

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday, May 15, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 5:31-32

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

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD'S KINGDOM #14
JESUS' TEACHING ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

When I was in junior high my parents informed me that the parents of one of my best friends were getting a divorce. I was shocked and saddened for my friend. He was the first friend that I knew whose parents would divorce. When the divorce happened, everything seemed to change for my friend and his three siblings. There were weekends with mom and weekends with dad and his girlfriend. There were Christmas celebrations with mom's side of the family and Christmas celebrations with dad's side of the family. There were awkward occasions when both parents needed to be in the same room at the same time for things like high school graduations or weddings.

I remember worrying if my parents would ever get a divorce. I wondered how many of my other friends' parents would eventually get divorced. And, over the years, many of them did.

Just this week, one of the top news stories in our nation was that of the separation of former California governor and actor Arnold Schwarzenegger and his wife of 25 years, Maria Shriver. In their announcement regarding their separation the couple wrote, "This has been a time of great personal and professional transition for each of us. After a great deal of thought, reflection, discussion, and prayer, we came to this decision together. At this time, we are living apart, while we work on the future of our relationship."¹

Some of you know all too well the very private pain that this public couple is dealing with today.

Earlier this week I received the news that one of my former students, who had sought my counsel regarding the disintegration of his marriage, had divorced. The divorce was announced in a Facebook relationship status update. His status went from married to single. And in typical Facebook fashion, his status update was debated by friends for all to see.

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http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/10/us/politics/10schwarzenegger.html?_r=1&scp=2&sq=arnold%20schwarzenegger&st=cse

Matthew Rogers once said to his church, “I doubt there is anything we could talk about today that has caused more hurt to the collective group assembled here than this topic of divorce. It has touched every family in some way.”²

A 2008 Barna Research poll showed that “among adults who have been married one-third (33%) have experienced at least one divorce”³. The same study showed that Evangelical Christians come in at 27%.

If we were to take a poll of those in this room today the statistics would probably come very close to mirroring what we see in society. Divorce is common, it is painful and it is stressful. When compared to the major stressors of life, studies indicate that divorce is by far the most stressful event that a person will go through save for the death of a spouse. Rogers writes, “It causes more stress than being fired, more stress than a jail term, and more stress than the death of a close friend and a mortgage foreclosure combined.

At least death brings some closure – it’s over. With divorce it’s never over. Your former spouse is still out there somewhere, walking around, and in most cases dealing with you. The pain just keeps coming. God never wanted people to experience the pain of divorce. God’s intention for marriage explains His view of divorce.”⁴

Look at Matthew 5:31-32.

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32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

Those are hard verses to read in light of the culture in which we live. Kent Hughes writes, “The mere mention of the word divorce is painful. Many have been deeply wounded by broken marriages, and a discussion of the subject brings up memories and feelings they would like to forget. For these reasons preachers find little joy in preaching on the subject. But since Jesus brought it up right in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, the greatest sermon he ever preached, he obviously thinks it is an important subject, one we dare not ignore. To see this matter through Jesus’ eyes is good for us as individuals, good for the church and good for society.”⁵

My hope today is that we will have an understanding of Jesus’ teaching on divorce and remarriage. That we will understand His perspective, and that we will commit ourselves to

² From the sermon, *Divorce and Remarriage*, by Matthew Rogers, May 6, 2001, p. 1.

³ <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/15-familykids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released>

⁴ Rogers, pp. 1-2.

⁵ Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway books, 2001), p. 114.

living for His ideal. To those who have been wounded by divorce, my hope is that you will find strength and grace in the words of Jesus.

Would you take a moment to pray with me?

“Dear Heavenly Father,

Today’s subject is one that your church has debated throughout the ages. Well intentioned followers of Christ have wounded others based upon their own interpretation of Jesus’ words in Matthew 5 and Matthew 19. May the words that I share today bring healing, hope and insight. May the marriages of Woodbury Community Church reflect your desire for marriage. May husbands love their wives as You, Christ, love the church. May wives love their husbands with a pure and undefiled love. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, Oh God, my Rock and my Redeemer.

In Jesus’ name,

Amen.”

There are those today, who would say that divorce is rampant. I agree. It is. But, we’re not the first generation to deal with such a terrible marriage success rate. Many of you read the news reports this week that showed the latest census data concerning marriage. For the first time in history, married couples account for less than half of all households in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area.⁶ There were lots of reasons that the article gave for this, but many of those that I have spoken to over the years say it is because they don’t want the hassle of divorce should things not work out.

There was a great controversy regarding divorce and remarriage in the first century. It centered on the interpretation of a phrase in Deuteronomy 24:1, which stated the ground for divorce, “1 If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house.”

By Jesus’ day, the Pharisees, Israel’s religious leaders were divided on the issue of divorce. There were two primary schools of thought, and which view you held depended upon which Rabbi you followed.

Rabbi Shammai was the conservative rabbi. He held that the phrase from Deuteronomy 24:1 which says, “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her . . .” should be understood to mean that the only lawful reason for getting a divorce should be for a serious marital offense such as adultery.

Rabbi Hillel was what we might call a liberal rabbi whose interpretation of this passage had become the most widely held interpretation. Listen to what Matthew Rogers writes about

⁶ <http://www.startribune.com/local/121674224.html>

Rabbi Hillel's position. "He believed the statement of Moses applied to a man 'who desires to be divorced from his wife for any cause whatsoever.' We're talking superliberal here. For example, a man could divorce his wife,

- If she spoiled his dinner by adding too much salt
- If she was seen in public with her head uncovered
- If she talked with other men on the street
- If she spoke disrespectfully to her husband's parents
- If she became plain-looking compared with another woman who seemed more beautiful in her husband's opinion

Unbelievable! These are all examples of reasons for divorce that were acceptable in Jesus day. We may laugh, but how different is this from today? Don't people still divorce for just about any and every reason imaginable?

A man in Hazard, Kentucky, divorced his wife because she 'beat him whenever he removed onions from his hamburger without asking for permission.'

A deaf man in Bennettsville, South Carolina, filed for divorce because his wife 'was always nagging him in sign language.'

A woman in Canon City, Colorado, divorced her husband because he forced her to 'duck under the dashboard whenever they drove past his girlfriend's house.'

A woman in Hardwick, Georgia, divorced her husband on the grounds that he 'stayed home too much and was much too affectionate.'

Currently, every state in the union except South Dakota has some sort of law in place allowing for what is commonly called 'no fault divorce.' Which essentially means couples can divorce for any and all reasons or no reason at all. The prevailing view in Jesus' day is still the prevailing view in ours.

I wonder what Jesus would say to us today?

So the question for Jesus was, 'In which camp are you? The strict camp or the one with a little give and take?' Matthew 19 says it like this:

3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?'

4 'Haven't you read,' he replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' 5 and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.'

Jesus wasn't as much concerned about the grounds for divorce as he was marriage in all its fullness."⁷

In Matthew 19, Jesus shows the unique bond that marriage creates between a husband and a wife. It is greater than the bond between parents and children or any other earthly relationship. No one or no thing is to get in between the most sacred relationship that we have outside of our relationship with Jesus Christ. When we stand before the altar and make vows, we are to take them seriously. Just like we would die for any of our children, so we should be willing to die for our spouse.

I talk to guys all the time who say, "Brian, I'd die for my family." That's great. But are you man enough to live for your family? Are you man enough to put their welfare ahead of yours? Are you man enough to stay absolutely committed to radical purity? Remember, Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage in the Sermon on the Mount comes immediately following His teaching on radical purity. To understand Jesus' words concerning divorce and remarriage we have to understand the perspective of Jesus' day. The prevailing attitude was one that cheapened marriage. Jesus turned that perspective upside down. He in Matthew 5 and again in Matthew 19 showed the sanctity of marriage.

While the people of Jesus' day were arguing about the proper way in which a man should divorce a woman, Jesus showed them that divorce was never God's plan and at best was a regrettable concession to human sin. The first book of the Old Testament spoke of God's plan that a man should leave his father and mother and be united to his wife as one flesh, and the last book of the Old Testament spoke of how much God disliked what had become of marriage. Look at how the New Living Translation translates Malachi 2:14-16.

14 You cry out, "Why doesn't the Lord accept my worship?" I'll tell you why! Because the Lord witnessed the vows you and your wife made when you were young. But you have been unfaithful to her, though she remained your faithful partner, the wife of your marriage VOWS.

15 Didn't the Lord make you one with your wife? In body and spirit you are his. And what does he want? Godly children from your union. So guard your heart; remain loyal to the wife of your youth. 16 "For I hate divorce!" says the Lord, the God of Israel. "To divorce your wife is to overwhelm her with cruelty, says the Lord of Heaven's Armies. "So guard your heart; do not be unfaithful to your wife."

Can there be any more clear words? God hates divorce. He hates what it does to people. He hates how easy divorce has become. He would desire for divorce never to be an option, but God knew the human condition, and as such he made divorce permissible under extreme cases.

Remember, divorce had become permissible for just about anything. Like our "no-fault" divorce system, a Jewish man could divorce his wife for just about any reason at all. And,

⁷ Rogers, pp. 2-3.

a group of Pharisees even taught that Moses had commanded men to do such things because of their interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1.

Now, turn your attention back to Matthew 19. Jesus has just addressed the Pharisees' question about the lawfulness of a man divorcing a woman for any and every reason. Look at verses 7-8.

7 "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

8 Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.

Hughes writes, "Jesus' answer corrects the Pharisees, for Moses only permitted divorce – he didn't command it as the Pharisees asserted. What Moses did command was the granting of a divorce certificate for the woman's protection. Without a certificate she could be subject to exploitation, even recrimination. The certificate also prevented the man from marrying her again. Thus she could not be treated like chattel. Marriage was not something one could walk in and out of. The reason God allowed divorce was the hardness of heart to which the men of Israel had succumbed. It was a divine concession to human weakness – reluctant permission at best."⁸

Rogers writes, "A man was generally thought to be righteous or good in the matter of divorce if he gave his wife a written statement of divorce. She, at least, then could prove she was unmarried. This allowed her to defend herself against adultery if found with a man, seek marriage to another, or make her living as a prostitute.

As long as you gave your wife 'pink slip' you were being a good guy as you shoved her out the door so you could welcome home a new wife, more to your present liking.

People in Jesus day saw this issue of giving divorce papers as a command. That's what they focused on. But Jesus saw the whole issue of divorce as a regrettable concession. . . a concession because hearts were hard. Because people just couldn't accept that God wanted marriage to be a permanent deal. So because of these hard hearts, Moses allowed divorce only in the most extreme situations.

A true case of being given an inch and taking a mile. Now Jesus explains the inch itself was only a concession."⁹

In Matthew 19:9 Jesus explained when it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife.

9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

⁸ Hughes, p. 116.

⁹ Rogers, p. 4.

If we are going to understand Jesus' concession for divorce, we better make sure we know what He meant by the phrase, "except for marital unfaithfulness." The phrase is translated, "immorality," in the New American Standard Bible and it comes from the Greek word *porneia*, where we get our English word pornography. Hughes writes, "When *porneia* is applied to married persons, it means marital unfaithfulness, illicit intercourse that may involve adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and the like. We should note (and this is very important!) that all these offenses were originally punished by death under Mosaic Law. These sins terminated marriage not by divorce but by death. However, by Jesus' time the Roman occupation of the country and its legal system had made the death sentence very difficult to obtain. Jewish practice had therefore substituted divorce for death. Thus the rabbinical schools of Hillel and Shammai were not discussing whether divorce was permissible for adultery. That was taken for granted by everyone. The point is, Jesus was far stricter than Hillel and Shammai because he superseded the teaching of Deuteronomy 24 and said that the only ground for which one may divorce his or her spouse is marital unfaithfulness."¹⁰

Jesus' words were radical! He hates divorce. He allows for it. He loves those who've been divorced. But, He teaches that it should be avoided as much as possible.

His disciples responded to His teaching in Matthew 19:10.

10 The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

In other words, they were saying, "Who wants to be stuck in a relationship that might not work out?" They just didn't get it. Jesus must have rolled His eyes and wondered, "Are these guys every going to get it?"

All marriages take work. John Trent and Gary Smalley wrote a book many years back called, "Love is a Decision." I've talked to engaged couples in pre-marital counseling who hate the title of that book. Within a year, most of those couples understand just how much work marriage takes. We have to decide to fight for our marriages. We decide to love. And we recognize that just because God has made concessions for divorce doesn't mean that we have to get divorced should we have biblical grounds. Several of my good friends have worked through the ultimate betrayal of marital infidelity and today report that their love is stronger and their marriage deeper than they ever dreamed possible. God is the great healer of marriages.

We've seen what Jesus says about divorce and remarriage. Does the New Testament have any further instruction on divorce? Yes, it does, and it's found in the Apostle Paul's teaching to the church in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 7:8-16 the Apostle Paul is giving advice to the believers in Corinth concerning marriage. In verses 8-9 he writes to the unmarried. Then in verses 10-11 he gives instruction concerning marriage to two married Christians. Then in verse 12 Paul does something unique. He speaks to those in Corinth who were

¹⁰ Hughes, pp. 116-117.

Christians but married to an unbeliever. This was common as there were many in Corinth who were coming to faith in Jesus after a lifetime of following pagan religion. Look at verses 12-14.

12 To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13 And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

Many times, God works through the faith of the believing spouse to draw the unbeliever and their children into a walk with God. Sadly this is not always the case.

15 But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.

Hughes writes, "The sense is, if the unbeliever deserts and is determined not to come back, let him or her go. The Christian is 'not bound in such circumstances,' which means that the believer is free from the marriage because the unbeliever has broken the marriage bond. The result is that the believer is free to divorce and remarry. The consistent use of the word 'bound' in this passage and others means 'is not bound in marriage.' There is no need to seek some other interpretation."¹¹

So, let's summarize. When does Scripture allow for divorce and remarriage?

- 1) When a spouse is guilty of sexual immorality and is unwilling to repent and live faithfully as a marriage partner (Matthew 5:32, 19:9). But, remember God's desire is always reconciliation.
- 2) When a spouse, who is an unbeliever willingly and permanently deserts the Christian (1 Corinthians 7:12-15).
- 3) There is a third instance where God allows for divorce and remarriage, and that is when the marriage and divorce occurred before a person became a Christian (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Look at 2 Corinthians 5:17.

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

Hughes writes, "I personally believe that when someone has been married and divorced before coming to Christ, remarriage is allowed . . . a new believer is

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

completely forgiven. I believe that among the old things that have passed away are all sins, including divorce prior to salvation. If it were otherwise, divorce would be the only sin for which Christ did not atone, and that would be inconceivable.”¹²

For too many years, the western church has made divorce a greater sin than others. It's not. Divorce is complicated. It's not God's plan. But, God loves the divorcee.

Matthew Rogers writes, “There are certainly [other] ways of being unfaithful to a spouse and family that do not involve adultery. For instance, sometimes circumstances involving abuse place spouses and children in a position of grave danger. Substance abuse is another special circumstance. Let me repeat, reconciliation is always, always what God wants. It is undoubtedly what any follower of Jesus Christ wants for his or her marriage.

But sometimes reconciliation doesn't come, does it? And divorces happen – even when one party doesn't really want the divorce.

And in every divorce, regardless of the circumstances (even more so when believers are involved) there is generally more than enough guilt.

And, yet I know, this teaching from Jesus we've heard today puts guilt into the hearts of many. Maybe you divorced improperly and the guilt is there for a reason. Let's look at this for a moment...

DEALING WITH THE GUILT OF DIVORCE

God's view of marriage and divorce tells us these things...

- If you were the innocent party and sought a divorce that fell within scriptural guidelines, then see the guilt as a tool of Satan to destroy your walk with God.
- If your partner asked you for a divorce or forced it upon you, admit there might have been more you could have done, but then there always is. Once again, recognize the devil at work.
- If it happened before you became a Christian, it is a dead issue. (2 Corinthians 5:17)
- If as a Christian you divorced unscripturally, the fact God was not pleased, and that He viewed your remarriage (if so) as an act of adultery does not mean you cannot be forgiven. Because you can.

TRANSITION: God's intention for marriage explains his view of divorce. He really wants people to fully enjoy all that life with a mate has to offer, and avoid the pain of putting an end to what was meant for a lifetime.”¹³

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹³ Rogers, p. 7.

He then closes with the story of a couple from his church named Craig and Kathryn.

“Craig wrote, ‘The day I moved out of our house was a beautiful day, but I’m surprised I even noticed, let alone remember. You could have said that our marriage of 10 years was dead long ago, but there was something about carrying my clothes and possessions out of our house that made the death seem more real.

There were no more tomorrows. No more chances to be the kind of husband or father that I should have been. The kind of husband or father that, somewhere, deep down inside, I wanted to be. It was over.’

Craig goes on to talk about how as the divorce was being finalized, he realized he needed to seek forgiveness big time. First and foremost from God. He hadn’t attended church for years, but now he really wanted to find a church home. A friend suggested a church near his house, and he started to attend. He took his children with him when he could. One Sunday, he remembers hearing these words in the sermon: ‘God can heal broken marriages.’ Somehow he got the courage to ask his now ex-wife, Kathryn, to attend church with him. She agreed to attend!

Craig goes on to say:

‘God continued to work in our lives. Through wonderful ministry and pastoral counseling, Kathy and I received healing for our guilt and anger. Eventually Kathy relented and accepted my persistent requests – she asked me to marry her again.

Today we have a beautiful marriage centered on Jesus Christ. Kathy refuses to say that God rebuilt our marriage. She says it was never built in the first place. I agree with her. It is overwhelming to think about what God has done in our lives. He has once again proven Himself to be a God of love, a God of hope, a God of forgiveness and a God of mercy. He has once again proven His incomparable power in fixing something so terribly broken and making it better than it ever was.’

That’s the love God has for us

Love that says, ‘Though you’ve strayed, I’ll take you back.’”¹⁴

If you are going through a tough time in your marriage right now, don’t give up. God loves to work miracles in the most difficult of circumstances. If you’ve been divorced and are dealing with the guilt, remember, when God forgives, He forgets. He can bring healing to your broken heart. This fall we will begin a new program geared at helping those who have been wounded by divorce heal. It’s called Divorce Care and there will be more information coming in the weeks and months ahead. If you would be interested in finding out more information about this program, please write “Divorce Care,” on the back of your welcome card and turn it in when the offering plate passes you by.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.