

# Sermons on Matthew

*Matthew 5:31, 32*  
Marriage and Divorce

*With Study Questions*

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# Marriage and Divorce

*Matthew 5:31, 32*

Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' <sup>32</sup> But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery (Matthew 5:31, 32).

## Review—Exceeding Righteousness

Jesus continues His instruction on the necessity of a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20). This matter should be of great concern to us being a necessary prerequisite for entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

I would like to state again that it is not a matter of the quantity (or amount) of deeds one can outwardly produce that Jesus is calling for here. The only way any quantity of righteousness could be pleasing before God would be as a result of a qualitative inward transformation.

When the Pharisees did a good deed then blew a trumpet to bring honor to themselves (Matthew 6:1-4), the problem wasn't that their good deed wasn't massive enough. The problem was the deed proceeded from a faithless heart. The Apostle Paul makes it quite clear that **"whatever is not from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23)**.

In order for someone's works to be acceptable before God, *they* must be acceptable before God. And according to Scripture, acceptability before God comes through faith alone in Christ alone (John 14:6, Acts 4:11).

The problem at hand is remedied when one's behavior proceeds from a faithful heart. When, by the grace of God, one calls upon the name of the Lord, and God imputes (freely gives) the righteousness of Christ to a person, that person, and his subsequent works, become acceptable before God. Apart from that it's merely a show.

## Six Examples

We are in the midst of examining the six examples Jesus gives of the kind of righteousness that proceeds from a faithful heart—that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

His first two examples were instruction on the Sixth and Seventh Commandments. He taught that mere hatred or anger toward another person is murder in the eyes of God and makes us guilty enough to be damned. He taught that mere impure thoughts toward another make us guilty as well.

In the first two examples we learned that restraining ourselves from the outward acts of homicide and adultery are insufficient to exonerate us before God. There are a number of observations I would like to make regarding verses 31 and 32: 1) the natural progression of thoughts to actions; 2) the propensity people have to twist Scripture to suit their own desires; 3) what does constitute justifiable divorce?

### Thoughts Lead to Actions

Jesus now proceeds to address an outward action which began to proceed from the aforementioned inward transgressions. When we rationalize and nurture impure thoughts, it is only a matter of time before these improper dispositions manifest themselves in actions.

For example, if I don't repent of my anger toward my neighbor, it will only be a matter of time before that inward anger turns into outward rage—a rage that I will somehow rationalize within the context of my religion.

The action in question was divorce. God's people had developed a comfortable and ostensibly biblical disposition toward divorce.

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## Distorting Scripture

There's an old saying that if you torture a verse long enough you can get it to confess to anything. What Jesus is speaking of here was, no doubt, an appeal to Deuteronomy 24:1-4; an Old Testament passage referring to a certificate of divorce that could be written up as a result of the husband having found some uncleanness in his wife. Notice that Jesus is not addressing those who have no regard for the Bible but those who open, read and distort the Holy Scriptures. The passage in question was, and still is, a difficult passage to understand; what constitutes this uncleanness?

The Jewish leaders were divided on this issue. Those who followed Hillel said it was permissible for a husband to divorce his wife for any reason at all. The other group (those following Shammai) said divorce was permissible only for a major offense (perhaps adultery). The religious leaders in power during the time of Christ would dismiss their wives on a whim.

### Hardness of Heart

In a separate conversation Jesus gives a short explanation of this Old Testament passage. He taught, **“Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept” (Mark 10:5)**. That wasn't a very thorough explanation—it seems Jesus had little time for people who were not sincere. John Calvin viewed Deuteronomy 24:1-4 as civil paperwork. In an effort to protect the discarded woman, the civil notice of divorce was granted her thus allowing her to remarry<sup>1</sup>.

Others have different interpretations of the passage. Be that as it may, Jesus cuts to the chase by stating,

***But from the beginning of the creation, God ‘made them male and female.’<sup>7</sup> ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife,<sup>8</sup> and the two***

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<sup>1</sup> If Calvin's view is accurate it must be noted that God's ordaining of civil paperwork to protect the discarded woman as a result of the hardened heart of the man doesn't imply approval of divorce on His part. Calvin writes, “: But they did wrong in viewing as a matter of civil law, the rule which had been given them for a devout and holy life. For national laws are sometimes accommodated to the manners of men but God, in prescribing a spiritual law, looked not at what men can do, but at what they ought to do.”

***shall become one flesh***; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. <sup>9</sup> Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate (Mark 10:6-9).

In other words, however one interprets Deuteronomy 24, it should not be understood as an escape clause contingent upon the whim of the spouse. The husband and wife are to be considered a single organism. And even though their marriage appeared to be the result of their love, thoughts, decisions, and vows—in the final and more authoritative analysis—they did not join themselves together, God joined them together<sup>2</sup>.

### **The Heart of the Commandment**

Before we take a moment to discuss the intricacies of justifiable divorce, let us remember the main point of Christ's words: one should not wield the outward form of God's law in such a way as to cater to his own selfish desires. In Jesus' first two examples—murder and adultery—the depth of the command had been ignored lost. In this example, God's design and intent for the covenant of marriage wasn't even considered.

We are to understand the full counsel of Scripture - Jesus went all the way back to Genesis. We are to seek to grasp God's holy design and purpose. We are to seek to foster a disposition (and subsequent actions) which reflect a heartfelt desire to honor God, even in the face of our own discomfort. Men who have no religion will inevitably create an ideology which caters to their own quirks and fancies. But as we see here, even men who have religion will often carve up that religion in such a way to accommodate their own selfish interests.

I believe this is the point that Jesus is making and it should not be lost in our discussion of marriage and divorce. But what of marriage and divorce?

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<sup>2</sup> Often people will seek to rationalize their divorce by stating that they were too young or immature when they got married. They'll say it was a mistake. But from a biblical perspective, regardless of the fallibility of the couple—God joined them together and no man (including the one's in the marriage) should seek to tear it asunder.

## Marriage and Divorce

**But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery (Matthew 5:31, 32).**

Why does Jesus word it this way? Why does He say that whoever divorces his wife causes her, and whoever marries her, to commit adultery? Perhaps because these Pharisees who were dismissing their wives on an itch had been deluding themselves into thinking that by granting the certificate of divorce they were keeping their wives pure. Jesus says 'no', you're casting them into sin.

It shouldn't be thought, however, that they (the ones enacting the divorce) were not in sin themselves. Later in Matthew Jesus will teach,

**And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery (Matthew 19:9).**

The long and short of this teaching is that divorce cannot be biblically justified and should be understood as sinful. Statistics that indicate that today's western church produces as many divorces as the world should be an unsettling and illuminating statistic; we have gone the way of the Pharisee! We, like the Pharisees, are seeking to justify and rationalize divorces by ignoring the intent of God's divine ordinances. Let us not forget that this is evidence of an unregenerate (unsaved) heart.

Let us also remember that God designed marriage as an analogy of His relationship with the church (Ephesians 5). When marriage is belittled it casts a dark shadow on that which it is designed to illustrate.

## Justifiable Divorce

But Jesus does give some grounds for the divorce certificate so we should pursue this a bit. Sexual immorality is grounds for divorce. Furthermore the Apostle Paul seems to go beyond the teaching of Jesus by stating that desertion is also grounds for divorce (1 Corinthians 7:15).

Since the word for sexual immorality *porneia* can refer to many different types of actions and *desertion* can be somewhat subjective, let us seek to define these. The divines of Westminster<sup>3</sup>, having studied the issue in depth, arrived at the following paragraph.

**Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage: yet, nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage: (Matt. 19:8–9, 1 Cor. 7:15, Matt. 19:6) wherein, a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills and discretion in their own case. (Deut. 24:1–4)<sup>4</sup>**

In other words, only adultery and desertion are justifiable infractions for divorce. And even in these cases the persons involved should not be left to their own subjective impulses or evaluations as to whether or not they are in a position which justifies dissolving the marriage. A very brief discussion of these offenses might be appropriate here.

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<sup>3</sup> This is referring to the Westminster Confession of Faith which was compiled between 1643 and 1647 by over a hundred of the world's best theologians meeting over a thousand times. Although it is a fallible document, it is certainly a helpful document.

<sup>4</sup>*The Westminster confession of faith*. 1996 (Chapter XXIV, 6). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

## Adultery

As far as adultery is concerned it may include various levels of sharing intimacy with a person other than one's spouse. For example, one should not think they've avoided *porneia* if they continually take long romantic hand-in-hand walks with someone other than their own husband or wife. A person doing such a thing should be brought before the elders of their church. The elders should charge him to repent of such inappropriate violations of his marriage covenant. If he refuses he can be charged with adultery.

Even in the case of adultery, restoration and reconciliation are always preferable to divorce. Nonetheless one cannot escape the fact that Jesus allows divorce for the offended party. In the event that the offended party does forgive and reconcile they should not view the previous isolated adulterous offense as a just cause to exit the marriage at some later time. They don't have a 'get out of jail free' card for the remainder of their lives.

## Desertion

As far as desertion is concerned it may also include various levels of abandonment. It is not to be thought of as merely geographical. If your husband goes away on business or to war, you have not been deserted. On the other hand, if they continue to stay in proximity but refuse to fulfill their covenantal vows of marriage they may still be guilty of desertion.

Some examples of the covenantal vows of marriage may include things like: *intimacy*—your body is not your own (1 Corinthians 7:4) and to unduly refuse intimacy with your spouse can be one action which begins to constituting desertion; *provision*—the husband has a covenantal obligation to provide for his family (1 Timothy 5:8) and failing to do so notches the desertion evaluation to a higher level; and *protection*—the husband is to protect his wife (Ephesians 5:25-29) and family and failure to do so (especially if it is he who they need protection from) could also mount up the argument for desertion.



## The Unbelieving Spouse

Two other points about desertion: The text teaches that if an *unbeliever* departs, the brother or sister is not under bondage (which I would translate as free to remarry). But what if the one who deserts the spouse is a believer?

Well, anyone can claim to be a believer. How are Christians to determine whether or not a person is a genuine believer? We certainly do not have access to their heart. That they walked forward at a Christian crusade and prayed a prayer is certainly insufficient. The answer is given by Jesus. If a person is being charged with desertion by the church (the elders or adjudicating board) and refuses to repent, Jesus teaches that they are to be considered a **“heathen and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17)**. They have revealed their true colors.

## Does Paul Contradict Jesus?

Is the Apostle Paul contradicting Jesus? Jesus says only adultery but Paul adds desertion! Paul isn't actually adding anything at all. If a person is deserted, they are not aggressively seeking a divorce (the way a person whose spouse committed adultery might). The deserted person has already been functionally divorced and Paul is giving them the freedom to live in peace (1 Corinthians 7:15).

## Recognizing True Citizenship

Much more can be said on these subjects but again, let us not miss the point Jesus is making. A person's tendency to twist the word of God in such a way as to cater to their own cravings is revealing that they have not grasped the true nature of the kingdom of God.

It is a kingdom of grace and love. By grace we have been brought into this kingdom. Our citizenship is not something we have earned through our own excellence; it is freely given by the power and grace of Christ. At the same time when God grants us

citizenship, He (as the INS would say) naturalizes us. He begins to nurture and shape our hearts and minds after His own.

This is something Christians view as precious. We should pray that God would continually conform us into the image of His own on (Romans 8:29).

## Questions for Study

1. Define a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (page 2).
2. Review the first two examples of a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (page 3)?
3. What is the inevitable outcome of a sinful disposition (pages 3, 4)?
4. What will people often do when Scripture doesn't say what they want it to say? Why (pages 4, 5)?
5. When God gives a commandment what should we be seeking to grasp within that commandment (page 5)?
6. What is God's disposition toward divorce (page 6)?
7. Under what two conditions is divorce justifiable? How should this be determined (pages 7, 8)?
8. How does one determine whether another person (who professes to be a Christian) is a genuine believer (pages 8, 9)?
9. Discuss the nature of a Christian's true citizenship (page 9).