

## The Beatitude Shaped Marriage

Matthew 5:31-32

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Our text this morning, from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, is short and difficult. This whole question of marriage and divorce is fraught – it can be theologically complex, with whole traditions disagreeing on exactly what is taught in Scripture. It is emotionally difficult territory. For many have experienced the pain of divorce, the trauma of infidelity, or just the sheer difficulty of making the mystery of marriage work. Not to mention that the complexities and tangles of real-world marriages present us with situations where it is not clear exactly how Scripture might apply. And thus, there is a lot of trepidation among pastors, even among commentators, to wade into this subject.

But with appropriate humility, with fear and trembling, wade in we must, because the topic is vital, and Jesus and the writers of Scripture address it. And because the main point, the big picture of what Jesus is saying here IS clear – perhaps too clear for modern ears.

Our text, from Matthew 5, is the third antithesis in Jesus' sermon. That is, it is the third time he introduces a topic with:

You have heard it said -- here it's "it has been said" – and then gives his definitive interpretation, as the One who is the end, the goal, the fulfiller of the Law.

But we should take note of the order. The previous bit of text, our last sermon, was on lust as the root, the very essence of adultery. So there is a natural progression here. It's as if Jesus is saying: not only lust, but divorce as well is equivalent to adultery. Both lust and divorce are forms of betrayal, they are violations of the seventh commandment, and they both partake of, or lead to, adultery. With that, we will make three points. Moses (for which we will use the OT lesson), the Pharisees (for which we shall use the longer discussion of this matter in Matthew 19, which supplemented our gospel reading), and finally, Jesus from Mt. 5, vv. 31-32. So: Moses, The Pharisees, and Jesus.

### I. Moses

First, then, Moses. Here we will look at the OT lesson from Dt. 24. Briefly the text says this: If a man finds what the text somewhat ambiguously calls “something indecent” about his wife and writes her a certificate of divorce. And she leaves and becomes the wife of another man, and the second husband divorces her, the first husband cannot remarry her. That’s what the text teaches.

You can see it plainly in the if’s and “then’s” in the text. If this happens and if this happens, then the first husband cannot remarry her. That is the only command in the text: he cannot remarry her. There is no encouragement to divorce in the text. There is only a kind of reluctant permission, an acknowledgement that it will, sadly, happen. And if things fall out this way, remarriage of the former spouse is forbidden. The law is actually trying to DETER the man from any kind of rash decision, and it is in fact seeking to protect the wife, who would become quite vulnerable in this society if she were divorced.

But, as our confession of faith, in its chapter on Marriage (ch 24), says: the corruption of man is such that it is apt to study (that is, to create) arguments to unduly put asunder those whom God has joined together in marriage. That is, it is human nature to find, to look for reasons to end, to put asunder, the covenant of marriage. And that is what has happened among the Rabbis of Jesus’ time with this passage. Notice how the text begins: If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him – because he finds something indecent in her.

So this became the focus. How broad can we make the “displeasing” things which allow the husband to write a certificate of divorce? By Jesus’ day there were two rabbinical schools with different approaches to this issue. The school of Shammai, which took a narrow reading of the Dt. text, basically restricted the reasons for divorce to adultery. But the school of Hillel took a broad reading of “something indecent or displeasing” and allowed divorce for virtually any reason at all. And it appears that this position was the dominant one at, or soon after, the time of Jesus.

Here, just to cite a few examples, are the reasons a man could divorce his wife according to the Mishnah (written collections of oral Jewish traditions, c. 200 AD):

If she were barren, if she had epilepsy, if her husband considered her lazy, if she had certain physical defects, if she burned his supper, or if he simply found someone he thought were prettier.....and on and on it goes.

Thus, a text in the Torah, Dt. 24, meant to restrain the man and protect the woman. A text which reluctantly acknowledges, but in no way encourages, divorce. A text which has one command – forbidding remarriage of one’s divorced spouse if she has an intervening marriage, that text was turned into the breeding ground for dozens of reasons to dissolve the original marriage. That is Moses. Or what we might better call the mangling of Moses.

## II. Pharisees

Our second point, then, is the Pharisees. And here we turn to the Matthew 19 portion of the gospel lesson. This text is helpful for it provides an extended context for the shorter statement of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

So, in Matthew 19, verse 3: Some Pharisees come to test Jesus. They know this is a complex and disputed area. They ask – listen – is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife FOR ANY AND EVERY REASON? That is the permissive position on Dt. 24. That is the position of the school of Hillel. And it seems to be the Pharisee's own position. The famous Jewish historian, Josephus, for example, was a divorced Pharisee, and held that virtually any reason was grounds for divorce.

So this is the concern: just how broad is our permission to divorce. And Jesus, as is his custom, directs them to the deeper more fundamental issues. They want to know about the grounds for divorce. Jesus wants to talk about the good and glorious institution of marriage established at creation. They allude to Dt. 24. He quotes from Genesis 1 and Genesis 2.

“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, Jesus concludes with his own authoritative pronouncement on Genesis: “they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” Marriage is between one man and one woman. And the very complementarity of male and female, creates one new flesh, one new person. It is exclusive, permanent, holy and indissoluble. It is a divine gift, an ordinance rooted in the very nature of creation itself. It is God who joins men and women, and no one, no one, should separate them. It is for this reason, that God, as the prophet Malachi said, hates divorce. The Pharisees started with Dt. 24 and Jesus took them back to Genesis. But they are undeterred. They go back to Dt. 24: Why then, did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?

Now notice – they say there is a COMMAND in Dt. 24 to issue a certificate of divorce and send the wife away. They are just assuming that divorce – for whatever reason --- is legitimate. We've already seen there is no such command – the only command in the text is the command that forbids re-marriage.

In any event, what they see as unquestionably legitimate, Jesus sees as a concession. Jesus replies: Moses permitted (there it is – it's a reluctant permission, not grounds for devising dozens of self-serving reasons for divorce). Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. What

a shock this must have been. Jesus first reminds them-- and us-- of the extraordinary dignity and vocation of marriage. Then he takes their central passage, the heart of all their rabbinical debates, and says it's a divine concession because you are evil, because your hearts were hard. The actual word means sclerosis of the heart.

As an aside: sometimes things are in the Torah, not because God is approving of the situation, but because of the historical state of the people, because of their hardness, God will often regulate an evil with the law, when the people are not ready, when the time is not yet ripe, for the evil to be abolished. Any good lawmaker does the same thing.

Back to our text: Jesus says, Moses permitted this because your hearts were hard, BUT, he says: it was not this way from the beginning. The ideal is the order established at creation. And Jesus, who comes to restore all things, is calling them, and us, back to the splendor of marriage, before the fall and human sin intervened. Before our hearts were hard, before the law had to accommodate the tragic reality of divorce. That's the Pharisees.

### **III. Jesus**

That brings us to our third point, Jesus' own summary of the matter in Matthew 5. He starts by citing – and this should be no surprise now – Dt. 24:

It has been said: Anyone who divorces his wife, must give her a certificate of divorce.

By the way – these texts assume it's the man divorcing the woman. But in Mark's gospel, Jesus makes it clear that the woman can initiate the divorce as well. He says there: "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery." So these texts apply in both directions.

In any event, he has now cited the Pharisees' favorite text. Then, with his audacious "but I tell you," he gives his ruling as the law-giver. But I tell you: Anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery.

There is a long-running dispute about the boundaries of the word used for sexual immorality here. That is, it surely includes adultery, but can it be expanded beyond that? I don't want to wade into this except to say: Jesus is restricting reasons for divorce to one, and so we can't create some sort of new loophole here much like what was done by Pharisees with Dt. 24.

In general, our tradition has taken this text to mean adultery alone is grounds for divorce. It's the position of the Shammai school. The strict position among the rabbis. But Jesus is even stricter, since (it appears) Jewish law REQUIRED divorce for adultery, and Jesus merely permits it. For him, and for us, in light of the gospel, the way of reconciliation, of forgiveness and healing, is always the nobler way to proceed – though it is not always possible.

So, there is this one concession, because adultery breaks the one-flesh covenant of marriage. It tears asunder what God has joined together. Thus, the innocent party can live as if the guilty party were dead. But notice, if a man divorces his wife unlawfully – for any other reason – he makes her the victim of adultery. This assumes that, in this culture, she will have to remarry to survive, and the that her new marriage is adulterous. And for this, Jesus places the blame on the man. He makes her the victim of adultery. And he concludes, anyone who marries a (unlawfully) divorced woman commits adultery. So the man who marries such a woman is guilty of adultery, and the man who put the woman in such a situation is also responsible for her subsequent adultery.

(Aside: the second marriage here is initially adulterous, but there is no evidence that it remains so permanently. There is no instruction here, or in the NT, about dissolving such marriages. What should one do? Repent (adultery has been committed), ask forgiveness, begin afresh with this view of marriage and fidelity with the current spouse.)

This a very hard teaching. And it cuts across the grain of a culture of no-fault divorce. Of easy and pervasive second and third marriages. Of a culture which has lost the very grammar and logic of marriage itself. Of a culture which would very much follow the school of Hillel and embrace almost any reason as sufficient for divorce – as long as the parties consent.

It turns out Jesus knew a bit about that kind of permissiveness in his day. After all, in Mt. 19 the disciples' response to his teaching is: if such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry. To which Jesus ups the ante and says, basically, well: if you can become a eunuch for the kingdom, become one.

So, as is his custom, he disturbs the current complacency. He rests his strict position – not on strictness for its own sake – but on the theology of marriage in Genesis. And the apostle Paul would add, in Ephesians 5, relying on Genesis as well, that marriage is to image Christ's relationship to the church. A relationship which ends in the marriage supper of the Lamb in the new creation. And this brings us to the role of this teaching in the SOM. Jesus is addressing his disciples as citizens of heaven, possessors of the heavenly kingdom, people who belong to the age to come. And thus he is calling us back to the design of marriage as a pointer forward to Christ and the church, and then even further forward to the coming wedding in the new heavens and the new earth.

Divorce, he is saying, destroys that image of God's love and covenant fidelity. It ruins the sign of the kingdom of heaven. It is almost always sinful, and it should be a rare exception. And if we have fallen here, if we are defiled, if we have failed. And regardless of whether a marriage ends in divorce or not, they are all full of brokenness, sin, and failure.

We must recall that Yahweh is Israel's husband. That Christ is the bridegroom of the church. And that they are, through the Spirit, in the business of wooing and pursuing and winning back and forgiving, an often wayward, adulterous, faithless bride – namely you and I. It is gospel mercy, manifested in what Christ – the embodiment of the beatitudes - did for his bride, that enables this affirmation, this embrace, this living out of marriage. In other words, it is the virtues of the beatitudes which are assumed here as necessary to sustain marriage.

As the great 5<sup>th</sup> c. bishop John Chrysostom put it: For he that is meek, and a peacemaker, and poor in spirit, and merciful, how shall he cast out his wife? He that is called to reconcile others, how shall he be at variance with his own?

How indeed? We are all called to the life of the beatitudes. Here the married are addressed directly. Go forth from here, seeking by the gospel of grace, to form to create, that most difficult and most glorious of human relationships – the beatitude shaped marriage. Amen.

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