

Perfection and Compassion – Matthew 19:1-15 Tregear 31.10.2021

In chapter 19 of Matthew, a group of Pharisees come to Jesus with a question about divorce laws. As a church we want to have clear thinking about the issue of divorce and know how we can support each other and how to respond to those who have been divorced. We want to know what God says about divorce. There have been some unhelpful things done and said on this issue in the name of God. Some of you here this morning have gone through the agony of a failed marriage; others have witnessed friends torn apart and children perplexed by the separation of their parents. What is our response as God's children? There are many things I would want to say, and I won't say everything, but I hope what I do say will stir us to action and looking to Jesus. I'm conscious that this issue of divorce may well stir painful memories for some here today. Please contact me or a trusted friend if you want to talk more after this.

LET'S PRAY – Lord we are conscious that this issue of divorce is one full of pain. Help us to consider carefully what you say and help us to know how you want us to respond to your word. Amen

Katrina and Geoff had been married for a few years. When Katrina decided to leave him, Geoff felt like he had contracted a severe illness. Only, no one was sending him Get Well cards. That was the really awkward thing about it: the church community of which he was a part started to treat him oddly – giving him a bit more distance than he was asking for. Then one day, the pastor called him in and told him that, as a divorced person, he wouldn't be leading a bible study in future. Mind you, Geoff didn't feel much like being a bible study group leader, so he accepted the decision.

Jessica had married Rob after only dating for a year. She had felt deeply in love. Rob was a passionate and even intense guy and was very protective of her. It seemed really nice that he was like that. However, once they were married, things took a turn for the worse. Rob became verbally abusive, and his sweet protectiveness turned into a bitter jealousy. He wanted to know everything she was doing and who she was talking to. When he lashed out at her

physically, she felt all her dreams smashed to pieces. She packed and left immediately. However, her pastor told her to go back and work on the relationship. He said that she just needed to be patient with him and try to understand him. Rob had pleaded with her to come back so she came back but within a few weeks the same thing happened again. The cycle of him getting angry and bashing her started again. Again, her pastor said she should keep trying because they were married till death us do part.

In our passage today, Jesus, it seems, speaks very directly about the issue of divorce in v. 9: “Whoever divorces a wife, except for sexual immorality, and remarries, commits adultery.” Is Jesus saying that the only right cause for divorce (and possibly remarriage) is sexual unfaithfulness? Let’s go to the story.

Firstly, we want to note where Jesus is. He’s moving towards Jerusalem. He’s on his way to his death. He’s on his way to suffering and humiliation. He’s on the other side of the Jordan River now – in Gentile territory. The large crowds are there. He’s healing, teaching. The momentum is building and getting closer to Jerusalem.

We don’t know how long he was on the other side of the Jordan – one week, two weeks, maybe longer. The action is closer to Jerusalem now. Stories are getting back there. A group of Pharisees go out to check him out, Matthew says they weren’t there to see what God was doing but they were there to test him. They were going to bring him down or trap him. So the question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” Can you hear the question, Can a man divorce his wife for any reason at all? These guys knew what they were doing – it was like the Caesar and God question. Whatever Jesus said would bring him down. And amongst the Jewish leaders at this time there were 2 schools of thought – one group said you can only divorce if your wife is unfaithful; the other group said you could divorce for whatever reason you like – you know if the wife burnt the dinner that night, “You’re divorced” or if she squeezed the toothpaste tube in the wrong way, “You’re divorced”. Whatever answer Jesus gave he was going to upset one group of people.

But Jesus sees right through them and their hypocrisy. Do you remember when we looked at the Sermon on the mount, Jesus said, “You’ve heard it said, don’t murder...don’t commit adultery etc...but I say to you. And then Jesus would give God’s view on the command and it would be such a standard of perfection that everyone would say, “How can we possibly do this?”

It’s the same here. Jesus doesn’t answer their question directly but he takes them back to the first book in the Bible. v.4 – “Haven’t you read, at the beginning God made Adam and Eve male and female; and the idea was that a man would leave his mother and father and be united to his wife and the two would become one. They are no longer two, they ARE ONE. If God has joined them together don’t you dare separate them. They are to be one for all the time they are alive on earth. That’s the norm. That’s the standard.

You see the problem with the Pharisees was that they were thinking what’s the least we need to do to obey God? What can we get away with? No, No, No – God’s standard is you don’t look for excuses; you stay together. You do not divorce just “for any reason”.

So in v.7 the Pharisees come back at Jesus, “Ok smarty pants, if we not meant to separate why did Moses, under God’s authority, command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away.” In other words, Moses let us divorce.

And Jesus’ response is Yes God did allow that but that was because of the hardness of men’s hearts; because of man’s sinfulness. Remember when we looked at Matthew 15 and Jesus said, “It’s not what goes into a man’s mouth that makes him unclean but what comes out of his mouth, that comes from his heart. His heart, the seat of his will is sinful. And then the strong statement of v.9 – you should not divorce apart from the reason of sexual immorality. With this kind of statement some church leaders have said that remarriage is also off limits to those who divorce.

However, this idea seems to vary from what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7. Here Paul says that it's ok for a spouse who is abandoned by a non-Christian partner to remarry – he says that they are “not bound” in v.15. That language – “not bound” – also indicates that, in Biblical thinking, the assumption is that legitimate divorce means “free to remarry”.

What Jesus was saying to these Pharisees was divorce should not be considered just for any reason. But it's interesting that as we look closely at the OT there were other grounds for divorce other than adultery. Exodus 21:10-11 says that a wife can divorce on the grounds of neglect. A wife had the right to be taken care of materially and to be loved in a marriage. If her husband took another wife and stopped caring for her with these material things, then she could leave him, divorce him. It is not a surprise then to learn that Jewish marriage vows of Jesus' time contained these rights in them, as well as a vow to maintain sexual faithfulness. And this is the basis for the concept of marriage we find in Christian services, with the promises “to love and to cherish, as long as we both shall live”. Neglect of these promises invalidated, or cancelled, the marriage. This is extremely significant, because it helps us to see why physical abuse is definite biblical grounds for divorce. When someone is abusing their partner, physically or emotionally, they are not “cherishing” their partner.

Sadly, sometimes Christians have used pieces of Scripture to keep an abused spouse from leaving the marriage – for example, there's the one in 1 Corinthians 7:10. Paul gives the direction that “a wife must not separate from her husband”. It is important to recognise the context of Paul's command here: he is urging Christians not to abandon marriage because they think that they'll be more holy if they're single.

We need to be very clear about this: the abuse of a spouse is an entirely biblical ground for separation and divorce. In our society where some people seem to treat marriage very lightly, you know you can leave a marriage just if you feel like you're out of love, so the Christian community and its leaders encourage people to stay in their marriages and to work at them. And this is good but we should not be the ones insisting that a person suffering physical or

emotional abuse has to stay in the marriage and thus be further victimised, like our example of Jessica that I gave at the beginning.

So how are we in our church to help in these often traumatic and complex situations? Like Jesus and Paul and Moses, we want to set a high standard for marriage. We want a high standard, we want God's standard. Marriage matters, and it is God who unites a man and woman and makes them one flesh. The unity of marriage is profound. The promises of Christian marriage are not for "as long as our love shall last", but "until we are parted by death". For that reason, as the marriage service says, "marriage is not to be entered into lightly" – and neither is it to be ended just because we feel like it.

Divorce, as I am sure many of the divorced have experienced, can be a costly exercise in every sense – personally and materially. When you're in the middle of a marriage breakdown, it is hard for you to think clearly about your situation. How do you talk about it with others? Who can you trust? Who will really support you and not judge you? We need to have such a community here at our church where people feel safe with each other. We need to be particularly sympathetic to the abandoned, the neglected and the abused, and recognise the stigma, or the shame, that often comes with being a divorced person. Just as people are proud of getting married, and share the photos with everyone, so people feel shame when marriage fails.

In the case of Jessica, then, that I mentioned at the beginning, the pastor and the church community, should have offered her support and as much help as possible. In the case of Geoff, there needs to be a patient and sympathetic approach, which recognises his trauma and helps him to heal from his abandonment. There may well have been things he did in the marriage that contributed to its failure, which he needs prayerful help and a reminder of God's grace to address. It may be appropriate for him to have a rest from a ministry position while he does this. But he needs support and people standing with him, not moving away from him.

I finish off on this point. God hates divorce. And God hates the selfishness, the abuse, the narcissism, the control, the neglect, the disrespect, and the failure to serve and love that combines to undo a marriage. It's not the legal divorce that's the problem; it's the offender's ongoing and deliberate failure to love and cherish like he promised. Divorce is the eventual natural consequence of a person's covenant-breaking actions. In Malachi 2:16, God speaks very clearly to people who have brought about divorce: "The man who hates and divorces his wife," says the Lord, the God of Israel, "does violence to the one he should protect."

God knows what divorce is like; he divorced Israel. In Jeremiah 3:8 God says, *I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries.*

God uses this painful language of divorce to describe the way in which his people abandoned him for other lovers. God knows what divorce is like. He knows what it is to not be in covenant with someone, because the covenant is broken. There are a number of things that can end marriages. Jesus mentions sexual infidelity, but there are other factors, especially where one spouse is exerting power and control over the other. We want to call it out for what it is – abuse. Abuse ends marriages. As soon as you're abusing a spouse that's not marriage.

To people who are suffering abuse or are being treated badly, it's not your fault. Divorce is not brought about by someone filing for divorce in these cases; abuse is the thing that ends the marriage. A marriage, under God, is a place of health and mutuality. If you are still living with someone who treats you badly, I would argue that the covenant has already been broken; that the marriage has already been killed. So many women feel that in their spirit, but don't feel that they're allowed to say it.

Then there is the matter of children. We need to give them a safe place too.

As a church we want to encourage couples to stay in marriage, but I'm aware that sometimes the church has made marriage an idol – almost like a sacrament. Marriage is elevated so that somehow you're a bad person if you don't stay in the marriage. And that is not right. We need to be so careful as well in our church that we don't have the attitude that you have to be

married in order to be fulfilled in life. I am so thankful for the wonderful single people we have in our church who show that to be a lie. How we all relate to each other is so important.

Remember that there will be no marriage in heaven. But I'm getting off track a bit here.

But for today, I want to encourage marriages to stay healthy. I really believe husbands and wives need to work at their marriages. For Georgina and I, two sinners sharing life together, there is a continual need to ask forgiveness and to work out ways in which we can build up each other. What are the daily rituals we can build into our life that will build our marriage – the cup of tea in bed, reading together, praying together, asking each other about our interests. One of our favourite phrases is “We are a team”. In other words, everything we do and say to each other is for each other. If you're on a team you don't tackle your own teammate – you encourage them, you pass the ball to them, you congratulate them – you don't criticize them or make snide comments about them – because they're on your team. I'm sure that there were times when George wondered, “who is this guy that I married?” Why does he spend so much time with his work or doing other things? Doesn't he want to be with me? Doesn't he love me? But she's stayed committed to me.

After 38 years of marriage you'd think we'd have it all worked out. No way – we still need to work hard on our relationship. But it's worth it. And God gives us his strength each day to continue to build into each other's life.

At our church we will do everything to help keep a couple together, to save the marriage; but we will also do everything to support the partner who is being abused, sexually, physically or emotionally – we will not try and save an abusive marriage at all costs. After all, your marriage is not going to give you salvation. We want our church to be a place of refuge. I want to apologise to you if it hasn't been. Sometimes the church has not been a leader in protecting you and meeting your needs. We want our church to be a place where you are safe, where you are heard and listened to, where you are loved and not felt that you have been shamed.

We are all fallen, broken people, sinners. Let us show grace and love to each other as Jesus has shown love and grace to us.

Last week the king forgave a debt that was huge, absolutely no way this guy would ever get near paying it back – and he cancelled it. Incredible. This is how our Father treats us. In marriage we mess up; or we get messed up by the other – God looks at us with compassion; he forgives; he has mercy. He says come to me.

PRAY – Thank you, Father, that you treat us with love and mercy, even though we mess up. Give us the strength to love others, especially in our marriages. Help us to show grace to each other as you have shown to us. Amen