



Divorce and Marriage

Matthew 5:31-32, 19:3-9 | J. Austin Becton | July 19, 2015

This morning we have two parallel texts dealing with divorce. Both in Matthew (chapters 5 and 19), both responses from Jesus on divorce, both draw our attention to the sanctity of marriage. In Matthew 19 Jesus provides a wider view of his teaching on marriage and divorce, and so we will be looking Matthew 5:31-32 through the lens and Matthew 19:3-9. In the SoM, we see Jesus saying, “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” Instead of striving to understand how to make marriages flourish as God had designed them, people were fighting over the fine line of what constituted a permissible divorce. This morning, Jesus speaks directly to this, as he reveals the spirit of the law from within the letter of the law. In this, he draws our attention to the tug-a-war between Covenant Love and Hardness of Heart.

Covenant Love (& Marriage)

In Matthew 19, the Pharisees question Jesus, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” Jesus replies, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 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’? So they are no longer two but one flesh.” Jesus immediately brings them to the heart of the issue, if they are asking questions about divorce they first have to understand how God intended marriage to flourish and its implications. In this, we see 3 components of marital covenant, namely a husband and wife are to be **with** one another and to be **for** one another and **for** God. In the creation account, Genesis 1-3, God creates male and female in his image and likeness (distinct, but equally in his image) and brings them together. The husband leaves his parents and “cleaves” with his wife to become “one flesh.” In this covenant established by God, with one another, Adam and Eve were to be perfect companions for one another, who, together, would populate the world, reign over it, nurture it, enjoy it, and be a reflection of God’s glory to all of creation. This was the first marriage covenant after which God blessed them and said, “it is good!” In “cleaving or holding fast to one another” and becoming “one flesh” we are quiet literally called to be with one another but we are also called to be for one another. We are present with and for one another: physically, emotionally, and sexually. We support one another, we give of ourselves for one another, we serve one another, we put one another above ourselves, we fight for one another, we engage with one another, we share with one another, we confess to one another, we pray for another. WITH one another in presence; FOR another in advocacy and service. However, in sharp contrast, most modern Western societies interpret marriage through the lens of economics. Tim Keller comments, “Today we stay connected to people only as long as they are meeting our particular needs at an acceptable cost to us. When we cease to make a profit—that is, when the relationship appears to require more love and affirmation from us than we are getting back—then we “cut our losses” and drop the relationship.” Maybe your spouse isn’t what you thought they’d be. Perhaps they are not as fulfilling as you thought and so you start considering divorce. This economical view of relationships has distorted our view of marriage, and in turn we demand things from marriage it was never intended to provide. For example, studies have tried to prove marriage, itself, brings happiness. They haven’t succeeded, because it doesn’t. Marriage is tough work. However, there is great joy in marriage when it is lived out as God intended in covenant to your spouse...to be with one another and to be for one another. The answer to joy-filled marriages, isn’t about becoming more with each other and more for each other, in and of itself, rather it is about living it out as God intended. You see, not only does the Bible begin with marriage of man and women in Genesis, but also it ends with the marriage of Christ and His Church in Revelation 19-22. Paul says in Ephesians 5, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. He shows the grander purpose of marriage between a man and women – that it is a glorious foreshadow of the marriage of Christ and his Bride, the Church. You see, unlike the culture view, marriage is about a complementary struggle and sacrifice (with/for one another) secured in covenant love designed to point to the true marriage...God’s marital commitment to his people. Marriage isn’t a social convention; it is a gospel reality intended to point away to the greater, glorious reality of our union with Christ. As such, in marriage we covenant to be FOR God. It’s for his purpose. *Marriage was created by God to be an echo of God’s*



covenantal love throughout creation and time. And so, Jesus declares, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” Do you see now, the glory of marriage, its intention to echo divine covenantal love, and how precious it is?

Hardness of Heart

Still blinded, these Pharisees asked, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” The Pharisees didn’t see it. They were hung up on the letter of the law. During this time, there was a debate regarding the interpretation of the phrase “some indecency” found within Deuteronomy 24:1. Some held that divorce was only for sexual misconduct. However, the common thought of the day according to the Jewish historian, Josephus, was that a man to divorce his wife for any matter that was displeasing to him [e.g. burning his food or even finding someone prettier than her]. However, it was understood in those days that, at a minimum, for a man to divorce his wife he needed to simply provide her a get (or certificate of divorce). But, Moses didn’t have this in mind; he permitted divorce in order to provide protection and dignity for women. Some of these men would simply kick their wives to the curb and find someone else who pleased him for the time, while at the same time demanding martial rights of the wife he booted out. Moses was saying, “Hey, this is wrong! You can’t do that. If you refuses to take care of your wife as God has commanded you to, then you need to divorce her so she can freed to move forward.” And so, Jesus answer them says, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.” Divorce was never (nor is it) the will of God. Marriage was a covenant that was to be a reflection of God’s unbreakable covenant love for his beloved people. Note, divorce is never commanded in the Scriptures. Moses only permitted divorce because hard-hearted men were destroying the covenant of marriage. Circling back to Genesis, in chapter 3 Adam and Eve have sinned against God, sin and death enter into creation, and from that time forward husband and wife would be against one another. No longer feeling the glory and joy of being one flesh, no longer ruling and having dominion together, but now they would desire to rule over one another, feeling burdened and pained by sin. And so enters the a tug-a-war between Covenant Love and Hardness of Heart. Hard-heartedness says, because I am angry and I need someone else to blame, I will be short or cold to my spouse and kids Hard-heartedness says, because I don’t feel significant...because I don’t feel pursued like I should be by my spouse I will look for and cling to flattery and attention from other men. However, Covenant love says my spouse and children don’t exist to be my emotional punching bag, but rather for my service, to bless them, to love them. Covenant love believes significance is not in my spouse, but in Christ, as beloved child of God. So I don’t look for it by working long hours or in the attention of a man. At the center of divorce lays sin...a hard hearts that desires its own way, a heart that rages and demands power and significance over the another, a heart that desires to receive rather than to give, to be served, rather than to serve...it’s about me and what I get or don’t get from this “marriage.” No longer is it about being with them and for them for God in covenant love, but now it is be about ME, for ME, unto ME. *While marriage echoes the covenant love of God, divorce resounds the hardness of the hearts of men and women.*

Permissiveness of Divorce

And Jesus hauling out the very spirit of the law says, “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” Or as we see in the SoM...“But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” We can’t help but notice the “exception clause.” “Except for sexual immorality” – What does Jesus mean? Jesus is acknowledging as Moses did that because of the hardness of hearts there are times when divorce might be, rightly, “the better of two evils.” First, as we’ve seen Jesus explicitly permits divorce on the basis of sexual immorality. (Some translations read “adultery,” but the word is best translated as “sexual immorality.”) Simply, this refers to sexual behavior that expresses unfaithfulness to the marriage covenant. Ultimately, what happens is the marriage covenant is broken because you say, no longer do I want to be with you in covenant as my husband or wife for God, but I’d rather potentially give it all up and experience a fleeting pleasure with someone else. Notice how this breaks the marriage covenant. Not only with your spouse, but also with God as the covenant was made before Him to reflect his covenant love to your spouse and creation. Second, in I Corinthians 7, Paul declares that desertion or abandonment by an unbelieving spouse constitutes grounds for a valid divorce. Paul clearly identifies this as an expansion of what Jesus has said for he says, “I say, not the Lord.” As such, we must conclude that Paul considered his expansion to be consistent with Jesus’



teaching on divorce, even if it had not been explicitly taught. What we see in these two texts is a break down of the marriage covenant; one spouse (or perhaps both) has decided to no longer be in covenant with the other either by means of their unfaithful sexual behavior or by quiet literally abandoning the family. What we can understand from this in context is that marriage covenants that once echoed God's covenant love have been destroyed as one partner has become so hard hearted and opposed to God that they refuse to be "with and for" their spouse and "for" God, and who has now become someone who is "against" their spouse and "against" God. For example, when a husband repeatedly abuses his wife, not only has he created an abandonment scenario, but also he is functionally saying I am against you and have no regard for God's purpose in this marriage. As such, when this happens, there are grounds for a permissible divorce, as one spouse has utterly shattered the marriage covenant with their spouse and God. Now, if we have been following along we feel the obvious tension here. Jesus has been revealing the spirit of the law – the marriage was sacred, it's an echo of God's covenant love, and now we are talking about permissible reasons for us to get divorced. Jesus is saying, "Pursue for the glory of marriage, show the world and one another my covenant love." As such, we must not be quick to jump at divorce, trying to find a reason or an excuse to "get out." Divorce is permissible in some situations, but in most situations it is not mandatory. Divorce is a last resort when one spouse's heart has been so hardened that they refuse to be before God and with and for their spouse as echo of God's covenant love. So, if we come to these texts looking for reasons to justify divorce we've missed the whole point. What Jesus is doing within these texts is challenging the cultural norms for marriage and anchoring marriage in his timeless covenant love. Calling our attention to back to the spirit of the law, namely that marriage was created by God to be an echo of God's covenantal love throughout creation and time. In so doing, if we want godly marriages that reflect the self-less, undying covenant love of God to the world around us then we must set our gaze and affections to the One that upholds God's covenant love in the true marriage, Jesus, our Bridegroom.

Jesus, our Bridegroom

In the SoM we see that kingdom of heaven has dawned and is breaking into the world through Jesus and he's calling his Bride unto himself. We don't need a precise list of laws providing every scenario in which one can get divorced, rather we need to look to magnify Jesus in covenantal love. Jesus as our Bridegroom. Have you been wounded by a divorce? The Bridegroom will never forsake you. Are you carrying condemnation because your sin caused your divorce? Cry out and repent to Jesus, he is faithful to forgive. Are you fearful of not being a good spouse or falling prey to divorce? Cast your worries on him. He promises to sustain you. Are you starting to see it? It's just a glimpse, but His covenant love is real. He is with you and for you, unto himself! Let us place our affections in Jesus Christ, who saw his Bride, the Church, and gave up his divine rights to be served, said, "It's not about me...I have come to serve you, to bless you, and to pour out God's covenant love upon you." It wasn't because she was so incredibly beautiful, in fact she was fairly tainted and ugly. It wasn't because she lived righteously, served him perfectly, remained faithful, gave cheerfully, or never offended him. No, in fact she was totally undeserving. Yet, he decided to love her – to remain in covenant with her - amidst her great failings. As a result, he united himself with her so tightly that her needs became his needs, Her sins fell upon him, And, in order to remain true to the God's covenant with his beloved, her unsettled death was paid for by him, So that his resurrected life would bring her new life forever with him. This is the gospel reality. The reality of marriage will fade, but it is only because of the greater, glorious reality of our perfect union with Christ. No more broken marriages, no more loneliness, no more pain, no more tears – for he is making all things new, even us. ***Do you hear the Bridegroom calling for his Bride?***