

Illegitimate Divorce

Matthew 5:31-32
Halifax: 29 February 2004

Introduction:

As we turn our thoughts once again to Jesus' great sermon, the Sermon on the Mount...

- I want you to consider the way Jesus leads us to God in this sermon!
- The great problem with sinful man is that his sin has separated him from God.
 - As a result we don't really deal with God as God.
- I mean, here we are...
 - frail sinful creatures before the face of a majestic holy God who sees the thoughts and intents of our hearts...
 - Here we are,
 - and what should we be like?
 - To use the language of Jesus:
 - We should be poor in spirit,
 - we should be mourning,
 - we should be meek,
 - we should be hungering and thirsting for righteousness,
 - we should be merciful,
 - we should be pure in heart,
 - we should be peace makers,
 - we should be willing to suffer persecution for Him...
- But something is terrible wrong with us because we are not like that!
 - We are in a fog about God!
 - We are far away from Him.
- But Jesus came into the world to bring us back to God!
- And in this Sermon,
 - He is continually bringing us before the face of God...
 - It is like He is saying—
 - You are playing games—
 - You act like God cannot see...
 - You act like He is someone entirely other than who He is.
 - Wake up to reality!

In verses 17-20, Jesus shows us that if we are to be blessed in His kingdom,

- we must measure ourselves by God's standard.
- His kingdom is not about finding ways to dodge God's requirements,
 - It's about fully meeting them... fulfilling them.
 - Until acknowledge who God is,
 - the redemptive work of Jesus won't make sense to you!
 - You'll either be like the Jews who were offended by the cross because they thought they were living up to God's standard (what a fog they were in!)
 - Or you'll be like the Greeks who thought it was all a bunch of foolishness because they denied that God was holy and pure.
- In the Sermon on the Mount,
 - Jesus is labouring to bring us before the true and living God.
 - He is showing us how much we need a Saviour...
 - He is showing us so that we will come to Him for salvation...

Recently we have seen how Jesus brings us before God's face when it comes to murder and adultery.

- He shows you that when you deal with God,
 - Murder is not just about shedding your neighbour's blood;
 - it's about hating him in your heart...
 - God sees your heart.
 - And adultery is not just about going to bed with your neighbour's wife...
 - it's about lusting after her in your heart.
 - God sees your heart.

And this week, we come to the part of Jesus' sermon that sets us straight about divorce.

I. He begins by exposing the wrongful use of divorce.

- A. As with other matters, all Jesus has to do is quote the common sentiment of his day to expose the error!
 - He says,

- Matthew 5:31: “It has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’”
1. Everyone knew what He was talking about!
 - a. In Deuteronomy 24, Moses gave instructions about divorce.
 - He did not endorse divorce, but simply regulated it to curb abuse.
 - b. These regulations required that a certificate be issued.
 - 1) This kept a man from rashly divorcing his wife in a fit of anger.
 - Before a certificate could be issued, there had to be at least two witnesses to sign it.
 - The divorcing man had to find at least two people that would support his decision to divorce his wife.
 - 2) The certificate of divorce also forced the man speak definitively about his intentions.
 - He could not be vague and unclear about what he wanted to do...
 - He had to put it writing that the marriage was over.
 - It kept a man from divorcing his wife and then claiming that he hadn't and accusing her of just running off!
 - He had to be deliberate about it.
 - 3) Moses also prohibited serial marriages...
 - you know, where a couple try other partners for a while and the return to the first one again...
 - He decreed that if a divorced woman were to remarry,
 - she was never permitted to return to her first husband.
 - Her husband had to realise that his action might not be reversible!
 - He needed to think twice before taking such a step!

TRANS> This is what Moses had said, and everyone knew about it...

2. But everyone also knew how this legislation was being applied...
 - a. It was commonly understood that as long as a man (it was tighter for the woman) did the paper work and issued the certificate,
 - he was free to divorce his wife for almost any reason.

- 1) Oh yes, there were those in the school of Shammai who advised against divorce unless there was some immodest behaviour...
 - but in practice, they did not enforce this view...
 - If you wanted to get a divorce for some lessor reason,
 - no one would stop you.
 - 2) The school of Hillel went so far as to actually **teach** that a husband could divorce his wife for **anything** that displeased him!
 - One example that was often given was spoiling the supper by burning it or over-salting it!
 - If they dinner was bad, the wife was out!
 - One Rabbi even taught that if someone prettier came along, you could claim that your wife no longer pleased you and divorce her.
- b. The result was that divorce certificates were being signed all the time for the most trivial of reasons!

B. Sadly, things are not much different for us today!

1. The main difference is that we have to work through a very bureaucratic and money grubbing system of courts and lawyers to get our divorce certificates,
 - and this has led many to dispense with the marriage covenant altogether—
 - Also, in our system, it is just as easy for women as men to get a divorce—
 - But as far as what constitutes **grounds** for divorce—
 - There is not much difference.
 - All you have to do is say you are tired of each other and it is enough.
 - Divorce is even looked at as a good alternative in such a case!
2. This is a very sad situation because it was not that long ago that a very different attitude about marriage was held in our land.
 - a. There was a time when marriage was held in high honour.
 - People were ashamed to break up their marriages—
 - and ashamed to sleep around like dogs with people to whom they were not married...
 - Certainly, there were hypocrites did things in the dark...
 - But that is just it!
 - It was something you were ashamed of and had to do in the dark!

- Breaking up a marriage was looked at the same way that bestiality is looked at today—
 - It wasn't an acceptable option!
 - People did it, but they did it in shame.
 - This all came about because God's people were salt and light in our land.
 - We showed the beauty of God's way and it made those who walked contrary to His way ashamed.

- b. But now all this has changed
 - You can break up your marriage with your head held high!
 - We are no longer good enough to be hypocrites!
 - Now we **approve** of our ugly rebellious conduct.

- c. All this is a sign of God's judgement on our society.
 - 1) When He is displeased with a people,
 - He turns them over to dishonour and wickedness.

 - 2) It is also a sign of God's chastisement and judgement on the Church.
 - a) It is a sign that He is not pleased with many of us.
 - His word tells us that when He abhors a man, he turns him over to immoral women:
 - Prov 22:14: The mouth of an immoral woman *is* a deep pit; He who is abhorred by the LORD will fall there.
 - The immoral man thinks he is free,
 - but he has fallen into a deep pit.
 - We need to wake up and repent!

 - b) My Christian brothers and sisters, do not be deceived!
 - God has declared from the beginning that marriage is to be a permanent bond between one man and one woman.
 - If this is not your standard,
 - Then God is not your God and Jesus is not your Saviour.
 - Jesus restores us to the true God, not to idols.
 - When the day of judgement comes,

- The Lord will declare to you:
- “Depart from Me, for I never knew you.”

TRANS> Listen to Jesus!

- He came to lead us back to God.

II. Jesus declares that illegitimate divorce involves you in adultery upon remarriage.

- The gospels record Jesus speaking about the connection between divorce and adultery four times.
 - He speaks of a variety of adulterous situations:
 - He speaks about a man who divorces his wife and marries another...
 - He speaks about a woman who divorces her husband and marries another...
 - He speaks of the person who marries a divorced person.

A. But here in Matthew 5:32, Jesus speaks about the wife who has been divorced by her husband...

- He says,
 - “Whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.”
 - He gives us a lot to think about here.

1. First, consider what He says about the divorcing husband...

- He says that the divorcing husband **causes** her to commit adultery!
 - a. Jesus is talking about being a stumbling block...
 - He is talking about putting her in a place of temptation to remarry when she shouldn't remarry.
 - b. In His teaching, Jesus has strong things to say about those who make other people stumble!
 - 1) Men, you have been appointed to be the guardian of your home.
 - You are responsible to deal with sin there.
 - You are responsible to command your household in the ways of the Lord.
 - 2) This is a position of honour, but with the honour comes great responsibility.
 - You will be judged more strictly because of it!

- In Matthew 18:6, Jesus says:
 - Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom they come!
 - In Matthew 5, Jesus is saying that you are guilty of causing your wife to sin if you divorce her!
 - You are putting the one whose holiness you are supposed to be protecting in the place of temptation.
 - God will not deal lightly with you for this!
 - He is a jealous God, and you have played the role of Satan, the tempter!
 - Do not think you will escape His wrath!
2. There is, of course, a very obvious exception that Jesus notes...
- He says,
 - “whoever divorces his wife for any reason **except sexual immorality** causes her to commit adultery.”
- a. In a sense, this is really to state the obvious...
- 1) If a man divorces his wife because she commits adultery,
 - his act of divorcing her very obviously does not **cause** her to commit adultery.
 - She has **already** committed adultery!
 - 2) Although this ought to be obvious, these words are not unnecessary.
 - Even with these words inserted,
 - there are some who say that a man is always wrong to divorce his wife, even when she **has** committed adultery;
 - and that a woman is likewise wrong to divorce her husband even if he has committed adultery.
 - 3) Several things show us that this is not so...
 - a) First, in the Old Testament, the penalty for adultery is death.
 - That certainly put an end to the marriage!
 - But if you are living in society that does not exercise capital punishment for adultery,

- which was generally the case in the time of Jesus as the Jews were under the Roman government...
 - you can divorce your spouse and consider them as dead as far as the marriage is concerned.
- b) Secondly, an approved example of divorce is given to us in the case of Joseph—or at least of plans to divorce!
- In Matthew 1:19, the scripture tells us what Joseph decided to do when he discovered that his betrothed wife has conceived a child that was not his own...
 - Mt 1:19: “Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.
 - He is referred to as a **just man** for wanting to divorce her...
 - Incidentally, the word “put away” is the same word that is translated “divorce” in Matthew 5.
- c) Thirdly, we have the example of God Himself divorcing Israel for her adultery.
- Though He bore long with her,
 - the day came when He finally divorced her and removed her from His house:
 - Jeremiah 3:8 refers to this:
 - Jer 3:8 "Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also.
- d) Added to this,
- In Matthew 19:9 Jesus again presents the exception of sexual immorality again...
 - only this time...
 - He speaks about the divorcing husband remarrying...
 - If he divorces and remarries for any reason other than sexual immorality, it is adultery...
 - But if his wife has committed adultery, he is free to divorce her and marry another.
 - It is not adultery for him to do remarry. He has not sinned.

TRANS> Very well then...

b. But what is included under this designation: **sexual immorality** or **fornication**...

1) The word in the original is *porneia*

- *porneia* includes any kind of sexual involvement outside of marriage whether heterosexual, homosexual, or bestial.
- It refers to the whole list of sexual sins catalogued in Lev. 18 and 20

2) Legalists like to try to find loopholes, (“we didn’t go all the way” or “it was just oral sex.”)

- but these passages in Leviticus don’t leave much room to squirm.
 - They speak of fornication as *gaw-law’ er-vaw’* “uncovering nakedness”
 - **Uncovering nakedness** occurs long before intercourse.
 - **Uncovering nakedness** includes any kind of sexual union in which you expose yourself to the touch or sight of one to whom you are not duly married.
 - Jesus shows that such behaviour is a breach of the marriage covenant.
 - It gives your husband or wife the liberty to divorce you and marry another!

TRANS> Thus we have the exception of sexual immorality given to us in Matt 5:32:

- But there is another important point that Jesus brings out in this verse...
 - a point that is rather unsettling when you first look at it!

3. Jesus indicates that the woman who is illegitimately divorced by her husband commits adultery as soon as she marries...

- and so does the man she marries!

a. This hardly seems fair!

- Here is a poor woman who puts too much salt on her husband’s fish...
 - He calls in a couple of buddies and hands her certificate of divorce...
 - And she is on her own for life—
 - If she marries anyone, it is adultery!
 - And, whoever marries her is also guilty of adultery.

- To remain faithful to God,
 - she must bear with loneliness and perhaps poverty—
 - think of a woman in a place where there was no social assistance!

- b. True enough, Jesus says the husband is guilty of making her stumble...
 - But that does not absolve her!
 - If someone causes you to sin, you still must answer for that sin!
 - Satan caused the human race to sin and he bears guilt for that...
 - But that does not take away **our** guilt!
 - We cannot excuse ourselves just because Satan caused us to do it!

TRANS> What is a woman to do in such a situation?

- Well, if God has called her to such a life,
 - she is to bear it all with grace and patience!

 - He calls us to bear with many things for His sake—
 - some are called to bear loneliness, some persecution, some sickness and pain, some poverty...
 - He is able to teach you rich lessons through these things...

- But I do not believe that God has imposed such a burden on a woman who is the victim of an improper divorce.

B. The point here is that the illegitimate divorce is not to be tolerated!

- She is not to accept it and neither is the church!

- 1. If your Christian spouse divorces you, you are not to allow it!
 - a. It's one thing if your spouse is an unbeliever.
 - Paul talks about that in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16.
 - Here he tells you that if an unbeliever wants to break up the marriage,
 - you are to let him or her go.

 - It is actually a command—
 - you are to let him go ahead and leave the marriage if that is what he is minded to do...
 - And Paul goes on to say:

- v. 15: “a brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases.”
 - The word **bondage** he uses here is essentially the same word he uses in verse 39:
 - v. 39 tells you what it means to be bound and unbound,
 - “a wife is **bound** by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.”
 - If you are not bound to your unbelieving divorcing spouse,
 - you are in the same status as the woman whose husband dies...
 - You are “at liberty to be married to whom you wish, only in the Lord.”
- b. But if it is a **believer** who divorces you for some illegitimate reason, it is an entirely different story!
- 1) Paul refers to the divorce of believers in 1 Cor 7:10-11.
- He says:
 - Now to the married I command, *yet* not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from *her* husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to *her* husband. And a husband is not to divorce *his* wife.
- a) The word depart (chorizo) that is used here means divorce...
- This is clear because after departing (divorcing) she is commanded to remain in the unmarried state...
 - You are not “unmarried” if you just walked out.
 - But remember, of course, that divorce in those days was not a long drawn out procedure as it is today.
- b) But notice what is commanded of her...
- She is not to remarry!
 - Jesus told us why...
 - **Remarriage after an illegitimate divorce would be adultery!**
 - She is to remain unmarried so that others can counsel her and try to restore her...
 - Or she is to go and be reconciled to her husband!

- She has sinned by departing,
 - but she makes the sin worse if she goes into another relationship!
 - Then she makes the situation completely irreconcilable by her adultery.
- 2) Do you see how this applies to you if your husband divorces you?
- a) You are not at liberty to go and marry someone else!
 - It doesn't matter who initiated the divorce...
 - If the divorce was illegitimate, remarriage is adultery.
 - b) Your first order of business is to pursue reconciliation.
 - To enter another relationship before you have tried to reconcile is adultery!
2. But how are you to go about demanding reconciliation of your husband?
- a. Well, he's a believer, isn't he?
 - What does Jesus tell you to do if another Christian sins against you?
 - You are to follow the procedure outlined in Matthew 18:15-17:
 - First, you are to go and try to work things out on your own.
 - If that fails, then you are to take one or others with you.
 - If that fails, then all of you are to take it to the church (that is, to the elders who represent the church).
 - b. If even the elders are unable to bring your husband to repentance,
 - **They** are commanded to put him out of the church.
- 1) The Lord commands us in His word to
- "Put away from yourselves the evil person."
 - The **evil** in this case is covenant breaking—
 - Your husband has broken the covenant of marriage by his illegitimate divorce, and he won't repent!
 - Such a person is not to remain as a member of the church.
 - The church is not to tolerate such behaviour!
 - To a church that does, the Bible says:

- 1 Cor. 5:2: “You are puffed up, and have not rather mourned that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you!”
- 2) This step is not to be taken until after every reasonable effort has been made to bring about reconciliation...
 - But if the offender refuses to repent of the illegitimate divorce, he must be removed.
 - A church that refuses to take this step prevents the matter from being brought to a proper closure.
- c. Once this step has been taken and your offending spouse has been removed from the church...
 - **then** you are no longer under bondage...
 - Your spouse has been declared an unbeliever and has departed from you.
 - You are to let him go.
 - You are free to marry another.
 - It is not adultery for you to marry.

TRANS> These are the legalities about divorce and remarriage, and they are very important...

- But I would be remiss if I did not address what might be called a divorcing disposition!

III. Beware of all motions and inclinations toward separating what God has joined together.

- A. Understand that the real offense is not divorce per se,
 - but breaking up what God has joined together.
 - God has joined you to your husband or wife,
 - and what He has joined together, let no man put asunder.
1. Every one of you who are married need to ask yourself:
 - What am I doing to nurture and strengthen my marriage?
 - And what am I doing that tears it apart?
 2. Remember that immediately before addressing the topic of divorce,

- Jesus was speaking about the sin of lusting after someone who is not your wife.
 - This context is important!
 - When you lust after someone else, you are mentally separating yourself from your wife!
 - You are guilty of separating what God has joined together in your mind!
3. Remember that you must answer to God who sees everything you do and think...
- a. If you are all concerned about vindicating yourself in the eyes of other people,
 - it's easy to forget that you must answer to God!
 - b. Every one feels sorry for Sally...
 - Poor Sally! Bill suddenly ran off with Cindy Lou.
 - Bill will definitely have to answer to God for his adultery!
 - But nobody saw all the years that Sally's contentions in the home were like a continual dripping...
 - She made the dog house look attractive!
 - Sally is vindicated in the civil court and the church court and the general opinion court...
 - But she will have to answer to God for her part in separating what God joined together by her contentions!
 - And so will all the other Sallys whose Bills did not run off with Cindy Lou
 - even though their Sallys were just as contentious.
 - And so will all the Bills who dreamed of running off with Cindy Lou, but never did.
 - Those Bills that did not concentrate on leading their Sally's to godliness,
 - but spent their time dreaming about Cindy Lou.
 - You must all answer to God!
- B. Every action with respect to your marriage is either drawing you together with your spouse or driving you apart!
1. The big issue in God's eyes is not the divorce papers,
 - It is about whether you are cleaving to your spouse or separating from him.

2. Every action you take with respect to your marriage is going in one direction or the other...
 - The harsh word is tearing it down.
 - The kind word is building it up.
 - Failure to deal with a festering problem is eroding it.
 - Asking forgiveness and working through problems is repairing it.
 - Making derogatory statements about your spouse to other people is destroying your marriage.
 - Honouring your spouse and hiding his or her faults is strengthening it.
 - Being cold and refusing to listen is driving a wedge between you...
 - Being warm and affectionate and understanding is uniting you.
 - Selfishness regarding the marriage bed is driving your spouse away...
 - Giving yourself in the marriage bed is drawing you together.
 - Avoiding prayer with and for each other is going to have its consequences...
 - God will unite you as you seek His face together.
 - Selfish purchases and selfish demands and selfish use of your time is a way to separate what God has joined together...
 - Honestly looking upon the interests of your husband or your wife is cementing you together with the bonds of Christ.

3. Are you in your heart and your actions moving toward divorce or are you cleaving to your spouse?
 - That is the real question you need to ask yourself.
 - And you cannot honestly answer it without seeing your need for Jesus Christ!
 - If you understand His teaching on this subject...
 - you will be poor in spirit, mourning for your sin, meek, hungering for righteousness, merciful and so on...
 - You will see that you need His grace to help you...
 - And you will see that you need His sacrifice for the remission of your sins.
 - You can't live before God's face without Christ!
 - But with Him, you can do all things!

Conclusion:

Let me conclude by saying that Jesus Himself is your example!

1. You know the book of Hosea?
 - a. In this book, our gracious Lord demonstrates to His people that He has plenty of grounds for divorce.
 - His people had gone away from Him...
 - His people had gone after other gods.
 - b. But what does He do instead of divorcing them?
 - He goes out of His way to restore things.
 - That is the spirit that is to characterise you!
 - c. He goes so far as to send His Son to secure our reconciliation.
 - Relationships in a fallen world require sacrifice!
 - Jesus is the ultimate example of such sacrifice!
2. You show how well you understand **His** love and mercy by the way you respond to your spouse when he or she does wrong or displeases you.
 - a. Do you make every effort to restore the breach?
 - Are you continually doing all you can to build your marriage?
 - b. Even if you have a wife like Hosea,
 - You can look at that as an opportunity to demonstrate in your own small way the love of Christ for you...
 - And you will demonstrate it in your marriage as well as you understand it.
 - c. It may be that things have deteriorated to such an extent that you have grounds for divorce...
 - And if you can't reconcile, that may be what you have to do...
 - But do an attitude check way before it comes to that point!
 - Men, is it your goal to love your wife as Christ loved the church?
 - Wives, are you treating your husbands the way you suppose that you would treat Christ if He were here?

You can't do this on your own!

- Come to Jesus and He will save you.