

# Divorce and Remarriage - Part 2

## INTRO -

Last time we began a two part sermon talking about Jesus' teaching on the permanence of marriage. Marriage was intended from the beginning to be the permanent union between one man and one woman, the sacred bond in the sight of God. We come this morning to part 2 in which we must consider Jesus' and the Bible's teaching on divorce and remarriage. And as much as in our flesh we may want to avoid topics such as these, this is a subject we need to talk about. Our culture is plagued with undervaluing the sacredness of marriage, our culture is plagued with easy divorce for any and all reasons, irreconcilable differences has become the ultimate "Get out of marriage FREE card."... More than that it plagues the professing Christian church. While many churches have I think taken the counsel of their fears and just relegated this subject to the pile of "Things we don't talk about or inquire about," here I stand as your pastor, convinced that Jesus wants you and I to understand this subject, and the Lord Jesus intends for His church to be an example the world can look to for healthy marriage, as well as a voice of humble boldness to uphold the bible's teaching on marriage and divorce.

I mentioned in the first sermon that this is not a theoretical subject by any means, this is a tangible, and for many a painful subject one that touches down in some degree or another upon every one of our lives. Perhaps you've been divorced, or your parents or grandparents, or siblings... And so I'm keenly aware that many in this room this morning are not just hearing this sermon to learn academically about the subject, but you're listening asking questions like "What does God think of my divorce? What does Jesus say about my parents divorce. How should I relate to those close to me who have walked through this?" You've wrestled through question of legitimate and illegitimate grounds. Can I remarry? Can my young sister or brother remarry? You've wrestled through "Does God view the innocent party in divorce differently than the guilty party?"

I want you to know that I stand here this morning with a bit of fear and trembling. Because second only to handling the truths of the Gospel and eternal life, preaching on marriage and divorce is holy ground, because it has implications for the most foundational and sacred thing given to man. Nothing I am going to say this morning is original to me. I am aware that this is an exceptionally challenging topic, and therefore I intend to speak even more carefully and guardedly because of the massive

implications this has for life. So I want you to know upfront I'm leaning heavily on others who are more intelligent than myself, other sermons that have been preached on the subject, articles, books, I'd be happy to point you to their material and resources if you're interested in going deeper. I just want to make that known publicly so you don't think I'm guilty of plagiarism, but I want to be extremely careful when talking about "What does the Bible teach about when marriages end?"

This morning's sermon is more topical than was part 1 in which we opened up Mark 10:1-10 in its own right. I have done my best to make this as Scripturally Robust for you as I reasonably can given our time limits, but I must warn you that I am going to be alluding to and citing various passages, but I'm not necessarily going to ask you to turn there or wait for everyone to turn there, in fact for that reason I've included this morning a handout FOR the sermon. I very much encourage you to try to follow along and to look passages up later that you aren't able to follow with me on. 6 things to understand about divorce and remarriage - Let's begin -

## **1. Divorce is never Ideal or God's Intention**

This is what we devoted the entirety of the first sermon to - Jesus' first and primary emphasis on the subject of divorce is always DON'T do it! Therefore that NEEDS to be our primary and first emphasis! 5 minute recap of last sermon - In the passage we just read, the Pharisees come to Jesus to test him. Trick Him. They want to get him in trouble with His views of marriage and divorce, probably trying to get Him to disagree with Moses, maybe even trying to get Him beheaded like John the Baptist was beheaded for making comment on Herod's unlawful divorce. They probably knew He had tight views on divorce, and so they ask Him to weigh in on the century-long debate among Jewish scholars "What are the legitimate reasons Moses gave for divorce?"

But Jesus answers their question with a question - What did Moses say? They say "well Moses permitted a man to divorce his wife." But Jesus points out "Yes because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted a man to divorce His wife. He certainly didn't require it. But as a concession to sin Moses did allow it.

And we talked about last time how the Pharisees had UTTERLY turned Deut 24 on its head, abused it - Moses didn't write Deut 24 to PROMOTE divorce, on the contrary, simply assuming that divorce WOULD happen, Moses GAVE THE STRICT warnings in Deut 24 TO PREVENT DIVORCE, which was rampant and to protect women in particular. Moses wanted to protect women from being treated like objects a picky husband can just throw away for burning the dinner, and so he requires first of all a certificate of divorce (meaning there has to be a legal process) as well as making very clear that once a husband divorces his

wife HE WILL NEVER GET HER BACK AGAIN. We saw that, if you divorce your wife and she becomes another man's wife you are forbidden to marry her again even if he divorces her or even if he dies. In other words "Think long and hard about what you are doing before divorcing your wife." But of course the Pharisees had jumped all over this exception and turned it on its head and made it a free for all for divorce - they turned it into "Moses said it's fine as long as we give a certificate! I gave the analogy of me telling my daughter Jerusha at the fair "Sweetheart don't you ever ever ever run away from daddy, do you understand? BUT if you ever do, for whatever reason, YOU MEET ME BACK AT THIS PLACE!" And it's like Jerusha interpreting that as "OK great dad said it's perfectly fine to run off from him whenever I want as long as I return here."

So Jesus tells them "Moses was giving a concession, not a requirement" and Jesus takes the discussion back to creation to talk about God's original intention for marriage. We don't get our theology of marriage from a concession about divorce, that'd be like preparing for battle by practicing our retreats, rather we MUST GO BACK to God's original intention for marriage given BEFORE SIN entered the world - Namely that marriage was intended to be the life-long, beautiful, one flesh union and covenant commitment intended to reflect God's glory and faithfulness.

So the Pharisees want to talk about how easy it is get a divorce, Jesus wants to talk about the permanence and sanctity of the marriage covenant. So that's where we must start. Our first emphasis when talking about divorce is "DON'T DO IT IF YOU DON'T HAVE TO!"

Our first emphasis must be "Remember what Marriage exists for, the glory of God. It is sacred. Even if you have legitimate grounds you are not REQUIRED to divorce! Reconciliation should be encouraged. Help should be offered. To divorce unlawfully is a great sin against God that we should take very seriously. The effects of divorce on children and others is horrible. That's the first note I want to strike because that's what Jesus strikes first. Marriage should be permanent - HOWEVER, having stressed that:

## **2. MARRIAGES CAN REALLY BE DISSOLVED - (Rom 7:2; John 4; mark 10:9)**

**In two ways -**

**By Death** - No one disputes this. Rom 7:2 - *"For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband."* Death dissolves a marriage and the remaining partner is free to remarry.

**Marriages can be dissolved by DIVORCE as well. MOST shouldn't be, but they can be.** The marriage covenant can REALLY be prematurely severed by divorce. I say that because there are some in our day, John Piper (I'll name names! I don't want to slander at all, I love Piper for many things) is one of them, who are advocating a position that is very novel in the church, a position I am convinced is very harmful, and I'm concerned that it is gaining popularity. Their position espouses what we might call a dichotomy/separation between the human side of marriage against the divine side. For instance they say things like "Well on the human level two people who were married might be physically separated and according to the courts of law on earth they are divorced, but in GOD'S eyes you're still married!" It seems they hold that in God's court there is this permanence that kind of transcends the earthly aspect of the covenant. And thus they don't recognize ANY legitimate grounds for divorce or remarriage EVER. But I don't think that's the right way to think about things - Divorced people really are divorced. The marriage covenant really has been ended, in God's eyes as well as in our eyes. The question is whether they SHOULD be divorced, not whether they are divorced.

Just to put biblical support to this - I think when Jesus says in mark 10:9 "Therefore what God has put together let no man tear asunder" he is implying that man ought not to, but CAN tear asunder what God has put together. Also think of John 4, Jesus is speaking to the woman at the well and he says "You've had five husbands", He doesn't say "You've had 1 husband and 4 adulterous relationships that you might call husbands but God doesn't recognize them as husbands, no Jesus recognized that her divorces, whether legitimate or illegitimate, are still real divorces, and remarriages are really marriages.

So marriages can be dissolved, by death and by divorce.

### **3. Divorce is NOT ALWAYS sinful (Jer 3:8. Matt 1:19)**

That might surprise you considering what I've just said. Is all divorce caused by sin? Yes! Divorce never would have existed apart from the fall. Only perfect faithfulness and commitment would characterize relationships, including marriage. But with the fall came unfaithfulness and broken relationships. But just because all divorce is caused by sin DOESN'T mean all divorce is for all parties in itself SINFUL. We've got to have that category. Just like blindness exists because of sin, but it is not sinful to be blind. The granddaddy of all proofs of this fact that not all divorce is sinful is that GOD HIMSELF DIVORCED apostate Israel in the OC -

Jer 3:8 - The Lord says: *Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce;* - Israel were spiritual adulterers! Abandoning their Husband, Jehovah, going after

foreign gods, committing atrocities against the holiness of their gracious husband, and finally God declares “I’m bringing this marriage to an end. Here’s your certificate, go.” Now the rest of the story is how God continues to pursue His people and eventually bring them back to himself in the church, but the point is God divorced Israel, and therefore it would be wrong to conclude that divorce is ALWAYS sinful!

How about a human example - Matthew 1:19 with Joseph after he finds out Mary is pregnant and he assumes what appears to be obvious, that Mary’s been unfaithful - *“Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.”* Joseph is commended as “just” when he desired to divorce what appeared to him to be his unfaithful wife (at this point they were betrothed, but Jewish custom still required a divorce for this). Of course an angel comes and informs him of what is going on.

Here’s the upshot - we need to be nuanced and biblically informed when treading through the muddy waters of divorce. God DOES NOT view all parties the same way! There is such a thing as a guilty party and an innocent (relatively speaking) party! Now sometimes both parties are guilty, both are unfaithful, both are abandoning their marriage vows, but God views the guilty very differently than the innocent. He has compassion upon the innocent, those who were wanting to stick in it, those who wanted a marriage that reflected His character, and we in the church need to extend great compassion to those who have been severely hurt and wronged in divorce. We need to come to those with the compassion of Christ, the promises of His grace to the brokenhearted. But to the guilty who trample the sanctity of marriage God will judge. He speaks very sternly of the need of deep repentance, deep contrition. So while divorce exists because of sin, not all divorce is sinful.

#### **4. The Bible recognizes 2 legitimate grounds for Divorce - Sexual Immorality and willful Desertion**

Here we really need to allow the Bible to guide us in this area. We’ve got many on the one hand today who act like God gives NO RESTRICTION on divorce, many lack the courage to tell people their divorce is or would be sinful if they were to pursue it. But on the other hand there are some, whom I’ve already alluded to, who want to say that the BIBLE recognizes NO legitimate grounds for divorce. Neither of these are correct. The Bible very clearly recognizes 2 grounds for divorce, sexual infidelity and willful desertion, and I think it makes sense that these are grounds because both of them destroy the very heart of the marriage covenant.

The first we find most clearly in Jesus’ words in Matthew 19:9 - the parallel account of Mark 10, Jesus adds a very important phrase which Mark doesn’t include - “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and

marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.” I mentioned last time there were the two schools of Jewish thought that had for centuries argued about what Moses permitted as legitimate reason for pursuing divorce, and the debate swirled around one word in Moses’ words in Deut 24 “If a man finds some indecency in his wife” - it’s a generic somewhat ambiguous word, and one school said “ANYTHING can be considered indecent, burning the dinner, talking so loud the neighbors hear, etc.” While the other conservative camp said it has to do with some form of nakedness. And contextually even from the previous chapter in Deut the hebrew word for indecency is used and clearly is in the realm of nakedness, lewdness, inappropriate revealing of oneself. And Jesus, the master interpreter of the Scripture is siding squarely with the conservative interpretation and interprets Deut 24 as referring to sexual immorality with someone other than your SPOUSE. This makes sense because the act of physical sex, as one commentator put it, is the “oath signing of the marriage covenant!” It is the one flesh union that signifies and seals the intimate union between this man and this woman. And to take that act and to experience it with another who is not your covenant spouse is tantamount to DESTROYING the covenant. It’s like signing on the dotted line of someone else’s marriage certificate!

Now let me make a brief comment. There are some, again I mention John Piper because his views are so popular, that say “this exception clause isn’t really what it appears to be on the face of it!” He argues that what Jesus is really doing here is NOT talking about divorce AFTER marriage, but Jesus is saying if sexual infidelity happens BEFORE marriage, during betrothal, one MAY pursue breaking off the engagement. And they argue that Matthew (who is the only one who has the exception clause) includes it because he wants to vindicate JOSEPH, you remember, from the opening verses of Matthew’s Gospel. In other words they argue that Matthew adds clarification so that his readers might not WRONGLY assume that Joseph was wrong to pursue breaking off the betrothal with Mary.

There a number of problems with that. 1. It assumes that Matthew ADDS to what Jesus originally spoke, which there’s no indication that these were not Jesus’ very words which he spoke to the Pharisees. Secondly remember the context, the Pharisees question revolves around divorce AFTER Marriage, not betrothal. This is an argument that revolves around Deut 24 which is all about divorce, not breaking off a betrothal/engagement. Again I think, as much as I have high regard and appreciation for these great men, this is a reach and exegetical gymnastics to defend a position that just isn’t defensible. I think a far better way to view this is not to say that Matthew ADDED something to Jesus’ words, but rather to say Mark and Luke left out these words of Jesus simply because the exception was taken for granted by everyone. There was not one person in Judaism who

would have disagreed that adultery is grounds for divorce, and so Mark and Luke leave it out, though it would have been assumed.

The second grounds, more briefly is willful desertion - Look at 1 Cor 7:10:

*Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord (Paul means He's getting this from Jesus): A wife is not to depart from her husband. 11 But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife. (So if you get wrongfully divorced, Paul is saying either reconcile with your former spouse or stay unmarried, we'll see this more in our next point.) 12 But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. 13 And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. 15 But if the unbeliever departs (deserts), let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. 16 For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?*

Paul is dealing in a different context than Jesus was, Jesus ministered mostly to the Jews, Paul now in a mostly Gentile context in which unbelievers who are previously married to other unbelievers are coming to faith in Christ, oftentimes only one spouse is converted, he's giving directions. If the unbelieving spouse is willing to stick it out and live in peace then great, stay married! Don't pursue a divorce! Praise God you have sanctifying influence on the unbelieving spouse. It's not unclean to share the marriage bed and covenant with an unbeliever. HOWEVER if an unbelieving spouse says "I can't take this, I won't have anymore of this holiness and Jesus business, I'm leaving" Paul says you are free to allow them to depart and you are not bound, lit. not enslaved. That is you are no longer bound to them in marriage, and presumably have been set free to remarry in the Lord.

So I hold, along with the majority of the Reformed tradition, that the Bible gives us two grounds for pursuing legitimate divorce. Adultery and desertion. And let me just say we should be very hesitant to go beyond these. Even given these two exceptions there are still a lot of hard questions to answer - What constitutes adultery? Obviously a husband lusting after another woman in his heart is not grounds for divorce (even though Jesus says it's adultery in the heart), but would rampant addiction to pornography? How do we define willful desertion? If a husband is continually physically abusive, or he commits a crime and goes away to prison for life, does that constitute desertion? I'm inclined to argue "yes it does." But we need wisdom, we need prayer, we need to seek God's help in these things as we weigh up different scenarios and cases, but let us not go beyond what is written.

## 5. What about remarriage?

Generally speaking, the question as to whether someone can or should remarry hinges on whether they were the guilty or innocent party, and whether the divorce was legitimate or not. If you are the guilty party and you wrongfully pursued divorce for reasons other than these two given us in Scripture, or if you were the adulterer or deserter I do not believe you ought to remarry. Paul says either be reconciled to your spouse or remain single. I know that's a heavy word in our day of divorces being a dime a dozen. But being the destroyer of the marriage covenant is serious business in the eyes of God! If our first response after destroying the sacred bond of marriage is "That seems a bit tight of God to not allow me to remarry after I abandoned my first marriage, instead of Oh my what a horrible thing I've done desecrating holy matrimony, how great is my sin! Something is wrong."

This is what Jesus is stressing, if someone divorces his wife or vice versa, EXCEPT for SEXUAL IMMORALITY or DESERTION and marries another he/she commits adultery and causes the former spouse to commit adultery (assuming they will remarry Matt 5:32). Again Jesus is not saying here that you aren't really divorced or that you aren't really remarried, it means you are NOW married to someone, sharing the marriage bed with someone other than your original spouse, with whom you have no good reason NOT TO STILL BE WITH!

Now, having said that regarding the guilty party, I don't think that applies in the same way to the innocent party! If you've been on the receiving end of unfaithfulness or a spouse wrongly leaving the marriage, even though you wanted to seek reconciliation, you wanted to stick it out, honor marriage, you are not bound like the guilty spouse. You don't have to remarry, and again reconciliation would be recommended if possible, we'd want to pursue that depending on the circumstances, but you are free to remarry and if you do you have not sinned! Even though, in one sense, if you remarry you will be married to someone who in one sense you should not be with (because the first marriage shouldn't have ended), and I think it's in that sense Jesus means it is adulterous even for the innocent spouse, that first marriage didn't end because of your wrong doing and I don't think Jesus means that the innocent party can not remarry! Indeed I think you could make the argument that they have been willfully deserted, which gives them grounds for remarriage.



Now it's at this point that we need to acknowledge that real life is rarely as clear cut as this. Rarely is it clear as day that you have a terribly obvious guilty party and a totally innocent party. Almost always even the innocent party has things they need to repent of, need to own, should probably give it some time before they jump right back into another marriage.

But right now probably many of you are running certain scenarios through your minds, applying what I'm saying and thinking through this relationship and that divorce. There are as many different scenarios as there are divorces and remarriages just about. Which is why we need wisdom and the grace of God. Jesus and the apostle Paul are giving us BIG PICTURE guidelines here, but they're not giving us an exact formula and rule book on how to walk through these things. I think that's the mistake many make is they want the bible to speak more explicitly to this issue than it does.

For instance what do you do when both spouses are guilty of adultery? What do you do when someone wrongly pursues divorce, but then their former spouse dies? Or gets remarried? Are they now free to remarry since reconciliation is now impossible? How does repentance factor into that discussion? Does pre-Christian/post-christian divorce have anything to do with the discussion? These and about 1000 other questions are why we need much prayer, we need to exercise the grace of being quick to listen and slow to speak. Not judging a matter before we hear it. Also we need the church, as this subject will often involve those we are most close to and emotionally attached to, we are not the best judge of objectivity, but we need each other to speak into our lives. OK so in general the question of remarriage hinges upon whether you are guilty or innocent, whether the divorce was legitimate or illegitimate.

## **6. Practical Direction for Various Groups -**

I want to close by addressing practically various groups of people - No doubt you have questions in your mind, and there's no way I can answer all of them in one sermon (though I'd be happy to engage further after the sermon), but let me try to hit some big picture things for you.

Let me first briefly again strike the main note we must strike. **To the married** - GUARD YOUR MARRIAGE! Stay married. Even if things are not going well right now, and your emotions and heart are not in it, stick in it. Seek help! Marriage is a precious gift from GOD. Don't take it for granted. Don't think you are above temptation, that divorce could never happen to us. Work intentionally on strengthening your marriage. Pray together, worship together, talk to each other, cultivate love. Confess your sins to one another, talk through issues, don't let bitterness take root or the sun to go down on your anger. Cultivate regular sexual

intimacy into your marriage. If there are any here who are contemplating divorce, please talk to someone. Consider the effects of divorce upon your children, consider the glory of God, stay married.

**To the wrongly divorced and single** - If you are the innocent party, someone who was deserted by a spouse without biblical grounds. We want to draw near to you in comfort. You need the hope of Christ, the help and encouragement of the church. We do not want to treat you like the criminal, but rather like the wounded who needs care. We want to help you as you wrestle through things like potential remarriage. If you are the guilty party who has wrongly pursued divorce and you're single - **Reconcile with your spouse, if possible, or stay single.** Even if reconciliation is not possible, perhaps they've remarried or have died, work repentance and make amends as far as is possible. Confess your sin to God! Own your guilt, run to Christ. In appropriate ways, if possible, confess your sin to your former spouse, to your kids, to your church.

**The *wrongly* divorced and remarried** - 1) Stay Married, 2) Run to the cross

There are probably some in this room who as you've heard what I'm saying you've realized "It was wrong of me to divorce my first spouse. It was sinful. I should have sought reconciliation." Either you didn't know these things or you were just disobedient. But nonetheless here I am remarried in what the Bible says was a sinful 2nd or 3rd marriage, what do I do? 2 things (at least) - **1) You need to stay married to your current spouse.** Do not divorce and go back to your former spouse, the Bible NOWHERE commends that. Though it was sinful to divorce and end your first marriage, it really did end and you are really married now. And God recognizes that marriage and calls you to begin NOW to honor the sanctity of the marriage covenant! **2) You need to run to the cross.** Illegitimate divorce is a great sin in God's eyes. To tear asunder what He put together! A sin worthy of hell and God's just judgement. Don't think to yourself "Weoh! I've really gotten away with one here! Praise God I didn't hear this sermon 10 years ago!" If that's the way you're thinking, like you've pulled a fast one on God you have some very serious spiritual problems. The right response is humble contrition and repentance, "Lord how I've sinned against you by not doing right in my marriage. Lord how I've sinned against my spouse, my kids. Lord I need grace, I need forgiveness, I need strength to honor my current marriage, to not go down the same sinful paths that led to divorce, have mercy on us, despite our sin! Christ pour out your grace!" God loves to answer that prayer! Divorce is not the unpardonable sin! Christ loves to pour out His mercy to repentant and trusting sinners. "A broken heart and contrite spirit, O God, you will not despise."

The hope we all stand in need of is found only in the Gospel of Christ! Divorce is but one manifestation of the corruption of our hearts that shows us our desperate need for the cleansing blood of the Lord Jesus!

All of us in this room, whether divorced or married or single, it doesn't matter how perfect of a marriage you think you have, we are all corrupt and guilty in the sight of God our maker. We have BAD hearts that produce BAD THINGS like unfaithfulness and abandonment. Like ADULTERY, towards our spouse and spiritual adultery towards God, like faithless Israel. We are separated from God and sit right now, if we are not in Christ, condemned under his wrath. But God, in His infinite love and mercy sent forth His Son, the Lord Jesus, the perfectly FAITHFUL, INNOCENT, and RIGHTEOUS ONE, to save sinful wretches like us! Though He was never married to any woman, He kept perfectly in our behalf AN EVEN BETTER COVENANT, the covenant made with His Father, to purchase His bride the church and to be her loving husband. Through his perfect life of obedience to the Father, through His amazing sacrifice of His own life in our place to take the punishment of our sins upon Himself, CHRIST HAS CLEANSED AND PURIFIED HIS BRIDE.

Christian and non-Christian, TRUST IN CHRIST! LOOK TO CHRIST! YOU NEED HIM AS A HUSBAND MORE THAN YOU NEED A GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH AN EARTHLY SPOUSE. Come to God through Him! Come to Him for the washing away of your sins in the fountain filled with blood. Come to Him to be counted in God's sight as "RIGHTEOUS". Come to Him continually for sanctifying grace, grace to BECOME HOLY, to fight the sin that dishonors Him and so easily besets us. Without Christ, no matter what you take away from this sermon by way of practical help in your marriage, if you don't come to Christ eternity in hell will haunt you that you stopped short of your greatest need. May God help us.