

# Jesus on Divorce

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We come now to the teaching of God's word and it's important as you come to Truth Community Church to realize something about what we do and about the teaching of God's word. We consider the singing of hymns and things like that to be worship. We also consider the teaching of God's word to be worship. It's not that we finish worship and now we go to open Scripture and to hear a message, this is a continuation of worship. Every time that you open God's word to teach it in a public setting, you are engaging in an act of worship. You are recognizing the authority of Scripture and bowing before its authority and saying, "We will receive this with receptive and teachable hearts." You are putting God's word at the center of what is said and then you respond in worship with belief and with obedience and sometimes with repentance. So we consider the preaching of God's word to be a continuation of worship, not something distinct from it.

And as we continue our worship then, this morning as we turn to God's word, we're in Matthew 5. We've been teaching through the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5, 6 and 7, for some time now and we'll be here for some time yet to come, but if you haven't been with us, we are in Matthew 5 and we come today to Jesus' teaching on divorce. Matthew 5:31 and 32 is our text this morning if you want to read along with me. If you don't have a Bible, we have Bibles underneath the seat in front of you. Feel free to take one of those as our gift to you. We would love to be the first to put a Bible in your hand maybe. But Matthew 5:31 and 32 says,

31 It was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce'; 32 but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Now, it would be very easy to just plunge into this text and just start talking about marriage and divorce as if they were some kind of mathematic equation that needed to be worked out and just deal with the mechanics of marriage and when is divorce proper and when is it not, but that's never the right way to approach anything on the Sermon on the Mount because you have to remember the broad context of the Sermon on the Mount which we have talked about over months gone by. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus teaching and Matthew has recorded it as an exposition, an explanation of exactly what Jesus meant when he said in Matthew 4:17, if you would look at that with me, Matthew

4:17, Jesus as he was entering into his public ministry as Matthew records it, Matthew says, "From that time Jesus began to preach and say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" Jesus here as he moves into the Sermon on the Mount, is explaining what it means to live a life of repentance. He is issuing a call to righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount and you can see that, for example, in Matthew 5:6 where he says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." And in verse 20, "I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." And in chapter 6, verse 1, oh, I can't wait to get to that passage, Matthew 6:1, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven." Matthew 6:33, "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." So I say that simply to remind you of the context that Jesus here in these two verses that we're going to look at this morning is not simply giving a mechanical legal explanation of the way that marriage and divorce should be handled. It's in a greater context, that's the key that you must see. Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce is part of a broader context where he is calling his disciples to righteousness as part of his call to repentance. So as we think about marriage and divorce, we must connect them, we must realize that this is rooted in a greater call to righteousness that Jesus is making.

Now along with that we've said in the past that the Sermon on the Mount is not only a call to righteousness but it's also a call to blessing. It is a call to God's blessing. Look at Matthew 5:3. He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted." And on and on it goes through verse 11 and in other places you see Jesus promising blessing upon the people of this character. So when Jesus calls a man or a woman, a young boy or a young girl to repentance, understand what he's doing, he's calling them to turn their back on sin. He's calling them to come out of the world. He's calling them, maybe this morning he's calling you, to come out of the world and to leave your self behind and to follow him. And as Jesus calls someone to follow him, as he calls someone to repent, he's not calling them primarily to rules and regulations, he's calling them to himself. The call of the Gospel is for you to come to a person, the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, a person who literally died on a cross, who literally was buried, who literally was resurrected, all to offer a sin offering for sinners like you who needed to be forgiven of their sin and their unrighteousness because you were born into sin, you are a sinner by nature, you are a sinner by choice and that life of sin leads ultimately to judgment and destruction. So Jesus in his gracious call and in his gracious teaching says, "Repent. Turn your back on yourself. Turn your back on the world. Turn your back on sin and come and follow me. Come to me for salvation. Come to me so that I can bless you and forgive you. So in all of this sermon in Matthew 5 through 7, Jesus is calling people to himself so that he can bless them and so that their lives would manifest the very righteousness of God. That's the context for what we're looking at here this morning in Matthew 5:31 and 32.

Now, we don't have the luxury to be able to review everything that we've said in the past three or four weeks, but we've made the point that in this particular section, especially in verses 27 through 32 of Matthew 5, Jesus is speaking about God's view on marriage and

on sexual sin. If you look at Matthew 5:27, you can see that Jesus introduces the topic of adultery. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery,'" then it goes on and says God's view of sexual sin is such that it's not merely the physical act but God looks on the heart. Verse 28, "I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." And the whole point of Jesus' teaching in this broader section, it is premised on an understanding, it is premised on presuppositions about the nature of the institution of marriage as God made it, as God established it in Genesis 2. We talked about this so many times but just by the way of the briefest of review, that God intended marriage to be an institution in which one man and one woman would covenant together to live in a permanent, loving, exclusive, intimate relationship for all their natural earthly lives and that is God's view of marriage. The Bible knows nothing about living together before marriage in order to test things out and see if it works. The Bible simply calls that fornication and sin. There is nothing righteous about that. The Bible knows nothing about people of same sex coming together and sharing in marriage. That is a modern-day perversion of a biblical institution that never should have been countenanced. The Bible knows nothing about an open marriage where people could move in and out of relationships while claiming to be husband and wife. No, you see, God established marriage to be a high and lofty institution; that it would be a righteous institution where God would bless people through it with a sense of companionship to break down the isolation that Adam felt in the garden; that it would be a place where families would be propagated; where the word of God would be transmitted. And we hardly need to say that we have watched that all disintegrate even in our day, haven't we?

Well, one of the blessings of teaching the word of God as an act of worship is to come back and to not just personally and individually deal with spiritual life but corporately and as a people of God, to realize that God saved us in part to deliver us out of a wicked world which in part in our day has so distorted the institution of marriage that it is marred almost beyond recognition. Well, our blessing, our opportunity is to see the purity and the loftiness of the institution as God intended it to be so that's what we've done over the past several weeks. For those of you that are visiting, there may still be a few copies of the CD on your way out in the main lobby. We would love for you to take whatever you want from that table there. Please don't hesitate to take them all if you wish. We would be delighted for that to happen.

Now, in light of that, oh, and this is so very important, in light of the high and lofty nature of the institution of marriage, that it is meant to be exclusive and intimate, God in the Old Testament pronounced very severe penalties on the sin of adultery, in fact, he prescribed the death penalty for it. We saw that from Leviticus and Deuteronomy. God prescribed the death penalty for those that engaged in adultery in the Old Testament. Now, in our day and age where adultery is simply a theme for entertainment in movies and all of that, that sounds so severe and so contrary and so strange to our ears that that might sound overly severe. The death penalty for sexual sin? Well, you see that question betrays something, someone who would say that is simply bearing witness to the fact that they are so saturated in our culture that they can't even begin to see it from God's perspective. From God's perspective, adultery is a dagger in the heart of the institution

that he established for the good of man to be high and lofty and revered, and adultery violates the exclusivity of marriage, it violates the intimacy of marriage, it violates the love and trust that are supposed to be at the heart of that marriage, it violates the permanence of it. And the fact that this is so trivialized in our culture is merely a testimony to how far we have fallen. So when you come to the teaching of Scripture on marriage and on adultery, you realize that you need to step completely out of what we have been conditioned to think by our surrounding environment and just let God's word speak to it and that's what we're going to try to do today.

In verse 31, let's go back to the text since I read it so long ago, so long ago, what was it, 10 or 15 minutes ago? That wasn't that long ago, was it? In verse 31 Jesus said in chapter 5, "It was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'" Now what we said about this last time was that in Jesus' day there was a group and a section of Pharisees that had greatly trivialized divorce. They basically authorized divorce for any reason whatsoever. If your wife burned the supper, you had grounds for divorce. If you found somebody that you liked better, you had grounds for divorce. And it was all based on a misinterpretation and a distortion and a twisting of Deuteronomy 24 which speaks about a man finding some kind of uncleanness in his wife. Well, the Pharisees, one group of the Pharisees interpreted that so broadly to make it simply dependent upon the man's subjective judgment. If he was displeased with his wife, he could send her away as long as he gave her the proper paperwork. That was such an utter travesty and distortion of what God intended marriage to be, it could not have possibly been the right interpretation of Scripture. So what Jesus is doing here in verses 31 and 32, is he is applying his corrective to the existing teaching of the day that was so loose and casual about divorce.

Really the situation wasn't much different than it is today where we assume the rightness of no-fault divorce. We assume that that's a good thing. Let's just make it as easy and simple as possible. Well, it hasn't always been that way. That's a relatively new modern invention since maybe 1960, if I'm recalling the dates correctly. This casual approach to divorce is a reflection of, a casual view of divorce – mark it – a casual view of divorce is simply a reflection of a casual view of marriage. To break a marriage, if it's easy and simple and not a process really to do that, is simply to say that marriage itself doesn't matter too much. We make it harder for people to break business contracts than we do for them to break marriage up. How could that possibly be right? How could that possibly be a reflection of the righteousness of God?

Well, Jesus here is applying a corrective in his teaching on this and in the verse that we are going to particularly focus on now in verse 32, Jesus is going to bring clarity to the situation. So I think I have two points here this morning. We're going to first of all look at what Jesus says on divorce. If you take notes, your first point would be: Jesus on divorce. And then secondly toward the end of the message we're going to answer some questions on divorce. So there is a lot of context from the past four or five messages that inform what I'm saying today. I've reviewed them as much as possible and now we need to get into the verse that God has for us here this morning in his providence and that is verse 32.

Jesus treated marriage and divorce as a key area of righteousness and as we said, marriage was intended to be exclusive and it was intended to be permanent. Now, before I read verse 32, what a privilege it is for our church to have so many young people in our midst, people that are still unmarried, people that are single and looking forward with hope and anticipation that maybe one day the right person would come along in God's plan for your life and you would be married, and what I want to say to you is this as you think about marriage, this is just a side pastoral point that really isn't tied directly to the text: when the time comes for you to enter into marriage, what you and your spouse must absolutely have clear in your mind is that the word "divorce" is never to be spoken from your lips again. When you enter into marriage, when you enter into Christian marriage, you are to close the back door, lock it and brick it off so that you never go out that door again; that that's never even an option. You don't enter into marriage, my friends, my young friends, you do not enter into marriage with a hidden mental qualification that says, "If this doesn't work out, I can get out of this by way of divorce." No. And here's the thing, that is not righteous thinking. Assuming that exception for yourself, leaving yourself an out like that is mentally sinning against the institution of marriage. So when you and your spouse, when you and your fiancé, when you start talking about engagement and wanting to think about marriage, you need to have it very clear in your minds with each other, "Now, what we're saying here is divorce is never an option, right?" "Right." Then you're in a position to go forward, but you have to have that clear in your mind and that's the way that you should honor and revere the institution of marriage and live in obedience to God in a way that says, "When I get married, divorce is not an option." You must think that way and you must have that clear and committed in your heart.

You say, "Well, that's kind of serious, then?" Well, exactly, that's the whole point. It's a great institution. That's the way that you are to think about it and that's the way you enter into it because it's only that kind of fundamental commitment that will carry you through the inevitable hard times that you will face once the exhilaration of romance dies down and settles down and you get into the routine of life and you start to realize, "Oh, do you know what? I married a sinner." And your spouse starts to realize, "I did too." And the sparks sometimes that that generates, what you have to understand is that you share a mutual commitment that, "We're not even going to breathe the word 'divorce' here," and that forces you to say, "Well, do you know what? We might as well work this out. We might as well resolve this and forgive each other because we're going to be with each other for another 50 years." And that fundamental commitment shepherds you and corrals you into the kind of relationship where you say, "Do you know what? We need to communicate. We need to forgive. We need to move on." Rather than saying, "I'm just going to stew on this until I'm going to drop the divorce papers on him." You cannot think that way. That is not an option for you as a Christian, my young friends. So that's the way that you need to think about marriage. That's the way you enter into it. You are shutting, locking the door, you are bricking it over so that there is no way out. The only way out of your marriage is through the grave.

Now, the Pharisees didn't see it that way when Jesus was teaching. They had an easy, slippery, elusive view of it that said you can take it easy, just give her the right paperwork

and you'll be fine. That is exactly what our culture does today. The more I think about that, the more appalling it is to me but that's not what we're here to talk about today. Here we're here to talk about what Jesus says on divorce and Jesus treated marriage and divorce as a key area of righteousness. Look at what he says in verse 32 he says, "but I say to you that everyone," making a broad comprehensive statement, "who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity," he builds in an exception, "makes her commit adultery." So just for a moment, just so you see the governing rule that Jesus lays down about divorce is this: everyone who divorces his wife makes her commit adultery. Divorce leads to sin and unbiblical divorce is in itself sin. That's what he says and with those words Jesus declares judgment on easy divorce. He says it is sinful. So his general rule is that divorce and subsequent remarriage are wrong. Saying, to just put it in the simplest of terms here in light of the context of his day and in light of the context of our day, beloved, here's what it all boils down to: why do people get divorced? Because they are unhappy. You can make up and blame people back and forth or whatever but that's the bottom line, "I'm not happy. I want a divorce." And what Jesus says is in a powerful, massive repudiation of the sin and selfishness of man in light of the great institution of marriage, Jesus repudiates that sinful selfish attitude and says, "Your unhappiness is not a grounds for divorce."

Now, in light of this verse and in light of other teaching on Scripture, there are some teachers who declare all divorce and all remarriage to be wrong and to be sinful and they allow no exceptions and they allow no remarriage. There are others who allow for divorce but forbid all remarriage and we're not going to dig into all of that. We'll talk about a little bit later on today but the only question that matters is what does Jesus say. That's the only question that matters in this. What does Jesus say about this issue of divorce?

Well, let's look at it here. Look at verse 32 with me again. Jesus says, "I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife," now we'll look at the exception clause, "except for the reason of unchastity." Jesus is saying, "There is an exception to the general rule that I am proclaiming here, it's the reason of unchastity." Then he goes on and says, "and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." We'll look at all of this later. But somehow Jesus qualifies the broad dogmatic statement that he makes with this word that in the New American Standard reads "unchastity." What is that? That must somehow be important. With what I'm about to say, it's so important to remember what we've said multiple times, that the Old Testament provided for the death penalty for adultery. If you remember that, this passage is going to become quite clear and easy to understand.

The word "unchastity" is from the Greek word "porneia." That's the word from which we get our word "pornography." This Greek word, "porneia," occurs 25 times in the New Testament. In the New American Standard, it is always translated by the terms "fornication" or "immorality" except for this one verse. Why they go with a different translation, why they say one time this and then 24 times this, may be more of a reflection of a theological bias in what they say rather than interpreting the term for what it says and what it means everywhere else.

The word "unchastity" I think obscures the meaning. I very rarely do this, very rarely will I ever dispute a translation in your English Bible that I preach from because I don't think that's a healthy thing to do, but when their own translators use the words "fornication, immorality" 96% of the time and make one exception here, maybe we should just stick with "fornication" or "immorality" as the term. It's my judgment, having studied this passage, that the word "unchastity" obscures the meaning of this text because it's just kind of outside the realm of our vocabulary. When did you last use the word "unchastity" in a sentence? You've probably used "immorality." That communicates. Those of you that follow the English Standard Version will find that it agrees with me. The English Standard Version here says, "but I say to you that everyone," it translates it this way, this is the English Standard Version, Matthew 5:32 says, "I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery." That's right. That's the proper way to interpret this and to translate this term. Porneia is a broad term for sexual immorality. Porneia includes the idea of adultery, of a married person having sexual relations with another married person in another marriage. But even in our use of the word "immorality," this Greek word "porneia" is used more broadly than that.

Think about it this way. This will help you understand where we're coming from. The Greek term includes adultery but it's broader than that. Greek as a more precise term, "moicheia," to describe the specific sin of marital adultery. So here let me give you an illustration that will make all of this clear. We're done with the technical part right now. You could say, just think about the way we use language. If she was married you would say, "Oh, she has committed adultery." But you would also understand that there is a breadth to that term that goes beyond adultery. To use the term "immorality" even in our language is a broader term than specifically talking about adultery. You can say immorality includes adultery but it's not restricted to adultery. There is a breadth to the term. And when Jesus is saying here, he is saying that the biblical ban on divorce does not apply in the presence of sexual immorality. Sexual immorality is a violation of the very fundamentals of marriage in a way that causes you to view that marriage differently. It has been violated in a way that requires a different look at it.

Now why? Why? Why would sexual sin be an exception to the rule? Here's the question that those who are very strict on this issue would ask, they would say, "Isn't God's plan that marriage be permanent? If marriage is to be permanent, then how could you ever authorize divorce?" That's the tension in the discussion on these matters. Well, I think the Bible gives a very clear answer to that. Adultery was subject to the death penalty. Do you know what the death penalty did? It ended the marriage. Yeah, there is a certain little bit of humor in that even as we are talking about something serious. The Old Testament view and elevation of marriage and its condemnation of adultery was, "When that happens, you die." That marriage has to end by way of execution.

Well, flash forward 1,400 years from the time of Moses to Jesus' day and the Jews did not have the authority to carry out the death penalty. They were now living under the realm and the authority of Rome and they did not have an independent ability to execute people. That's why they had to go to Pilate when they wanted Jesus crucified. They could not do

it on their own. They were forbidden from doing it. Now, beloved, just stay with me. Sometimes these things are just so clear and simple to understand. The legal authority of the Jews had changed. They were no longer a theocracy able to execute people on spiritual grounds. They had lost that privilege when they came under the domination of Rome. But do you know what? Their situation, their authority had changed but do you know what? God hadn't changed. God was the same and God still hated adultery and God hated the way that it violated his institution and his holy ordinance and his holy covenant of marriage.

God hadn't changed and so in this exception Jesus is showing forth that divorce is the way that God upholds the sanctity of marriage in the face of adultery. That may sound somewhat counterintuitive. I have a strict friend who says, "No, no," on this issue but I think they are badly mistaken on that. They say, "But you've got to uphold the institution of marriage," to which I reply, "You're not recognizing what adultery does to the institution. Adultery is a nuclear bomb in the midst of it." So the reality of the matter is that you protect the institution of marriage, I'm talking about in principle here, I'm not talking about the individual relationships right now. That's not what we're talking about, we're talking in principle here. Divorce is the way that God upholds the sanctity of marriage and says, "Divorce is never supposed to happen. Marriage is permanent, loving, exclusive and intimate." But when this sin occurs, it changes the game. There is something else in play here. And to allow a man to continue, allow a woman to continue in the benefits and the prerogatives of marriage when that has been violated as if nothing had happened, it so trivializes adultery in those cases to say that, I think my friends that disagree with me on this are badly mistaken and are missing something fundamental about the institution of marriage and the seriousness of the sin of adultery based on what Jesus says here.

Martin Lloyd Jones says this, he says and I quote, "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." Understand the reason why that is true, it's because adultery has violated, it has stabbed at the heart of one flesh, one flesh intimacy, one flesh permanence, and divorce under those grounds is legitimate. Notice that we haven't said and we will not say that divorce is commanded, that divorce is required. We're making a distinction there, a very important one, that divorce is legitimate under those circumstances. And since divorce under that limited circumstance is not sinful, then remarriage after a lawful biblical divorce is not sinful either. That's what we believe the teaching of Scripture to be.

Sinclair Ferguson, you know, it's such a privilege just to quote men like Martin Lloyd Jones and to quote men like Sinclair Ferguson, to quote men like John MacArthur who have established their credentials and their faithfulness to God's word and to help make plain that when we teach at Truth Community Church, it's our intention to identify with a certain category and a certain class and a certain quality of men. We're not teaching on our own, going off, spinning off into orbit based on what we think, but we are in a broad stream of men who have proven themselves faithful over time and we stand on their

shoulders and we swim in their wake. Sinclair Ferguson says this, he says and I quote, "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." So there you go. That's why Jesus would make an exception for sexual immorality, make an exception for adultery. And we're not going to defile the conversation to say there are a lot of ways for immorality to affect a marriage beyond simply the act of physical adultery. We understand that and that needs to be taken into account when certain pastoral situations come up. I'm just going to leave that therefore now but we'll touch on that at the end of the message.

Now, you may have heard there are a few teachers who say this and they would disagree with everything that I have just said. They will say that Jesus only intended to apply this exception to immorality by a Jewish woman during her betrothal period before she was married. So using today's term, the Jewish man and Jewish woman, they were engaged, before they got married she violated it with sexual immorality and therefore he could send her away and break the betrothal and they say, "Betrothal was a lot more like marriage back then than engagement is today." Well, what's the problem with that view? Two points in my judgment. One, lesser ground: they underestimate the biblical condemnation of adultery. Secondly, these things are so plain. Jesus in Matthew 5:27 through 32 is not talking about betrothal. Wouldn't the context matter to the view that you're advocating? Jesus isn't talking about betrothal. Jesus is dealing with how the Pharisees treated marriage and divorce. That's the context. He's talking about those who were married and those who were seeking divorce and so to restrict it to a narrow view that says this is only talking about betrothal, in my judgment, is a great violation of the context which is the first principle of biblical interpretation. So we step back from it to say and to say again that adultery strikes at the heart of marriage, it is a legitimate grounds for divorce if reconciliation proves impossible.

Now, the sad reality of it is that people who claim to be Christians find themselves in this situation, "What do I do? What do I do now that my spouse has committed adultery?" We'll deal with that in just a moment but Jesus, just to wrap up the treatment of the text in front of us before we get into these pastoral questions and applications, if the divorce was not for immorality, Jesus says that remarriage is forbidden.

Look at verse 32 with me again. Again, this just cuts against the easy approach to marriage, divorce and remarriage that's in our society but do you know what? Wouldn't you expect a holy God who created marriage and created sexuality, wouldn't you expect him to have a higher standard, a higher view of what he created than what sinful men who are in rebellion against him would have toward it? Wouldn't you expect that? Wouldn't you expect God's view to be higher, to be holy, to be more strict than those who simply are slaves to their own lusts? Of course it would be different. Here is the thing, beloved, I feel like I'm fighting for really important ground in your heart right now. The fact that God's view is higher and more holy is not an argument against the correctness of what Scripture teaches. It's not an argument against it at all. The fact that it is different is a testimony to its truthfulness, its righteousness, rather than an argument, "Well, we don't do it that way, preacher. Don't you understand that's not the way it's done? Therefore this

high view, the strict view couldn't possibly be right." To which I say, "No. In light of the high view of marriage, your approach to marriage couldn't possibly be right, O world." That's the way to think. We set aside our presuppositions and our prejudices and our world philosophies and we come humbly before the word of God and we bow before it in an act of worship and we say, "Lord, speak. What would you say in your word? I will respond. I will believe. I will obey. I will teach. I will defend." That's the way that you approach God's word, beloved. That's the way a church approaches God's word and how grateful I am to have people like you that I know share that commitment and we get to do this corporately together. That is a blessing and as our Brother Paul prayed during the Scripture reading time earlier, "God, protect that and help it and develop it more." You see, we abandon all sense of entitlement, we abandon all sense of wanting the approval of the world. We don't care about the approval of unregenerate men, we just want to please God by teaching what his word says, believing it and doing our best to obey it. That's the only thing that matters in life.

Here's the thing, let's think together. This is part of us learning under and growing in discipleship under the word of God together. Let's think about it from this way: you must have that fundamental core approach settled in your mind about the authority of God's word and submission to God's word, a commitment to believe and to obey, you must have that in place and let that inform the way that you respond to the Bible's teaching of marriage. You see, if you approach it from the other perspective and you just say, "I'm unhappy. What does the Bible say about marriage? Eh, I don't really like that. I'm going to go my own way." That's a recipe for disaster. That's just saying... You know, look, beloved, think about it this way. We're talking about our view of God's word right now not simply about our view of marriage. If someone is just going to do what they want to do anyway, why even bother to open the Bible? If you're just going to do what you want to do, go do it but don't go to Scripture and then twist it and deny it and misinterpret it simply so that you can do what you want to do and claim biblical justification for it. Don't do that. That's really bad. Better to just say, "I'm going to do what I want to do," than to open the Bible and say, "I see what the Bible says but then I'm going to do it anyway." God's word deserves more respect than that, wouldn't you say?

So watch what Jesus has done as we come back to marriage on this matter. Jesus has protected the sanctity of marriage from both directions. It's brilliant. One of the things I love about the Sermon on the Mount is you just get a window into how utterly brilliant his mind is. To call him a genius is not adequate. This is the infinite omniscient mind of God in human flesh speaking and teaching us. What has he done here? Jesus has protected marriage from both directions with what he has said. There is a perfect balance in what he has said. On the one hand he has protected it from casual easy divorce and said, "Everyone who does this, commits adultery, is sinning against God." And yet in the other direction, he protects it and says, "But adultery is such a great sin and such a violation of the core of what marriage is meant to be that this exception changes it." He protects marriage from adultery and he protects it from casual divorce so that marriage could be what God intended it to be: loving, exclusive, permanent and intimate between one man and one woman until death do us part. That's what Jesus has done here. It's

brilliant. He rejects the frivolous grounds, permits divorce when adultery has violated the exclusive intimacy that God requires. That's Jesus on divorce.

Now, let's deal with some pastoral questions here, point 2 here today, not tied directly to our text but questions that we now come up in ministry and in life. So questions on divorce or answering questions on divorce for point 2. Oh, and this gets right down to where we live. First of all, how does forgiveness relate to adultery by a spouse? How does forgiveness relate to adultery by a spouse? Remember that we said Jesus here is not commanding divorce. He says it's legitimate. He's saying it's permitted. That is not the same as saying you must be divorced once this happens. That's not the teaching of Scripture. You can forgive.

In fact, beloved, turn back to Matthew 5 with me. There is a spirit in the righteousness and blessing of the Sermon on the Mount that permeates with grace, permeates with forgiveness both from God to sinner and on a human horizontal plane so that if you look at Matthew 5:7, for example, this is the context of Jesus' teaching on divorce. Matthew 5:7 he says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Verse 9, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." This is the intrinsic nature of Christian character that Jesus is describing here and as one speaking to you now, you have been, speaking to you as a Christian, you have been forgiven of great eternal sins against God, haven't you? God has been gracious to you and forgiven you when he could have judged you immediately and sent you to hell, and God has been good to you and has not held your sins against you, instead has given blessing to you that you did not deserve. Well, the spirit of New Testament teaching, we won't bother looking at passages like Ephesians 4, the spirit of New Testament teaching is that if you have been forgiven, then be forgiving. Be merciful to those who have wronged you. Be a peacemaker with those with whom you have conflict.

Look over at Matthew 6:12. Adultery is a sin not only against God but also against the spouse but there is a spirit that animates daily prayer in verse 12 that says, "God, forgive us our debts. God, I confess my sins before you and, God, as I pray that, God, I want you to know that I have forgiven those who have sinned against me, who are indebted against me." You see, there is this peaceable forgiving spirit that animates every true Christian.

And beloved, let's say this: Christian marriage can survive even adultery. It has happened many times, probably for some of you in this room where you go through that, your spouse has betrayed you, your spouse has sinned against you, sinned against God, but somehow you have come through that on the other side and by the grace of God, by the work of the Spirit, but the work of the word, by forgiving one another, by communicating through it, you were able to restore that marriage rather than seeing it broken. Some of you have experienced that. Some of you have lived that and we thank God for that. So it would seem from the tenor of Scripture, answering the question how does forgiveness relate to adultery by a spouse, it would seem from the tenor of Scripture that the immediate impulse, the first step, the first option would be to say, "I want to forgive you. Let's work through this," and to try to find a way forward that would preserve the

marriage and that you would extend forgiveness to a serious sin against you because you understand God has forgiven your serious sins against him.

That's how forgiveness relates but in light of Jesus' teaching, there obviously comes a point, you can never define in advance exactly what that point is, but there comes a point where the divorce is prolonged, the divorce is hardhearted, it is stubborn, it is repeated, and at that point under the counsel of your elders, seeking the counsel of the authorities in the church that you belong to, you say, "Yeah, this is appropriate at this point." And what our practice is here when a spouse comes and says this is the situation, we'll talk through it, ask questions, "What happened here? What happened there? Where is your heart at on this?" And when it's obvious that adultery has occurred, that that is factually established and there is no restoring it, then we'll write a letter and say, "Yes, we believe you have grounds for biblical divorce here. You can pursue divorce without fear of sinning against God." But that's a last option rather than the first option. At first you see, "Can this be restored?" But do you know what? And this is just life, when a pattern is established where a spouse leaves and goes with somebody and comes back and goes again and comes back, adultery, I want you back, adultery, I want you back, you're not bound to live under that kind of treacherous behavior. You're not at the mercy of someone who is a slave to sin like that. That's why Jesus offers this ground of protection.

Secondly, is adultery the only grounds for divorce? We've said unhappiness is not grounds for divorce but is adultery the only grounds for divorce? We believe that there is one additional exception in limited circumstances. If you turn over to 1 Corinthians 7, Paul who said very plainly in 1 Corinthians that what he wrote was the Lord's commandment expands beyond the things that Jesus said during his earthly ministry to cover some matters about divorce that Jesus did not address in his recorded public ministry and in 1 Corinthians 7:12 Paul says, "that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her." And so picture two unbelievers who are married and one of them becomes a Christian, God saves them and now you have a Christian living with an unbeliever. The teaching of Scripture is that if that unbelieving one consents to live with you and lives in that marriage with you, then you should stay with them. You should stay with your unbelieving spouse. Absolutely.

He states it from the perspective of the opposite sex, verse 13, "a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife," he is set apart, in other words. There is a realm of blessing that he is in by being married to a Christian spouse. "And the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy." If you are in a position where God has put you with an unbelieving spouse, God has put you in a position where you bring the blessing of God to that man even though he is not a Christian. He sees a living illustration of the Gospel. He finds grace and understanding and kindness and love through your Christian life and so do your children. You shouldn't violate that if a man is willing to continue in it.

But look in verse 15, he says, "Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave." It's actually a command. If the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave. If this man has determined, "I do not want to be married to you, O Christian woman, I am an unbeliever, I like it that way, I want nothing to do with you," and he goes, then you let him go. "The brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace." You're not bound by the marriage vow when that person has voluntarily left the marriage. Divorce in that instance is not sinful.

Thirdly, third question here. We've said where does forgiveness fit, is adultery the only grounds? We tried to answer that briefly. The third question. I don't know how else to put this: what if my situation is complicated? You know, and there is no end to the permutations, there is a good mathematical term, there is no end to the permutations of difficulties and complexities that can come up when a marriage starts to go south. Well, beloved, we believe that it's the teaching of Scripture that God gives you spiritual leaders in your local church, he gives you elders, he gives you pastors to guide you and to help you understand. You should seek out their counsel. These are not issues to try to decide on your own. You should seek out spiritual counsel and let the spiritual leaders, the spiritual care, the shepherds that God has put in your life, help you sort it out so that you can know what to do with it and to know what's right. Not trust your own heart. You're a little too close to the situation to think in a purely objective manner about it. We're all too prone when a relationship goes south to feel sorry for ourselves, to want to blame the other person, to view it in a narrow way and the protection for that is seek the counsel of your elders and let them help you think through it and sort through it. This is one of the blessings and the privileges of church membership to be able to do that.

With that said, not having said this before from the pulpit at Truth Community Church, I don't think, just waiting for the right time and the exposition of God's word to come up: because unbiblical divorce is sinful, someone who is pursuing an unbiblical divorce as a member of our church is subject to church discipline. You do not have the freedom as a member of Truth Community Church to pursue an unbiblical divorce without consequence. You see, it's our responsibility to uphold the institution of marriage and it's also our responsibility to uphold the purity of the body. Now I realize, I hear stories over the years of gross failure by other churches to uphold this and people will divorce and remarry within a single congregation. Can you imagine the way that pollutes relationships and worship? We don't go there. We don't do that. We have to protect marriage and we have to protect you and we have to protect the body. Oh, my goodness, this is going everywhere today. This is going everywhere today.

You see, beloved, now we are talking about church life here. We're talking about the way that we view each other, the way we view ourselves and our commitment to the local body of which we are a part. When somebody goes off the rails in a church of our size, our modest size, when somebody goes off the rails, when somebody sins, when somebody violates unity and just goes off and makes a spectacle of themselves, that affects everybody. We're all affected by that and the point of all of that is this: is that you have to, we have to think about people other than ourselves. We have to be selfless enough in light of the selfless Savior that we serve, we have to be selfless enough to say,

"How does what I'm doing affect the other people that I fellowship with?" You see, when you rejected the world, when you denied yourself to take up your cross and follow Christ, that was embedded in that. "I'm not living for myself anymore. I have to consider others in the midst of this." So do you know what? I'll say it again. What a great blessing God has given me to be able to pastor a congregation that is marked by that attitude, that that attitude permeates the life of our fellowship. I am thankful to God more than you know.

Well, finally, it's come to the end here. Point 4: what about my prior unbiblical divorce? You know, in my past, this is what I did and then I became a Christian. Or I sinned against God, I remarried and now I'm here. I want to follow Christ. I've been following Christ but now here I am with this, now what in light of what Jesus has said? I say, "So let me get this straight. You have an unbiblical divorce in your past?" "That's right, pastor, I do." "You remarried in an unbiblical way and now you're married?" "Yes, pastor, that's right, I have. God, that's what I have done." Follow me all the way through here to which we say, "Okay, do you know what? You have sinned with that and that is serious that you have done that. You're a sinner. Do you know what? Welcome to the club. We've all sinned against God." Go back, my friend, those of you that are feeling the tremors in your heart over this as you sit here today, go back to the entire point of Christian salvation. Go back to the entire point of the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Look over at 1 Timothy 1:15, "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all." Paul says, "I am the chief of sinners and Christ forgave me." Verse 16, "Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life." Paul says, "Christ came into the world to save sinners and I am the worst one ever and he saved me." Paul says, "Look to me as your example. If he forgave me, he'll forgive you too that you might see the perfect patience of Jesus Christ, that Jesus Christ receives sinners of all types and graciously forgives them and does not hold their guilt against them." Christ forgives thieves. He did so with the guy next to him on the cross. He forgives liars. He forgives adulterers. He forgives those who have sinned against the institution of marriage and he does so gladly, willingly, graciously, freely. That's the whole point of Christian salvation, beloved, do you see it? That even you in the way that you violated marriage can come humbly to Christ and say, "O Christ, I had no idea what I was doing. I see the guilt of it now. I am so sorry. Receive me for who I am. Show me the patience and mercy that you showed to Paul and forgive me." To which our loving Savior says, "Of course. That's why I came." It's precious, isn't it, that we could sin so greatly and find an even greater Savior whose even greater sacrifice covers even the worst in depth of our sin. That's our Christ for us. Isn't that good news? Isn't that wonderful?

So if that's you and you say, "I have this in my past," beloved, a fresh day is offered to you. As Christ says, "Come to me in confession. Lay it all out, confess it to him freely in humility, beloved, believe the promise of Scripture. He received Paul, he will receive you too. And once you have settled accounts with the Lord like that and your mind is resting, your heart is resting in Christ for forgiveness of what happened in the past and you are assured of his promise, you look around at your existing marriage, your existing

relationships, your existing life, Christ says, "I forgive you." Then he says, "Go and sin no more." What a wonderful Lord. What a merciful Savior on sinners unworthy like you and me.

Let's pray together.

*Our gracious God, we pray that you would help each one sort through the significance of this teaching in their own lives. Where your word has convicted, Father, may those respond in repentance. Where it has bruised and brought up things from the past, may your grace be swift to meet the hurting and tender conscience. May those who perhaps are convicted of the sinfulness of their whole way of life through your word today, turn to you for the first time to Christ, that they would receive Christ and rest in him for eternal life in the complete, full, immediate forgiveness of all their sins.*

*Father, so many marriages are represented here, some where fights have occurred recently, where settled discontent is present, we ask, Father, that through your word and through your Spirit you would have mercy on each one. And may the fact that we are still living and breathing and under the grace of Christ give us the hope that the past does not necessarily determine the future. May you renew a sense of commitment to marriage amongst us as a church and in our individual marriages. May individual believers commit to having a forgiving spirit where perhaps they have been grudging and reluctant and withdrawn. Father, for the sake of Christ help them to see that they should extend mercy if they have received mercy and let that mercy be met with a response of mercy and grace from the other spouse.*

*And Father, I would echo what my Brother Paul prayed earlier, protect our church, help our church as we move forward from here. Indeed Lord, let the best days of Truth Community Church still be ahead. May we look forward in the days ahead to your blessing, to multiplied conversions, to Christians growing and flourishing in unity and peace. May the days ahead be so great under the hand of your Spirit exclusively to your glory that we would look back on these days and say those were just the meager firstfruits of greater things that came later. We cast ourselves upon you, upon your mercy. We gladly submit to your authority and the authority of your word and we pray, O God, with the hymnist, "Lead on, O King Eternal." In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

I just wanted to say one final thing that occurred to me. You know, when you talk about a topic about marriage and all of that and I said there are just so many permutations of what can happen, you realize as soon as you're done, "Oh, I should have said this or I should have said that." I wanted to say one final thing.

You know, the approach during the main part of the message was dealing with those who have committed the sin of adultery and what do you do and how do you think about it, but I also want to say that recognizing the various types of relationships that some of you have had in the past, there are many in here who through no fault of your own, you have been greatly hurt and greatly sinned against in marriage and maybe that person is long gone out of your life and there is still the echo of the pain of that in your heart. We care

about that. We're sympathetic to that and I wanted to say just a word about that realizing that maybe even some of you are with a spouse now that just does not treat you well and it's not your fault. You are on the receiving end of unjust, unfair and unkind treatment no matter what you try to do.

What about you? Well, Jesus' teaching on divorce doesn't specifically speak to that, that wasn't specifically in the text but that's the reality of life, isn't it, that people go through that? What about that? And you say, "I don't have grounds for divorce but I'm hurting and I'm suffering here. What about me?" I want to say just a word to you. Let that become the occasion that prompts you to draw into closer intimacy with your Lord Jesus. Do you know what? The Lord Jesus knows exactly what unrighteous suffering is like. He knows what it's like to be spat upon, to be hit unjustly. He knows what it's like to be betrayed by those close to him. He knows what it's like to stand alone in the midst of opposition. And that means his earthly life has equipped him by experience to be a sympathetic and gracious Savior to you as well. You can go to Christ knowing that he receives you and that he understands you, that he does not condemn you, that he does not blame you, that his loving, forgiving grace is especially marked out for you in the midst of your silent suffering. So rest in the love of Christ. Find your comfort in him and let human betrayal become that which brings you into a greater understanding of the perfect unflinching faithfulness of your Lord Jesus.

With that said, let's stand for a benediction that will reinforce those words that I just said. Bow with me. Hebrews 4:14. This is your encouragement as you walk out today, "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Amen.

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