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The Gospel According to Matthew

Marriage and Divorce – Getting it Right – Part 2

September 15, 2019

Sermon Text: Matt 19:1-12

Scripture Reading: Micah 6

2Ti 2:15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

We began with these words of the Apostle Paul last time so that we were reminded to handle God's Word with great care. We begin the same way this morning as we return once again to some of the most frequently misused and misapplied texts in the Bible.

Let me give you a contemporary example of the interpretation of words as an illustration of how easily we go wrong in handling God's Word. Consider this little phrase that I saw the other day on a sign:

Heavy Truck Traffic

Now we who are familiar with the goings on around us in our day easily understand this sign. It means that there are a lot of trucks, an unusual number of trucks, going and coming on this section of road so we need to be extra cautious as we drive through.

But consider someone, say, 1,000 years from now who unearthed, in an archaeological dig, this sign, long after all the roads in that area had been obliterated. How would they interpret it? What does it mean?

- Heavy. Weighty? Of unusual importance (gravity)?
- And does this adjective, if they recognize it as such, describe "truck" or "traffic"? Some would

conclude that there must have been things called “trucks,” but then there were these other kind called “heavy trucks”?

And how would the words be finally and properly interpreted? ONLY by somehow having other knowledge of life 1,000 years before. That there were highways there. That trucks were used in special construction or logging operations and they came and went on and off these highways so that there was an unusually busy truck activity. Other cars (the cars and the trucks were “traffic”) traveled those roads and had to be cautious or they would get squished by a truck. In this case, “heavy” would have had a rather figurative meaning that *had nothing to do with mass or gravity at all!* Heavy meant “busy.”

Does that set you back a bit and slow you down in your handling of Scripture? Because when the Pharisees asked Jesus:

Mat 19:3 And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?”

And when Jesus answered them:

Mat 19:9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual

immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

...as we saw last time that little loaded phrase “**any cause**” is the key to understanding the entire interchange. It turns out that Jesus was not stating a universal principle at all but was answering a hot potato question which the Pharisees had been arguing about for a long, long time and which they hoped would trip Jesus up.

Listen as I read the text again:

Mat 19:1-12 Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. (2) And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. (3) And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?”

(4) He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, (5) and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? (6) So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

(7) They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” (8) He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. (9) And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

(10) The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” (11) But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. (12) For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.”

You will notice that Jesus did not answer their specific question at first. He took them to the more foundational issue – the disobedience of *both* parties (Hillel and Shammai) – to God’s design for marriage. Here it is again:

(4) He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, (5) and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his

mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? (6) So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

Despite all the distortions and perversion of marriage that we are seeing today, many times even claiming Jesus’ authority for same-sex marriages, gender twisting and other sinful re-writes of God’s blueprint, Jesus’ teaching here is very plain. He takes the Pharisees back to the beginning, back to Genesis, to the first man and first woman. What do we see there? –

- Human beings are created individually male and female. Male or female.
- Marriage is a man and a woman becoming one flesh, leaving off the old ties of childhood to father and mother (many people never complete this leaving and it causes chaos)
- This oneness of a man and a woman is effected by God Himself and is intended to be for life, not to be separated by man

In other words, divorce was never in the design. God didn’t tell Adam and Eve that they were one flesh until they decided to end the thing. But then, of course, sin entered into the picture and that leads us to this:

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The Pharisees, as all wicked people do, were just certain that they had found a loophole in Scripture that justified their practice of divorce. It was based upon this:

Deu 24:1-4 “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, **and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house**, and she departs out of his house, (2) and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, (3) and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, (4) then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you

for an inheritance.

The main intent of the passage is to prevent injustice to the woman and perhaps to outlaw “legalized wife-swapping.”

But it is these words of Jesus we want to focus on –

“Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.”

I am going to let David Instone-Brewer explain again because reading his words is the best way to communicate these things to you. Listen as I read:

Paul and Jesus have the same message for two different cultures:

1. Believers should never *cause* a divorce- that is, they should not break their marriage vows.
2. Believers should not use a groundless divorce. Jewish believers should not use the Hillelite "Any Cause" divorce, and no one should use the Roman "divorce-by-separation." Jesus adds that believers should do all they can to save a marriage, which includes forgiving a partner who breaks vows and then repents. And

Paul adds that believers who have wrongly enacted a divorce-by-separation should attempt to be reconciled and not remarry because that would make the divorce irreversible. Paul says further that if someone is divorced against their will, they may accept it. There is nothing they can do to reverse the divorce, and God has called them to peace.

But this leaves us with two questions:

- Can a believer divorce a partner who breaks their vows unrepentantly?
- And can a believer remarry after a divorce?

Instone-Brewer continues and gives this real-life case scenario that is VERY common in local churches today:

Someone e-mailed me the following story: I was the adult Sunday school teacher in a Baptist church, and my pastor invited me to sit with the deacons and himself in a difficult decision. A young lady had been constantly threatened by her alcoholic husband. One afternoon, he came to her with a shotgun while she was visiting her sister. After chasing her out into a field, he pinned her down, put the shotgun to her head and pulled the trigger, but the gun jammed. He served a few months in the county jail.

My pastor explained that our church took a hard and fast view that divorce was always sin, so if we followed that we would be advising her [MY NOTE: In most cases “demanding upon threat of ex-communication” is the real meaning] to reconcile with her husband once he was released from jail. As I pondered that, I could not believe that God could possibly ask her to do that, and I said so. The decision that was eventually made was that she could separate from him, but not divorce, and was to live the rest of her life in that state unless he died. I felt this was better for her than reconciliation, but I didn't have complete peace with that either.

Although this is an extreme example, any Christian counselor [MY NOTE: Actually, very FEW will] will tell you that abuse within marriage is very common, and there are a huge number of people who live in fear in their own homes. The husband or wife who is the victim of physical abuse or emotional torture by their partner lives as if they were imprisoned in a double cell with their worst enemy. As much as we would like to believe otherwise, it happens within Christian marriages as well, although it is difficult to tell exactly how frequently, because those involved are often too ashamed or embarrassed to admit it even to a friend or relative.

In modern times most Christian teachers would likewise say, "I know it sounds harsh, but unless your believing partner has committed adultery, the New Testament is clear that you must stay with him or her and trust God who has bound you together." Andrew Cornes, who wrote an excellent book in support of this traditional church teaching (Divorce and Remarriage: Biblical Principles and Pastoral Practice), makes one concession: he says that if your life is at risk because of the amount of abuse you are suffering, then you are allowed to separate, though you may not divorce. [MY NOTE: This precludes the book from being "excellent"]

Many others extend this concession to include all abusive marriages. We may well sympathize with this way of solving the problem- it it does, after all, seem fairer for a victim of abuse to be allowed to separate rate even if they cannot divorce- but the solution is not biblical. A couple should not separate without getting divorced, because Paul specifically says that married couples may not separate (1 Cor 7:10-11). So if we take the traditional interpretation of the New Testament seriously, no one may separate from an abusing partner. [And that brings us back to the injustice]

We have already seen that God gave clear and fair laws in the Old

Testament to limit the damage caused by the sin of neglect and abuse: the victim was allowed to decide whether or not they wanted the marriage to end. Would God really have abandoned this wise and practical approach in New Testament times or is it a principle for the church today?

David Instone-Brewer. Divorce and Remarriage in the Church: Biblical Solutions for Pastoral Realities (pp. 79-95). Kindle Edition.

Now, this brings us around to that Deut 24 question we began with: what is "hard heartedness"?

DIVORCE ONLY FOR "HARDHEARTEDNESS"

Jesus also says that God does not want us to divorce if we can avoid it, even in the case of adultery; he wants us to forgive an erring partner rather than divorce them. "But surely there's a limit to the number of times we have to forgive?" we say- and I'm sure that the Pharisees also said this, or at least they thought it. So Jesus explains further: "Moses allowed divorce for hardheartedness." The Pharisees knew immediately what he meant, but we are not so familiar with the Old Testament, so we have to work at it a bit.

Hardheartedness heartedness means "stubbornness," and the corresponding Greek word had been invented by the translators of the Septuagint, the official Jewish translation of the Old Testament into Greek. It occurs frequently in the Septuagint but does not occur in ordinary Greek except when people were quoting the Old Testament.

So Jesus is presumably alluding to an Old Testament text but which one? This was not a difficult question for the Pharisees, many of whom knew the Old Testament by heart, because hardheartedness occurs in only one place in the context of divorce-where where Jeremiah warns Judah that God might divorce them as he divorced Israel: "Circumcise yourselves to your Lord, and circumcise your hardheartedness" (Jer 4:4 Lxx).

Jeremiah has described Israel as God's wife at the beginning of this section (Jer 2:1) and has said that she committed adultery with other gods (Jer 2:20-26) so that God was forced to divorce her (Jer 3:1-8), as we saw in some detail in chapter three. Jeremiah warns Judah that she is going the same way as her sister nation, Israel (Jer 3:10-14), and that she is being hardhearted- stubborn -in her adultery (Jer 4:3-4).

Jesus says that marriage was not like this "from the beginning" (Mt 19:8). In Eden there was no sin to break up marriages, and therefore there was no need for divorce.

But when sin came and marriages started going wrong, Moses "allowed" divorce for broken marriage vows (Mt 19:8).

Jesus thought that people were being too quick to divorce, so he reminds them that **Moses meant divorce to occur only when there was "hardheartedness"-that is, a stubborn refusal to repent and stop breaking marriage vows.**

Jesus says elsewhere that we should forgive people if they sin against us and repent: "If he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him" (Lk 17:4). In marriage, too, we should forgive a partner who sins and repents. However many times they break their vows, we should forgive them **if they repent and want to change their ways.**

We should consider divorce only if they continually break their vows with hardheartedness- if they stubbornly continue without repenting or trying to change. God found himself in this position when Israel constantly and unrepentantly went running after other

gods, until eventually God, who hates divorce, had to divorce her for hardhearted adultery.

David Instone-Brewer. Divorce and Remarriage in the Church: Biblical Solutions for Pastoral Realities (pp. 62-64). Kindle Edition.

Understand? Do you see the HUGE error that has been carried out in the church for centuries and which is still a real plague among us today? Every single week, sometimes even every single day, these abuse victims contact me and tell me their stories. And it is the same old enslaving line: “No, God does not allow divorce for abuse. Admit your part in causing the abuse. Stay in the marriage and suffer silently, doing a better job of submitting, and when you die and go to heaven, the Lord will reward you. Oh, and if you don’t obey us, we will ex-communicate you from the church.”

For this, many church leaders are going to give account to Christ one day. Why did they abuse His flock? Why did they cause the little ones to stumble?