

“Divorce and Remarriage”
(Matthew 5:31-32)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

This morning,

We were looking at what Jesus had to say

About the seventh commandment:

“You shall not commit adultery.”

He was distinguishing

What God really intended

As over against the Rabbinic tradition.

In their view,

The command simply prohibited the act.

Jesus tells us

We can also break it in our hearts -

If we have a strong desire

To engage in sexual activity

With someone we’re not married to:

If we’re married,

Or that other person is married,

We’ve committed adultery;

If neither we nor they are married,

Then we've committed fornication.

Jesus isn't saying

That breaking this sin in our hearts

Is the same as breaking it in our actions:

There's a big difference

Between wanting to kill someone

And actually killing them;

Between wanting to have sexual relations,

And actually having them.

We don't find anyone in Scripture

Being executed for either hating or lusting;

But we do see there was capital punishment

For both murder and adultery.

But He is saying

That it's still serious -

It's still a violation of His commands

Serious enough to bring eternal condemnation.

That's what we would have received for it -

And all our sins -

Apart from His grace;

But being in Christ by faith,

No sin will ever destroy us.

That doesn't give us an excuse to sin,

But a reason to fight against them -

And that's exactly what Jesus says we'll do:

By His Spirit,

We'll tear out the offending eye,

And cut off the offending hand -

We'll work to kill these sins in our hearts

So that we'll not only keep ourselves from committing them

But also strengthen ourselves from wanting to do them.

B. Preview.

This evening,

Let's move to the second part of our text:

The Rabbinic Tradition

Had also corrupted God's original intent for marriage:

At least one school taught

That a man might divorce his wife

For any reason at all –

Jesus says that to do so

For any reason but one,

Is to commit adultery.

II. Sermon.

A. First, we're reminded again

That Jesus isn't addressing God's Law,

But the Rabbinic interpretation of the law.

We read in verse 31, "It was said, "WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE."

Notice again, He doesn't say, "It is written" -

Which is His usual formula for introducing Scripture -

But, "It was said."

Here, He's actually quoting the Law

He gave through Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

We read there: "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 indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife, and if the latter husband turns against 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 husband dies who took her to be his wife, then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since 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 gives you as an inheritance."

But though that's what He's quoting,

That's not what He's addressing -

He's addressing the Jewish misinterpretation of that Law,

And in the process,

Telling us what it really means.

There were actually two main schools of thought on this passage:

The school of Hillel -
Who understood the words “some indecency”
To mean anything in the wife
That was offensive or disagreeable to the husband -
If he didn’t like the way she cooked,
Or maybe the way she looked -
Then he could divorce her.
All he had to do
Was put a certificate of divorce in her hands
And send her away -
No alimony,
No child-support,
Nothing but a document
That proved that she was legally divorced
And so could remarry.

The other school was that of Shammai
Who taught that this “indecency”
Could only mean adultery.

As you might suspect
The tradition favored the school of Hillel -
As our unbelieving culture also does today –
This is what Jesus now corrects.

B. What does Jesus say that God really intended?

He goes on in verse 32, “But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for *the* reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

1. Jesus sides with Shammai:

The proper grounds for a divorce is “indecency,” or “unchastity,”

A word that means “sexual uncleanness,”

Which in the context of marriage generally means adultery,

But could mean some other form of unlawful sexual activity.

If a woman was found to be an unrepentant adultress,

Then her husband may divorce her.

We should include the fact that this is *unrepentant* adultery,

Because Jesus later speaks about this command given by Moses

And says it was because of the hardness of their hearts

That Moses gave it to them (Mat. 19:8; Mark 10:5).

If our spouse should break the marriage covenant,

And then repent and ask forgiveness,

We should renew that broken covenant with them –

We should show mercy –

But if they continue to break it,

There comes a point where the right thing to do

Is put them away.

It's true that adultery often carried with it the death penalty,
But there were times when capital punishment wasn't carried out:
The husband, in that case, could forgive
Or he could divorce his wife.
If he divorced her,
The woman could marry again,
And she and her new husband
Would not be guilty of adultery,
Because – *notice* – she was lawfully released
From her previous marriage.

But if adultery wasn't the grounds,
Then, as Jesus explains,
The husband who divorces his wife
Causes her to commit adultery when she remarries,
Because he sent her away – he prosecuted the divorce.

The one who marries her also commits adultery:
Because – *notice* – she is still bound by her first marriage covenant –
She's still married to her first husband,
Because that covenant was never broken.

This also means
That if her first husband remarries under these circumstances
He also commits adultery.

Jesus is saying
That the seventh commandment can be broken –
Not only by engaging in activity
With someone who is married;
And not only in our hearts,
By lusting after another
To whom we're not married -
It can also be broken by remarrying
*If our previous marriage covenant
Hasn't been broken.*

The exception Jesus gives
To this rule of divorce and remarriage,
Is when that covenant has been broken by adultery:
If that's the case,
The divorce is legitimate,
There is no binding marriage covenant,
And so no adultery upon remarriage.

2. Paul gives us one further ground

For a divorce and remarriage
That doesn't violate the seventh commandment:
And that is desertion by an unbeliever.

He begins in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11

By repeating what Jesus said.

“But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.”

He reminds us that it's God's will

That marriage last for a lifetime:

The wife should not divorce her husband,

Nor the husband his wife.

It's generally assumed

That Paul is speaking here of two believers,

Because he next addresses what to do

When a believer is married to an unbeliever.

This is also what our Lord was speaking of.

But he also adds

That if the wife leaves -

And the same would apply to the husband -

That she should remain unmarried,

Or else be reconciled to her husband.

Why can't she just marry someone else?

Because she's still bound to her husband –

Even though she's divorced,

Her marriage covenant wasn't broken –

To marry someone else in that situation

Would be to commit adultery -

Which is why Paul goes on to say

That she should be reconciled to her husband.

Paul almost seems to be giving her a choice,

Whether to remain unmarried or be reconciled.

But there isn't any question

That the Lord requires reconciliation -

If it's true that an offending brother

Must be reconciled with the one he offended

Before he can come and worship the Lord,

How much more is it true

Between those who are married?

The wife shouldn't have left the marriage in the first place,

Unless she had biblical grounds –

Such as her husband committing unrepentant adultery –

Which in this case, she must not,

Otherwise, Paul wouldn't have required her to remain unmarried.

This means her marriage covenant hasn't been broken,

Although it might be, if she never returned,

As we'll see in a moment.

She is to remain single
 In the sense that she isn't to marry someone else,
 So that she and her husband can reconcile,
 Because they are, in fact, still bound together
 In a marriage covenant.

Paul then goes on to address a second ground for divorce: Desertion.

He says in verses 12-16, "But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. *Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace.* For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?"

Notice first,

That even though the Lord forbids us to marry an unbeliever -

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6:14, "Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?" -

That if we should do so –

Or if we become converted

While married to an unbeliever –

That we should not divorce them.

But if they should leave,

Paul says, let them leave -

It's actually stronger in the original:

He says, they *must* leave.

But are they still married?

Notice what he goes on to say:

“The brother or the sister is *not under bondage* in such cases, but God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?” (vv. 15-16).

The brother or sister is no longer bound to that unbeliever -

The marriage covenant has been broken -

Which means both are free to remarry

Without fear of breaking the seventh commandment.

There are two grounds for a divorce

Where remarrying is not adultery:

When a spouse commits unrepentant adultery,

And when an unbelieving spouse deserts the marriage.

What if both are professing believers

And one of them abandons the marriage?

This situation is really no different

Than that of the believer married to an unbeliever:

If a believer leaves,

And all attempts to bring him back fails,

Then the church would be required

To enact discipline and put him out of the fellowship.

If that happened,

He would be declared an unbeliever

And treated as such: If the unbeliever departs, he must depart.

3. Another thing to consider

Is whether the guilty party –

The adulterer –

Is ever able to remarry -

Or if anyone can marry them -

Without committing adultery.

This is an area

The Bible doesn't seem to address:

It never says plainly anywhere

What happens if they remarry,

Though it does the innocent party.

But it's actually quite easy to figure out:

If it's true that the reason any commit adultery

Is because they're still in a marriage covenant

When they remarry,

Then if they are free from that marriage covenant –

Which they would be

If their innocent spouse was free –

Then they may remarry without committing adultery.

How could you still be bound to someone

Who is lawfully married to someone else?

4. Here's another related question:

What if someone

Sinfully divorces their spouse,

Marries another –

Commits adultery by so doing –

Then later comes to their senses and repents?

Do they need to divorce their current spouse

And try to get back with their former one?

The answer is, No.

To do so would be again to commit adultery,

Because they're now married to someone else.

Even though they committed adultery,

They're not living in perpetual adultery:

If they divorced without biblical grounds,

Married someone else,

And by so doing committed adultery,

That adultery broke the first marriage covenant,

Making the second valid.

If that's not enough,

We also have the express statement

Of our Lord through Moses

In the passage in Deuteronomy we read earlier:

“If the latter husband turns against 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 husband dies who took her to be his wife, *then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since 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 gives you as an inheritance” (Deu. 24:3-4).

He doesn't say they *should go back*,

But that they *must not go back* –

They are to remain in their current marriage.

5. One last thing to consider

Is that even though those

Who divorce without biblical grounds and remarry

Aren't continuing to commit adultery,

They are still adulterers –

Because they committed adultery –

In the same way a murderer

Continues to be a murderer,

Even though he only murdered once.

The good news is

That they don't have to remain so:

After Paul gives us a list
Of just a few of the many sins
That make us guilty
And would shut us out
Of the Kingdom of Heaven,
He tells us that if we are trusting Jesus,
These things are no longer true of us:

He writes in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. *Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.*”

This reminds us again
Of what we saw this morning in the Westminster Assembly:

“As there is no sin so small but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent” (WCF 15.4).

If you have committed the sin of adultery
Sometime in your past,
Know that the Lord has forgiven you
Of that sin, as well as all others,
If you have repented
And turned to Him in faith.
Our sins will only cling to us,
Until we run to Jesus.

If you haven't come to Him,
Come to Him now,
And find His forgiveness for all your sins,
As well as the perfect righteousness you need
To enter into heaven –
That is the Gospel – the good news. Amen.

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