

Marriage and Divorce

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[0 : 00] Now we come then this morning to the biblical basis behind the next chapter in the Confessional Faith and the section we're looking at, which is chapter 24, which is entitled Of Marriage and Divorce.

Now of course that always makes people a little bit on edge because divorce can be such a catchy or controversial subject and it was then and it is now, despite how common it is now, it's still something of a slightly controversial subject, particularly where Christians are involved.

Jesus is tackled by the Pharisees on a couple of occasions about the subject of divorce. In Matthew 19 and in Mark chapter 10 he is asked specifically about it and he responds and we'll come to those in just a moment.

But the first time that Jesus mentions the subject of marriage and divorce is in the Sermon on the Mount and that is what we have read from this morning in Matthew chapter 5.

And you will see there that the context in which Jesus is talking about these things is in the sense of this is what used to be said, this is what is said, this is what the minimalist requirements of the law are, whether with regard to thou shalt not kill or thou shalt not commit a battle free or marriage or divorce or whatever.

[1 : 21] He says, this is what the law permits. But I say unto you, we should be doing better. We should be aiming higher.

If you want to be like the Lord, to be perfect, ideally fit for purpose as God is, verse 48, if you want to be holy as he is holy, if you would follow me, this is what you should aim for.

Don't just love your neighbor and hate your enemy. Love your enemies. Do good to those who persecute you. Don't just not commit adultery. Don't look at somebody with adultery in your heart.

Don't just sort of say, oh, well, I can divorce my wife or husband if I give them a bill of divorcement. Say rather that we shouldn't be doing it at all except to be, he says, for fornication.

We should be holding fast to that which may be difficult. This is what Jesus is teaching. And this is the context in which he is teaching it.

[2 : 24] It is part of his overall wider teaching. Jesus does not pluck and manage your divorce here and there and just sort of drop it down and then says, by the way, this is what I'm saying on this subject.

He is addressing in the Sermon on the Mount a whole range of subjects and he is contrasting what the law allows with what God desires and what Jesus himself says that his followers should be doing.

If you would take his teaching, this is what you should be aiming at. And it's no accident, of course, that the teaching with regard to divorce follows immediately after the teaching on lust and adultery.

And we have to bear in mind that right from the beginning in Genesis, an integral part of the marriage bond and relationship is the physical union between husband and wife.

But in that context and time, there wasn't the sort of widespread wall-to-wall promiscuity that there is in our society nowadays. If somebody wanted to, shall we say, change or adjust or vary their sexual partner, the only way of doing it without stooping to harlotry, which would have an effect on their reputation in the community, was to change wives or husbands.

[3 : 49] And so if you desired somebody different, and remember, that's the context in which Jesus is giving this teaching, then you got rid of the one and you just took up with the other.

And it implies in the context that the motive was carnal in that sense. Now, of course, this is exactly what is followed by some other religions in the world.

The Boko Haram terrorists in West Africa or Al-Shabaab in East Africa. It's not unknown for them to kidnap girls or women.

And then they become what they call temporary wives. Because to just commit promised fury and fornication under Islam would be frowned upon. So they say a few words.

That makes them their wife temporarily. They have their way. And then they just say, I divorce thee, I divorce thee, I divorce thee. And that's that stuff. So they're a wife for a few hours, a few moments, and then it's not technically fornication.

[4 : 45] It's not technically adultery. Nothing could be further from God's understanding of marriage and the sanctity of it. It is then, as we say, in the context of the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus addresses this subject just as he addresses so many others.

And his intention and desire is, this may be what the world does. This may be what the law allows. But if you're going to follow me, this is what you should be aiming at.

This is how you should live. This is how you should be. Of course there would be difficult domestic circumstances in Jesus' day.

Just as there would be in our day. Human nature has not changed. Of course there would be people who would turn out after the first bloom of honeymoon joy is gone, who turn out to be very difficult people.

But again, look at the context. Jesus is saying if you have to love your enemies, how much more ought you to love your husband and wife, no matter how difficult they may be?

[5 : 50] If you simply love those who love you, the easy ones, what do you more than the publicans? Surely you ought to be devoting as much love or attention or patience with somebody with whom you have this close and intimate thought.

Now of course, in Jesus' day there were two schools of thought. Well those are the rabbis who said, you know, that according to the law of Moses, then what you've got in Deuteronomy 24, you can look it up in verses 1 and 2 there.

Or 1 to 4 there where it says about the writing of the bill of divorcement and the giving of one and that enables you then to move on to a different wife or husband or whatever the case may be.

There were two schools of thought. One was that only something really serious. Like in Deuteronomy 24, because he had found some uncleanness in there, something really serious that would quite merit the death penalty for adultery, but it was still severe enough to have effectively destroyed the marriage from within.

That would justify adultery, said one school of thought. The other school of thought said, no, no, it doesn't have to be as serious as that. No, it says, Deuteronomy 24, a man, I think, a wife, a manager, come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes.

[7 : 08] Because he had found some uncleanness in there. Just if he, you know, if she cooks his food the way he doesn't like, or if he gets fed up with the way that she darns his clothes, or if he just doesn't like living with anyone.

There could be any reason that he likes at all. Just write a bill of divorcement and that's it. There were these two schools of thought. One was called Shammah, the other called Hillel. And they challenged Jesus on it.

In Matthew 19, they specifically, the Pharisees came to him, tempting him and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? He answered and said unto them, Have ye not read that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female?

For this cause shall a man, we father and mother, shall cleave to his wife, and they twain shall be one flesh. And they said unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a right to a divorcement to put her away?

He said, Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, suffered you to put away your wives. But from the beginning, it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except to be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery.

[8 : 12] And whoso marrieth her which is put away, doth commit adultery. This is the teaching of Jesus. In that instance, it's because he's being challenged about it. In the Sermon on the Mount, he's coming up with it himself. It's not just in response to somebody else.

Mark's account is interesting in chapter 10. Because there are a couple of hosts that are very similar to Matthew. So there's a couple of wee verses here. Verses 11 and 12 of Mark chapter 10 says, Whosoever shall put away his wife and marry another, committeth adultery, against her.

Now that was novel in those days. That was revolutionary. And if a woman shall put away her husband. And that idea was almost revolutionary. And be married to another.

She committed adultery. You see what he's doing with these two verses, first of all. In a former age, if you committed adultery, you were not reckoned, if a man committed adultery, he was not reckoned to have committed adultery against his wife.

But rather against the neighbour whose wife he had slept with. He had violated that neighbour's property, for want of a better word.

[9 : 19] That neighbour's special person, relationship. He had also cast a cloud of doubt over any subsequent children that that neighbour might have.

Because who's to say now whether they're the adulterous neighbours or whether they're his own. So the adultery was said to be against your neighbour. Against the husband of the person that you had your adulterous relationship with.

But Jesus, of course, who is God the Son, and who restores what at the beginning was God's intentional equality between the two sexes.

He's complimentary one or the other. He says, if he commits adultery against her, he puts the wife on the equality position with the husband.

But with equality of rights goes equality of responsibility. Because in the very next verse it says, if a woman shall put away her husband and be married to another, she committed adultery.

[10 : 19] So it's not just that she could have passed over as the innocent party in either case. She bears equal right. Adultery is against her, not just against the neighbour.

But also equality of responsibility. She is expected to behave with the same level of integrity as a righteous husband ought to.

Now what Jesus is doing, it's revolutionary in terms of his culture and his day, but it's not revolutionary in terms of what God did at the outset. And we have to go back to the beginning to see how God intended marriage to be.

And remember that this is what Jesus does. When he says to the Pharisees and what he says in the Sermon on the Mount about marriage and divorce, he doesn't just say, I say to you, I, Jesus of Nazareth, go on my authority.

He takes them back to that which they themselves must acknowledge, the law of God. The book of Genesis say, when God created men and women, this is how he made them.

[11 : 24] And this is what he intended for them. And he can't argue with that. Right at the beginning, God does it right. Man begins to distort it as he goes along. Ecclesiastes chapter 7 verse 29 tells us this.

Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright, but they have sought out many inventions. One of which is the way in which man desires to pervert or twist or change the marriage relationship from what God intended.

So we go back to the beginning. We find, what did God do at the outset? We find that what God did at the outset was to make a relationship intended to be mutual.

Let us make man in our image. God, remember, is a trinity. He does not exist simply as a monounity, a single entity.

He is a trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Therefore, the Godhead is permanently in relationship. Now, we looked at this a wee bit when we looked previously at God's work of creation and so on in the previous chapters of the Confession of Faith.

[12 : 36] But just to reiterate, when God makes man and he makes them male and female in his image, it means that both complementary parts of that mankind, therefore both each together or individually, as the bank statements used to say, jointly and severally, represent God in his fullness.

But the relationship intended between man and women unites, completes, complements one another. And just as we're thinking, yeah, but hang on, that's only two.

That's only two people in God's a trinity. Who's the third person in the relationship? The third person in the relationship is ideally God. There should be God at the centre of and in the heart of every right marriage.

And you think, oh yeah, come on, but loads of people get married who aren't Christians. Loads of people get married who don't acknowledge God. Are you saying their marriages aren't valid?

Are you saying they're not real? Of course they are valid. And of course they are real. And of course God still intends marriage right across humanity. It's a creation ordinance.

[13 : 53] It's not unique to the Hebrews or to the Christians or to the Romans or whatever the case may be. It is for all mankind. But its intention ideally, as at the beginning, is that God should be in the centre and at the heart of that relationship.

When a husband and wife are brought together, and remember that that too is in there right at the beginning, right at the outset, procreation or the consummation of a marriage is not, it's intentional by God, it's not remedial.

In other words, it's not a response to the fall. It's not the case that Adam and Eve were just to be sort of friends and companions, like brother and sister in the Garden of Eden, and then after the fall will soon enter in, so all sorts of carnal stuff enter in there.

No. God gives his instructions about to be bonded together, to be a helpmate one for another, the mutual help of one with another, that they should be one flesh, that they should increase and multiply and cover the earth.

And all of this is before the fall that these instructions are given. So it's not remedial, it's not a remedy for something wrong that has happened. It is intentional by God before the fall.

[15 : 14] So it's the case that they are meant to be together. God is meant to be involved in that relationship, and God also is the one who causes there to be offspring.

It's difficult to go into the fascinating detail of how God has designed everything without indelicacy. But if we can just think for a moment about, the husband and wife do not themselves cause conception to take place.

They cannot do that. They do not have that power. There are millions and millions of possibilities with the seed produced by the father. There are hundreds over a lifetime of possibilities with the seed produced by the mother.

What dictates that that individual seed from the father and that individual seed from the mother should be fused together to make an immortal soul unique in personality and every other detail?

They can create the conditions in which that might happen as many times as they might. But only God brings together that fusion. Only God brings together that conception to bring an immortal soul into being.

[16 : 28] God is involved in the conception and bringing into being of every single soul that ever existed. That includes the immortal souls of all the unborn who never saw the light of day.

God is in that. He is in man. And he brings that soul into being. The intention in marriage is there should be the husband and the wife and God.

Yes, the husband is the head of the wife, but God is intended to be the head of the marriage. There are millions of marriages throughout the world where God just doesn't treat you at all.

That doesn't mean they're invalidous marriages, but it does mean that they are not being all that they were meant to be. All that they were designed to be.

Just as we know from our categories, a man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Millions and millions of people are not doing that. Does that mean they're not human beings?

[17 : 31] Of course they're human beings. Does that mean they're not made in the image of God? Of course they're made in the image of God. Does that mean that they are not living up to the fullness of the potential they might have been able to enjoy?

That's it exactly. A marriage or a life without God in it is one that is not being lived to the fullness of all that it might be.

It's like if I, it's perhaps more of a masculine illustration here, but if I were in a position to buy a Lamborghini and I get my Lamborghini and it purrs away in the driveway and I take it up the A9 and I just ignore the A9s and all the potential police traps and so on.

And there I am. And I'm tumbling up the A9s and I'm tumbling up the A9s and I'm tumbling up the A9s and I'm tumbling along quite happily. Every single person going past me is going to think, why on earth did he spend all that fortune on a car like that and tumbling up 35 miles an hour?

Why isn't he opening up the throttle and giving it all that he can? Why isn't he racing up this road? Why isn't he giving it? It's foolhead. And you could say it's none of your business.

[18 : 59] My car, I can do whatever I like. If I want to drive it at 35, that's up to me. And that would be true. And there's nothing wrong with what I'm doing. There's nothing wrong. Nothing says I have to drive at some incredible speed.

But why would you do it? Why would you choose not to give the car its full potential? Why would you choose to live a life as little more than a slightly superior form of animal?

As though we'd simply all emerge cell by cell from the primordial sludge. Rather than being made in the image of God. And being filled with his presence and with our marriages and our lives.

Filled with his input to be all that we could be. That is his intention. That is what God plans at the outset. Marriage by God is intentional, not remedial.

It is intentional that Adam and Eve should be one flesh. It is intentional that they should produce children. It is intentional that they should be a mutual help one for the other.

[20 : 13] It is meant to be relational. It is meant to be a reflection of what God is like. Now, one reason, of course, why marriage is so downgraded in our day.

There's two reasons. One is obviously, the most obvious one, is because God has been taking out the picture. The other is, if you think about it, the nobility and the virtue of singleness of life has also been downgraded.

And because now singleness of life is not treated with the virtue and with the integrity by the world at large that it once was. So, likewise, marriage is not saying, oh, this is so much better.

This is superior. No, marriage is also downgraded. Neither chaste, single integrity on the one hand, nor manical fidelity on the other hand are exalted.

It all is just reduced to a kind of animalistic, promiscuous, nothing really matters anymore. This is one reason why, for example, in the homosexual lobby, that when they say, you can't possibly, you know, deny somebody the identity, one would say, as a Christian, but nobody's being asked to deny their identity.

[21 : 35] They're simply being required, if they claim to follow Christ, if they claim to belong to him, to live as many, many heterosexual men and women have done in the past in chaste, virtuous singleness of life.

Some people are given a gift for that. Some people wouldn't perhaps choose it, but it's the providence that they've been given. But it is a noble calling to which the Lord himself was single.

Paul recommended singleness of life. It is that which is incredibly far more common than you would think. And about my previous charge, what surprised me throughout the parish was the large, the high number of bachelors.

There was a lot of spoons. There were some spoons, there were some spoons, there were some bachelors. Even men who'd gone through life completely unmarried and seeming reasonably content with that state of life.

Now, of course, there's advantages and disadvantages to both singleness of life and to marriage. But as the singleness of life has been downgraded in the eyes of the world, so likewise marriage has as well.

[22 : 42] The idea that somebody might be called upon to live that chaste and virtuous single life is, oh, that's a denial of my very identity. As though our identity in Christ consists in unfettered sexual expression.

Now, that is neither the place nor the purpose of the gift which the Lord has given us in sexual love. It is intended to be constrained within the sanctity of the managed bond.

And because it is intended to be such a rare thing, such an exclusive thing, such a precious thing, which when it is valued and kept within that safe, as it were, when that safe is broken open and the treasures scattered abroad, Jesus himself, God the Son, says, that's the only excuse for breaking up the managed bond.

And the implication is that the sanctity and the sacred mystery and the secret intimacy of that has now already been smashed. Therefore, yes, you can dissolve the managed bond.

Now, Paul, later on, goes on to spell out in Corinthians about how, you know, somebody would be called an adulteress if she took another husband when her husband's still alive. But if he's dead, then she can marry somebody else and she's not an adulteress or he's not an adulterer.

[24 : 17] In other words, the divorce as recognized by Jesus is effectively stating the other person is as dead to you. That's how serious a violation of that marital intimacy is regarded by God.

That it renders the guilty party as dead. Now, this is the way I've had to do a bit of a learning curve over the years because whilst I have only ever conducted marriages of divorced persons, if I have been solemnly assured, in some cases in writing, that it was because of adultery that the previous marriage broke up.

Whilst that is certainly the case, there's no getting away from the fact that this violation of the marital bond rendering the guilty party as dead, I had previously thought, I must admit, that, OK, if it's OK to marry one party from a marriage that was broken up by adultery, then eventually it must be OK to marry the other party too.

Now, if they've been divorced for their adultery and they're the guilty party, it must be OK to remarry them. Now, a conversation with a colleague who might rate in respect says, no, you can't do that. I said, well, why not?

If the marriage is over and it's divorced for adultery, surely it must be OK to remarry them now. I said, no, I can't because they're divorced. They're to be regarded. The other person remarries because they are treated as dead.

[25 : 44] You can't marry somebody who's dead. You can't remarry somebody who's dead. OK, fair enough. Can't escape the logic there. But this is how serious Jesus takes it.

That the violation of the marriage brought by adultery renders one party as though dead. Now, that's not literal, of course.

And just as there is opportunity and perhaps encouragement for forgiveness and for reconciliation, that is, of course, at the discretion within the married couple themselves.

It would be an ideal. Forgiveness and reconciliation. But it's like with a broken window and you tape it up with sellotape or brown tape or whatever. You may keep out the wind, but it's never quite the same again.

We simply have lost in our day and age the seriousness, the sanctity of that intimacy of the marriage bond.

[26 : 41] It's something we scatter abroad as a society as though it didn't really matter. A few years ago, one minister rendered an illustration really well when he said that marriage, and to an extent the physical desire, which is an element of it, is like a fire.

A fire that burns. Now, the place in any home for a fire is in the grate. And as low as it's in the fireplace, as low as it's in the grate, confined where it is meant to be, it will bring light to the room and warmth to the house.

It will be a benefit to everyone. But if you take that fire out of the grate and you scatter the coals and the hot ashes everywhere, you're going to burn the house down.

It's not going to be, oh, how much warmth there is all over the house. Isn't this lovely? Isn't this wonderful? It's great. No. That's going to destroy your home. It's going to destroy everything in it.

Nobody imagines the damage that can be done when that which is intended by God to be contained within that one-to-one relational unit, which is meant to reflect the uniqueness of God in his relationship.

[27 : 57] When that is broken and scattered abroad, the damage we just cannot imagine. Now, the other thing, of course, might say, recognizing that it says in Malachi, you say, why would he make one?

He says, you've dealt treacherously against the wife of your youth, yet she is a companion and the wife of thy covenant. Did not he make one? He made one wife for Adam. Yet had he the residue of the spirit.

In other words, he could have made as many wives for Adam as he wanted, but he made only one. And wherefore one, that he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth.

Malachi 2, verse 50. God made one wife for Adam. And again, without wishing to drop into indelicacy, men and women, as you know, are biologically, anatomically complementary.

We are designed to complement one another. It is not physically possible to complement several different partners at once.

[29 : 03] We are not physically designed that way. And although it is physically possible to be matched and to be coupling with different partners at different times, and even to call each one a marriage bond, polygamy is, of course, mentioned in the Bible on many occasions.

But it begins, if you look back at the beginning, it begins with the fifth generation from Cain. They curse it. It comes in his line.

It comes in his posterity. And no end of trouble follows once that enters in. It is extremely rare in the covenant line.

Abraham does not marry anyone. Yes, there's the incident with Hagar, but we know all the reasons behind that. But Abraham does not marry Keturah. His second wife still says that it's dead.

Isaac doesn't marry anyone else except Rebekah. Jacob, yes, he has two wives. But he is tricked into that. He doesn't intend that. And, of course, you know the strife that follows between the two because of that.

[30 : 13] It is not God's ideal of intention. And trouble flows from it. We think of David and Solomon, both of whom, you know, Solomon, 700 wives and 300 concubines.

And look how that turned that. David had at least eight wives plus concubines as well. But what was the big damage to David's life and reign?

The incident with Bathsheba. And then what followed on from that? And the trouble with Absalom. How did the trouble of Absalom start? Because the son of one of David's wives fell in love with the daughter of another of David's wives and forced himself on her and so on.

All of this arose because of the multiple number of wives that David took for himself. And yes, God didn't smite him down for it.

And yes, lightning didn't zap him. And he didn't send Nathan the prophet to say, You're making a mistake having so many wives. But he did cause the inevitable result that followed.

[31 : 15] The trouble, the strife, the disintegration of the family and household, even of the man after God's own heart. And as for Solomon, well, we know fine what happened with him.

But you love many strange women. By God's design, physically, anatomically, spiritually, religiously, he has intended one man for one woman for life.

Because this is intended, and we go back again to the sermon on the mat, this is intended to reflect the commitment, the intimacy, the permanency, and the self-sacrifice of God's own love for and relationship with us.

This is why Jesus is consistently in the sermon on the mat, not saying, This is what you can get away with. This is what the law will allow you to do. Look, there's wee loopholes here.

You can keep the law and still do this. You can keep the law and still do that. Jesus is not interested in minimalistic legalism. He is interested in the transformation of lives by the power of God's Spirit.

[32 : 32] And lives are not transformed then because, Oh, let's do a new thing and call it marriage. Marriage is as old as creation itself. But rather let us breathe new sanctity, new commitment, new determination into the marriage bond that God has already given.

To recognize the nobility and sanctity of the single state. To recognize the sanctity of marriage. To recognize the rarity, the extreme rarity, of sanctioned divorce.

And to recognize that in the eyes of God, the guilty thus divorced are to all intents and purposes treated as dead.

That is how serious God regards it. What is our chief motive then? In perhaps putting up with difficult marriages.

Or violent marriages. Or unhappy marriages. In all these situations. Because we cannot believe that such things didn't exist in Jesus' day. What is our motivation?

[33 : 41] What is the same as our motivation for, As in lawful, oaths and vows. We swear something and then we find, Oops, that's a bit inconvenient. We'll say motivation with, Somebody has been put over me as a king or a prime minister or a first minister and I don't like them.

And I don't like their policies. And I would like to get rid of them. So I'm going to have a demo which will turn into a revolution and then I can assassinate or overthrow them and put something better in place.

No. What is our motivation? To submit to the powers that be. The civil magistrate. What is our motivation? To submit ourselves to the lawful oaths and vows that we have taken.

What is our motivation? To adhere to the marriage bond. To forgive our enemies. To turn the other cheek. To go the second mile. It is that we become as God would have us to be.

Be ye therefore, Jesus says, perfect. Now we know that perfect in a biblical context does not mean sinless. It doesn't mean spotless. It means fit for purpose.

[34 : 45] If we are to be fit for purpose to show forth the goodness and commitment and kindness and mercy and intimacy of God, then we must live it here.

We must reflect it here. When God is taken out of the relationship, it begins to fall apart. When God is taken out of society, it begins to fall apart.

When God is taken out of the authority of his word, it just becomes so much advice you can take or leave. God has given us his teaching on the holiness and purity and intimacy of marriage.

God has identified through his son Jesus Christ. Those very rare occasions when divorce will be sanctioned by God.

But above all, God desires that husbands and wives in their relationship together should have him at the heart of their marriage.

[35 : 51] that that relationship, God, God, God, husband, husband, and wife may reflect the Trinity as God himself is.

Let us make man in our image. So he created man in his image. Male and female created he them. For relationship.

For the reflection of what God is like. The one who invites us, not just to the marriage supper of the Lamb, but invites us to be and to become the bride of Christ.

Let us pray.