

Sermon Text for February 16, 2025

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Deuteronomy 21:1-4 and Matthew 19:1-12 ***“What does the Bible say about divorce?”***

So Valentine’s Day came and went on Friday, hopefully those of you who are married were able to do something special. We had cheese fondue for dinner that evening, that’s pretty special for us. Let’s do something, everyone stand up. Now, if you are not married or have been married for less than 5 years sit down. Okay, now if you are married for less than 10 years sit down. 20, 30, 40, less than 50. Each of you standing now I need one statement on what keeps the two of you together.

A number of you raised your eyebrows on the topic for today, others of you completely ignored and sent me articles saying hey, I know you are preaching on marriage on Sunday. No, I’m not preaching on marriage, I am preaching on divorce and what does the Bible say about divorce and surprisingly for many of you, it says a lot about divorce. Jesus himself addresses it multiple times, so it is not one of those topics that is hidden away. We are going to learn about physics today and specifically the second law of thermodynamics. Who knows what the second law of thermodynamics is? It is that entropy, or the movement from order to disorder, is always increasing over time, and it takes a whole lot of work to maintain the order and to avoid entropy. Marriage is an act of avoiding entropy that lasts a lifetime.

That sounds really romantic doesn’t it? If you stop working on your marriage then entropy will inevitably take over, disorder. Jesus addresses divorce a number of times in Scripture and we are going to read one of those times now. Let’s read.

READ

So you are all right, that when you talk about divorce, you have to start by talking about marriage. Let me also be clear that for this sermon I took more notes and did more study than I have done on just about any other sermon. I’m old school and I write everything down on yellow legal pads and normally I put together about 6 or 7 pages of notes, this one was a full 10 pages. I think because it is a topic that has affected and impacted all of us. We all have a brother or a sister, or a child, or parent, or we ourselves who has been divorced and so this is not one of those topics that any of us can sit there thinking it doesn’t affect me and so I can tune out. It is also a very sensitive topic and one that can easily go the wrong way if you aren’t careful as you present it and as we study and go together to understand what Scripture tells us.

Maybe surprisingly for many of you the Bible actually has a lot to say about divorce because it is not a new practice, in fact as we read in Deuteronomy, it has been around since the people of God walked on the face of this earth and were trying to figure out what do we do when this union that we have between a man and a woman goes in a direction that doesn't seem to be of God's will or desire. How do we move forward? As a result in Jesus' day there were a lot of theories of what was permitted and what was not permitted in regards to divorce. But no one was saying in Jesus' day, and actually nowhere do we read in the Bible, that divorce is not permitted.

Jesus is approached today and he is asked a question not about the legality of divorce, but rather for what causes can one be divorced. This was a really hot topic for Jesus' day also because who remembers why John the Baptist was beheaded? Remember he publicly criticized Herod for divorcing his wife Antipas so that he could marry his brother's wife. This was a huge scandal and so divorce was front and center in these three years of Jesus' ministry. The questions before Jesus in vs.3 by the Pharisees is not is divorce legal, but rather for what cause can a man divorce his wife? The phrasing of that question is crucial to us understanding divorce in Jesus' day, not only for what cause, so the assumption that it was legal, but can a man divorce his wife.

There was no wife divorcing her husband in Jesus' day. What we read in Deuteronomy addresses that, if a woman does not please a man and he finds something objectionable, was enough cause in Jesus' day for divorce. But again, only the male was able to initiate. The man could divorce a woman at any time for any reason and the woman could do nothing about it. Let's look at the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, you know the one that had five husbands and when we read it we often look at it as Jesus calling her out in her sin. That is not the case at all. It wasn't her sin which caused her to be divorced, it was the whim of her previous 4 or 5 husbands which put her out on the street. When a woman was divorced by her husband she had to find another husband in order to survive or else she would inevitably find herself in prostitution.

We have such a different view of divorce today than they did back in Jesus' day that when we read Scripture where it is obvious that the woman is the victim to the whims of unrighteous men we assume that it is the woman who has sinned. No, that was the dynamic of divorce in Jesus' day and so we do Scripture injustice by reading into it that way. In Judaism marriage was a contract that could be broken by the male and by the male alone. Rarely do we see in history the woman able to initiate divorce in Jesus' day.

So as you can imagine there were different schools of thought in Jesus' day as to what causes were justifiable for divorce. When the Pharisees ask their question of Jesus they want him to choose a side. The school of Hillel said that something as trivial as a spoiled dish for dinner, while the school of Rabbi Aqiba said that if the husband finds a woman more beautiful it is justified. So it isn't about the legality of divorce but rather what causes are justified.

Jesus answers the question of divorce by beginning with marriage, and specifically to how God was the one who originally instituted marriage from the very beginning of time. He goes back to Genesis 2:24 and says specifically do you remember how God made us man and woman, and from the beginning of time God has called man and woman to be together in marriage and that unity, that joining together is from God, is blessed by God, is desired by God, and that unity is seen in the two becoming one flesh, and that unity which takes place is from God and so that which God has established no man should ever, ever separate. Who are we to separate the work of God?

So Jesus doesn't give them an answer as to what cause would justify divorce but rather reminds them about what marriage is all about. Jesus gives us first the creator's will for marriage. This is what marriage looks like, and it is good, and it is of God, instituted, blessed, supported and strengthened by God. Any meaningful treatment of divorce, Jesus basically says, has to begin with a clear understanding of God's intention for marriage. Jesus says it is God who brings us together and binds us in one flesh and whatever God does has permanent validity. Let's spend a little time here where Jesus begins his answer.

Jesus says a few times the two shall become one, their flesh becomes one, it is not by chance what happens with a man and a woman in marriage, but this was God's design from the creation of the heavens and the earth. This is the natural way in which God has created and continues to create and order things. The two becoming one flesh is a critical part of marriage and can't be overlooked. Paul in I Corinthians 6 states that when we become one flesh with each other then from that moment on a part of you becomes a part of them and a part of them becomes a part of you forever. They never leave your mind, your heart, your body, even your soul when you are joined to a person. This is why you wait to join with a person until marriage because it is meant to be for life. This is what Jesus is saying.

God has joined us together physically, our bodies are made to go together, to produce children if we are able. Paul calls it the natural way. All of this is God's design, what God wishes, and how he preordained things. And who are we to mess with God's design? That which God has joined together in marriage no one can separate. Certainly not a rando man who

wakes up one morning and finds his wife displeasing as it was in Jesus' day. Jesus is asked for what causes can we divorce and he answers you have forgotten the whole point of marriage.

The Pharisees respond, but what about Deuteronomy 4 where we are commanded to divorce. That's the phrase they use in vs.7, and Jesus says God has given you permission, not commanded, but only because of your hardness of heart. Divorce was never God's plan, it came about as a result of sin and so God relented and allowed it. That is Jesus' response. It was never meant to produce the reality that a divorced woman would be forced to marry another man in order to survive. Where is the righteousness in that?

With Jesus we affirm the Creator's intention that marriage remains a lifelong commitment despite its inevitable frustrations. We acknowledge that in a sinful world that this ideal, despite our prayers for grace, may often fall short of attainment. But the ideal of marriage remains our vision. What mother who is divorced would want their daughter to suffer the same experiences that she went through? None would, so we begin with the ideal and not allowing disunity to rear its ugly head.

Almost as an aside Jesus mentioned celibacy as well. I was convinced after college that God has called me to celibacy, I was wrong. Jesus mentions celibacy as an option, but it is the more difficult option. Paul teaches on this as well. It is interesting that John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul all seem to be unmarried. We know that Jesus' disciples are married and as a result they question Jesus about this teaching in a way that may surprise us. After Jesus reminds the Pharisees that God's purpose in marriage was unity for life, that God planned once you get married you stay married, the disciples come up to him and say: I guess it is better to never get married then, who can do such a thing? I'm guessing this is a result of potentially the disciples, some of them at least, already divorced. Who can live up to this teaching when we have been taught our whole life that as men we can marry and then divorce at whim. It's not even worth getting married if that's the case.

But Jesus' teaching on divorce was meant to lift up the woman from her position of servitude to equality with man so that together they could fight that 2nd law of thermodynamics, so that disorder would not win out.