

# DIVORCE

## SUMMARY

- Some context – limited provision for divorce in the Law of Moses
  - Quick note: OT Case Law
  - What were the OT provisions around divorce?
  - Emphasis of laws – largely protection of women in vulnerable circumstances
- A heart problem – “what can I get away with?” – stems from hard hearts
- A re-emphasis of the Biblical ideal
  - One man, one woman, for life
  - ... and also ... celibate singleness – devotion to the Lord
  - And also the place of children – in the context of faithful marriage
- And therefore some practical outworkings
  - Jesus goes back to Genesis – and so should we
  - To the married – invest in your marriage
  - To the unhappily married – invest in your marriage, help is available – don’t give up
  - To all of us – don’t judge.
    - Firstly, because Jesus tells us.
    - Secondly, Deut, Jesus, Paul all indicate that not all separations and divorces are equal.
    - Thirdly, there are a very limited set of circumstances in which God doesn’t simply see divorce as a sin to be forgiven, but as permissible. However, these scenarios are extremely limited.

## INTRO

- Varied passage – won’t cover all of it – leave Rich Young Man for home groups to explore
- So – a passage on divorce. Not only applicable to married people:
  - What each of us believes about marriage (and other truths) affects how we function as a community
  - Marriage is one picture the Scriptures use frequently to explain God’s relationship with people, so all of us need to understand His teaching on it
- Some parts of Scripture are very easy to read; others hard. As we read the Scriptures, we are sometimes find it uncomfortable that God sets His standards so high (mention speed limits?) Remember: God does set His standards high: “be perfect, as I am perfect”. His response to our fallenness is not to lower His standards, but:
  - To extend grace and forgiveness
  - To remind us that He has endured more than we have
  - To strengthen and equip us to meet those standards

## CONTEXT

- Where does this passage sit? Straight after “if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off” and just before a story about the cost of following Jesus.
- There are parallel passages in Matthew 19 (longer) and Luke 16 (one verse). The Matthew account in particular gives considerably more detail, while the Mark account summarises and Luke simply puts the whole statement in shorthand. In the Matthew account, the disciples response to Jesus’s teaching on marriage is – “if that’s the case, it’s better not to marry!” – so we should be expecting the teaching to have been radically challenging in that day and age, and potentially in ours too.
- Matthew’s extra detail is helpful. Writing primarily for a Jewish audience, Matthew gives us a point of context – “is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”
  - Hillel vs Shammai debate about Deuteronomy. Shammai: divorce permissible only in the case of gross sexual immorality; Hillel: any source of displeasure.

- Which takes us back to Deuteronomy 24. What they disagreed about was a particular word – “ervah”, which is normally translated “nakedness”. Deut 24 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 if 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 house, or if he dies, 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.*

- This word “ervah” is hard to translate – not just for us, but the 30AD rabbis found it hard too! Hillel emphasised “who becomes displeasing” and taught that divorce was permissible for the most trivial reasons – even a wife burning a meal. Shammai emphasised the deeply personal nature of “ervah” and taught that it was clearly a reference to sexual impropriety of some kind.
- And so, the Pharisees come to Jesus. They come to test him with one of the trickiest matters of the day, and perhaps also hoping that he will side with them. Jesus starts by pointing them back to the Torah. This is another area where Mark and Matthew differ – Mark has Jesus ask, “what did Moses command?” and the Pharisees answer, “Moses permitted...”; Matthew has the Pharisees asking “why did Moses command...?” and Jesus answering, “Moses permitted...” You can tell the same conversation different ways – but both affirm a really important point about the Old Testament divorce law – it didn’t **command** a man to divorce his wife under certain circumstances; it **permitted** or **tolerated** it, but commanded **how** it must be done.
- To get our heads around this – statute law vs case law. Ten Commandments = statute. Most of the other 613 = case law. Not laying out 100% “this is how everyone should act” but rather, “here are some worked-out principles”.
- So Jesus corrects their understanding – permitted not commanded. This law was to protect a woman from being left in a limbo that was even worse than divorce – informal separation. And then, as usual, he gets to the heart.
- **Hard-hearted people ask, “what can I get away with?” – God-followers ask, “how do you want it to be?”**
  - **The yellow line on the platform**
- Jesus: not “never ever ever OK” but “don’t seek to find ways to divorce, seek to live God’s way”
  - Note – God presents Himself as a divorcee (Jeremiah 3)
- Reminder: Biblical ideal – one man, one woman forever
  - Points to God’s nature!

## SO WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR..?

1. Someone who has been divorced? Grace, no judgment – seriously, even if you were not the innocent victim – although if someone recently divorced were to join the fellowship, we’d want to hear what happened as in some circumstances, seeking reconciliation might be something we could encourage.
2. Someone in the fellowship contemplating a divorce? Scripture does not leave us at liberty to do so, except in some exceptional circumstances. Those are only where a partner has shattered the marriage vows and is unrepentant. If that’s the case, we’ll walk with you through it – otherwise, please let us walk with you through seeking to see your marriage restored.
3. To those who are married – invest in your marriage! It is valuable, it reflects the Lord’s character, and it do so beautifully. Give yourself sacrificially at every turn for your spouse’s good, and see them flourish.
4. To those who are not married, but might hope one day to do so – “marriage is not to be undertaken lightly”. Don’t assume that if you’re both Christians and you get on well and fancy each other then you should get married. Prepare well – the church is the best place for that!
5. To those who are not married and don’t see that as a likely scenario – honour marriage in your heart and in your words. But remember that the one human being we all strive to emulate more than anyone else – Jesus Christ – lived the most fulfilled, the most significant, the most God-serving life without being married. Whether you’ve chosen it or not, your walk can be a challenging example to us all of single-hearted devotion to Christ.
6. To all of us – yellow line on the platform. In *all* God’s laws and teaching, let our heart attitude not be “what can I get away with?” but rather “how did God make the world to be, and how close can I get to that?”