

Kingdom Values: Looking at Divorce  
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Matthew 5: 31-37

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This is, as I'm sure you can appreciate, a difficult topic upon which to preach. And I want to thank Duncan and John for letting me go thru their past sermons, John for taking several phone calls on the topic and I also want to thank Lorna Van Besouw for giving up her time to come and answer my questions and for her insights.

So basically if you don't like this sermon its not my fault – blame them. If you do like it it is of course because I have a hot line to God and blessed with deep theological understanding.

Why is this so hard? Because divorce is so hard.

1/Huge hurt – life dissolves, great pain, rejection.

2/You can't move on from it - not like house burning down – Lorna likened it to a death without a corpse – never done and dusted. Goes on unraveling and hurting.

3/You hurt for your children as well as your self and suffer guilt that they don't have 2 parents

4/As a Christian you can then add guilt of failing God – even if you were left apparently

5/And the pain of feeling judged by the church.

We can't do much about 1,2, & 3 this morning – that is the job of on going prayer, counseling and time. And please know that if anyone needs prayer that it is available at any time.

What I do want to focus on today is 4 & 5.

I asked Lorna if being a Christian helped people that were getting divorced or compounded the matter. She told me it compounded the matter. I find that devastating. As Duncan said 2 weeks back we know that our faith isn't going to bring an insurance policy – perhaps the oppersite – but it does bring help in the suffering.

I can't think of any other situation that we go thru as Christians when our faith does not help us. But in the midst of this hell – divorcees

don't feel able to call on the help of the one person that really can help – God. They find what the Bible has to say very difficult and so often they do not feel supported by the Christian community - but judged by the very people that should be there for them.

So this is a very important issue for us examine.

We'll look at this morning's text, linking it to Matt 19 – because there Jesus is talking about the same thing, and they we'll look at Malachi – another well known text on the subject, to see what the Bible says and what that means to us.

Right – Here Jesus is saying `Men if you are going to get divorced, give your wife a certificate of divorce – but if you divorce her on any grounds other than indecency – you'll be forcing her to commit adultery as you will the man that marries her.'

[ - explanation – you'll force her to commit adultery because she will have to remarry.]

In Matt 19 Jesus also says whoever divorces his wife except for unchastity and marries another commits adultery.

Ok – so what did he mean?

Well firstly its clear divorce and re-marriage were permitted in certain circumstances and that needs to be made clear because despite the amount of times divorce is mentioned in the Bible we seem to believe it didn't happen and wasn't allowed.

Now on the face of it it seems clear that one can only divorce for indecency. We assume an affair but in fact there was little need to discuss adultery because for that the woman could be stoned. So Jesus is not actually talking about adultery. That is irrelevant today for us because thank goodness we don't resort to that any more and one would therefore include adultery in this - but it makes one realize that one has to understand the background to the Bible before one can make sense of the text.

And what we need to know here is that there was a debate on at the time between two Rabbinic schools. It was over a quote from Deut

24 which was actually a law saying that if a man divorces his wife and she remarries and gets divorced again – the first husband may not then remarry her. [the idea was to prevent hasty divorce and to protect the woman from an unloving first husband]. What the rabbis were focusing on though was the wording around the reasons for divorce in Deut. The wording was for `some indecency'. The Shammai school said that meant a sexual indecency where as the Hillel school translated it to mean any matter that displeased the husband. So if she burnt the toast, became quarrelsome or a prettier version walked past – basically anything that caused annoyance or embarrassment. [ I don't know about the rest of you woman but I'd have been out on my ear ages ago on any of those grounds].

Jesus normally agreed with the Hillel but in this he did not. He did not agree that a husband could divorce his wife for anything that displeased him. This debate was raging at the time and this is the debate that the Pharisees were engaging him on in chp 19 and it is this same debate that Jesus is speaking to his disciples on in today's text because he knew they needed clarity. He is not giving a total teaching on divorce.

Why don't we all know this? Because the argument is no longer relevant. When Jerusalem fell the Hillelite school became the dominant school and their teaching accepted. There was no one strong enough to question it any longer and the debate ended. Without that context Jesus seems to be clearly saying divorce only for adultery.

How can we be sure, because this is a very important point? For me the compelling argument is that Paul obviously believes this to be the case. There were other well known accepted and undisputed grounds for divorce. The rabbinic schools agreed that, based on Ex 21, there were three reasons for divorcing your spouse; failure to do their part in providing food, or in clothing or in love of each other.

In fact the rabbis even discussed how many times a week a woman may demand her conjugal right! No pressure guys!

Paul obviously believed these to still be valid post Jesus because in 1 Cor 7 he talks about Christians divorcing non-believer spouses if they

feel unable to live together. Because we are called to peace Paul says. [worth noting this was a huge deal to go from pagan belief to Christianity – life changed dramatically]. Paul is basing 1 Cor 7 on these accepted grounds for divorce because he believed they still existed. Now if anyone understood Jesus and stuck to and built on Jesus' teaching – it was Paul. Paul obviously understood JC to be addressing the debate between the two schools over deut 24. And If Paul felt that the Ex grounds for divorce were still valid then so can we.

This an important point to make clear. If Jesus is not saying we can only divorce for adultery then those us driven to divorce through abuse and neglect ought not to add spiritual guilt to the pain. If we don't understand what Jesus was saying in this way then we are saying a woman that is being beaten up that she cannot divorce her husband because he is not cheating on her. Or that a man must stand by as the children are emotionally abused by their drug abusing mother because she hasn't had an affair. Do we believe JC meant that? Is that the message of the Bible? Live in hell or live in guilt?

The other text that I must mention because it causes so much grief is the one from Malachi 2 v16. 'for I hate divorce' says the Lord. Several things to say here.

1/ the word translated divorce ought to read 'sending away'. The word is used 878 times in the Bible 13 times referring to break down in marriage, 865 in other ways. There is another word for divorce. God is talking here about people being 'sent away' in a treacherous way. He is talking about men disregarding the woman they married when young and to whom they have been unfaithful and now want to dispose of unjustly with no care and no regard and no provision. God hates that.

2/ even if you say he is meaning divorce literally – then yes – who doesn't hate it? Esp divorcees. [God also hates blasphemy and it is set out in both the 10 Commandment's and the Lord's Prayer but millions of Christians do it everyday and escape our censure.] But that doesn't mean that he does not allow divorce. In fact in Ezra he orders it! The Israelites had married foreigners against God's wishes

– and Ezra prays and then orders everyone in order to make things right, to divorce these women as it is basically the lesser of two evils. Another point worth noting is that in Jeremiah we read that God gave Israel her certificate of divorce because she was unfaithful to him – which as John says -makes God technically a divorcee.

Yes God hated divorce or sending away – but The Bible makes provision for divorce – which it would not do if God did not allow it. The Bible does not tell you how to blaspheme – but it does regulate as to how to divorce.

So it is clear that divorce and remarriage were practiced in the Bible and that there were several accepted grounds for divorce. Divorcees must not feel condemned and must feel able to draw on God's strength - because he so wants to be able give it to us in all our struggles. And they must feel able to draw on the Christian community for support too.

You are not outside the church simply because you are outside your marriage.

But it is also clear that divorce was not to be taken lightly.

There is God's perfect will and God's permissive will. He wants us to marry and stay faithful and stay together. He wants us to bring children up in stable homes that are filled with love.

That is his plan for us and all of us, married or not, know that that is what makes us very happy. Of course it does – because that is what God wants for us and he understands us best.

JC in Matt 19 starts his answer to the Pharisees by saying don't you know that God made man and woman for union and no-one should break them up? The Pharisee says so why did Moses command divorce? Jesus corrects him and says Moses `allowed' divorced because humans are heart hearted. In other words we are not perfect and therefore the world is not the therefore marriages [among many other human endeavors] may fail –We do not live in a perfect world and there are things that arise that break us down and tear us apart. Hence the need for divorce.

What we must not do is take this as something we can enter into casually. Jesus makes it clear it is not for any indecency – for any failing as some Pharisees wanted to. As painful as divorce is some people do seem to give up on their marriage too easily. They feel they have a right to something perfect – which cannot exist – or to a better model. Jesus' teaching on 'not for any indecency' speaks to men today [ I know I sound sexist but it is usually men] who feel entitled to divorce because something younger [maybe blonder] and with firmer movable body parts arrives on the scene. [quip re mid life crisis trade in] And to balance that up Jesus is also talking to women who feel entitled to move on because their now redundant husband isn't able to maintain the previously high standard of living. These are not grounds for divorce!

We must not endorse the consumer throw away society in which we live where we are used to disposing of whatever we no longer want too easily. This must not apply to marriage.

We live in a society where work gets more of our energy and time than our marriages. Perhaps because in some cases we value possessions over relationships [remember Duncan's sermon again about not building treasures on earth instead of heaven] .Ironically we then have to split them up when the neglected marriage fails!

The Anglican Church puts a lot of effort into this. It allows for divorce for those who, 'for whatever cause', have experienced their marriage fail - as long as both parties have made every effort to achieve reconciliation.

And the church states that as divorce becomes more frequent we have an obligation to uphold Jesus teaching that marriage is intended for life.

As a church community we need to support marriage, endorse it and affirm it. Ironically I think most divorcees would. Its perhaps those that haven't been thru it that think it might be an easy option.

2 important points that come out of this mornings text for us with regard to relationships.

1/ don't look for loop holes.

Jesus was in fact picking the Pharisees out for trying to find loopholes. They wanted [for whatever reason] to find easy ways to end marriages – but they were Pharisees so they needed it to be lawful. And so they looked for loopholes in Deut.

We must not try to find loopholes to justify our position on things – whether this is in marriage or in divorce. We must not look for the weakness in the other person to exploit. The saddest marriages are those where the 2 manipulate each other. They continually seek to put one another down thru the other's weakness. This is so destructive of the marriage and the individual. It is so wrong.

In healthy marriages – when there is a fight – which does not indicate a bad marriage – better to get things out than not and its how we fight and resolve things not whether we fight that matters – we must be wary not to seek to score points and exploit lop holes in arguments. We must rather seek to understand one another - as we do our children – the grace and understanding that we extend to children we should extend to our spouses sometimes too. Look for solutions, not loopholes.

And this applies to divorce too. We must deal with each other fairly – which I imagine must be easier said than done if you feel betrayed. But it is clear that God's permission is for just divorces – not one's filled with vengeance and spite. So we must not look for loopholes to get us out of child maintenance or allowing access. The sending away God speaks of in Malachi was an unjust and malicious situation. God hates injustice in any scenario – we must draw on his grace in these situations to help us rise above our own inclinations. Draw on bucket loads if need be. He wants to give it to us.

The other important point is

2/ let your yes be yes and your no be no. Don't swear on this or that or the other. [there were various rules about if you swore on that you were bound but not if you swore on the other – it was all about getting out of promises] say what you mean and stick to it. If you can't do what you said you could then say you can't honestly and

why – but don't squirm out of it with legalese. Let us be honest with one another and straightforward. May our word be good enough because we are honest and trustworthy.  
In all our relationships - Esp in our marriages.

To sum up and end -

Divorce is hard – and it can be made even harder for Christians if they feel condemned by the church and unable to lean on God as they go thru it.

But the Bible clearly does allow for divorce in various circumstances – when everything else has failed.

But it is not to be taken lightly. It is not his plan that we divorce but he gives permission when we really need it. But we must not see marriage as disposable as so much of our lifestyle is.

The Anglican church is clear on this and as a church we need to endorse that stance. We need to protect and promote marriage. Part of this is not looking for loopholes in our marriages or finding them in our divorces – both must be conducted fairly.

And we must be honest with one another in our speech. Let our yes be yes and no be no.

It is the spirit of God's law that we strive to live by. To love him and one another. and in all our dealings we need to be honest and straight forward and fair – because that is what holds relationships together and it is perhaps esp important if they have fallen apart.