

CONVERSION: A study of the Sermon on the Mount

Jesus changes everything for the one who believes to live in Him.

INTRO In this series we are walking through the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. **CONVERSION** means we look and listen to the One who is our Lord, remember His righteousness He has put on us in salvation, and convert our lives by faith to walk in obedience with Him. Today's topic is no exception. I implore you to listen today to all that will be said.

CONVERSION: Divorce

Matthew 5:31-32

MPS: Divorce damages and destroys people, but Jesus heals and redeems to restore when we trust to obey Him.

OBJ Every person can understand how to obey Jesus as our better righteousness by two questions.

READ Matthew 5:31-32

*"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' ³²But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. **Matt 5:31-32***

Matthew presents this teaching here because Jesus addressed the hard things of life with truth and hope. And few things are more difficult than the situation that causes and that subsequently follows divorce.

Divorce damages and destroys people,
but Jesus heals and redeems to restore when we trust to obey Him.

OBJ I want us to see what Jesus teaches to trust and obey, and walk in His righteousness. Every person can understand to trust Jesus' righteousness by answering two questions.

Question #1: What does the Bible teach about divorce?

TRANS Let's begin by looking at what the Law actually teaches. Turn to Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

READ Deut 24:1-4

*"When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, ²and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, ³and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, ⁴then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance. **Deut 24:1-4***

Anytime we study the God's Law it is imperative that we understand what it actually says as well as the situation within which it was written. Otherwise, as is so often the case today, we impose our current situational / cultural understanding on it in order to diminish, dismiss, devalue or disregard it altogether. This is both foolish and wrong. Only as we understand it in its context can we begin to understand its value for us today's as God's wisdom for life.

The Law addresses divorce with a view toward a Biblical understanding of marriage. When we consider God's teaching on divorce we must set it against the backdrop of His teaching on marriage in Genesis 2:18-25. So, while we don't have time to cover the entirety of each passage, we must keep God's creational command for marriage in our mind to



understand what the Law addresses. [God ordains marriage as His making of one between a man and his wife as they leave their family and cleave to one another to form a new family.](#)

For the sake of our time I want us to understand the intent and purpose of the Law. The Law stated that if a man's wife finds no favor in his eyes due to some indecency, he could write a certificate of divorce and send her away. "Indecency" was not a general dislike but a specific reference to some manner of uncleanness, specifically in the moral or sexual nature. D. Martin Lloyd-Jones provides three helpful principles that outline the purpose of the Law which includes that ¹the Law actually limited divorce to certain causes, that ²any man who thus divorced His wife must give her a bill of divorcement, and that ³he is not allowed to remarry. The Law was introduced to control what had gotten out of hand and turned to chaos.¹ And while only a man could enact a divorce when the Law was written, these parameters would transfer to include anyone today who had the power or ability to enact a divorce.

The Law provided boundaries that protected women and allowed them a way to continue to pursue a livelihood without complete public shame and disgrace. This was the very situation Joseph found himself in when he learned that Mary was pregnant with Jesus. The Law provided boundaries that guarded against frivolousness in marriage and personal whims of men. The Law made "divorce...something formal, something serious, the idea being to impress upon the minds of those people that it was a solemn step and not something to be undertaken lightly in a moment of passion when a man suddenly felt he disliked his wife and wanted to get rid of her. In this way the seriousness of marriage was emphasized."² [The Law makes clear that marriage is serious before God and should never be reduced in how one thinks or acts to damage other people in its dissolution.](#)

TRANS When we come to our passage in Matthew, we must understand that the problem arose NOT because the Law was outdated, obsolete or wrong. The problem arose because the Law was incorrectly taught and abused and therefore caused people confusion and condemnation. The problem was NOT God's law regarding divorce, but the false interpretation and application by the Pharisees and scribes. The problem in the Scriptures is NOT what God said, but what people were saying about what God said so they could skew it for their own purposes, preferences and desires. **Sound familiar?**

The Pharisees and scribes had so skewed the Law that they were encouraging divorce, and using Moses' command as their justification. The Pharisees and scribes propagated a "disposable ideology" toward wives, and ultimately marriage, that said if there was any reason a man ceased to like his wife, he could claim the Law's "uncleanness" clause to divorce your wife. This was never God's desire nor Moses' intent in writing the law. The Pharisees likely knew it with their mind but didn't care in their hearts. And as with all disobedience, this is the root of their problem.

The Pharisees and scribes disregarded God's teaching on marriage by encouraging divorce. Their abysmal disregard for the Law is made even more poignant when we consider Malachi's words about how God feels about divorce. Malachi states that God hates divorce.³ The language actually states that what God hates is the act and the one committing the act, the "divorcer", because of what it does to people. First, those in the marriage, but also those associated with the marriage, and ultimately all because of what it says about God's design for marriage. And so when we arrive in the New Testament, those charged with the right teaching of the law had actually concealed, nullified and degraded it to lead people in sinning against God's Law.

God hates divorce because in it man attempts to undo by his doing what God has put together as one by His doing. Malachi states that God is the witness to the covenant between a man and woman in marriage. Divorce doesn't end a marriage. Divorce lacerates the covenant promise and leaves mangled the people of that covenant relationship that adultery

¹ D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, [Studies in the Sermon On The Mount](#). (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 224. Lloyd-Jones commentary is very helpful to understand the situation, purpose and application of the Law.

² D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, [Studies in the Sermon On The Mount](#). (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 225.

³ Malachi 2:16 "'I hate divorce,' says the LORD God of Israel, 'and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,' says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.'" (NIV)



destroyed, as it despises God for what He did in making them one. [Divorce is the 'crown of lust' jeweled with coveting, thievery, adultery, and idolatry of the highest order.](#)

TRANS Friend, please listen today and hear our Lord Jesus' words. As we seek in this CONVERSION series, a better righteousness NEVER comes by mis-interpreting, diminishing or dismissing the Law but by the ONE who is the fulfillment of the Law. Jesus is our better righteousness. In believing His teaching we walk in Him as our righteousness that we might see in hope, trust and obey.

Matthew 5:31-32 is not the only or most expansive teaching on divorce. This is likely a brief synopsis of Jesus' more expansive teaching on divorce in Matthew 19. The Pharisees try to trap the One who is eternal wisdom in his teaching. (Fools!) Jesus' response provides a fuller understanding of what it means to trust Him as our better righteousness.

Jesus responds by appealing to the sanctity of the marriage covenant. He states, *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?"* ⁶*So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.*" (Matt 19:5-6) According to Jesus, "Marriage is not a civil contract, or a sacrament; marriage is something in which these two persons become one flesh."⁴ And thinking they had him trapped they asked why Moses allowed it. Jesus responds simply, "because your heart is hard." (19:8) Jesus honors the Law and explains the situation. [Divorce is rampant because God's design for marriage is not rightly honored as sacred.](#)

God has never commanded anyone to divorce, which is exactly what the Pharisees and scribes were doing. Jesus makes clear that there is only one legitimate justification for divorce, and that is marital unfaithfulness. Why? Because adultery breaks the oneness of marital union. Fornication stands as Jesus' one legitimate allowance for divorce. But, we too must understand how this is to be applied. It is neither a concession for weakness, such as Moses offered, nor is it a command that must always be followed. Rather, Jesus' teaches this as a principle to apply that honors God's design for oneness in marriage. Jesus says that all divorce stems from hardness of heart and one does not have to divorce, not even for adultery. [Honoring the sanctity of God's design for oneness in marriage is Jesus' priority, to glorify the Father in the marriage relationship.](#)

Extreme teaching? Surely it is, and especially in light of our times today. But this only demonstrates how far we remain from God's holiness for our lives. So we must ask; **HOW, since we are so far from God's holy standard, can we ever hope to satisfy God's holy demand?** This is exactly the question we seek to answer throughout this series. And the short answer is, we cannot and never will. But Jesus as our righteousness already has!

According to God's Law, no one has any hope. **Then why does the Law have any importance for us?** The Law remains vital for us to understand where we stand before God in our own self-righteousness or religious righteousness. Only the Law can adequately show all of us that we, in fact, have absolutely NO standing with God. [The Law is God's first word in showing us where we stand before Him. But God also has the last word in Christ Jesus.](#)

TRANS Understanding Jesus' teaching now leads us to our second questions for today. And this is where our listening and heeding of God's Word becomes so important as we seek to apply it faithfully.

Question #2: What does it mean to trust Jesus as our better righteousness in regard to divorce?

Trusting Jesus as our better righteousness begins by knowing and applying His Word to walk in obedience to Him in the specific situation of our life. Question two helps us apply what the Bible teaches regarding divorce.

First, we trust Jesus as our better righteousness when we honor first God's design for marriage, that He makes two One flesh. And, what God makes as One no person should seek to make back into two. This means we also recognize that

⁴ D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, Studies in the Sermon On The Mount. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 227.



God's will for all is that all sexual activity occurs ONLY in the marriage relationship. [Sexual intimacy consummates in the flesh the marital union of God making as one.](#)

Second, we trust Jesus as our better righteousness when we understand divorce, what it is, what it does, and what is involved when it occurs, the hardening of hearts. Understanding divorce before you have to encounter or deal with it is critical. Trying to learn these lessons in a wounded state carries a heavy and near impossible burden. Understanding what it is the best way to steer away from the allure of its "easy promise". Understanding divorce means that even when one encounters it, you know what it is so no matter what got you to it you turn to the only One who can get you through it, Jesus.

Third, we trust Jesus as our better righteousness when we hope in Him alone, first in marriage but also in divorce. No one who can hear this message today is without hope in Jesus. But you can choose to reject the hope he holds for you by allowing your heart to be hardened to refuse Him.

How well you do or survive, how much damage is done to you in a divorce will be directly dependent on this, who you trust as your righteousness.

**Divorce damages and destroys people,
but Jesus heals and redeems to restore when we trust to obey Him.**

APPL I want to conclude by providing pastoral counsel to specific situations; "How should I apply this teaching if..." Knowing what is right and knowing what to do can often feel worlds apart. I hope this helps, clarifies and encourages.

How should I apply this teaching IF I have been divorced in my past or if I am struggling through the effects of divorce?

Divorce is not the unforgiveable sin, nor is it the "scarlet letter" sin of life. There is forgiveness, cleansing and healing in Jesus. But you must seek Him and trust Him. If you have been divorced and continue to struggle with it, ask yourself why you are struggling. Then, deal with the answer to that question. God is not the One who heaps guilt on you. Sin's condemnation is the "guilt heaper". Repent as you are convicted by Holy Spirit. And that may mean you have to seek forgiveness from others. Do not dismiss what God by Holy Spirit conviction puts before you. But know this; when God forgives you, you are clean and free. Do not continue to hold over you what God has released from you.

IF you are "the divorcer", as Malachi 2 says, I still want you to hear me today. There is still hope in Jesus for you. He stands ready to forgive and cleanse you if you will turn to Him. Adultery is not the unforgiveable sin. You are not outside God's power to forgive and save.

How should I apply this teaching IF I am considering a divorce now?

- Reject the shame, embarrassment and / or guilt that would tempt you to run away or hide. That is Satanic temptation to isolate you so he can destroy you.
- Reject the voices of those who encourage you to a) not seek Biblical counsel, b) just do it so you can end it (the pain). Doing it will not end the pain of it. Understanding and walking through it the right way is the ONLY way to minimize the damage, avoid the destruction, and alleviate the pain in a healthy, God-honoring way.
- Surrender to Jesus by seeking strong, Biblical counsel for your situation. Submit to that counsel, trusting the people God has placed in your life.

How should I apply this teaching IF I am counseling another person on whether or not to get a divorce?

- Make clear what God's Word says and hold out all hope in Jesus' power through the gospel.
- Encourage them to make decisions based on God's Word. Let the decision be theirs to make. Be very careful NOT to press them to make any decision hastily.



- When you give counsel to someone heading toward or going through a divorce, be very careful that you give clear counsel but refrain from personal conclusions. They don't need to hear what you would do. It is not your decision, no matter how well you think you understand the situation. They need to hear how they can move forward by trusting in Jesus.
- Continually remind how much God loves them and that you are praying for them in this decision. Stay near to them.
- Depending on their heart posture and actions,
 - 1. Stand with them, if their spouse is acting to press for divorce.
 - 2. Stand on God's Word if they are in sin toward their spouse, and let them see how their decisions and actions are tearing relationships and lives apart, hoping and praying that it will "tear their heart up" to turn from their sin in repentance.

