

Jesus on Divorce

A Real Look at Real Marriage

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Our text this morning comes from the gospel of Matthew chapter 5, and I invite you to turn there. Matthew chapter 5 will be our text this morning looking at verses 31 and 32, where we read Jesus saying,

31 "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Now, if you're just joining us, if you haven't been here with us over the past few weeks, we've just kind of completed a series that started with a message titled, "When Marriage Gets Difficult." We kind of developed that out of verse 31 and saw that difficulties in marriage are to be expected based on what Scripture says. There are so many books in the Bible that address difficulties in marriage or describe marriage difficulties in great detail and yet we saw that marriage is a highly exalted institution of God and therefore it is to be treated with respect. And that marriage in a unique way manifests the glory of Christ and the glory of salvation as the role of wives is compared to the role of church in submitting to Christ, and the role of husbands is compared to Christ loving the church. And so in a proper understanding of the institution of marriage, Christ is woven around every aspect and every role that we could discuss about it and so we should not, we said, we should not look at a spouse apart from Christ. We shouldn't look at marriage apart from Christ. We should see him at the center of it, radiating his glory through all of it, and letting that inform and elevate the esteem that we hold the institution of marriage in and the way that we interact in marriage and what we look for in marriage and every aspect of it.

It's so fundamental to see these things and so we've covered all of that in probably a half dozen messages leading up to today. As a finale sort of to this series, it might seem almost anticlimactic, but actually you'll find that it is the perfect capstone to everything that we have said, we come to this message that I've titled "Jesus on Divorce," and Jesus addressing divorce here in the context of the Sermon on the Mount. And divorce has been made easy in our culture, but that's nothing new; the Pharisees had made it easy and superficial in the first century, and so Jesus was addressing that and correcting it in the

text that we read. But we need to come to this and approach it with the sense that divorce is, in light of everything that we've said about marriage, divorce is an assault on the glory of Christ. Divorce is an assault on our union with Christ. It could be no other way. There could be no other description or understanding of it if the role of the wife is wrapped around Christ, the role of the husband is wrapped around Christ, the institution came from God and Christ affirmed the institution in his earthly ministry, then we have to realize that divorce is far more serious than anything that is, you know, certainly treated by anything in our legal system today. There should be no such thing as easy divorce if it was understood in a biblical concept. And also, beloved, let me just say this as well and just by way of recognition, I realize that, as I've acknowledged throughout this series, that many of you have been impacted by divorce. Some of you carry the scars of divorce. Some of you are living lonely lives on account of divorce. And I'm mindful of that, and I'm not making any judgments on any individual situation that's represented in the room or over the live stream here today. That is not what I'm doing at all. We're talking about the ideal view of marriage and the way that God considers it and the way that we should consider the institution of marriage ourselves, and then and only then will we have a proper view of it.

But divorce, if you're able to call upon your memory for some of the things that we've said in the past few weeks, this exalted view of marriage and Christ and the way that marriage reflects Christ in the church, if you think about what we talked about with the high dignity of women, and that wives come from the realm of women and therefore should be held in high regard, and that husbands are to love their wives sacrificially, and wives are to submit to their husbands, you look at marriage from the fullness of that biblical perspective, and you should realize something, that in a sense, and certainly factoring out sin from the equation, divorce should be something that is utterly unthinkable in light of those great and lofty things that we have seen. If marriage is an exalted institution that's descended from heaven, blessed by Christ, and manifesting the glory of Christ in the respective roles that it has, and husbands are called to love their wives and wives to submit their husbands, in that realm, beloved, isn't it obvious that there is no room for divorce to intrude upon the picture? And yet, here we are, you know, dealing with divorce as a regular sad reality in the world around us. But as Christians, if we're going to think rightly about divorce, we should understand that it is utterly contrary to the plan of God. God has said in Malachi 2:16, "I hate divorce." Jesus said in Matthew 19, verse 6, "What God has joined together, let no man separate." And so there should be a sense in which we realize that when we come to divorce, we're dealing with something foreign that has been injected into the institution by the nature of sin. Sin has assaulted marriage, and that is why we have divorce, but it could not be part of the plan of God, it could not be an expression of the will of God for marriage in any way except in the limited circumstances that we'll see Christ discussing here.

So, with that said, the context of what Jesus says about divorce is something that we need to keep very clearly in mind. Jesus, in Matthew 5:21 to 48, is giving six different illustrations to help us understand the righteousness that God requires and the righteousness that God requires was far different from what the first century audience had been conditioned to understand by the teaching of the Pharisees. Let me just remind you

of this context because it is so vital. Look at Matthew 5, verse 20. Jesus said, "I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." And in verse 48 of Matthew 5, Jesus says, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The standard of God is perfect righteousness, which is something that none of us bring to the table. We need a righteousness from outside ourselves given to us as a gift in salvation, which is found in the Lord Jesus Christ. But that doesn't mean that the standard is lowered simply because we don't meet it. That's one of the great fallacies of a lot of theological systems that think that salvation must not be as difficult as Jesus said because we can't keep the commands that God gives us. No, it's not that, and it's not that the standard is lowered, the high standard simply exposes to us our sin and our need for grace from Christ. And so the standard, the righteousness that God requires, is much higher than what the Pharisees portrayed it as being. The standard is the perfect character of God himself.

Elsewhere in the Bible, you'll remember that it says, God says in multiple places, Old and New Testament, "You shall be holy as I am holy." The holiness that God requires is in keeping with the holiness of his own character and so we approach this with that perspective, realizing that Jesus is restoring the proper view of marriage in his teaching from the distortions that the Pharisees had injected into it. There was a debate, you may recall that we described briefly, there was a debate that between two different rabbis, schools of rabbis in Jesus' day, one said that you could divorce for any reason, the other more conservative school said, "Well, you can only divorce in cases of adultery." And that's kind of the cultural background, the current background, the historical background behind what Jesus is teaching here.

I'm going to make this simple today, simplify my teaching on this text from even ways that I've done it in the past. We're going to break it into three basic points here this morning. First of all, I just want to consider Jesus on divorce. We'll look at that from verse 32. And then secondly, we're going to look briefly at the Old Testament teaching on adultery, the Old Testament teaching on adultery, because I think it opens up to us what Jesus is doing and why he does it. And then thirdly, we'll just address some practical questions on marriage and divorce to wrap up our time and then Tuesday we'll move on to the next section on the Sermon on the Mount. So this is the last teaching that I intend to give on marriage, at least in this series.

So Jesus on divorce, point number one: Jesus treated marriage and divorce as a key area of righteousness, and it comes right on the heels of his prior teaching about the nature of adultery and lust. We should look at that just to remind ourselves of the context, and remember that sexual immorality, unrepentant sexual immorality is a sure mark of someone who is not a Christian, it is a sure mark of someone who is not going to heaven unless they repent of their sins and turn to Christ. We looked at that from other passages in Scripture. We're not going to review those today. But Jesus was speaking on lust before he spoke on marriage.

Look at 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." The righteousness that God requires is a heart righteousness. God looks on the heart, Scripture tells us, over and over and over again. And so a mere external avoidance of physical carnality is not the necessary mark of true righteousness; someone could avoid physical immorality and be full of hidden private corruption in his heart that he feeds and fantasizes over. And so we need to see that Jesus is looking to purify our hearts and to call us to a higher righteousness than most of us are accustomed to think about and it's from that teaching on lust and adultery that Jesus goes into his teaching on marriage and divorce, so that he says in verse 32, let's review it again. Jesus says, "But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

And so, my friends, with those words, Jesus pronounces his judgment and condemnation on easy divorce. He was judging and condemning the easy divorce that was practiced in some Jewish circles in his day, and nothing has changed. The ease with which divorce is obtained, you know, that you've all seen, maybe you have, you know, advertisements from attorneys, \$99, \$299, no-fault divorce and all of that, it's really easy to get out of. You should look at that and say, that is so contrary and such an assault on the institution of marriage; to think that what is so sacred in the sight of God, so sacred in the revelation of God, could so easily be dispensed is a sign of how far away from God we have turned in our legal system and in the way that we practice things, and we need to be very candid that this is prevalent within the Christian church as well. And it's, you know, I can't tell you how often I hear from people in other churches pleading with me to give them some perspective. "Why won't my church, why won't the leadership or my pastor deal with this situation in my marriage?" Well, in part it's because a wrong view of marriage is driving things as well as a wrong view of church discipline, but that's a matter for another time.

What is Jesus saying here in verse 32? Let's keep it simple today. Let's keep it very simple. His general rule, his general proclamation is that divorce and remarriage are wrong, that they are sinful, it is a violation of the plan of God. If you take out the exception clause just to see the flow of his thought, he says, "everyone who divorces his wife makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." That's the broad rule, and you need to understand the broad rule before you get to the exception, and one of the things that's very wearying to me, as you read literature on biblical interpretation about this, is that people will expound for chapters and chapters, if not books, on divorce and remarriage are wrong, divorce and remarriage are okay, and they just go on and on, and they just kind of gloss over the general principle that Jesus is making, that divorce and remarriage are wrong. And on a very simple level, beloved, that means that unhappiness in your marriage is not a sufficient grounds for divorce. If it was, then we would just go with the easy divorce and say, "I'm not happy here anymore, my marriage is over," and we do the paperwork and everything, and you move on. But that's not at all how God views it. And you and I, as believers in Christ, and us as a local body, a local church, we have to constantly come back and remember that we are driven by different philosophies, there are different principles, there are different affections that drive us. We believe God. We believe his word. We submit to the authority of his word, and when his word is clear on these things, then we're not at liberty to violate them and

maintain our profession as Christians. And so we accept what Jesus says. We accept the honor of the institution of marriage and realize that that means that there are boundaries put around it to protect it.

Now, some teachers declare that all divorce and all remarriage is wrong, is sinful. Others allow for divorce but forbid all remarriage. The only question that matters for us today is this, is what does Jesus say about it? Does Jesus give an exception to that general rule in his teaching or not? And he does. In verse 32 he says it, "whoever divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery." So when sexual immorality is injected into the marriage relationship, then there's another set of considerations that come into play, and that's what we're going to consider here briefly this morning. And let me just give a word about this. The two words in our text here translated sexual immorality, it comes from a single term, *pornea*, in the Greek, and that's a broad term for all kinds of sexual immorality. The English language gets its word pornography from this Greek word. And so it's a broad term, and Jesus says that when sexual immorality is injected into the marriage relationship, then a different analysis applies to what is said. The general ban on divorce does not apply in the presence of sexual immorality. This could be all manner of prolonged, unrepentant sexual sin that is covered by this, a broad term here.

Now why would sexual sin be an exception, that's the question, and if we understand why sexual sin is an exception, then we'll have even greater clarity on what the nature of the institution of marriage and what God called marriage to be. So let's go to our second point and consider the Old Testament on adultery. The Old Testament on adultery. What we need to do here, very crucial for us to do, is to compare Scripture with Scripture for guidance and Jesus gave us a broad spotlight of clarity before we ever got to this section in verses 21 to 48 that can help us guide our thinking into the proper interpretation of the passage. Jesus said in verse 17, chapter 5, verse 17, if you'll look there with me, Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." That is a very crucial text for interpreting all of Scripture. It's very crucial for understanding what we have here today. Beloved, follow me on this very basic and simple point. What Jesus is saying there is that his life and ministry are a fulfillment of what the Old Testament required so that the Old Testament prophesied of a suffering Messiah who would come, a sin-bearing Messiah, Jesus says, "I'm the one to do that, I'm the one to fulfill that," broadly speaking. But understand also that when Jesus is teaching, in the teaching that Jesus gives, and not only him, but in his appointed apostles, he is teaching in a manner that is perfectly consistent with what was given in the Old Testament before Jesus came to earth. Let me say that again, because that's very important. Jesus' teaching is consistent with the spirit of the Old Testament. He is not contradicting the Old Testament in what he teaches, because the Old Testament is the word of God, just like the word of Jesus is the word of God, just like the rest of the New Testament is the word of God. There is a divine congruity, there is a consistency between the Old and New Testaments so that we should understand that the spirit of what Jesus is teaching at any given point is going to find points of consistency with what the Old Testament taught.

Now, you're going to see why that is so very important because, let's go back, let's turn back to the Old Testament so you see this. I was just going to read the text, but I think we'll just take a little time here. Go back to Exodus chapter 20. Go back to Exodus chapter 20, where we find the first iteration of the Ten Commandments in Exodus chapter 20 and the Ten Commandments, as we saw in our series on the Ten Commandments a couple of years ago, the Ten Commandments are an expression of the eternal moral law of God applicable to all people in all places, and the Ten Commandments are a codification, they are a written code of the moral law that existed that God imprinted on the hearts of men before the days of Moses. Now, in that we find, in those Ten commandments we find in Exodus 20, we find in verse 14 the statement, "You shall not commit adultery." The word of God, the law of God, the moral law of God says that there are boundaries, there is a fence that you shall not cross. You shall not enter into the realm of adultery at all. And we know, even from the Ten Commandments, that this was more than simply the outward physical act of married people engaging in relations with someone other than their spouse. We know that because when we look down in verse 17, we find the convicting words, the words that were convicting to the Apostle Paul and the broad principle where we read, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife." The Ten Commandments, the moral law of God, set a boundary around the marriage relationship so that not only do you not violate the boundary with the physical act of adultery, you are forbidden in your heart to even desire to want to go that way. The mere desire for another man's wife, the mere desire for an act of adultery is a violation of the moral law of God, and Jesus, through the New Testament writings in the book of James, says, "If you've violated one commandment, you've violated them all, you've broken the commandments of God, and therefore you are a lawbreaker regardless of whatever kind of defense you might make." So that the coveting for adultery is sinful and a breaking of the law of God. The actual act is expressly forbidden. And as we saw in our series, the fullness of the teaching of Scripture around this commandment forbids everything homosexual, forbids everything premarital by way of premarital sex, forbids all of the permissive environment in which we live, It's really a cause for fear and trembling when you realize the environment in which we live, how hostile it is to the revealed law of God, number one, and then to just realize that we've all violated this in one way or another, and to realize that God's law cannot be broken. It's no wonder Christ had to come to save us. We could never save ourselves if it was a matter of conforming ourselves to this standard.

Now, Ten Commandments, moral law of God, adultery clearly forbidden. Now, in keeping with the Old Testament, we don't just stop there, you look elsewhere in the law of Moses. You know, Moses was the author of the first five books of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. So there's the same human author being inspired by the same Holy Spirit, giving an expansive realm of revelation, which is all internally consistent so that if we look at the rest of, if we continue reading in the Law of Moses, we see the interpretation and the significance that God himself attaches to the command, "You shall not commit adultery." We have been conditioned by the media and the entertainment around us to treat it so lightly and so casually, and shame on us if we take in entertainment that celebrates and glorifies adultery or portrays it in any kind of favorable light and we drink that in as something to entertain us. It should be repulsive to

us. It should be utterly unthinkable to us to engage in any kind of so-called entertainment that has that as a theme that's presented in a favorable light, let alone portrayed My goodness, it's frightening to think about such things.

And then we go on and we read in Moses that adultery was a capital offense. Adultery was so serious that contrary to the lighthearted way that it's dealt with today, you start from God's perspective, you start from God's word, and you're sobered very quickly about the reality of it. Look at Leviticus 20. Leviticus chapter 20, again, part of the law of Moses, written in close chronological proximity with the Ten Commandments that God gave. In Exodus chapter 20, verse 8, we read, "Keep my statutes and do them; I am the LORD who sanctifies you. For anyone who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death; he has cursed his father or his mother; his blood is upon him." And so we see that God requires the death penalty for a violation of the fifth commandment to honor your father and mother. God is showing us the holiness, the sanctified nature, the set-apart nature of the law of God and awakening our minds to the sobriety of what it is and what it says.

Just prior in verse 7, to remind you of, you know, to just point out that what I was saying earlier, we read, "Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God." "Be holy for I am holy," in other words. And so this, this coming immediately on the heels of the manner in which the law of God was revealed with thunder and darkness and thick clouds and Moses up on the mountains and people trembling at the sight of it all, God showing by outward manifestation the sobriety of the written revelation that he was giving and causing and provoking fear in their hearts by what was happening around them in the circumstances, in that context, beloved, look at verse 10. "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death." You can read something similar if you'll turn to Deuteronomy 22 with me for just a moment. Deuteronomy 22. We read in verse 22, Deuteronomy 22:22. I'll give you time, I hear those pages turning, I'll give you time to catch up with me. Don't want you to miss this. "If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel."

Now, this is an important point of transition in the message here and in the understanding that I believe is the right understanding of the words of Jesus in Matthew 5. What we find in the Old Testament is God's declaration that the one who commits adultery deserves death, and that in the theocratic operation of the kingdom at that time, people could legitimately be put to death for adultery because it is a violation of the institution of marriage and of the law of God. And that is God's perspective on adultery. That is the spirit of it all. And in a broader sense, if you remember that in Ezekiel 18, verse 4, it says, "the soul that sins shall die," we realize that we're like people whose immune systems have been compromised, and we're just walking into a realm that brings us death. That's how serious it is. That's how vulnerable we are. That's how great the guilt of adultery is. And so God views adultery as something that is worthy of death and actually prescribed in the Old Testament times in the kingdom of Israel that adulterers could legitimately be put to death for their violation of their marriage covenant.

Now, keep that in mind. Keep the spirit of that in mind as we go back to Matthew 5. By the time of Jesus, Jews could not conduct the death penalty in their own realm. You see that reflected when Pilate wanted... They were calling for Jesus to be crucified, Pilate said, "I'm not going to do it." They said, you know, "We want him to die." "You do it yourself." "We can't do it. We don't have that authority." The Jews lived in Jesus' day in a secular society under the Roman Empire, not a theocratic kingdom. They didn't have the authority to carry out the death penalty but God still condemned adultery as expressed in his moral law as shown by nothing changed about the spirit with which, the holiness with which God had revealed his whole consideration of adultery. It's still serious even if the death penalty itself is not practiced as it's obviously not practiced in our day. We should not confuse the absence of the death penalty for the act with the way that God views the act. God views this as a matter of utmost sobriety. What that means, beloved, is this, is that in the fullness of the revelation of God, adultery is a capital crime that strikes at the heart of marriage. When I say it's a capital crime, I'm not advocating for a return to the practice of the death penalty on adultery. I'm simply showing forth the spirit of the Scripture about it because that's what we're doing, we're teaching Scripture, we're giving voice to God's word, we're talking about his institution of marriage and how God views it and what God views as the right consequence of disregarding, violating, stabbing against the institution that he created for the good of man. That's what we're talking about here. We were just giving voice to God and viewing it from his perspective and as we do that, we get a perspective and clarity on the teaching of Jesus here. That's why adultery is legitimate grounds for divorce.

Divorce, in the context of sexual immorality, watch this, it actually upholds the sanctity of marriage. It upholds the sanctity of marriage. Let me quote a couple of commentators briefly for you. Sinclair Ferguson says this, he says, "Jesus' teaching seems to suggest the rightness of acting as if the death penalty had been carried out. Although that penalty is no longer used, its effect is still relevant." And so the effect of adultery, the spirit of it, is as though the death penalty had been carried out. And we know from Romans 7, for example, and in other places, that if the husband has died, the wife is free to remarry. Keep that in mind. Martin Lloyd-Jones says this, "The person who is guilty of adultery has broken the bond and has become united to another. The link has gone. The one flesh no longer obtains, and therefore divorce is legitimate. A man who finds himself in that position is entitled to divorce his wife, and the wife is entitled to divorce the husband."

Let me give you a comparison from Scripture that will help you if you'll turn to Genesis chapter 9. Genesis chapter 9. This is a comparison. This is an analogy to support the proposition that divorce is a means of upholding the sanctity of marriage when adultery has entered in, when sexual immorality has entered into the relationship. In Genesis chapter 9, God is authorizing the death penalty for the act of murder. He says in verse 6, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." Now, contrary to the liberal politics of our day, the death penalty upholds and makes even more sacred the sanctity of life by saying that if you take away a life, you will lose your life also, so that there is a boundary, there is a fence set around the sanctity of life so that if you violate that, God authorizes human government to execute

the one, after proper procedures have explored the circumstances, to execute the one who has done it. The fear of the punishment instills in people the sanctity of life. Even though the argument is raised, "Well, if you're such a proponent of life, how can you argue for the death penalty? You think someone should be killed. How's that protecting life?" Well, that's a convoluted distortion and ignoring of the whole context that says life is so sacred that you forfeit your life if you take someone else's life and thereby the sanctity of life is upheld.

Now, beloved, just as the death penalty upholds the sanctity of life in the case of premeditated murder, for example, so divorce in the case of adultery upholds the sanctity of marriage. It shows that when adultery is entered in, that that person has committed a capital crime in the eyes of God, that divorce is a proper method because marriage by God was intended to be exclusive, permanent, intimate, and without separation. What God has joined together, let no man separate. Well, then, when you violate that, then you have forfeited your right to the protection of marriage, just as the murderer forfeits the protection of his life by what he has done so that a proper view of marriage makes adultery unthinkable, and when you have both of those things in their proper perspectives, then you see why adultery would be proper grounds for divorce without it all being inconsistent on the high view of marriage. We have a high view of life, Bible affirms the death penalty. We have a high view of marriage, Bible affirms divorce in the case of adultery. And if the divorce was not for immorality in the words of Jesus, remarriage is forbidden, as we see there in verse 32.

What have we seen here? What is the consequence of what we've seen here? Jesus has protected the sanctity of marriage on both sides of the equation. He has rejected all frivolous grounds for marriage. You can't get divorced simply because you're unhappy. Thus, unbiblical divorce is proper grounds for church discipline. Thankfully, we haven't had to deal with that yet in the life of our body, but do understand that church discipline, the authority of the local church, is rightly exercised when a member is pursuing an unbiblical divorce. But on the other side, Jesus protects the sanctity of marriage by saying that when adultery, when sexual immorality has been injected into the marriage, the whole dynamic has changed. You, as the provoking spouse of that change, are now subject to losing the privilege of marriage. Christ permits divorce in the presence of sexual sin, and he does so consistent with the spirit of Old Testament teaching. In some ways, divorce is a mercy because it's given in place of the death penalty that was to be exercised on adultery. But nobody, nobody, nobody, nobody, nobody, and people do this, this is why I have to emphasize it, nobody should be saying, "Oh, okay, so if I commit divorce or if I commit adultery, I can get out of my marriage by way of divorce, right?" That's no way to think. That kind of thinking comes from Satan. That kind of mindset does not come from a regenerate mind. That's the thinking of someone who has no regard for the holiness of God, the law of God, no desire to obey God, thoroughly dominated by sinful considerations so that there's much bigger questions raised than how can I get out of my marriage? You wouldn't commit a sin in order to get a result you want if you're living according to the righteousness that God requires. Your righteousness has to exceed that of the Pharisees. You're to be perfect as your Father is perfect. How is it possible to contemplate adultery as a means of getting out of a marriage? It's all unthinkable.

And so while we have deliberately not tried to deal with every knotty issue that could come up from this passage, we're content with the simplicity of the basic principles that are right there on the surface of the text. Marriage is sanctified by God, and therefore is to be honored, and there is no consideration for divorce, except when someone has injected sexual immorality into the relationship. On that limited exception in the teaching of Jesus, there are other considerations that come into play. God has revealed his attitude toward divorce in the Old Testament, and the spirit of that attitude is expressed in allowing divorce for the innocent partner when sexual immorality has been injected into it. That's the fullness of what Jesus is saying here. He permits divorce in the presence of sexual sin.

Now, thirdly, let's move on and just deal with a few practical questions here this morning and let me start with this one. It's actually number three in my notes, but I'm going to start with this one. One of the reasons that I chose to keep it simple this morning and just focus on those two principles is this, is that if there are a million marriages under consideration, there are a million different difficulties, and hard questions related to the application of those particular principles that we just announced. There are so many complexities to the way that these things work out in practice, and our church recognizes that and accounts for that. If your situation is complicated, what God has done is, in the context of the local church, God has given elders to the local church to help guide you and understand the right application of biblical principles. So that, you know, without going into details, there's this history one, two, three, and I did one, two, but my spouse did four, five, and six, and so it's just a tangled mess. Yes, it is a tangled mess. That's what sin leaves you with, is tangled messes. And so it is the responsibility, it is the privilege, it is the prerogative of the elders of the church to have the authority and responsibility to help church members rightly apply biblical principles to their specific marital difficulties. No one, no Christian that is a part of a local church should unilaterally pursue divorce with no consultation or input from their elders. That should not happen because these things are so profound, they are so serious, they are so subject to the serious scrutiny and judgment of God that there should be the participation in your life of the elders. If you've become a member of the elders that you publicly pledged to be in submission to, something that serious and sober is something that should be guided by the elders that God has given to you. That's your protection in this, so that a person who truly fears God and is faced with a marriage that has been ravaged by adultery should be seeking the counsel of their elders and let God lead you and guide you through the elders that he has given to you. It's not something to be done unilaterally and one of the reasons for that, we're being very practical here, is if you've been hurt in marriage and you're wondering about divorce, everything that you think is biased in your own favor. You need someone objective who loves you but can speak truth to you to help you see things in a right perspective and go forward like that. And so, so no, a church member should not unilaterally pursue divorce. Even if it seems like the grounds are clear, the elders need to be involved in something like that.

Now secondly, we've said so much about sexual sin here, let me ask this second question, ask and answer it. How does forgiveness play into this? How does forgiveness relate to a

spouse that has been guilty of sexual sin? That's a critical question and I think it's fair to answer it in this way, beloved. Jesus here does not command divorce in this situation. He does not command divorce. He simply says that divorce is permitted if the situation cannot be resolved but, beloved, we should think about it from this perspective as well, we should think about it from a New Testament perspective, we should think about it from other aspects of the life and work of Jesus Christ. We are all sinners who all have been forgiven. If we are Christians, we have been forgiven a great debt of sin by the one that we've offended. We have sinned against Christ and he has graciously forgiven us of all of our sins and even covered them at his own initiative with his own precious blood. That affects the way that we think about and how we respond to people that have sinned against us, broadly speaking so that, staying in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, look at Matthew 5, verse 7, where we read, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." Chapter 6, verse 14, "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." There's a spirit of mercy at the heart of true Christianity. There's a spirit of peacemaking in the heart of a true believer. There's a spirit of desiring reconciliation that is the manifestation of true Christianity. 2 Corinthians 5, Paul speaks about, we've been given a ministry of reconciliation so that it is perfectly appropriate for the first impulse of the offended spouse to say is there a way of forgiveness forward here? Is there a way to show mercy here if the spouse is repentant?

Beloved, Christian marriage can survive adultery, and many Christian marriages have survived adultery. It's not easy, but mercy and forgiveness in the face of one who has sinned against you is very Christ-like. When we went before Christ confessing our sins, asking him to save us, we were in the presence of him, and we deserved nothing. We had only an appeal to mercy to make, only an appeal to his promise, "You said you'd forgive if I came to you. I'm coming without any claim to anything, Lord. Just be merciful to me, the sinner." Well, if you and I have been on the receiving end of mercy from Christ, then somewhere in the sorting out of the whole mess that sexual sin creates, is a recognition that, a question that says, "Is there room for me to exercise mercy here, to forgive, to avoid adultery even though it's available to me? Divorce, to avoid divorce even though it's available to me?" Divorce is not commanded, it's permitted.

Now, thirdly, is adultery the only grounds for divorce, and the answer to that is no, it's not the only grounds for divorce. Jesus in, look, in two verses here in Matthew 5, it's obvious that Jesus was not giving a comprehensive catalog to everything about divorce that could ever be said with no remainder left over. As you read on in Scripture, if you go to 1 Corinthians 7, let's look there, 1 Corinthians 7, that Paul the Apostle, an authorized representative who could speak on behalf of Christ, addressed another consideration that was not the subject within the purview of what Jesus was saying in Matthew 5. In 1 Corinthians 7, beginning in verse 12, we read this. Paul says, "To the rest I say (I, not the Lord)," what he means by that is, "I'm giving you something new that the Lord did not address." It has all the equal authority of the word of God. He's simply saying that, "I'm saying this and building upon what Christ said. Christ did not address this situation during his earthly ministry and his teaching." So that he's now going to address, well,

what about when there's an unbeliever and a believer that are married together? Verse 12, "if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him." And so if you find yourself in a mixed marriage, perhaps you were converted after marriage and your spouse is not yet in the Lord, if your spouse is happy to live with you, then you should stay in that marriage. That's the biblical teaching on it. But he goes on in verse 14 and he says, he says, "the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife," made holy meaning he's set apart, he's set apart for blessing because of his wife. "The unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy." Your presence as a believing spouse in an otherwise unbelieving household communicates and is a vessel of spiritual blessing to those in your household who are not believers.

Stay there, Scripture says, but then he goes on and addresses another consideration, but what if the spouse doesn't want that? Verse 15, "But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace." If you are a Christian in the sad situation of being married to an unbeliever, and that unbeliever rejects your marriage, and leaves you, not you leaving him, but the unbeliever leaves you, Scripture says that is proper grounds for divorce. You're called to peace. You don't have to live under the bondage of that situation. If the unbelieving spouse leaves, the Christian is to let him or her go. You're commanded to let them go, not hang on, not cling to it. It's a command in the original language, "let it be so." Let them go. And again, in the context of the local church, let your elders help you sort through the meaning of it all.

Now let's go to the fourth and final point that I have here for today. What about my prior unbiblical divorce? Maybe you pursued an unbiblical divorce, now you're remarried, you're walking with Christ now and you've got that hanging in your past. Maybe you were unbiblically divorced and you're feeling the pain of that. Let me just approach it from this perspective. Let's say that you're the one who did it. You pursued the unbiblical divorce. You committed the adultery. You've been remarried. You now find yourself in a new marriage bond that has taken effect. What about that? What about the death penalty on adultery? Well, let's not minimize things. You know, if you committed adultery, you pursued an unbiblical divorce, my friend, you have sinned and that is serious. But let me also say this, when it comes to being a sinner who's committed serious sin, welcome to the club. We're all in that boat. We're all charter members of the club of sinners just different manifestations of the way that you and I have sinned. And in that situation, if you feel the weight of saying, "That is what I did, and I recognize now that it was wrong, and I can't undo it," you should not pursue an unbiblical divorce now just because you had a prior one. You say, "I can't undo this. I can't fix this." Welcome to the entire point of Christian salvation, beloved. The whole point is that Christ came to save sinners who were lost, who were dead in sin, who had broken the law of God. Every human being since Adam falls into that category. We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And so, rather than protesting our innocence, saying, "Well, you know, it wasn't that bad." No, we just embrace the fact that we've sinned, we've fallen short of the glory of

God, and then we go to Christ and we go beyond issues of marriage to the issue of my soul standing in solitude alone before a holy God and asking who can bridge the gap between me and him, and when you ask the question like that, then you're brought into the realm of grace and the realm of Christ.

Listen as I read to you 1 Timothy 1, beginning in verse 15. "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason," Paul says, "that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life." The point is, Paul was a blasphemer and a murderer of Christians before his conversion, and Christ showed mercy to him, saved him, forgave him, and appointed him as an apostle and representative of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says, "If Christ did that for me, understand that see in me an example for you. You've sinned badly, look at what he did to me. Look how he showed mercy to me, he'll show the same mercy to you. I'm a worse sinner than you are, he showed mercy to me, he'll show mercy to you." That's the argument.

Jesus Christ forgives all kinds of sinners, including adulterers, including those who have broken the vows of marriage and, my friend, he invites you to come. Go to him. Go to Christ in humble confession. He received Paul. He'll receive you. You can be restored to God. Christ didn't come just to declare judgment on easy divorce and adultery. He came for a greater purpose. He came to save sinners. And so when you come to him, you go to him as a guilty sinner, you're on the terrain of grace. He'll receive you. He'll forgive you. You can be restored to God. And once you're restored, then what? Beloved, as Jesus said, "Go and sin no more."

Let's pray together.

Gracious God, to speak on the difficulties of marriage and relationship issues like this is to touch on raw nerves and raw hurts and old scars and all of that. You know that, Lord. May you, by your Spirit, graciously apply your word to the help and health of each soul before us today. In Jesus' name, amen.

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