

**Reading:** Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Matthew 19:1-12

**Theme:** Thoughts on Marriage, Divorce and Jesus' Teaching.

I have played rugby games when we knew we were on a hiding to nothing even before kick off! I come to this sermon with the same feeling! We are looking at the emotive topic of divorce and for some I will say things that are too harsh, but others I will not be hard enough. I have read on this subject and to be honest I'd rather avoid preaching on it, but it is next in our studies in the Sermon on the Mount and I am not aiming or targeting at anyone. I've read with a mind to understand Scripture without any emotional biases, or any traditional views, feel I still need to learn much. I came to Scripture asking God's Spirit to direct me. What I say is not an exhaustive study of divorce, nor will I deal with every question on divorce and especially the thorny, divisive question of remarriage. That said, realise I am not apologising for what I will say, as I feel that I will bring and open up Scriptural principles.

During this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contrasts the ideas and traditions of the Pharisees etc. to the right and true interpretation of these things. Jesus does this specifically in 6 areas, yet these contrasts carry on throughout the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus corrects the man-made adjustments and interpretations put on these various parts of God's word and He gives God's word it's true and right honour and place. In **Matthew 5:31-32** Jesus turns our attention to the matter of divorce and does so to expose the false teaching of the Pharisees, their interpretations and correct their thoughts and views. I want us to briefly look at 4 things:

### **1. Marriage - the Biblical View.**

People say marriage is a man-made institution, is a thing of law to try and regulate society, or a custom that has grown up over the centuries. Yet it is not the case for marriage was put in place by God as right and proper. God created a male and female and brought them together in the first marriage (*which contrasts to modern ideas*). Therefore, marriages are to be governed and directed by what God

says. Marriage is a foundational institution - the married couple is the most basic and important unit in society. Marriages must be worked at and are not merely in place to propagate the human race. Neither is marriage only the sexual union as some say. It is a covenant, a covenant of companionship and that includes closeness on all levels - including the joy of the sexual union. In God's eyes marriage is for life - where one man and one woman are joined in this covenant to each other. What God has joined together no man or woman should separate.

As this is a covenant of companionship, vows are taken. It is right for this to be done publicly and in accordance with the laws of the land where possible. If we are Christians then we can call on God to witness and help us maintain such vows. This covenant involves a leaving of parents, a cleaving (*supergluing*) to each other, a physical union in becoming one flesh, a helping of each other, a complementing of each other's abilities; also the developing, cultivating and maintaining of their companionship in all areas. That is a very brief outline of marriage from a biblical viewpoint. Now we see:

## **2. Divorce - the Teaching of Moses and the Pharisees.**

I take these together to contrast them. Surprisingly the Bible recognises divorce - in OT and NT and the Bible also regulates divorce. Do we realise that not all divorce is wrong? Joseph was called a just man in his plans to divorce Mary! Nehemiah ordered divorce on a large scale in his day and the people were commended for doing so! Moses, directed by God in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 regulates divorce. That is why it is so important to consider the Scriptures to understand as much as we can about this emotive and painful subject of divorce. That said, we are to realise God hates divorce, but not all divorce is wrong. God certainly hates what brings about divorce - sin. He hates the hurt and the pain to those involved in divorce - whether to marriage partners, children, family or friends. God hates divorce for the "wrong" reasons, but even that is not the

unpardonable sin as some make out. Even divorce for the “correct” reasons is brought about by sin.

We are to realise divorce is a human institution, as opposed to marriage which is a Divine institution. Divorce is recognised, permitted and regulated in the Bible. It is not ignored, nor does God denounce it and He Himself even issues a divorce writ against His people Israel (Jeremiah 3:8). Realise God knows mankind, their sin and hardness of heart; He recognises divorce and does something about it. We have His instructions to and through Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. This is done to make sure divorce occurred under permitted circumstances, was done in an orderly fashion and all were aware of the consequences. We are to note that Moses’ legislation was to **control divorce**. It was to prevent women who had upset, or didn’t please their husbands, simply being turned out and abandoned. It was a formal and legal act whereby the covenant of companionship was formally ended and all benefits, privileges and obligations of marriage were to cease.

Moses’ regulation was given to prevent hasty and foolish overreactions made in the heat of the moment. It was designed **not to make divorce easy**, but **to slow things down**, to give everyone chance to think things through and to consider the consequences. Women in those days were not viewed as highly as they should be and so this regulation was a means of protecting the wife and to prevent untold suffering on women and their children. I find it interesting to note that Jesus spoke of divorce immediately after speaking of adultery - as if to say that the wrong control of our desires and thoughts can lead to dissatisfaction, to divorce and all the heartache and pain that involves.

Moses’ teaching in Deuteronomy lays down 3 principles - **divorce could only be for certain causes**, this cause had to be established and proved (*no doubt*) under the term “indecent” or “uncleanness” (AV). So, all frivolous and superficial excuses went out of the

window. **The man then had to give her a bill of divorcement** and not merely turn her out and abandon her, but give her this bill of divorcement before witnesses. He then had to realise **he could not marry her again if she remarried and later divorced or was a widow.** The whole force of Moses' teaching is to emphasise the seriousness of the marriage covenant and make people realise they could not slip in and out of marriage for whims or sexual urges. It was in place to regulate a chaotic situation that apparently was in existence among the people of Israel.

The Pharisees had looked at this teaching of Moses and reduced it to v31 - the external legal bit and for trivial reasons. They turned it upside down and used it to make it easier to divorce one's wife by saying "*uncleanness*" or "*indecent*" – which could be about virtually anything – burning food, not doing exactly as their husband demanded and the divorce was fine as long as they had a bit of legal paper! God's word to warn against and to prevent hasty divorce was not only turned upside down, but conveniently ignored, glossed over and terrible injustices occurred. God's word through Moses was ignored, but Jesus spoke out and so we see:

### **3. Divorce - the Teaching of Jesus.**

In contrast the lax and wrong teaching of the Jews, Jesus comes and demonstrates, says the standard He, the King, expects - especially of His people i.e. believers, but also expects of all men and women. Here He says divorce is allowable on grounds of fornication (AV), marital unfaithfulness (NIV). The Greek word does not mean fornication or adultery alone, or marital faithfulness, but **ANY** sexual sin - it is the word (πορνεία) from which we get porn, pornography. We are to note that divorce is not commanded, nor required, **but is permitted**, allowed in such a case. The ideal in such a tragic situation would be for the offending partner to be brought to a realisation of their sin and guilt, confess it, repent and reconciliation occur. That is difficult from both sides of the fractured relationship. If true repentance does occur, ideally the offended partner will forgive them

and they then work towards reconciliation and the rebuilding, a reforming of the marriage covenant! It will be hard work, but it is not impossible. Some argue that divorce is not permitted after granting forgiveness. If the other partner does not repent - blaming others or this or that, then divorce proceedings can go ahead.

If a divorce occurs on unbiblical grounds, then both partners are to consider their situation. If one remarries, the woman in the case in Deuteronomy, because she is desperate, homeless etc. and marries to get a roof over her head, then she becomes in effect, in God's eyes, guilty of adultery, though it is not her fault; the blame lays at the door of the one who wrongly divorced her and put her into such position. The wrong divorce exposed her to this.

Here in Matthew 5 and also 19 Jesus reinforces the serious nature of marriage. We've only touched on this subject divorce and these things need to be considered carefully especially in our days. I recommend 2 books in particular "*Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*" by Jay Adams and "*Putting Asunder*" by Stephen Clark. Regrettably divorce affects many, has knock-on complications in people's lives; affects believers, affects families, affects those who are divorced and then become believers. Finally:

#### **4. Some Practical Implications and Outworkings.**

Pray for marriages and if married **always** cultivate the companionship of our partners - keep on courting each other! It will also involve guarding thought life - so that heart adultery (v27-30) is not present and we don't see the grass as greener with someone else. Make sure our grass remains green by constantly nurturing and feeding our relationship. We are to help and encourage each other, to set examples to our children and those around us, so that they will desire marriages like ours. Yes, we need God's help and enabling and are to read and learn of God's principles, directives for marriage in His word and pray for help and strength to work them out in our own marriage situations. Tragically in society even Christian

marriages can break down – causing shock, hurt, confusion and great distress. Pray for marriages, for Christian marriages to be examples and shine brightly in our society.

Those who are married and those unmarried as well, whether younger or older, need to realise marriage is God's norm for society. If you are single, or widowed, even divorced, realise along with those who are married, that singleness is a gift from God and such ones are to be highly viewed - as not all are called to this. Such ones may not like this great gift and may not want to be on their own, but all of us, on their behalf, need to seek God's help and blessing on them and we should keep them in mind in our hospitality, care and planning events. I encourage you on your own to use your singleness as a gift and develop yourselves and your life as fully as you can and learn of God's way of for your singleness, maybe even for marriage, also learn from married couples in the church and if God should bless with a marriage partner, then enter into it with right attitudes, motives and not in desperation.

What of those Christians who are divorced? I suspect this is going to be a growing problem in Christian circles, as the devil will deceive many, cause many to sin as society's standards affect us all, also people will be saved from varied backgrounds. My personal view and understanding is that if a Christian divorce their partner due to their sexual sin, then they would be free to remarry in the Lord i.e. Christians. I also see Christians who have been left, abandoned by unbelieving partners as free to remarry, again only in the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:15). Stephen Clark in his book argues that abandonment includes mental and physical cruelty or gross neglect. In all cases reconciliation must be attempted and only as a last resort should divorce proceed.

Christians who divorce for whims, or nonbiblical reasons, are in a different category and firstly the question of church discipline comes into play. I personally would not be happy to remarry the one

bringing about the proceedings if it was unbiblical as this can impact the situation of the 'innocent' partner. Reconciliation must be pursued wherever possible.

Those who have been divorced prior to becoming Christians present their own particular problems. We are to urge reconciliation wherever possible. This may not be possible as the partner may be remarried, or be in a relationship with someone else. I question if such trophies of grace are to remain unmarried? I feel that they do not and they can remarry - ideally only again in the Lord. I would have certain conditions for them to remarry in church - made every effort at reconciliation; make sure they're free from all past obligations and if their fault they have sought forgiveness from God, their former partner, their children, relatives and others hurt. Before they could be remarried in the church, I would ask them to talk to the church officers and if the church officers felt they could remarry, that we bring it to the church to consider the situation and add anything that we may not know and for the church as a whole to decide. Though they may be guilty of unbiblical divorce, or be wrongly divorced, (*if reconciliation is not possible,*) my main reason for such ones being able to remarry is Christ saved them in the state of divorce, past sins are dealt with. I would not force the issue in the church, but use those principles in dealing with each and every individual situation.

Christians can seem to make marriage a sacramental thing like the RC church and this "sin" of divorce seems to become the most serious. Yet we would rejoice over a converted murderer who wanted to marry, or a converted thief or a liar marrying. For many divorce, for whatever reasons, seems to be the unforgivable sin! Yet such marriages, even of adulterers and adulteresses are sanctified by divine forgiveness - else what do we make of David and Bathsheba? It would appear their marriage was sanctified by divine forgiveness and even used of God in the plan of salvation!

These are things for your consideration and discussion. I'm in no way trying to minimise the trauma and painfulness of divorce, nor undermine the solemnity of marriage. What I do want to emphasise is that divorce, as an outworking of sin, has painful, traumatic and devastating consequences, but our God, our Saviour is far greater than our worst sins, our worst blunders. He and His grace can restore our broken and breaking down marriages and we are to seek His help. Yet above it all we can know the forgiveness of all our sin if we have the Lord Jesus as our Saviour and He can help us in our current, as well as with future relationships and, if He wills, our future marriage. My prayer and desire is that we would all know the joy of secure, loving, God blessed marriages now and in the future. Yet above all that, I pray that we would all know the Lord Jesus as our Saviour and know His help in all we do and say for Him in society and within our marriages.