

Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

Call to Worship: Psalm 119:97-104

1st Scripture: Matthew 19:1-10

2nd Scripture: Matthew 5:17-20, 31-32

Hymn #505- *All the Way My Savior Leads Me*

Hymn #722- *Wonderful Words of Life*

Hymn Insert- *O Church Arise*

Introduction

This morning, we move on to address the third of our Lords, “You have heard it said...but I say to you,” commands, addressing the matter of “divorce.” And as we examine this commandment, let us again remember, that, throughout the course of all six of these commands, our Lord is laying down, one, primary, underlying principle, which rests at the foundation of all of God’s Law, namely, the fact that God is concerned first with the “spirit of the law,” over and above the “letter of the law.” And so, our Lord is not changing, adding to, or improving upon the Law of Moses, in any way, shape or form (which would contradict everything that He had just said about not coming to abrogate it), but rather, He is salvaging it from the corrupt ways, in which, the religious leaders (the Scribes and the Pharisees) have misinterpreted it. To this end, He exposes the true nature of the Law, which was always meant to get down to the heart and motives of man. This will be especially relevant as we consider the text in front of us.

And so, this morning, we move on to consider the matter of divorce, and how our Lord deals with the gross misinterpretation of the law, put forth by the Scribes and Pharisees, concerning this important topic. Now, as we look at our text, I want to temporarily lay aside all of the debate and confusion that surrounds the issue of “marriage, divorce and remarriage,” dealing with the text, as it stands (with the aid of Matthew 19), before addressing some of the more controversial matters surrounding this topic, *primarily* in the application portion of this sermon.

I. The Context

As we seek to understand this text, it is important that we take a few moments to consider the context, both historically and scripturally, which will aid in helping us to unwrap its true meaning.

1) From an historical standpoint, it is important to understand that divorce played a huge part in the life of God's Old Covenant people. We tend to think, "wow, this divorce topic...how can you even begin to address this in the twenty-first century, where divorce is so rampant today." Well, it was equally, if not more, rampant then. And what was worse, is that it was rampant even among the religious leaders, which made it much more easy to justify among the general population. Now, why was this the case?

For one, there was a major debate among the two schools of thought which directed the spiritual life of the people (the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel), concerning the matter of divorce, all surrounding a *universal* misunderstanding of Moses's instructions about divorce, given in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which reads as follows:

*"When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some **uncleanness** in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's wife, if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.*

Now, what then was the major issue of debate, between the two schools, over this text? It was over the interpretation of the word "uncleanness." You see, in keeping with the legalistic focus of the religious leaders, rather than looking at the very heart and purpose of God's law, once again, they obsessed on the letter, leading them to take pains to discover any valid reason/s for divorce (for *dissolving* the marriage), rather than focusing on emphasizing the importance and sanctity of *preserving* the marriage. And so, one school (the school of Shammai) looked at the term "uncleanness," in the strictest sense, seeing it as indicating some form of "moral indecency," such as adultery. And the other school (the school of Hillel) took a much more liberal approach, seeing it as meaning virtually any way, in which, a woman might lose the favor of her husband, even to the extent of burning/spoiling his dinner! Indeed, Rabbi Akiva allowed divorce in cases even where a man found another who was fairer than his wife!

This being the case, again, the emphasis was on what was permitted to justify a divorce, and not on the great importance of sanctifying the marriage. Needless to say, in both cases, marriage itself had lost its intended design, which led to the promotion of divorce, over and above the sanctity of marriage. And so, this is what our Lord is dealing with, from an historical standpoint.

2) From a Scriptural standpoint, it is important to recognize something as well, before we conclude our contextual overview. It is no coincidence that this particular command is given by our Lord, immediately after He had addressed the matter of “adultery in the heart,” which we had considered last time. You see, our Lord knew, that in many cases, the religious leaders themselves (let alone the general populace) would look for (what they had considered) valid reasons to divorce their spouses, when they were truly lusting after someone else. Because they looked at adultery, only as involving *the act*, they had entertained adulterous thoughts, and then, finding reason to divorce their spouses, they were able to justify remarrying another woman without being considered an adulterer. [Especially those who were from, or who were influenced by, the school of Hillel]

You see, as long as they gave the certificate of divorce to their wives; and as long as they determined never to remarry the same wife (in keeping with the Mosaic Law), they could remarry someone else, while skirting past any violation of God’s Law, concerning the matter of adultery. After all, they were only sexually active with their new spouse, after the former was put away, and they were legally married to the new one. And hey, the legal certificate had existed to solidify and confirm everything. This was their sinful reasoning. And so, you don’t want to miss the power and impact of what our Lord had just stated, concerning the matter of adultery in the heart, which would have blocked the artery of this kind of wicked thinking, while bringing guilt upon those who taught and lived in such a way as this.

And so, it is important to keep these historical and scriptural, contextual matters in mind, as we now examine this text.

II. Divorce

“Furthermore...” Our Lord’s use of the word “furthermore” here, would definitely seem to indicate that He is, indeed, attaching this to the former command, as we have just seen.

“Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’” And so, again, our Lord exposes here, how the religious leaders’ focus was primarily geared to supplying legitimate reasons for divorce. They would beat the drum real loud, slamming down the gavel with all fervency, declaring, “If you are going to get a divorce, you make sure you do it legally, and provide that certificate for your wife. You give them what God has commanded you to give them, or God’s judgment will be upon you! And don’t ever think about going back to that same spouse, once you leave!”

You see, again, the emphasis is on the “letter” (providing the certificate), rather than the heart, where Moses was actually attempting to curb and limit divorce, which was another sad, but inevitable consequence of the fall. Originally, men would divorce their wives, and pursue new lust interests, while still comforting themselves with the fact that they could always try to get their spouse back at another time. And furthermore, they could walk away, leaving their spouses cold and dry, with no ability to support themselves. And so, Moses put a stop to that, especially to protect the wife, who was financially and materially dependent upon the man, particularly during that period of time. The certificate of divorce she had received, provided her with protection, and a means of proving that she was now available for remarriage.

And so, the Lord then adds His authoritative correction to the erroneous teaching of the religious leaders, stating, “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.”

And so, our Lord sets things straight here, by saying, “The attempts to maneuver around the Law of God, by the religious leaders, who think that, by their crafty manipulating of the letter of the law, they are able to freely satisfy their own lusts, are not getting over on God, in any way, shape or form. Their hearts are wicked and they desire evil. And this is why those who are “pure in heart,” and who truly “hunger and thirst after righteousness,” are those who are truly blessed of God. God intended marriage to be permanent, between one man and one

woman...”till death do they part.” And unless the covenant of marriage has been broken by some form of adulterous act, it cannot be dissolved in the sight of God. And to attempt to dissolve the marriage, for any other reason, would ultimately be a means of opening up the way into adultery, for both parties. Now, brethren, let me highlight two additional points that will help us better understand why our Lord says what He says here:

1) You’ll notice that the emphasis on this text, as well as the preceding text (dealing with adultery in the heart) is addressed primarily *to men*. “Whoever looks at a *woman* to lust for her has already committed adultery with *her* in *his* heart” (vs. 19). “Whoever divorces *his wife* for any reason except sexual immorality causes *her* to commit adultery; and whoever marries a *women* who is divorced commits adultery” (vs. 32). Why does our Lord directly address the *husband* and not the wife here? Is this to say that a women cannot lust after a man? No, of course not. What happened with Joseph clearly affirms that women do lust after men.

Our Lord addresses the men here, primarily, because, (again, both texts being joined together, as we have already seen), at that time, it was not permitted for a woman to divorce her husband. If there was to be a divorce, a man had to send his wife off with a certificate of divorce, but a woman could not do that. We saw this in Deuteronomy, didn’t we, which addressed the *man* who finds some kind of “uncleanness” in his wife, and not vice versa. And so, it is important to realize that, from a cultural standpoint, a woman divorcing a man, was generally not acceptable. And that’s why the man, who divorces his wife, sets her up to commit adultery as well, because she will more than likely remarry, even for the sake of having sustenance and support, for that matter. The man creates the whole mess, and sets up adultery, in every case, when he divorces his wife for any reason other than some form of adultery, in which case, the wife would (obviously) be the cause of her own adultery.

2) Why then is remarriage considered adultery, to the man and woman, who remarry, when the marriage has been dissolved for unbiblical (“non-adultery related”) reasons? Our Lord answers this question in Matthew 19, which we read in our first Scripture reading. There, He states,

“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his

wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (vs. 4-6).

And so, the reason why remarriage brings about adultery for both parties, when a marriage has been dissolved by means other than adultery (on the count of one party), is because the marriage covenant is still intact, and that covenant has been officially consummated in the "oneness union" that has come about through the marital oath, and the sexual union of the two individuals, who have taken that oath. The two have become one flesh. And so, that oneness is ultimately only broken, when the covenant has been broken, by either of the individual's sexual union with someone else. That's why, our Lord states, "Look, not only are you an adulterer, when you divorce your wife, for reasons other than adultery (and marry another), but you cause her to become an adulterer, by inevitably forcing her to be united to someone else, as she will not remain alone, following the divorce." But, if one spouse has committed adultery, he/she has broken the "oneness" covenant, leaving the other spouse free then, to remarry, since he/she is no longer bound by that covenant, which the other broke. The oneness union of a man and a woman is meant to be a permanent union in the sight of God. And that is why Jesus says, "Therefore what *God* has joined together (by the marital vows and the physical union), let not man separate."

I believe that this is an honest and faithful representation of the text, brethren, without having inserted all of the current controversy about marriage, divorce and remarriage into the equation. All of that said, brethren, let me then dip into some of the controversy, as we move to apply all that we have gone over. [Note: Paul's warning about joining with a harlot, because of the whole "oneness" concept, which is defiled by that means...]

III. Concluding Applications

1) Before we even address the topics of divorce and remarriage (and lest we fall into the very pit, into which the religious leaders had plunged), it is important that we emphasize not viable reasons for divorce, but rather, the fervent and compelling motivation for upholding the sanctity and permanency of marriage, "till death do you part." From the standpoint of God, it is always better and preferable to ask, "How can I better improve, sustain, fix and work on my

marriage,” and not, “What are the valid reasons, if any, for dissolving it?” Remember, the religious leaders were primarily focused on getting the divorce legally, and making sure the certificate of dissolution is properly worked out, signed, and given to the appropriate parties. That is to miss the boat, entirely!

Marriage is a God-ordained institution, and ultimately God is the One who unites men and women together into this holy estate. We may not feel it, but this is what God’s Word assures us of. When you take those vows before God and all witnesses, you are committing to remain with that partner, and that partner alone, for the rest of your life (or until the other spouse should die). And God seals that union through your vows. And the sealing of that union is further affirmed in the union that takes place in the marriage bed. That is why individuals should not enter quickly into marriage, without serious thought and prayer...because, it’s permanent. And that is why, we offer several counseling sessions to those who are preparing for marriage, so as to encourage and strengthen the couple, by God’s Word, unto the commitment to always build upon and strengthen that union, with no option to break it. [Note: maintaining intimacy...]

And furthermore, this wonderful and holy estate of marriage is also sanctified by the greater reflection that it bears, in presenting the glorious union of Christ and His bride, the church. In Ephesians 5, Paul states, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. *This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church*” (vs. 31-32).

2) What about divorce and remarriage? Before I leave you with a few principles regarding this, often, very debated topic, let me state two quick things. First, again, so often people get caught up in the letter of the law here, doing to our Lord’s words, the very thing that the religious leaders had done with the Law of Moses. And so, we need to avoid that. And secondly, often times, when dealing with individuals who are struggling with whether or not they are eligible for remarriage (after having been divorced), the matter requires careful examination. In other words, coming to understand the will of God in such cases, is not always black and white, and must be taken on a case by case basis. Even our Lord’s words here, are not meant to be observed in a “letter of the law” fashion. The spirit of what He is saying here, must be strongly taken into account.

That said, we can consider several factors, when considering the matter of divorce and remarriage. Regarding the matter of divorce, first, we ought to consider whether or not the “covenant” of marriage has been broken. If not, then the marriage is still binding and ought not to be dissolved. And so, certainly, if two Christians desire to be divorced for any reason other than, some form of sexual impropriety has been committed, then they should be strongly counseled to remain together, and with the aid of much prayer and biblical counsel, to seek to patiently rectify things. And if, against such counsel, the individuals decide to divorce anyway, then they ought to remain single for the rest of their lives, or be reconciled to each other. I think that is the clearest and most basic understanding of what our Lord is saying here.

And supposing that a Christian is married to an unbeliever, and the unbeliever is willing to remain married to the Christian, and no sexual impropriety has been committed, then the Christian ought to be counseled to remain with the unbeliever, considering (as well) that the Lord may even use his/her testimony unto the salvation of the unbelieving spouse. However, if the unbeliever leaves of his/her own accord (and not by being unnecessarily forced out), the covenant is broken and dissolved, leaving the Christian no longer bound to that marriage covenant. The Apostle Paul addresses this matter with the Corinthians. While this process ought not to be rushed, but rather, soberly worked through with ongoing prayer and the receiving of counsel, it is ultimately permitted to divorce and remarry in such circumstances. [Note: Children being involved, adds another sobering dimension to these realities, as well, which ought not to be easily overlooked]

However, in both of these cases, if some form of sexual impropriety has been committed, even with the covenant having been broken, the victim spouse can receive back the offending spouse, if he/she so desires, and thereby, restore the covenant. Indeed, it could be a very good thing, and a picture of God’s forgiveness of covenant breaking sinners, to do so, if the offending spouse exhibits true repentance. That said, the offended party, while definitely obligated to forgive the offender, is under no absolute obligation to continue on with the marriage.

These are the basic principles which are entailed in the text. But, what about situations where adultery was not committed and marriages have already been dissolved for unbiblical reasons in the past? Again, this must be considered on a case by case basis. Suppose an

individual, who was married prior to his conversion (perhaps several years ago), had been divorced, and his former spouse is now remarried or has absolutely no interest in rectifying the marriage, ought the individual to remain single for the rest of his/her life? I don't believe so. The individual is no longer bound to that covenant, because the former spouse would be in the category of a departed unbeliever. However, now, in a redeemed setting, should the individual be remarried (to a believer, as per Paul's command), he/she will be bound to the new marriage for life. Should divorce come about again, and that, for unbiblical reasons, he/she ought to remain single. [Note: If able to rectify with former spouse, that may be proper, as well, particularly if both parties have remained single and pure]

And what if an individual, prior to salvation, was a gross adulterer; what if he/she was the offender in a former marriage, which led to the dissolution of the marriage? Would he/she be obligated to remain single for the rest of his/her life, because of these former sins, which destroyed his/her former marriage? Friends, again, the spirit of the law would apply here. In Christ, and through the cross of Christ, such an individual could be forgiven, and I believe, able to enjoy a Christian marriage, should his former spouse be unwilling or unable to take him/her back (supposing the former spouse is remarried). Adultery and divorce are not unpardonable sins, and especially having been committed prior to salvation, such sins ought not to bar an individual from enjoying the benefits of a Christian marriage, if they so have the desire. Remember, the covenant was already long broken, and it is presently irreparable.

Again, all in all, we have to consider these issues on a case by case basis, in light of the fact that marriage is a covenant bond. If that bond has been dissolved, yes adultery has taken place (going forward), but that is the inevitable consequence of divorce in a fallen world. But again, the Gospel renews us in Christ, and enables us to relive, even a new marriage, in such a way that Christ is glorified. To hold everyone up to a fine line of "qualified/disqualified," without careful consideration of such things, based on "letter" parameters, and not "spirit" parameters, is not what I believe our Lord would have us do. And so, is there a place to tell someone to remain single? Yes. But, is there a place to encourage someone forward, who has been divorced, in the direction of remarriage (in accordance with new redeemed desires)? Yes,

but not without sobriety and caution. [Especially, if someone struggles with burning sexual desires...etc]

2) To the unbeliever, consider the fact that you have been divorced from your God and Creator, because of your sins. But, there is a way back...in Christ! [The Gospel!!!!]

Amen!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25