

We are going to tackle a biggie. Today we move on in our You Don't Say Sermon on the Mount Series. In today's discourse, Jesus is talking about adultery and divorce. Gulp. When I was putting this sermon series together, I paused at doing this one. What could I possibly say about divorce? After all, I am a divorced woman? But the nudge to speak on this wouldn't go away. So, as we spend these next few moments together, I need to have a word with Jesus for a moment. "Jesus, take the wheel!

Those of you who are married or have been married know this. There are a lot of marriage experts out there. Some have even written books. As I was researching this topic, I found some "experts" on a happy marriage.

- "I love being married. It's so great to find that one special person you want to annoy for the rest of your life." — Rita Rudner
- "Husband secretly lowers the thermostat, and I secretly turn it back up. We both vehemently deny touching it. Marriage is fun." — Stephanie Ortiz
- "Women marry men hoping they will change. Men marry women hoping they will not. So, each is inevitably disappointed." — Albert Einstein
- "To keep your marriage brimming, with love in the loving cup, whenever you're wrong, admit it; whenever you're right, shut up." — Ogden Nash

In our passage today, Jesus is not tackling the keys to a happy marriage. He is addressing things that lead to or are the result of an unhappy marriage. Issues of adultery and divorce. As we said last week, Jesus is doing what all good Jewish rabbis do. He is putting fences around these two issues.

Jesus starts with statements about adultery. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery,' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Jesus is referring to the law as cited in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus. If a man committed adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress were to be put to death. Serious business.

Let's look at what adultery was in Jesus' time. Today we define adultery as infidelity by either spouse. In Jesus' time, adultery was sexual relations between a man and a betrothed or married woman who wasn't his spouse or his betrothed.

Not all sexual relations with other women were considered adultery for a Jewish man. A divorcee, not adultery. A prostitute, not adultery. Any other unmarried or unengaged woman, not adultery. It wasn't exactly smiled on, but these encounters were not considered sin.

The law said that both, the adulterer or adulteress, were to be put to death. But the stories from the Old Testament and the Gospel don't support that this happened often. Capital punishment in Jewish culture general was avoided as much as possible.

David and Bathsheba were guilty of adultery. Both should have been put to death, but they were not. The minor prophet, Hosea was commanded to marry a prostitute. One who would continue to be adulterous after marriage. She was not put to death.

The Pharisees brought a woman to Jesus in the Gospel of John. She is caught in the act of adultery with an unnamed man. They wanted to know if she should be stoned. Given that death wasn't a typical punishment for adultery, this was nothing more than an attempt to trap Jesus.

He's doomed whether he says execute her or release her. Jesus' response captures them in more ways than one. "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Anyone remember what happened to all of her accusers? So, think about it, what must they all been guilty of? And as for the woman? She is not executed by Jesus, she is forgiven.

Although this was not treated as a capital crime, it was still serious. It was something that could tear at the fabric of the better humanity Jesus was advocating for. So, Jesus builds a fence around adultery. He does this by equating lust to adultery.

The Greek term for lust or desire here is “epithyneo”. It’s the same word used in the commandment “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house or wife.” This word isn’t so concerned about the first look one might cast on an attractive person. The first look is simple attraction. The second look and beyond...leering.

Epithyneo goes beyond mere sexual attraction. It intentionally cultivates sexual desire for the sake of the feeling itself. It is far removed from love. Love looks into one’s eyes, epithyneo steals glances below the eyes. Love values the other person, epithyneo degrades them. Ladies today epithyneo no longer just applies to men. We can be guilty of this too.

Jesus then offers some cures for lust in some pretty dire ways. Tear out an offending eye. Cutting off an offending hand. Jesus wasn’t really suggesting these outrageous things. But he was hoping for impact, which he clearly got. What Jesus was trying to point out is that it is much easier just to avoid sin altogether. Daily we are offered a simple choice. To live with or to live without God. Jesus will dive more into how to live with God as time goes on. He will even touch on it later in this discourse.

With the idea of adultery and its consequences fully in mind, Jesus turns to the topic of divorce. Just touching on it here in the sermon. The Pharisees will later challenge Jesus with a question of the legality of divorce. So as we address this topic today, we will want to look at what Jesus said in Matthew 19 about divorce too.

Jesus extends the fence around divorce by forbidding remarriage. “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Matthew 19 adds the full extent of Jesus’ meaning here. Vs 3=9

Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.” They said to him, “Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?” He said to them, “It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Jesus weighed on this, because in his time, reasons for divorcing one’s wife was running wild. If your wife couldn’t cook and you found a better cook, if your wife was plain and you found a more beautiful woman, in some Jewish circles these were enough to justify a divorce.

Jesus wasn’t about to get tangled in this mess. Instead, he refocused them on what was really important.

The Pharisees? They were preoccupied with the grounds for divorce. Jesus was concerned with the institution of marriage itself. Jesus doesn’t take them back to the law from Deuteronomy, he takes them all the way back to Genesis chapter 2 and the aspects of a union there. Those joined together are no longer two but one flesh. And what God has joined together, let no one separate.

The Pharisees tried to convince Jesus that this provision of Moses regarding divorce was a command. Jesus reminds them that this was a concession because of the hardness of their hearts. There’s more if we look at what the Pharisees were referring to in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. If a man divorced his wife, the certificate allowed her to remarry. This would be true if there were multiple occasions for a woman to be put away as long as she had a certificate from each spouse. But if she ever became available again, anyone who had divorced her could not take her back. Could not remarry her.

This was a sacred union to God. A union established at creation. Jesus' response to the Pharisees in Matthew 19 doesn't deny that God created this "loophole, but he defined it as a concession and not an instruction or command.

The Pharisees had a lax approach to divorce. Jesus took it seriously and saw only one exception for it. Plus, he saw any remarriage after divorce as adultery.

Now we've gotten through some really hard stuff about divorce. So what are we as a church family to do with these words of Jesus given the current facts about divorce in America.

- There are 86 divorces every hour, compared to 230 marriages an hour
- Estimates say 41% of first marriages will end in divorce
- As many as 60% of second marriages won't make it
- Third marriages end in divorce 73% of the time
- The average lifespan of a first marriage before divorce is eight years
- Marriage and divorce rates in the U.S. are decreasing for a range of reasons
- Millennials (quite frankly all younger couples) are waiting to get married and stay married longer, driving the divorce rate lower

Let's not get bogged down in the words Jesus spoke in a very specific context to a very specific issue created by the Jewish culture of the day. What Jesus is saying is true, a union between two people is sacred to God. This union is considered sacred and therefore honored as a lifetime commitment.

However, perhaps we can agree that Jesus might have different things to say about our current context and the issues of our culture today. Is a marriage that is a constant battlefield one that is sanctioned and sacred to God? Is it possible that all marriages are not made in heaven? Or perhaps lose that touch after a while? Is a marriage that is loveless and or abusive one a sacred union to God? Is a devoted couple who lives together without being married because marriage would be detrimental in some way to one of them not in a union sanctioned by God?

Jesus never answers these specific questions. But anytime he answered a complex question it was not with a mindset of war but of peace. Jesus always spoke of a Christian life or a Christian home as a model of the love between Christ and the church. So perhaps Jesus might agree that any Christian marriage that does not model that love doesn't need to remain forever.

Let me close with a story about a dear friend of mine from seminary. She'd been married for several years. They had a daughter. Both she and her husband had good jobs, lived in a nice house, drove nice cars. They took vacations, sent their daughter to good schools. Both went to and were very active in their church. They seemed to have a dream life.

Then she found out the unthinkable. Her husband was having an affair with someone. It was like he stabbed her in the heart. She was angry, she was heartbroken, she felt betrayed. Would she be able to stay with him. Would she be able to trust him. Would she be able to get past this and love him again? She prayed and cried to God many, many times throughout this.

One night as she was praying and crying to God, she heard these words. "Just love him, and I will take care of the rest." She knew this was from God. She didn't know how she was going to do it, but she knew she needed to. And she knew God would give her the strength and the way to do it. They went to counseling, kept involved in church. Before long, God kept the promise. She found that she again loved her husband. She was able to let go and forgive him. They just celebrated 28 years of marriage.

Curbing lust, our defense against adultery. Seeking to live our Christian lives and maintaining our Christian homes as a model of the love between Christ and the church. A strong defense to ensure that our unions with others remain as sacred as God created them to be.