

You Have Heard It Said Whoever Divorces His Wife

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[0 : 00] Thank you very much for being here. It's a great encouragement to come and find you all here. And what we're looking at today is Matthew chapter 5, and we're continuing in that series of actually excerpts from the Sermon on the Mount, which are taken from the fifth chapter of Matthew. In the Blue Bibles, this is on page 4 of the New Testament section.

I think we've got a cough drop. And I don't know what it is in the red. Joe, have you got it in the red? 785. 784. Going, going, going. It reads as follows.

Oh, you got one. Thank you very much, David. I meant to pick one up this morning, and I didn't. All right. We're looking at Matthew chapter 5, verse 31. Now, it's hard to tell if you look at this passage whether it's just a continuation of verse 27, because the full formula isn't here. You see, when it begins in verse 27, it says, you have heard that it was said, you shall not commit adultery, but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her.

And then, in this section, it says, it was also said. So, it's not the full formula. You have heard that it was said, but I say unto you. Well, I think I'm going to treat it as a separate section, even though it's very closely related to the subject that we dealt with last week.

[2 : 18] And do remember this about the, about the, what, what Christ is doing here. If you have a situation like that, and the law is straight like this, Christ says, I have come not to, to end the law, but to see that it is fulfilled. And he says that the person who tries to bend the law is in trouble.

And I think that primarily that's often the function of a minister in a congregation. There's a lot of pressure on to bend the law, to make it work. And I think a lot of people get themselves in the position of doing that. The thing that I think is wrong with doing that, even though I get caught on it all myself all the time, is fundamentally this, that the person we're dealing with is the person of Jesus Christ. And you don't have to obey me or what I say, nor can you take any final assurance from what I say. You have to come under the word of God, under the authority of Jesus Christ. That belongs to each one of you. You know, the function of the church is not to take the law of God and accommodate it to people, but to take the law and the gospel and to say to people, this is the way it is. You have to come to terms with it in your situation, whatever that may mean, so that our job is not to bend it. And Jesus makes that very clear when he says in the introduction to this passage, he says, whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

And yet those people who are ministers of the faith of the Christian religion seem to be required to spend most of their time relaxing one of the least of these laws, accommodating it to people who find it too hard to deal with. But Jesus does not relax this law. He makes it very hard indeed. And I want to trace that as we go through what we're talking about today. Now, let me pray and then I will just go at the text. Our God and Father, there is not sufficient human wisdom to understand these things apart from the fact that you have chosen to speak to us about them through the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And that our Lord Jesus Christ is the one who commands, but he's also the one who enables. And so we ask that as we hear what are hard words today for our society, that we may be able to hear them as from Jesus Christ. And to know that he has come, that we might have, he hasn't come to condemn us, but we through faith in him might find life. And so as we come to this particular hard saying, we ask that you will guide and direct us in our understanding. And we bring to our hearing of this all the many members of our own families, even our own families, where the clear command of Christ, we have not been able to obey.

And those whom we love and for whom we deeply care, they have not been able to obey. And so we ask that you will give us both the understanding of the law, but also the love of our hearts, that

we might hold our loved ones before you in the areas of failure and disappointment for them. Grant us understanding of these hard things. We ask in Jesus name. Amen.

[6 : 54] Okay, now, you will remember that we once had Good King Henry the VIII. And Good King Henry the VIII was the younger brother of Arthur. Arthur was engaged to Catherine of Aragon, which was considered a suitable and diplomatic marriage, except that Arthur died. And so Henry, who succeeded Arthur to the throne, not only inherited the kingdom, he also inherited his brother Arthur's fiancée, Catherine of Aragon.

And so he was married to Catherine of Aragon, and she was unable to bear him a son, and she died. But she was very well connected, because she was, she had a nephew. The nephew was Charles the something of, where was he from? France or Spain?

Aragon. Aragon. Aragon. And, and he, he has the, was, was the Holy Roman Emperor. And the Holy Roman Emperor at that time had some authority over the Holy Roman Pope. So when, on what would have normally been considered entirely legitimate grounds, Henry the VIII said, if I'm going to have a male heir, then I've got to have a wife who can bear me one. And so he went to the Pope. And the Pope, of course, was addressed by Charles, the Holy Roman Emperor. And the possibility of an annulment of that marriage got lost in the bureaucratic shuffle, so that nobody would come out and say, whether it could happen or not.

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Whether it could happen or not. And one of the things that happened then was that the Reformation was gaining full steam. And there was a brilliant, I think, Cambridge professor by the name of Thomas Cranmer, who said, an issue like this should not be decided by a foreign potentate under foreign domination.

[9 : 30] But should be decided by the teachers of Oxford and Cambridge, the professors. So they should hear the thing and decide whether the wedding marriage should be annulled or not. Well, as you know, they heard it and they annulled it.

And that was why when I was a missionary at Kingston Penitentiary in Kingston, Ontario, and went into the Roman Catholic Chapel, and they had a chart of where all the churches started from, they pointed out very clearly that the origin of the Anglican Church was the divorce of King Henry VIII. And of course, that's why the Anglican Church is supposed to champion divorces ever since then. But that was something which happened. It was the process which the Roman Catholic Church still uses is that they don't allow divorce, but they do allow annulments.

And what they do, as in one case happened to me, because I was involved in the marriage of a young man who subsequently became a Roman Catholic, and subsequently moved to Australia or someplace, and many years later wrote to me and said that he wanted to get divorced.

Only he couldn't be, because he wanted to continue in the Roman Catholic Church. And so would I ask questions. And so some legal official from the Roman Catholic Church down here came up and brought a tape recorder and asked me a number of questions.

[11 : 21] And what they were seeking to determine was that a marriage had never taken place. You know, there was a wife and three small children. So that establishing that a marriage had never taken place was fairly difficult.

But that's what they were out to do, and I think subsequently did. They annulled the marriage, saying that, and the grounds on which they do it, and I must say that this intrigues me, the grounds on which they do it is that the understanding of the parties to the marriage was such that it could not be said of them, those whom God hath joined together.

So if God has not joined them together, then it's possible to take them apart. Now, the reason I'm interested in that is because basically that's what happens to lots of marriages.

People decide God has not put us together, and therefore we want out. And that takes place. Well, if you were, as I am, a pastor in the Anglican Church, and if in a parish like this there's a great many divorced people, what happens here is that a divorce takes place, a subsequent relationship develops, and they come and wish to be married in a church.

Now, the difficulty you have marrying them in a church is presumably they've been married in a church before. And when they came to be married in a church before, they took the vow that I promised to love and to cherish and to be faithful till death.

[13:20] Well, death has not happened. And so the vow on which the marriage covenant is based has been essentially broken.

And yet they want to come back to church and make another parallel vow to the one that's already broken. Back in the 1960s, the general synod of the Anglican Church under enormous pressure was decided that what they would do would be to set up tribunals in every diocese.

So that if somebody comes to be married in an Anglican Church, then they have to fill out a long questionnaire. The long questionnaire inquires into the reasons for the breakdown of the marriage. The attempts that were made for reconciliation of the marriage. Those are to be recorded. That there are to be recorded. So, whether any provision has been made for the children of the marriage. And whether there is any reason to believe that the people entering into a second marriage have any better understanding of the vows they're making the second time than they had when they made them the first time.

[14:51] And all those things have to be discussed thoroughly and gone over and written down. And the submission made to the matrimonial commission, and the matrimonial commission decides whether or not they will give permission for a marriage to take place.

The Anglican church in England will still not marry divorced persons in the parish church. They can't do it. They have to go somewhere else and get married.

And provision is made in one of the new Anglican prayer books for the blessing on a state marriage. That is, you can go downtown and get married, but you don't get married in church, because you can only do that once.

Well, you can see what a problem it was. It's exactly, you might note, and I think this is intriguing, it's exactly the same problem that existed in that part of Israel where Christ was teaching when these people approached him and said, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?

Now that seems an innocent theoretical question. But you may remember that before Jesus' ministry ever began, there was another gentleman, probably more famous in those days than Jesus ever was, as a preacher and teacher, and his name was John the Baptist.

[16:33] And in the course of his duties, he had seen fit to say that there are no grounds for divorce, and that the divorce which had been contracted by Herodias from her first husband in order to marry her second husband was unlawful.

And that John the Baptist, for that, was thrown into a dungeon and subsequently beheaded. So you've got to remember that that was the background of the question that was being asked to Jesus.

Would he follow down the same route as John the Baptist followed and teach the same thing? Well, obviously, he did.

And in the passage that we have here, it says simply, whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.

Now, that's what the law had said, and it says it in Deuteronomy 24, verses 1 following. And in Deuteronomy 24, it says that a man can give his wife a certificate of divorce, but the passage is really not about divorce.

[18:01] It's about whether a wife, once she has been divorced by a husband, marries another and he divorces her, the first husband can't go back and marry her a second time.

In other words, the whole purpose of that passage in Deuteronomy is to give some protection to the woman from her first husband, that he does not have any claim on her.

And this passage is similarly, I think, designed because of men taking advantage of women and saying it's not sufficient that you simply go down to the courthouse Monday morning after a rather difficult weekend and have a certificate of divorce drawn up and take it home and give it to your wife and say, out.

That's not satisfactory. In fact, Jesus says, it is so unsatisfactory that I will tell you what the basis of marriage really is.

I say to you, everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

[19 : 25] Well, you know, most of you know, that for a long time that became the basis of legislation in our country. That if one partner to a marriage could be proven to have been in an adulterous relationship, then a divorce would be granted.

And you got talking about the innocent party and the, what is it they used to call the person who was, who was compromised?

What was it? What was it? I remember. The correspondent. And that that was, that was how it worked for a long time.

Well then, as the number of divorces increased and increased and the complexity of the reasons for divorces got greater and greater, we soon got to the place of no fault divorces.

In a sense, it's just a time lapse has to take place and then a divorce is granted and no questions are asked. So that the grounds, which are known in the New Testament as the Matthean exception, because in Luke and Mark, this exception does not occur, particularly in Mark chapter 10.

[20 : 50] Only in Luke does it say, except on the, only in Matthew does it say, except on the grounds of unchastity. And they don't know from the wording exactly what that means.

It was popularly thought to be adultery. The problem with that is that when the law was given back in Deuteronomy, adultery was dealt with by summary execution.

In other words, you were put to death for adultery. So they thought that there was some kind of other sexual aberration. And then the Pharisees and the Jewish commentaries got to the point where one badly burnt roast beef was enough.

And that was the end of the marriage, you know. Or then it became sort of trifling issues that were covered on this grounds because of the, well, the Matthean exception is here.

So you have that, you have that pattern then of Christ saying, look, the basic reality is marriage is for life.

[22 : 15] It's a monogamous, one man, one woman, one life relationship. That's what it is. And that's the principle that was established.

Well, in a sense, it's a principle which is put down like this to be, you know, this is the principle and there are no exceptions.

And then you erode this corner off and you erode this corner off and it erodes and erodes and erodes and gradually the principle breaks down till it's just a little blip down here.

The whole thing is squashed simply because people can't accept it and our society can't accept it. Now, what our, what our society has done and this is what I think makes it even more complicated, what our society has done is programmed us for divorce.

In other words, divorce is the normative pattern in our society. And you can argue statistically it may not quite be true, but I, I think that you could say quite easily that divorce is a normative pattern.

[23 : 33] In TV, soap operas, in movies, all the time, divorces come and go and it's just accepted. That's what happens. And the grounds for divorce have been broadened enormously.

so that our society and the young people that come to me and sometimes not so young who want to get married a second time, most of them I recognize as being people who have been programmed for divorce.

I mean, it's a, it's a kind of contagious thing that spreads throughout our society. This is what happens. This is what our culture teaches. This is what our schools teach.

This is what the media teaches. This is the way our culture is organized around the acceptability of divorce. Now, you know, a generation ago and two generations ago, it was much less acceptable.

And many of you, I'm sure, could say that for your marriage, it never was an option. Nobody ever even considered the possibility. But there is no marriage in which that possibility is not considered regularly.

[24 : 43] Once a month anyway. And the idea that there is no option is an idea which has been almost entirely lost in our society.

And so people, people do it. A brilliant young doctor came to me just after having left his wife and I talked to him about the possibilities of reconciliation.

And he, with the kind of professional candor that doctors have in telling you the way it is, said, some of my friends at this point have decided to go back to their wives.

And some of my friends at this point have decided not to. And both of them say they were right to do what they did. Now, you see, I don't know if you see what's happening when you hear that statement.

But fundamentally what's happening is it's up to you. you are not held accountable by anybody as to what you do. You are certainly not accountable to God.

[25 : 54] It's up to you what you do. And you can make it work whichever way you want the ball to bounce. Now, you see, that's where you see the enormous significance of what Christ is doing when he says there will be no divorce.

That it's a lifetime relationship. relationship. And that's why the principle that is established is not meant to erode away.

Marriage is not based on, and I think this is, I'll sort of conclude with this, but there's a lot more material that I haven't even got close to yet, but let me conclude with this.

Marriage is not based on getting two young people at a very idealistic stage in their lives to say that they will be loyal to each other for life.

Because idealisms like that are simply not practical, and they break down. And part of our responsibility as a community is not to encourage people to live according to a certain ideal.

[27 : 12] Because ideal marriages don't exist. I mean, there is no such thing. The whole function of marriage is to break down the idealism and to be confronted with the practical reality of a human relationship between two very selfish, sinful people.

I mean, that's the way it works. That's the battle you've got to fight. Maintaining idealism is of no value whatever. You've got to get down to the reality of two sinners known to each other to be sinners, and what are you going to do at that point?

And Christ says, that's the point at which it all begins. That's the point at which forgiveness and love must become some kind of reality.

Now, when Jesus is asked, well, why did Moses allow divorce to take place? And Jesus says, the reason he allowed it was because of the hardness of your hearts.

You couldn't hear this message. And I think that it's probably true for many people in our society, that this message is simply too hard. They cannot hear it.

[28 : 43] And that, I think, is, you know, and the problem, I see it this way, and I don't know whether this has any help to you, but, you see, if this is a timeline which comes along here, you know, and that the crisis comes at this point here, and somebody has arrived at this crisis point and then you try and tell them thou shalt, you know, that you're not to enter into a divorce, that's no good.

because what emerges as the crisis at this point started back here somewhere and has been brewing and brewing and brewing and brewing.

And, of course, the teaching of the gospel of who Jesus is and coming into some kind of relationship to him, it's got to start back here too.

you know, so that when you come to the crisis, people can acknowledge the love of God which is revealed in Jesus Christ, the grounds for forgiveness which are revealed in Jesus Christ, and the reality of Christ's authority as Lord in order to deal with this crisis.

The roots of the crisis go way back here, so also the teaching of the gospel has got to go back there. And it's very difficult to meet people in crisis and to tell them, will you allow Jesus to be Lord in your life?

[30 : 23] Well, sometimes by God's grace that happens. And so, you know, that, I mean, I hope I'm not betraying myself, but very often, I mean, sometimes, I don't want to qualify that, but it does happen that people sometimes enter into a second marriage on a far better footing than they ever entered into the first one, because they have understood the reality of who Jesus Christ is, what his authority in their life is, what the basis of forgiveness is, and where love comes from.

They begin to understand those things. But indeed, if they don't begin to understand those things, then the probability for the second marriage working are probably worse than they were for the first. But that seems to me to be the important thing. Now, what I think is, you know, where I think the tension comes here is between these two things.

And this is the tension point right here. And the tension is, to what extent do you explain the teaching of Jesus Christ as being, thou shalt not commit adultery, because adultery is what results from unwarranted or unsanctioned divorce.

You shall not commit adultery over here, and the fact of God's forgiveness over here. How do you make both those things true to somebody?

[32 : 13] How can that happen? Well, I think it can only happen as, I think it can only happen as Jesus is made Lord in our lives, and we can learn to live in obedience to him.

You know, we've been careful to take love, honor, and obey out of the marriage service, but obedience to Jesus Christ is still an essential dimension of marriage.

And I think that, you know, we can't impose this on our culture because our culture is programmed towards divorce.

One last thing I want to tell you, but I'm keeping you up late, or keeping you over time. But let me tell you this. You see, I think that divorce is like death.

Now, one of the things that the New Testament teaches about death is, it's the worst enemy, but worst enemy though it may be, it ultimately will be overcome.

[33 : 41] The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. It's an enemy to be destroyed. Death is not a permanent reality.

And that's what the New Testament teaches by Christ coming and dying and rising again. He said death is not a permanent reality.

Life is. And life is stronger than death. And I think this is another enemy here. And it doesn't, it's not permanent.

That God intends to overcome this problem amongst us. And that's why it's very important. That even though, you know, saying no divorce in our society, in our culture, is very much like going as a missionary to darkest Africa and saying, no more polygamy here.

It takes them a long time to, I mean, that's built right into their culture. And how are they going to get it out? Well, our culture is in a similar situation where divorce has been built right into the fiber of our society.

[35 : 06] society. We're programmed into it. And it's only as the Christian community can bear witness to Christ's command and can deal with this problem seriously.

And not, you know, not as those who want to bend the law to suit our society, but to preach the gospel to our society in order that they may come to recognize the authority of the teacher who says, I say unto you, you know, that marriage is for life.

And if I say it to you, I am able to deal with any problems you have with it as you come to me in repentance and in faith.

Well, that's all for today. And we'll go on next week. And God bless you all.