

# Matthew 5:31-32

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Date: 05 August 2018

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[0:00] Our text for today is Matthew chapter 5 verses 31 and 32. As has been said a number of times now, it's a difficult text.

! And it's a difficult text because, as we look at the larger teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage in the Bible, the waters can get a little bit muddy.

And it's a difficult text because almost all of us have been affected by divorce in one way or another. And so it's a very real, present issue for us. At the end of July 2014, in our verse-by-verse study of Mark's Gospel, we came to some of Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage in Mark chapter 10 verses 1 through 12.

At that time, I presented two widely accepted conservative views. And I framed them as, number one, the more permissive view.

[1:12] And number two, the more restrictive view, often called the permanence view. But I did not settle for you or for myself, quite frankly, which view we ought to hold as a church.

And I suggested that we needed to settle the matter as a church. That it was a weighty enough issue that we should, in fact, work through it. It is astounding to me that it has been four years, almost to date.

In fact, last Sunday would have been four years to the date since we first stated the need for a formal position on the matter.

Many churches, we've discovered, have no formal position on this at all. But as we saw the need for it, four years have passed by already.

Initially, my fervency for the issue was derailed by simple schedule conflicts that made it absolutely impossible. I wrote seemingly impossible.

[2:19] It was impossible for our elders to gather that fall of 2014. And then life happened.

Everything else in our world just kept on moving on. And we didn't get to time out everything else going on in our personal lives and in the life of the church to study the matter.

Since then, we've preached through the rest of Mark, Colossians, Ecclesiastes. I'm pretty sure the book of Jonah, the parable of the prodigal son, and the book of Acts.

We've begun new ministry efforts like training for the Center for Biblical Counseling and the ABBA initiative, our foster care and adoption initiative. We have sent out new ministry partners.

For example, the Zwimpkes to Germany and Oseama Obele to Brazil. We've said goodbye to many people. Our dearest of brothers, Sid, went home to be with the Lord, and we grieved that loss together.

[3:35] We said goodbye to Wes and Liz. As I mentioned earlier, Wes was an elder of our church and music leader, and we've worked through the labor, the effort of replacing all of the work that both of them did for our church.

We have done lots of premarital counseling and officiated numerous weddings. I think 15 in the past four years.

And praise the Lord, we've had a lot of babies. My family included, which definitely made for a tough year for our family personally.

Silas is now two years old. So, life moved on, and the situation got shelved. Not forgotten, but shelved.

And so, I am once again grateful for our general habit as a church of verse-by-verse exposition of God's Word.

[4:40] As in God's good design, we've been brought to the topic of marriage, divorce, and remarriage once again. And I will tell you, to just be entirely honest, I would have loved just to have skipped these two verses for now.

If you're paying attention, you know I've delayed them a little bit. We've done a few things topically over the past couple of weeks. I want to, right now at the outset, just burst the bubble of anticipation for you this morning.

I do not intend to settle the matter today. I appreciate the prayers that you guys have had on my behalf, both prior to and this morning as well.

Even this week, I had every intention of sorting out every detail. To be honest, I'm not sure I could even preach a reasonably-length sermon to cover all of the massive amount of information that ought to be covered.

I had really hoped, but I have yet, despite an incredible number of hours of prayerful study, to sort out all of the complexities of the matter.

[5:59] If you find that you have a confident position on divorce and remarriage, you have either, A, made assumptions based on how you have heard the matter taught, you just grew up believing a certain thing about marriage, divorce, and remarriage, and so you're just assuming, and it may be the right teaching, but you're assuming that it's right.

Or you've not spent nearly enough time in reading broadly, reading opposing arguments, hearing all of the many interpretations of the many texts that speak to the matter.

Or you are much more brilliant than I am, which is a distinct possibility. I want to be clear. I don't dare think myself the most brilliant amongst us.

Or you have spent considerable time on the matter, carefully weighing out the teaching and varied interpretations, and have arrived at a position.

And if this is the case for you, I would ask that you would come speak with me. I find myself in this process, and your input would be most welcome.

[7:22] So we're not going to sort it all out this morning. I do hope that you can appreciate my desire not to be brash on this topic.

It has real application for today. And I think we should be careful about the lines that we draw concerning it.

I believe that the consequences are too dire to take an issue like this lightly. I also hope that you can sense this morning my earnest longing to lead our truth, our church in truth and love, and not to divorce the two.

Pun intended. What I promise is that from this date forth, we will not settle this issue in a matter of years, but rather in a matter of months.

I intend, and you can be praying for me, to present a position paper to you, I hope, in the coming few weeks, for your prayerful consideration and conversation, and for us to discuss at our next quarterly members meeting, which is at the beginning of October, I believe.

[8:40] So, we are going to look at today's text, and we are going to talk about today's text, but we are not going to work out every bit of its possible meaning for us today.

All the same, let me remind you before I read Matthew 5, verses 31 and 32, beloved, that this is God's word to us. It was written for His glory and our good.

We would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and obey its commands. So, I read in verse 31, It was also said, Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.

But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman, commits adultery.

Now, we are in Jesus' most famous of sermons, we commonly call the Sermon on the Mount. And recall the two prominent themes of the Sermon on the Mount are number one, human flourishing.

[10:01] What does it look like to live well as a citizen of God's kingdom? And we have seen that the human flourishing that Jesus teaches is not the same as the flourishing of the world.

Jesus says, Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, and mourn, and are meek, and hungry, and thirsty for righteousness, and merciful, pure peacemakers.

Those who are persecuted for righteousness, Jesus tells us are flourishing. And the second theme that we have seen, and really is beginning to pick up some steam now, is the theme of whole person righteousness.

Not merely outward appearance of righteousness, but a holiness that indwells us, that affects our thoughts, and our attitudes, and our intentions, as well as our actions.

Jesus has taught us that citizens of his kingdom are keepers of the law. Not that they gain their citizenship by being keepers of it, but that they have been granted citizenship, and their keeping of the law evidences their citizenship.

[11:23] Right? And this law keeping, this righteousness, is not just this outward thing. Right? It is a whole person thing.

This is what Jesus means when he says in Matthew 5, in verse 20, For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

We spent quite a bit of time looking at the law, and going back to Exodus 20, and considering all of the implications of the moral law for us. So, with this idea in mind, Jesus begins to press this point by using a series of phrases, beginning in Matthew 5, verses 21 and 22.

You see, at the beginning of verse 21, he says, You have heard that it was said to those of old. And then in verse 22, But I say to you.

So, there's this pattern that follows through chapter 5. He does this six times through the end of the chapter. And what he is doing is correcting the common misinterpretations of the law in his day.

[12:42] He is correcting the mere pharisaical outward appearance understanding of these laws. And he is showing his listeners then and us now how it is that we are to embody the law as citizens of his kingdom.

And he does this in this pattern. You have heard it was said, but I say to you. He does this six times over. So, in Jesus' teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage, which this is just a snapshot of. So, if you have heard me read the text and you've gone, that seems incredibly clear. Just hang on. This is just one of the teachings on it. And it gains some complexity, I believe.

What he's doing is he's correcting something. He's bringing a clear understanding to something. He begins in verse 31. It was also said, whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.

And Jesus here is referring to an interpretation of Deuteronomy 24, verses 1-4.

[14:02] The interpretation of Deuteronomy 24, verses 1-4. And I want you to hear me. I'm going to read it. And you can get there quickly if you want to. But listen quickly. It's a case law issue, Deuteronomy 24, which says, when a man takes a wife and marries her, if she then 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 of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, and the latter man hates 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 man dies who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled.

For that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin upon the land that your Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance. Okay? And so, the Pharisees of the day had interpreted this commandment, right?

Which is a very specific commandment. It's a very specific issue that has taken place, and you'll see in some coming months how it applies to the total argument.

But what we have to recognize at first is what they thought. What was it that they had done with these four verses? The reigning opinion in the matter was given by a rabbi named Hillel.

He was the liberal rabbi of the day. He had in fact died 20 years before this, but all the same, it was his view that prevailed.

[15:45] Rabbi Hillel promoted divorce for any reason at all. He had said, if your wife burns your dinner, you can divorce her. He's also quoted

saying, for any reason, unload that woman.

So, his interpretation was, merely as long as a certificate is given, you can divorce for any reason whatsoever, which is a pretty fast and loose interpretation of Deuteronomy 24, verses 1 through 4. I think that you will agree. Later in Matthew, chapter 19, verses 3 through 8, we see a similar response by Jesus, but this time he's being tested.

Verse 3 says, And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, Who are you going to side with, Jesus, is what they were asking. They said, is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause, as Hillel had said.

Jesus answered, this is verse 4, Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother, and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.

[17:06] So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate. They said to him, Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?

And he said to them, Because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives. But from the beginning, it was not so.

So something that we can be sure of in this text is that the reigning opinion of the day was that you could divorce your wife or your husband for any reason whatsoever, just as long as you did it through the legal channels.

It was no big deal. And Jesus' response, we can see in Matthew 19, very clearly is, This is not what God intended for our marriages.

God designed our marriages to be more permanent than that. They are in fact weighty promises that we make to one another when we are married.

[18:15] He is correcting this huge misconception. And we live in a day much like that. Misconceptions needing to be corrected.

So Jesus goes on to say, and we get into some of the more challenging and more troubling words, I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife except on the grounds of sexual immorality makes her commit adultery.

And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. And it does not matter which view you hold. All of these views make a case that you have to understand the culture of the day and the nature of divorce laws.

And they make opposing arguments using the very same premises, which seems like a real moving target. It is hard to plant your flag on this one, I would contend.

Again, you might be more brilliant than I am and be able to pull it off. But I've heard the same arguments made to support a different view, which I think that if you have a premise, it should lead to a conclusion.

[19:19] So it can be quite frustrating altogether. So there are a broad spectrum of views concerning divorce and remarriage.

And clearly some of them are outside of orthodoxy, right? Would be like the teaching of Hillel in our day, a no-fault divorce teaching that you can divorce for any reason, you can remarry for any reason, it does not matter.

Certainly as a church, we are not on that end of the spectrum concerning the issue. And I would suggest that there are two widely accepted conservative views, which I mentioned to you previously, and I'll give you some more details about here in a moment.

Previously, I called them the more permissive view and the more restrictive view. And I have found it extremely problematic to give these views names.

No matter what I seem to do, one of them gets framed in the positive and one in the negative. It's a very difficult thing to do. Permissive and restrictive, for example.

[20:34] You can bring whatever thoughts you have to those words. Permissive in your mind could be a negative. Restrictive in your mind could be a negative. As of late, as our church, in various formats, have been having lots of conversation about this, I've been using the titles broader view and narrower view.

I recognize, once again, this is problematic. Some of you, when you hear the word broad, may think of the way that leads to destruction. That's not what I mean by it.

Some of you, when you hear narrow, may think of narrow-mindedness. And this is not what I mean either by this. So, I'm going to use those terms, but I recognize that they're problematic terms all the same.

So, a few details about each of these views to prime your minds, to get you thinking about these issues.

Number one, the broader view. The broader view would say that divorce is permitted under certain circumstances, although there's some fracturing here about the particulars of those circumstances.

[21:53] Most agree that when a spouse commits adultery, is sexually unfaithful in a physical sense, that divorce is permissible.

Or, when a spouse, an unbelieving spouse, deserts the relationship, abandons the relationship, this is 1 Corinthians chapter 7, that it is permissible, and maybe even, some would say, commanded that you grant a divorce to that person.

Some contend that when a spouse is dangerously abusive, has given up on the covenant promises that accompany a marriage, that that falls in that abandonment clause and layers and layers and layers.

Most who hold this view would say that remarriage is permitted to the non-offending spouse when the divorce has occurred for those aforementioned reasons.

Some would say it's permitted with some parameters to any party, and it's complex. And it's complex. That's where I'm at right now.

[23:06] Second, the narrower view, it's a bit simpler. It's an attractive thing about it. I would say that divorce is only permitted when a believer is married to an unbelieving spouse who demands a divorce.

Some who hold this view don't agree with that, but most do. Most would say that 1 Corinthians 7 text applies here. If you have an unbelieving spouse who will not live peaceably with you, abandons you, demands divorce for the sake of peace, it should be granted.

That's 1 Corinthians 7, 10 through 12, I believe. They also say in this narrower view that remarriage is not permitted under any circumstance unless it's a reconciliation to that spouse provided that the spouse is still alive.

So, as I've said, it's not a clear-cut, simple issue. It's been widely debated. It would seem throughout the history of the church, at least since the Reformation, that broader view is held by modern pastors and scholars like John MacArthur and Andreas Kostenberger as a professor at Southeastern, now at Midwestern, I just found out.

This is the most widely held evangelical view, again, with some variances within it. It's historically held by Protestants like John Murray who wrote a rather fine work on it.

[24:36] The Westminster Confession of 1647 reads, In case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce and after the divorce to marry another as if the offending party were dead.

So there's some veracity of this view held both historically and presently. The narrow view is held by modern pastors and scholars who we love like Votie Bauckham and John Piper.

Historically, the Baptists of England, when they adopted the Westminster Confession, which then became known as the Second London Baptist Confession, which we are very fond of, they omitted the previously read paragraph from the Westminster Confession.

They didn't say anything. They just took it out. So I don't know exactly what they thought on the matter. My guess would be that they weren't sure, but that there were some, at least amongst them, that would have debated for that narrower view and wanted that statement removed, and so it was done.

Either way, from our text today, we should see that Jesus is adding great weight to marriage.

[25:59] In fact, in our conversations about this, I've wanted to express, and I think that at least most who have joined me in this have done so, that we pick up a very, very heavy weight.

Marriage, when it was designed to picture something, it's important and it matters and it accomplishes things in our lives, and we set that heavy weight on the one side of the scale in this conversation, and then we begin to talk about the possibilities for divorce and remarriage, and we drop very little light, light weights onto the other side of that scale, right?

The weight of this one crashes, right? This thing matters on this side, and then we go dink, dink, dink over here. Like, we can be clear about this, right?

There are some non-negotiable things, right? Some things that we cannot and should not, and I don't believe any of us would want to waver on as we consider this issue, and so I want to talk about those non-negotiables.

I have five of them for you. If you were here four years ago, these are a repetition of what we did last time we talked about this matter.

[27:12] So five non-negotiables. Number one, God presided over the first marriage and every subsequent marriage, right?

God created the institution of marriage before He created any other institution. It's the only pre-fall institution that God created, and He made it very good.

We see this in Genesis chapter 2, and we saw from our text in Matthew chapter 19, Jesus quotes from Genesis 2, 24, and He goes on to say, what therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.

Marriage is a good thing, and it was created for our good and for the glory of God. So the second, non-negotiable, is that God created marriage to give us a shadow of the blessed relationship between Christ and the church.

We read about this in Ephesians chapter 5, verses 22 through 33, that Paul works out for us this wonderful, profound mystery that although imperfectly, our marriages are meant to display this relationship.

[28:40] The loving, sacrificial headship of Jesus Christ and the humble submission of the church is meant to be working out in our marriages.

Our marriages are meant to be holy and set apart in this way for the glory of God. They're meant to show something that is permanent.

Jesus Christ will never fail the church and husbands. We fail our wives so imperfectly we display this but all the same it's meant to display this.

And for these reasons, the third non-negotiable is that divorce is never ideal.

Even those who hold that narrower view must admit that it happens at times. But it is never ideal. Malachi chapter 2 and verse 16.

[29:45] The ESV says this, for the man who does not love his wife but divorces her says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence says the Lord of hosts.

So guard yourselves in your spirit and do not be faithless. Now there's some interpretive challenges in Malachi chapter 2 and verse 16 and if you have an ESV you'll see a footnote concerning this particular interpretive challenge.

The NASB and many other, I think it's actually most other translations render Malachi 2.16 this way. Well I'll just read you the beginning. At the beginning of Malachi 2.16 they translate for I hate divorce says the Lord, the God of Israel.

God does not desire or intend for any of our marriages to end in divorce. This is why we say permanence vows whatever view we may hold.

If you've ever heard me officiate a wedding we work together in that time in front of people who love us to make huge promises to one another and all of those promises are until death do we part promises.

[31:04] Never ever want we never ever desire that a marriage would end in divorce. Fourth non-negotiable the marriage covenant is temporal that is death breaks the covenant and gives a remaining spouse the ability to remarry.

this is a non-negotiable Romans chapter 7 verse 2 and 3 Paul writes for a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage accordingly she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive but if her husband dies she is free from that law and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

we can recall again the Pharisees coming to test Jesus and asking about multiple marriages and whose wife who will have a husband and he says do you not understand this is a temporal thing marriage is a momentary thing it's not an eternal thing it's meant for the life of covenant together if a

spouse were to pass remarriage as possible and then fifth the fifth non-negotiable is that divorce and or remarriage after divorce is not an unpardonable sin it's not an unpardonable sin and I am extremely grieved by how many churches seem to make members of their church second class Christians because of some past sin in their life the only unpardonable sin is the sin of unbelief it's denying the conviction of the spirit in your life all others are covered plentifully by the blood of Jesus Christ both views either way hold that if someone is wrongly divorced and or wrongly remarried remarried that these are acts of sin but not perpetually not perpetual sin that they should be confessed from the past and certainly avoided in the future but they are not unforgivable! and these things are non-negotiable for me I believe they would be for you I believe the cases are clearly made for these things and so hear the weightiness of what we believe is of good value about marriage I want us to settle this again many churches don't and my assumption is that the churches that don't have a formal view on this merely bow to the pastor's personal view on the matter he takes care of all of the counseling he's the one that has to be making decisions on whether or not he'll officiate a wedding etc and so they just simply appeal to him but I believe that we need to as a church form a view on this in the coming months because we believe in a congregational church polity that is to say we believe the bible teaches that in matters of doctrine and discipline it is the congregation that holds the power to decide these things certainly given some leadership from the elders of the church but that you ultimately need to be part of the process of deciding what the bible teaches what view we ought to hold as a church on this matter and of course many others that means that this is a responsibility that you have to take up you have to get involved in looking at the texts and then further looking at the cases made for the text you have to engage your mind in prayerfully considering where we ought to land on this

[35:31] I'm going to produce I promise I'm not looking forward to it I don't esteem myself a very good writer but I'm going to produce a paper that you'll need to carefully consider I'm going to say I'm proposing Doug's going to join me in that this is what we propose our church adopts together and then we're going to have a conversation about it and I don't really want to have a conversation with a bunch of people with opinions carefully!

dialogue about the matter but you have to get engaged you have to get involved and we have to decide together I don't have the power to plant my flag and say this will be our flag we need to do this together secondly we need to do this together because these matters have bearing on how we function together as a faith family what we will permit or not permit so what we will call sin and what we will not call sin there's a lot of implication to deciding this who would be expected to repent of something or not repent of something or if they're unwilling to repent who we would allow in church membership or put out of church membership if they don't see eye to eye with us on the matter right and that process of permitting members and seeing members out communication and the process of discipline is a church responsibility it's not just mine all of the difficult things don't just land in my lap we bear much of what the church does as a church together so we need to decide it together third we must contend for the truth in this generation concerning marriage we need to carefully work through this together because we cannot let the culture at large define truth for us and we must serve as a

God fearing example to our community so you need to understand the case you need to be able to articulate in some measure the case for where we land as a church concerning marriage divorce and remarriage fourth I believe it's going to be good for us to go through this process together because it's going to be a test of our love for the truth it's going to press us as it has me I cannot I can't express to you in unthought out words how tied up in knots I've been over this issue I believe in the doctrine of the clarity of scripture and that's shaky I want it to be more clear on this matter oh the scribbles I have done on a white board downstairs I have approached this thing from all kinds of angles trying to blank slate and start over and blank slate and start over it will I think if taken up rightly help us to better love the scripture we have to decide things and these things have implications right we have to work out in the life of our church and I think it will press us together to greater love for the truth of the Bible and fifth this is going to be a test of our love for one another you did not commit right speaking to members to this church as a set of programs presentations certainly not a not a property a particular position on something but as a commitment to a people people who love the truth of God who are trying to walk together in the truth of God we

ought not hurl doctrine at one another carelessly and Paul writes in 1 Corinthians chapter 13 and verse 2 and if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge that's how I feel right now about this particular I feel like I have to at the moment and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but have not love I am nothing and Paul is not here minimizing!

[40:24] the truth but he's merely saying if we could understand everything that there ever was to ever understand and none of us do right so we have less than this to be clear but we have not love if we can't walk together in love and the truth then we're nothing and I would suggest that since we know so much less than all the prophetic powers and all the mysteries and all the knowledge and all the faith that we would be less than nothing if we can't do this in love so be expecting a further work from me on this matter up until late last night I had intended to do more just unsettled about some of it be in prayer for me and for our church begin having scripturally informed conversations with your closest relationships in our church and then have conversations with people you may not regularly speak with don't get into an echo chamber talk broadly where are you coming from on this ask that question of people you will be asked if you're a member to vote on a document in some coming months be an informed voter do not take your responsibility as a church member lightly in!

in the meantime and beyond let's fight for marriages let's fight for marriages many of you may not know this but it's one of my high goals as a pastor to never officiate a wedding that ends in divorce what a wonderful goal that would be if you have had me officiate your wedding you know that's why we do six long sessions of premarital counseling I want to see successful marriages in our church I don't want to have to apply I don't want to have to apply the teaching on divorce and remarriage wouldn't it be wonderful if we could just skate through and never have these issues arise although they have and I'm confident they will in the future because marriage is the first and most fundamental of human institutions may we be a church full of marriages that exist for the glory of our great God let's pray together