

“Till death do us part” Series
Sermon 6: “Parting before death”
June 14, 2015

Let me start with a question: Have you ever given a gift to someone that you hoped they would never open, a gift they would never use? I have. A few years ago I bought Julie a concealed carry pistol. When she took her test, she put 12 rounds into a circle about this big. It was worthy of a double take. She’s kind of scary. By the way, some of you guys are probably thinking that the reason I hope she never uses it is because I’m scared she’ll shoot at me. No. I just hope she is never, ever in a spot where she is fearful enough to pull it out. I can’t imagine shooting anyone. But ... I can imagine things even more terrible than shooting someone, which is why I gave her a gift I hope she never opens. So, have you ever given a gift to someone that you hope would never be opened?

This is the last message in this little series on a God-honoring marriage and it will be unlike any of the others. In fact, this message will be unlike most I preach. There are significant differences between preaching and teaching -- I won’t unpack the differences – but today I am going to do even more teaching and less preaching than I usually do. Because there is so much misunderstanding out there on something kind of connected to marriage, and it’s tearing people up.

Now, some of what I will say today will make some of you uncomfortable. It will probably contradict what you’ve heard before. In fact some of it contradicts what I have taught before. But my mind has changed; I hope it has been changed by God. You see, I take very seriously the warning in the book of James. Jesus’ brother says, “Not many of you should become teachers ... because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” (3.1) You see, I believe I will be held accountable for everything I teach ... which is scary. And even though some of what I will teach this morning may be ... controversial, I think I am supposed to teach straight what the Bible says. I will try to teach God’s truth, and I ask for his grace, and yours, when I mess up... Are you curious yet? Well, let’s dig in.

The Bible teaches that God's design, God's dream, God's desire for every marriage is "till death do us part." You buy that? It's all over the Bible. Do you remember the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden? Well, there's more to the story than you might know. Adam was given the job of naming all the animals. But it was getting boring, and there was no one to talk to, no one to impress. So God says, "Since you are lonely, I'll make a woman for you." Adam says, "Woman? What's a woman?" God says, "This woman will be the most intelligent, sensitive, caring and beautiful creature I have ever created. She will be so intelligent that she can figure out what you want before you want it. She will be so sensitive and caring that she will know your every mood and how to make you happy. Her beauty will rival that of the heavens and earth. She will unquestioningly care for your every need and desire. She will be the perfect companion for you." Adam gets excited and says, "Sounds amazing, but what will it cost?" God says, "She'll cost you an arm and a leg." So Adam ponders for a while, and then he asks, "Well, what can I get for a rib?"

For those of you haven't read Genesis yet, that's just a joke. But Genesis chapter 2 does give us a glimpse of what God meant for marriage. It says, "A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife." And that word is so strong: it's kind of like he is welded to his wife, he is superglued to his wife. The King James says he "cleaves" to his wife. "And the two are united into one," till death do us part.

That was God's ideal, his dream: one man, one woman, bonded together for the rest of their lives. They make each other better. It's not hard to understand. You old guys remember Rocky Balboa? Rocky was no rocket scientist and he got it. He says: "I got gaps; Adrienne's got gaps; but together we got no gaps." It's forming a team that is better than the sum of its parts. It may not be hard to understand, but it is hard to do. On Iwo Jima the mandate was clear: Take that hill! But doing it meant shedding blood, and sweat, and tears. Well, marriage can be like "taking the hill." But ... if you can make it to the top it's worth everything it costs.

Here's the deal: God wants your marriage to work. If you are in a lousy marriage right now, God wants you to work through it, to turn it around, and to build a good marriage. I know of lousy marriages that have turned around. I know husbands who didn't quit on their wives, and wives who didn't quit on their husbands. I know people have kept on because they made a promise: they made a promise their partner, and they made a promise to God. And sometimes – not always – but sometimes they will tell you that it was so worth it. And that's what God wants us to do. He wants us to fight for our marriages. He wants us to work through those for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health – till death do us part. That's what God wants for you; in fact, that's what you want for you, that's what your kids need from you. So before I move on, let me say it again: God intended your marriage to continue till death do you part.

But he also recognized that sometimes they don't. And that's what we're going to talk about today. What do you do when you don't make it "till death do you part."

I'm going to start here. This is a given. Here's the first big idea: God hates divorce. He hates divorce. Whenever divorce happens, something God-dishonoring has gone down. Divorce is always a failure to do love, a failure to do marriage, to do life God's way. Do you buy that? Listen to what God says. It's flat-out direct. He says, "I hate divorce!" says the Lord, the God of Israel. 'To divorce your wife is to overwhelm her with cruelty,' says the Lord of Heaven's Armies. 'So guard your heart; do not be unfaithful to your wife.'" (Malachi 2.16) Is that plain enough? God hates divorce.

So ... If God hates divorce ... Is divorce sin? Can God hate something that is not sin? Well actually he does, a lot. God hates disease – but disease isn't sin. Sometimes sin causes disease, but the disease itself isn't sin. God hates death – but death isn't sin. Sometimes sin causes death – but death itself isn't sin. Now divorce is always caused by sin. Divorce is always caused by a failure to love God's way, to live God's way. Divorce is always a "falling short" of

God's intent for your marriage. Right? But is divorce itself always sin?

This will blow your mind. Did you know that God considered himself a divorcee? At least, that's the language he uses. Here's what the prophet Jeremiah says, for God. God says, "I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries." (3.8) God says, "I threw her out; I gave her her walking papers; I divorced her, because she kept cheating on me."

So, let me ask the question again: If God calls himself a divorcee (figuratively), is divorce itself sin? I don't think so ... although I believe that divorce is always the result of someone's sin. There is no divorce without someone breaking their vows to love, and honor, and keep, and forsaking all others be faithful as long as the both of you live. Are you with me, so far? So God hates divorce, but it is not in itself sin, although it is always the result of sin.

Here's the next piece: Did you know that divorce was God's idea? Now maybe that's going too far. But at least, did you know that God makes provision for divorce in the Old Testament law and that Jesus reinforced that provision for divorce? Let me show you.

This is part of the Old Testament law, Deuteronomy 24.1: "If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house." That's in the law! That was a man's right! Now there are two things here you need to hang on to.

- One: Understand, God is not ordering divorce. God isn't mandating that a man divorce his wife if he finds something indecent about her. He is simply permitting the divorce as an option.
- Two: Deuteronomy never explains what it means by something indecent. And figuring that out is going to be huge in the time of Jesus.

Let's keep going. Verse 2: if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again." (2-4) So this divorced lady marries a second guy; and he dumps her too. It says, she can't go back to the first husband. In fact it says that would be detestable to God. Now listen to what it is saying. It is not forbidding remarriage. In fact, the only remarriage it forbids is going back to the first husband after she has married someone else.

Now here's what you'll hear sometimes. You'll hear people says that someone who divorces and marries another is living in sin. And you'll hear that what they need to do is to divorce their second partner and go back to the first. When that is exactly what is forbidden in the Old Testament!

Most of you know that I have a preaching partner. Randy and I study together, and we prepare our sermons together. It just worked out that he preached this sermon last week. Now they have 3 services: one on Saturday night, two on Sunday morning. He told me that in each service, all three, people walked out right at this spot. It's hard to call that a coincidence. But even though a lot of people think it would be purer to divorce the second and go back to the first, I don't think the Bible would support that. You don't sin to correct sin.

So ... here's where we are so far. God hates divorce; but sometimes God permits what he hates. And at least in the Old Testament, even though divorce is never mandated, it is permitted. And if you are divorced twice, there is no going back to spouse #1. Let's keep going.

There's some strange stuff in the book of Exodus, chapter 21: another part of the Old Testament law. Here's what's going on: Suppose a man has a female slave (they did that back then). And then suppose the man decides to give the slave girl to his son as a wife (they get married), then the father has to treat her like a daughter. Now, suppose the son marries another girl. They did that back then too –

it's called polygamy. Here's what it says – this is the part that applies to divorce in the Bible. It says, "If a man who has married a slave wife takes another wife for himself, he must not neglect the rights of the first wife to food, clothing, and sexual intimacy. (He's still got to feed her, cloth her, and love her.) If he fails in any of these three obligations, she may leave as a free woman without making any payment." (10-11)

Now there is a principle here that is pretty big. If a husband neglects his wife, she can divorce him. So at least in this case, in the Old Testament, if the husband doesn't give his wife enough food to eat, if he doesn't give her adequate clothes to wear, if he doesn't take care of her sexual needs, she can divorce him. In fact, to my knowledge, this is the only place in the Old Testament that gives a woman the right to divorce her husband. And apparently if he wouldn't give her the divorce, she could go to the elders of the city who would beat him until he did what was right. Pretty weird stuff, isn't it? I'll bet you didn't know that one was in there!

One more. This one isn't from a verse in the Old Testament; this one is from archaeology. In the Old Testament time divorce wasn't just about ending a marriage, it was also about freeing the divorcee for remarriage. That was big, because a woman without the freedom to remarry was in a world of hurt in that world. There weren't many moral ways for a woman to take care of herself in that world. She needed a husband. Well, archaeologists have discovered several certificates of divorce from the first century and earlier. They all ended with this line: "You are free to marry anyone you wish." It looks like a certificate of divorce gave them the right to remarry.

Now, some of you guys are probably a little uncomfortable with these verses. Some of you guys might be thinking, "I don't know if I agree with where this is going." And you are thinking, "That's all Old Testament stuff. We're not under the law any more. Jesus changed all that." ... You are right. We are not under the law any more; and Jesus changed a bunch of their rules. So we need to listen to Jesus

and see whether these Old Testament verses reflect God's heart, or whether Jesus changed things up.

There are 4 places in the gospels Jesus teaches on divorce (Matthew 5, 19, Mark 10, Luke 16). There are some minor variations, but they all are pretty much the same, so I want to unpack what Jesus said in the Gospel of Matthew for a few minutes.

One time, "Some Pharisees came to Jesus to test him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?'" (Mt 19.3) (any and every reason!) You see, the rabbis in the world of Jesus were still fighting over what was a justifiable divorce before God. They were still fighting over that verse we looked at just a couple minutes ago: "If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her..." (Dt 24.1) Well, what does "something indecent" mean?

Well one group of rabbis figured that a man could divorce his wife for just about any cause. If it is indecent to you, that's enough.

- If she's too loud or whiny, dump her.
- If she doesn't take care of herself adequately – maybe she goes out with her hair uncovered, or maybe she turned around on the street to fast and her skirt kind of billowed up -- dump her.
- Maybe she simply can't cook, and she keeps burning your bacon (that's humor – Jews back then wouldn't be eating bacon), anyway, dump her.
- Or maybe the older she gets, the worse she looks, and the younger girls keep getting hotter -- dump her.

But there was a second group of rabbis that were more narrow. "Something indecent," they figured, meant adultery. The only legitimate cause for divorce was that your wife was cheating on you somehow. So these Pharisees ask Jesus, "Are you on the 'any cause' side, or are you on the 'adultery' side?"

And here's what Jesus told them. He said, "You morons! You twits!" That's actually not in there, but I'm pretty sure he said it. He says,

“Haven’t you read,” (By the way, that’s quite an insult to a Pharisee; 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.” (Mt 19.4-6) He says, He says, “You keep looking for an excuse to tear apart what God meant for you to hold together. Quit looking for loopholes!”

You see, God’s plan, God’s ideal, God’s dream was that these two become one till death do they part. God’s dream for you is that there never will be a list of acceptable reasons to end your marriage. You are asking the wrong question. You are asking, “Do I have cause to get out of this marriage?” God’s question is this: “Is there any way you can do this marriage God’s way?”

Well that didn’t stop them. The Pharisees ask him, “‘Why then,’ they asked, ‘did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?’” (Mt 19.7) If God cares so much about keeping a marriage together, why does he give us a way out?

And Jesus says, (this is huge) “Because sometimes a person gives a gift he hopes will never be opened.” He says, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.” (Mt 19.8) If you loved each other God’s way, if you did marriage God’s way – there would be no divorce. But ... God knows that sometimes you just won’t love each other God’s way. And God knows that sometimes – sometimes – it is so broken, that you simply cannot, or will not, put it back together in a God-honoring way.

- Some have been so hurt. You have been hurt so badly; cut so deeply you are scarred.
- Some of you have been hurt so many times your heart has grown callouses.
- And some of you have done the hurting...because you don’t care. You have cheated; you have lusted; you have neglected,

you have abandoned, you have abused — because your heart is hard.

- You are stubborn. And worst of all, you don't believe God can change things; you don't believe God can fix things.

So God, in his grace, gave us a gift he hoped we would never open. God hates divorce; but there are some things he hates worse.

- So Jesus goes on to talk about infidelity. Just because your partner has been unfaithful does not mean you have to divorce. There are strong marriages in this room that have made it through infidelity. But God says, sometimes you can't, or you won't put it back together in a God-honoring way. So his gift is there.
- The apostle Paul talks about a partner who simply refuses to live life God's way. Sometimes you can't stop them from walking away, no matter who it hurts. Well, God's gift is there.
- There are times we have encountered abuse, or neglect, and the abuser simply refuses to treat their partner with the respect and the love God requires. And God's gift is there.

Guys, divorce is God's response to what we call a moral dilemma. There are times in this broken world when no matter what choice you make, it's the wrong one. Sin gets in and messes things up so badly, you end up with no good options left. A 15 year old girl decides to have sex. She gets pregnant; now all her options are bad. The good options have all already been removed by her previous poor choices. Or a marriage fills up with hurtful choices, nasty words, painful actions. Some marriages get to the point where there are no good options left. Divorce is a bad option that comes as a result of previous bad actions. In a perfect world divorce is never on the table. It's only here because people choose to live in ways that do not honor God.

So let me ask you again: Have you ever given a gift that you hope would never be opened? Have you ever given a gift hoping it would never be used? I have.

- I sent both my kids to study Karate. Not because I want them to fight, but because I want them to be able to defend themselves.

- There are parents in this room who have bought mace for their daughters. You hope she never has to use it. But you want her to have it ... just in case.
- And I have said — to some of you, “If you ever need me—day or night—just call. I’ll be there.” When I say those words I meant it; but I hope I never get the call.

God gave us a gift he never wants us to open. It is a provision for a marriage broken beyond repair. When Randy preached this sermon last week, one of his families went home and had this conversation. Their marriage is terribly fragile. She said, “What did you get from the sermon?” He said, “It reminded me that I have taken a vow before God, I made a promise, and I need to keep it. What did you get from the sermon.” She said, “I can get out of this marriage, and still have God’s grace.”

Listen guys, God hates divorce. Sometimes it is not sin, and it is never the unpardonable sin. But to open the gift is to acknowledge a hard heart. It is to say, “I’ve given up hope that God can fix this.” And most give up way too soon. Most get tired and get out. Some of you are considering it right now. Please don’t. Honor the vow. Keep your promise.

Is divorce sin? No. It means there’s been sin. Is remarriage a sin? Not usually. The purpose of a divorce is to free a person so they can remarry. So those of you who are remarried, accept God’s grace and start building a God-honoring marriage. That’s the thing about life with God. He gives us these restarts. That’s grace!

Prayer: Give us honesty; give us courage; give us mercy