



## Marriage: Built to Last

SERIES: *Turning Point: Start Fresh/Stay the Course*

What you just saw in that dramatic sketch is a realistic portrayal of what a lot of people experience in their marriages. I probably don't have to bore you with depressing statistics about the divorce rate in our country. It might surprise you that the divorce rate among Christians isn't much different. I think you know that when we bring up the issue of divorce, we're speaking about something that's very relevant, but we're also speaking about something that's very painful. I would bet there isn't a person here this morning who hasn't in some way been touched by the pain and tragedy of divorce. Perhaps it was your own parents, perhaps a brother or sister, perhaps it was you.

It's not an easy subject to address these days. There are those so rigid and self-righteous in their views that people in pain are left to feel nothing but shame and rejection. I'm afraid that describes how some Christians deal with this topic. But then there are those who've become so loose and self-indulgent on this issue that divorce is made out to be some kind of personal victory. One book on divorce says, "Your marriage can wear out. People change their values and lifestyles. People want to experience new things. Change is part of life. Change and personal growth are things to be proud of... You must accept the reality that in today's multifaceted world it is especially easy for two people to grow apart. Letting go of your marriage, if it is no longer fulfilling, can be the most successful thing you've ever done...a positive, problem solving, growth oriented step. It can be a personal triumph."

What a naive statement! I don't know many people who would look back on their divorce as a personal triumph. Yes, there's healing, and by God's grace we can grow from the most devastating experience, but God forbid that we view divorce in such a casual way. Because of the immense confusion in both the church and the culture on this, it's so important that we understand what God's Word has to say about it. This morning, in our study of Deuteronomy, we come to a passage which deals with this issue. We're also going to see that this was a passage that Jesus commented on.

### I. Moses makes three affirmations (Dt. 24:1-5).

**A. The sanctity of the marriage covenant:** First, turn with me to Dt. 24:1-4.

**"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."**

Moses makes three affirmations. First, he affirms the sanctity of marriage. He starts out and says "when a man takes a wife and marries her." We could easily just pass over that but we shouldn't. It reminds us that the marriage of a man and woman is basic and fundamental to our society. Marriage was invented by God and it's here to stay. Notice what Moses says in v.5 to bolster and enhance that relationship. **"When a man takes a new wife, he shall not go out with the army nor be charged with any duty; he shall be free at home one year and shall give happiness to his wife whom he has taken."** This is a great law! Let the honeymoon continue! Let this couple free from any heavy-duty responsibilities that would keep them from enjoying each other on a regular basis. One of the reasons was you didn't want this new husband going off to war and getting killed before he had the chance to make a baby with his new wife! This was partly meant to protect the wife from becoming a widow before she could have a child. In that society the child would be her security. But it was also a great idea for this young couple to have the freedom to spend as much time together as possible in that first year. It would make for a stronger marriage. My wife and I dropped all our ministry responsibilities our first year. Some people resented that, but we've never regretted it. We tell young couples getting married to drop as many outside commitments as possible in that first year of marriage so you can just be together. It's even okay to stay in bed and miss church!

**B. The permission to divorce:** The second affirmation Moses makes in this passage is that divorce is permissible. It's not commanded, yet it's permitted under certain circumstances. First of all, there needs to be a good reason. You can't just say, "Oh I'm tired of her." Or "I don't like her cooking." Or "I'm attracted to someone else." It says here the cause is "he has found some indecency in her." Notice this was a patriarchal society so everything is spoken of from the man's point of view. This probably means that she was guilty of some improper conduct. It can't mean adultery because the penalty for adultery was death, not divorce. But she couldn't be sent away just because a husband felt like it. By the way, in the Canaanite society where the Israelites would soon live divorce was rampant and husbands divorced their wives for no reason at all.

Women were thrown out and replaced like old sandals. But Moses wants to guard against that. Notice he had to “write her a certificate of divorce and put it in her hand.” The certificate would have to be legally issued, causing a man to hesitate before he went forward. It would slow the process down. And the certificate in hand was meant to protect the woman because it would prove that she was free to remarry and hadn’t been divorced on grounds other than seen on the certificate.

**C. The right to remarry:** The third affirmation Moses makes here is just that: the right to remarry. We see that in the case of this woman who is sent out by her first husband and marries again. There is nothing wrong with this. The only restriction placed on this is if her second husband divorces her then the first husband can’t take her back as his wife. Part of the reason he might want to do that is he might get some financial gain from it. This would also protect the woman from being kicked around like a marital football, passed back and forth between irresponsible men. When Moses says the first husband can’t remarry her because “she has been defiled” he probably means that she’s been defiled for him. That’s why he sent her away in the first place. She’s out of bounds for him because he already found indecency in her and divorced her.

## II. Jesus clarifies these three affirmations (Matt 19:1-9).

**A. The Pharisees’ question:** So, that’s what Moses says. Now let’s fast forward about a 1,400 years to the time of Jesus. In Matthew 19:3 some Pharisees approach Jesus. **“Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?’”** Notice the words “for any reason at all.” Remember Moses said that there had to be some “indecency in her.” But in Jesus’ day there was a debate going on among the rabbis over what this word “indecency” meant. One group had a strict view of this and said it meant some form of immorality. The other group was much more liberal. They said even if a woman burned her husband’s toast or had a bad hair day he could write a marital pink slip and send her away. It was the ancient version of “no fault” divorce. The Pharisees want to know where Jesus stands on this debate. Notice their motives are anything but pure. They were “testing him.” They probably expected Jesus to be on the liberal side because he had mercy on people like the woman caught in adultery. Perhaps they wanted to reveal that he was lax in his morality.

**B. The sanctity of marriage:** But Jesus refuses to get caught in their trap and responds first by affirming the sanctity of marriage. Look what he says in vv.4–6: **“And He answered and said, ‘Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, and said, ‘FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.”** Jesus focuses NOT on what’s lawful, but on what God’s purpose for marriage has always been. Jesus says, “Let’s get beyond rights; let’s get beyond what’s lawful; let’s talk about God’s purpose.” He goes all the way back to creation

and shows that divorce is inconsistent with God’s original blueprint. He says some basic things about God’s design for marriage. He talks about how God made us. He quotes from Genesis and says “God made them male and female.” God made two genders of humanity, male and female, for the purpose of bringing them together in marriage.

I’ve always been amazed why God would choose to bring together two different kinds of people. Male and female are both made equal in the image of God but most of the similarities stop there. We’re different creatures—physically and emotionally. We’re brought together to complement one another in our differences; even to celebrate and enjoy these differences. Men and women were brought together not to compete with one another but to complete one another. I know a lot of couples who compete with one another. I think this is God’s way of teaching us unselfishness. Marriage forces us in a kind of unnatural way to take into consideration how someone operates; someone who seems to be from another planet. We begin to realize that WE are not the center of the universe.

That’s why when Paul teaches on marriage he tells husbands and wives to do different things to meet the needs of their spouse. He tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church. Why is that? Because a woman’s greatest need is to be loved and cherished and protected. That’s how God made her. If she ever doubts her husband’s undivided love she becomes very insecure. But to wives he says something different. He says they’re to respect their husbands and be responsive to their leadership. That’s because a man’s greatest need is to be respected and his greatest fear is failure. That’s how God made him. A wife who constantly puts him down and refuses to trust his abilities really cuts away the very heart of his manhood. This is the first thing Jesus says about God’s design. He made us male and female.

He also tells us how God joins us. He quotes from Gen. 2, **“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall be joined to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh.”** In a mysterious way, God glues together two people. One plus one equals one. It starts with leaving father and mother. What’s the primary relationship in life? Some say it’s between parents and children. That’s a crucial relationship, but it’s not the primary relationship. The primary relationship is between husband and wife. That’s why we leave our father and mother in order to be married. If you continue to see your relationship with your parents as primary, that will interfere with your marriage. Couples, especially newly married couples, have to draw very clear boundaries with their parents; otherwise that leaving is jeopardized. An even deeper problem is when we see our relationship with our kids as more important than our spouse. Regardless of how we feel about our kids, the marriage relationship is still primary. If you love your kids then put your wife or your husband first. The greatest gift you can give your kids is a good marriage.

Jesus says when we leave God makes us into one flesh. What does that mean? There is a spiritual, physical and emotional aspect to this. Spiritually, we become one when we make our vows. A spiritual transaction is made in heaven and two become one. Physically, we become one

flesh as we enjoy the beauty of our sexual union. The Bible calls this “knowing” each other. It’s a nice way to describe a good thing for two people to enjoy who are committed to one another for life. Emotionally, we become one in a process of living together, working together, struggling together and praying together. God uses that process to make us one. It’s a oneness that is shaped as we stay committed to each other through all the experiences of life. And it grows. After a while you get to a point where you don’t know where you stop and she begins! It’s kind of scary, but people even tell Lynn and I that we look alike! Scary for her! That’s why when couples do that unity candle at their wedding, and take those two candles and light the one in the middle, I like them to blow out their candle and leave just the one lit. Jesus says, “they are no longer two, but one flesh.” Blow it out. You’ll never be the same. You’re one flame.

You may be wondering what all this has to do with divorce. Well, the next thing Jesus does is warn us. He says, “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” Marriage is designed to be a lifelong union. You can’t take something God has glued together and separate it with a piece of paper. If it were a man-made thing, maybe you could, but it’s a God-made thing. I’ve noticed this over the years as I’ve watched couples. No matter what kind of awful things might happen in a marriage, when it comes right down to it, it’s pretty tough to break it up. You can, but not without great pain and suffering, because you’re undoing something God has glued together. A friend of mine put it this way, “If it’s true that in marriage one plus one equals one, then how can you divide the number one without making fractions?” That’s the deception of divorce, to think we can divide one flesh and be left with two whole individuals. Jesus says don’t even try. What God has joined together let no man separate. He’s talking about YOU, the married couple. Don’t you mess with what God has done.

So Jesus says divorce is inconsistent with God’s creation purpose for marriage to make two into one flesh. That’s how he deals with the Pharisees’ question about divorce, by giving them his view on marriage.

**C. The permission to divorce:** But the Pharisees aren’t finished yet. They say, “What about Deuteronomy?” Look at Matt. 19:7: **“They said to Him, ‘Why then did Moses command to GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND her AWAY?’”** They’re saying, “Wait a minute, Jesus. Don’t you read your Bible? Moses said divorce was okay.” Notice they say Moses “commanded” this, but remember he didn’t command it; he permitted it. There is a big difference between commanding something and permitting something. In practice, the Pharisees acted like it was commanded because they wrote a lot of these divorce certificates. Their main concern wasn’t true righteousness, but what the law would let them get away with.

Jesus responds with these words in v.8: **“He said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.’”** Jesus says God permitted it because of our hardness of heart. Divorce is God’s reluctant concession for hardhearted people. It’s like a tourniquet. It can be a way to stop the bleeding and bring some kind of protection to people who need it. As we’ve already seen, much of what this law

did was protect women from calloused men who thought nothing of ruining a woman’s life and reputation by throwing them out on the street. Divorce was never God’s desire, but something he tolerated because of hard hearts.

Why do marriages fail today? A lack of communication? Problems with the in-laws? Sexual incompatibility? Financial problems? These things are just symptoms. At the root, the problem is that hearts grow hard. What is a hard heart? It’s a heart that’s stubborn. It’s a heart that’s calloused to God and to others. It’s a heart that’s bent on going its own way. It’s a heart that’s cruel and unforgiving. Sometimes that hardness is in one person more than the other, but this is the core of the problem. This is still why divorce is sometimes necessary.

I’ve seen how this hardness can destroy a marriage. I can’t look into a person’s heart but I can look into their eyes and hear their tone of voice and I can see they’ve made up their mind to do what they want to do regardless of what God says. Several years ago I met with a couple I had introduced to one another and later married. I’d known this woman a long time. She came into my office and explained how she had met another man. The look in her eyes, her tone of voice, her blatant disregard for her husband, all told me she was hell-bent on doing what she wanted to do. What happened? Her heart had become hard. It didn’t happen overnight; it takes time for a heart once warmed by God’s love to petrify, but it happens, and we have to guard against it.

**D. The right to remarry:** But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He also talks about the right to remarry. Look at v.9. **“And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”** Let me try to paraphrase what Jesus says to them: “Any man who divorces his wife to marry another woman commits adultery against his wife, unless he divorces her because she has committed adultery.” Notice that Jesus allows for divorce and remarriage in only one case and that’s marital infidelity. Even then he doesn’t command it; he just permits it. That’s a pretty strict standard. What about abuse? What about if a person got divorced before they became a Christian? Can they not remarry after they’ve come to Christ? These are all good questions, but for now, let’s just let Jesus’ words settle in our hearts. Because of the true nature of marriage as a one flesh union, to divorce and remarry for any reason short of infidelity is adultery.

### III. Applications for today.

Let me finish by addressing three different groups of people. First, I want to address those who are single but contemplating marriage. I don’t know how else to put it, but it’s very important you know what you’re getting into. Marriage is God’s gift, but don’t enter it casually. This is why we take the premarital process so seriously. This is why we won’t just marry anybody. So, before you take the step, seek the Lord in prayer, seek counsel from wise people, and give yourself plenty of time to prepare. Some of you are single and want to be married, but the Lord hasn’t provided the right one yet. As painful as it is to wait, hold out for God’s best. Let God forge you and shape you into a person who will be a great husband or wife.

Second, I want to speak to those who are struggling in marriage. Maybe you're thinking about calling it quits. Maybe you can feel your heart begin to harden towards your spouse. If you're in that situation you may have a hard time hearing this, because as the heart hardens the ears grow deaf, and it becomes hard to hear the voice of God. But, if that's you, I want you to know that in almost every situation I can think of, it's worth hanging in there. God really does hate divorce. He hates it not because he's a hateful God, but because he loves you. He knows that decision will create wreckage beyond imagination in your life and in those you love. The best reason to stay married is because Jesus tells you to. But let me say something else to you. You can stay in a marriage and still be hardened against your wife or husband. So, besides just staying in the marriage, let God soften your heart. Confess your bitterness and resentment and unwillingness to forgive. Focus more on yourself than your spouse. Be the first to say you're sorry. God loved you when your back was turned to him; now you turn and do the same for your spouse. If you need to, get help. Call one of our pastors. Call a Christian counselor, but don't give up.

Finally, I want to speak to those who have been broken by divorce in one form or another. I want you to know that God loves to come alongside of you in your pain and bring comfort. God hates divorce but he doesn't hate divorcees. You may have been abandoned, but God will never abandon his children. His healing and his grace is available. He will even give you the power to forgive that person that has hurt you. Maybe you're the one that needs forgiveness. Maybe this message has left you feeling guilty. Again I want to remind you that these words are mainly directed towards hostile Pharisees. There is not a word about redemption here, because the Pharisees had no remorse. They didn't think they needed redemption. But if you come to the Lord with a broken and repentant heart he won't turn you away. Remember, the same Jesus who spoke these words was on his way to the cross where he will become the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.