

Luke 16:18 "Marriage, Divorce, and Jesus"

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Pray with me. Father, thanks for a love like that. Love that never lets us go. Where would we be without it? What would our hope be? It's only a love like that that could even enable us to look honestly at the darkness of our hearts and our lives without just despairing. And so would you reassure us of that love this morning as we look at your word, at a challenging part of it? And Father, by your Spirit, please do challenge us. Would you do so well, would you comfort those who are afflicted? Holy Spirit, come and do that as we look at your word.

[1 : 10] We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. This morning we're going to look at God's word together on the issue of marriage and divorce.

Divorce, a significant and sensitive issue in our culture, in our lives. You've probably heard a lot of statistics about divorce.

Divorce, while the 50% of marriages end in divorce one has never been true in the U.S., divorce does seem often to be all around us, doesn't it?

Another one you've probably heard is that Christians get divorced at the same rate as anyone else. Again, not true according to the best statistics.

But still, it's very believable for us because many of us in this room have endured the pain of divorce. Most all of us have a family member who has.

[2 : 11] And we've seen the reality of it, the hurt of it, the difficulty there. Over the last 10 years or so, I've talked with a lot of people considering divorce.

And I often hear things like this, things that reflect on our vision, our goals for marriage. I hear people say, her unreasonableness, his uncontrolled anger, her demeaning distance, his emotional neglect, whatever it may be, is not something I can live with any longer.

Or, I know God doesn't like divorce, but He doesn't like unhappy marriages either. Or, God doesn't want me or my kids to be unhappy.

I know He wouldn't want us living like this. And there's an element of truth in those statements, isn't there? In a culture flooded with divorce, it makes sense that when I'm miserable in my marriage, I need to get out.

I notice similar things actually at the other end of marriage when I talk with those at the beginning, maybe in premarital counseling, for example. If you ask them why they're getting married, you'll hear things like, I just like being with her.

[3 : 37] Or, we're really a great partnership, we get along so well. Or, I just realized I can't live without Him. A little bit different words and wonderful things to feel, but you may hear a similar focus.

All of these seemingly focus on a relationship that exists to fulfill me, right? Isn't that the natural way that we think about relationships and marriage in particular?

It's here to help me become the best version of me. We might call it self-actualization. So, it's no surprise when a few months or years in and my spouse doesn't seem to be helping me feel good about myself and be the best that I can be.

In fact, it feels quite different. I need another plan. It's not just our culture that has focused on self or that has promoted divorce.

Jesus encountered the same situation with the Pharisees, the religious teachers of His day. Some rabbis did teach that divorce should be very rare, but many of them taught that a man could get a divorce for just about any reason, including some who taught that if dinner was overcooked, that

was grounds for divorce.

[4 : 57] Or if a man found another woman he found more attractive than his wife, that was grounds for a divorce. You see, basically for anything that one came up with.

And so, as we've been reading and studying through Luke, we came to this passage back before Easter, and what Jesus is doing in Luke 16 is challenging the Pharisees about their attitude actually towards money.

That's primarily what he's been talking about here and how they have a low view of God's law that actually calls them to sacrificial generosity and they've lowered that bar way down here.

And while he's talking about it, he mentions as another example of them lowering the bar of God's law, their view on divorce.

It seems to be a common place to drop that standard. Luke 16 at verse 18, Jesus says, Adultery.

[6 : 10] They heard that, didn't they? They knew the law. That's one of the big ten. That grabbed their attention. What's going on here?

What's Jesus doing? They know not to take adultery. Adultery being unfaithfulness. The breaking of a promise. The breaking of the bond of a relationship and a commitment to someone else.

It doesn't take long to see that Jesus' view of divorce is a bit different for Mars, does it? He reaffirms this strong passion for marriage and strong distaste for divorce in another conversation with the Pharisees where they actually ask him about marriage and divorce specifically.

So he gives a much fuller explanation than he does here when he's just using it as an example about something else. Let me read that for you in Matthew 19. In other words, don't get divorced.

So they said, well, why then did Moses command one to give her certificate of divorce and to send her away? Why is that in the Old Testament? And Jesus says, if we keep going into verse 8 on the next slide, Because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives.

[7 : 55] But from the beginning, it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality and marries another commits adultery.

The disciples understood what he was saying. And in their response, they said to him, if such is the case of a man with his wife, it's better not to marry. Wow.

Jesus says again, divorce except in very specific circumstances is adultery. Don't do it. And we're not misunderstanding him.

That challenges our personal and cultural sensibilities, doesn't it? It certainly did for the disciples when they heard it. Quick side note.

If God and his word never challenge our personal and cultural sensibilities, we're probably not listening to it very honestly. Think about that.

[8 : 52] God being God and us being not God, if nothing he said ever challenged our hearts or stretched us beyond what seemed right to us, we would need to wonder why that was, why we just naturally knew so well.

This is one of those points where it stretches us a bit, doesn't it? Let's not write it off. It is God's word. Let's ask Jesus, why set the bar so high for divorce?

I think to understand Jesus' strong passion against divorce, we have to understand his strong passion for marriage.

It's what he keeps referencing here. God's purpose for marriage is much different from what our approach usually is and where our goals are typically focused.

See, for God from the very beginning when he invented marriage, which he did, didn't he? He invented it to have a purpose that was God-centered first, not merely man-centered.

[9 : 57] To display who God is and how he loves. That's what was on his heart. I love to think of it, and you've heard me talk about it in terms of storytelling, right?

That we get this privilege to share the great story of God's work in all of history in relationship. Because that's really where it starts, Jesus says.

God created us, male and female, in his image. And Jesus, in that passage we just read, goes all the way back to Genesis 2, in the garden, and says relationships are part of the way that we reflect the image of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We're to reflect his image in all of our relationships, and especially in our marriages where Paul says we tell the story of the love of Jesus for his bride, the church, that particular relationship.

You remember Ephesians chapter 5? Paul 2, like Jesus, goes all the way back to Genesis chapter 2 and explains what marriage was designed for.

[11 : 05] A man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. And Paul says this mystery is profound. I'm saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

That's what God was up to. A profound mystery. But marriage about Christ and the church. That's the great story our marriages are to tell.

So I think what we have to do is remember that great love story, the greatest of all love stories, what's going on in that story that we're supposed to reflect, that we're supposed to tell in our marriages.

Just a few minutes, we're going to look at it to help us see why divorce is so abhorrent to God, and also why it's so painful for us.

It's a true Cinderella story where a princess who's intended for glory is lost and abandoned and broken in need of rescue.

[12 : 10] And the prince of heaven comes on a rescue mission, doesn't he? To find this princess and at the cost of his own life to restore her to the beauty and glory that she was created for.

And he does that. He marries her, in fact. She delights in his love, and they live in intimate relationship happily ever after. Three things, particularly in this story, that we see about God.

The first is we see God's purifying grace on display in this story where failings are met with forgiveness. It's this way from the very beginning of the relationship, actually.

I'm not going to read all of Ezekiel chapter 16 this morning. It's kind of long. But you should do that this afternoon. Ezekiel 16. God describes finding Israel, his people, for the first time as a baby born and never washed, lying in its blood, weak, undesirable.

And he, rather than rejecting her, tells the rest of the story in terms of marriage. Verse 8. I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord God, and you became mine.

[13 : 30] Then I bathed you with water and washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil. And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty.

For it was perfect through the splendor that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord God. This is what happens. In his grace, he comes to one not deserving of anything, not beautiful at all.

And he loves the unlovely. He doesn't merely overlook the weakness, but he washes, cleanses, purifies in his grace.

And then you know what happens in the next 40 verses or so? Israel runs off. Dirties herself with the nations of the world and their idolatry, adultery.

And God says this in verse 60. Yet, despite all that you've done, yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant.

[14 : 33] I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the Lord, that you may remember and be confounded and never open your mouth again because of your shame. When I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord God.

That covenant commitment, no matter what the other one did, intended never to be broken, that's why divorce is so painful, isn't it? Several of my friends who have experienced divorce said to me this week, that no matter what else they felt in their divorce, no matter what the circumstances, the pain, the breaking of that relationship is so awful.

It hurts so deeply. It's like tearing apart two things that were never meant to be separated. It hurts. And God has given us this purifying grace.

It's often painful in its application too, but it ultimately washes the dirtiest, forgives the biggest failures, and makes beautiful the ugliest and most undeserving.

That's what God does in His relationship with us. So then as we get to the middle of the story, at the real climax of it, we see God's sacrificial love.

[15 : 59] It's a story where sacrifice is not a burden, but a delight. Where it's not a path to misery, but a road to glory, isn't it? The Father sends His only Son, the Prince, who sacrifices His rights as the Prince of Heaven.

Who sacrifices His riches and comforts as the heir of all things. Who sacrifices eventually His very life in order to marry the princess.

In order to make the unworthy one worthy. That's the picture that Paul paints in Philippians 2 when Jesus, rather than clinging to heaven's glories, lets go of them.

He humbles Himself and sacrifices His life for us. But He did that all not out of some obligation, but out of love, right?

Out of His love for us because of the joy set before Him that He endured the cross. He suffered certainly, unimaginably, but purchased for Himself a bride whom He loves, with whom He will enjoy glory forever.

[17:11] And that was the path there. It's a concept of sacrifice that we know very little about these days, isn't it? Divorce often offers to us fulfillment in other people, in other situations, whatever it takes to take care of number one.

But marriage is not meant to be merely a rejection of personal fulfillment into misery for the sake of someone else, but rather, in the steps of the one who designed us and invented marriage, it's finding mutual fulfillment through mutual sacrifice.

Finally, as we get toward the end of the story, marriage is to display God's tenacious faithfulness. It's to tell the story of a God who continues to pursue the unfaithful with love rather than punishing them with rejection.

The prophet Hosea tells that part of the story really well through his own life as God sends him to marry a prostitute in order to teach God's people about His love for them in the midst of their adulterous idolatry.

Listen to how Hosea describes God's faithfulness to an unfaithful people. In that day, declares the Lord, you will call me my husband and no longer will you call me my Baal.

[18:45] For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth and they shall be remembered by name no more and I'll make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, the creeping things of the ground.

I'll abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land and I will make you lie down in safety. I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and mercy.

I will betroth you to me in faithfulness and you shall know the Lord. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness forever.

forever. You can run away to other lovers but I will chase you down and buy you back. And there may be painful discipline in the process but we will be together forever.

I'm committed to it. There ain't no darkness strong enough that could tear you out from my heart. There ain't no strength that's strong enough that could tear this love apart.

[19:56] No, I won't let you go. Tenacious faithfulness. When repeated rejection has come from one side to the other, when the name of your lover has been dragged through the mud publicly, when divorce seems to be the only reasonable option, I won't let you go.

God says. We all probably know people who in the midst of their unfaithfulness have experienced this tenacious faithfulness from a forgiving spouse.

As one of my friends has said, it's experiencing a grace that he had only been taught existed. Isn't that supposed to be the daily reality in all of our marriages?

Man, I could never repay my wife for the number of times that she has in my failures met me with faithful, forgiving love, giving me a taste of God's love when I didn't deserve it at my lowest points. Loving the unlovely requires grace. It requires sacrifice. It requires tenacious faithfulness.

[21:17] And when we experience those, we experience and tell the story of God's love for us in Christ. It's beautiful. It's glorious when you see it, isn't it?

I'm just going to share two stories of this with you that I've shared before. They display this kind of love in the midst of physical trauma that could have altered a relationship entirely.

And it's a kind of love that God would call us to show not just when physical realities change things, but emotional and relational trauma comes to us too.

The first is Robertson McQuilkin. He was president of Columbia Bible College over 20 years until in 1990 his wife Muriel was struggling deeply with Alzheimer's, becoming frantic whenever he was not with her, even bloodying her feet walking back and forth from their home to his office looking for him.

So he wrote to the Bible College community about his decision to step down from the job he loved. The decision was made in a way 42 years ago when I promised to care for Muriel in sickness and in health till death do us part.

[22:32] So as I told the students and faculty as a man of my word, integrity has something to do with it. But so does fairness. She's cared for me fully and sacrificially all these years.

If I cared for her for the next 40 years I would not be out of her debt. Duty, however, can be grim and stoic, but there's more. I love Muriel.

She is a delight to me. Her childlike dependence and confidence in me, her warm love, occasional flashes of that wit I used to relish so, her happy spirit and tough resilience in the face of her continual distressing frustration.

I don't have to care for her. I get to. It's a high honor to care for so wonderful a person. He sacrificed, laid down his life as it were, and yet found joy and fulfillment there.

Shortly after David Ireland's young wife got pregnant, David found out he had a disease like Lou Gehrig's and his body began to shut down rapidly.

[23 : 44] He realized that he may not meet his child. So he decided to do some parenting through letters, now published in a book called Letters to an Unborn Child.

He introduces his baby boy to his mother this way. My child, I want you to know what your mother is like. She is absolutely incredible. I think I can make it clear to you by just telling you what she has to do when we go out to eat at night.

When we go out to a restaurant, this is what she has to do. Because I'm a quadriplegic now and in a wheelchair, she has to bathe me, dress me, empty the urine and fecal bags that are strapped to my legs, then put me in the wheelchair, drive me out to the garage, open the garage, open the door, get out aboard, pull up the arm on my chair, slide me across the board, put me in the car, put down the arm, fold up the chair, open the trunk, put in the chair, close the trunk, close the door, get in the car, back it out, close the garage door and drive to the restaurant.

When we get there, the whole process is reversed. We sit down at a table, she feeds me, wipes the drool from my mouth because I can barely eat, gets up, pays the check and then the whole process is reversed again.

Go out to the car, open the door, take off the arm, put down the board, slide me across, put down the arm, fold up the chair, go to the back, open the trunk, put up the chair, close the trunk, get in the car, drive. Get to the garage, up goes the garage door, everything else reversed, take me in, clean me, empty the fecal and urine bags, bathe me, put me in my pajamas and lay me in bed.

[25 : 20] And then he says this, Son, these are her last words to me. Thank you, honey, for taking me out to eat tonight. That's tenacious faithfulness at not letting go.

Sacrificial love that honors the weak and the seemingly undeserving. What beautiful pictures of how Jesus cherishes and cares for his bride, right?

That's how he loves you. And so often, the picture we present tells a different story. A story of Prince Charming turning up his nose at Cinderella, sending her away from him.

Do you see why God takes divorce so seriously? Yes, he wants to spare us the pain, but ultimately, what's his heart?

He's telling the world a story. The good news, the good news of great joy for all people and right at the climax of this story, divorce seeks to rewrite it.

[26 : 32] Seeks to tell a different one with a different ending. And that's why we as a church seek to take divorce seriously as well. It's not to be difficult, but to protect the glory of the story of Jesus' love for us and believing that God's design is best for us too, even in the pain.

That may well mean some hard situations and difficult decisions. I don't have the time to go into this morning as we wrestle with broken covenants.

It happens. But in the midst of that, focusing on the glorious purpose for marriage really does change things.

Think about it in your own marriage. Be honest. What's your goal in your marriage? Or in a potential marriage that you're thinking about. You see, if I prioritize personal fulfillment in marriage, I actually overemphasize and idolize marriage as though there's someone or some relationship that could completely fulfill me.

And at the same time, I underemphasize the glorious purpose of marriage. I make it a consumer contract to stay in while it serves me rather than an unbreakable covenant that serves God's mission and His glory in the world.

[28 : 03] So practically, if my purpose is self-fulfillment, then how do I have to act? Well, I have to deny any sin or weakness in myself. That doesn't fit.

I have to redefine marriage by my desires, what I want it to look like and feel like and reach for divorce quickly when they're threatened or almost as bad. Even if I stay, I begin to tell the wrong

story.

It's one about me where I'm the hero. On the other hand, if my purpose is telling the story of Christ's love for His church, then I can actually acknowledge sin and true forgiveness because in those moments, we can actually best tell the story, right?

The story that's about grace and redemption in the lowest moments with Jesus as the hero and the great lover, not me as the one who's perfect. See, the miracle of marriage is not two relatively compatible people surviving in the same house for 50 years.

But rather, the miracle that reflects the miracle of God's love is two people at great cost to themselves loving the unlovely and the unworthy.

[29 : 19] That's the story, isn't it? That's what marriage is to be about. And so in the low points, we get a chance to tell that story beautifully. It's why we honor marriage now because of the glorious, great love story that it's telling.

So Jesus speaks certainly strong and direct words to the Pharisees and to us to elevate the seriousness of God's law.

Verse 18 again, everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

It's a perfect law and he won't tolerate our lowering the standard, will he? He doesn't want marriage redefined, divorce made easy.

And so for some of you this morning, perhaps it's painful to think back through things you've endured in your life. Hard moments, deep grief, wrestling with God about what's next.

[30 : 35] Man, if you're there this morning, love to walk with you through that because there's not much that's more difficult than this because it's a battleground where God's telling a story and Satan wants to write a different one.

And we need each other in that. And you may be sitting there and hearing words this strong from Jesus like adultery and feel someone pointing a finger at you and saying, adultery.

You feel you've got a scarlet letter on you because of your divorce or your unfaithfulness. In just a minute, I'm going to do something that sounds very unpastoral.

To have all those who've committed adultery raise their hands. First, let me remind you of God's law. Exodus chapter 20. You shall not commit adultery.

Adultery. Matthew chapter 5 verse 27. You have heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

[31 : 46] Then, in our passage, Luke 16, Jesus says to them, you are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

And then he goes to apply it to divorce and marriage. Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery. And he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

And we now understand that what Jesus is saying in this passage is much harder than we might realize. That if we have ever longed for marriage or for anything else other than God to fulfill us, that's adultery.

adultery. If we have ever had a less than glorious view of marriage, whether in our own or toward another's, that's adultery. If we have said things or avoided saying things rather than embrace the truth of God's Word on divorce or anything else, that's adultery in our hearts.

Now with a fresh reminder of God's perfect standard, let's go back to the hands being raised and I'll start.

[32 : 59] All those who have committed adultery according to all of God's holy law, raise your hand with me. There's no one left to throw stones.

There's no one who's got it together and can accuse you. Adultery is a sin, but it's not the unforgivable sin.

And that's why God gives us His law so that we see His holy character and pray that the Holy Spirit would work in each of us that we would, in our friendships, and if appropriate, as spouses and as a church family, that we would love with purifying grace and sacrificial love and tenacious faithfulness.

We would see how He does that and long to reflect that to those around us. And, and He gives us His law set perfectly beyond what we can measure up to so that, seeing our sin, so that realizing we can't fix the problem, we would turn to our Savior to find forgiveness and to actually believe that as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.

Amen? We read it earlier, do you believe that? Has He wiped the adultery that far away from you?

[34 : 44] Don't lower the standard. Embrace the Savior. It almost makes you wonder why God allows divorce at all, doesn't it? You remember how Jesus, when He allowed for divorce reluctantly, said, well, only because of the hardness of human hearts, is divorce even permitted?

Why? Why then does it have to be? It's because He's saying human hearts are not divine. We can't love as perfectly, as infinitely, as eternally as God can.

And it's because human marriage is not ultimate. See, the ultimate hope of the gospel is not in your marriage now being a perfect reflection of God's love for you.

The hope, the promise to us is of the ultimate marriage where your perfect spouse removes the scarlet letter.

He's the perfect one. In fact, He's the only one standing who could rightly judge you for that. And instead of judging you for that, He does what? He removes it from you and He not only takes that off of you and removes your sin as far as the east is from the west, He clothes you with white robes in glorious beauty and He comes to you to be with you forever, He promises.

[36 : 18] No divorce to endure ever. He's the perfectly faithful spouse and He loves you passionately.

Even unlovely you in your worst moments in fact, His promise is to make you lovely because He loves you. If your marital or relational experience makes you feel unlovely now, know that Jesus will make you lovely and will love you forever.

Let's pray. Jesus, we give you thanks for a love we don't deserve and could never earn.

We confess we like better the idea of fixing things ourselves, but we need you to rescue us. none of us stands on our own without our great need for you and so we thank you that you love us.

We rejoice in the story that you give to us and that you give us the privilege of telling and we plead for your grace that we would tell it in all of our relationships, in our marriages, in this church family.

[37 : 45] Father, would we love and would we especially love where the brokenness of life interrupts and knocks us down? Would we be there and love each other well?

In Jesus' name, Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org WELT