

TIL DEATH DO US PART MATTHEW 5:31-32

The most esteemed religious leaders in Jesus' day—the Pharisees—did not like Jesus. One reason for this is that He exposed their fraudulent spirituality. He called them hypocrites. He called them poisonous snakes and white-washed tombs. He also said that unless a person's righteousness exceeded theirs, they would never enter the kingdom of heaven. The implication was clear. Jesus thought their "righteousness" was a sham.

The Pharisees responded by trying to ruin His reputation and undermine His credibility. One of the ways they did this was by asking Him questions in public about controversial subjects, not because they wanted to learn from Him or know the truth, but because they wanted to trap Him. They were hoping He would answer in such a way that they could accuse Him of heresy or blasphemy or treason.

On one occasion "...Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, *"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"*

"What did Moses command you?" Jesus replied.

They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."

"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' '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. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

Jesus essentially told the Pharisees that the question of how to get *out* of a marriage was the wrong question, based on an erroneous premise. The question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife", presupposes that a man has the right to make that decision because *he's* in charge of the relationship, and, therefore, he can create or dissolve it as he wills.

The logic goes like this: since the man decided to get married, he can decide to get unmarried.

But Jesus asserted that this was a completely skewed understanding of marriage. He said, "If you want to know the answer to the question about divorce you've got to go back to the creation account where God established marriage in the first place." That's why Jesus quotes two verses from the first two chapters of Genesis (1:27; 2:24) that describe what marriage is from *God's* perspective. And in one of those verses the fundamental nature of the marriage relationship is stated explicitly. A man and a woman are united to each other to become "*one flesh*".

So important is this concept of "one flesh" that Jesus repeats Himself on purpose. After quoting this verse from Genesis 2 He says, "*So, they are no longer two but one.*" And then He makes a powerful statement: "*Therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate*".

A husband and wife may have decided to get married, but when they got married *God* did something to them that only *He* can do—something profound, something supernatural. He merged their two separate identities to form a brand new identity. They were like two individual branches that He grafted onto the same tree, so that they became one single tree. So when He looks at them He no longer sees two separate individuals; He sees one entity.

Again, they didn't make themselves one flesh. Jesus says, "*God* joined them together." And if God joined them together, it is presumptuous to think that they can un-join themselves.

So they may have decided to *get* married, but they cannot decide to get unmarried, because when they got married God made them *one flesh*, and divorce mutilates that sacred union.

There are a number of passages in the New Testament that reinforce Jesus' teaching about divorce, one of which comes from the Sermon on the Mount. Remember, in Matthew 5 Jesus was shedding new light on some of the more well-known commandments of the Old Testament. He was not reinterpreting these commands; He was commenting on their original, intended meaning—a meaning that was not merely concerned with external behavior, but the thoughts, attitudes, and motives of one's heart. And so He said that murder is not just taking the physical life of someone; it is killing a person's honor or reputation through such things as inappropriate anger and name-calling. Likewise, adultery is not just going to bed with someone other than one's spouse; it is wanting to. *Lust* is adultery in God's sight.

In the passage we will be looking at today Jesus comments on a law in Deuteronomy that allowed for divorce. It's the same law that the Pharisees were asking Him about in Mark 10—a law that was being grossly misinterpreted in Jesus' day. He says in **Matthew 5:31-32** *³¹ "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' ³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (ESV).*

The excerpt from Deuteronomy 24 that Jesus quotes was a favorite passage on which to have a series of lectures or debates. The entire passage is found in **verses 1-4**. *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, ² and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, ³ and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, ⁴ then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD" (Deut. 24:1-4).*

When the Pharisees and teachers of the law looked at this passage, they were focused on the *permissibility* of obtaining a divorce, and the *reasons* a man is able to legitimately divorce his wife. But that's not the message of the passage. Moses is asserting that marriage is not a revolving door. He's saying that if a man divorces his wife, he cannot remarry her if her second husband dies or divorces her and she becomes single again.

The fact is, marriage was no less sacred in Moses' time than when God first established it. The reason Moses addressed it in Deuteronomy is because divorce and then remarriage to the same person is extremely serious. He says at the end of verse 4, "it is detestable in the eyes of the Lord."

However, Moses alludes to the fact that divorce *is* permitted if a husband finds something "indecent" in his wife. "Indecent" is way too soft a translation. The word has reference to something that is filthy or vile. It's the word that is translated "excrement" in other passages of Scripture. Most commentators understand this to be a reference to sexual misconduct, such as prostitution, adultery, or lewdness. It is clear from verse 32 of Matthew 5 that Jesus, the ultimate Author of the Law, interpreted it this way.

However, it is this interpretation of "indecent" that was the issue around which the controversy and the debates revolved among Jewish scholars. By the time Jesus came onto the scene that interpretation had evolved to mean just about anything.

One of the leading theological schools in Jesus' day, the School of Hillel, based on

their interpretation of “indecent,” taught that a man was permitted to divorce his wife if he felt she was no longer attractive, if she walked outside with her arms and legs uncovered, if she accidentally burnt a meal, or if she embarrassed her husband in front of his friends.

In fact, in Jesus’ day a man was not even required to state the grounds for divorce on the certificate. He could just give her a certificate and send her away. In other words, a man could divorce his wife for just about any reason he wanted, just as long as he filed the proper paperwork.

But Jesus says, “Marriage is not about paperwork. Marriage is not merely a legal contract. Marriage is the merging of two identities. Husbands and wives are “one flesh,” and that sacred union is to be protected and preserved at all costs. Because God is the one who welded them together, and that weld is permanent.”

When God established marriage and said in Genesis, “*...A man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh*” (Genesis 2:24), He was describing an insoluble union. That word *cleave* has the idea of a firm, permanent attachment. It means “to glue,” “to fuse,” or “to weld.” And it goes beyond just the blending of two minds and hearts and wills. It is the fusion of two identities so that a brand new identity is formed. Therefore, divorce is akin to maiming or mutilating that identity.

Many men in Jesus’ day, instead of focusing their attention on the wonder and glory of marriage, focused on this relatively obscure passage in Deuteronomy about divorce, and took it out of context. In so doing they devalued marriage and proved that their hearts were hard, just as their ancestors’ hearts were hard in the days of Moses.

Look now at **verse 32**. ***³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.***

I want to be careful that we don’t do what the Pharisees did in Deuteronomy and primarily focus on the insubordinate clause in the middle of the verse which gives the grounds for divorce. The primary thrust of verse 32 is not to give us the reason for divorce, but to admonish us to stay married. And Jesus’ rationale is very significant. He says married couples should stay married because divorce creates a moral slippery slope.

Not only is divorce itself a sin, but it cultivates the fertile ground for more sin, because Jesus presupposes that many people who divorce will remarry. And when they do, they are committing adultery. Look again at what Jesus says. “*...Everyone who divorces his wife...makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*”

In the ancient world, and even within Judaism, women were treated like property. They were routinely used and then discarded by their husbands. When that happened they were left without any rights or resources, and often ended up in very precarious circumstances. What is more, *they* were most often blamed for the divorce. People assumed that they had been “indecent,” and so they were often stigmatized as immoral.

Jesus says that if a man divorces his wife for any reason other than sexual immorality, he actually *causes* her to become an adulterer. That means he is complicit in the sin, because he is putting her in a no-win situation—he is forcing her to remarry because being single was not an option for most women, unless they wanted to starve.

But here is Jesus’ point: Divorce leads to more sin and more alienation from God. It’s bad enough to mutilate the one flesh union that God created, but to actually do that and then become an adulterer is a slap in God’s face.

The writer of Hebrews wrote, “*Marriage should be honored by all...for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral*” (Heb. 13:4). That statement is intended to be an

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incentive for not committing adultery or sexual immorality. You don't want to be the object of God's judgment.

Now, Jesus *does* tell us that there is one legitimate reason where divorce is permitted, and in giving us this reason He is actually interpreting what Moses meant by "indecent" in Deuteronomy 24:1. It is, indeed, sexual immorality. **Verse 32. *But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.***"

The Greek word translated "sexual immorality" (*porneio*) is a general term that refers to such things as adultery, incest, homosexuality, and prostitution, to name a few. Essentially, it is any kind of sexual relations outside of marriage.

Why is extra-marital sex permitted for divorce?

Because the physical intimacy between a husband and wife is the most profound expression of their union. It is the means by which the two literally become "one flesh." And when a person has sex with someone other than his/her spouse he/she becomes one flesh with that person, too. And that is the ultimate betrayal of that sacred union.

That betrayal is so devastating that Jesus allows a person to divorce his/her spouse because of it. Notice, He *allows* it. He doesn't command it; He doesn't even encourage it. He *permits* it.

I've never known a situation where adultery has occurred where the wounds have not been excruciatingly painful and where the pain doesn't last for a long, long time. But I've also known men and women whose spouses have committed adultery who have stayed with their repentant spouses after the offense. Yes, it is difficult; yes, it takes a long time to heal, and an even longer time for trust to be rebuilt. But God, in His grace, *can* heal and restore the relationship.

So, what is the application for us as followers of Christ? It's very simple.

If you are married, stay married. God made you one flesh, and that sacred union is permanent til death do you part.

You say, "But, Stan, you don't know my husband or my wife. You don't know how mean he is, or how moody she is, or how lazy he is, or how unreasonable she is. You don't know how incompatible we are—I mean we have absolutely nothing in common. You don't know how unhappy I am in this marriage. You don't know how difficult it is to get along—we're always arguing and getting on each other's nerves. Besides, we're not in love anymore."

The Bible never once talks about compatibility or happiness or feelings or even friendship being the reason we marry. Nor does it tell us that incompatibility or unhappiness or even dislike for each other are reasons to end the marriage.

A famous preacher and best-selling author stated that if he as a husband ever infringed upon his wife's personhood, and ever assaulted her self-esteem he hoped she would have the courage to do the only noble thing: "walk out of the relationship and salvage her self-respect."

That might *sound* noble and altruistic, but that preacher didn't understand God's view of marriage. Marriage is a *permanent* relationship. Marriages cannot be dissolved because a person has decided to salvage her self-respect or fulfill her dream of being happy. Happiness is the by-product of living as God intended us to live in the one flesh relationship—but it's not the goal of marriage.

Marriage is the merging of two individuals to form one entity, one being, one flesh. And when we got married we made a vow before God to preserve and protect that sacred

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union at whatever cost. That requires forsaking what's best for "me," and pursuing what's best for "us." It means abandoning self-interest, self-promotion, and self-protection and doing whatever it takes to nurture the relationship between me and my spouse.

Brothers and sisters, let's not let the world dictate our concept of marriage. If you are married it is God's will that you stay married...to that person, and that you love that person and be faithful to that person as Christ loves you and has been faithful to you. Your marriage was made in heaven, whether you are happy in it or not. Your spouse is Mr. Right or Mrs. Right.

“Til Death Do Us Part”
Matthew 5:31-32

Main Idea: “What God has joined together, let not man separate”

Traditional understanding of legitimacy of divorce (v. 31)

Moses’ pronouncement (Deut. 24:1)

The meaning of “indecency”

The reason for ‘certificates’

Jesus’ comment on the provision (Mk. 10:5)

The faulty theological reasoning in Jesus’ day

Jesus’ rationale for staying married (v. 32)

Divorce is a sin that leads to more sin

The plight of divorced women in the day

The complicity of the husbands

Divorce is permissible if there is sexual immorality

The meaning of the word “*porneio*”

The reason why *porneio* is the *only* reason

Divorce is allowed, not mandated

Application—If you are married, stay married!