February 28, 2016

“Needed Words on Divorce”

Matthew 5:31-32

**FCF**: Reality of divorce, the anguish and aftermath

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Jesus came to fulfill the Law.

(magnet) We need to hear what He says on this – including with divorce.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Here’s a cheery fact. “*Every marriage begins with smiles. And ends with tears*.” Why? Because death or divorce awaits every marriage. Death is a certainty for us all. And divorce is increasingly a strong possibility as well. We have but to consider the numerical statistics or the personal stories. Which is why, for those of us here this morning, even if we haven’t personally gone through a divorce, we have all been affected by it – simply because it’s so prevalent.

Divorce and all the pain surrounding it is no less a hot topic in the 21st century than it was in the 1st century. So let us pay heed to Jesus’ words here, remembering He is wise and good.

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Matthew 5:17-20, 31-32

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Let’s start with a reminder of who is speaking. Jesus is the son of David, the son of Abraham, the son of Mary, and the Son of God. He is the King of kings, come to usher in His kingdom, reclaiming and redeeming that which is rightfully His – all creation and His people.

And what has the King proclaimed? In the Sermon on the Mount, He shows us not how to become a citizen of His kingdom but how to be one – what life looks like in His kingdom, under His rule, even as we wait for it to come in full. That’s the Beatitudes, vv.2-11. Then, in vv.12-16, Jesus shows that, as we live this way, we will have an effect upon this world as salt and light. Then, in vv.17-20, He makes clear that the Old Testament Law is not in any way separated from the kingdom but connected to it. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law – the answer to every prophecy, the end of all the sacrifices, the reality behind all the key figures and events in Israel’s history, with His teaching bringing out the full meaning and intent of the commands.

From there, we have a series of six antitheses, six contrasts made between what the people had been told about the Law and its true meaning. Anger is equated with murder. Lust is equated with adultery. And flowing from that, as we see in our text today, divorce is equated with adultery as well. Again, Jesus came to fulfill the Law. We need to hear what He says on this – including with divorce. Now, please understand that this is not the sum total on this topic. This is something of a tightly compressed, heavily footnoted abbreviation. But, again, Jesus came to fulfill the Law. And so we need to hear what He says on this – including with divorce.

To get at this, we need to look at three things. First, the command itself. Second, the correction Jesus gives regarding the command. And, third, the needed cautions to consider.

1. **THE COMMAND**

So, first, the command. What is Jesus speaking to here? (READ Matthew 5:31)

1. *What Was Said*

As with the other contrasts, we need to make clear what was said and what was read.

1. Background

Here’s the background (READ Deuteronomy 24:1-4). This series of conditional clauses was case law – not encouraging divorce but restricting and regulating it. That’s important to see.

1. Significance

And it’s significant because it did two things. First, to uphold God’s intent and vision for marriage. Second, to protect the woman, to keep her from being treated as an object by the man.

1. *How It Was Read*

That’s what was said. But, by Jesus’ time, how was it being read?

1. Preoccupied minds

The religious authorities were preoccupied with the grounds for divorce. “*What’s the line? How far can we go?*” And so they were fixated on this certificate, seeing only the command.

1. Sides of the debate

And there was a debate at the time over what “some indecency” actually meant. Rabbi Shammai was fairly strict. Rabbi Hillel, however, was looser. His side said a man could divorce his wife for such crimes as ruining his breakfast. And this ‘easy divorce view” was the dominant one.

So there you have the command – the gulf between what was said and what was read.

1. **THE CORRECTION**

Which takes us to the correction (READ Matthew 5:31-32). What is Jesus saying here?

1. *Clarifications*

First, we need some clarifications, a clearing away of some obstacles to understanding.

1. The grounds allowed

The sole ground for divorce Jesus mentions here is “sexual immorality”. The Greek is *porneia* – all such intimacy outside of marriage. Which would include a host of things. Is that the only allowable grounds? For time’s sake, let me just say that the full biblical teaching speaks also of desertion. All of which points to a “radical breach of marital trough” which, yes, would include cases of abuse. Now such decisions shouldn’t be made alone but with the help of godly counsel.

1. The sin of adultery

But obviously, Jesus is honing in here on *porneia*. Which brings up the question of adultery. How is the divorced woman committing adultery? The assumption is that she will remarry. And so the second marriage then begins with adultery since the first marriage hadn’t really ended.

1. *Intensifications*

We see this come up again later in Matthew’s Gospel (READ Matthew 19:3-9).

1. Preoccupation revisited

Let me revisit those preoccupations. The Pharisees saw this certificate as a command. Jesus said, “*No, that was not a command but a concession to your sinful hearts*.” The Pharisees were taking divorce lightly. Jesus said, “*I’m calling you back to God’s original intent at creation*.”

1. Marriage and divorce

A husband and wife are to leave, cleave, become one flesh. Jesus was saying to the Pharisees, “*You think you’re being noble in all this. I’m telling you that you’re actually in grave sin*.”

Jesus is calling for a deeper hatred of divorce because of a higher view of marriage.

*Illustration:*

A scene in the film *Family Man* is worth mentioning. Jack Campbell is trying to revive his career but it means moving his family. This is how his wife, Kate responds (READ quote):

Maybe I was being naïve, but I believed we would grow old together in this house. That we’d spend holidays here and have our grandchildren come visit us here. I had this image of us all grey and wrinkly and me working in the garden and you repainting the deck. Things change. If you need this, Jack, if you really need this – I’ll take these kids from the life they love, and I’ll take myself from the only home we’ve ever known together, and I’ll move wherever you need to go. I’ll do that because I love you. And that’s more important to me than our address. I choose us.

*Application:*

Why do I bring this up? Because those who are married need to be ordering everything under that which serves marital oneness. Letting it take priority over all other relationships. Guarding against all encroachments. Investing the best of our energies to enhance and enrich it.

That’s what Jesus is calling for. But let me add this. Jesus is not saying that those who initiated and pursued an unbiblical divorce cannot then be forgiven. Nor is He saying that those who are in a subsequent marriage cannot be happy and fulfilled. Let us be clear on those points.

But we must still reckon with what is being set forth here. And who is saying it. Jesus came to fulfill the Law. We need to hear what He says on this – including with divorce.

1. **THE CAUTIONS**

Thinking about the clarifications, there are legitimate grounds for divorce. But that takes us to some cautions. For there are illegitimate grounds for divorce as well. And these are borne out of some common myths. This is culled from some writings by R. C. Sproul and Ken Sande.

1. *The Love Has Gone Out*
2. Stated

Myth 1 – When the love has gone out of the marriage, it’s better to get a divorce.

1. Refuted

Well, this assumes we have the ability to assess that the love has gone. And that it can’t return. Besides, the foundation of marriage is not to be our fleeting feelings but a steadfast commitment.

1. *It’s Better for the Children*
2. Stated

Myth 2 – It’s better for the children to go through a divorce than to live with parents who fight.

1. Refuted

There are severe cases where this can be true. But this is usually a rationalization that takes little consideration for the impact divorce has on children and little time to consider a false dilemma. It’s not just “stay in and hurt the children” versus “get out”. What if the marriage was to change?

1. *God Led Me to It*
2. Stated

Myth 3 – I know this is against biblical teaching but God led me to this. And I’m at peace.

1. Refuted

This has God speaking with a forked tongue. Inner peace is no sure guide of right choices. Ask yourself, “*Was Jesus at peace in the Garden of Gethsemane?*” No, even as He was doing just what His Father wanted Him to do, He was trembling with trouble. Inner peace is no sure guide.

1. *A Loving God Would Not Want Me to Suffer*
2. Stated

Myth 4 – Surely a loving God would not want someone to stay in such an unhappy situation.

1. Refuted

Well what is God’s purpose in the life of the Christian? Is it really only about our happiness? We need to ask ourselves, “*If we could go back in time and counsel the early Christians as they were about to be given over to the lions, would we say, ‘Surely a loving God wouldn’t allow this’?*” The fact is that there are times that God calls us to do what is contrary to our desires.

1. *But God Is Forgiving*
2. Stated

Myth 5 – I know it’s wrong but God is forgiving. He’ll understand and love me still.

1. Refuted

Is this not to presume and abuse His love and forgiveness? One wonders if there is any reality to the relationship. Imagine taking such an approach with a friend. What would they rightly think?

*Application:*

Again, back to what I said earlier. These are all forgivable sins, readily cleansed by the blood of Jesus. But they are myths, tall tales, lies that require the blood of Jesus upon them. Jesus came to fulfill the Law. We need to hear what He says on this – including with divorce.

**CONCLUSION:**

Fundamentally, this text is about fidelity to marriage. Which takes us to two huge things for us to consider. First, the state of things today. Studies show that, in the West, Christianity is increasingly seen not just as irrelevant to society but bad for society. There is concern and fear over extremism. And guilt by association. Anyone devoted to a cause, creed, or faith is suspect.

Which brings me to the opportunity before us. As in the 1st century, Christians have the opportunity to demonstrate something radical and other-worldly to a world dying to see it. And given the great confusion in our times over marriage, that opportunity is now all the greater.

Let me give you an example, Robertson McQuilkin (READ Chappell, pp.60-61):

Robertson McQuilkin, a leader not only of his home but of the evangelical world, was, until 1990, president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary. He resigned from the presidency because his wife, Muriel, afflicted with Alzheimer’s disease, needed his care.

During his last two years as president, McQuilkin wrote that it was increasingly difficult to keep Muriel at home. When she was with him, she was content but without him, she became distressed and panic-stricken. Though the walk from their home to the school was a mile round-trip, she often tried to follow him to the office. Seeking him over and over, she sometimes made the trip ten times a day. When he took her shoes off at night, McQuilkin found her feet bloodied from all the walking. Washing her feet prepared him for what most saw as an even more Christ-like act, sacrificing his position to care for her.

Is this extreme? Yes, in the best possible sense. It is the fruit of devotion to Christ. It is the transformative effect of the gospel upon a marriage. His faithfulness and patience with us taking root and taking hold, His mercy and forgiveness flowing into us and then through us. Our identity and security settled and so then freeing us to gladly and sacrificially serve one another.

Stories such as Robertson McQuilkin’s devotion to his bride get the world’s attention. You see, the issue is not “*Are you extreme?*” For everyone, when it comes down to it, is extreme, devoted to a set of fundamentals. The question is, “*Where do your fundamentals take you?*” Fidelity in marriage among Christians is a powerful apologetic, a compelling defense of the Christian gospel. And so, with that in mind, let me come back to what I said earlier. Jesus came to fulfill the Law. We need to hear what He says on this – including with divorce.

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