

## From the Beginning It Was Not So

Matthew 5:27–32<sup>i</sup>

### The Spirit and the Letter.

One way of considering this part of the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew chapter 5, verses 17 – 48, is to look at the particular sin addressed in each section—anger, lust, divorce, unlawful oaths, retaliation, and hatred for enemies—separately, as if Jesus was just randomly pulling exhortations from the law and putting them out there as examples of how the spirit of the law might relate to the letter.

By the way, I don't think that's what's happening here, at least not primarily, but if we're inclined to think along these lines, it's worth noting that in every case, the spirit of the law is actually more demanding than the letter. I think this is more than a little counterintuitive, because we're used to thinking that the letter of the law would be something like, "Thou shalt not get a divorce," and the spirit would say, "But the heart wants what the heart wants." We've grown used to quoting 2nd Corinthians 3, verse 6,

<sup>6</sup> ...For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life 2 Corinthians 3:6 ESV

as if that were proof that the whole of God's law has been abrogated in favor of love (whatever you perceive that to be). We're so used to this, that we seem to have forgotten that love was in fact the very purpose of the law—first love for God, and then love for our neighbor. That's another sermon for another time, but notice once again here in Matthew 5, verses 31 and 32 how Jesus, expounding the **spirit** of the law, takes us behind and beyond the letter to the life of faith required by God in His word. He said,

<sup>31</sup> "It was *also* said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'

So, that's pretty straightforward. Good so far. The predominant culture would have no problem as yet. "But," Jesus continued,

I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality...

(except on the ground of porneia [πορνεία]; except on the ground of fornication)

...makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Matthew 5:31–32 ESV

Of course, this came as something of a slap in the face to any scribes and Pharisees who may have been present on the occasion. The letter of the law was easy.

<sup>31</sup> "... 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' " Matthew 5:31 ESV

This was a summary and a paraphrase of Deuteronomy 34, verses 1 – 4, which is actually addressing more of the practical aftermath of divorce, but it seems that the Pharisees had latched onto it and were using it as a justification for their own peculiar understanding of "no fault" divorce—an understanding which mostly meant that they were never at fault—it was

always the woman. This was exactly their thinking when they came to Jesus in Matthew 19 and Mark 10, testing Him by asking,

<sup>3</sup> ...“Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife **for any cause?**” Matthew 19:3 ESV

Now, in Matthew chapter 5, we have the so-called exception clause (“except on the ground of sexual immorality,” Jesus said), but the language in Matthew 19 is not, “Is there even one single cause that would justify divorce?” It’s more like, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any [and every] cause? What if she burned the toast, or something?” Now, in Mark’s account of this, Jesus answered them, saying,

<sup>3</sup> ...“**What did Moses command you?**” Mark 10:3 (ESV)

Which makes perfect sense. They knew what the Law said, and He knew that they knew what the Law said, and they knew that He knew that they knew, so they replied (and accurately enough):

<sup>4</sup> ...“**Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.**” Mark 10:4 (ESV)

To which Jesus replied,

<sup>5</sup> ...“**Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment.**” Mark 10:5 ESV

And (as one guy said), “All God’s people said, ‘Ouch. Ouch. Ouch.’” See, they wanted to entrap Him, and instead ended up trapped themselves. Jesus, who knew the law much better than they did (after all, He and His Father wrote it), ended up telling them, in effect, “Yes, you know the letter of the law (“Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce”), but you don’t understand the spirit or the purpose of the law.” In Matthew, we read:

<sup>8</sup> ...“**Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.**” Matthew 19:8 ESV

### **Beyond the Letter.**

So, here again, Jesus took them beyond the letter to the heart of the matter. In effect He was saying, “Yes, there is a law that permits divorce under certain circumstances (people are sinful and sin needs to be regulated by law), but before sin, there was an order to creation which makes clear that this is not how it was meant to be.” Before the law, there was a norm, established by God from the beginning of creation, that could not be undone by the fall.

In other words, the being—the nature of the created thing—preceded the ethic. God didn’t create the man and the woman (“male and female”), independently of one another and then suddenly notice that oddly enough, this was a combination that worked pretty well together. Jesus said:

<sup>4</sup> ...“**he who created them from the beginning made them male and female...**” Matthew 19:4 ESV

quoting from Genesis (part of that law that His Father gave to Moses).

<sup>5</sup> 'Therefore...

("For this reason..."; because God's purpose for humanity was baked into the way He that He made them; Therefore...)

...a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh' Matthew 19:5 ESV

So, this business of marriage and sexuality was not just a happy accident. It was (and is) God's good order—and God's good gift—for the world that He made. Genesis 1, verse 27:

<sup>27</sup> So God created man...

(as in, "humanity" or "mankind")

...in his own image, in the image of God he created him...

("mankind")

...male and female he created them. Genesis 1:27 (ESV)

This is the creational order that preceded the Law, and not only that, it is a biological necessity because the very next words recorded in Genesis (you know, that book that God gave to His people through Moses), are:

<sup>28</sup> And God blessed them. And God said to them, "**Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it...**" Genesis 1:28 (ESV)

And given that being fruitful and multiplying was never something that Adam was going to do alone (even in paradise), God made two sexes, and they were made to compliment each other—to fit together and to work together, and to deeply enjoy one another in a physical relationship—and in such a way that in the ordinary course of events we would come to Genesis chapter 4, verses 1 and 2:

<sup>1</sup> Now Adam knew Eve his wife...

(so named because she would be "the mother of all living,"<sup>ii</sup>)

...and she conceived and bore Cain...<sup>2</sup> And again, she bore his brother Abel... Genesis 4:1-2 (ESV)

The prophet Malachi, was referring to this very aspect of the creation order when he wrote:

<sup>15</sup> Did [God] not make them one, **with a portion of the Spirit in their union?** And what was the one God seeking? **Godly offspring.** So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. Malachi 2:15 (ESV)

In simple point of fact, then, as Jesus stated in Matthew 19, verse 6:

<sup>6</sup> ...they are no longer two but one flesh.

And,

...What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” Matthew 19:6 ESV

### Covenant Breaking.

But, looking for a loophole, the Pharisees (and many people since), asked the question, “But what about that certificate of divorce thing that Moses mentioned in Deuteronomy?” In answer, as we have seen, Jesus pointed them to the reality that predated the Law. He pointed them to the reality that was established “from the beginning of creation.”

<sup>8</sup> He said to them, “**Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives**, but from the beginning it was not so.” Matthew 19:8–9 ESV

Then we get a recap of His teaching from our text in the Sermon on the Mount. He went on,

<sup>9</sup> And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, **commits adultery**.” Matthew 19:8–9 ESV

And note the complimentary nature of the two texts. In Matthew, chapter 5:

<sup>32</sup> ...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 5:32  
ESV

But in chapter 19:

<sup>9</sup> ...whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” Matthew 19:9 ESV

So, the man and the woman, depending on the circumstances, can both be guilty. There’s no loophole to be found. Breaking the covenant of marriage constitutes adultery—it is in fact the very definition of adultery—and it’s effects are far reaching. This is hard for us to hear in a time and a culture where divorce and remarriage are almost ubiquitous. Common wisdom has long said that half of all marriages end in divorce, but one website included this happy news (and by happy, I mean sad):

So, what about the famous statistic that half of all marriages end in divorce? That’s a bit of an exaggeration when it comes to first marriages, **only 43%** of which are dissolved.

So, not as many as half, I suppose, but wait, there’s more.

Second and third marriages actually fail at a far higher rate...with 60% of second marriages and 73% of third marriages ending in divorce.<sup>iii</sup>

Common “wisdom” (and I am putting wisdom in scare quotes for a reason), also states that the divorce rate in the church is the same if not higher than the world, but that hinges on our definition of the word “church”. An article on The Gospel Coalition website states:

What appears intuitive is true. Couples who regularly practice any combination of serious religious behaviors and attitudes—attend church nearly every week, read their bibles and spiritual materials regularly; pray privately and together; generally take their faith seriously,

living not as perfect disciples, but serious disciples—enjoy **significantly lower** divorce rates than mere church members, the general public, and unbelievers.<sup>iv</sup>

The same article elaborates that “active conservative protestants are 35% **less** likely to get divorced, while mainline protestants are 20% **more** likely than unbelievers or those who identify as non-religious. Apparently, hardness of heart is still a factor.

The thing is, whatever the reasons, whatever the statistics, Jesus said,

...What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” Matthew 19:6 ESV

Sadly, our culture has spent the last 60 years (give or take) in thrall to a so-called “sexual revolution” that has been busy calling evil good, and (more recently), calling good evil.

### If We Confess Our Sins...

But God’s word stands. All forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, are contrary to God’s law, and to His good order in creation. That’s why the Apostle Paul wrote in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6, verses 18 – 20:

<sup>18</sup> Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. <sup>19</sup> Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, <sup>20</sup> for you were bought with a price. **So glorify God in your body.** 1 Corinthians 6:18–20 (ESV)

God’s gift of sex was given to unite a man and a woman as one flesh, “with a portion of the Spirit in their union,”<sup>v</sup> Outside of this covenant, or when this covenant is broken, sexuality is disordered and sinful and leads to judgment.

Of course, this leads to many questions that can’t be answered in the context of a sermon, but here are a couple. Is divorce always wrong? Well, no; Jesus Himself, and later the Apostle Paul both spoke of exceptions in the case of adultery and abandonment and every case has to be considered individually.

More importantly, are all divorced people, whatever the immediate cause, and regardless of whether or not they have remarried, living in a state of perpetual adultery? The answer (and I really want to emphasize this) is **no**, absolutely not, otherwise we’ve declared adultery, and perhaps all forms of sexual sin, to be unpardonable, as if God might forgive other things, but certainly not this.

And we can’t emphasize this enough. That **is not** true. This **is not** the gospel. Yes, Jesus said,

<sup>32</sup> ...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 5:32 ESV

He also said,

<sup>9</sup> ...whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” Matthew 19:9 ESV

So, is adultery sin? Yes. The law of God clearly states,

<sup>14</sup> “You shall not commit adultery.” Exodus 20:14 ESV

and more still,

<sup>17</sup> “...you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife...” Exodus 20:17 ESV

So, don’t do it; just don’t. For,

<sup>8</sup> ...the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh.

And,

<sup>9</sup> What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” Mark 10:8–9 (ESV)

This is God’s definition of marriage, and God’s good order for human sexuality. Adultery is sin, as are all other unlawful expressions of human sexuality, and all need to be acknowledged as such, because

<sup>10</sup> If we say we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and his word is not in us. 1 John 1:10 ESV

But this is the message this morning, and this should go without saying, but I’m going to say it anyway, because this **is** the gospel—this is the good news.

<sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9 ESV

As Christians, we are called to glorify God, not only with heart and soul, but also with our bodies and behaviors. In that light, may we flee from sexual immorality, remembering always that Jesus Christ, our faithful Savior, has fully paid for **all our sin**—every bit of it; every thought, word, and deed; even our lust and adulteries—with His precious blood and,

<sup>1</sup> There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. Romans 8:1–2 ESV

So, where we have been guilty in the past, we need to repent and turn to Jesus, and when we fall, we need to get up and follow, not so that we **can** be saved, **but because we have been**.

<sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:8–10 (ESV)

---

i All Scripture citations, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), unless otherwise noted.  
ii Genesis 3: 20.

- 
- iii Bieber, Christy. 2024. "Revealing Divorce Statistics in 2024." Forbes, January 8, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/legal/divorce/divorce-statistics/>.
  - iv Stanton, Glenn. 2012, "FactChecker: Divorce Rate among Christians." The Gospel Coalition. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-divorce-rate-among-christians/>.
  
  - v Malachi 2: 15.