

Divorce

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[0 : 00] This morning's sermon is difficult. It's been difficult to prepare and it's certainly difficult to preach! And it's difficult on lots of different levels. My guess is that there's not a single person in this room who's not been affected in some way by divorce.

In our families there are people who we deeply love and have experienced it. There are friends out there that we know who are walking through a divorce.

Maybe a bitter one. Maybe few that personally you know the pain of it. Part of my reason for teaching on it this morning is we've come to that part of Matthew. We've come to Matthew 19. But we all need to know, don't we? The Bible doesn't hide these things from us. We need to know what love looks like in hard places. And there are difficult sermons to preach because sometimes life is difficult.

More brutally difficult than we ever imagined it would be. And so this morning it may be that this morning is not what you need. Maybe it's what someone else needs.

[1 : 16] And it may be that one day it is what you need. Certainly it's what you need to help someone else. And I want to dive right in. I'm going to give you six Biblical principles on divorce.

Mainly based in Matthew 19. And I want to be upfront. I'm going to lean quite heavily. I've read quite a lot this week. I'm going to lean quite heavily on a report by the Free Church of Scotland. And that they produced on an article by Kevin DeYoung.

First of all, my first principle is this. Jesus says start with the intention before concession. Jesus tells us that when you do your difficult thinking about this difficult issue of divorce.

Start your thinking with God's intention for marriage. Before you come to the concessions which God gives for divorce. Start with what God intended.

Before you look at what he concedes. And where you start from is so important. And in Matthew 19, do you see the Pharisees? And those kind of religious leaders. They're coming to Jesus and getting to comment on divorce.

[2 : 30] And they're asking him what he thinks about something way down the line. In the Bible story. And Jesus says, we'll come to that in a moment. He says, I know what you're asking about.

And I know where you're going with this. I know your line of travel. But you're forgetting the Bible's beginning. And so he says, look at what the Bible at the beginning says about marriage. Chapter 19 in verse 3.

And they ask this question, don't they? They come to test him by asking, is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause? And the question comes directly from Deuteronomy chapter 24, the fourth book of the Bible.

The fifth book of the Bible. It's a very important passage. And we'll look at it in a moment.

Deuteronomy is book five of the law. It is Moses speaking to the people of Israel as they're about to go into the promised land.

And Jesus says, I see you've got your copy of Deuteronomy. But have you got your copy of Genesis with you? He answered verse 4.

[3 : 39] 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 mother and hold fast to his wife and the two shall become one flesh.

That is hugely important for you and I. For two reasons. The main thing that Jesus says to us about divorce is this. Don't do it.

Don't do it. You're talking to me, says Jesus, about the acceptable concessions for one, that God has made one to become two again.

That God's original intention for two to become one and to stay one. And so marriage is a sacred union between one man and one woman.

And God gave it to help men and women live together in the world that he has created. And God's intention and his plan for marriage is for it to last a lifetime.

[4 : 41] The principle here is that the original is weightier, heavier. Yes, there are concessions. But the original intention is the best.

Advertising uses this again and again, doesn't it? Levi jeans, still the original and still the best. And it may be that some of us who are married to you today, maybe you're delightfully, happily married. It may be that one day you find yourself looking for a way out. You find yourself looking for a valid reason to walk away.

And Jesus says, you start with what God intends for your marriage before you do anything else.

Here's why, the second thing. And the original intention shows God's tender heart.

That's the original intention, that it shows God's tender heart and the concessions reveal our hard hearts. You see that in verse 7 and 8?

[5 : 46] Yes, Jesus may be raising the bar for us, keeping it high, but he's tender. He's also tender. Do you notice in verse 3 why the Pharisees came to him?

They came to him to test him. The Pharisees are not church elders in perplexity, desperately trying to help someone in their congregation.

That's not what they are. They're not grappling pastorally with this, with wisdom and with grace and with love. No, here's a chance to trap Jesus himself.

It's a trap. Will you be conservative or will you be liberal? And in Jesus' day, this question, is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?

Some literally were saying, if she burns the evening meal, that is a reason that you can get rid of her. If she does something in the day that you find offensive, well you can divorce her.

[6 : 52] Is that okay, Jesus? Is that grounds for divorce? And before he answers, and he will answer, Jesus goes back all the way to Genesis.

He says, look, the reason we're asking this question shows how far we've fallen. For when somebody leaves in a marriage, they are pulling apart what God has joined together.

It's very, very important to know that. Every marriage in every part of the world, in every religion, whether it happens in a church or a registry office or a beach or a golf course, every marriage happens before God.

And he designs the gluing together. And every divorce tears it apart. And the Pharisees just want to know, don't they? Well, when's it okay just to tear it apart?

And Jesus says, why are there no tears in your eyes when you talk about divorce? And I think Jesus is tender here because he sees two people join, a man and a woman.

[8 : 03] The Pharisees see the men. And what they're allowed to do to their wives. But Jesus says, sees what God loves to unite.

Humankind always divides, doesn't it? But Jesus is saying that the original intention matters so much. Because God didn't just put your wife beside you.

He glued you to each other. And you are saying that divorce is sending away. But actually Jesus says, I want to teach you that divorce is amputation.

One of these approaches to divorce is cruel and the other is tender. Jesus knows the immense pain that divorce can bring. You're wrapping presents and you get salad tape.

And you cut the salad tape and it folds back on itself. You know that feeling? And you try to unstick it but you can't, can you?

[9 : 09] You get an envelope. And you lick the envelope. And then you remember, oh, I forgot to put the gift token in. I forgot to put the cash in. And so you go to open up the envelope and it's dried and you rip the envelope.

Children, you get two pieces of paper and you glue them together. And then you realise, oh, I shouldn't have done that. So you've got to pull them apart. And they're different colours of pieces of paper. And as you pull them apart, what happens? It is messy, isn't it?

And there's bits of paper on the other bits of paper. And you can't cleanly break it because it's like amputation. So divorce people often speak how the divorce tears apart the very fabric of who they are.

As a man and a woman. And two people cannot be united in a one flesh union and then be separated and be just the same as they ever were. Divorce means nothing will ever be the same again.

And our Lord Jesus knows the price of separation is very, very high. And the Pharisees, they look at the data. But Jesus looks at the people.

[10:19] And the Pharisees want to tick boxes and make hard and fast rules. And Jesus sees a world of pain. And so number one, start with the intention. Number two. Number two, divorce is not always sinful.

Divorce is not always sinful. You start with God's intention. One man, one woman in a union for life. But there is a but, isn't there?

We know that God's gardeners, Adam and Eve, actually became vandals. And with them, every man and woman who's lived after them have had the same problem.

And there is now no one flesh union of any man and woman that is not in some way spoiled. And which does not in some way continue the spoiling of the world.

We are fallen. And fallen unions sometimes fail. And here is what we need to say. Every divorce is the product of sin.

[11:23] But not every divorce is therefore sinful. Do you get that? Every divorce is the product of sin. But not every divorce is therefore sinful.

In Malachi chapter 2, the Bible very clearly says God hates divorce. So do you. So do you. And some Christians have argued and do argue that there can only be some very, very extreme cases for divorce.

And a minority of Christians have argued that there can be no grounds for divorce ever. And I think that view does immense damage. What that view gets right is that every divorce is the product of sin.

But what it gets wrong is to assume that every divorce is therefore sinful. So if you'll come with me to Jeremiah chapter 3. So if you'll come back, it's on page 6 to 9. I do want you to go there because it's a remarkable passage.

Jeremiah chapter 3. And again, if you haven't got a Bible, do that walk of shame to the back and grab one. Jeremiah chapter 3, page 6 to 9. And I want to read you from verses 6 to 8.

[12:34] Jeremiah chapter 3, page 6 to 9 in the church Bible. So I'm going to jump around a little bit this morning. Jeremiah says, The Lord said to me in the days of King Josiah, Have you seen what she did?

That's the people of Israel, the church. That faithless one, Israel. How she went up every high hill and under every green tree. And there she played the whore.

And I thought, after she has done all this, she will return to me. But she did not return. And her treacherous sister, Judah, did not fear.

It's going to be split into two. But she too went. And she played the whore. Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree.

Sorry. Verse 8. She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithful one Israel, I had sent her away. And here's the key point. With a decree of divorce.

[13:41] Israel's worship of her false god. God says it's like prostitution. It's sinful. And do you see what he does?

Verse 8. He divorces her. It's actually an amazing picture of what the exile is. That she's been sent off into captivity.

And God says it's like my wife being sent away with a certificate of divorce. Every divorce is a product of sin. And yet God himself is not sinning by cutting her off from the land.

Do you see that? Many people in churches have had to live with the stigma of divorce and the shadow of suspicion. That's cast a long and dark shadow over them.

And it's not right. Because God himself at one time, in an incredible way, dare I say it, God becomes a divorcee.

[14:48] And many people, maybe you this morning, you feel a deep sense of shame today. Because we've not been clear enough about the fact that not every divorce is sinful.

We need to be clear that some divorces are, certainly. But not everyone. And so what are the grounds for a divorce that is not itself an act of sin?

And I think there are three, and here they are, the next three principles. Number three, divorce is permitted, but not compulsory for sexual immorality.

Just notice the language there. Divorce is permitted, not compulsory. I'm going to use that language for the next two points as well. Permitted, but not compulsory.

And we're going to look at the permission each time, and then I'm going to say something at the end about the not compulsory bit. Here's the first ground. Permitted, but not compulsory. And it's sexual immorality.

[15:47] This is Matthew chapter 19 and verse 9. And what we need to see here is that Jesus has been asked to walk into a very specific trap. Verse 9 is his answer to the question of verse 3.

And verse 3 comes from Deuteronomy chapter 24 verse 1. This little phrase in verse 1, if a man finds some indecency in his wife. What does that mean? It's a really ambiguous term.

And even to us as we look in our Bibles, it's ambiguous. And it was as ambiguous as the Jews in their day. They argued about it constantly. In general, the word means something repulsive.

But what exactly? And as usually happens when there's a really contentious issue, a spirit emerges. And so there are those who are on the more conservative side that say that this phrase, some indecency, it means unchastity, it means kind of sexual expression outside of marriage.

Sexual unfaithfulness. That's what's in the frame here. The other school of thought, which is more liberal if you like, widened it. And so said basically anything that's offensive is a grounds for a divorce.

[17:00] Spoiled dinner at the table. That's something anti-sook. Which is it to be? But it's a really significant issue, isn't it? One opens the door very wide to divorce for almost anything.

Anything the husband deems worthy of divorce. The other narrows the door of divorce to sexual misconduct. So Matthew 19 verse 3, when the Pharisees ask Jesus, is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause for some indecency?

What they want to know is, which side will you take Jesus? You come from the synagogue or walking in the vineyard and the house is a mess at the end of a day's work.

You have an argument. You enter in your marriage into a kind of season of difficulty where it just seems you rub each other up the wrong way and you don't get on. Or there's a distance in your marriage and you think it's your wife's fault.

Jesus, is it time for the divorce courts? Or is divorce only possible when that one flesh union has been breached in some way?

[18:05] And Jesus is really explicit, isn't he? He says the more limited ground for divorce is right. Sexual immorality. Isn't he tender?

Isn't he protective of women? The men who want to discard their women? No, you may not cast her away quickly, easily, sir.

The word here, sexual immorality, I think it includes, but it is not limited just to sexual intercourse. Gross lewdness.

Something which brings catastrophic damage to a marriage. To the one flesh union. You see, marriage at its heart is a sexual union.

And you cannot set fire to that without in some way tearing at the very heart of marriage. For nothing will arouse such intense anger and pain and jealousy as sexual unfaithfulness.

[19:12] And where there seems to be a profound damaging or severing of that one flesh union, divorce is permitted. So I think that this means that Matthew 19 is addressing a particular debate in that day.

When he says here that the only ground for divorce is sexual immorality. He does not mean in my view that that is the only ground for divorce kind of period, full stop.

The end. The end. You know what he means? In this debate, over the meaning of the phrase, any cause some indecency, in that particular war of words, Jesus is on the side of those who say, indecency means sexual indecency.

This cannot mean that it's the only ground for divorce because principle number four. Divorce is permitted but not compulsory for desertion.

For desertion. So again, come with me. Stick with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 7. Which is on page 9, 5, 5. 1 Corinthians chapter 7. Ok, 1 Corinthians chapter 7.

[20:24] I'm going to read you from verse 12. On page 9, 5, 5. He says. To the rest I say, I not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever and she consents to live with him, he

should not divorce her.

If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband.

Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you in peace.

For how do you know wife whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know husband whether you will save your wife? So here are the Christians in the church in Corinth. And they're asking, what does my new love for the Lord Jesus mean for my old love for my husband?

Or my wife? This person who has not followed me in my devotion to the Lord Jesus. What does it mean for our marriage? It's so important to see the principle. Trusting in Jesus does not mean that you're airlifted out of your situation, out of the world, out of your network of relationships.

[21 : 45] Jesus. One flesh means one flesh. Means one flesh. One flesh for life. So stay as you are. And Paul knows that not every unbelieving spouse likes their partner's new love for the Lord Jesus.

Jesus in the home can make the other partner want to leave that home. And if that happens, if there's a desertion, then the person who has been deserted is not bound in any way.

There have been two traditional grounds for divorce in Protestant theology, very Protestant church. Sexual immorality and desertion.

I'll give you them both. In both cases, the marriage covenant is broken. Seven. One because a sexual intimacy takes place with someone else.

and the other because the other part he does isn't there. They've left. But I do want to argue quite strongly that there is another ground which has been strangely neglected by the church.

[23 : 03] And so can you come with me to Exodus, the second book of the Bible. And I've not got a page number for this. Exodus 21. Exodus 21.

Just after the Ten Commandments. It's the last passage we're going to turn to this morning. Exodus 21 verses 9 and 10. And so the fifth point is this.

Divorce is permitted but not compulsory for humiliating neglect and abuse. Divorce is permitted but not compulsory for humiliating neglect and abuse.

Let me read you from Exodus 21 verses 9 and 10. If he designates for his son he shall deal with her as with a daughter.

Here it is. If he takes another wife to himself he shall not diminish her food her clothing or her marital rights.

[24 : 11] The context here is slave marriages. But of course those marriages are still marriages. And it is clear isn't it that something short of adultery or sexual immorality is given as permissible ground for divorce.

For some reason the debate about the meaning of Deuteronomy 24 and that any cause language has dominated the church's understanding of divorce. But in fact it is most likely that rabbis in the Old Testament and at the time of Jesus took it for granted that to refuse food and clothing and sexual rights to a wife to your marriage partner constituted a form of humiliating abuse of that partner which she should not have to endure for life.

In fact the ideas of Exodus 21 have made it into our marriage though haven't they? We know that on a wedding day a husband promises to his wife to forsake all others and hurt him there's a sexual immorality to him.

And what else does he promise? He promises will you take this woman to be your wife? Will you love her? Comfort her? Honour her? And protect her? It's a beautiful rendering of the ideas of Exodus 21. Adultery can end a marriage yes.

Desertion can end a marriage yes. but one of the most cruel forms of desertion can be the one that takes place emotionally or psychologically or physically even while the abuser is standing there right next to you present to a spouse but present only to harm and that too in my view the humiliation of neglect and abuse means divorce may be permitted and we need to be clear about this don't we crystal clear that the sanctity of marriage the oneness of a marriage is never a sanctuary for a man or a woman in wreaking devastating physical or emotional or psychological abuse on their spouse the Bible does not it does not provide warrant for domestic abuse or violence

in any form does it particularly in churches we have the incredible privilege of living with an extended family sometimes that family needs to provide a world of shelter and love for men and for women while people try to get involved and bring about the right kind of end to devastating happening devastating damage that happens in marriage the sixth point and the last point is this divorce is not the end of the story divorce is not the end of the story it's not the final chapter of anyone's story did you notice the other correction that Jesus makes to the Pharisees in Matthew chapter 19 and they look to him and they say oh yeah yeah

[27 : 28] Jesus and we know about the one flesh that you need to be in the Bible but why then did Moses give a certificate of divorce why did he allow it see what Jesus does Matthew 19 in verse 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 correct gentlemen Moses commanded no Moses didn't command Moses commanded no such thing did he do you see the difference Moses allowed it Jesus says Moses permitted it because of the hardness of heart divorce is permitted but not commanded it's not compulsory sometimes sin spreads its tentacles around our hearts and it weaves such strong cords that we can never seem to break it sometimes the fallenness of our world and our relationship spreads its reach so far that some marriage unions just become irretrievably broken and divorce is permitted for immorality and for desertion and abuse but it's not commanded for any of those things does that surprise you

I think it should when we see people suffer in marriage yet no divorce is not commanded forgiveness might yet win through God is not just a divorcee he remarries he calls back his exiled people from Babylon he sets his love upon the people who trampled on his love and trashed his garden and vandalised his house and spurned his love and he calls them back and he marries the prostitute girl and so it is with us divorce is permitted but the deeply broken spurned lover may with God's grace forgive if the deserter will return and the wonder of wonders is that through gospel grace the deserter may return in tears and shame and repentance to find bread and wine on the table and the best robe on her shoulders and a ring on her hand and a fatten calf coat is that possible or is the good news of the

Lord Jesus too weak to do that the abuser may repent and there may be healing for what they did Saul do you remember him he held the coats of men who murdered Christians and he approved of it but he was wonderfully transformed Jesus always always always brings the promise of gospel transformation some people head towards divorce and the gospel can stop it divorce is the solution only when all else fails and we need to say that it's just as true where divorce has happened where divorce had to happen it's just as true whether a sinful divorce took place or a divorce caused by sin but which was not in itself sinful in none of those cases none of those cases does God ever pull down the curtain and say well that's the final act that's the story over divorce is not the unforgivable sin it's not the end of you and the pain of divorce can be healed with the gospel of grace now what is the only thing that marks the end of the road for someone's walk with

Jesus the only thing that marks the end of the road for someone's walk with Jesus is hardness of heart and may God give us as a church family in his kindness cause to cherish his original intention for marriage our refusal to stigmatise anyone a profound compassion for others in this broken world in which we live repentance for our sin protection for the weak faithfulness to those we are bound to today and love for Christ and his word in first place in our hearts all our days amen