

Jesus and Divorce

GOD'S WORD AND SEX:

Matthew 5:31-37

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Bethany Church

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(15 second family feud video clip)

It is hard to imagine something more painful or messy than divorce. Most everybody wants to avoid it. There are a few greedy individuals who go into a marriage planning to gain a financial windfall through divorce. A friend of mine was a victim of that. However, for the vast majority of us, we're not masochists. We don't want to suffer failure, rejection, grief and guilt. Who wants all the anger, fear and uncertainty? Who wants to negotiate all the complicated and hurting relationships? The heartache of divorce is wrenching, and unfortunately it is no longer rare in America. Perhaps, there are extended families unaffected by divorce in our country, but there are not many. As I mentioned earlier in this sermon series, a major change took place in the 1960s, and we all are affected by it. In the previous generation, my father grew up as one of eleven siblings. None of them divorced. My mother is one of seven siblings. None divorced. In their day and the previous generations, rarely if ever did committed believers divorce from one another. If a divorce occurred, usually one of the spouses walked away from his or her commitment to Jesus and the church. Today, I'm one of four siblings. All are committed believers. Three of us married committed believers. Two divorced. We live in a totally different atmosphere than our older parents. Even though we are responsible for our actions and choices,

something happened. Committed believers are being torn apart. It appears that God has walked right out of our marriages.

One day while listening to a wife reveal marital turmoil, I recalled a Bible passage:

Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies and tricks of the Devil. For we are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against wicked spirits in the heavenly realms. (Ephesians 6:11-12, NLT)

Did you know that passage followed Paul's writing on marriage and family? It dawned on me. This couple would have a ball if it weren't for the Devil and his tricks. This couple, along with the rest of us, is struggling with unseen powers and schemes affecting our relationships. What are these powers doing, what are the schemes they employ and how do we defeat them? I dealt with some of that earlier in this series. Today, however, I want you to hear one thing.

In the video clip the little boy hands his father the Bible? What impact will that have? What impact does it have on you? What weight do its words carry?

When we explored "Jesus and Marriage," we found that the Bible stresses atonement and redemption far more than relationship principles. Without God's Spirit changing the "should do" on the pages of the Bible and other books into the "love to" of our hearts, we find ourselves causing the people we love a lot of pain. I remember Jesus telling some religious leaders:

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. (John 5:39-40, NIV)

The key to life is not the Bible, but what it points to. Jesus came to bring life to all of us who are dying because of sin. He came to give life to those who are single, to those who are divorced, to those who struggle in marriage, and to those who enjoy marriage. The Bible doesn't

heal a marriage or the wounds of divorce, but Jesus does; he wants to, and he loves to... because he loves the divorced. A lot of divorced people don't feel loved or lovable, but they are.

Suppose you have an elementary school child who gets in a fight. The child comes back to you with a black eye, a broken tooth, a cut lip, a swollen face and dirty, tear-stained cheeks. Now, despite the fact that the situation could be complex and involve a lot more than you see, and your child probably is not guiltless, do you still love your child? How could you not? Well, God's love is greater, and he sees his beat-up divorced children... and he loves them.

In the Bible we meet our first divorcee in Genesis. Although there was no legal document (the incident preceded the Law of Moses), Hagar was sent packing. Her situation was really messy. Hagar and her son Ishmael suffered from their own sins and those of other family members. Hagar had fled the family for safety reasons, but Hagar finally departed because she was sent away by Abraham. God met her in her despair and cared for her and Ishmael. Although God loved and cared for them, there still is pain in that family. The descendants of Ishmael (the Arabs) and the heirs of Abraham (the Israelis) continue to fight in the Middle East, and 15 terrorists, with hearts embittered by that conflict, attacked us one September 11th.

Some marriages get messy over Jesus. Paul counseled the Corinthians believers to honor the marriage and unbelieving spouse, but not above their relationship with Jesus. If the unbelievers wanted a divorce, they were not to fight it. If they wanted to stay married, the believers were instructed to stay married and not be afraid to have children. God's Spirit would work in those children (1 Corinthians 7). Believers were told to trust God with their marriage and let their partners freely choose without their manipulation.

Jesus spoke about divorce while preaching on a mountain. He said:

Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5:32, NIV)

Since marriage is the union of two, there is no union with three. That union is where God's love is reflected and his spiritual protection enjoyed. Jesus tells us that the dissolution of it is a very serious act. He told men that if you send your wives packing (and in that day the women had to be supported by men) you bear the responsibility of adultery for her unless that is the reason why they leave. The women had to go somewhere and belong to someone. The divorce decree gave them the freedom to remarry and receive support, but it didn't cancel spiritual responsibility for breaking the marital bond. It didn't help their hearts. The rejection and hurt would still inhabit some chamber of their hearts. So think about the momentous responsibility Abraham carried when he sent Hagar packing. Did God still love Abraham? Absolutely. Did God still bless Abraham? Overwhelmingly. But his children still suffer today, and God still loves and works with them.

We all suffer and experience complications because of sin and our spiritual culpability. Don't think any of us are in a different boat. We're floating together. Jesus simply gives us direction that can help us avoid terrible pain and receive the redemption we need. That redemption was tasted by a Samaritan woman who had been divorced five times and was cohabiting with her sixth husband (or she was divorced four times and cohabited twice, or who knows? She had six men.). Don't look down on her. That woman is our sister, and she needed the one thing we all need. She needed the water of God's great love to flow into her hurting, thirst-driven heart. She needed to be filled with the presence of this loving God, and she needed his word to reshape her thinking. She needed what Paul calls "the washing of water and the word" (Ephesians 5:26). We all need that.

Our hearts have chambers. As we become broken by both the sins of others and our own, some of those chambers become dilapidated and haunts for God's enemies who call us to focus on needs and wants so that we become out of touch with God and others. We become insensitive to this person and that, to this issue and that. We develop hot buttons where our tempers fire. We collect more guilt and cause more hurt. We need the water of Jesus' loving Spirit and the words of his wisdom to flood every chamber and clean it out. Then we need Jesus himself to rule and put each chamber in order. Do you want that? Then let's invite him.