

Marriage, Divorce and the Transforming Gospel of Jesus

Luke 16: 14-18

Now one of the outcomes you might never have predicted ahead of time from Jesus' ministry was that it was the religious, morally upright, bible-believing people of Jesus' day who rejected Him, and it was the tax-collectors and sinners, people who everyone else washed their hands of, who responded to his message and came to him.

But as I said last week, that begs the question, what next? If salvation is by God's sheer, wonderful grace, and all we have to do is respond to the invitation to come, does that mean it doesn't matter how we live, because 'hey, grace covers everything!'"? Can the sinners go on sinning and the tax-collectors go on defrauding?

And as we saw last week, the answer to that is 'no'. Becoming a follower of Jesus means following Him wholeheartedly, and upending the idols in our hearts. If God is going to be your master and your God, Jesus said, money can't be.

So far from the grace of God in the gospel meaning it doesn't matter how you live, and anything goes; following Jesus is going to fundamentally affect the way you see life, and how you orient your life. And if that was true for money, it is also true for marriages; if it was true for how we treat our wealth, it's also true for how we treat our wives and our husbands.

Seeing things God's Way

Luke tells us in v14, that 'The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.' They've just overheard Jesus telling the disciples that they should serve God not money, and they respond to Jesus by ridiculing Him. Literally that verb means, they turned up their noses at him.

Now, just a chapter and a half ago Luke told us that the Pharisees were grumbling at Jesus. Now, they are ridiculing him. Grumbling's dangerous isn't it? And it's dangerous, because it rarely stops at grumbling. So if you're given to grumbling, beware! The Pharisees have graduated from grumbling and now they are sneering and turning their noses up at Jesus and it won't be long before they turn their backs, and reject him outright.

But why are they ridiculing Him? And the answer is, because they loved money. What Jesus was telling them was so counter-cultural to them, so contrary to everything that mattered to them, that they just scorned him. Whilst outwardly they seemed so moral and righteous, inwardly they loved the honour and the prestige and the social standing that money bought. Sure they would give to charity, and make sacrifices, but they did so from a wrong heart – to be seen. And it's the heart that God is looking at.

And so when Jesus peeled back the outer wrapping and revealed and challenged their hearts, they ridiculed him. And in response Jesus said, v15, 'You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.'

And that should give each of us pause. You see, it is possible, Jesus says for something to be highly exalted in the eyes of men, but for God to hate it. It's possible for everyone else to think something is wonderful, and to be all for it, and for God to think it's appalling. It's possible for a society and for governments to approve of something and promote something, and rejoice in something, and God to be implacably opposed to it. Just because a vocal minority, or even a majority, think something is great, does not mean that God agrees. Man can exult in something, Jesus says, that God abhors. And, you know, there aren't many words stronger in the bible than abomination.

And the danger is that we reject what God says because we don't like it. But the fact that everyone else agrees on something does not change what God thinks. His law is not subject, thank goodness, to the winds of public opinion. It's not as if God is sat on His throne, and hears what is going on in the corridors of power in London or Washington or some pressure group, or think-tank somewhere and thinks, 'oh, ok is that what people are thinking? My how society has changed, well, I'd better change the law then, where's my pen?' No, it's what God thinks about something that matters, not what we think.

You see, whilst in v16 Jesus says that 'The Law and the Prophets were until John' – but since John the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, that doesn't mean that now anything goes and God doesn't care, and sinners can go on sinning and the tax-collectors go on taxing. He does care: v17, 'It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.'

The law and the prophets were all looking forward to Jesus. They were the promise. But Jesus is the fulfillment, and in preparing Jesus' way John the Baptist was the transition. And now, under Jesus, the new covenant has arrived. But that doesn't mean that God's moral standards have changed. Instead, through the gospel of His life changing grace real heart transformation is possible, that increasingly conforms us to the way God sees life.

And that is going to radically affect, not just how we see money, but how we see marriage. It's going to affect how we treat our wives and husbands as well as our wealth. And the extraordinary situation we find ourselves in, with escalating divorce rates and attempts to redefine what marriage is, makes it crucial for all of us, married or not, to understand how God sees marriage.

Now, I am very aware that talking on marriage and divorce and remarriage is just about as sensitive an issue as it comes. So you need to know that when it comes to this stuff we are all on a level playing field. We are all, including me, sexual sinners. There's not a marriage in this room, or anywhere, that's perfect, we have all failed. So there's no finger-pointing. And secondly, many of us either as children with our parents, or within our own marriages, know the pain of broken marriages. And having grown up in a home where the shadow of divorce was constantly present, and we would go to bed in tears and on tenterhooks wondering whether both parents would be there when we woke up, I want those of you who have or are facing this for yourself to know that as we consider this

stuff this morning, this isn't some kind of dry academic exercise for me or any of the other elders.

Marriage: a life-long covenant.

Now reading Luke, you might wonder why on earth Jesus throws in a line about divorce and remarriage at this point. We've had the three parables on God going in search of lost people, we've had the parable of the dishonest manager, and next comes the story of the rich man and Lazarus, both of which tell us the gospel is going to influence how we use our money, but slap between the two comes a one-verser on divorce and remarriage. What's all that about?

Well, this was a hot issue back then, just as it is now. There were, broadly, two rabbinic schools: The school of Shammai, and the school of Hillel. And when it came to divorce, the school of Shammai were the conservatives – and they held that the only reason a man could divorce his wife was for adultery. Whereas, the school of Hillel taught that you could divorce your wife for really any reason, even if she burned the toast, or if you happened to find someone who was prettier.

So there was a culture, both in the Greek, Roman and Jewish worlds, where divorce and remarriage were widespread, where divorce was easy to come by and permitted for virtually any reason, where women were seen as somehow expendable and you could trade yours in for a better model whenever you wanted.

And Jesus is saying, the good news of the kingdom is going to radically affect how you see your commitment to your spouse. You see, elsewhere, when Jesus is presented with this question of what are the permissible grounds for divorce, he takes us right back to the basics. Matt 19:3-6, 'And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

And Jesus is quoting directly there from Genesis 2:24. In other words, he's saying, 'Look it really doesn't matter what other people say or think, that's not the debate. What matters is what God thinks. And God has established marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman, who leave their parents and come together as husband and wife, and become one flesh. They leave and cleave.

And this isn't just any other human contract and if it's not working for me anymore, I'm out of here. The Bible calls it a covenant – a covenant in which God is the witness between the couple. In Mal 2:14 God says, 'The Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.' Marriage is a covenant, and God is the witness, and Jesus says, it's God who does the joining together.

So God's plan for marriage, Jesus says, was a lifelong, one-flesh covenant. One wife, for life. In the words of the Anglican wedding service: for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish; till death us do part; according to God's holy law. In the presence of God I make this vow.

And seeing marriage as this life-long covenant, gives you the security you need, the commitment, to let love flourish, so it's not always looking over its shoulder and wondering, 'what if?'

But what if? What do you do if it all goes wrong. What are you supposed to do when sin and selfishness trash a marriage?

Divorce and the death of marriage

Some months back the elders spent a number of weeks looking at this whole issue of divorce and remarriage, and whilst I don't think any of us changed our minds from where we started from I think we were, once again, struck by the pastoral complexity and the personal pain of divorce. But still, for all of us, our guide has got to be God's word and what he thinks, not what we wish were true. As we've already said, something can be widely accepted in society, like divorce, and God can take a very different view.

So facing a situation where wives and marriages were seen as expendable, Jesus says, v18, "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." Divorce, Jesus is saying, is a violation of the three-way covenant between husband and wife and God. And to divorce and then remarry someone else is adultery in the sight of God. Why? Because marriage is a life-long, one-flesh covenant. And the apostle Paul tells us, in Romans 7:2, that marriage only ends with the death of a spouse.

So, if you took this passage on its own, it would seem that there are no grounds for divorce and remarriage. But if you know your bibles you will know that elsewhere Jesus says that there is one exception to this, and that is in the case of sexual immorality on the part of a spouse.

Matthew 5:31-32, this is Jesus speaking, "It was also said, 'whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 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." And then again in Matthew 19:9, "And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." So Jesus gives one ground for valid divorce and remarriage and that is sexual immorality.

And the word Matthew uses there for sexual immorality is the word *porneia*. And that term referred to just about any kind of sexual intercourse outside of marriage: whether sex before marriage in the betrothal period, or adultery, or incest, or prostitution. And so what Jesus is saying in these Matthew passages is that the only valid reason for divorce and subsequent remarriage in the sight of

God, is if a spouse breaks the one-flesh covenant through some form of adultery, and that a divorce gained on those grounds by the other spouse is not wrong, and they are free to remarry.

Now, some commentators and some of us elders are persuaded that rather than porneia referring to sexual immorality generally, here in Matthew Jesus has something very specific in mind, and that is where a man discovers his fiancé has been unfaithful to him in the betrothal or engagement period and subsequently seeks to divorce her, and that that is valid. And that the reason Matthew mentions this, and Mark and Luke don't, is because this is exactly the situation that Joseph the adoptive, earthly father of Jesus faced with Mary, who was pregnant outside of marriage, and it's Matthew who records how Joseph had to wrestle with that and was ready to divorce her until the angel stepped in.

And for a number of reasons, I am very sympathetic to that position, that this exception Jesus mentions here is limited to the discovery that your future spouse, your fiancé, has been sleeping with someone else during your engagement period. Because, remember, in Jesus' day, the betrothal period was the year following the couple's legal binding agreement to marry, but before it had been sexually consummated, and could only be got out of by divorce. However, whilst I am sympathetic to that view, I am also aware that that has not been the historic position of the protestant church, but rather the more general forms of adultery are valid reasons for divorce.

And so, in these horrible, painful, gut-wrenching situations, where one partner has so trashed the marriage covenant by having sex with someone else, divorce is permitted, and we may rightly see that marriage covenant as having been irreparably broken, and remarriage on the part of the spouse who has been sinned against can be entered into without guilt, I would also want to add, it does not mean that divorce is required. That something is permissible is not the same as saying you have to do it. Rather, and for reasons we will look at in a moment, repentance and forgiveness and reconciliation and blood-bought restoration should always be our first option.

Now, if sexual immorality is the one legitimate ground for divorce that Jesus mentions, it seems that Paul adds a second. In 1 Cor 7:10-11 Paul repeats Jesus' teaching on divorce: "To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife." But then in v12-15, Paul addresses the situation where one partner in a marriage is a Christian, and the other isn't; which of course is not a situation Jesus would have faced:

"To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) [that is, we don't have any specific teaching from Jesus' ministry on this] that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your

children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved.”

So Paul is saying, if you’re married to an unbeliever, stay married, it’s good, it’s holy. But if that partner leaves, you’re not enslaved, you don’t need to keep on fighting to keep it together. And given the context, most commentators think Paul is therefore accepting that where that is the case divorce, and remarriage for the abandoned spouse is ok.

So, there are only three things that dissolve this life-long covenant of marriage: death, adultery (which of course in the Old Testament would be punished by death) and desertion – where one (non-Christian) partner simply leaves and says its over and wants nothing more to do with his or her spouse. And for a partner to divorce their spouse for any other reason may be legal in the eyes of the state, but to remarry is adultery in the sight of God.

Now, that begs two questions. Firstly, what about other reasons – what about physical or emotional abuse? Aren’t they valid grounds for divorce? Surely you can’t be justifying a wife and children staying with a violent husband? And my answer to that would be, there are going to be times when it is absolutely right, indeed urgent, for the wife or husband to separate from such a partner. In such situations the full force of both church discipline and the law should be invoked. The God-ordained authorities both within the church and in the state – the police and the courts - should be brought against abusive husbands and fathers, no question. But separation is not the same as divorce, and separation leaves open the door that with time and with the transforming grace of Jesus, something might be salvaged from the wreckage of sin.

But the second question it begs is what about those who have been divorced and remarried, and it wasn’t for either of these reasons? If the re-marriage begins with adultery does it carry on as such? Are such a couple living in a perpetual state of adultery. And the answer to that is ‘no’ – they are now married to each other and to no-one else. Jesus describes such a marriage as just that – marriage. It may have begun with adultery but it is still a real marriage, and it would be further sin to break it up. There is no justification for divorcing a second time over.

Now, I want to close out with one last point:

Marriage and the one death that really counts.

Now, there are a whole load of reasons why marriage has been designed by God for our good: it’s for a couple’s mutual help and comfort, it’s the commitment within which love can flourish, it’s the enduring relationship in which we can enjoy the pleasure of sexual intimacy, it’s the framework within which kids can be raised. It’s a means of us growing more holy, as well as happy, as grace and patience work their way out in our lives.

But in the end, marriage isn’t really about you. In Ephesians 5 Paul says, quoting Genesis 2, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his

wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.’

All along, Paul says, right from the first marriage, marriage has been designed to paint a picture, and that picture is of Christ’s love for His people. That in a husband sacrificially laying down his life for his wife, even when it hurts, even when it costs him, even when it kills him, and in a wife submitting to her husband even when that chafes, marriage is painting a picture of Christ’s sacrificial, costly, life-laying down love for His bride. And Jesus would never divorce His bride. He dies for His bride.

And it’s in the death of Jesus – in Him giving Himself up for us, that you and I, with our past sexual sin, and our broken marriages, and those things in our past that we wish we had never done or said – it’s in Jesus’ dying for us, that we can find cleansing for our sin, and the slate can be wiped clean. And that is just as true for you if you’ve been divorced. And if that is you, you need to know, again, that divorce is not the unforgiveable sin. Turning your back on Jesus and the grace He offers is the unforgiveable sin. But in the face of our sin, we must be humble ourselves, and face our sins in confession and repentance. That was what the Pharisees were never prepared to do. They just justified themselves. We must man up to our failings and then drink deep of God’s grace in Christ, that cleanses every sin.

And it’s in the cross and the resurrection and the giving of the Holy Spirit, that we can find the grace and the power to change. Change for ourselves and change for how we respond to our spouse. You see, the gospel, and Jesus’ teaching on divorce, is not the chains chaining you to an unhappy marriage; it is the transforming power for changed hearts and hope-filled homes. Because Jesus died, your marriage doesn’t have to. You can know grace now for your past that wipes away the stain and the shame; and you can know grace for the future, that gives you hope that can endure.