

Good morning, one of the advantages (or is that disadvantages?) of going through a gospel is that you don't get to duck the tough subjects.

And this morning IS ONE of the toughest.

- Jesus teaches on marriage and divorce

Anyone who has ever gone through a divorce, or has been part of a family that has experienced divorce, or is in a marriage where Divorce is a possibility will know that this is something where no-one comes out unscathed, where something deeply **personal** becomes painfully public and where almost every memory is going to ache with pain.

So please pray with me...

that my words may be **sensitive**,

that I may teach **truth**,

that we may **hear** what God is saying to us through this passage...

Matthew 19v1 says this, that

[When Jesus had finished <his teaching on forgiveness>, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea... and Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.](#)

Now this is no coincidence that Jesus' teaching on divorce comes *right after* his teaching on forgiveness and right in the middle of his commitment to healing.

The passage that we are looking at follows Jesus' teaching on Forgiveness and is set in the immediate context of healing.

Forgiveness and Healing.

Matthew is making the point that whatever Jesus says and whatever he does it is for our flourishing.

He is no "ivory tower academic" or "uncaring politician"

Everything he does/ everything he says is for our redemption, for our flourishing, for our healing.

And therefore we can trust him.

We need to know this - *let there be no doubt* – that God wants what is best for us.

And so in the midst of this

³ [Some Pharisees come to test him.](#)

- if Jesus' motives are transparently good

- then the Pharisee's are anything but – they come to trap him and destroy him

[and they ask, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"](#)

For many centuries, divorce had been an issue for the Jews.

Rabbi Shammai, taught that divorce was **never** permissible. Never allowed, no matter what happens, no matter what the other person does. Divorce was impossible in God's sight.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, believed that you could divorce a woman for any reason, including such outrageous things as: wearing your hair down in public, talking to other men, burning the bread or putting too much salt in the food (*I am guilty of all of those expect, of course, wearing my hair down in public!*)

Jesus goes with neither extreme – life is way more complicated than that!

He first of all teaches about

The Purpose of Marriage; and then he talks about

The Permitting of Divorce.

The purpose of marriage v4-6; and the permitting of divorce v7-10.

1. Jesus takes us right back to the Purpose of marriage

⁴ “Haven’t you read,” Jesus replied, “that in the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’”

1.1 Marriage is an Asymmetrical Partnership.

“He made them male and female”.

What Jesus is saying is that

The one who made us, who designed us, who created us:
created us to be in an asymmetrical partnership.

- Now Jesus himself was gloriously single and he talks about that in next week’s passage and that is a crucially important subject – but for now,

Jesus says that God made us to be in an asymmetrical partnership with someone

“who is like us – but not like to us”.

“like us – but different to us”.

Someone with different physiology, different psychology,
with different spiritual, emotional and even physical strengths and weaknesses.

God said to Adam “here is Eve” and

you two are going to need the rest of your life trying to understanding each other!

You think you understand each other but ‘boy’ you’re in for a shock!

and there are books and books and books on the subject.

Men are From Mars and Women are from Venus

Or this one “Why Men Don’t Listen and Women Can’t read Maps”

- I didn’t write it!

The point is this – the strongest team is when the weaknesses of one are compensated by the strengths of the other, where the excesses of one are curtailed by the other.

And that isn’t always easy.

Churchill said “*If your husband or wife **always** agrees with you - one of you is redundant!*”

It isn’t always easy to live with someone who doesn’t see things the way we do –

who has a different perspective, different expectations, different temperament, different appetites even!

Everyone who is married knows the tension of this.

But growth always happens when we encounter difference.

We can either DISrespect our differences - which will just make us just harder and harder to each other.

Or we can choose to understand the differences which will make us more patient and more sympathetic, wiser and broader.

God gives us people who are ‘like us’ but ‘not like us’:

People who need our support, people who can support us, people to help us to grow.

Marriage is an asymmetrical partnership

1.2 It is also a Covenantal Partnership

for God said, v5 ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?’⁶ So they are no longer two, but one.

the thing that unites them is this Covenant promise.

A covenant is a formal, public promise that binds two parties together.

It is **formal**: in that it is a legal act,

It is **public**: in that all of society is called on to honour it.

It **binds**: in a way that neither party has a right to break.

A Marriage covenant expresses an unconditional, life-long, exclusive, union

It is “for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health” –

it is “no matter what happens”, “no matter where we find ourselves”, “no matter how tough it is” – here is my vow.

I bind myself to you “unconditionally”, “until death us do part”, “we are one”!

- it is not for “as long as we are getting on”,

- it is not for “as long as I am happy”,

- it is not for “as long as I feel in love”,

The promise is much, much deeper than that – it is more than a feeling – it is an act of will

I remember speaking with a couple in their mid-twenties; and who were about to Divorce.

And I asked the man why he wanted to leave his wife.

He said, 'I don't feel in love anymore.'

I said to him,

Did nobody ever tell you when you married that there will be times when the feeling of love is absent?

*Did nobody warn you that 'a love that lasts', does so by loving with the **will** not just the heart?*

*Did nobody say that unless you understand this, you are doomed to move from relationship to relationship at the **mercy** of your feelings?'*

He looked genuinely surprised. He said. 'No, Nobody told me that.'

Nobody told him that, yet every marriage goes through periods where the *feeling* of love is absent!

Rob Parsons (a hugely experienced marriage counsellor) once said “I am often asked what I believe is the greatest threat to families today. there are many answers, but I believe the biggest is the lie that ‘love is a feeling’”

The greatest threat to marriage → Love is a feeling.

It isn't just a feeling...

When the Bible talks about love talks about 'doings'.

1 Corinthians 13 – the greatest text on love *in the world* talks about love **as an act** —

“the doing of love”.

One Translation puts it like this:

'Love never gives up, never loses faith... and endures through every circumstance'

I know that in our human frailty this is not always possible,

but the Biblical view **is a million miles away** from the expectations of today:

that we always have a right to be happy;

a right to have a partner who fulfils all our needs;

a right to feel in love.

On holiday we once went for a walk along the beach. It was a wonderful day.

The sun shone, the sky was blue and it felt good to be alive.

I said to a stranger 'Glorious, isn't it?'

I don't know if he was having a bad day or he was just tired of tourists,

but he said, 'You should see it in January.'

*The next day we went for another walk - but this time I imagined the hills, the sky, the sea say to me,
'Will you love us in January?'*

I believe that the need 'to love in January' comes to every marriage.

There is a time when we do not feel 'in love', it is a time when everything cries out, 'hide, run away - it's over.'

The only solution to keeping the marriage alive in January is by “**doing** love”.

Love is a promise, it's a Covenant, it's a “doing” it's not a feeling.

Do you see?

Marriage is an Asymmetrical Partnership

it is a Covenantal Partnership

v6 Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.

1.4 Marriage is also a Picture painted by God

Marriage is God's idea.

Every marriage is made by God.

whether it is between Christians or atheists,

whether it is arranged by parents or by mutual desire

whether it is entered into wisely or foolishly, sincerely or insincerely, with great or little commitment,

God has designed every marriage to point to something much, much more profound than itself:

All marriages point to our relationship with God.

The highest purpose of marriage is to be a picture of our union with Christ.

Marriage is the closest of all our relationships

yet no matter how strong it is,

it is just a shadow, a hint, of the relationship that God wants with us.

Describing His love for Israel, God said in Ezekiel 16

when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you... I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, and you became mine.

So no matter whether we are married, single, divorced or whatever

Marriage is just an echo of the relationship that God has for us.

And I would have ALL OF US know this relationship

because the fulfilment we look for in marriage

God delivers in himself

His faithfulness is a promise we can always depend on

His love is an experience that is rock solid

Together we and He are the most creative, enriching, life-enhancing team in all the world:

God brings new life to people through you,

He saves people through you, and

He makes a difference through you.

It is our relationship with God that turns out to be the true building block for civilization.

And I would have all of us discover this for ourselves.

We long to be loved unconditionally – we can find such love in Christ – and then we can show it to others

We long to find faithfulness – we can find that faithfulness in God – and we can talk about it to others.

We long to know intimacy – we can encounter that in God's Spirit – and others can find that too.

This is the purpose of marriage.

to point to something greater, to be a place of stability, a covenant and a true partnership

2. So then what does Jesus say about Divorce.

What happens when it all goes wrong?

2.1 What does the world do?

The Sunday Times asked, 'Is there anyone left in the land who has not heard a friend or a child or a parent describe the agony of divorce? Divorce is pandemic, to the point that hardly anyone can be found who has not been affected by it either directly or indirectly.

Many marriages seem little more than socially recognized battlegrounds where warfare between the spouses is the rule and harmony the exception.

⁷ “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

⁸ Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.

The reality is that in so many marriages we break and break and break our covenant ‘to love and to cherish’ each other until it feels so broken that one or both parties believe it cannot be put back together again.

The reality is that so often we forget, for so long, ‘what we are trying to do’ that we end up so hurt that **neither** party has the emotional strength to even **want** to try again.

The reality is that one or both parties just walk away.
This is the reality.

This is why Moses permitted divorce because their hearts were too hard and too hurt to try anything else.
But this is not what God wants.

The Bible tells us that God hates Divorce
And anyone who has ever experienced divorce will tell you it is a personal apocalypse, a family road crash, the loss of all direction in the storm.

This is what Jesus said...

⁹ I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”¹⁰ The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation, it is better not to marry.”

The disciple’s response was a hopeless response.
Their response was “you’re asking too much”
The difference between what the disciples grew up with and what Jesus was teaching was so radical that they were completely staggered.
They believed if married life became unhappy you can abandon ship.

*Today a Gallup Poll reveals the same thinking –
73% of those under 45 regard the idea of being committed to one person for life is a “useless and unworkable” idea.*

Marriage = a useless and unworkable idea – ¾ of under 45 year olds!

Ten years ago I asked the 6th Form of Guildford High school if it is possible to say “I will love you forever” – everybody said “no”.

God disagrees.

From God’s perspective, the God who loves us, who wants us to flourish
from God’s perspective Divorce can only happen when one party abandons the Covenant.

“Drifting apart” is not a reason.

“Incompatibility” is not a reason.

“having made a mistake” is not a reason.

God’s call’s us to redeem marriage – not abandon it.

2.2 God’s Way is that

Divorce can only happen when one party abandons the Covenant.

2 Timothy 2:13, talks about God’s attitude towards his covenant with us.

He says

If we disown him, he will also disown us;

if we are faithless, he will remain faithful.

There it is, there is the principle:

If we disown him, he will also disown us;

if we are faithless, he will remain faithful.

Throughout the Bible God demonstrates his faithfulness to his faithless people – when they reject him – he calls them back, when they let him down – he continues to invest in them, when they go after other gods – his pain is unimaginable, and yet he remains faithful. Time and time again God demonstrates his faithfulness.

It is only at the end, when it is clear that Israel has forsaken their covenant with God ‘completely and forever’ that God lets her go.

He says in Jeremiah 3:8

Have you seen what faithless Israel has done?

She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there.

I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not,

and so I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries.

God knows what it is like to be betrayed by someone he loves with all his being.

He knows what it is like for that to be done **in full view of everyone**,

He knows what it is like to have his heart-broken and for the person who did it not to care.

God knows what it is like for the Covenant to be broken and repentance not to be offered.

It seems to me that the only grounds for Divorce that God gives us, is when the other person has abandoned the Covenant

When they sin so continually and without repentance that they have no intention of keeping their marriage vows

Adultery can be evidence of this, but it doesn’t have to...

If the person is repentant and if you are willing - even that situation can be redeemed.

Mark was married to Sue, he had done something that many people would deem unforgivable.

What would happen?

Would the injured party call an end to the marriage or choose an infinitely more courageous path?

For ten aching days the jury was out. For ten days their friends quietly held them in prayer

And then one day a card was left on a pillow it read

“I forgive you, I love you, we can work this through”.

Putting right what is wrong in our marriages is hard:

it involves risk,

it involves both partners willing to try.

it involves believing that your marriage can be redeemed by God
It is never too late.

*I know of one couple who faced January love.
It had been January – cold and stormy - in their marriage for years,
they had stayed together because of the kids, but now they just had each other.*

*They decided to give their relationship one last chance and to try something new.
They agreed that each Tuesday night they would spend the evening on their own together.
Sometimes they went to the cinema, sometimes they went for a walk, sometimes they had a drink in the
corner of the pub.
They made time for each other a priority and they evoked the love of the will*

*They've had those Tuesday evenings for at least the last 12 years
Was it that, that saved their marriage?
I don't know, But I do know this: it became important to them and they rediscovered their love for each
other.*

So I want to leave you with two things...

Firstly, to everyone who is hurt
God is the God of redemption.
What is broken he can heal
What is missing he can fill
What is a mistake can be forgiven.

I pray that you may know this – and that you and I may open yourself up whole-heartedly to him.
and receive his love even into all your pain

Secondly, to everyone whose love in is January
we live in a culture whose **ONLY creed** is the importance of **our own happiness**.
we live in a temporary, throw-away society
God's ways are not our ways
I believe in redemption, I believe in resurrection even of seemingly dead marriages,
AND I believe God can do abundantly more than all we ask or imagine according to his power that is at
work in us.

I pray that will too.

That you will talk, that you will set aside time for each other, that you will evoke the love of the will, that
you will find someone to help you see together and
That you will draw close to the God who can hold you close.