

We are going to talk about a challenging topic: marriage and divorce. It is a challenging topic for a couple of reasons. One, marriage brings a variety of emotions in each of us. For some of us, marriage is a picture of joy. You grew up among married people or were surrounded by married people who were images of joy. Some of you are married, and it has been everything you imagined. For some, however, marriage brings an image of disappointment. You have stories of family or friends whose marriages took a turn for the worst. Or you are married, and you're fighting to hold on. And for some, you are single, and marriage represents a mysterious longing that intertwines with your identity and understanding of God. I was single for most of my 20s (not out of choice!) and discovered a deep well of experience and struggle of which few people can relate.

Talking about marriage is complicated. Even more complicated is talking about divorce. Divorce is complicated because all of us have been impacted by it. Maybe you were raised in the homes of divorced parents. Perhaps you have family or friends who are divorced, or you have been divorced. No matter our connection with divorce, we have seen that divorce impacts people deeply.

So, as I approach our topic today, I approach it carefully, knowing this topic stirs something in each of us. I also approach it desiring the clarity that Jesus brings, knowing we all long for grace in this arena. As a pastor, one of the practices I have the privilege of doing is presiding over a wedding ceremony. I have the best spot in the entire ceremony - standing at the end of the aisle. I love watching the groom in his anticipation, and the bride in her elegance. Weddings are a joyful event because they speak to a deep grace that resonates with what it means to be human.

As we read the words of Jesus on marriage and divorce, we're going to read words of that grace. Jesus has something to say to all of us - whether married, divorced, or single. Jesus takes us back to the beginning of the human story, fighting for the dignity of every person, and the dignity of marriage.

Matt.1-3: The Test

When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. 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?"

The Pharisees, one of the major groups of religious leaders of that day, came to Jesus with a test. Not a "test" in the sense of seeking to learn, but in trying to trap Jesus. To understand how their question was a test, you need to know about their cultural situation and a religious debate.

First, let's talk about the cultural dynamic. Matthew tells us Jesus entered Judea, which was ruled by the Roman governor, Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great). One of the scandals of the day was Herod Antipas divorced his wife to marry his brother's wife. Sometime earlier, John the

Baptist publicly criticized Herod for his action, Herod arrested John in response, and John was eventually killed (Matt. 14:1-12). So, when Jesus was asked to answer when divorce was allowed, the religious leaders were perhaps setting a scene, which would put Jesus in danger with Rome.

Second, and probably more directly to the background for the test, was a religious debate in Jesus' day on Deuteronomy 24:1-4. This passage describes what happens if a man divorces his wife (in a patriarchal society, it was the male who initiated the action). At the center of the debate was how to interpret the phrase, "something indecent."

In Jesus' day, there were two schools of thought of Scripture interpretation. One school followed the teaching of a rabbi named, Shammai. He interpreted Scriptures with what we would might today label in a "narrow" sense. The other school followed a rabbi named, Hillel. Hillel interpreted the Scriptures in what we might label today in a "broad" sense. Shammai interpreted "indecent" as something serious, namely an adulterous act. Hillel interpreted "indecent" as anything that didn't please the husband. Some of his followers went so far as to say if your wife wasn't a good cook, or if you found another woman more attractive, that was grounds for divorce. All that one had to do was give her a "certificate of divorce" in front of two witnesses, and it was done. They used Deuteronomy 24 as permission to do as they pleased. From their question, we see that the Pharisees followed Hillel. They asked Jesus, what side of the debate was he on?

v.4-6: Marriage

"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 flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Jesus responded to their question about divorce fascinatingly. He changed the topic from divorce to marriage. That may seem semantically insignificant, but Jesus reframed the conversation from a political scandal and religious debate to recover the original design of God. Jesus took the conversation to before Deuteronomy - all the way back to creation. God created a man and woman in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). In other words, people have dignity because people are created in the image of God. And then, God joined together these two God-imagined and God-imaged people (Gen. 2:24) into a union.

The Pharisees were preoccupied with the grounds for divorce. Jesus was preoccupied with the dignity of marriage. It's as if Jesus said, "Before we talk about divorce, we need to recapture the beauty of marriage."

v.7-8: It Was Not This Way

“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 of your hearts.”

His questioners, feeling the pressure, got right to the point. What about the certificate of divorce? The interchange is stunning: The Pharisees called the certificate of Moses a “command.” Jesus said it wasn’t a command, but a concession. The certificate of divorce wasn’t a green light for them to do whatever they pleased. It was given because of their “hearts were hard.” To put it another way, the certificate of divorce was given because the human condition was in need of transformation. Deuteronomy 24 was meant to safeguard the dignity of people and the dignity of marriage, but it had been misused as a means for people to do as they wished.

To further His point, Jesus made His most powerful statement: “It was not this way from the beginning.” This is not how things were meant to be. There is a sense in which Jesus is talking about what it means to be human. We have these moments of heartache, disappointment, suffering, and fear; and the statement that rattles inside our head as we try to make sense of things is, “This is not how things were meant to be.” Or to use Jesus’ words, “It was not this way from the beginning.” Jesus called forth a need for people to be renewed, for their God-imagined and God-imagined dignity to be restored.

v.9: Narrow

I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

His view of divorce then makes sense. If Jesus is about restoring the dignity of people made in the image of God, He is about restoring the dignity of the union of God-imagined people. Jesus followed Shammai’s conservative interpretation. Jesus’ grounds for divorce is narrow. But far more than a new policy, Jesus seeks the renewal of people like you and me who stumble our way toward our holy design. Reading Jesus’ words, you get the sense that divorce chips away at the ancient beauty and dignity of marriage.

Think, for example, about your experience with divorce. Maybe you grew up in a home with divorced parents. Perhaps you have close friends/family who are divorced. Perhaps you are divorced. I have seen the heartache as I have journeyed with friends and family who have experienced divorce. Just as marriage unites something deep within us, divorce attacks something deep within us. There is a pain that is hard to make sense of. As a pastor, people will ask me, “What does God think of divorce?” In other words, they’re wondering if they will be alone in their pain. My response is often, “God thinks probably the same thing you do: “it was not this way from the beginning.”

Maybe as you hear this, the pain of divorce from your story comes to your mind and heart. If that’s the case, there is grace for you. Maybe as you hear this, you have felt alone in your pain. Hear today that Jesus deeply desires to restore your dignity. Perhaps as you hear this, you’re considering divorce. You think divorce is a way to make things better. Hear today that Jesus deeply desires to restore the dignity of your marriage.

v.10-12: Kingdom Passion

The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.” Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

This is not easy to navigate. The disciples listening to this exchange were so overwhelmed by the implications of Jesus’ teaching that, if this how things are, it was better not to marry. Jesus seemed to concede the point, using the dramatic metaphor of a eunuch. The metaphor is to live with a single, focused passion for the way of the kingdom. Whether married or single, make your passion to live like Jesus, restoring dignity to people, and dignity to marriage.

The dignified beauty of marriage is one of the central images the Biblical writers use to picture God’s faithfulness and joy for people. Prophets like Jeremiah pictured God as rejoicing over people like a groom rejoices over his bride (cf. Isaiah 62.5). When the Apostle Paul wanted to use a metaphor to teach about marriage, he said, “It’s like how Jesus relates to His people.” And when John described God’s future, he described a wedding day when God and His people are forever joined together as bride and groom.

Ways to Restore

What can we do with this teaching of Jesus about marriage? We can act in ways that restore the dignity of marriage and the dignity of one another. I have two questions for you. First, if you are married, what can you do this week that will benefit your marriage? I don’t mean, what can you think about, but what you can do. Second, for all of us - married or single - what can you do this week that would reinforce the dignity of someone else? People are God-imagined and God-imagined. What can you do this week to show someone that truth?

If you do this, you can follow Jesus in changing the topic of the marriage/divorce conversation. You can offer a new starting point, declaring to people that Jesus is for you. Jesus is for your spouse. Jesus is for your marriage. He is your Restorer, not your shame. He is restoring the dignity of people like you and me.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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