

## When marriage isn't Christ-like

**Matt 19:1-12, 1 Cor 7:1-15**

What words would you use to describe God?

It's a bit of a children's ministry question, isn't it?  
 And we could come up with the Sunday school answers:  
 God is powerful, God is wise, God is merciful.  
 But what if I were to say to you that God is a *divorcee*,  
 that like many people in our society today,  
 God has suffered the trauma of divorce?

Throughout the Bible

the relationship between God and his people is described as a marriage.  
 In the NT the church is the bride and Jesus is the groom.  
 In the OT the bride is the nation of Israel.  
 The Israelites had a wandering eye;  
 all too often their interest would be drawn away to other gods.

In Jeremiah 3:8, we see that Israel's adultery evokes God's anger,  
 and he speaks about issuing faithless Israel a certificate of divorce  
 and sending Israel away because of all her adulteries.

Make no mistake,

this isn't simply an occasion where the Bible is using a strong metaphor.  
 God is a being who, like us, experiences emotions,  
 and so when he uses the word *divorce* and when he speaks about *adulteries*,  
 we can be sure there are real feelings behind his language here.  
 He knows what it's like to watch a partner chase after someone else,  
 He knows what it's like to long for companionship but only hear silence,  
 He knows what it's like to have love and sacrifice treated with disregard.  
 God knows what its like to go through a divorce.

Which is why it's so strange that the modern day church

has such a strained relationship with those whose marriages have broken up.  
 Research tells us that divorced people are underrepresented in our churches,  
 it's as if there is a big imaginary sign out the front of our buildings:  
*If you're divorced this is going to be uncomfortable. Enter if you dare!*  
 Which is odd because the God we worship is himself a divorcee.

Why is it the case that divorced people feel uncomfortable in a place like this?

Maybe one reason is they're a little unsure as to what we think of the issue.  
 Will they come only to find that they've violated a Biblical standard  
 making fellowship impossible?

I think we need to provide some clarity on this issue

and so today we're spending time exploring what the Bible says,  
and within its pages we'll find two different types of divorce.  
I've called them sinful divorce and permissible divorce:  
we'll see that not every divorce is the same.  
but we'll also see that God remains sympathetic and gracious,  
while also remaining very concerned about this area of life.

We begin with Jesus' teaching about divorce, which was brought about by a question.

Matthew ch 19 v 3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him.  
They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"  
Divorce was a contentious issue in ancient times, just as it is today.  
And in v3 we get a sense of what one group of Rabbis were saying.  
One school of thought suggested that  
a man didn't have to have any particular reason to end his marriage;  
that a divorce could be arranged for any and every reason.  
If he decided that his wife was too irritating or too demanding  
or not attractive enough or if she couldn't provide children,  
or if he simply fell in love with someone else, divorce was relatively easy.

Today we find ourselves living in a society that permits a very similar point of view.  
In 1974 our government changed the Marriage Act to allow no-fault divorce.  
Until then there were 14 grounds for divorce (like drunkenness and abuse)  
and you had to provide evidence of these grounds for the divorce to proceed.

Then Gough Whitlam was elected, and he said that you didn't need an excuse  
you just needed to say that there were "irreconcilable differences".

Now in one respect it was a good change,  
in that it allowed poorly treated and disadvantaged spouses to end marriages  
without having to go through lengthy fights in the courts,  
But the terrible consequence of this change was a spike in divorces,  
many of which were for quite soft reasons.

Jesus' response to this free and easy approach is found at the end of v6  
what God has joined together, let no one separate.  
Jesus' answer goes back to the way marriage is described in Genesis.  
In particular he zeros in on the fact that marriage is a union joined by God.

Everytime we look at the Bible there's something new to be discovered.  
Here's my discovery from this week's passage.  
When we stand at the front of the church and take our vows  
It's not simply a matter of two individuals deciding to make a commitment,  
what it's actually about is two individuals asking God to join them together.

Marriage is an act of God, but I'm not sure we're used to thinking about it as such.  
Think about the different activities that God puts his hand to:

God is the one who scattered the stars in the sky,  
 he's the one who molded the planets and spun them into orbit,  
 God's the one who flooded the oceans and raised the mountains,  
 God's the one who put the seasons in place,  
 who calls up shoots from the ground and breathes life into animals  
 And he's also the one who brings a man and woman together in marriage.

It's simply not our place to reverse God's creation.

If someone told you that they intended to stop the planet from spinning  
 you'd dismiss them as raving mad "You can't reverse an act of God!" we'd say.  
 Yet this is exactly what we are doing when we seek out a divorce.  
 When people announce that they're getting a divorce  
 we say "oh, that's disappointing"; there's very little sense  
 that the decision to end a marriage  
 is a decision to break apart something that God has joined together.

And this breaking of a union can be terribly destructive.

I remember when I was a teenager catching a train to school  
 and sitting in the crowded carriage was a woman holding baby.  
 And she was sobbing. Loud, uncontrollable, pain-filled sobs.  
 I remember thinking "What. Is. Wrong? Something with the baby?"  
 Then someone asked what the matter was and she simply said  
 "He just told me he loves someone else".  
 And everyone in the carriage had their heart broken instantly.  
 Here was a young mother, new baby in tow,  
     and her partner decided to call it quits  
             leaving behind a broken woman and a broken home.  
 And Jesus says, "it's not meant to be that way".  
 What God has joined together, let no-one separate.

In verse 7 the Pharisees point to a passage of Scripture  
 which they think supports this idea of free and open divorce  
 "Why then," they asked,  
 "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

In his response Jesus corrects their false thinking.

Verse 8 Jesus replied, "Moses *permitted* you to divorce your wives because your hearts  
 were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.  
 Note carefully the shift in language here.  
 The Pharisees speak of Moses *commanding* certain actions that end marriage,  
 Jesus corrects this and says that Moses merely *permitted* those actions.

The Pharisees see one small concession in the OT  
 and blow it out of all proportion.

You've heard of the saying "If you give an inch, they take a mile".  
 This is what's happening here.

Rules governing divorce in *some* circumstances  
are interpreted as laws allowing divorce in *all* circumstances.

When Jas was pregnant with Theo

I imagined what an emergency rush to the hospital would look like.  
If things become critical I knew which lane to be in at which point on the trip,  
I was willing to break the speed limit to get there,  
and I'm sure that if the cops pulled me over they would have understood,  
there would've been no issue.

But the exception to the rule doesn't mean I can drive at breakneck speed ordinarily.  
What the Pharisees had done was to turn the exception into a norm  
and in doing so they were making up their own laws.

I think it's easy for us to do the same; to make up our own 'laws' regarding marriage.  
We have little rules like, "It's important to follow your heart".  
That might be a fair enough when you're single and looking for love  
but once you get married the rule becomes  
"Your heart needs to follow your commitment"  
Another rule might be "God wants me to be happy,  
and my current marriage isn't making me happy".  
Well, God prefers you to be content with the situation you are in,  
that's actually how the Bible speaks about contentment.

It may be that you yourself have fallen for one of these false ideas,  
and you've broken up a marriage that should have stayed together.

There is no sin that's unforgivable—we need to remember that—  
and every church member is a forgiven sinner in some form or another,  
so I want to say that divorced people are welcome here.

But it's also true that we need to repent of our sins  
and so I wouldn't be doing my job  
if I didn't encourage you to seek forgiveness over this,  
and I wouldn't be doing my job  
if I didn't encourage you to decide to act differently in the future.  
"God hates divorce", the Bible tells us,  
but I'm confident that he loves those who admit their mistakes,  
and he loves to help those who wish to see a change.

So that's what sinful divorce looks like:  
the free and easy dismantling of God's creation, based on flimsy reasoning.

But in what situations is divorce permissible?

Jesus has an exception here in verse 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife,

except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.  
So *an affair* is one situation where the innocent victim can end the marriage.

We learn in 1 Corinthians 6 that sexual intimacy is how  
the union between a man and a woman is physically manifested,  
so intimacy with someone else becomes a way of breaking that bond.

I've been marrying couples for 12 years,  
and I know at least two of those couples have either divorced or separated.  
In one case *she* left her husband after cheating on him numerous times.  
After the first occasion the husband thought "we can survive this",  
but she then found another man and took up with him, getting pregnant.  
And so that was the final nail in the coffin.  
It would be cruel to not allow her husband to get a divorce.  
It's unfair to expect a husband or a wife to endure the emotional damage  
of seeing their spouse take off after someone else.  
The cheating spouse also exposes their partner to the risk of infection.  
So adultery is one occasion when a marriage might end.

Moving to our second passage and we see another provision allowing for divorce.  
In 1 Corinthians 7.15 Paul says that *an abandoned spouse* is no longer bound.  
If a husband or wife is no longer interested in being married  
then the party that's left behind is permitted to end the marriage.  
This is the case with another couple that I married.  
He decided that he didn't want to be married any more  
and moved back with Mum and Dad.  
Well, the wife who has been left behind in that instance is free to divorce.

It's this idea of abandoning a marriage that allows a third possibility for divorce.  
The reason we are even discussing this topic  
is because we've just finished a series on the book of Ephesians,  
and in that book Paul paints a picture of Christian marriage  
where the wife is submitting to her husband  
and the husband is loving the wife sacrificially, just as Christ loved the church.  
But what if Christ-like love is absent?  
What if this dynamic of submission and headship actually leads to abuse?

The logic of 1 Corinthians 7:15  
is that when one partner makes it impossible for the marriage to work,  
—for instance by leaving it all together—then the marriage can end.

Marital abuse can be another instance when marriage become impossible,  
especially when it forces one half to remove themselves for safety reasons.  
There are significant similarities between a spouse who walks out  
and a spouse who causes the other to flee.  
It's the same result, in that one party has forced the split,

and in that situation the innocent party is free to divorce and start over.

This provision to divorce an abusive spouse has a long Anglican heritage.

Here's a quote from some Anglican theologians of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century:

*If a man is cruel to his wife and displays excessive harshness of word and of deed toward her ... and if he refuses to abandon his cruelty... Then he must be considered his wife's mortal enemy and a threat to her life ... In her peril, recourse must be made to the remedy of divorce, no less than if her life had been openly attacked... it is our will that parties set free in this manner may contract a new marriage, while those convicted of the said crimes be punished either by perpetual exile or imprisonment for life.*

These Anglican leaders were saying that if a wife is seriously abused  
then divorce can be applied.

This opinion was never formally adopted by the church,  
but it shows that serious Anglican theologians  
have been thinking this way for quite some time.

And then just two weeks ago

a report was presented to the Anglican Synod here in Sydney,  
which at one point says this:

*By making it impossible for their spouse to remain in the marriage, it may be argued that the abusive spouse has unilaterally abandoned the marriage. Following the moral logic of 1 Corinthians 7:15, this would suggest that in such circumstances the spouse is no longer bound to the marriage and is free to remarry.*

So as I see it, and as others in our denomination have seen it,  
divorce is permissible for either one of the three A's:  
Adultery, Abandonment, Abuse.

These are tragic experiences for anyone to go through  
but they are occasions when a divorce should be made available  
as a way of protecting those who are suffering.

It's the same kind of experience that God himself has gone through,  
so churches should be a place where sympathy abounds.  
And because God has experienced divorce,  
he's concerned when it occurs unnecessarily.

We need to take great care with this issue.

Care for those who are hurting  
but also care that we don't become part of the problem.

Let's pray for God's help.