorced is completely the right thing for someone to do. There are situations where it is inconceivable that a wife should stay with her husband or a husband should stay with his wife.

Now, there are marriages where the promises to keep, honour, love and be faithful have been so abused that there is simply and sadly no way back.

[24 : 26] And I guess this morning if you or those you're close to have suffered or are still suffering in that kind of situation then as a church we want to be here for you and with your permission we want to be asking for God's healing for you from the hurts the memories the pain that comes from such a breakdown.

And the cross of Jesus tells us that he is able to profoundly identify with our pain. pain. So if you're hurting allow Jesus to hold that pain with you and in time to help you find a way through it.

Likewise if you or those known to you have been the cause of someone else's suffering in a relationship then again we want to be here for you as a church because God will always be there for you when you turn to him.

The ability to confess and repent and turn around and leave behind is a gift from God which can bring immense healing and freedom in all sorts of ways.

So yeah on the one hand divorce may well be the right course to follow and the prayer is that God is in the midst of that reality for all those who may be affected.

[26 : 00] But on the other hand divorce need not be the inevitable outcome even if the promises to keep honour love and be faithful have been broken.

You know I know personally of numerous couples and families and I know there are people here today who have come through times of betrayal and brokenness and who are stronger in their relationships now than they were before those times occurred.

An affair doesn't have to break a marriage. Abandonment doesn't have to mean that there's never a way back.

I'm not for a moment suggesting that a process of forgiveness and reconciliation is easy. In fact I think it's up there with the very toughest of calls which God may place on our lives.

But again the life of Jesus shows us that he knows all about the process of repairing brokenness and he knows how to restore a relationship where there's been rejection and betrayal.

[27 : 21] So again if that's you or if those known to you are struggling to hold on in a relationship or if there's a crushing sense of inevitability about where you think things are going.

I wonder perhaps this morning if God is asking you to place all of those hopes all of those fears firmly in his hands and ask him in faith to do with them what only he can.

I guess ultimately in all this talk of divorce you know when it's allowable when it's not when it's inevitable and when it's avoidable. The hope is that God's redeeming restoring love would move in power so that ultimately so that his will is done.

You know marriage is a precious gift from God a gift which as it says in the marriage service today a gift which all should honour. And so we pray for our marriages or of those of people closest to us that they may be nurtured and protected and fulfilled.

And yet when that gift of marriage is dishonoured then in his mercy and grace God does give people the possibility of a way out through divorce and a way forward through his healing.

[28 : 58] And so we also pray for those who are going through or who have been through divorce that they too may be nurtured and protected and fulfilled.

Indeed may each of us whether we're single or in a relationship whether we're married, divorced or widowed may we all know God's nurturing, protecting, fulfilling love as we seek to know and follow him more closely day by day.

Amen.