

The King Who Calls Us to Holiness in Marriage

Matthew 5:27-32

This morning we have a rather sensitive but very significant topic before us: What does it mean to honor Jesus as King with respect to sex, marriage, and divorce? It's a sensitive topic because it's rather personal. And it's an area in which so many of us have made mistakes, or have been directly affected by the mistakes of others. Some of us grew up in homes torn apart by marital unfaithfulness or divorce. Some of us are living in those homes right now. Some of us have been divorced. Perhaps we're remarried, or maybe married to a divorced person—and some of those divorces were not for the right reasons. Some of us are involved sexually with someone who is not our spouse. Some of us just dream and think about that. This passage is going to raise some uncomfortable questions that touch each of us in one way or another.

It's a sensitive topic. Yet it's also a very significant topic, because contrary to popular opinion, marriage, sex, and divorce are not just ideas out there up for grabs. Jesus has an opinion on them. In fact, he not only has the authority to determine what purpose and shape they should take, but also to judge those who ignore or overturn his design or purpose for marriage and sex. I don't think many of us believe that today. And yet right here, as Jesus lays out his vision for life in his kingdom, under his authority as King of heaven and earth, he gives us his decree: that marriage is a holy covenant, that sex is a holy activity—both having been designed *by* God and *for* God and his kingdom purposes.

My prayer this morning is that we would deal sensitively with this topic, recognizing that we're all sinners in need of grace. And yet that we would deal seriously with it—that to whatever extent we've ignored or overturned or rewritten God's rule, his vision for marriage and sex—that we would be convicted by his Spirit, and that we would be strengthened by the same Spirit to repent, to turn away from our sin, and to joyfully follow Jesus.

The Heart of the Law and the Kingdom of God

We've been going through the Gospel of Matthew for a few months, and are in the famous portion of it known as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus began his sermon with what's called the beatitudes—the family portrait of life under his rule and reign. But then he transitioned to connect the dots between that opening portrait and ancient Israel's Law, found in the Old Testament. Jesus wants to show how what he's saying doesn't overturn God's law, which God had already given to his covenant people, Israel. Rather, Jesus and his kingdom bring God's law to fulfillment. The whole thing was pointing to this.

He also wants to point out a significant difference between how his kingdom and how the religious leaders in his day (groups like the scribes and Pharisees, cf. Matt. 5:20) handled God's law. The scribes and the Pharisees were content to keep their obedience on the surface, where

everyone could see it and praise them for it. They would keep the letter of the law, and announce it with trumpets and post it on Facebook. But it didn't come from the heart, and therefore it didn't really reflect the purpose of the law. It wasn't real; it was show.

But Jesus goes below the surface. Just as the law itself is but the tip of the iceberg expressing God's character underneath, so obedience to the law must go below the surface. True righteousness comes from a heart changed by the gospel. So Jesus says in Matthew 5:20, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." And from that verse to the end of the chapter, Jesus offers six corrections to the way the religious leaders of his day handled God's law, forcing us to drill beneath the surface—beneath the surface of the law to see the heart and purposes of God, and beneath the surface of our own lives, to expose our hearts and show us what it looks like to truly honor Jesus as King.

Last week Pastor Bruce showed us how keeping the sixth commandment ("You shall not murder," Exod. 20:13) is not about checking the box that says, "Yeah, I have never physically done that," but about the posture of our hearts toward one another. To call someone "Fool" is to be liable to the same kind of judgment as killing them. What goes on in the heart matters just as much as what happens with our hands.

The two sections that we're looking at this morning deal generally with the seventh commandment from the Old Testament: "You shall not commit adultery" (Exod. 20:14). Notice how that word comes up in both sayings, specifically in vv. 27-28: "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit *adultery*.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed *adultery* with her in his heart." And then again in v. 32: "But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an *adulteress*, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits *adultery*."

Adultery and the Purpose of Marriage

By *adultery*, the Bible is talking about engaging in sexual activity with someone other than your spouse, or with someone else's spouse. It is a breaking of the marital covenant, and under the Mosaic Law it was punishable by death (cf. Lev. 20:10). And the reason that the punishment for adultery is so severe is because marriage and sex are so holy in God's design. Marriage is a holy covenant; sex is a holy activity. Both were designed *by* God, *for* God and his kingdom purposes. They are *holy* to him—which means, by the way, that he has the right to say what they're for and how they should be shared in and enjoyed.

To treat something as holy, means you *recognize its purpose*, and you *respect its value*. We don't typically use the word 'holy' to describe things in our households, but we do this on a small scale every day. There are items in our home that we attribute special value to and use just for special purposes. For instance, you don't drain your lawn mower oil into the crystal salad bowl. Guys, I dare you to try that one this weekend and see how it goes over. Neither do you toss the china into the trashcan when you're done with supper. There's a big difference between *china* and *Chinette*—and the wise husband will not get them confused. One is a family treasure, the other is just trash when you're done. One has a special purpose—you don't eat on it every day, but for special occasions like an anniversary or holiday meal. And it has a precious value—you don't just toss it into the dishwasher, you place it gently so there's minimal clanging and bumping so

that it doesn't get chipped. And to recognize its special purpose and respect its precious value is to treat it as *holy*, if you will.

So it is that marriage and sex have a special purpose and a precious value, which have been assigned by God himself. Marriage was God's idea, and within marriage, sex. Look at Genesis 2:20-24:

. . . But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ²¹ So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. ²³ The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." ²⁴ For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. (Gen. 2:20b-24)

So God is the author of marriage. He designed it for the deepest level of companionship and completion, not least for our calling to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 1:28). According to God's design, marriage is *a permanent, exclusive, and public commitment between one man and one woman to share every part of their lives with each other*. It is a holy institution, and within marriage, sex is a holy activity—the consummation of that deepest union and commitment within human relationships. There is no other relational context in which sexual activity is ever permissible in Scripture than marriage between a man and woman.

But as beautiful and important as all that is, the purpose and value of marriage go far beyond the human plane. They were designed by God not merely for oneness and commitment at the human level, but as a display of God's steadfast commitment to us, and as a foreshadowing of our spiritual union with Christ.

When the apostle Paul is giving instructions on how husbands and wives are to treat each other in Ephesians 5, he continually ties the various roles in marriage to how they display our relationship with God. "Husbands, love your wives, *just as Christ loved the church*" (Eph. 5:25). "Wives, submit to your husbands *as to the Lord*" (5:21). And then he comes right out and just says it in Eph. 5:32: "This mystery is profound—but *I am talking about Christ and the church.*"

In other words, the love that we express to one another in marriage, the sacrificial love, the covenant loyalty, is designed to be a living sermon to each other and to the world of what Christ is like and how he relates to his people. Just as Jesus laid his life down for us on the cross to rescue us from our sins, so husbands are to reflect that love to their wives, laying their lives down and serving them and pointing them to Christ. Just as God will never leave nor forsake his people, so the permanence and commitment of marriage is to reflect his undying love and commitment. Our marriages represent Christ.

And within marriage, as Jay Thomas and Gerald Hiestand explain, "God created sex to serve as a living portrait of the life-changing spiritual union that believers have with God through Christ."¹ Just as the husband and wife become one in sex, so through faith in Jesus we are united with God in the most intimate spiritual way (see 1 Cor. 6:15-17). Which is why one of the most common metaphors for unfaithfulness to God in the Old Testament was adultery and prostitution.

¹ Gerald Hiestand and Jay S. Thomas, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships: A Fresh Approach* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 18.

Jeremiah 3:9 says, “Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood.” Her idolatry, bowing down to false gods of stone and wood, was spiritual adultery. They broke their covenant with God.

Marriage and sex are designed to display God's covenant faithfulness and our spiritual union with him. God's commands about the exclusivity, permanence, love, and loyalty of marriage and sex reflect God's “single-minded connection and devotion to his bride”—the church.² And when sex is removed from marriage, or when marriage is broken and dissolved, what happens to the picture? The picture is ruined, the purpose is thwarted, and the value is despised. The wine flutes used to celebrate the wedding day toast become a bedpan, and we chuck the whole thing out the window. And of course, not only is the picture destroyed, but the lives of those through whom it was displayed. And so God prohibits adultery because of the holiness of marriage and sex.

Now come back to our passage in Matthew 5. It's not as though the scribes and Pharisees were okay with adultery. They all agreed that it was wrong (unlike our culture today, which tends to be rather unimpressed with the sin). They just thought they could keep the letter of the law on the surface while ignoring the heart underneath. Jesus takes significant issue with this. And it's important to note that Jesus' criticism in this passage is not against the world around us. That's easy enough to do. There's no question that this world has gone insane with respect to sex and marriage. But that's not Jesus' concern here. His concern is the extent that that insanity has overtaken his people—the people who claim to be part of God's kingdom. The problem here is not merely ignoring or overturning God's purposes, but thinking that one can do that and still be okay with God. In other words, as we look at this passage, our first response should not be to wave a finger at the world around us in its godless trajectory (godless as much of it is). Our first response should be to search our own hearts, and invite God to do so as we look at his Word.

There are two ways the religious leaders were overturning the holiness of marriage through their surface-level obedience; two ways that we are tempted to do likewise today. The first is with respect to lust.

Adultery and Lustful Desire

Verse 27: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:27-28). See again the depth at which Jesus is operating; the depth of his concern—the heart.

This may seem prudish to some. What's the problem with looking? As one of the women's basketball coaches at my high school once said to a friend of mine, “I figure I can read the menu as long as I don't order.” No harm done, right?

But it's this very sentiment that Jesus is correcting. The problem here is not noticing an attractive person, or even feeling the impulse of lust when you see someone attractive. The problem is following that impulse. Feeding it with your imagination. Looking, as the ESV puts it, “with lustful intent.”

² Hiestand and Thomas, 28.

Neither is the problem sexual desire itself. Again, sex was God’s idea, and the desires that go with it. And within the context of marriage, those desires are a very happy and holy thing. They are pure desires. The problem is when we feed those desires outside of marriage and direct them toward someone that doesn’t belong to us—someone we’re not bound to by the holy covenant of marriage. So you might think of lust as *sexual covetousness*. To covet something is to want for yourself what rightfully belongs to someone else. It’s not wrong to want for yourself what is yours. It is wrong to want what belongs to someone else. Lust is wanting someone sexually who doesn’t belong to you. Whether we direct those desires toward someone we see on the street, or on the cover of a magazine in the checkout line, or toward the women who are objectified and dehumanized through the porn industry. And though we may never touch the person, to desire them sexually is to commit adultery with them in our hearts. It removes sex and sexual desire from the holy bond of marriage, thwarting the purpose and cheapening the value. Moreover, lust is one of those secret sins that we try to hide, but that eats away our souls from the inside. And it sets us up for greater failure. As Kent Hughes, writes, “Sensual sins are preceded by sensual fantasies. . . . No sensual sin was ever committed that was not first imagined.”³

It is not enough to say that one can honor Jesus as King with respect to marriage, and still feed our lustful desires. We must repent and turn away from lust and turn to Jesus instead. We’ll talk more about that in a minute.

Adultery and Divorce

The second way that the religious leaders in Jesus’ day thought they could keep the letter of the law and honor God and marriage, but still get what they wanted out of life and sex, was by making sure they filled out the proper paperwork for divorce. Verse 31: “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’”

Here Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 24:1, part of God’s law. But what he’s challenging is not the law itself, but what the religious leaders were doing with it. Later in Matthew 19, some of the Pharisees tested Jesus by asking him “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” or “for any cause?” (Matt. 19:3). In other words, what are the legitimate grounds for divorce? Their question reflects a debate between two schools of thought among the Pharisees, some of whom thought the only proper ground for divorce was sexual sin, others who thought it could be something as trite as burning dinner. We have our own lists today: ‘I don’t love her anymore.’ ‘I’ve found someone else.’ ‘We got married too young.’ ‘My expectations were too unrealistic.’

But Jesus says to them, ‘You’ve missed the point. Go back to the beginning. Look again at God’s design.’ Matthew 19:4-6: “‘Haven’t you read,’ he replied, ‘that at the beginning the Creator “made them male and female,” 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”?’ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.” Because if you do, the picture is ruined, the purpose is thwarted, the value is despised, and lives are destroyed. So stop trying to find loopholes, Jesus says, and start being faithful to the promise you made before God and man, and the very purpose and value of your marriage.

³ R. Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 107.

Now the Pharisees still want to know, “‘Why then . . . did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?’ Jesus replied, ‘Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness [or sexual immorality], and marries another woman commits adultery’” (Matt. 19:7-9). In other words, divorce was not part of the design, but because we live in a sinful and fallen world, it was a concession made *in order to protect the divorced wife*.

In the ancient world, an adult woman’s means of support was pretty much contingent on being married. If her husband should for some reason divorce her, Moses wanted a document stating so, so that she could be free to remarry and be provided for. Without a document proving the divorce, who would marry her and risk being killed for adultery? It was a concession made in order to protect the vulnerable.

But as Sinclair Ferguson clarifies, “A law that was clearly intended to safeguard the women in Israel was turned into an escape clause for self-indulgent men.”⁴ And Jesus will have none of it. That is not true righteousness because it does not come from a heart that reflects God’s character and purposes. Simply going through the motions and filling out the right paperwork doesn’t mean you’re keeping the heart of the law. In fact, Jesus says in both Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, that if you divorce your wife without proper cause, and she remarries someone else, you make her an adulterer. Because she should still be married to you. And if you, in a similar way, marry a divorced woman, you commit adultery, because that woman should still be married to her husband.

But notice I said “without proper cause.” Though there is disagreement among pastors and scholars, I believe that there are two clear exceptions in Scripture in which divorce is not sinful. It’s always caused by sin, but it is not always sinful. And if it can be said that the divorce is permissible, then I believe that in such cases, remarriage is permissible as well, since the whole purpose of divorce in Deuteronomy 24 was to free the woman for remarriage.⁵ Paul deals with one exception in 1 Corinthians 7, when a non-believing spouse abandons a believing spouse (cf. 1 Cor. 7:12-16). And Jesus deals with the other, here in Matthew 5 and later in ch. 19—namely, sexual immorality.

And I think he retains this exception for the same reasons Moses made a concession in Deuteronomy 24: for the protection of the vulnerable. Divorce is not *required* in cases of sexual immorality or adultery. Forgiveness and reconciliation is always preferable, even as God sought after his wayward wife—that is, *you and me*, as we give our worship and devotion to things other than God. And yet because we are still in a fallen world, waiting for the final wedding supper of the Lamb, divorce is permissible in cases of sexual immorality, where one party has broken the covenant through sexual activity with someone else (including, but not limited to intercourse). And sadly, there are times when a vulnerable spouse needs such protection—the wife whose husband can’t stop sleeping with every new client he meets. The husband whose wife decides to up and leave to be with another man. This is not the way it’s supposed to be, and anyone who has

⁴ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Life in a Fallen World* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 86.

⁵ See Ferguson, 91-92; N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One* (Louisville: WJK, 2002, 2004), 48; D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (EBC 8; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 417; Grant Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 199-200.

experienced it will be the first to tell you so. Yet because of the hardness of our hearts, that exception remains.

Marriage is a holy covenant, and sex is a holy activity. It was designed by God, for God and his kingdom purposes. And so we look at all of this, and who among us stands innocent? Whether our adultery takes a literal form, or the form of looking lustfully at someone, or perhaps the form of an inappropriate divorce and remarriage? How do we, with unclean hands and impure hearts, dare draw near to God, or call Jesus King? How do we honor Jesus as King with respect to marriage and sex?

Adultery and the Gospel

This is where we must remember again what the whole purpose of marriage is—what it’s all about. Even though we are so often and in so many ways unfaithful, Jesus Christ, our bridegroom, will remain faithful to the end. He is the great King who crossed the divide between heaven and earth to slay the dragon and win his bride. And he did so at the price of his own life. On the cross he took every lustful glance, every bitter word, every broken promise, every act of adultery—physical, emotional, or spiritual—onto himself to pay the death penalty we deserved, and to cleanse us of our sin and unite us with him. Ephesians tells us that Christ, our bridegroom, “loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:25-27). Through faith in Jesus we are forgiven, we are cleansed and purified, we are united with God in the most intimate way possible. Through our union with Jesus we are poised to treat marriage and sex with the honor and respect they deserve—to recognize their holy purpose, to cherish their special value, and so honor Jesus as King.

And so if you are married, I want to say this to you this morning: Stay married.⁶ Cherish your marriage and nurture it. Spend time together in God’s Word and prayer. Get time away from the kids. Younger couples, spend time with older couples, learning from them. Older couples, take the younger couples’ kids off their hands once in a while so they have time to get away. Think about the promises you made, and think about God’s covenant commitment to you, and by his grace seek to reflect that faithfulness and love to each other. And if you need help, get help. There’s no shame in that. If you’re thinking about divorce, slow down and talk to someone who’s going to counsel you from the gospel of Jesus.

If you are divorced because your spouse committed sexual immorality, or else denies the faith and has abandoned you, I want you to know this morning that our hearts break for you. It’s not right for you to be treated that way. We don’t look down on you, and don’t want anyone to look down on you as though you’re the sinner when in fact you’ve been sinned against. We love you and want to come alongside you, to be family for you, and help you find healing in Jesus Christ.

If you are divorced and you shouldn’t be, perhaps even remarried now, but your divorce was not caused by sexual immorality or having been abandoned by a non-believer, I want to say this to you: we love you too, and there is forgiveness with repentance. Sinful divorce is no small offense—to tear asunder what God has joined together. But neither is it the unpardonable sin. If

⁶ The form of these applicational points was inspired by DeYoung, “A Sermon on Divorce and Remarriage.”

that is your situation, then I think repentance means acknowledging your sin for what it is, seeking forgiveness from those against whom you committed it, and remaining as you are. That's what Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 7. If single, don't pursue remarriage unless it's with your former spouse. If remarried, don't add the sin of divorce to a sinful remarriage. Confess, seek forgiveness, remain as you are, and find grace and forgiveness in the gospel.

To everyone—single, married, divorced, remarried—I want to say this: honor the holiness of marriage, and flee from sexual immorality. Do not cozy up to it and see how close you can get to it without getting burned. Fight. Fight with all the power of God's Spirit and all the vigilance of fighting for life itself. It's not always easy. It is often a grueling battle that requires prayer and accountability, and that calls for radical steps of obedience. Listen to Jesus' exhortation in Matthew 5:29-30:

If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

That's an incredibly graphic image. And while Jesus is obviously using hyperbole, we don't want to lose the gravity or urgency of what he says. Marriage and sex are that holy—honoring them require that kind of radical action—not mutilation, but what Paul calls “mortification.”

John Stott offers a helpful clarification and application on this point:

‘Mortification’ or ‘taking up the cross’ to follow Christ means *to reject sinful practices so resolutely that we die to them or put them to death*. What does this involve in practice? Let me elaborate and so interpret Jesus' teaching: “If your eye causes you to sin because temptation comes to you through your eyes (objects you see), then pluck out your eyes. That is, don't look! Behave as if you had actually plucked out your eyes and flung them away, and were now blind and so *could* not see the objects which previously caused you to sin. Again, if your hand or foot causes you to sin, because temptation comes to you through your hands (things you do) or your feet (places you visit), then cut them off. That is: don't do it! Don't go! Behave as if you had actually cut off your hands and feet, and had flung them away, and were now crippled and so *could* not do the things or visit the places which previously caused you to sin.” That is the meaning of “mortification.”⁷

Honoring Jesus as King with respect to marriage and sex calls for radical repentance, and radical dependence on the gospel of Jesus. “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. . . . This is all my hope and peace . . . This is all my righteousness. Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”⁸

⁷ John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978), 89, emphasis mine.

⁸ Robert Lowry, “Nothing but the Blood” (New York: Biglow & Main, 1876).