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Sermon: January 4, 2015  
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“BUT I SAY: DIVORCE”**  
**Matthew 5:31-32**

{Songs 8:6-7}

**Place me like a seal over your heart,  
like a seal on your arm;  
for love is as strong as death,  
its jealousy as unyielding as the grave.  
It burns like blazing fire,  
like a mighty flame.  
Many waters cannot quench love;  
rivers cannot sweep it away....**

☑ {NIV study note, Songs 8:6-7} At its best marital love is **“the strongest, most unyielding and invincible force in human experience.”** It weaves together robust threads of passion, affection, and commitment to form a resilient union that thrives despite all the tedium, disappointment, conflict, and suffering life throws at it.

Isn't that what people desire in marriage? Yet many do not have this experience.

Isn't that the Creator's design for matrimonial union? Yet many marriages are not like this at all.

Many, instead of being **“strong”** and **“unyielding as the grave,”** yield to the grave.

Many, instead of roaring as **“a mighty flame,”** sputter like candles in the rain.

Many, instead of standing firm against torrents of trouble and temptation, are swept off shaky feet.

The majority of wedded couples vow, with evident sincerity, to become and remain one for **“as long as both shall live.”** But a high percentage of them are parted not by death, but by divorce.

The **“seal”** is torn away from **“over [their] heart.”** Their **“love is”** *not* **“as strong as death.”** It does *not* burn fiercely, it *is* quenched.

This is not the way it is meant to be! Some divorces are morally permissible and even a practical necessity, but they are never ideal. At its *best*, dissolution is the lesser of two evils.

■ Please turn to Matthew 5. In verse 31 the Lord Jesus begins, **“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’”**

● He is referring to Deuteronomy 24:1-4. It is a complicated passage, so I invite you to follow along. It is on page 204 in the pew Bible. Moses is speaking:

**<sup>1</sup> 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, <sup>2</sup> and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, <sup>3</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable...**

What is the topic here? Divorce is involved, but it is not the issue in question. Moses is focusing on remarriage to one's former wife after she has had another husband.

To whom does this law give guidance? First husbands. In the Law of Moses divorce is an exclusively masculine right.

Under what conditions is divorce permitted? Moses says it is allowed when a husband **“finds something indecent about his wife”** or he **“dislikes”** her.

In the first scenario a wife **“becomes displeasing”** when her husband **“finds something indecent”** (literally, **“a thing of disgrace”**) **“about her.”** Is it adultery? Might her **“disgrace”** be premarital intimacy that was discovered after the wedding? Could it be flirtation with other men, immodest attire, or explicit language? Moses does not say.

In the second scenario a husband **“dislikes”** his wife. The Hebrew is more intense: this man **“detests,” “despises,” “hates”** her. Is it because of indecency, or for some other reason? Moses does not say.

This is the foundation of all other ancient Jewish statutes of divorce, except those that apply only to priests. Women and girls, raise your hand if you would be eager to live under this law. Men, would you want your daughters to be bound by this?

{Mishnah, *Gittin* 9.10} The inadequacy of this law is exposed by its routinely unjust application. In the first century Jewish husbands are free to discard their wives on the flimsiest of pretexts: Rabbi Hillel teaches that a ruined meal is adequate cause; according to Rabbi Akiba it is enough that a husband **“[finds] another”** woman **“fairer”** (more attractive) than his current wife.

Are most men so petty and self-centered? That is debatable. What is indisputable is that first century divorce rates are very high.

For the woman there is much more at stake here than dashed hopes and a broken heart. She depends on men for access to food and shelter.

A divorcée's best prospect is to get a new husband, but that can be difficult. The next best thing is for her to go home to her father or brothers – but what if they are dead, or too poor, or unwilling to take her in? If so, she is left with three options: she can sell herself as a slave, sell herself as a prostitute, or starve to death.

▣ It is into this context that Jesus declares (verses 31-32), **“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that any-one who divorces his wife, except for sexual immoral-ity, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.”**

In a few short lines the Lord simultaneously strengthens the Law, modifies its function, and reframes it.

★ Christ Jesus strengthens the Law. He reduces the grounds for divorce to one: **“sexual immorality.”**

★ Christ Jesus modifies the function of the Law. It has been misused to buttress masculine *privilege*. He repurposes it to advance masculine *responsibility*.

★ Christ Jesus reframes the Law. He shifts the focus from dissolving a marriage to honoring it.

- This reframing becomes unmistakable when we pair these verses with Matthew 19:3-6:

<sup>3</sup> **Some Pharisees [come] to [Jesus] to test him. They [ask], “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”** <sup>4</sup> **“Haven’t you read,” he [replies], “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’** <sup>5</sup> **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’?** <sup>6</sup> **So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”**

‡ By reminding us that the Father’s plan is for husband and wife to **“become one flesh”** and equating self-serving divorce with adultery, the Son changes the discussion. The question is not “How can I have divine approval to end my marriage?” It is *“How can I fulfill the Creator’s purpose for marriage?”*

Please hear me: Not every divorce is self-serving. Not every divorce is adulterous.

- Nevertheless, even when divorce is justifiable and necessary it is not God’s best plan for us. **“‘I hate divorce,’ says the LORD God ... ‘and I hate it when people clothe themselves with injustice,’ says the LORD Almighty”** (Malachi 2:16).

- Consider this interchange in Matthew 19:7-8. The Pharisees ask, **“Why then did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate ... and send her away?”** Jesus answers, **“Moses permitted... divorce... because your hearts were hard... It was not this way from the**

**beginning.” Divorce is permitted as a concession, in recognition that the sacred covenant of marriage is already broken.** It does not bring about the problem; it formalizes what has already happened.

{1 Co 7:10-16} This explains why Paul expands the valid grounds to include desertion of a wife by her husband. It is the abandonment which ended the marriage.

On this principle we rightly conclude that a pattern of abuse also justifies divorce. Maltreatment is an obscenity. It desecrates all that marriage signifies and breaks the covenant. Divorce simply lays bare that reality.

Abuse frequently makes divorce necessary. Infidelity makes divorce permissible. Neither makes divorce good and right.

- This teaching is hard! The Lord himself acknowledges, **“Not everyone can accept this word”** (Matthew 19:11).

The last thing I want to do is make it harder. I do not stand here with an attitude of superiority or condemnation. I am not anyone’s judge!

God is our judge, and he is full of grace. When God convicts us, it is not to grind us into dust; it is liberate us and make us whole.

✍ Let us receive God’s grace of forgiveness.

{Ps 103:10, 14} He **“does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities... he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.”** No sin is unforgivable, no guilt unexpungeable, no one beyond redemption!

Divorce does not disqualify us from salvation and discipleship. God's mercy and kindness are greater. Amen? Amen!

✈ Let us receive God's grace of provision.

Every husband wakes up to find that the woman he married is not a goddess. Every wife discovers that the man she married is not Prince Charming. Divorce is not the answer to disappointment!

Every married couple has disagreements. Divorce is not the answer to discord!

Every wedded pair is liable to be pulled apart by different careers, unshared dreams, and busyness. Divorce is not the answer to distance!

{Jn 6:35} **“Jesus [declares], ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’”** By his grace he can provide for our deepest needs even in a difficult marriage. Amen?!

✈ Let us **receive God's grace of purpose**.

No human relationship makes me happier than my marriage. Even so, it does not exist primarily for our personal happiness.

✪ The main purpose of marriage is divine glorification through human sanctification. It is to exalt the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by making husband and wife holy.

{II P 3:18} Marriage is not necessary for holiness (God has plenty of ways to sanctify those who are single), and sanctification isn't inevitable (matrimony brings out the worst in some). Still, for the wedded Christ Follower who surrenders their union to the purposes of God, marriage is

one of the most powerful means by which we **“grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior.”**

A union which exists to glorify God through the holiness of its members will stand firm in the face of disappointment, disagreement, and distance. It will not easily fall victim to adultery and abuse.

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like a mighty flame.  
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By the grace of God may our marriages be **“the strongest, most unyielding and invincible force in human experience.”** May we weave together resilient unions that thrive no matter what life throws at us.

Matthew 5:31-32 is the word of the Lord.