

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT – MATTHEW 5-7

Divorce, Marriage, and the True Bridegroom

Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-12

Faith Church of Linden

By Daniel Patz on July 12, 2026

Genesis 2:24 – Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife and the two shall become one...[from God about marriage]

Marriage is a beautiful thing. It is an amazing thing that God takes a man and a woman and brings them together and makes them one — not two, but one. And of this joining Jesus says, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” Marriage is from God and it points to God.

Twenty-five years ago in Minneapolis, Molly and I stood and said our vows to one another and we ended by saying this to each other: “Where you dwell, I will dwell. Your people will be my people and your God, my God. May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.”

Marriage is on my mind a lot these days. I recently had the joy of officiating my own son’s wedding. I have several weddings coming, and I’m doing pre-marriage counseling with a number of couples. I come to this text with marriage not at a distance.

And yet here in our text, Jesus does not talk about the making of a marriage. He talks about the breaking of one. Right in the middle of teaching us the righteousness of the kingdom, and after addressing the sin of adultery, He stops and speaks about divorce. Why? Because of sin. Because the same hearts that were made for the beauty of marriage are hearts that can go looking for the exit. Hearts that were meant to love God and others and be guided by His Law — so easily drift off the rails in rebellion and selfishness. So let’s go to the text and hear Him.

TEXT — MATTHEW 5:31–32 (ESV)

³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” — Matthew 5:31–32 (ESV)

LOOKING AT THE TEXT — MATTHEW 5:31–32

With this third example (of applying the law) we come to something that looks different from the two before it (murder and adultery). It is shorter. And it opens differently. Jesus says simply, “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’” He is not quoting the Law directly here. He is quoting what people had

made of the Law — their handling of Deuteronomy 24:1-4. And this passage does not stand on its own; it presses right up against the one before it. Last week we heard Him on adultery and the lustful heart. Now He takes up marriage from the other side — not the sin that invades a marriage (lust), but the sin of tearing one apart (wrongful divorce). A sin that ignores what God has said and what God intends in marriage.

So we have to go where Jesus is pointing — to Deut. 24. Listen to what it actually says:

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house... and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife... then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife... (1-4)

Notice what this text does and does not do. It does not command a man to divorce his wife. It regulates something already happening in a fallen world, and (most likely if understand the historical context) it throws a measure of protection around the woman being sent away. It was to keep her from being exploited by the first husband. The certificate of divorce was never a permission slip for divorce. It was a restraint upon it.

By Jesus’ day that restraint had been turned into a license. The rabbis argued over one question — not “What is marriage?” but “What are the grounds? **When may a man divorce his wife?**” The school of Shammai said: only for sexual immorality (and then you must). The school of Hillel went the other way — a man could divorce his wife for almost any cause: if she burned his supper, if she spoke too loudly, if he simply found someone he thought was prettier. For now, just hear the question everyone was asking: **What can I get away with? Where is the exit?**

That is exactly the trap the Pharisees set in Matthew 19: [turn with me there as we see Jesus expanding on what we see in our text] “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” (verse 3) Watch what Jesus does. They ask about grounds; He answers with the institution of marriage. They ask when a marriage may **end**; He takes them back to the **beginning** — to the God who made them male and female and joined them as one flesh. “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (see 19:4-6). And when they push back in verse 7 — “Why then did Moses **command**...?” — He corrects. Moses did not command divorce. Verse 8 - “Because of your hardness of heart Moses **allowed** you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.” The Pharisees were preoccupied with the grounds of divorce. Jesus was concerned with the institution of marriage — and with the hardness of heart that goes hunting for escape. Then v. 9:

Matthew 19:9 ESV And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

From all of this, hear two things Jesus is teaching. First, **sexual immorality is the one ground Jesus names for divorce**. Second, **divorce and remarriage without such grounds is adultery**. I think this is what it means: a certificate (of divorce) does not dissolve a marriage. The paperwork, the sending-away in divorce — none of it has power to un-join what God has joined. So when a man divorces his wife on some frivolous (unlawful) ground and marries another, he commits adultery, because the first marriage was never actually ended. Wrong grounds - God did not dissolve the bond.

Now let me say something here that I'll come back to at the end, because it matters for some of you in this room. When Jesus calls a **wrongful** divorce-and-remarriage adultery, He is naming the act — He is not sentencing you to a life of continual, ongoing adultery. If that is your story, the call is not to tear apart the marriage you are now in. It is to receive God's forgiveness by confessing your sin, and then to obey Him right where you are — living toward your spouse in love and faithfulness, as Christ has instructed us, to the glory of Christ.

I think this is what it means: Here is the principle that holds it together: **the act of divorce alone never dissolves a marriage. Only a covenant-breaking sin can tear one flesh apart. And Scripture gives two grounds**. The first is here — sexual immorality. The second, the apostle Paul takes up writing to Corinth:

“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.”

— 1 Corinthians 7:15 (ESV)

Paul is careful — he is applying the Lord's teaching to a case the Lord did not directly address: a believer married to an unbeliever who abandons the marriage. If that spouse walks away and will not stay, let them go; the brother or sister is not bound. Desertion, like immorality, is a covenant-breaking act, and the abandoned partner is freed. Two grounds — **unfaithfulness and desertion**. In both, it is the offender who tears the one flesh, never the innocent one. And in both, the innocent one is released.

But do you see what can happen? We quickly focus on asking about grounds, asking where the line is, asking what we can get away with. And Jesus, in Matthew 19, will not let us stay there. He drives us underneath the letter to the spirit, underneath divorce to marriage, underneath our conduct to our hearts. This is the greater righteousness of the kingdom He has been teaching all along — not a letter-only obedience that asks “How little can I do?” but a whole-hearted, whole-person righteousness that wants God's will from the inside out. And behind all of it stands a God who made a covenant and kept it with a people who broke theirs. We will look to Him but, First, three things this text presses on us.

1 — OUR HEARTS MUST EMBRACE WHAT THE WORD TRULY SAYS ABOUT MARRIAGE

Notice where Jesus starts in Matthew 19: not with us, but with God. Before there is anything for us to do, there is something God has done. **He** is the one who joins. **He** takes two and makes them one. A marriage is something God makes.

When I stood before Elijah and Chaya, I charged them to be amazed at this, and I want us to be amazed at it too. Be amazed that this comes from the beginning, and it comes from God. Marriage is not a human institution that God later blessed.

If married, be amazed that you were made for this — male and female, in the image of God. Your difference is not accidental. Your complementarity is not cultural.

Be amazed that it is good and right to leave and to hold fast. “A man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife.” That word — hold fast, cleave — is covenant language. The same word is used of Israel’s call to hold fast to the Lord their God. It means: I am yours. I will not let go. And what God joins in that holding fast, He means to last. If you are married, you made that promise too.

Be amazed that you are no longer two but one. That is not just poetry. When you cherish the other, you are loving yourself. When you wound the other, you wound yourself. Let that govern how you speak, how you fight, how you forgive.

So here is the heart question, and sit with it honestly: do I receive my marriage as something God made — or do I keep one eye on the exit for when it gets hard? The Pharisees asked, “How do I get out? Where is the line?” A kingdom heart asks the opposite — not how little can I be bound, but **do I embrace what God has made?**

2 — OUR HEARTS MUST BEWARE HOW THE SINFUL HEART TWISTS THE WORD

See what the human heart did with Deuteronomy 24. God gave a certificate to **restrain** divorce, and men turned it into a license **for** it. The rabbis built a catalog of petty things that were grounds for him to divorce her and it included almost anything. They took a text meant to protect a woman and used it to discard her. This is what the sinful heart does — it uses even the Word of God to justify what God hates. It reads Scripture asking “what can I get away with?” instead of “what does love require?”

And do not think this twisting is only ancient. Our hearts do the very same thing.

Some say, “I’m just not in love anymore.” But that is a wrong view of love. Love anchored in God is not first a feeling — it is a commitment, aimed at His glory and the good of the other. Feelings rise and fall. The covenant holds.

Some say, “It’s just too hard. I can’t believe God would make my life this hard.” What a lie — that we should never do anything hard to ourselves, that we must be true to ourselves, that we must protect our own rights above all. That is the opposite of Christian love. It is the opposite of the Beatitudes. It is the opposite of Phil 2 – of Christ.

Some say, “I’m not being loved the way I should be.” Again the eye is on what I can get, on what I am owed, rather than on what God’s Word calls me to be.

And some say, “I don’t want my kids growing up watching us fight.” I understand that ache. But divorce is not God’s ordinary way to bring peace into a home. There may be extreme cases where God providentially leads otherwise — but that is not the ordinary path, and never the first answer. It is as if we are making these vows:

I, _____, take you, _____, to be my wife — as long as we both shall feel this way.

I promise to love you as long as love comes easily, and to stay as long as staying makes me happy. I promise to be faithful — unless I stop being in love, or unless it gets too hard, or unless I find that I am not being loved the way I deserve.

Because I have to be true to myself. And I could never believe that God would ask me to live in something this painful.

I will not tear down our home in front of the children. I will simply dismantle it quietly, and call that peace.

So I vow to remain until this no longer serves me. What God has joined together, let no man separate — unless I stop wanting it.

Then the turn:

Nobody stands at an altar and says that. But we say it in our hearts.

Am I bending God’s Word to justify what I have already decided I want? The Pharisee lives in every one of us. Am I seeking my way or God’s?

Now hear this carefully, because it cuts the other way too. Even the grounds Jesus and Paul give are a **permission, not a command**. Sexual immorality and desertion give the innocent party freedom — they do not compel divorce. And this is where the whole Sermon on the Mount presses in on us. The kingdom Jesus is describing is one of meekness, mercy, forgiveness, and peacemaking. So where sin has wounded a marriage, the first question of a kingdom heart is not “am I free to leave?” but “can this be forgiven? can this be reconciled?” How might God be glorified? There is a gospel light that shines when forgiveness and reconciliation happen even in the most devastating situations — even where immorality has occurred. That is not easy, and it is

not shallow. And I have to be honest — sometimes it is not possible, where sinner is unrepentant and persistent. But even then, the heart that has been shaped by this Sermon reaches for reconciliation before it reaches for release. So ask yourself honestly: when I am the one wounded, is my first instinct release — or reconciliation?

And what makes that possible? Only a God who does the same. God had every ground to divorce a faithless people — and He pursued them. Which brings us to where all of this has been going.

3 — OUR HEARTS MUST BE FIXED ON THE ONE WHO MARRIED US

Everything in this text finally points here. Paul tells the Ephesians that marriage was always about something bigger than itself:

“Wives... submit as to the Lord...the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior... Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” — Ephesians 5:22–33

Be amazed. I mean gasp with joy, be startled with wonder, be provoked to praise.

Be amazed: **what God has joined together, no one is to separate.** What God joins, no one has the right to break — not outside pressure, not hard seasons, not our own worst impulses in our worst moments.

And be amazed above all — because this is where the whole thing was going: **Christ has already done this for you in the gospel. Marriage rings gospel bells!** Hear what this Husband (Christ) is like. He did not find a lovely bride and choose her. He chose an unlovely bride and **made** her lovely — a love that makes lovely, not because she was first lovely. The eternal Son left His Father. He came down. He took on flesh. He held fast to His bride — the church — and would not let go, even when it cost Him everything. He bore her sin. He rose for her justification. He purchased her with His own blood. He is the one Husband to a sinful church who has every right to write the certificate of divorce— every ground, against a bride who plays the harlot — and instead He bore the tearing Himself, in her place, and stays to sanctify so that she/we could be His forever.

This is the good news. Jesus, the true Bridegroom – Christ – He is the lover of our souls! He died on the cross and rose again. And He is the very one preaching this Sermon on the Mount. The one who calls us to a greater righteousness is the one who first **gives** us that righteousness.

You can't be righteous on my own strength — instead fix your heart on the Husband who was perfectly faithful in your place?

Do you see what marriage was for all along? Marriage points us to Christ. It puts on display a love that is unconditional toward those God sets His covenant upon.

CONCLUSION

So let me land this with three words to three kinds of people in this room.

To the married

Faithfully married, and married and struggling: be amazed, and do not grow proud or give up. Your marriage was never meant to display **you**. It was given to display Christ and His church. So guard it, and let it preach. Every year you hold fast is a sermon to everyone watching. And maybe some of you are **trying** to be faithfully married and you are really struggling right now — hold fast anyway. The God who joined you will sustain you, and his grace runs to those struggling with eyes on Him.

To those who carry divorce

There are so many divorced people on the front lines serving the Lord with faithfulness and fruitfulness! If you are carry the weight of this in your past - And there are many — some with cause, some without, some who remarried in ways that should not have happened. To those without cause: That sin is not the unforgivable sin. And it does not mean you are living in ongoing, continual adultery now. God works with imperfect people, and He draws straight with crooked lines. His will for you today is not to undo the past but to be faithful where you are and he is working your past for your good and his glory. Seek to put the glory of His grace on display in how you follow Christ and love the one you're bound to.

To those who have never come to this Husband — Christ the only Savior

This is the offer of the gospel. You do not make yourself lovely first and then get chosen. He chooses, and then He makes lovely. Come to the One who had every ground to turn you away and yet bore the cross and offers you a relationship with him. Come to the One who will never divorce His own.

Let this love consume us — as we think about our own marriages, and as we face our own sinful hearts.