

Divorce

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[0 : 0 0] Well, to be honest, some people might be surprised that I include divorce in a series called Crisis. Because today, divorce is less and less seen as a crisis, and more and more we're seen as just something that is completely normal.

People aren't even calling it divorce anymore. That sounds too negative. Instead, it's being called conscious uncoupling. And you actually get counselors and life coaches who train you in how to consciously uncouple with no damage and no negative results.

In fact, a statement from a life coach who helps people to consciously uncouple states this. He says, basic biology means the idea of being married to one person for life is too much pressure for anyone.

And so, in the world that we find ourselves, and parents, the world that our children are growing up in, society is telling us that divorce is just part of the normal course of things.

But we've really got to ask, and we're at church to ask the question, well, what does our Creator have to say about it? We know what society says about relationships and divorce, but do we live our lives according to what the You magazine says?

[1 : 1 6] Or do we live our lives according to what the Bible says? What our Creator says. And so, that's what we're here for this morning. To open the Bible, see what our Creator says about this. Because you'd think the God who made us, and the God who invented human relationships, and yes, the God who invented this thing called marriage.

By the way, we didn't come up with it. God invented marriage. You would think He has something to say about when we just dispose of marriage, like some, I don't know, disposable razor.

And He certainly does. God has a lot to say about marriage and the breakup of marriage. And it would do us well to listen. It would do us well to know just what the Bible says about divorce.

Because John says, if you haven't already, you will be affected by divorce sooner or later, whether it's a family member or a friend or a colleague at work or indeed you yourself.

It touches everybody because it's so prolific in our society. And you'll need to know what the Bible's view is on divorce, which you'll find is quite different from what you read in the You magazine.

[2 : 1 9] And so, we're going to tackle that. How is a Christian, especially someone who has submitted themselves to the rule of Christ and is living their life God's way, how is a Christian to go about thinking through this very sticky topic of divorce, very difficult topic?

Well, there's three things I want us to see today from what the Bible says. The first, perhaps surprising thing we learn about divorce in the Bible is that divorce is not a sin. And it's surprising for many to hear this.

You see, the automatic assumption is that if you get divorced or you've been divorced, you've somehow failed God. You know, there's this guilt that divorcees carry around, which often keeps them from having a relationship with God or coming to church because of the sense of shame they carry, maybe even subconsciously.

As if, you know, as if coming to church is only for those people who have their lives sorted out, in which case, St. Mark's would be empty, no offense. But coming to church is certainly not for people who have their lives sorted out.

In fact, it's for people who realize they don't and realize they can't sort out their lives without God. But for someone who's been divorced, it's important to know that the Bible actually doesn't say divorce is a sin.

[3 : 40] It's important to know this. Yes, often the causes that lead up to divorce are sinful and need to be dealt with. But divorce itself, if you've gone through it, is not something you have to necessarily feel guilty for.

Because what we discover in Scripture is that God not only recognizes divorce, but He even allows for it in certain circumstances. I want to actually begin with a conversation Jesus has with the Samaritan woman, which we read earlier from John 4.

Let me just give you some of the background to the story. So keep your Bibles open at John 4, because it'll be very useful to go through this. Jesus is tired out from a journey. He sits down at a well outside a Samaritan town, and soon enough, a woman comes to draw water.

It seems just like a random occurrence, this conversation they have, but we found out later that actually it was all part of Jesus' plan. But because Samaritans don't associate with Jews, it comes as a shock that Jesus not only addresses this woman as a Jewish male to a Samaritan female, but He asks her for a drink, which is just unheard of.

But as you read on, it becomes clear that this whole conversation is not about Jesus wanting water at all. Rather, it's about Jesus offering this woman something far better than water, something called living water that never runs out.

[5 : 07] And it turns out, in the ensuing conversation, Jesus quite scarily knows this woman. He knows her history. This seeming stranger, these two strangers who have never met before, and yet Jesus knows her inside and out, knows the secrets of her heart, and knows her deeper than she knows herself.

It must have been quite something having a conversation with Jesus, don't you think? I mean, having a conversation with this man who knows everything about you, you couldn't hide anything from him.

And when words came out of his mouth, they seemed to connect with the very deepest needs of your soul. That's what it was like having a conversation with Jesus. Wouldn't that have been amazing? Well, you know what?

That's what happens every time we read the Bible. Jesus still speaks to His people through His Word, and the same thing happens. The Word, the Bible, if you've been reading it, you'll know this book knows us better than we know ourselves.

And when we open it, and when the Holy Spirit guides us to understand the words of the Bible, it pierces to our very soul. It connects with us, and it addresses our deepest needs. Just like how Jesus spoke to people when He was here in the flesh, He still does it through His Spirit, no less powerfully.

[6 : 27] And He speaks to this woman. And it's in verse 16 that He really gets to the point of what He wants to say to her. And I want you to follow along with me.

Verse 16, Jesus told her, Go call your husband and come back. Strange thing to say, but yet Jesus knows what the situation is. Verse 17, I have no husband, she replied.

Jesus said to her, You're right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband.

What you have said is quite true. This is exactly what Jesus wanted to address with her. Very interestingly, in the very next verse, she changes the subject completely. She's feeling exposed. She's feeling awkward.

She now changes the subject to worship, and where the right place to worship is. But this is deliberate, a deliberate turn in the conversation Jesus makes. And besides showing us Jesus' supernatural knowledge of this woman, it also reveals to us Jesus' view on marriage as a byproduct.

[7 : 30] And thus God's views on marriage and divorce. Because I want you to note that Jesus recognizes, firstly, He recognizes marriage as a formal agreement, not just a matter of living and sleeping together.

This woman was currently shacking up with a guy, but Jesus didn't consider them married. Do you notice that? He said, the man you are now with, you're not married to. On the other hand, He did consider her married to five men previously, namely, that she had formally committed herself to them in a marriage ceremony.

But here's where it's interesting. Jesus considers all five of those marriages as legitimate marriages, even though four of them were after a divorce. So what does this teach us?

Well, this teaches us that Jesus Himself recognized the legitimacy of divorce and remarriage after divorce. We see the same thing, for example, in God's laws to Israel in Deuteronomy 24.

You can turn there if you want to. Deuteronomy 24 from verse 1 says this. This is the instructions, the laws to the nation of Israel.

[8 : 38] And God says, if a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her, and sends her from his house, and after she leaves his house, she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her, and sends her from his home, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled.

Now there's a lot we can go into, and we're going to go into this passage deeper, and just the reasons for this law in our growth groups. But what I want us to notice from here is that God recognized formal divorce.

Do you notice that? In those days, through the writing of a divorce certificate, formal, legal divorce. And he recognized not only the legitimacy of divorce, but the legitimacy of remarriage following divorce.

And so from these passages, it's clear, it's important that we make this clear, that God recognizes that divorce has happened. And he allows for divorce even amongst his people.

And so it's not a sin in and of itself. However, this doesn't mean that God is pro-divorce. On the contrary, we also learn in the Bible that although he recognizes divorce, he is still very much against it.

[10 : 08] That's the second thing I want us to just learn about divorce from the Bible. God is against divorce. Now, this law in Deuteronomy that I just read for you, it didn't take long for Israelite men who got bored of their wives to start abusing this law and getting rid of their wives for any and every reason.

Apparently, many rabbis of the day even encouraged men to divorce their wives if she had spoiled a dish for him or if he found another fairer than she.

And it's the same today, isn't it? People tend to find the most trivial reasons to seek divorce, women and men. I heard a story of a woman who filed for divorce from her husband. True story.

And this was the reason she put for filing for divorce. He makes me gain weight by cooking four-course meals for me and making me food whenever I'm hungry and he doesn't care what size I am.

That was the reason she was filing for divorce. Well, understandably, the judge who happened to be a woman threw out her application and asked her whether she had lost her mind. But it's true, isn't it?

[11 : 14] People will find any and every reason to break off a marriage today. And it's very easy to do. And you don't really need legitimate reasons.

And it was just the same in Jesus' day. It's not, you know, divorce, although we see it a lot in our society, it's not a new phenomenon. It was around in Jesus' day just as much. This breakup in relationships that were once a good thing.

In fact, this topic came up in a conversation that Jesus had with the Pharisees, these very same Pharisees who were wanting to throw away their wives, divorce their wives when they got bored of them.

I'm going to ask you to turn again to Matthew 19. This is the thing with these topical sermons where we look at a topic. We have to jump around Scripture quite a lot, so do forgive me, but it does give you practice in navigating your Bible, which is a good thing to do.

Matthew 19, from verse 3, we see this conversation that Jesus had with these Pharisees about divorce. Matthew 19, from verse 3, Some Pharisees came to Jesus to test him.

[12 : 26] They asked, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason? Haven't you read, he replied, that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female and said, For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh.

So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate. Oh, why then? They asked, did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?

Jesus replied, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for sexual immorality and marries another woman commits adultery.

Okay, so, you had these Pharisees and they were busy debating the little different reasons, what counted as legitimate reasons that they could use to divorce their wives and Jesus comes along and says to them, guys, haven't you read Genesis?

Haven't you read about the beginning? God doesn't want you to get divorced at all. Don't you get it? So, so what Jesus did is he brought them right back, further back than, than the law that they were debating, right back to the beginning of creation and he made them consider God's original design for marriage rather than debate what was allowed and what wasn't.

[13 : 55] And that's why, by the way, today I don't want to stand here and tell you what's allowed and what isn't when it comes to marriage and divorce. I want you to consider what Jesus wanted people to consider, God's original design for marriage.

Because when we consider God's original design what marriage is meant to be, it'll help us much better to understand how to go about the breakup of marriage. And when we turn to Genesis, what we discover is that marriage was meant by God to be a permanent thing.

The language that was used here was the language of combination, combining two things together, never to be separated. Marriage, we find out, was meant to be a beautiful and secure relationship where a husband and a wife are free to be completely themselves without fear that the other will reject them or leave them.

And marriage was meant to be the foundation of a secure household where children can be raised in the security of having both a mom and a dad present. And that's God's design for marriage.

And when you mess with that design, all kinds of harm occurs, not only to the spouses but to the family, the extended family and of course the children themselves.

[15 : 20] You know, once when I was a teenager in some youth group, the youth leader was talking on marriage and he used a really good illustration. He said it's like when you glue two pieces of paper together.

Imagine you've got two A4 pieces of paper and you cover it with glue and then you glue them together and you let the glue dry. Now try to take those pieces of paper apart. What's going to happen? Both of them will get damaged, won't they?

They're not going to end up the same. And it's a good illustration. It's always stuck with me. Stuck with me. Excuse the pun. But it's always stuck with me because marriage is a gluing together of two people, of two souls into a lifelong union.

When you destroy that, it's not just conscious uncoupling. It's not just something pleasant. It leads to all kinds of damage. And so God never wants people to get divorced.

That was never his plan. Okay, so the Pharisees say to Jesus, but then why did he give us the law about writing certificates of divorce if he never wanted people to get divorced?

[16 : 26] Jesus replied, verse 8, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. In other words, God's laws on divorce weren't to encourage divorce but to regulate divorces that would inevitably happen because of sin, because of people's hard hearts.

And in fact, as an aside, the law on the certificate of divorce was actually meant to protect the woman who had no rights in society back then. And sometimes, sadly, someone will have to go through a divorce through no fault of their own, like many women back in Israelite society, but because of the sin of the other party.

But whoever's fault it is, Jesus is effectively saying to these Pharisees, the root problem, and this is very important for us to understand, the root problem that leads to divorce, that causes the breakdown of a relationship, is not that your wife spoiled your food or that your husband made you fat, or any other reasons that we tend to pin it on.

The problem is your hard heart towards God. You notice that? Jesus says the problem, what leads to divorce is your hardness of heart.

It's because you're not living in line with God's will and God's word, which, by the way, is instinctive of all of us, not to live according to God's will, but according to our own.

[17 : 55] And that's why we mess it up. That's why we can't manage relationships with each other. But the point is, this is so important to get, the real problem underlying divorce is not horizontal.

It's vertical. What Jesus is saying here is that the reason human relationships break down is because we have a broken relationship with God himself.

But that's exactly why Jesus came to earth, you see. That's exactly why Jesus came, to fix our broken relationship with God first and foremost.

And we were right back in our first sermon in this series where we spoke about disease. I gave a little spoiler and I said, what you'll find in all of these crises of life is that the answer is Jesus.

And here again, the answer is Jesus. Because if our broken relationships with one another are actually due to our broken relationship with God, the only solution for all of those relationship breakdowns is Jesus.

[19 : 08] That is why he came to earth. And we find out that in this conversation that he has with the Samaritan woman, I want us to go back there. It's very important that we see what he says.

Because it turns out that this woman, as we saw earlier, had been through a string of broken marriages. She was evidently looking for something in relationships with men that she wasn't finding.

And so she was moving from broken relationship to broken relationship, much like people do today. hopping from one relationship to the next, from one marriage to the next, trying to find fulfillment, trying to find happiness.

And it seems, okay, they found the perfect person. This person is going to make me happy. And then, five years down the line, everything's falling apart. And they break it off because they're disappointed that they're not finding what they were looking for in the other person.

And they can never find it, so they keep moving from one person to the next. You see, the real cause of relationship breakdowns, which result in divorce, is dissatisfaction. It's unfulfillment.

[20 : 21] It's that, you know, my spouse isn't giving me what I thought she or he would give me. And that's, that's exactly the problem that this woman at the well had. Just hopping from one relationship to the next, never satisfied, never finding what she was looking for.

And so, Jesus then goes on to show this woman that what she's been looking for in human relationships are the things she's actually only ever meant to find in relationship with God, her creator.

And that is what Jesus has come to bring her. And that's what he means when he tells her in verse 10, if you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.

See, the gift that he's talking about, the gift of God to humans is access into a relationship with himself, which is the only place that we'll ever find the true fulfillment and satisfaction that we try to find in human relationships.

And that relationship comes through Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone because Jesus Christ is the only person who has ever died for human sins to remove the barrier between us and God to bring us into relationship with our creator.

[21 : 37] And once you come to Jesus and repent of your sins and trust in him and enter into that relationship with God that you are made for, that Jesus came to bring you into, you know what you'll find once you actually enter into that relationship with God?

Well, firstly, you'll discover that you're far less frustrated with your earthly relationships because you're not looking to them for your ultimate fulfillment anymore.

And secondly, you'll discover that God himself, through his word and through his spirit, gives you everything you need to start living his way and to conduct your marriage his way if you're married.

And therefore, the last lesson about divorce this morning that I want us to see is that while God recognizes divorce is sometimes inevitable in a broken world, it should, for his people, always be the last resort.

Because divorce is so easy and common today, struggling couples think the moment they hit a wall, the only solution is divorce. I've seen it time and time again. But for Christians, for those who have access to God, the creator, and his help through Jesus Christ, divorce is never the only solution.

[22 : 57] It's never the only solution. Look with me at 1 Corinthians 7 because this is another important passage that teaches on divorce. If you struggle to find it, either look at the contents page or just listen to me.

But it would help. And if you're taking notes as well, take note of 1 Corinthians 7, a very helpful passage when it comes to the topic of marriage and divorce. As the Apostle Paul, with God's authority, writing from verse 10, to the married, I give this command, not I, but the Lord.

A wife must not separate from her husband, but if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And her husband must not divorce his wife.

Now, this is another passage we're going to look in more detail in growth group, so please do make sure you're there. But notice for now that for a Christian who Paul's writing to, his audience in 1 Corinthians is the Corinthian Christians, for a Christian, in a case of a marriage breakdown, which he concedes sometimes will happen, before jumping to formal divorce, a couple should seek to be reconciled first.

Do you see that? They should never just move on without trying to resolve the problem that led to the breakdown. Sometimes they think it's easier, and sometimes it is easier just to break up something and move on, but that's not what God's people, who understand God's design for marriage and have got the resources to fix it, that's not what God's people do.

[24 : 39] They don't just move on without trying to resolve the problem. And the reason Paul says this is that he knows Christians have supernatural resources at their disposal to help them restore their broken relationships with one another.

You see, Christians, those who have come to Christ, have had their ultimate relationship with God restored, and therefore, that flows down and enables us to restore our human relationships as well, with the resources which the gospel of Jesus Christ gives us.

And you know what those resources are? If you're a Christian, do you know what resources that the gospel has given you to fix human relationships? Well, resources like the ability to forgive, which is so important in a human marriage.

And only Christians can forgive fully and without limit because only Christians have experienced being forgiven in that way. The gospel also gives us the ability to love and serve our spouse, to put their needs above our own because we've experienced Jesus doing that for us.

And the gospel gives us the immense privilege of prayer, direct access to God, through which God promises to work in our lives and do things in our lives and our relationships that we could never achieve for ourselves.

[26 : 02] And these are just some of the resources that a Christian has at their disposal. And so we should never think that a Christian marriage is broken beyond repair when we have such immense privileges and immense resources and such access to a powerful miracle-working God.

You see, Jesus came to liberate us from sin. We know that. That's what the Bible teaches. That's what the gospel is all about. That's what this church exists for, to tell the people in this community and further afield that Jesus has come to free you from sin and free you from the ultimate penalty of sin in eternity.

But you know what? Jesus hasn't only come to free us from the penalty of sin. He's also come to free us from the power of sin here and now in this life and in our relationships.

The effects that sin has in our relationships, Jesus came to help us to overcome that. And you know what our problem is though? Our problem is that we don't ask.

We don't use the resources that God has given us. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, if only you knew what I could do for you, you would have asked me. But she didn't because she didn't know and you know what?

[27 : 15] That's a rebuke to us. Jesus is saying to us, when we hit troubles in life, when we hit troubles in our relationships, he's saying, if only you knew what I could do for you, you would ask me.

Brothers and sisters, we so often run into trouble in this life and in our relationships, not just our marriage relationships, but our friendships and our relationships with one another.

Breakdowns of relationships, problems in the home between husband and wife and between parent and child. And you know what we do? We try to fix it on our own strength, don't we?

We read books or we rely on our own cleverness to try to overcome our problems and fix our problems and it doesn't work and we try again and it doesn't work so we eventually throw in the towel.

If only we knew the power of God, the living water that He offers us, not just for eternal life but for life here and now. And if only we knew the influence that God can have in our homes and our marriages, if only we would let Him in.

[28 : 23] If only we would get into the habit of making God our daily focus and our first port of call when we have problems in our marriages, there would be far less troubled marriages in the church today, I can assure you.

And so if you're a Christian this morning, realize the immense privilege and resources you have at your disposal to fight sin. And if you're not a Christian, I don't assume that everyone who comes to church has given their life to Jesus.

If you haven't, if you're not a Christian, then I want you to realize this morning that the only way that your relationship problems on earth will ever be truly sorted is when you enter into that one relationship that you were made for.

And that is a relationship with God, your Creator. And that is what Jesus Christ came to earth to give you when you come to Him and put your trust in Him. And that's really all I want to say this morning.

But I do want to close with some practical advice depending on what situation you're in. And apologies to those who aren't married. This practical advice isn't so much for you.

[29 : 39] It's more to married people. However, you may be married in the future and you certainly have friends and family who are married. So I hope this will help all of you. And so the first piece of advice I want to give to you, if you're married and you're considering a divorce for whatever reason, I want you to know that first and foremost God wants your marriage to be saved.

And I want you to know that if you're a Christian He's given you the resources to do that. Now, it won't always work especially if the other person isn't going to play ball and use the resources that God has given.

But, if you haven't yet and you're in that situation, talk through it with the pastor or with a trusted Christian friend who can open the word with you, who can pray with you and who can just help you on the road to restore that broken relationship.

It is possible. And that's what God wants. Secondly, if you have been divorced, if you are divorced and it was your fault and you know it and in hindsight you can look back and you know it was your sin that caused it, well, I want you to know that God is a God who offers complete forgiveness and restoration of your past sins when you confess and when you trust in Jesus.

He is ready and willing to wipe your past mistakes away that you don't have to carry that guilt around. He's ready and willing to give you new life and He is ready to give you joy beyond marriage even in singleness because marriage is not the be-all and end-all.

[31 : 17] And then finally, I want to speak to those of you who have a happy marriage and you think divorce is not even a topic that's applicable to you and you're not even really listening to this sermon.

Well, I want to tell you don't for a minute take your happy marriage for granted. It's a miracle that two instinctively self-seeking sinners can live together at all.

You know, we should be surprised not at the amount of marriages in our society but that there aren't, I mean the amount of divorces in our society but that there aren't more divorces in our society given how sinful and selfish we are by nature.

A happy marriage is possible by God's grace alone so thank God for your marriage. Guard your marriage, nurture your marriage as the treasure it is. But also, finally, and very importantly, don't seek your ultimate fulfillment and happiness in your marriage.

Don't idolize it which is a tendency to do if it's going well and if it does make you happy because you will sooner or later end up frustrated if you make your marriage your idol.

[32 : 28] Rather, give God the place He deserves in your life and in your marriage. Help your spouse to love Jesus more than he or she loves you and realize that even the best marriage on earth even the happiest marriage on earth and the enjoyment that you get from it is only a temporary small taste of the true marriage in heaven between God and His people that we can look forward to enjoying forever through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And with that in mind let's pray as we look forward to that. Yes Lord, we thank you for this relationship of marriage that you've given us on earth but we do remember Lord that it is only temporary it is only for the time we are on earth and it is it is only ever meant to point to something much greater than itself.

It's meant to point to our relationship with you and Lord thank you for giving us this little this little sneak peek all the good times and the best times in human marriage will be the smallest times that we have with you in heaven.

Lord, thank you that you've given us this great hope through Jesus Christ and thank you not only that you've given us this hope and that Jesus has overcome our sin and the penalty of our sin but you've given us the power to overcome sins that we battle here and now to become even now the people that you call us to be and to conduct the relationships that you call your people to have and so Lord we pray that you will help us help us in our relationships help us in our marriages to make them the marriages that you want them to be help us to take on the attitude of Christ that's not self-seeking but always seeks the good of the other and then Lord I pray for all those who are not married and who may never be married Lord I pray that you would help them not to look to marriage to be the solution to all their problems and to give them the ultimate happiness but to look to you in relationship with you which is the true marriage which is the true relationship that you made us for

Lord help us to live out that relationship and to enjoy that relationship above all others and so we pray that you'll be with us as we go on into this new week in Jesus name Amen you who Who who who who