Jesus on Marriage and Divorce

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I have a vivid memory of gym class in middle school. One of our Phys. Ed. units was designed to introduce us to gymnastics. We were taught basic principles of the rings, pommel horse and balance beam. The balance beam was my least favorite. Maybe it had something to do with my large frame and big feet. Trying to maintain my balance on a four-inch-wide wooden beam was no small feat. I decided early-on my future was not on the balance beam.

It dazzles me how petite gymnasts can maneuver so gracefully on the balance beam. Each Olympic competitor must perform a 360-degree turn on one leg, two flight elements in which they leave the beam, a large jump and an aerial dismount using the entire length of the beam.

The worst fate for a gymnast is falling off the beam. This fatal error is a deduction of five-tenths of a point. It may not sound like much, but it dropped Gabby Douglas, the women’s overall champion in the 2012 London Olympics, from beam competition.

I would liken preaching on divorce as comparable to maintaining balance on the beam. There’s a danger in falling in either direction. To one side is legalism, which relies on rule-keeping as a means of earning favor with God. Legalism was a particular malady for religious leaders called Pharisees. To the other side is laxity. This approach dismisses laws as binding on believers, the plight of many Christians today. There’s a danger in either direction; either in making too much of the law or too little of it.

Consider our Scripture lesson in Luke 16: “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery” (16:18). Some Christians insist Jesus teaches an ironclad law to govern all times and circumstances. On the basis of this passage, they neither allow marriage to divorced people nor allow them positions of leadership in the church. Other Christians are more lenient, treating Jesus’ words as old-fashioned and irrelevant. How can we take Jesus’ word seriously, especially in light of our divorce-saturated culture, yet avoid the pitfalls of legalism?

Our sermons this summer focus on Jesus’ teaching on any number of issues. Today, our topic is what Jesus teaches about marriage and divorce.

One word that comes immediately to mind is pain. Divorce causes so much pain. Pain for
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divorced couples, as some of you can personally attest. Pain for children—as hard as it is we must pay more attention to the long-term deleterious effects of divorce on children. And pain for families and church members who try to forge a new relationship with each member of a fractured marriage.

So what are we to do with this passage from Luke’s gospel? For starters, you’ll notice that Jesus directs his comments specifically to men. First century divorce laws favored men. Jesus’ strong, anti-divorce message repudiates an easy approach to marriage that works in men’s favor. His words are meant to protect and defend women.

We’re still left with the blunt edge of Jesus’ words, namely that anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery. It’s a standard rule of Biblical interpretation to compare what Jesus says in one gospel with the other three gospels. This verse also appears in Mark and Matthew’s gospels. But what Jesus says about divorce in these two gospels is occasioned by a dispute among the Pharisees over divorce. Let’s look at this story from Matthew’s gospel.

The Pharisees (think legalism!) come to test Jesus (19:3). Circle this word “test.” It’s critically important. These religious leaders intend to scrutinize Jesus’ answer to their question to find fault with him. They ask, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason?” (19:3). Their question is intended to trap Jesus over a technicality in Mosaic law. In the book of Deuteronomy (which is part of the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament) Moses permits a man to divorce his wife for “some indecency.” (24:1ff).

Two schools of thought coalesce around the meaning of this phrase. The conservative viewpoint, as expressed by Rabbi Shammai, interprets “some indecency” restrictively as referring only to infidelity. The liberal side, as represented by Rabbi Hillel, interprets this same phrase leniently. Some indecency could refer to most anything—the way a wife looks, cooks or acts in public. Rabbi Hillel went so far as to say that a man could divorce his wife if “she burned the toast.” I kid you not!

These two schools of thought converge on Jesus to ask for a ruling. They want to know whether Shammai or Hillel is right on this one. As the passage indicates, it’s a trap, since Jesus will invariably favor one viewpoint over another point of view.

Jesus’ response is nothing short of ingenious. He answers, in good rabbinic fashion, their question with a question: “Have you not read in the beginning God made them male and female?” (19:4). Jesus has little interest in debating the legalities of divorce. He says, in
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essence, ‘You’re asking the wrong question, folks. The question is not when it’s lawful to divorce, but what is God’s purpose for marriage?’ While these Pharisees appeal to Deuteronomy, Jesus takes the debate all the way back to Genesis itself. Jesus continues, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one. What God has joined together let no one separate” (19:5-6).

The Pharisees continue to press the issue and follow up with a related question: “Why then did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” (19:7). Jesus’ answer reduces them to silence: “Moses permitted divorce because of your hardness of heart.” He closes his comments with nearly identical words from Luke’s gospel, “Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery” (19:9).

Jesus adds an exception clause for marital unfaithfulness in Matthew’s gospel. Does Jesus intend to restrict his exception to the narrow definition of this Greek word as referring to adultery, or does he intend it more broadly to apply to anything that contributes to marital unfaithfulness? If we try to parse this word too specifically, we’re right back to wrangling over words, which is how Jesus began this dispute with the Pharisees. This is not the only exception for divorce in Scripture. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, puts forward another exception, when an unbelieving spouse seeks a divorce from a believing spouse (1 Corinthians 7:15). Or what about desertion or physical abuse? Don’t they qualify as appropriate exceptions? Jesus is not interested in instituting a new law to replace an old one. This would favor a new type of legalism over an older form of legalism.

Jesus wants, as it were, to stay on the beam. He wants to avoid legalism while challenging laxity. He has the cavalier manner in which people regard divorce clearly in his sights, yet he’s not the least bit interested in legal maneuvering.

It has been said that 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce. The actual divorce rate is 41 percent for first marriages, 60 percent for second marriages and 73 percent for third marriages. The divorce rate is about the same for Christians as it is for the public at large.

I read recently that some lawmakers and activists want to introduce “term limits” in marriage. They want to make it possible for couples to agree on a marriage contract of anywhere from one year to ten years. When a couple completes the term, they can always enroll in a new term. How’s that for family stability?
Young couples are understandably cautious about getting married today. Sixty percent of couples now live together before marriage. Their rationale for living together has everything to do with determining whether they’re compatible for marriage. This will come as a shock to some of you that the divorce rate for couples who first live together before marriage is actually higher than those who don’t live together before marriage.

Jesus’ says God’s intention for one man and one woman in marriage is a permanent, indissoluble union. This is God’s expressed ideal. Sometimes God’s ideal goes unrealized. That’s why God permits Moses to make concessions for divorce in the Torah.

Divorce always involves human sin. Sometimes one person in the relationship is more responsible for the break-up, especially when something like abuse or adultery is involved. That said, a break-down always takes two. The legal profession has a category of divorce called “no fault divorce.” It’s a legal way of saying that no one person is particularly at fault in the divorce. The language is something of a misnomer. Maybe the language should be changed to mutual-fault divorce.

This seems as good a place as any to remind us of a core belief of our church. We are all sinners, each in our own unique way. There’s no biblical justification for treating divorced people like second-class citizens. Any time I take pride in keeping my marriage vows, I’m reminded of Jesus’ words, “Anyone who looks at a woman with lust in his heart has committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). Every man I’ve ever known is guilty as charged. Jesus’ intent in this passage is to call out self-righteous people who have become smug about rule-keeping. I don’t kill, steal or commit adultery. Yet, according to Jesus, we have all killed people’s reputations, stolen their good name and committed adultery in our hearts.


We must do more in this church to strengthen marriages in our church. We must do more! We must do more to support separated and divorced people. We must do more!

What Jesus says about marriage and divorce brings us to a place of humility. We’re all sinners, each in our own unique way. We all stand in need of God’s grace.