

Going There: Jesus Say What?!?
Week 3: Whoever Divorces His Wife

I. Today's topic is one that could invoke a strong response. Based off the stats, half the adults in the room have gone through the pain of divorce and many more have been impacted in some way. The last thing I want to do is rip open a wound or make anyone feel less than. So let the words of the Apostle Paul set the tone for our discussion today:

Romans 8:1-2 (CSB) [Slide]: 1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, 2 because the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.

A. These are inspired words of God through the Apostle Paul who persecuted the early church and might have had divorce in his background. Some scholars (i.e., Wright and Bruce) believe Paul at the very least was betrothed at one time during his early years in Tarsus. All that to say, there is no category of people period who are somehow beyond the reach of God's mercy over our past, grace in the present, and hope for our future.

II. But here's the reality. Jesus is not a feel-good Savior.

Like we talked about last week the invitation is the same today as it's always been:

[Slide:] Follow Me!

A. That means the way the arrangement works is that we open up everything as we follow and conform our lives to Jesus. Everything is everything! Our careers, our relationships, our finances, our sexuality, everything. The main problem that we all struggle with that gets to the very nature of sin is this: metaphorically speaking, we've got our arms wrapped around Jesus's waist, and we're either clinging on to Jesus as he leads us, or we're doing everything we can to hold Him back to conform to our agenda.

Please let this sink in deep as we dive into a difficult saying of Jesus today:

[Slide]: Jesus loves us too much to conform His standard to our lives.

1. The standard is Jesus, and that standard is perfection. We all come up short. Grace fills in the gap for those who are in Christ, but the standard doesn't change. The sooner we realize that and yield our lives to the Holy Spirit's empowerment to pursue the standard of Jesus Christ, the more we will experience the abundant life that only comes from following Jesus! I don't always get it right, but I believe that statement to be true with every fiber that is within me!

B. Here we go! Another difficult saying of Jesus that left everyone that day (even his disciples) saying, "You had to go there? Jesus say what?!?"

Matthew 19:9 (CSB) [Slide]: 9 "I tell you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery."

1. How do we know this was a next level "Say What?!?" moment:

Mathew 19:10 (CSB) [Slide]: 10 His disciples said to him, "If the relationship of a man with his wife is like this, it's better not to marry."

2. Like we said last week, when it comes to interpreting the Bible, it's not rocket science. But it does take some effort to understand passages within the context it's written. Our job is to do the best we can to understand a passage within its original context and apply those principles to our lives today. Particularly the hard texts (hard from the sense it causes friction with our lives and culture), we want to disclose or uncover God's ideal knowing it is to our benefit to bend our lives to the Book! So, let's back it up a bit and interpret this passage in context.

3. On this particular day, Jesus was on the move from Galilee to Judea (headed toward Jerusalem). He's across or beyond the Jordan River. That's a geographical marker that lets us know:

[Slide] Jesus is in the sticks!

a. But a crowd is on hand filled with a variety of people and the draw from a human perspective was Jesus's ability and willingness to heal.

It's within this setting some Pharisees approach Jesus and ask him this question:

Matthew 19:3 (CSB) [Slide]: 3 “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife on any grounds?”

- b. Now that question is loaded more than a baked potato! Why? Because it was a hotly contested debate circulating amongst the Pharisees of the day. So much so that the Pharisees had split into two schools of thought. This wasn't the only point of contention, but it was a major one!
Here are the two competing schools of thought:

(1) [Slide]: The School of Shammai

They were the conservative party of Pharisees. On the backside of their donkeys, they probably had a “Shammai Rules” sticker or brand, I guess. They took the hardline when it came to divorce in the 1st Century and said the only grounds for divorce was sexual impropriety. They referenced Deuteronomy 24:1 as the basis for their position.

But there was another group of Pharisees who viewed divorce differently. They were:

(2) [Slide]: The School of Hillel

The School of Hillel were the more liberal party of the Pharisees and also using Deuteronomy 24:1 as the basis of their position concluded that the grounds for divorce should be expanded to include all indecent acts done by the wife.

- c. By Jesus's day, divorce had become a widely accepted practice because it had been sanctioned into the religious system. The religious leaders of the day felt justified in their course of actions because they had rigged up a loophole through their interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1 to support their sin.

Both schools were off track and let's go back to the source of Deuteronomy 24:1 to see why.

Deuteronomy 24:1 (CSB) [Slide]: 1 “If a man marries a woman, but she becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, he may write her a divorce certificate, hand it to her, and send her away from his house.”

- d. Most Bible translators are nice Christian folk and with good intentions smooth off the rough edges sometimes. ערוה (er-wah) is the Hebrew word translated as “indecent.” Now indecent is a kind way to express this Hebrew word that is really a straightforward word meaning “shameful in one's nakedness.” Please make a note here that this is Moses attempting to legislate a lose-lose situation. He's not commanding anything. Basically, in the ancient world when a woman was given over to be a bride. There was money or some tangible price paid for that bride under the agreement that she was a virgin. Sometimes it would come to pass that it wasn't the case. Never mind that it takes two to tango! Moses wasn't commanding divorce; he was legislating a respectable out that could be used.

- e. Fast forward 1400 years to the time of Jesus. Isn't it interesting to see how the Pharisees, presumably comprised of both schools, understood Deuteronomy 24:1!

Matthew 19:7 (CSB) [Slide]: 7 “Why then,” they asked him, “did Moses command us to give divorce papers and to send her away?”

- f. That's a huge overreach of Deuteronomy 24:1. Moses hadn't commanded anything. He had made an exception on a difficult situation all around. The School of Shammai had determined that it was a duty or command to divorce one's wife in the event of sexual immorality and the School of Hillel had gone so far to say any act of indecency would be justifiable grounds for divorce. The Talmud, which is a codex of legal interpretations from the time of Jesus and beyond, gives examples of divorce certificates being granted for burning a meal. It had become that absurd.

- g. This is the background for which Jesus enters the conversation regarding divorce. Jesus responds to the question regarding divorce with these two schools of thought in the background and steps over both! Both schools have missed the mark and Jesus doesn't mince his words!

Matthew 19:4-6 (CSB) [Slide]: 4 “Haven't you read,” he replied, “that he who created them in the beginning made them male and female, 5 and he also said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

4. It's in response to Jesus's affirmation of God's design for marriage in the very beginning before the fall that the Pharisees try to throw Moses under the bus. "But Moses commanded us." Jesus had just reminded them of God's ideal from the creation and they go squirming to make an appeal from the Law of Moses.

a. Jesus doubles down:

Matthew 19:8-9 (CSB) [Slide]: 8 He told them, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because of the hardness of your hearts, but it was not like that from the beginning. 9 I tell you whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery."

5. I can't smooth this saying over. It is an extremely difficult saying of Jesus to the point that the first thing out of the disciples' mouth is basically, "it sounds like it's better to be single." Jesus didn't correct their conclusion which would present a vastly different position from the Jewish culture of Jesus's day. A culture that held marriage as a foregone conclusion.

a. When we come to a difficult text like this our natural inclination is to:

[Slide]: Look for the loophole.

b. I want to challenge us, that might be our natural inclination, but it's not the path we want to go. Let's recognize that we've all sinned. When it comes to missing the mark (i.e., sin), we're all in the same boat!

Romans 3:23 (CSB) [Slide]: 23 For all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory.

c. But let's hear Jesus out on this difficult saying about divorce.

(1) The way God has dealt with sinful humanity is not by lowering or compromising the standard. God sent His Son Jesus to fully live out the standard and still die a sinner's death. Through His resurrection He's overcome sin and death and calls us to follow Him! All fall short but the standard never changes and our aim through the Holy Spirit's empowerment is to live out Jesus's standard. Where there's a gap, there's grace! Praise God, but the standard never fluctuates. This passage isn't so much about a loophole for divorce as much as it is about God's ideal for marriage. In a culture much like Jesus's in which marriage vows were broken at the drop of a hat, we've got to go against the grain of our culture and demonstrate God's beautiful ideal for marriage.

(2) What's that ideal? Jesus tells us exactly what that is:

[Slide]: One man and one woman for life.

(3) There's no wiggle room on the standard. God laid it out in Genesis 2 before the fall and Jesus affirms that standard in Matthew 19.

Marriage is such a holy and sacred bond that it falls under the category of a:

[Slide]: Covenant

A covenant differs even from a contractual obligation in the sense that you're writing a blank check that says I'm vowing my commitment to you before God and there's no fine print or Plan B. A covenant isn't based off a feeling but a commitment and it's the 3-way bond between man, woman, and God that then creates an atmosphere for intimacy. We live in a world that longs for the intimacy but laughs at the covenant. But intimacy is the fruit that comes forth out of covenant. No matter what the world tries to sell us, it's just not true.

The theme of Matthew 19 isn't divorce, it's God's standard and design for marriage.

6. But I suppose there are still a few elephants in the room.

a. One might wonder why this passage seems to be so male centric? Jesus was speaking to a Jewish Culture that promoted a system of male dominance. Please hear me out on this. Jesus was dealing a blow to this very system. Women had no recourse in this culture. A woman divorcing her husband isn't mentioned because that option wasn't on the table for a 1st Century Jewish lady. Interestingly, Mark 10 does include a command for women to not divorce their husbands.

Mark was written to a Gentile audience in Rome and women did have more rights under Roman Law than in a Jewish Culture. There very well may have been a cultural moment that brought forth Jesus's

challenge to women when Herodias (a Jew) divorced her husband Herod (half Jew half Idumean) for Antipas. Herodias used Roman Law in order to do this. That's just an aside.

(1) Jesus had many women followers, and this is likely due to his willingness to push into a culture that objectified women in shameful ways. I just wanted to clear up why this challenge isn't given to women in Matthew.

b. The big elephant in the room though is this: Is it o.k. to divorce and remarry? It's not about my opinion; it's about God's word. Divorce is never compatible with God's ideal. God takes covenants seriously and if we're married today or considering marriage, please prayerfully consider the marriage covenant. God never waters down his ideal. But I do understand there to be two circumstances in which divorce is granted. It's still not favorable but granted.

(1) One is the circumstance of sexual immorality. When a spouse engages in sexual activity with a partner outside the marriage covenant that is such an egregious offense that divorce is permissible. Not commanded though. I know people personally who have been through an affair and God has brought about healing and reconciliation. But divorce is granted in this circumstance. I also take divorce and remarriage in a Jewish context as one in the same thing. If divorce is granted because of sexual immorality that by its very essence opens the door for remarriage. Jesus was an anomaly not just because He was the Son of God but that He was single. In a world of arranged marriages being single wasn't an option like we experience. Again, this isn't a command but was granted.

(2) The second circumstance isn't found in the Gospels but expressed by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 and I put this in a different category than sexual immorality. Paul is writing to an all-Gentile church at Corinth and situations are arising in which people are being converted to Christianity and they are still living in a very pagan world and more times than not the other spouse isn't a believer. Here's what we read:

1 Corinthians 7:10-11 (CSB) [Slide]: 10 To the married I give this command- not I, but the Lord- a wife is not to leave her husband. 11 But if she does leave, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband- and a husband is not to divorce his wife.

What's the deal? Again, in a world where men held the power, Paul is instructing the wife to make it her aim to honor her husband and in doing so many will be brought to the Lord. I know so many situations where a wife starts following Jesus and the husband is brought to the Lord. But in some circumstances, it's not feasible or safe for the wife to remain. Paul grants permission to leave but to remain single. Paul does not grant that same approach to the husband because in that world when a husband became a Christ follower the family would follow suit. I see this circumstance more as a protection for women in a world where a Christian wife married to a nonbeliever could easily be in a dire or dangerous situation.

c. Many of you have divorce as a part of your story. May I talk to you for a moment? God doesn't see you as less than! Everyone in this room and tuning in online falls short of the standard and ideal set by God. The gap between God's ideal and our sin is filled by grace when we accept it! Divorce isn't the cardinal sin.

1. Jesus didn't set out in Matthew 19 to determine the parameters around divorce. The theme of Matthew 19 is God's ideal for marriage and no matter what our culture has to say about it, the ideal is one man and one woman for life. I pray I have many years as a pastor at Tab and over the course of that time, I pray that we as a church celebrate God's ideal for marriage and make it our aim to bend our lives to the Book in this key area of life. God loves us enough to not bend His ideal to what we want or think. Just because something is hard doesn't mean it isn't life giving.

Matthew 19:9 (CSB) [Slide]: 9 I tell you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery.

2. Jesus went there. It was a "say what?!?" moment and His tough love was a gift! He loved us enough to give us His life-giving standard! No matter what yesterday looked like, the choice before us is this: will we trust Him and make it our aim to conform our lives to His standard? Grace is available in the gap. We'll fail forward in the process. But God loves us enough to give us the standard. Life is found when we pursue it.