

The Commands of Christ

Sermon # 27

"Let No Man Separate"

Matthew 19:1-12 (v. 6)

In our last examination of the commands of Christ we looked in Matthew 18:15-20 which deals how we should deal with a brother or sister who has fallen. We find the next command in verse six of chapter nineteen in a discussion of Marriage.

"The majority of marriages today end in divorce. If we have not experienced it personally, we know personally someone who has. It's happening everywhere. It seems that when things get rough, people want out. And they are getting out in increasing numbers.

What do we say about all of this? What does the church have to say? Well, often the church simply condemns divorce. That's easy enough. The tragedy is many condemn both divorce and those who are divorced - both the sin and the sinner. It's far neater that way. By doing that, we can not only continue to pontificate against divorce from our lofty platform, but we also will not have to get our hands dirty by grappling with real people who have been divorced.

We must be careful when we listen to what the church says. Often, churches are guilty of twisting the Scriptures to accommodate their own particular bias. Generally, they either raise the standard or lower it. On one hand, well-meaning people raise the standard in their desire to stop divorce. So they say there should be no divorce for anybody for any reason, and absolutely no remarriage for anyone at any time, period. That sounds nice and neat, doesn't it? The only problem with it is that while it may be well-intentioned, it is biblically incorrect. On the other hand, there are those well-intentioned people who look at the problem of divorce and say we must not forget that people are involved, and we need to love them, care for them, minister to them, and accept them. What happens here is that the standard is lowered to accommodate everybody. While these churches rightly emphasize forgiveness, they end up lowering the standard to the same as the world's. And that is biblically wrong.

Perhaps we should not be asking what the church says, but rather what the Bible - God's Word says. Does God have a word for the tragedy of divorce? The answer is, yes, He does. And it is a redemptive word for those who have been scarred by divorce; and also a strong word of encouragement for those seeking to build strong Christian marriages. [J. David Hoke. "For Better or Worse" (www.orizonsnet.org/sermons/mark32.html)]

"Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings, that He departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. (2) And great multitudes followed Him, and He

healed them there. (3) The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?"

Just as today - divorce was a hot topic. Just as today there were two competing schools of thought.

(4) And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning "made them male and female, (5) and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? (6) So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no man separate. " The think the command found here in verse six (let no man separate), is interesting.

(7) They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" (8) He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

The religious leaders came to Jesus and tested Him by asking, "What do you think about divorce?" He responded to them by saying, "What do you think about marriage?" And then He revealed to them what God thinks about marriage. God sees marriage as two people becoming one, committed to one another, in a covenant relationship which lasts a lifetime.

But we still have the question: What about divorce? Does the Scripture have anything to say about that? Divorce is real. Divorce happens. Are there any guidelines? Is there any sure word from God? Is the original intention of God all there is in the Bible by which we judge marriage, divorce and remarriage? How do we deal with people who get divorced? Are there any biblical grounds for divorce? All these are questions which need answers. And while Jesus expresses the divine intention for marriage, He does not stop there. He goes on to deal with the issue of divorce.

The divine assessment of Divorce is stated in an unequivocal manner in Malachi 2:16, *"For the LORD God of Israel says That He hates divorce... and the next passage tells us why, "For it covers one's garment with violence. " God hates divorce! It does not say, "God hates Divorced People." It says that he hates Divorce because of the violence that it does. It does violence to the Family, especially to the Children. He hates how it does violence to testimony of Christians.*

(9) And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery. " (10) His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry."

In verse nine Jesus gives a ground for divorce. This ground is also found in Matthew 5:32. There is no doubt that this is the authentic teaching of Jesus because none of the ancient manuscripts of Matthew omit this clause. Adultery in the Old Testament was punishable by death initially. No one would have disputed that marital unfaithfulness was a just ground for divorce.

So we see here what is some times referred to as the "exception clause." One of the permitted reasons for divorce is marital unfaithfulness. Just as under the original law, adultery - punished by death would break the marital bond and release the partner, so marital unfaithfulness by adultery could do the same. But notice here that Jesus never commanded divorce for unfaithfulness. but only permitted it. What Jesus is saying is that if a man divorces his wife for anything less than adultery, he then causes her to commit adultery and commits adultery himself.

Is there anything else the Scripture says on this subject? Yes there is. In 1 Corinthians 7 we find another important passage dealing with divorce and remarriage. Let's look at 1 Corinthians 7:8-15. Remember that Paul is writing to Christians. The first category he addresses are single people: "8But I say to *the unmarried and to the widows. It is good for them if they remain even as I am*" -What he's saying here is that if you are single and can remain single, do so. But if you have a need to marry, then that is OK too. Next, he addresses two Christians married to one another: "Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband (11) But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife. (12) But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. (13) And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. (14) For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. (15) But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart, a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace." (vv. 10-11)

Here we have two Christians married to one another. Paul simply says, "Stay together." There is no reason to leave. If there is no unfaithfulness. stay together. It is interesting that he does make a provision for a separation. And in fact, the Bible does not anywhere teach that the wife has an obligation to stay in a home with an abusive man who threatens her physical welfare or the welfare of her children. But if she leaves under those circumstances, she is either to be reconciled unto her husband, or to remain unmarried. There is no biblical reason why two Christians should divorce.

Finally, Paul addresses a mixed marriage - a Christian who is married to an unbeliever. These mixed marriages could happen in a couple of ways. Two unbelievers could be married, and then later one becomes a Christian. That, I believe is the most common way a mixed marriage happens. The second way is that a believer could marry an unbeliever in direct contradiction to the Scriptures. The Bible teaches us that we are not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. That is the command of God. It is not something put there to make us more miserable. In fact, it is something put there for our own good. God is trying to save us the misery of being locked into a marriage with someone who is fundamentally different from us, whose values are different, whose outlook on life is different, whose goals are different. Let me encourage you and plead with you -- do not be foolish enough to marry an unbeliever. While it is possible for God to do something to save that person, there is no guarantee that it will happen. You may be condemned to a life of misery.

Here Paul addresses mixed marriages and says, "But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband and he consents to live with her, let her not send him).

The teaching here is quite simple: Paul is well familiar with the teaching of Jesus and he, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, expands the exception from marital unfaithfulness to include desertion by an unbelieving partner. He says, "If you *are a believer married to an unbeliever, stay with them. God may save them.*" He holds out hope for that to happen. In verse 16 he says, "For how do you know, oh wife, whether you will save your husband; or how do you know, oh husband, whether you will save your wife?" In other words, he's saying, "God may do something. Stay with them as long as they desire to stay with you." But then verse 15 gives us the only other biblical grounds for divorce. When an unbelieving partner leaves a believer, the believer is to let that partner leave. The Scriptures tell us that "the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases." Bondage to what? Obviously, bondage to the law of marriage. Paul speaks of being "bound by the law of her husband" in Romans. Here he speaks of being released from that bondage by the desertion of an unbelieving partner. What the Scripture is teaching here is that Christians should stay with non-Christians as long as the non-Christian is willing. But if the non-Christian leaves the Christian and divorces him or her, then the Christian is released from that marriage biblically, and is free to remarry.

To sum up, there are only three things that release a marriage partner from a marriage: Number 1 - the death of one marriage partner; number 2 sexual unfaithfulness by a marriage partner; and number 3 - the desertion and divorce by an unbelieving marriage partner. That is the plain teaching of Scripture.

But while those are the biblical grounds for a divorce, what about those who have divorced outside those grounds? To those, we have to say that what they have done is to sin against God and against their partner. If there is the possibility, they need to go and be reconciled to the one they divorced. If one of them has remarried, then they must simply cast themselves on the mercy of God in repentance and ask for forgiveness. They must call it what it is - sin. There was no reason for it, and there is no excuse. But at the same time, let me hasten to add that the sin of divorce is no different than any other sin. It is not the "unpardonable" sin. And to make it otherwise is to sin an even greater sin, the sin of self-righteous spiritual pride. The sinner who casts himself upon Jesus in sincere repentance will find forgiveness. And we must forgive those whom God forgives. It is sad, but in some churches, you could be forgiven of murder, but not divorce. I want you to know that God can heal and restore divorced persons and can use them in His Kingdom, not as second-class citizens, but in the same way he uses all saved sinners. Nothing is closed to you.