



Matthew: The King and His Kingdoms

Series: The Manifesto of the King, Part 13: The Blessedness and Beauty of Marriage

Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-9

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Introduction

The text that we are looking at this morning is a testimony to the worth of sequential, expository preaching, of preaching through the Word of God and dealing with the texts as they come rather than preaching themes and passages that are comfortable and easy to teach. If that's what we were after we would preach John 3:16 every single week. But desiring to preach through the whole counsel of God requires that we deal with tough texts, tough texts with tough application. The words that we are looking at from Jesus this morning in the Sermon on the Mount are, quite frankly, going to be hard for us to hear. All of us who are married, regardless of the circumstances, are going to be brought face-to-face with how far short we have fallen of the Divine diagram for marriage and how desperately we need a Savior. Jesus is showing us this morning the proper view that His disciples are to have of marriage and divorce.

Remember again what Jesus is doing here. He had said to His disciples: For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus called for a righteousness that exceeded the Pharisees not in degree but in kind. He called for a righteousness that is born of a regenerate heart, born of faith, born of love to God. True righteousness, Jesus says, is the outgrowth of a saved heart and soul, of a man or a woman made new by the power of God and the cleansing blood of Christ – a righteousness born of gratitude and love. It goes beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the law.

Jesus instructions in the Sermon on the Mount are not a new, external legal code to follow. Rather they are illustrations and expectations of the ways of an obedient heart before the Lord. The righteousness of Christ's disciples surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees because it is rooted in a heart for God – a heart made alive and obedient and sensitive and submitted to God. The kind of righteousness of which Jesus spoke refers to the practical, moral outworking of character transformed by submission to the gospel of Jesus

Christ. So this morning, Jesus is laying out for his disciples the spirit of the Law regarding marriage and divorce. He is showing us how His disciples are to properly understand and walk in God's commands regarding marriage. So let's look this morning at Jesus' words and let's start by understanding:

1) The Context of Christ's Words (Matt. 5:31; 19:3)

Jesus says in verse 31: "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' " (Matthew 5:31, ESV) Now, why would Jesus go right into a discussion on divorce after just talking about lust desire? It is evident that Jesus is tying this statement to the one that went before it by the use of the word "also." You have heard this and you have also heard this... Why the connection? Well, let me explain.

In order to avoid a charge of adultery, in order to avoid a letter of the law charge of adultery, the Pharisees and scribes had adopted a liberalized view of marriage and divorce. Basically it amounted to this: if a man wanted to divorce his wife, he need only have to give her the proper paperwork and the deed was done. Give her a certificate of divorce and that was it. Marriage was held in very low esteem. It just simply was not valued.

It is not unlike our own society. If we are honest, we have to admit that ours is a throw-away society when it comes to relationships – not just marriages, but all relationships. Many give up too easily on spouses, children, parents, friends, and siblings, both in blood families and church families. When a relationship no longer does it for us, when it is no longer enjoyable, when it is no longer "working for me", when it requires "too much" we are so quick to get rid of it, no matter what the relationship is – but especially marriage.

So the Jews of Jesus day had been told that the man who wants to divorce his wife must give her a certificate of divorce and that was it. The problem was, that they were being told was not exactly true. The Old Testament passage that this erroneous view came from was Deuteronomy 24:1-4. (Deuteronomy 24:1-4, ESV)

The gist of this passage is clear, isn't it? What Moses was saying was that if a man finds some indecency in his wife (something short of adultery, since the penalty for that was death) and he

divorces her, giving her a certificate of divorce, and she then marries someone else who in time either divorces her or dies, then the first husband was not allowed to remarry her. Why was this instruction given?

This instruction by Moses does not provide for divorce, much less command divorce, nor does it make divorce consequential in any way. It is rather the statement of a very narrow and specific law that was given to deal with the matter of divorce which had become a major issue. God's Word and God's spokesman, Moses, acknowledged divorce as inevitable in a sin-filled world but they did not give blanket legitimacy to divorce. Far from approving divorce, it is a strong warning against it. The certificate of divorce mentioned here did not make the divorce right, it only offered some protection to the woman in a society that often devalued women. This instruction was intended to dissuade people from quick and instant divorce, to keep women from being passed around like chattel, and to offer some protection to the woman that was cast out. It was also intended to make divorce something formal, something serious, and not to be undertaken lightly. In other words, marriage was not to be something that you could just walk in and out of at will.

The problem is that the Jews of Jesus' day ignored the heart of Deut 24 and had seized upon the word "Indecency" and used it as a justification for all sorts of divorce. They interpreted Deut. 24 as advocating divorce. Rather than esteeming marriage, they became consumed with the grounds for divorce. How can I get rid of my wife? How can I get free of this marriage? In the quest to discover the proper grounds for divorce, there arose two main schools of thought. Rabbi Shammai took what was considered a strict view. His view was that indecency implied some grave matrimonial offense, some kind of inappropriate sexual conduct that stopped short of adultery. Rabbi Hillel, on the other hand, advocated a very permissive view of indecency. In Hillel's view, men could divorce their wives for anything from burning his breakfast, putting too much salt on his food, showing disrespect to him, speaking disrespectfully of her husband's parents in his presence, speaking to a man on the street, or even just lost interest in her. Rabbi Akiba went so far as to say that a man could divorce his wife if he found another woman who was more beautiful. You can guess which view was most popular in Jesus' day. It was Hillel's. So this low view of marriage, this easy divorce, allowed for men to stack up wife upon wife upon wife. It allowed for serial breaking of the marriage covenant, which Jesus describes as resulting in adultery. It was this debate over what were acceptable reasons for divorce that led to the Jesus' clearer explanation of this over in Matthew 19. We need to look at that text alongside of these words in Matthew 5. In Matthew 19, true to form, the Pharisees approached Jesus seeking to trap him, to make him declare sides in the divorce debate: "And

Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” ” (Matthew 19:3, ESV) They were looking for Christ to give them his view regarding what were legitimate reasons for divorce. But instead of falling into their debate, instead of being preoccupied with the grounds of divorce, Jesus instead focuses on

2) The Divine Blueprint and Beauty of Marriage (Matthew 5:32; 19:4-9)

Jesus answered them saying, (Matthew 19:4–6, ESV) In essence, Jesus says to them, “Haven’t you guys ever read Genesis? If you have you certainly didn’t understand it.” The question of when divorce is permissible and justified is the question of the Pharisee – it misses the heart of the whole thing. They missed the weight, the gravity, the truth about marriage – what it is and what it represents – they were asking the wrong question. The preoccupation of the disciple of Christ is the divine plan and beauty of marriage. It the desire to know what God intended in marriage and then to pursue that ideal by His grace. Jesus tells us what the divine intent in marriage is.

Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female? – Marriage, He says, is God’s plan. From the very beginning God ordained marriage. He created it and it is why he made mankind male and female. Marriage is good and holy and God intended it to be a wonderful blessing for mankind. That is what Jesus is saying. So beautiful is marriage, so excellent is it, that marriage is the very picture that God uses to describe, the prism through which God illustrates the covenant relationship God has with His people through out the OT and which Christ has with His Church. The reason that God uses this picture of marriage to illustrate his relationship with his people is because marriage is more than a contract, more than a convenience – marriage is a covenant, a sacred covenant. That much is made clear by the words that are used to describe it – leaving, cleaving, one flesh. That is the language of covenant. Jesus reminds us that God’s design for marriage is this:

A man shall leave his father and his mother—The first step in establishing the marriage covenant is the leaving of all other relationships, including the closest ones of father and mother. All other relationships, all lesser relationships must yield to this newly formed marital relationship. A leaving behind of every other relationship must take place and the marriage relationship takes precedence over every other earthly relationship and pursuit – that includes

family, jobs, hobbies, friends, past pursuits, everything. This principle of leaving applies to our own covenant relationship with God in Christ. (Matthew 4:21–22, ESV) Like we saw on Wednesday, Paul described the salvation of the Thessalonians describing how they turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ” (1 Thessalonians 1:9, ESV) In the divine picture of marriage, there is a leaving of the old life, a decisive break with our old lives. We leave and we cleave...

A man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast (or cleave) to his wife – This idea of holding fast or cleaving to someone is at the very heart of covenant faithfulness to one another. The Hebrew word for cleave is the idea of being permanently glued or joined together, to stick with someone. It is one of those words that is used to describe the idea of exclusivity and permanence. Just as God commits Himself to His people, joins Himself to His people throughout Scripture saying: “I will be your God and you shall be my people” – this at the very heart of marriage. Holding nothing back, I am exclusively, loyally, faithfully, utterly, entirely and permanently yours. That is the idea of cleaving. At the root of it all is covenant love. Marriage by God’s design is that we leave, we cleave and

The two shall become one flesh—Marriage makes something entirely new. From two God makes one flesh. This is about so much more than the sexual aspect of marriage. It includes that, but it is so much more. It means our lives are bound up with one another in every way. Emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, financially, physically and in every other way, the husband and the wife become one. They have been divinely united to each other in a way that they will never be with anyone else. Everything that affects one affects the other. It means that as a husband and a wife, the entirety of our lives are folded into one another and I can no longer live to myself or for myself. The husband and wife become one functioning unit – two people interpenetrating one another’s lives in such a way that we become one flesh – one new entity. It is an extraordinary thing, and we will never plumb its depth. Marriage grants the deepest possible intimacy in earthly relationships. John MacArthur says: “In marriage a man and woman are so closely joined that they become “one flesh,” which involves spiritual as well as physical oneness. In marriage God brings a husband and wife together in a unique physical and spiritual bond that reaches to the very depths of their souls. As God designed it, marriage is to be the welding of two people together into one unit, the blending of two minds, two wills, two sets of emotions, two spirits. It is a bond the Lord intends to be indissoluble as long as both partners are alive. The Lord created sex and procreation to be the fullest expression of that oneness, and the intimacies of marriage are not to be shared with any other human being.” Sexual intercourse is not what makes us one flesh, it is the fruit of being one flesh – the

crowning act of marital union that says without words we are one – that is meant to signify the love, faithfulness, commitment, permanency and exclusivity of the marriage covenant.

Just as the underlying purpose of God's covenant, through the Bible, is to create for Himself a people to whom He will unchangeably give Himself as their God and Lord, and who will give themselves to Him as His people. And that is exactly what marriage is to reflect a man and a woman giving themselves unchangeably to one another, freely and fully. Out of two independent people, God makes a husband and wife, one flesh. The woman for the man, created from his rib, taken from his side to be his helpmate and his partner in life, to be his covenant love, to seek the heart of God and to know Him together and to display His glory in the earth. Of two, God makes something new.

Marriage has this exalted purpose: to reflect the beauty of the relationship of Jesus with His church. We read in Ephesians chapter 5: (Eph 5:22-32) Our God has established Christian marriage as the picture of Christ's perfect relationship to His Church. And in reflecting the relationship of Christ to His church, marriage grants the greatest of joys possible – love, care, spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical intimacy and oneness.

Rather than be sucked into a debate regarding the permissible and justifiable reason for divorce, Jesus instead magnified the beauty of marriage. When we consider all that God designed marriage to be, we have to realize that just because you may have been married a long time or short time and have never been divorced does not mean that you have a marriage that looks like this. The truth is there are many marriages that remain together out of convenience, for the sake of reputation, marriages that are devoid of the passionate faithfulness and love that is to characterize the union of two believers in Christ. There are too many who are functionally married singles with their own separate lives but who share the same bed and roof, those who are married in name only but whose marriages lack vitality and intimacy, joy, a sense of purpose or shared life. That is just as much a denial of the divine purpose of marriage as divorce is.

The question is not merely do you live together under the same roof and have you remained faithful from a worldly perspective. The question is, are you one flesh before the Lord? Tertullian, one of the early church fathers, says this: "How beautiful, then, the marriage of two

Christians, two who are one in home, one in desire, one in the way of life they follow, one in the religion they practice... Nothing divides them either in flesh or in spirit... They pray together, they worship together, they fast together; instructing one another, encouraging one another, strengthening one another. Side by side they visit God's church and partake God's banquet, side by side they face difficulties and persecution, share their consolations. They have no secrets from one another; they never shun each other's company; they never bring sorrow to each other's hearts... Seeing this, Christ rejoices. To such as these He gives His peace. Where there are two together, there also He is present."

So Jesus reiterates the divine blueprint and beauty of marriage and then He finishes by saying: What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate. His whole point is this: God is the one who joins people in marriage. God is the one who forges one flesh from two. God is the author of marriage, not man, and we have no right to tamper with what God has done.

The Pharisees still don't get it. "They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so." (Matthew 19:7–8, ESV) God, Who made marriage in the beginning, did not approve of their sin of divorce. Divorce is an evidence of the depravity and hardness of man's heart in sin.

3) The Exception Clause (Mathew 5:32; 19:9)

(Matthew 5:32, 19:9, ESV) Beloved, this is pretty straight forward, isn't it? Jesus is very specific about what constitutes the only grounds for divorce from the perspective of God. It is sexual immorality. The word that is translated here as sexual immorality is the Greek word, "porneia." It's a wide-ranging word that includes such things as: adultery, homosexuality, sexual abuse of minors, voyeurism, addiction to pornography, and the like. Divorce is not to be condemned when a husband or a wife persist in these kinds of sexual sins and are unrepentant of them. But notice something: Jesus does not command divorce in this case. In God's eyes, the better way is always the way of love and grace, repentance and restoration. It may seem impossible, but nothing is impossible with God.

But Jesus words give no room for the "irreconcilable differences" or the other popular notions for divorce these days. That is how serious and binding the covenant of marriage is. This

"exception" is an act of mercy from God toward those who are trapped in a situation in which one's spouse is aggressively and habitually violating the marriage vow. But let's remember: To focus on this exception clause and make it the key point of this passage is to commit the same error as the scribes and Pharisees had committed with respect to the letter of the law. Now, there are, of course, other texts that deal with divorce and remarriage, most notably 1 Corinthians 7 which talks about the rejection and abandonment of an unbelieving spouse, but beloved, understand that Jesus focus in Matthew 5 and in Matthew 19 is not how much we have to put up with before we can seek a divorce. Instead, Jesus is showing us how ultimately important the bond of marriage is. Divorce tampers with the divine design. Rather than looking to the Lord for grace, wisdom, and strength in marital trouble, divorce plows ahead to find relief outside of the cross and the sufficiency of Christ. That is why Christ gives only adultery as a concession for divorce. For the covenant people of God, divorce must not be an option.

4) How Do We Respond to Jesus' Words?

So, what should be our response to these words of Jesus?

Some of us this morning have become painfully aware that we have been divorced and perhaps remarried disobediently. What should we do? Recognize that we are sinners who need a Savior, that we have sinned against God and that we need forgiveness and grace. We need to confess our sin, admit that our divorce was an offense against God. If there is the possibility, you need to go and be reconciled to the one you have divorced. What if you are remarried? You must simply cast yourself on the mercy of God in repentance and ask for forgiveness. If you were unbiblically divorced, then you confess it and repent of it as you would any sin. Divorce is serious, but it is not the unpardonable sin. These words of Psalm 103 are eternally true: "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust." (Psalm 103:8–14, ESV) Having confessed your sin, trust in Christ's forgiving grace, give yourself fully over to Him in the marriage you are now in, and work now to make this marriage, by God's grace, to reflect the beauty of God's divine plan.

For all of us who are married, what we need to do today is to repent of the ways in which our marriage has not reflected the divine will and plan for marriage, the ways that we have fallen short in fulfilling the divine picture of the covenant of marriage. Perhaps we need to repent of our low view of marriage, of our unfaithfulness to God or to our spouse. Be honest about the state of your marriage and seek God's grace for it. We need to seek to protect and grow our marriages.

For those of you that are single, you must be wise in your choice of a marriage partner. If you are a believer, you marry a believer...that's it, no debate. Examine seriously your potential spouse's spiritual life. Does he/she give evidence of being regenerate? Is there a reality of fruit of the Spirit in his/her life? Is he/she faithful in church attendance and participation? Does he/she demonstrate spiritual and emotional maturity that can handle the demands of marriage? Does he/she desire to serve Jesus Christ? Do I know it is God's will for my life to marry this person? Has it been confirmed by godly counsel?

Marriage is a beautiful gift from God. It is meant to be cherished and protected.

What does covenant commitment look like in marriage? I could do no better than to share with you the words of another preacher from another era named John Brown. Old as they are, his biblical understanding is as relevant now as it has ever been. I am, however, going to modernize the language so it is more easily understood, but the sentiment is dead-on. Think about his words carefully.

Few things have done more to promote the happiness and the moral improvement of man, than our Lord's re-establishing the principle that the marriage relationship is unbreakable save for one cause. Let all who are married, seriously consider the nature of what it means to be married, and the importance of their duties. Let them consider, that since they form as it were one body, they ought also to have one mind and heart. Let them consider, that as they are so intimately connected, they ought to love and cherish each other with the same attention and affection, as they do their own bodies. Let them strive to have the same inclinations and desires, as they have the same interests, and guard against all disputes and disagreements. Let them beware of all irritating language or disrespectful treatment, and always be kind and gracious to one another. Let them bear with each other's weaknesses; study each other's

character; make an effort to correct each other's failures. Let them always conduct themselves with gentleness, and perform their respective duties faithfully, though they may not receive the return they have a right to expect. Let them suppress every dislike, which might produce in their mind even a wish to be separated, or which might render them more negligent in the duties which they owe to each other. Let them bear with, and forgive, and make peace with, and comfort, and cheer one another. Let them consider themselves as obligated by love to promote to the uttermost of their power, not only the present happiness, but the future joy of each other. Let them often together draw near the throne of the Father, and pray for one another, mutually exhorting, instructing, and comforting one another. Let them live together as heirs of the grace of life, as those who know that death, the only lawful cause of separation, will soon cut the otherwise unbreakable bond; and let them seek to be bound together by a tie, which even death itself cannot dissolve, - even the faith of the same truth—the gospel, the love of the same Savior, the hope of the same salvation. Thus will they spend a happy lifetime together on earth: thus will they spend a happy eternity together in heaven.

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