

Matthew 5:31-32 - Abolishing All Divorce

This passage is arguably the most controversial section in the entire Sermon on the Mount because the subject of divorce and remarriage is a very difficult subject.

But before we even get there we need to start by saying that the gospel of Jesus Christ affects every aspect of our lives. That Jesus, the Son of God, suffered and died for the sins of his people and rose again the third day is not just the entry point into Christianity. It is the basis by which we live our entire lives.

So to link that with our passage here, we need to be reminded that the Bible teaches what is called eternal security. The reality that all those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ alone for their salvation have entered into the New Covenant and we will always be part of the New Covenant. Those who trust in Jesus for salvation have **eternal** life. Not 2-month life, not 2 year-life, not 2 decade life until you blow it so bad God revokes your salvation. No, those who believe in Jesus have eternal life. Like forever and ever. And because the faith we have in Jesus was given to us by God, and because it is God who sustains our faith even after we are saved, we will always be part of the NC. Or to put a different way, once you are part of the bride of Christ you will always be the bride of Christ.

That last bit is important because **Eph. 5** says that God designed marriage to be a picture of Jesus's covenantal love with the Church. And if Jesus's covenantal love for the church never fails, then our covenant with our spouses will not end until "death do us part" because marriage reflects that unbreakable covenant.

Now, part of the difficulty of this chapter is that not all Christians agree on when or if divorce is allowed or when remarriage is allowed. And far from being theoretical, this is an issue that impacts almost all of us to one degree or another. Maybe you've been divorced or you were raised in a divorced household or a friend of yours is thinking about getting a divorce or your friends have divorced parents. Maybe you've been invited to a wedding where people are getting remarried after a divorce and you don't think they should be. What then?

Christians usually fall into 3 camps on the issue of divorce and remarriage:

1) Permissive view: Divorce is allowed for almost any reason. This is usually a view of more liberal or mainline Christianity. Is your wife irresponsible with money or no longer shares your same interests? Divorce is okay. Does your husband just not talk with you like he used to or when he does all you do is argue or you're no longer intimate with each other? Divorce is okay. And since the divorce is legitimate then remarriage is legitimate as well.

Rarely do you see this view advocated in more conservative circles where people take the Bible seriously. Usually people argue for the permissive with emotional pleas, or logical conclusions: "Well, if he just spends all the money every week they'll get kicked out of their house, and she'll be destitute. She has to divorce him to protect herself financially." Whatever we might do with that, there's no appeal to Scripture. I will say although this is usually a more liberal position, in practice, many conservatives end up defaulting to this position as well.

2) 2-exception view. This view says that the only 2 times where divorce is allowable in the Bible: adultery or abandonment. If your spouse commits adultery with someone else, you don't have to get a divorce, but it is an acceptable reason for divorce if you so choose. Or if your spouse absolutely abandons you - runs away to another state or country or moves out and files for divorce - then that is legitimate grounds for divorce. They would also say that if there is a legitimate ground for divorce, there's also a legitimate ground for remarriage.

This is the view of most Christians today.

3) Permanence view. This is the least common of all the views among those who consider themselves Christians. This view says that there are no legitimate grounds for divorce. And since there are no legitimate grounds for divorce then there are also no legitimate grounds for remarriage. The only time a person could get remarried is if their spouse were to die then they could get remarried to another Christian. This was the majority view for the first 600 years of the Church.

Now, I hold to the last view - the permanence view. I held to the 2 exception view for a long time, but after studying Scripture it seems fairly plain to me that there are no exceptions. "But Jesus there's an exception

right here in this passage!” I think we’ll see in a little bit that the exception Jesus gives isn’t the exception we might think it is.

I also want to say that divorce is not the unpardonable sin. I think it’s important to start a study this emotionally loaded with a large helping of grace. For all who trust in Jesus alone for salvation, his blood covers all of our sins. The righteousness of Christ is applied equally to those who have been divorced as it is to those who are single as it is to those who are married for 70 years. Divorced people are not second class citizens in the Kingdom of God, they don’t have to continually identify themselves as divorced. For all believers, our identity is solely in Christ and through Jesus our account is filled with nothing but righteousness. So before we say anything else, we need to take comfort in those truths.

On the other hand, the gospel is not permission to go get divorced. “I’m saved and going to heaven so I can leave her and it’ll be okay.” That would be a high-handed, presumptuous sin. Nor is the gospel permission to get remarried if you’ve been divorced. The gospel is the assurance of pardon for our sins and the assurance that we can walk in righteousness - even in the most difficult life situations - through the power of the Holy Spirit. That doesn’t mean it’s easy, it just means we can.

Now, I think we’d all agree that God intends marriage to be between one man and one woman for life. We shouldn’t have to say that, but that is clearly what the Bible says.

Gen. 2:24: Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” So one man, one woman for life. Jesus adds to that in **Matt. 19:6:** “What God has joined together let not man separate.” So one man, one woman, no divorce because God has brought 2 people together in marriage.

Marriage, whether people acknowledge it or not, is a union that **God** makes between 2 people. There is a spiritual union that happens between man and woman and that union happens whether the couple are Christians or not. When God brings 2 people together in marriage there is a one flesh union that happens with spiritual implications.

Okay, let me give you a little historical background to this passage. The first thing we need to know is that there were different views on divorce and remarriage in Jesus’s day that were remarkably similar to our day. There was one camp that said a man could divorce his wife for any reason, including burning a meal. That was the more liberal side of things. The more conservative side said that could only divorce his wife for adultery - if she slept with another man.

Now, in the OT, the penalty for any sexual immorality or adultery was execution. You were to be stoned to death with stones. So think about that: the only way out of marriage was death: either because the spouse died naturally or because the spouse committed infidelity and was put to death through the death penalty. But the Jews had created loopholes that allowed for divorce, and by Jesus’s day they usually just got divorced because it seemed like Moses had given them the ability to do that rather than put people to death.

Why does that background matter? Because those were the 2 main views people held to when Jesus comes along and says “You’ve heard it said ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce’ but I say to you...”

Whatever it is that Jesus is saying here - just like all the other commands - is stronger than whatever they were used to hearing. To quote Voddie Baucham, Jesus isn’t saying “You’ve heard it said...but I say the exact same thing.” No, just like with adultery and anger he’s taking our responsibility as his followers to a much higher level.

Now, we’ll deal with Jesus’s exception here in a little bit. But let’s just lift that out for a second so we can clearly see what Jesus does say. **Read 32-33**

So here’s the contrast Jesus is making:

You've heard it said all you need to do is write a certificate of divorce and then God blesses it and you can go on with your life and get remarried. You're good to go. That's what you've heard.

"But I say to you 2 things in response to that":

- 1) Everyone who divorces his wife makes her commit adultery.
- 2) Everyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Now, where is this initial command found? Where do we find the whole write her a certificate of divorce? We know that you shall not murder and you shall not commit adultery are part of the 10 commandments. But this one is not part of the 10 commandments. **Look over to Deut. 24.**

Remember Deuteronomy was written by Moses. Moses was 1,400 years before Jesus and already Israel was dealing with divorce and remarriage so rampant that Israel had established a system of certification to deal with it.

Now, we're going to read this is a second. But I want you to see how much the religious leaders had twisted this passage by the time of Jesus. The only command in this passage is a prohibition of remarrying someone. A certificate of divorce is mentioned, but not as a command and not to give people a green light just to divorce whenever. **Read 1-4**

Okay, so what happened here? A man marries a woman and after the marriage he finds something indecent in her. Literally in Hebrew it's "Nakedness of a thing" which doesn't help us much. Scholars debate about what it could mean: it might mean she has already slept with a man and never told her husband, it could mean she is unclean because of perpetual hemorrhaging and unable to have children. It could be a lot of things. We don't know what it is but it seems like it's probably not sin because Moses isn't shy about calling out sin.

What we do know is that her first husband writes her a certificate of divorce. And then the whole thing happens again with a second husband. They get married, he hates her, and sends her away with a certificate of divorce. Now, all of that is just to set up the command. What's the command? The command is God will not allow her to go back and remarry the first husband. **Read 2-4**

Do you see that? The only command in the whole section is that she can't go back and remarry husband 1. Why? Can I just be blunt? Because he was a jerk who defiled her. **Vs. 4** makes it clear that **she** had been defiled by **him**. If this were sin she would have been put to death, but instead it's something he doesn't like about her. And not only is he not gracious, he makes the issue publicly known through the process of a public divorce. Because of Hebrew culture at the time she would have been damaged goods. So out of desperation and survival she marries this other guy. Her whole life has been upended by husband 1 being ungracious. And God is making it clear, you don't do that to God's daughter and then get to do it again. There were some issues about dowries that were likely factors as well, but that's the gist.

So this command is actually a protection for women who have ungracious husbands who make power plays and ruin their lives. Well, the religious leaders took this passage and said "Hey, what Moses is saying here is as long as you make the divorce official by giving her a piece of paper it's fair game to remarry and go on with life."

Notice that adultery is not mentioned here. You'd think that if this were the woman's fault it would be clear that she was guilty. In fact, just 2 chapters earlier (**22:13-30**) Moses made it clear if she was guilty of some sort of sexual sin she would be put to death. He doesn't say that here so it doesn't seem as though she's morally guilty of anything.

And so what they did was take a passage that protects vulnerable women from abusive men who might take advantage of their former spouse - gee, that never happens - and they make it a loophole that allows men to divorce their wives for almost any reason.

So back in **Matt. 5** Jesus says "You've heard it said all you have to do to have a legit divorce is to write a certificate." But you're misunderstanding what Moses wrote.

So Jesus gives 2 quick correctives. 1) Everyone who divorces his wife makes her commit adultery. How is that possible? Does the act of divorce mandate someone commit adultery? No. What Jesus is assuming is that if a husband divorces his wife she will go get remarried - just like the gal in **Deut 24**. Women in ancient times relied on a husband to provide for them. So unless she wanted to be a destitute beggar or a prostitute she would go get remarried to whoever would take her. And when she got remarried she would be guilty of committing adultery because marrying another man while the first was alive was adultery.

Now, just as a side, some people think that those who are remarried commit perpetual adultery. I do not believe that. I believe the adultery is just the one time when the new marriage is consummated. That doesn't make it okay, but I don't think folks who are remarried are guilty of perpetual adultery or polygamy.

So Jesus says the divorced wife, upon remarriage, commits adultery. Now, that's weird. Most people would say that the exception clause Jesus mentions here is **because** of adultery. They'd say that if you're a husband and your wife commits adultery, that's grounds for a legitimate divorce. But if that's the case, she's already an adulteress. The husband divorcing her wouldn't **make** her an adulteress because she already is an adulteress.

So whatever the exception Jesus gives here, it is not adultery.

The second thing Jesus says here 2) everyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. So this is not just a warning to spouses who are married and are contemplating divorce. This is a warning to those who are not married and they're thinking about marrying someone who has been divorced. Don't do it. Why? Because you would be committing adultery.

"Wait a minute, but they're not married anymore! It's fair game." No it's not. If you're a single guy and you marry a divorced woman the only reason you would be committing **adultery** is because you're sleeping with another man's wife.

Now, I want to talk about the exception clause here and then I want to survey the rest of the NT to show you that it is all consistent with this teaching. So what's up with the exception? I'm going to get technical with words here for a minute but it's important because Jesus is getting technical with words.

The words used here in Greek are very specific. If you divorce your wife you make her commit μοιχάω - adultery. Adultery is the act of sleeping with another person's spouse. Which assumes the marital union is still binding. But adultery is not the exception Jesus mentions.

The exception here is for sexual immorality - πορνείας - where we get the word pornography. He does not say μοιχάω (adultery). He uses a different word altogether. Sometimes the word πορνείας means a variety of sexual sins, and occasionally it is used as an umbrella term that includes adultery. But more precisely, the word means sexual sin that happens between unmarried people. So if 2 people who have never been married sleep with each other, technically speaking, they commit πορνείας - sexual immorality/fornication.

In Israel, before a couple was fully married, they entered into a betrothal period. Betrothal - what we would call engagement - was a legal status in Jesus's time that made a man and a woman technically married all except consummating the marriage. And in Jesus's day if you wanted to get out of betrothal, you had to go get a certificate of divorce. It was that binding. The exception Jesus is talking about is sexual infidelity during the betrothal period. Here's why I think that:

Turn back to **Matthew 1:18-25**. This will change how you read the Christmas story forever. Who do we have? Mary and Joseph. Notice how Matthew carefully describes them. They are husband and wife but only in the betrothal stage. Joseph assumes that Mary has committed πορνείας because she's pregnant before they've come together. And he wants to divorce her quietly. **Read 18-25**

So here's where the pieces of the puzzle start coming together. Joseph and Mary are betrothed, they are pledged to be married. That pledge is a legally binding agreement. They're even called "husband" and "wife" because except for being intimate they have all the benefits of marriage. And in order to terminate the betrothal

what do they need to do? Get a divorce. So Joseph seeks to divorce Mary quietly because for all he knows she has been unfaithful. I mean if your fiancé was pregnant and you didn't do it, what would you assume? "It was from the Holy Spirit, I promise. An angel told me." Right.

So Matthew says Joseph was a good guy, a righteous man and wanted to divorce her quietly. Why? Not for adultery - because they weren't technically married. He would divorce her for sexual immorality. And he would have been just and right doing so because they were not technically married. And we see how good of a guy Joseph is because not only does he want to divorce her quietly when he could have made a big deal, but he obeys the angel and keeps Mary and endures the shame that people would have heaped on them because they would have thought Mary was unfaithful too.

How this relates to chapter 5 is that Matthew's gospel is the only gospel that talks about the exception clause for sexual immorality. No other place in the NT has an exception except Matthew. **Look** over at **19:1-12**. In both places in Matthew, the exception clause for divorce is not adultery. It is for πορνείας - sexual immorality prior to official marriage. **Read 1-6**

So Jesus is asked: Is there any reason we can get a divorce? Answer? No. What God has put together, let not man separate. And remember **Vs. 3** says that they asked him this to test him. Jesus would get in hot water if he said this. And it's crystal clear. Well, what about Moses? **Read 7-9**

Now, question: Remember when we read **Deut. 24**? Did Moses command anyone to give a certificate? No. Moses commanded no remarriage to the initial ungracious spouse. But clearly divorce certificates were common. Why does Jesus say they were common? Hardness of heart of the spouse who issued the divorce. What is Jesus's solution? Again, let's take out the exception clause for a moment. **Read 9**

Here Jesus adds on to what we saw earlier we saw that if a man divorces his wife, she becomes an adulteress. And whoever marries her becomes an adulterer. Here he makes it clear that the man himself would commit adultery when he remarried. "But I thought if the divorce was final, then remarriage is okay?" Not according to Jesus.

And again, the words Jesus uses here are important. Except πορνείας, then he commits μοιχάω. Except sexually immorality prior to marriage, then he commits adultery. Jesus never ever says adultery is a way out of marriage.

Now, just to hit this home, look at the response of the disciples. They are floored at what Jesus is saying. **Read 10-12**

They say: What you're saying is so radical it'd be better to just not get married! And Jesus basically says "You're right!" A eunuch was someone who had a removal surgery, let's say, and they would never be married. Jesus says sometimes people were made eunuchs by their parents when they were born so they could serve the royal family without anyone fearing that they would be immoral. Other people volunteer for that surgery for the same reason. And there's a 3rd category: people who make themselves proverbial eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven. They make themselves eunuchs because they realize how demanding the marriage vow is, how serious God is about the marriage covenant, that there is no way out even in the most difficult situations and they say, "That's too intense for me." And Jesus says that's not a bad reaction to what he's saying.

Now, I mentioned that Matthew is the only gospel that includes this exception clause. Mark and Luke both don't include it:

Mark 10:11-12: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." No exceptions.

Luke 16:18: "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." No exceptions.

Why not? Again, it seems clear that Matthew wants to be sure to clarify the situation with Joseph and Mary; Matthew wants to clarify that that's okay if it's in the betrothal stage.

Here's another interesting thing: Usually when Matthew and Mark record the same event - which they do with the conversation between Jesus and his disciples about divorce - Mark's gospel includes more detail than Matthew. Yet here in this very difficult passage he includes less information, specifically no exceptions. Why not? Because Mark's gospel doesn't include the Joseph/Mary situation. Nor did Luke.

Look over to **Romans 7**. I want to look at 2 more passages that speak specifically to marriage and divorce. The first is here in Romans 7 where Paul is explaining how Christians are no longer under the OT Law. And he uses an analogy that when a spouse dies, the widow - or widower - is free to remarry. And his point is that in the same way, through faith in Christ we have died to the Law and are now in a new covenant with God. **Read 1-3**

So point he's making about the Law only works if the statement about marriage is true. If a woman were to live with another man while her husband was still alive she would be an adulteress. But the binding of the marriage covenant lasts until death.

And this is an important point: once a spouse has died, then the other person is free to remarry a Christian. That's not sin, there's no guilt. But until death happens, then we are bound to our covenant.

Look over at **1 Cor. 7**. This section includes the other exception most people think the Bible gives for divorce: abandonment. **Read 11-12**

So the words separate and divorce are used interchangeably here. The wife should not separate from her husband, and the husband should not divorce his wife. Christians are never, ever to pursue divorce. That's the straightforward command.

But what if for some reason they do? Only 2 options from there: either reconcile with your spouse or remain unmarried. Those are the only options.

Well what if the spouse is an unbeliever? Stay married! **Read 12-13**

When he says "I say not the Lord" all he means there is that Jesus didn't talk about this scenario. What he says is still Scripture so it's binding, but we just don't have any record of Jesus on this particular issue. But the Holy Spirit through Paul says that if the unbelieving spouse will stay with you, let them stay. Don't kick them out, don't leave. You're bound together by covenant. And your faith actually makes it okay to be intimate and have children together. **Read 14**

This is an issue Israel would have had to deal with: if a Jewish man married a gentile their children were unclean and even their intimacy was unclean. Paul is saying in the NC, it's different. In the NC the power of the Christ within us is so powerful that Christians can still have children with their unbelieving spouses because there is a sense in which the union is sanctified.

What if the unbeliever wants to leave? What about abandonment? **Read 15-16**

Paul recognized that there are times when unbelieving spouses will reject us because of our love for Jesus. And he says in those situations don't fight it. Let them go. You are not required to keep fighting for the marriage if the unbeliever really just wants out. Don't provoke them, but you're not enslaved to them either. In our legal system there comes a point where it doesn't matter how much anyone fights, one party can end the marriage. Let them go. Then what? God still regards them as their spouse. **Read 16**

They may have left, but in God's eyes the covenant remains. Well now what? The command to the believer to either remain unmarried or be reconciled still stands. There's no green light here to go get remarried. Do you see why the apostles exclaimed "then it's better not to marry!" This is what it is to be a picture of Christ and the church.

Couple of considerations:

1) Those who have been divorced and remarried should take comfort that in Christ they are forgiven, their new marriage is legitimate, and that through faithfulness to their new spouse God will bless that marriage. There's no need to feel guilt or shame. What they should do is all the more cling to the permanence of their marriage vows and represent Jesus and the Church well.

2) There may be times where a man or a woman need to separate from their spouse for a season. Abuse is real. Manipulation is real. It is phenomenal how masterful some people are at hiding their treachery from everyone but their spouse. So there may be times where separation is necessary. But at the same time divorce is not an option.

3) If you're married and times are difficult, represent Jesus well. There have been times in our marriage where we're just putting up with each other. We can't get divorced so we're just biding our time until we die or Jesus comes back. Let me ask you: Do you think Jesus just bides his time with us? Or does he love us deeply and lavishly even when we're wayward. Our marriages are just a passing reflection of Jesus and his love for us, his bride. Don't just bide your time, love your spouse like Christ loved the Church.

Pray