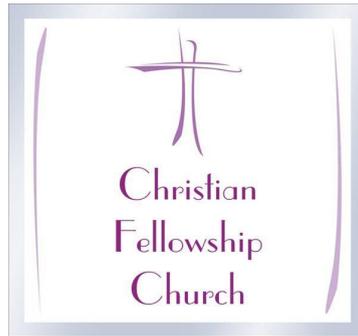


Sunday 13th January 2021



Ministry of the Word
Sunday 13th January 2021
by Vincent Gannon

Scripture: Matthew 5: 31 and 32

Subject: Part 28 – The King’s Law: Divorce

“Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32 But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.

Divorce is an enormous subject, which we will not be able to cover every aspect of it tonight, but we will at a later stage, when we get to chapter 19. People have lots of opinions on this subject but regardless of all the opinions and confusion on the matter even within parts of the church, God is very clear on this subject. There is no confusion with God, that rests with man and man alone. So far in chapter 5 of Matthew, we have seen the King's standards for His citizens of His Kingdom, and what qualifies a person for Heaven.

Let’s put things in perspective, people go to heaven because they have a right relationship with God in Christ, because of the finished work on the cross, not because of what they have or haven’t done. Divorce does not keep you out of heaven just as much as staying in a miserable marriage gets you there. It is God’s grace, mercy and love that brings us to this right relationship. Remember the context of Jesus’s teaching.

He is inviting His citizens in a new kingdom to enter into that kingdom. But he wants you to have the heart and the mind that reflect His values.

Sunday 13th January 2021

As you know, marriage was instituted by God, between a man and a woman, and it's the only union that can become one flesh before God. In fact, marriage is one of the three ordinances given to us by God (and the other two are the Lord's Table, and Baptism). We can see that marriage has played a fundamental role in the stability and the security of society and civilization. God instituted marriage for the comfort and the convenience of mankind. From the very beginning, long before the promises made to Moses and Abraham, marriage took place in the Garden of Eden.

The Bible gives at least four reasons for marriage. Number one - to continue the race as we read in Genesis chapter 1 verse 28 when the Lord said be fruitful and multiply. Number 2 - for companionship, for friendship, for fellowship, for enjoyment. Number three - marriage was also given to avoid fornication or sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 7:1-6). And number 4 - and possibly one of the greatest reasons, it was given to illustrate or demonstrate in type and picture the relationship of the Lord Jesus Christ to His church. In Ephesians 5:22 and 23, Paul wrote that marriage becomes a type and a picture of God's relationship with us through Christ and I don't think it's a coincidence that the Bible begins with a wedding in Genesis and in the book of Revelation it ends with a wedding.

Divorce was not ordained by God but God made it permissible on account of the hardness of man's heart. When a marriage fails, it is not a good thing. It's bad because it has a high price tag as divorce has tremendous repercussions on the individuals concerned, their families, churches and society. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16) but maybe not for the reasons you might think. God hates divorce because he loves people. God hates divorce because He hates sin and the pain and the terror that takes place. Numerous medical, legal, and parental organisations witness the impact of marriage breakdown, let me just quote you one. The famous Harvard Medical School psychiatrist Armand Nicoli said:

“Certain trends prevalent today will incapacitate the family, destroy its integrity, and cause its members to suffer such crippling emotional conflicts that they will become an intolerable burden to society. If any one factor influences the character development and emotional stability of an individual, it is the quality of the relationship he or she experiences as a child with both parents. Conversely, if people suffering from severe

Sunday 13th January 2021

nonorganic emotional illness have one experience in common, it is the absence of a parent through death, divorce, or some other cause. A parent's inaccessibility, either physically, emotionally, or both, can profoundly influence a child's emotional health." (The Fractured Family: Following It into the Future," Christianity Today, 25 May 1979).

The attack on the family is not new; the evil one is at the root cause of it, he is the main assailant, and the attack goes right back to Genesis. Divorce is found in the Old Testament in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 24:1-4. There we find the law concerning divorce. The law in all cases was enacted by the man. The Hebrew word for divorce is "ishshah" and it means, sending away. There are basically four views of divorce and remarriage that are held in various Christian circles. These views go from liberal to conservative, and somewhere in the middle. The first is that divorce and remarriage can take place for any reason.

The second view is that divorce and remarriage can not take place under any circumstance or for any reason. The third view is that divorce is permissible for certain reasons, but remarriage is never allowed, for any reason. And the fourth view is that divorce and remarriage are allowed for certain reasons. The bible teaches only one of these four views and that view is taught by Jesus here in these verses.

Jesus' disciples would have been influenced by how they were brought up in the Jewish tradition, just like many of us have been influenced in some form or fashion by how we were brought up. In verse 31, Jesus addresses the issue. This is not the only time when he will address the issue of divorce. You may recall that it came up again in the ministry of Jesus in Mark 10:2 - *"The Pharisees came and asked Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" testing Him"*.

Here in Verse 31, Jesus begins by addressing their preconceived understanding by saying - *"Furthermore it has been said"*. You will remember that was how he began to address the other issues as we seen in verse 21, and why did He do that? Because tradition over the previous centuries often got in the way of what God set out. Then in the rest of verse 31 - He gives them the current understanding of divorce by saying - *"Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of dismissal."*

In the first century BC, there were two opposing Pharisaic parties, led by Rabbi Shammai and Rabbi Hillel, who debated this very subject of divorce and remarriage which they would have

Sunday 13th January 2021

closely examined Deuteronomy 24 vs 1 to 4. Here we see the grounds set out and procedure for divorce. Please turn to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which says,

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house,² when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man’s wife,³ if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife,⁴ then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.

Here the provision for divorce was allowed when a husband found uncleanness in his wife and therefore no longer found favour in her. It goes on to speak about remarriage, and ensuring the wife never goes back to her first husband if she remarried, even if her second husband died. The only words that the different schools focused on were, *“anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce”*

Shammai was conservative and understood “some uncleanness” or as other translations have put it *“something indecent”* (whose Hebrew root alludes to “nakedness” or “exposure”) as a sexual offence of some kind which, though left undefined, fell short of adultery or promiscuity. Shammai interpreted that if one spouse was guilty of some sort of sexually immoral activity then they insisted on the bill of divorcement. Shammai believed that remarriage was completely not allowed. The only time they believed you could remarry was if the husband or wife died.

By contrast, Rabbi Hillel was liberal. He interpreted uncleanness to mean anything unclean or anything displeasing to the husband, basically anything that threatened the marriage, even the most trivial misdemeanours. Maybe in today's language it would be called ‘irreconcilable differences’. It had much broader implications than just adultery. His view was that divorce was a merciful alternative to death (Leviticus 20:10), and so He focused on the word uncleanness that disrupted the unity and therefore putting the marriage at risk. He picked on the phrases which said that the wife “becomes displeasing” to her first husband

Sunday 13th January 2021

(verse 1) which could mean anything from the husband finding the wife no longer attractive, if she embarrassed him in public, failed to keep kosher, to being unable to bear children.

Only the husband could divorce a wife, not the other way around. He would have to provide the woman that he divorced with at least a document of divorce which included the reason for the divorce, and the decision was his and not hers. It was a merciful alternative to death as well as providing some measure of protection for the women as her dowry was given back to her. They also understood Deuteronomy 24 to state that even though in this case she was the guilty party, having done “something indecent” on account of which she had been divorced.

Out of the two different teachings at that time, the majority of people favoured the more liberal way of thinking which was the only requirement was the giving of a certificate of dismissal which two people were required to witness the signing of the document. By that period of Jewish history divorce became easy and casual. Jesus is not contending with either of these schools of thought, but instead He challenges them by revealing what God said on the matter. God recognised and permitted divorce under certain circumstances when it accompanied a certificate but he did not condone or command divorce.

God's permission for divorce was yet another accommodation of His grace to human sin the hardness of your heart (Matthew 19:18). This brings us to the question, “*what in fact did Jesus teach*”? We see it in verse 32 - ***But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.***

Jesus endorsed the permanence of marriage, we see this in many places of the bible, for example Matthew 19v 4 to 10. When the Pharisees asked about divorce, He first spoke to them about marriage referring back to Genesis 1 and 2; and drawing their attention to the reason of the divine ordinance and He added in verses 5 and 6 of Matthew 19, “***Therefore, what God has joined together (literally, ‘yoked together’), let man not separate.***”

The marriage bond is more than a human contract. It is a divine yoke which God lays upon a married couple. It is not by creating a kind of mystical union but by declaring His purpose in His Word. There are many reasons for marital breakdown humanly speaking, but not all are grounds for dissolution according to God. Remember, God’s standards for His people, is

Sunday 13th January 2021

higher than that of the world's. The human experience may change, but the divine will and word of God does not.

In verse 32, we can see that Jesus declared the provision of divorce to be a concession due to human sin - adultery. John Stott wrote - *“Human conduct which falls short of the absolute command of God is sin and stands under the divine judgment. The provisions which God’s mercy has designed for the limitation of the consequences of man’s sin must not be interpreted as divine approval for sinning.”*

The bond of matrimony began in a Hebrew marriage at the betrothal not the consummation. The indissoluble union in a Hebrew marriage began at betrothal not consummation, as illustrated by Mary and Joseph (Matthew 1:18-19). He was her “husband” during the betrothal period. The Old Testament punishment of death for adultery was the same for both participants, and it applied whether the adultery was committed during betrothal or after consummation of the marriage. Prior to betrothal, a man and woman who committed fornication were only required to marry each other (Deuteronomy 22:28-29). In that cultural context, betrothal was clearly an element of marriage.

Let me put it to you bluntly, sexual activity does not initiate a marriage. Sexual activity outside of the marriage does not initiate a divorce. If you have sexual relations with someone other than your husband or your wife, you're not divorced you're an adulterer. You know what this means, marriage creates something different and divorce makes it something different. Some people have tried to say that the Exception Clause(*1), which means remarriage, doesn't really apply in verse 32. It says that the exception clause appears only here but let me ask you a question: how many times does God have to speak to an issue before it becomes true - once.

Jesus permits here in verse 32 divorce and remarriage on the grounds of adultery providing that you are the innocent party. In fact, Jesus calls remarriage after divorce adultery if you are not innocent. Jesus’ statement that whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Luke 16:18) completes the picture. A man or woman who has no right to divorce,

Sunday 13th January 2021

has no right to remarry. To do so, initiates a whole chain of adultery, because remarriage after illegitimate divorce results in illegitimate and adulterous relationships for all parties involved.

The word used in verse 32 is “*porneia*”, meaning sexual immorality. This could be translated very strict or too liberal, so let’s just look at both scenarios so that we can have a balanced view. There are several strict interpretations of what ‘porneia’ means. These views include - Premarital fornication (in other words, finding out someone was sexually immoral prior to marriage and ending the marriage because of it), Prohibited familial relationship or post-marriage adultery. While any of them may be true, none of these could fall into the category that Jesus meant because what He states is very specific. So a word to the wise, before you get married, make sure you do your homework, and a pre-marriage biblical course. Know what you are getting into!

The liberal view is that porneia includes offences which can be regarded as broadly as “sexual” thinking or talking rather than just physical terms; and so embraces even a basic temperamental incompatibility. Now it may be possible to use other arguments for the legitimacy of divorce on these grounds, but it’s impossible to do so from the meaning of the word porneia. Porneia means physical sexual immorality; the reason why Jesus made it the sole permissible ground for divorce is that it violates the “one flesh” principle, it violates the covenant which is foundational to marriage as divinely ordained and biblically defined.

Now Adultery isn't the only grounds for divorce and remarriage for the believer. In God’s sight, the bond between husband and wife is dissolved by death (Romans 7v2), adultery (Matthew 5v32; 19v9) or if an unbeliever leaves. Let’s quickly look at 1 Corinthians 7v15&16 ***But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*** The bond is broken, and in any of those three cases, the believer is free to marry. We will come back to this when we get to look at Matthew 19.

Sunday 13th January 2021

Divorce for immorality is permissible, not mandatory. Jesus did not teach that the innocent party must divorce an unfaithful partner, or even that sexual unfaithfulness dissolves the marriage. He did not even encourage or recommend divorce for unfaithfulness. On the contrary, his whole emphasis was on the permanence of marriage in God's purpose and on the inadmissibility of divorce and remarriage. His reason for adding the exception clause was to clarify that the only remarriage after divorce which is not tantamount to adultery is that of an innocent person whose partner has been sexually unfaithful, for in this case the infidelity has already been committed by the guilty partner. Why did God allow divorce to replace the death penalty? Well in Jeremiah 3v8, we can read that God divorced Israel and Judah for spiritual adultery rather than putting them to death. Ultimately, God in His mercy chose Himself not to enforce the death penalty and wipe them out completely. Israel and Judah were so completely immersed in immorality that there was no sufficient desire for righteousness left in the people to carry out executions for that offense.

It was a last resort—to be used only when unrepentant immorality had exhausted the patience of the innocent spouse, and the guilty one would not be restored. That is consistent with the divine nature revealed in Jesus, who challenged the Pharisees who were about to stone a woman for adultery and then forgave her Himself (John 8:7). Apart from the death penalty, divorce became the divine alternative, tolerated only because of the hardness of the human heart, as Jesus states in Matthew 19:8. Jesus sets the record straight that God still hates divorce and that His ideal is still monogamous, life-long marriage. But as a concession to sin and as a gracious provision for those who are innocent of defiling the marriage, He allows divorce.

God wants husbands to love their wives and God wants wives to respect their husbands (Ephesians 5). God wants marriages to be a reflection of joy and peace and unity. We need to honour God even in difficult circumstances and difficult marriages. God isn't giving us an excuse for divorce, but He is showing us just how evil divorce really is. Remember earlier in the chapter Jesus spoke about anger in the heart and that anger in the heart can sometimes leads to murder. Remember also earlier, Jesus spoke about lust in your eyes which sometimes creates a circumstance where people act out in adultery. Now Jesus is speaking

Sunday 13th January 2021

about how evil it is to want to divorce your spouse for any reason or no reason at all. God certainly has a high view of marriage and God certainly has a low view of divorce.

Understanding what God thinks about marriage and divorce is a good start. Ireland has the lowest rate of Divorce in Europe. In 2015 it was calculated that 0.7 per 1,000 marriages end in divorce. Which is very low in comparison to America, where 1 in 3 marriages end in divorce. Statistics were done in America in relation to divorce and unsurprisingly the stats were surprisingly low in the biblical churches. It noted that couples who married in the church, and attended church on a regular basis, the divorce rates plummeted from one in three to one in 50. The states also showed, couples who get married in the church, go to church and then pray and read the Bible together, the divorce rate went from one in 50 to one in 1,105. That's the difference that Jesus can make in a marriage. Jesus talks about marriage because marriage matters. He also talks about divorce because your marriage problems are important to Him. Your marriage is important to God and it is meaningful before God. So we shouldn't look for reasons to end it, we should look for reasons to keep it. We live in a broken world, with broken people, doing broken things that are irretrievable, but for the Christian, there's hope in Christ.

Amen

Footnote -

*1 - The exceptive clause should be accepted as an authentic utterance of Jesus because it does not occur in the parallel sayings in Mark and Luke. Many scholars have been too ready to dismiss it. Some suggest that it was an early scribal interpolation and no part of Matthew's original text. But there is no manuscript evidence that it was a gloss; even the alternative reading of Codex Vaticanus, retained in the RSV margin, does not omit the clause. Other scholars attribute the clause to Matthew himself, and/or to the church in which he was writing, but deny that Jesus ever spoke it. But its omission by Mark and Luke is not in itself a sufficient ground for rejecting it as an editorial invention or interpretation by the first evangelist. It is perfectly possible to suppose that Matthew included it for his Jewish readership who were very concerned about the permissible grounds for divorce, whereas Mark and Luke, writing for Gentile readers, did not have the same concern. Their silence is not necessarily due to their ignorance. It may equally well be that they took the clause for granted. Pagan cultures regarded adultery as a ground for divorce. So did both the Jewish schools of Hillel and Shammai, in spite of their disagreements on other points. This was not in dispute.