

Honouring the Marriage Covenant (Matt 5:31-32, 19:3-9)



A. Introduction

1. Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' most comprehensive teaching on discipleship. So far Jesus dealt with two primary negative emotions that are destructive for our lives - *'the spirit with anger'* and *'the spirit of lust.'* Jesus now turns to the subject of 'the marriage covenant'. The family unit is the most basic building block for any society, and the blueprint of heaven (Eph 3:15) in building healthy enduring relationships and restraining evil. If we truly are to become the light of the world, we must first shine out from our homes before we do so from far away mission fields.
2. Therefore, cultivating a happy godly marriage and home life is every believer's privilege and responsibility. It is one of the greatest achievements in life and an enduring legacy one can leave behind.
 - a. *Every marriage is holy in the sight of God*, and Christian marriage in particular, is a direct prophetic witness to the world, pointing to the believer's spiritual union with the Lord (Eph 5:25-28). That is why there are so many attacks on marriage today.
 - b. A wholesome marriage is also one of the best witnesses to one's character. Someone said, *'If you want to know how successful I am as a husband, don't look at me. Look at my wife.'* Your spouse's life is the outworking of your marriage vow. Someone asked, *'What kind of man is he?'* This was the reply, *'I don't know. I have met his wife yet.'*
 - c. A godly, happy marriage is also the best environment to raise happy, healthy children. One of the greatest blessings we can give to our children is to really love and care for our spouse.

B. What Jesus Meant - Fuller interaction between Pharisees and Jesus (Matt 19:3-9)

There is Old Testament text behind the New Testament question, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce?'

Deut 24:1-4 says, 'When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, ² when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's wife, ³ if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, ⁴ then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.'

1. Misunderstanding 1: Deut 24:1 is not a manual on how to divorce correctly, but how to handle it when it happens. It is a concession, not a recommendation. *'Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you; but from the beginning, it was not so.'*

Each marriage is holy in the sight of God and is not to be tampered with by any man: *'For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh' So then, they are no longer two but one flesh.'* So that they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate.' (Matt 19:5-6)
2. Misunderstanding 2: Women in those days were not self-sufficient economically. In the farming society women depended on men to survive. Their livelihood depended on men who took care of the family. So the certificate of divorce was for the protection of women, not for men seeking a divorce, so that women who were being divorced by their husbands could remarry.
3. Further Protection Mechanism for Women: Men were forbidden from taking back their ex-wife under any circumstances after the divorce was finalised. This was yet another safety mechanism to fend off hasty trivial reasons men can give for divorce. Divorce was permanently binding. It couldn't be undone.
4. Burning Question: What is 'some uncleanness' (ערוה - *nakedness/indecency/shame*)?
 - a. 'Shammai' school = 'sexual impurity'

- b. 'Hillel' school = a much broader meaning including 'spoiling dinner'

Given the hardness of the human heart, guess which school of thought was popular? *'The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?' (Matt 19:3) Jesus' answer was, 'And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.'* (Matt 19:9, 5:32)

Sexual immorality comes from the Greek word 'porneia' (derived from 'pernao': 'to sell off'). *What is this act of sexual immorality in the marriage context? Adultery - the 'act of breaking the sign of covenant bond.'*

C. Two Components of the Marriage Covenant

1. The marriage covenant is initiated by the:
 - a. Public vow - the consent of the two humans – man and woman - before God and before the people.
 - b. Consummation in the physical union - in this act of union, the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual bond is created between man and wife, invisible to us but visible to God. *'They are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together let not man separate.'*

This invisible bond is current and sacred before God, even if one party decides to nullify it. Unless this bond of trust is violated by one or both parties in the act of 'porneia', the marriage bond still stands before God. Hence Jesus' teaching, *'whoever divorces his wife except 'porneia': adultery, he is 'causing her to commit adultery' (by forcing her to marry another man for economic reasons), AND 'whoever marries a woman who is divorced (in this manner) commits adultery.*

2. Another ground for divorce in the Scripture is 'desertion' which happened in the new gentile believers. (1 Cor 7:12-15) Christians are not to seek a divorce, but if the unbelieving party deserts the believer because of their faith in Jesus, then believers were to let them go and live in peace without feeling guilty or ashamed. Note: Our children are 'holy' before God if one of the parents is a believer in Jesus.

D. Marriage as a Covenant

1. There are only two biblical covenants we are to make and keep as believers in Christ:
 - a. New Covenant in Jesus' blood (Matt 26:28)
 - b. Marriage Covenant between a man and a woman (Mal 2:14-16)
2. How is the covenant made (cut)? It means a life laid down (Heb 9:16-17). In Gen 15, God cuts a covenant with Abraham by walking through the dead animals cut in two in the form of a burning torch. It meant that God was laying down His own life for Abraham. Note: Abraham didn't go through the pieces. In time Christ came into the world and laid down His life for us, and that is how Jesus established the New Covenant in His blood.

The same principle applies to our marriage. Careful consideration must be given before marriage, and there must be the willingness to lay down one's life for the good of the other. The rest of married life is working out the commitment in practice. When both parties are committed in this way and are seeking to live out this vow, the mystery of God's blessing flows into the marriage.

3. Paul speaks of marriage as a 'great mystery' (Eph 5:32) – the peak and the height of all mystery.
 - a. There is a great parallel between our relationship with the Lord and our relationship with each other in marriage. The Bible opens with Adam's marriage and closes with the marriage of the Lamb. God took out a rib from Adam's side and formed Eve. Out of Jesus' side blood and water flowed and through this sacrifice, the Holy Spirit is forming the Bride of Christ.
 - b. God intended human marriage to be earthly counterpart of the heavenly reality of God's love for us.
 - c. Thus, every godly marriage among believers is a prophetic demonstration of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, which is the consummation of this age and it will usher in the new age.

4. When we stand before God one day, one certain question we will face is - *how have we ministered to our spouses?* One day I will present my wife to the Lord and the question I will have to answer is - whether my wife has become everything that God has called her to be - that she was cherished, loved, and cared for.
5. Story of Selwyn Hughes (Author of 'Every day with Jesus') and his wife Enid: Just before Enid went into a coma and passed away she said to Selwyn, *'Thank you for helping me to understand how deeply loved I am by God by the way you have loved me and cared for me.'* Just before she lost consciousness Selwyn whispered to Enid, *'And thank you, too, for helping me understand more clearly how much God loves me by the way you have related to me.'* Those were the last words between the two of them.

E. Reflection

1. What was the problem with the Pharisaic interpretation of marriage and divorce in Jesus' days? (Deut 24:1-4) What are we to watch out for in today's culture?
2. What does Paul mean by a great mystery in Ephesians 5:32? How does it relate to the New Covenant and our marriage covenant?
3. If you are married, how can you enrich your marriage more? If you are not married, what grace is available from the Lord for you to be fulfilled and fruitful as a single person?