

Dealing with Divorce

Matt 5:31-32, Matt 19:1-10, 1 Cor 7:10-16

Friends, there was a particular Sunday on which it is reported that Calvin Coolidge, the 30th President of the United States was said to have returned home from church and his wife wanted to know what the minister had preached about.

“Sin” President Coolidge replied. “What exactly did he say about Sin?” his wife asked

“That he was against it” came the reply.

And Friends when we happen come across the scripture passages that we’ve read this morning, at first glance they appear to answer the question “what Jesus does have to say about divorce?” in the same manner. “He’s against it”

To which we respond ok... but there’s obviously more to it than that isn’t there, and we want to know what that is, we need to know what that is... especially if we might be facing the prospect of divorce, maybe going through a divorce, or perhaps dealing with the aftermath of a divorce.

Because as we learned last week, when we started this series on following Jesus when life hurts, Psalm 38:18 says us “*the LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit*”

And we know that God is closest to in Jesus Christ - God in the flesh, Emmanuel – God with us...

So when we are facing the prospect of divorce, maybe going through a divorce or dealing with the aftermath of a divorce we might know enough about Jesus that we instinctively turn to him for encouragement, and comfort... and so we open our bibles, or we more likely do a Google Search for “Jesus divorce” to find help...

And what we find are these verses in Mathew... “He’s against it”

And it’s been my experience that dealing with divorce brings up feelings of betrayal, abandonment, shame, and guilt - whether it’s true or not- and when we read these passages we feel condemned – not comforted or encouraged.

I think of the poor fellow who had recently become a Christian and was enthusiastically reading his bible only to come to a screeching halt in Mathew 5 because he's married a woman who has been divorced – and now he's wondering if Jesus considers him to be an adulterer.

But friends, there is Good News in Jesus' teachings about divorce – that can bring comfort, encouragement and some correction for whatever stage of dealing with divorce you might be in, whether it seems to be looming on the horizon, whether you're going through it, or if you are dealing with the aftermath.

Now, as a minister I often can see divorce looming on the horizon in the lives of people because they come and confide in me about how their marriage is in trouble, and they don't really want advice on how to problem solve or improve their relationship, they are looking for an “authority” to judge who is right and who is wrong.

He's so controlling I can't live like that, She always got her family coming over I don't feel like I've got space in my own

house, He won't take initiative and find a job, She doesn't really take care of the kids... If this doesn't change I really don't see how we can stay together? I shouldn't have to put up with that...should I?

When I hear that friends... I know that divorce is somewhere on the horizon, unless...

Somehow, one person or both can stop judging the other one – even if it's a legitimate complaint – and see their own faults, their own sin and deal with it instead.

Friends this is precisely the spirit of what Jesus is trying to do when He is says “*whoever divorces his wife causes her to become an adulterer and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery*” A bit of background will help you see this.

Under the Law of Moses divorce was an option for a husband. A husband could send his wife away, but he had to provide her with a certificate of divorce.

This proved she was no longer his wife and thus no one could accuse her or her new future husband of adultery.

Now as I've said before, by Jesus' time God's people had a big problem with self-righteousness. They figured that because they kept the letter of this law – *which according to one Rabbi allowed a man to divorce his wife if she burned his supper, and in fact some interpreted it that you should divorce your wife if she displeased you* –

they figured they were obedient to God and that they were still within God's good books.

Hey we're all good people here. Anybody murder anyone, No ok... anybody here unfaithful to their wife, committing adultery... you? Nope! You? No! – see we're all good.

Never mind the fact that you've sent away your wife because she's no longer attractive and taken a younger, prettier one instead – well that's ok because I gave my old wife a certificate of divorce. I followed the law so I've done nothing wrong!

But Jesus says yes you have! Following the letter of the law does not relieve you of the guilt of your hidden true motives, the spirit in which you doing this makes you guilty...of adultery.

Jesus clarifies that the divorce clause in the Law of Moses was only an “option”, not a command when there had been marital unfaithfulness. It was a way of recognizing legally what had already taken place in the reality of their marriage.

Jesus wants his listeners to face their own sinfulness which caused them to judge and divorce their spouses and see their own faults instead, the hardness of their hearts he calls it, He wants them to stop hiding their hard-heartedness behind the law.

So friends – here's how we need to understand Jesus' words if divorce is looming on our horizon.

Stop worrying about the speck in your spouse's eye and take the log out of your own.

Just because divorce is a legal option for us, just because we might have a case to go before a judge, just because we can get a ruling that our complaints are legitimate so we deserve a settlement and custody etc...doesn't mean that we are right before God who can see our hearts.

I have a friend who has been struggling in their marriage for a while now, but by God's grace in answer to a great deal of prayer... in the last little while he has been able to begin to start looking at himself and stop focusing on all the things his wife is doing wrong.

In our last conversation he had begun to see some of things he had been doing that were wrong – divorce is still on the horizon... but for now it's not moving any closer and there is some small hope for reconciliation...if...

If he and his wife can both keep cooperating with the Holy Spirit as He shows them their own faults, their own guilt and applies Christ's forgiveness to it and teaches them how to extend that grace and forgiveness to each other...*if*.

But that *if* doesn't always happen does it? – all it take is one person to stay hard-hearted and the divorce that's looming on the horizon bears down on us and engulfs our world.

If that's happening to you...or someone you know – what kind of comfort and encouragements can the scriptures bring to you?

Friends what you need to hear while you are going through a divorce has a lot to do with what you might be feeling doesn't it – and there are a wide range of emotions you can experience depending on your situation – everything from confusion and bewilderment to anger and fear all the way to relief.

It was relief that a youth pastor friend of mine expressed to me years ago when he was going through his divorce. I remember him saying to me – Grant I know this isn't right but I'm feeling so much better because I'm not fighting anymore.

But there's one feeling I've discovered that almost everyone going through a divorce encounters... and that is guilt, both real and false.

So let's deal with the false guilt because we've already heard Jesus speak about our true guilt.

What a horrible thing false guilt is because it torments us and taunts us, accusing us that if we'd only done been a better wife, if we'd only tried harder to listen, if we'd not made such a big deal about that issue – maybe our marriage would have worked.

So I want to turn our attention to what the Apostle Paul says to us in 1 Cor 7:15-16 where he says

“But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?”

Friends Paul is talking about what to do when one person in the marriage becomes a Christian and the other doesn't – but we can also apply this to situations where a spouse – who may claim to be a believer - is determined to act like an unbeliever

when it comes to God intentions for marriage and for how forgiveness and healing and reconciliation can take place.

God did not intend for marriage to be a place where a spouse or a child's health and safety are endangered, God did not intend for marriage to be an open arrangement where people are free to have multiple partners, or where partners are forced to perform criminal activity, or where vows and commitment are forsaken when life circumstances change.

In cases like these I understand Paul to be saying “you've tried, but a marriage takes two people to be committed to what God intended it to be and if the other person isn't willing to do that, divorce is an option because you're walking in God's direction and the other person isn't.”

And that can clear up the false guilt afterwards friends. It can silence the accusations of the enemy who will say if you'd only tried harder, given them one more chance, perhaps things would have turned around and it would have all gotten better – you could have saved them.

Listen to Paul friends – *“How do you know whether you will save your husband? How do you do whether you will save your wife?”*

Friends if they have “departed and left” what God wants for marriage and are unwilling to return to it because of the hardness of their hearts - it is ok to let them go and I pray that this will give you peace from any false guilt, or false responsibility you might feel for what has happened.

And friends, while guilt might be the most common emotion that scriptures can speak to, you also need to know scriptures speaks to the pain and anguish that comes with divorce as well.

If you’re feeling like your heart has been broken, if your spirit has crushed because your close friends are now fighting it out in court, because your parents are splitting up, because the person who promised to love you is now leaving you...

Remember Psalm 38:18 says *“the Lord is close to the broken-hearted and he saves those who are crushed in spirit”*

Friends – divorce might separate us from others but it can never separate us from God. In Heb 13:5 God promises *“never will I leave you never will I forsake you!”*

As I was attempting to prepare for this message I asked another friend who is going through a divorce at the moment “what’s the most helpful thing that you have heard?” and he replied “Keep hanging on because it gets better!”

that’s true Friends, because God is with us, Christ is with us, the Holy Spirit is with us!

What an awesome promise, what a comforting promise to know that when we’ve gone through divorce that we will not truly be alone afterwards. God is with us.

And if you have gone through a divorce and you’re dealing with the aftermath friends let me take us back to Matt 19 and highlight what Jesus says in vs. 4-5

*“at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,
For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be
united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”*

Jesus is quoting from Genesis here in order to correct the Pharisees on their misuse of the divorce law, but it can also function as a reminder for us that in the aftermath of a divorce Christ can take us back to the beginning to start over again.

I love that old Canadian Tire commercial which says “where you end up has a lot to do with where you started out”

So friends, if you have to start over there’s no better place than Genesis to start out to ensure that you end up where God wants you.

Genesis points out that marriage was God’s idea, he created it and he created it to be good – that means in the aftermath of divorce you don’t have to give up on marriage, you don’t need to be cynical and bitter about it.

God created it and God can recreate it for you again. That’s whole story of the bible friends,

How what was originally good got messed up because of our own rebellion but God is always working to recreate it anew again – that praise God that He has accomplished this in Jesus Christ. AMEN!

And Genesis establishes that marriage was created because God could see that it was not good for us to be without close, intimate human companionship.

Even though God personally walked and talked with Adam He could still see needed something else was needed for Adam.

So he brought all the animals before Adam, but as the bible says “not a suitable partner was found.” So what does God do? The story continues...

The Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman

from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman, for she was taken out of man.”

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

God provided Adam with Eve, and friends God can provide you with companionship once again after a divorce - when He’s got you ready for it.

And part of getting you ready for it might be a conversation with God about a suitable partner – and that maybe you didn’t take his plans for you into consideration the first time around.

Getting ready might involve realizing that your former marriage wasn’t founded on serving and honoring Christ as savior and Lord.

In the aftermath of a divorce you have some time let God show you who can be a suitable partner for you and how a marriage can become Christ centered.

And finally friends, Genesis teaches us that marriage means we leave the past behind us.

And to leave the past behind we need to deal with it first. So make sure to take the time after to deal with your real guilt, let Jesus’ forgiveness heal you, and let the scriptures free you from any false guilt.

Learn from your mistakes about not keeping Christ as the center of your marriage – and trust that in his time God will show a suitable partner...

And then its time to leave the past behind and be united to your spouse and the two become one flesh!

So...there really is good news in the scriptures to help us deal with divorce.

And when you leave here this morning and somebody asks you “what did your minister speak about on Sunday?” and you reply “Divorce” and they respond by asking “what did he have to say about it?”

You can answer back “He may be against it..... but Jesus still offers us comfort, encouragement and correction if we are facing divorce, if we are going through it, or dealing with the aftermath.”

I’ve put that on the sermon notes just in case you can’t remember that line☺