



THE LIFE GOD WANTS FOR YOU

Jesus' Words on Divorce and Remarriage

Matthew 5:31-32

Last weekend Miriam had a privilege very few get to have. She stopped by to visit with her parents, wishing them a Happy 67th Anniversary. Sixty-seven years is a long time to be linked together as “husband and wife.” In this day-and-age, it is also, unfortunately, remarkable. But what is even more a blessing from God is the heritage passed down from them to their children and their children’s children. Ron & Audrey Arnold had six children, all of whom married and none of whom have divorced. Adding up the years of these marriages, there have been about 213 years of marriage without “putting asunder what God had joined together.” Now the generation of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren has begun. So far seven grandchildren have married, totaling about 65 years of marriage. Still not one divorce in the lineage, now adding up in the three generations to about 350 years of marital bliss.

Well, actually, if the truth be told, although there hasn’t been divorce, these marriages haven’t always been blissful. Sometimes all marriages experience more blister than bliss. Speaking of my own marriage with Miriam, I sometimes say we’ve been happily married for 35 years. People respond, “Wow, happily married for 35 years. That is a long time.” I then give the punch line, “Well, 35 out 37 years of marriage isn’t bad. Those first two years were pretty rough because she had to train me.”

I hesitated to share this information about the Arnold Family Tree, let it come across as bragging. No, I am humbled before God for his mercies upon the family into which I married. And, I think there is a positive value to know not every marriage crashes and burns. Marriage—which was God’s plan and idea—is good.

But, so often, marriages end in bitterness and divorce. I don’t have to quote the statistics for you to know that Family Tree is remarkably blessed. You know the stats. Many of you have had to live through the pain of the bare bones statistics. Some of you felt your lives torn apart when your mom and dad explained to you they weren’t going to live together any longer, but “You’ll still see us both.” Some of you felt the strange weirdness when your parents called it quits after the nest emptied out. And some of you have felt the hot tears of anger, rejection, and betrayal leading up to, or flowing out of, your own divorce.

Today in our sermon study we are going to look at Jesus’ teaching on divorce and remarriage. You may not like what you hear because it may not square with what you have done or have advised others to do. Jesus’ view may not even be what I wish he had

said. But what the preacher or parishioner wishes the Bible teaches is not our standard, is it? We need to know what God says, and we know that God is good all the time.

Jesus' teaching on the subject of divorce and remarriage is found in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, & Luke. But since Mark and Luke are condensations of his more lengthy teachings of Matthew, we will look only at the two times he speaks of the subject in Matthew 5 and Matthew 19. The words of our text from the Sermon on the Mount pick up at Matthew 5:31-32:

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

The context of these verses is, as we saw last week, Jesus' teaching about the sin of adultery. Jesus does not minimize the sin of adultery. In fact, in these verses he indicates the act of adultery is the one sin caustic enough to burn through the bonds of marriage, to undo that which God has joined together. Let me summarize what I believe Jesus is teaching about marriage, divorce, and the possibility of remarriage, here and in Matthew 19. Then we'll back up and see the foundations for Jesus' teaching.

There are two ingredients that are indispensable in constituting an actual marriage: a **public declaration** before God and society that a couple intends to be husband and wife, and **sexual relations**, signifying the "one flesh" marital union.

It is not an actual marriage if either of these two actions are absent. It is not a marriage if there is no marriage ceremony or certificate of public declaration. The form of that "public declaration" differs from culture to culture, from century to century, but in every culture there is some form of "public declaration" intended to declare a new family unit has begun. It is not a marriage if a couple just starts shacking up. Similarly, it is not a marriage if there is a public declaration, but no true union. For example, the couple that goes through some bureaucratic paperwork to allow for a change in immigration status, but does not actually intend to live together, may have a marriage in the eyes of the courthouse or fool the INS, but they are not married in the eyes of God. To form a marriage before God, there needs to be a public declaration and a sexual union.

Similarly, concerning divorce, Jesus teaches marriages are dissolved only when both of these actions are canceled or abrogated.

The public declaration of marriage is reversed by a public certificate of divorce.
The sexual union of marriage might be broken by the sexual union of adultery.

To see this teaching explained more fully by Jesus, we turn to Matthew 19:3-12, *“Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?’ ‘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. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.’”*

“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

When the Pharisees came to Jesus, they came with a hot-topic. The Rabbinical school of Shammai took a conservative, strict view that the only reason for divorce was adultery. The more liberal wing of Rabbis, the school of Hillel, allowed divorce by a man for almost any cause or point of irritation. The Pharisees wanted Jesus to commit to one camp or the other. The Pharisees asked, *“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”* That “any reason” would be the view of the liberal, Hillel, camp, which was the most widely held position. Anticipating that Jesus would be more “conservative” than “lax” the Pharisees wanted to alienate people by his unpopular stance.

Currently the USA has adopted as public policy the Hillel view. We have “no fault divorce” laws in which couples can divorce for any and all reasons.

- A deaf man in Bennettsville, South Carolina, filed for divorce because his wife “was always nagging him in sign language.”
- A woman in Canon City, Colorado, divorced her husband because he forced her to “duck under the dashboard whenever they drove past his girlfriend’s house.”
- A woman in Hardwick, Georgia, divorced her husband on the grounds that he “stayed home too much and was much too affectionate.”

In reply to the Pharisee’s challenge, Jesus refers them back to God’s original creation intent. *“Haven’t you read, 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. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.' Jesus reminds them of God's gracious provision of marriage in the beginning, before sin entered into humanity. God made one woman for one man. He did not stop creating women for the man because he got tired or ran out of ribs. His original intent—which cannot be improved upon by polygamist patriarchs or serial divorcees—was for one man to be united with one woman for one lifetime.

But at that reply, the Pharisees thought they could catch Jesus in conflict with Moses permission for divorce found in Deuteronomy 24. The Pharisees countered, "*Why then did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?*"

In reply, Jesus concedes that Moses permitted divorce, but corrects their verb choice that Moses did not "command" divorce. Here's what Jesus said: "*Moses **permitted** you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.*"

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is the passage about which they are parsing the choice of verbs as either "commanded" or "permitted" divorce. Lets read it: "*If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her...*"

The meaning of this phrase "indecent about her" was the great debate between the Rabbinic Schools of Shammai and Hillel. Shammai believed indecency meant only sexual unfaithfulness to the marriage, but Hillel thought it was a loophole that allowed men to divorce their wives even for burnt toast.

Regardless of what "something indecent" meant, Moses' instruction about the required steps of divorce proceedings continues in the rest of the paragraph:

...and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her, and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies then her first husband who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord."

In this passage Moses gave Israel its regulations concerning limitations of divorce. God's bylaws for the Hebrew people placed limitations on the rampant practice of divorce that was developing. He restricted its use and required a written document to make it legal. In this legislation, Moses provided the wives a degree of protection by requiring a divorce review. It also served to remind the husband to weigh carefully his action because if he followed through with a certificate of divorce, he would lose her

forever. Even if her next husband should die, the former husband could never remarry her, for God regarded this—trading a woman back and forth sexually—as an abomination.

From this Old Testament legislation it is to be noted God did recognize divorce when it took place. Moses spoke of the woman becoming “another man’s wife” and of her first husband as being her “former husband.” Although God saw sin to be the cause of the marriage dissolution, He did recognize the possibility of it occurring. Divorce then is “permitted” in some situations because hearts are sometimes too hard to forgive and restore. But it was never God’s intent “from the beginning.”

Referring back to the text in Matthew 19:9, Jesus takes his stand along with the Rabbinic interpretation of Shammai, the dissolution of a marriage is only allowed for the reason of marital unfaithfulness: *I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.*”

Malachi the prophet has already preached, “God hates divorce” (Mal. 2:16). Here the greatest prophet, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, confirms if someone divorces his wife (or husband) and then marries another, he (or she) commits adultery in getting remarried. Unless—as Jesus notes in his exception clause—the divorce was initiated because of “marital unfaithfulness.”

That term, “marital unfaithfulness,” is a translation of the Greek word *porneia*. In the NT this term is used 26 times, referring to all types of illicit sexual intercourse. *Porneia* is a broader term than *moicheia*, the word for “adultery,” but often includes it. The Bible evidently uses *porneia* as the term here, rather than *moicheia*, so that an exception is made for other illicit sexual relations besides an adulterous affair as a violation of the marriage.

So do you understand the instruction of Jesus on divorce? As I have explained it, marriage happens when a man and woman make a public declaration of marriage and seal and symbolize that with sexual union; divorce occurs when a certificate of divorce is issued because a sexual union outside that marriage has burned through the bonds of matrimony. Or at least, the ending of the marriage is “permitted” but not “commanded” in such a case. If—and only if—there is a full and complete repentance by the guilty partner, the “innocent partner” may be able to forgive. The marriage can be rebuilt. Although forgiveness can be granted in a moment in time, trust will have to be restored through faithful efforts over the long term. But Moses and Jesus recognized people’s hearts may be hard, unable to forgive, unable to rebuild. If that is the case, divorce is allowed, although it was not God’s original intent.

But what if a marriage is ended by divorce in such situations? Is remarriage permitted? The Bible teaches remarriage itself is not a sin. Remarriage was allowed and even required at times under Mosaic regulations. Jesus did not challenge the propriety of

remarriage when Sadducees posed the question about a woman who married seven times as each of seven brothers married her after the previous brother had died. (Can you imagine how fearful or perhaps stupid the seventh brother must have been, standing at the head of the aisle watching this bride of death walking toward him?) (Matthew 22:23-32)

The Matthew 5 teaching of Jesus makes it clear he assumed remarriage would happen after a divorce. If the divorce were not because of “marital unfaithfulness” then the initiation of the remarriage would result in adultery. But if a marriage has actually ended for a permitted reason, the remarriage also is without sin.

How does the rest of the New Testament, especially the writings of Paul, build upon Jesus’ teaching? In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul follows up on this subject as it applied to the church of new believers. In 1 Corinthians 7:10, Paul writes, *“To the married I give this command (not I but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.”*

When Paul says, “not I but the Lord,” he is saying that Jesus has already taught about this, and so this is Paul’s interpretation of the meaning of Jesus’ words on this subject: “A wife must not separate from her husband, but if she does she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband.” And, Paul says the same thing if the genders are reversed. That is in essence what he means by “And a husband must not divorce his wife.”

There may be justified reasons **to divorce** to protect a spouse and children—such as desertion by an unbelieving spouse, a situation specifically cited by Paul (1 Corinthians 7:12-16), or alcohol or drug substance abuse or physical or emotional abuse. Divorce may be advisable for physical or emotional protection or financial separation in such dire situations. But the “innocent spouse” does not have a right **to remarry** unless or until there has been a sexual violation of the marriage.

Some have accused me, or those who hold my view of Scripture, to be liberal because I allow for the God-blessed remarriage of those who have divorced when their previous marriage has been torn by marital unfaithfulness. But rather than this position being “liberal” or soft on sin, it is actually “conservative” dealing with harshness against the sin of adultery. It is the view that treats adultery with the same gravity Jesus did, seeing it as a sin so serious its acid can burn through the bonds of matrimony.

So what various applications can the Holy Spirit impress upon your heart today? I would suggest several possibilities.

- **If you are single**, go cautiously into wedlock. Recognize there is no godly escape clause except through the gut-wrenching betrayal that would come if your spouse were unfaithful. We live in a society in which to get a driver’s license you must pass a written test and even a driving test of proficiency. But to get a marriage license you have only to pay \$65 at the courthouse. Before you get married look

at your potential fiancé with you head and not your hormones. After engagement, get premarital counsel, keeping your eyes wide open, right up until the “I do” of commitment. Divorce is just too costly. One once-burned man after a bitter divorce said he wasn’t going to get married again. “Instead of getting married and divorced, I’m just going to find a woman I don’t like and give her a house.”

- **If you are married and are being tempted with adultery**, refuse to carry the acid in your pocket or purse. Don’t handle the beaker of acid because it so easily can splash out and burn through the bonds of marriage. If you have been flirting with the thought or even becoming involved in the deed, before you scar your marriage or cause your children to be casualties of the conflict or POWs of custody, do a 180 and run. Do the Joseph sprint. Run.
- **If you have been divorced and remarried without “biblical grounds,”** claim the grace of God to forgive. Although initiating the new marriage may have been sinful, continuing in the marriage now begun is holy, and right, and good. Ask for God’s grace and forgiveness upon your past and seek his strength for the future.
- **If you have been divorced and are unmarried**, I counsel you to remain unmarried unless or until your former spouse has entered into unrepentant sexual activity with another. Until then the door to return to your former marriage may be closed, but it’s not locked.
- **If you are married**, stay that way. Remember the great qualities you first saw in your mate, and see them again. Work as hard to improve your marriage as you did to win her hand or his heart at the beginning. Turn the spotlight of things needing improvement on **your** own flaws rather than his or hers.

The fourteen marriages of the Arnold Clan that have accumulated 350 years of marriage without a divorce are still in jeopardy. The coin tosses are still in the air for 13 or those 14 marriages, because only one has already ended successfully in death. So 13 of the marriages are still vulnerable. Our marriages need the touch of God through prayer. Let’s go to the Lord in silent intercession for the marriages of those we love. Will you pray for your own marriage? For your children’s and grandchildren’s marriages? For your parent’s marriage? For the marriages of those around you in the friendship and family of this church? Let us pray.