

“Living with Integrity in Marriage”

Introduction: We are working our way through Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount to consider how he desires to form us as citizens of God’s kingdom such that we might be salt and light to the world around us, revealing the goodness and beauty of God, and pointing people to what it means to live a genuinely human life.

Last week we began to see how Jesus lays the teaching of the Pharisees and teachers of the law alongside his own, not to abolish or deconstruct the law, but to lead us toward understanding and living it out in a deeper way. So we heard him express his concern not only with murder, but also with anger, with the murder we can commit with our words.

This morning we’ll hear Jesus take on two more issues – adultery and divorce – which I’ve drawn together under the title, “living with integrity in marriage.” The word “integrity” surfaced for me as my devotional reading this past week took me to 2 Corinthians. There, at the beginning of his second letter to this congregation, as Paul writes: “Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God’s grace” (2 Cor. 1:12).

As those called to be salt and light, we need to live with integrity and godly sincerity in all of our relationships, and we need God’s grace to do so, especially with issues like those Jesus brings to our attention today that are challenging, complex, and painful for so many. And so we want to look at them as best as we can within the embrace of God’s amazing grace, so that we can hear what Jesus wants to teach us, receive the healing we may need, and reveal the glory of God that the world definitely needs.

I. Adultery

A. Jesus’ first word on this pair of issues addresses the breadth of faithfulness to which he calls us in marriage:

²⁷ You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Just as not committing the physical act of murder but also watching our words is important if we want to live as salt and light in our world, so too is simply not committing the physical act of adultery enough either. Jesus takes us to the level of our heart and declares that what goes on there is important, too. While desire is a good and God-created emotion—just read the Song of Songs and the uninhibited delight of bride and groom revealed there as they fulfill their God-given desire in one another—Jesus says that problems begin when our imaginations take us outside the covenant of marriage, and lust begins to sow the seeds of mental infidelity, which then, becomes adultery in another form.

B. Sometimes, perhaps, we need to remember that our sexuality is a tremendous gift and joy, given to us by our Creator God. The picture we are given in the opening chapters of Genesis is that of God creating woman from the rib of the man, and then declaring that the two should come back together in marriage as one flesh, a reunion, if you will of two persons who were originally one. This reunion knits together our emotional lives, our psychological lives, as well as our physical lives. Lust brings an intruder into this reunion, this relationship, someone who does not belong.

C. Importantly, lust is not merely noticing that someone is attractive. We in fact were made to notice, and appreciate, beauty. It's what we do with what we notice that is the issue. As Martin Luther once put it, "We cannot help it if birds fly over our heads." "But," he continued, "it's another thing if we invite them to build a nest in our hair." So we hear Jesus speak forcibly, encouraging us to deal ruthlessly whenever a "nest" seems like it's beginning to take shape. In fact, he says we should gouge out our eye or cut off our hand! I'm pretty sure he was exaggerating to make a point. Although, there was a group of Pharisees, dubbed "the bruised and battered Pharisees," who would shut their eyes upon merely seeing a woman. They earned their nickname because they kept bumping into walls and posts as they walked! Rather, Jesus is directing us to pay attention, in his often-exaggerated kind of way, to how we look, and what we do with what we see, otherwise we'll find ourselves on a highway that leads to nowhere good – to separation from God and what he desires for his people. Jesus is concerned not only with actions and deeds, but with thoughts and desires, in his call to live as salt and light in the world.

II. Divorce

A. Jesus follows his word on adultery with a word on divorce. Pause for a moment and consider: If lust were ruthlessly eliminated, I wonder if marriages might stand a better chance of flourishing? Yet Jesus saw the need to press on, and so shall we! And what Jesus sees a need to take on in this regard are divorces that had become far too easy to obtain. He talks about having a "certificate of divorce," which comes from Deuteronomy 24, as part of the law of Moses. It begins:

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce . . .

Such a certificate was meant to protect a woman against being dismissed without cause by her husband and being forced, in a time without social security or paid jobs for women, to quickly find another man, or even turn to a life of prostitution, just to support herself. The problem was that such divorce certificates were being written often, and without real cause.

B. The challenge was, what is meant by "something indecent?" By Jesus' day, it had become a pretty big debate in Jewish religious circles. Two major rabbinic schools of thought had arisen. For one, "something indecent" had a very wide margin. It could actually include burning the man's toast or putting too much salt in his soup! For the other, a serious sexual offense—meaning adultery—was required before a divorce would be granted. Interestingly, some of the Pharisees later tried to draw Jesus into this debate, asking him the question: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason" (Ma. 19:3)?

C. Instead of answering directly, Jesus focused instead on God's intent for marriage and the beauty of a faithful relationship (Ma. 19:4-6):

Haven't you read 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 flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.

Thus, we see Jesus, again, moving the discussion to a place of deeper righteousness. I appreciate John Stott's counsel here when he says that whenever someone wants to speak with him about divorce, rather than beginning by trying to see if there are adequate grounds to seek a divorce, he first seeks to

speak to them about marriage, and then reconciliation. For, like trying to tear apart two pieces of cardboard that have been glued together, divorce can rip lives, families, and even communities apart. Studies in fact have shown that children whose parents have divorced are, on average, less emotionally stable, show more behavioral problems at school, leave home earlier, are more likely to have a child before the age of 20, are less likely to secure a full-time job, and are divorced or separated more frequently themselves. In other words, God has designed marriage in part for the ongoing health of the human race, and being salt and light involves seeking to live according to that pattern as best as we are able, for our good, but also for the good of others.

D. Just a word to say that Jesus while Jesus's desire is that we seek reconciliation wherever possible, given the brokenness of the human condition he does allow for exceptions, which include the freedom to remarry. He identifies the exceptions under the heading "marital unfaithfulness," though this, too, as you might imagine, is open to interpretation. Some would say it involves only an act of sexual immorality. However, while not wanting to go the "too much salt in the soup" end of the argument, Paul, in 1 Cor. 7:15, does widen the reason for a divorce, saying that desertion by an unbelieving spouse who refuses to be reconciled is adequate grounds. "In such cases," he concludes, meaning that there are other exceptions the spouse who remains is not bound (see Wayne Grudem, "Wayne Grudem Tells Us Why He Changed His Divorce Position," *Christianity Today*, December 2019). It would also seem that if Jesus is concerned with matters of the heart, and not just an act, then various forms of addiction and abuse would be more than adequate reasons to be able to leave a dangerous marriage behind as well.

E. We also want to say that neither adultery, nor divorce, are unforgivable sins. That, maybe especially in this season of Lent, we need to acknowledge the gift of forgiveness and a new start that Jesus brings. There is opportunity, in the wideness of God's grace and embrace, to identify and repent of whatever our part might have been—be it physical or mental—in any of what we've discussed today, and to seek the guidance of the Spirit, and the counsel of others, as to how to move forward.

If we're part of the "counsel of others," seeking to come alongside those who are going through or have gone through these painful issues, it is vitally important that we listen carefully and with empathy and compassion, guarding against being judgmental. (9 of 10 millennials who do not attend church stay away because they have experienced the church as being judgmental!)

And, may we not wait until there is a crisis, but seek always to build strong marriages, characterized by good communication, trust, respect, and friendship, so that, as salt and light, we might live with integrity in our marriages, revealing and modeling the faithfulness of God as we do so.