

THE KINGDOM WAY: CHRISTIAN COUNTER-CULTURE

The Tragedy of Divorce

Matthew 5:31,32

INTRODUCTION

I would probably not be preaching this sermon, on Jesus' teaching on divorce, were it not for the fact that I'm preaching through the entire Sermon on the Mount...

and we've arrived at these verses

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce'. But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

We've arrived at these verses, so I have to preach them. And that's good.

This is why I preach through large chunks of Scripture... it forces me to preach all of God's word... even the most difficult and challenging parts. The controversial parts...

And that, I believe, is good for you. It is my responsibility to you.

At the same time, I am so deeply conscious this morning, that this is a difficult subject for us, not so much intellectually... but emotionally.

Marriage trouble... and marriage breakdown... and divorce... and remarriage... affect us all.

Is there any one of us whose life has been untouched by these things? And painfully so.

But I'm deeply conscious too, that for some of you, this is a subject so deeply personally painful, that it may be hard for you to concentrate... and to stay with me...

because pain will resurface, or because you live in pain, and pain has a way of numbing our brains and our hearts.

I don't wish to add to your pain. Or cause you pain. That is the last thing I intend.

I simply intend to preach God's word as faithfully and as clearly as I can.

I must be true to God's word, or I am of no use to you.

And I trust that God's word, clearly and faithfully preached, is always what we need. Always!

And I trust that God's word, in the hands of God's Spirit, will do marvelous things.

We start with

I. THE SETTING - THE VULNERABILITY OF WOMEN

The setting of all this teaching of Jesus is 1st c. Palestine, and the presence of God's Son in the midst of God's people, the Jews.

Jesus has been announcing to Israel, that God is now acting to save them ... God is taking up his place as ruler and beginning to make things right ... God's Kingdom is arriving....

And Jesus is here teaching 'would be' citizens of the Kingdom of God... what life will now look like... as we live under God's rule, in the middle of a world in rebellion against God's rule.

We'll develop a different character... will have a good influence... we'll we called to much higher standards....

But Jesus is also doing all this teaching in the middle of a debate among Jewish men over divorce.

We get the story of the debate more fully given in Matthew 19, where Jesus is asked point blank,

"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

There was a debate going on, between rabbis, on the subject of divorce. And the debate was centered on the proper understanding of **Deuteronomy 24:1** and the phrase there, **something indecent about her**.

Stricter rabbis argued that this referred to grave moral behavior on the part of women, that damaged a marriage. And they argued that a man could not divorce his wife apart from such behavior.

Less strict rabbis argued that it referred to anything about his wife that was displeasing to the husband. That a man could divorce his wife if she displeased him in any way.

According to the Jewish historian Josephus, the "any reason at all" view prevailed.

So in Matthew 19 the Pharisees want to know Jesus' view. Whose side was he on?

Jesus' answer is that they are asking the wrong question.

The men are asking the question, when is it OK for me to divorce my wife?

The question they should be asking is, Jesus implies, is, what is God's intention for marriage? And there in Matthew 19, as here in Matthew 5, Jesus issues a call to fidelity, based on God's intention for marriage.

What I want you to see at this point is that, in that culture, in that debate, women were very, very vulnerable.

Nobody was asking them for their opinion! And they needed marriage for a place in that society.

Jesus assumes they will re-marry, if their husband divorces them. Life would be almost impossible for them if they didn't.

It seems to me that Jesus saw that, the vulnerability of women, while the religious leaders of the day did not see that. Or did not

think it important.

Think with me now about

II. THE KINDNESS OF JESUS

I say that Jesus upheld God's design for marriage with an eye on the vulnerability of women, because he was so kind to women. And sensitive to their vulnerability.

For example, on one occasion, Jesus encountered a Samaritan woman who, as it turned out, happened to have had 5 husbands. And she was currently living with yet another man, outside of marriage. (John 4)

This surely is not right! This is about as far from God's design for marriage as we can imagine.

And reading John 4, we see Jesus treating her with respect, with kindness, with firmness... with a heart for her salvation.

On another occasion, Jesus is teaching the people in the temple, and he is interrupted as a group of Scribes and Pharisees bring a woman caught in adultery (dragged her firmly by the arms, I would guess) and put her in front of him.

"They made her stand before the group.", the text says.

They point out that the law prescribes stoning. What does he say?

Do you remember his answer? **"Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."**

Don't you love this Jesus?!

Then to the women, **"Has no one condemned you?... Then neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."** (NIV **"Go now and leave your life of sin."**) **John 8:10,11**

Still another time, a woman who, we're told, **had lived a sinful life in that town"**, comes into a dinner party, at a Pharisees house!, interrupts the party, and anoints Jesus with expensive perfume, and her tears fall on him.

The Pharisee disapproves. I expect everybody is uncomfortable. Except Jesus.

He speaks the words to the woman that every one of us longs to hear and needs to hear... He says to her, **"Your sins are forgiven... go in peace."** **Luke 7:48,50.**

Life is so messy. How do you ever untangle the mess these women have made? With the help of willing men!

Please, as we hear God's teaching on marriage and divorce, don't miss Jesus' kindness to vulnerable women.

Why does this matter? Because the question of divorce is not simply a legal issue. It's a human issue. And we need to uphold God's design for marriage in the same way in which Jesus upheld it...

With firmness, in love, in a messy world...

We mustn't ever abandon the broken. Including the broken in marriage.

Now,

III. THE FIRMNESS OF JESUS

In Matthew 5, and in Matthew 19, Jesus says that divorce causes adultery.

That re-marriage, which he takes for granted will happen after divorce, is really adulterous in God's eyes, except in those cases where marital unfaithfulness caused the divorce.

Underlying this is Jesus' view that in his Father's eyes, marriage is exclusive and it is permanent and it involves a true and real oneness.

It is exclusive - that is, it is for one man and one woman. There is no room for more.

It is permanent - it's designed for life.

And it creates one out of what were two.

This cannot be undone or erased. Except by the death of one of the partners.

That is God's design for marriage.

This is God's perfect will.

God hates divorce. Mal. 2:16

"May you rejoice in the wife of your youth" Prov. 5:18

Jesus firmly maintained God's design - and called anything else sin - while dealing in kindness with people who had made a royal mess of God's design.

He called people to fidelity.

And spoke words of life and hope to those who weren't.

So must we.

God likened his people Israel to adulterers - they had gone whoring after other gods.

And He wooed them back.

God is a God of new beginnings. Of new creation. A God for whom our sin need not be the final word.

I watch him bless people, broken people, including broken re-married people, who wish now to live in faithfulness.

IV. THE HIGHER STANDARD

Jesus' words on marriage and divorce occur in a long passage where Jesus says that life in the Kingdom of God...

life that is lived in the middle of a rebellion against God...
will be a life of higher standards.

In everything. We kingdom people don't just refrain from killing people! We stop using anger destructively. (Matt. 5:21-26)

We don't just refrain from committing physical adultery. We stop looking lustfully. (Matt. 5:27-30)

And soon to come... we become people of our word, we don't take revenge or focus on our rights, we love our enemies. (Matt. 5:33f.)

High standards indeed.

And we kingdom people are called to the very highest standards when it comes to marriage.

If you are about to enter marriage, enter it for life. No escape clause.

If you are married, God's highest will for you is that you make it work and you honor your vows.

If you are re-married, God's will for you is that you honor these vows, until death.

And God's will for all of us is that we do everything we can to help married people honor their vows.

“what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

Yes, there are Biblical reasons for permitting divorce and re-marriage.

Certainly adultery. Probably abandonment by a non-Christian. (1 Cor. 7) Perhaps pre-Christian behavior.

Pastors and scholars argue over this list.

I would simply remind us all that the real issue is not, when can I divorce and re-marry?

The issue for Jesus is - what is God's design for marriage?

CONCLUSION

I conclude with a challenge and a story.

We've learned in our culture to ask, 'But, don't I have a right to be happy?'

I don't know of any place in the Bible where it says I have a right to be happy. On my terms.

But the Bible does say - I have a duty to be faithful. To God first. And to those around me. Especially to my spouse.

And God's people often find happiness sneaking up on them, as they are faithful.

Now a story.

My Church history professor at seminary was Gaylord Albaugh. He was 64 years old when I met him.

He had one adult son. Gaylord Jr. Who lived in another city.

His wife was living in a mental health institution in Rochester NY. When their son had been born she had a breakdown, never recovered, and spent the remainder of her life in an institution. Most of her adult life.

Gay never divorced her. He visited her regularly, making that 2 or 3 hour trip from Hamilton to Rochester.

He was her husband. He had made vows.

May his tribe increase.

Amen.