

Jesus on Adultery, Divorce, Marriage, and Celibacy

Matthew 5:27-32; 19:3-12

Turn to Matthew 5 please. In this sermon we will read what Jesus said about adultery and divorce, and about marriage and celibacy. We will begin in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5. But in Matthew 19 Jesus talks about the same things more fully, so we will read that, too.

The world around us thinks differently than Jesus does, but that's always been true. But because even inside the church there are different views on this, I am taking this chance to go through the fuller teaching of Jesus in Matthew 19. We need to keep holding his ways in front of us.

What this means, which some of you were suspecting, is that this will be kind of a long sermon. You're lucky, though, that you are listening online, because you can "pause" me and go have lunch or a nap any time you want. Next sermon will be shorter, I promise.

Let's go to Matthew 5. We are going through the six contrasts. Six times Jesus revises the OT teaching. He's fulfilling the Law, getting the real OT meaning out there.

We covered the first contrast last week, "you shall not kill, but I say to you." Today with the second and third. The second contrast is about adultery, and the third is about divorce. Adultery and divorce both have to do with marriage, and marriage is a big deal in the kingdom.

By the way, I myself am divorced and remarried. I'll not say more about it here, but you need to know that. And it is not a very nice story, I don't think it ever is.

Second Contrast: Adultery – 5:27-28

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

The seventh commandment is "you shall not commit adultery." That means, once you are married, you will be faithful to that man or that woman. Adultery means sexual actions that break the marriage covenant, sexual intimacy with someone that is not your spouse.

If we take the 7th command literally, people who did not actually have sexual intimacy with their neighbour were not adulterous. Wrong, says Jesus. If your eyes and your heart are committing adultery, that also is adulterous.

The problem here is not sexual arousal. That a man would be sexually aroused when he sees a woman, or a woman would be sexually aroused around a man not her husband, is not the problem. Sexual excitement is made by God, and healthy, and in itself not sinful but good.

The problem is when arousal turns into coveting. “I want that woman to be mine, I want that man to be mine,” and we imagine life in that way, then we are violating that commandment. Adultery of the heart also adultery, it breaks that command. Kingdom people turn away from adultery of the heart. We don’t give ourselves permission for that.

We live in a pornographic culture, it is all over the place. Sexual arousal is used and sold in all kinds of ways all around us, and it is an ongoing spiritual battle. This is a real problem for many men, young and not young, certainly including me. And for women too. That’s how it is.

Jesus does not blame the woman for being attractive enough to arouse a man. The problem is not the woman’s attractiveness, it is the man’s eyes and the man’s heart. It would be nice if the adulterous heart could blame someone else, but Jesus does not do that.

On the other hand, no man or woman should think they are dirty, or perverted, because this is a problem. That this is a problem does *not* mean your mind is in the gutter. God made men to be aroused by what they see, and gave men sexual energy. And sometimes arousal is visual for women too. The struggle is normal, not dirty or perverted. But the Lord’s call is clear.

Warning – 5:29-30

If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. (Hell mentioned 3x so far – v22))

Jesus uses these words in other places as well, about sin in general. Jesus is not saying we should actually mutilate our bodies, and Jesus does not think body parts cause sin. In Matthew 15 Jesus is clear that all sins, and he includes adultery and sexual immorality, come from the heart. Sexual sins and the rest come from the heart and nowhere else.

These two lines are like a parable, showing us the seriousness of sin. If sin is keeping you from saying yes to the kingdom of God, take drastic measure. Jesus assumes that struggle with sin is going to be a real problem. Amputating an eye or hand will not solve this. The Lord’s prayer tells us that God forgives our sins, but Jesus warns us here against taking sin lightly.

Third Contrast: Divorce – 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 sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

The Law of Moses did not list the proper reasons for divorce. Didn’t say anything about that. All Moses said was that if a man divorces his wife, he has to give her a piece of paper saying so.

This way she is free to remarry. So the Jews generally thought you could divorce for any reason at all, since Moses did not say otherwise. They always assumed there would be remarriage. Couples divorced because one of them wanted to be married to someone else. We are still dealing with adultery here.

If a married woman wants another man, so she leaves her husband and takes up with the other man, that's adultery. The 7th command said not to do that. But if the married woman can get her husband to divorce her, then she can marry the other man, and it's not adultery. Perfect!

No, says Jesus, the whole thing was adulterous from the start, you wanted a divorce so you could marry someone else, it is still adultery, the certificate does not change that.

The NIV says "makes her *the victim of adultery*" in v32, but there's no word "victim" in Greek. Remember that this is case law. Jesus is giving a particular case. This case is different than the one in Mt 19. In the case Jesus describes here, it makes most sense to see the woman as convincing her husband to divorce her, so she can marry another man. Here, the woman initiates divorce. In Mt 19, the man initiates divorce because he wants to marry another woman.

There is an exception clause, "except for sexual immorality." We will take this at face value. If your spouse has been sexually unfaithful to you, the Lord gives you the right to divorce your spouse and remarry. In that case your next marriage is not adulterous. You don't have to choose that, but you can. The Lord probably hopes you will forgive and carry on, but he will not argue if you divorce and remarry.

Both the adultery contrast and the divorce contrast tighten up marriage faithfulness. Stick with your spouse, eyes and heart and body. This is very important in the kingdom that Jesus brought us into. God is overwhelmingly faithful to his people, so his people are faithful to their spouses. Now to Matthew 19, where Jesus speaks more fully on these things.

A Test for Jesus: Reasons for Divorce - Matt 19:3

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 want to know if a man can divorce his wife for any reason. How is that a test? Probably because Moses did not say anything different, and they remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. They thought Jesus was much stricter than Moses, and they hoped to use Moses to trap Jesus and get Jesus in trouble for going against Moses.

Jesus Explains Marriage from Creation – 19:4-6

"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."

They asked, "is it lawful for a man to divorce for any reason?" and the short answer is "No, it is not." Pay attention to where Jesus goes, he goes back to Genesis 1-2. He quotes the Genesis creation stories. The Lord's view of marriage is not anything new, it goes back to what God set in place right at the start. Kingdom marriage flows out of Genesis 1-2.

Jesus' view of marriage here is a five part sequence.

(i) **The Creator made male and female from one flesh.** "*Haven't you read,*" he replied, "*that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female.'*" Jesus is thinking about Genesis 2, where God takes the man, one flesh, and divides the one flesh into two, male and female. Male and female humans started out as one flesh, and God divided that one flesh, made one into two separate people with flesh, male and female. That's part 1.

(ii) **A man will leave his father and mother.** *The Creator 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',*

Because male and female began as one, a man will leave his father and mother. A woman will leave her father and mother as well, because women and men started out as one.

In the ancient world, a child's first loyalty was steadfastly to their parents. So these are strong words. There is a profound shift of long term loyalty, from father and mother to spouse. The Bible likes extended families, 3 or 4 generations living together. The fifth command is "children, honour your father and your mother." We're not ignoring that, but still, these are strong words. Marriage starts with a big change of basic long-term loyalty, a higher priority.

(iii) **And will be united to his wife.** *The Creator said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother, and be united to his wife.'* He will be joined to his wife. He will cleave to his wife, as the older English said.

This joining of husband and wife has sexual union in mind, in part. But it is paired with "leave his father and mother" so "be united to his wife" is the new loyalty or allegiance. Your first direction and duty and loyalty is no longer to your parents, it is to your spouse.

Our Lord connected sexual intimacy to this fundamental shift of deep, long-term loyalty and duty *from* father and mother *to* spouse. Anything else failed to honour the Creator's plan.

(iv) **And the two will become one flesh.** *The Creator 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.

Remember that Adam and Eve began as one flesh. All of this happens, the leaving, then the cleaving, then becoming one flesh, because they began as one flesh, and God divided them. “The two will become one flesh” again has the flavour of sexual coupling.

But for Jesus, being one flesh is the ongoing state. It begins with leaving parents and cleaving to spouse, and being one flesh is constant from then on. So Jesus is not just thinking about sexual union. From the time they come together, from then on, the husband and wife are one flesh. We don’t strive for it, or try to achieve it; it is a done deal.

And to reinforce this, Jesus adds, “So they are no longer two, but one flesh.” Married couples are two separate people, we don’t merge into one body again. And yet, in God’s eyes, in deep way I do not understand, husband and wife have gone back to that original state, before God separated the man into male and female. They are no longer two, but one flesh.

(v) **It is God who makes them one again.** *Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.* We don’t make ourselves one flesh, God does that. Genesis did not say that when the two became one flesh, that was God making them one again. But Jesus says it plainly. God divided one flesh into two, and when they come back together, God makes them one flesh again.

This is not just Christian marriages, this is every marriage. In the first century, many pagans were already married when they became followers of Christ. Paul assumed all this was true of them. God does this at every marriage, he makes the woman and the man one flesh again.

One brief reflection before we move on. Sometimes Christians move in together without marrying, because, they say, “God does not care about a piece of paper, we love each other so we’ll live together.” It is true about the paper, God does not care. There was no marriage paper at all at the time of Jesus, only a divorce paper.

Jesus repeats the Creator’s design for marriage, and he makes it the kingdom standard with no doubts. The piece of paper is not the issue. Nor, to be honest, does Jesus ask how much we love each other. Do we love Jesus enough to hear him, that’s the question. Do we love Jesus in this?

God starts with whatever society calls marriage. Every society has something called marriage. Egyptians had marriage, and the Canaanites, the Philistines, the Babylonians. And Canada also has something called marriage. If you see a man and woman together in Canada, and you ask if they are married, they either are, or they are not, and they know the answer. God always started with whatever any particular society calls marriage, and he takes it from there.

In Canada, the piece of paper matters. “Well then,” says the Lord, “if that’s marriage in Canada, get the piece of paper.” Usually, the reason Canadians do not marry is that they do not want marriage according to Jesus. Outside of God’s people, it’s always been like that. But we love and serve the Lord, so we live in his ways. If you love the Lord Jesus, get the piece of paper.

Let's summarize these five, this is the biblical theology of marriage right there. 1, God made male and female by dividing one flesh into two people. 2, For this reason, because they began as one, a man and a woman leave their fathers and mothers. 3, The man and woman come together, are joined, so that the new loyalty and duty are greater than that to parents. 4, They become one flesh again, because they began as one flesh. That oneness is their ongoing state. 5, It is God who has made them one again, and no one should separate that.

The Pharisees asked if it was lawful to divorce for any reason. Jesus has not forgotten the question. "Not at all," he says, "what God has joined together, let no human separate."

Jesus Explains Moses – 19:7-8

"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.

When Jesus said, "what God has joined, let no human separate," the Pharisees thought, "perfect, Jesus has fallen into our trap, now we'll get him with Moses." But Jesus was ahead of them.

If you want to make Jesus grumpy, criticize Moses. Jesus always defended Moses and his law. Moses permitted you to divorce because your hearts were hard. The Pharisees thought they had trapped Jesus, but Jesus had trapped them. Moses was just doing damage control. He knew you would divorce, he knew you would not follow God's ways, so he permitted it.

But now Jesus was teaching the kingdom of God, and God's righteousness. Jesus was doing nothing new with marriage. He went back to creation, and that's how it would be in the kingdom.

Is this the only time Moses compromised because of the hardness of Israel's hearts? I doubt it. There are many hard teachings about marriage in Moses that fall far short of the creation story. I now take them as other examples of this. Moses knew better, Moses knew the creation stories, but because of Israel's resistance to God's ways, he permitted things God did not prefer.

Jesus Explains Divorce – 19:9

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

In the example of Matthew 5 that we read, it seems the woman initiated divorce so she could remarry. Here the man initiates divorce so he can remarry. No, says Jesus, the plan was adulterous from the start, divorce does not change that. But if your spouse is sexually immoral, you may divorce them.

The Disciples Respond: Better not to Marry – 19:10

The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.” The disciples have never heard anything like Jesus’ teaching. For Jews in the first century, divorce was when the man wanted it, including being persuaded by his wife. I have read Philo and Josephus on this, and the Mishnah. In practice, Jewish divorce was easy and common.

The disciples were dismayed. “Then it is better not to marry at all.” Jesus was fighting the culture of devout Jews by his stern teaching on divorce, don’t miss that. No accommodating.

Jesus Agrees with the Disciples – 19:11-12

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 eunuchs who make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

It is better not to marry, say the disciples. Jesus says, not everyone can accept this, but only those to whom it is given. The one who can accept it should accept it, that it is better not to marry. Not everyone can make this work, but if you can, it would be better if you did not marry.

And then Jesus spoke about eunuchs. Normally a eunuch was a man who had been castrated, his testicles had been cut off. It changed men, and it was a lonely life. Neither men nor women knew how to treat them. And of course there was shame, they were not whole, not complete.

The thing about eunuchs is that they had no choice. They don’t get to decide if it is better not to marry or not. Someone else decided for them, and they cannot marry. Jesus widens “eunuch” here to mean anyone for whom the marriage he described was not possible. And get this, people, Jesus made himself one of them. He calls himself a eunuch!

Born eunuchs. Jesus means people with birth defects, people born with genitals incomplete or confused in some way, or anyone born in such a way that marriage is not possible.

Made eunuch by others. This includes castrated males, but Jesus is widening the word “eunuch” in this section, so it would include anyone who cannot marry because of what others have done.

Make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom. The commentators agree that Jesus includes himself here. At some point the Father told the Son, “if you say ‘yes’ to my call, you must not marry.”

I would include in this those who could find someone to marry who was not a believer, but they want to follow the Lord, and there is no suitable believer to marry. Those people also, in a real sense, make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom, as Jesus did.

When Jesus lumps all three kinds of people together under the unpleasant word “eunuch,” he includes himself. It is better not to marry, if you can make that choice. And many people who might want to marry, but for some reason have no choice. Jesus put himself in that group.

John the Baptist, the kingdom announcer, was a celibate. Jesus, the King himself, was a celibate. Paul the apostle, the main example of following Jesus that God give us, was a celibate.

Remember Paul. He certainly thought it was better not to marry, and he actually felt sorry for married people. He had excellent relationships with men and women, and he is probably the most confident and thankful people in the Bible.

In the church, single people are not lacking anything. They are not unmarried, they are celibates. We are all either married or celibates, no other options.

Bottom Line

The bottom line is that there are no easy choices regarding sexuality and marriage. Sexual attraction, sexual arousal, are good things, put in place by God. There are two godly ways to handle this, and neither is easy. We can be married, or we can be celibates.

When the disciples heard Jesus talk about marriage, they said, “then it is better not to marry.” Jesus basically agreed, and then he told them that not marrying was not an easy choice either. And then, Jesus described people for whom there was no choice. They could not marry.

But remember, whether you’re married or celibate, the Lord is always with us, he’s helping, he’s giving grace and comfort and endurance, he’s upholding us with his righteous right hand, he’s guiding and protecting us. Tough marriage or tough celibacy, the Lord says to each one, “my grace and my power are enough for you.”

People might say to me, “that’s easy to say, you’re married.” But if I was single, they’d say, “you’re just saying that because you’re single.” You can see for yourself that we’re just reading Jesus here. He said it, and he was a celibate.

Both marriage and celibacy are modeled after our Lord himself. Jesus also left his Father and his home to be joined to his bride, to become one with his bride. And our Lord is incredibly faithful to his Bride, he never turns aside to another, even when we his bride are dismal. And our Lord is waiting, waiting, for his marriage, waiting, waiting, waiting, until he can return and grab his bride. In faithful marriage and in faithful celibacy, we imitate our Lord.

And God gives everyone all kinds of good things to enjoy, so let’s all make sure that we are enjoying them, and giving thanks to God. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord, thank you for teaching, thank you for being so clear about these things. You've left no doubts about your views on this. And you were such a good example. And now, Lord, we are all either married or celibate. You know that neither of these are easy. So help us. May your grace and encouragement surround us. Strengthen us and comfort us. Don't lead us into temptation here, we don't do well. Rescue us from evil and the evil one. Always lead us in the right path, for your name's sake. In your mercy, be a good shepherd for us. Amen.

BENEDICTION: Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.