

The Priority of Purity

The Gospels

Matthew 5:17-32

Introduction

When a sermon like the one today is preached, it is natural for there to be something of a pall. We are going to deal with a very heavy passage of scripture, in looking at Matthew chapter 5.

There is a reason many preachers do not preach on the subjects of lust and adultery and divorce – they are unpleasant to consider. However, I am committed to telling the truth to you, so as we go through God’s word and come to passages, I will continue, by His grace, to tell the truth. I trust that I tell it with love because these issues have been on the doorstep of more people than we know and, in fact, have been on ours.

We discovered in our last discussion that Jesus Christ had a far, far greater standard for righteousness than the Pharisees. The Pharisees were concerned with what a person did; Jesus Christ was concerned with what a person was. The Pharisees were concerned with the acts of people; Jesus was very concerned with the attitudes of people.

Jesus, in fact, reinforced this, when He said in Mark 7:21,

For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries,

We discussed in our last session that if you are free from anger, your hands will be free from murder.

Today, we are going to carry this further and discover with the writer as he recorded the words of Jesus that if our hearts are free from lust, our bodies will be innocent of adultery.

Guard Your Heart Against Impurity

Notice Matthew 5:27.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery”;

Now, in Matthew 5:28, Jesus will basically say, “Let Me clarify this for you; let Me deepen it for you.”

but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman with lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.

When Hugh Hefner first published his pornographic magazine in the 1950s, it was a scandal of national proportions. Today, the thought of this magazine hardly elicits a wink as it tries to arrest our attention in the store where we buy gasoline, or wherever, as it sits among the myriad of other magazines that have followed suit.

With this magazine, came the era of “anything goes,” especially if it feels good. We were told that it was just a puritan hang-up or a Victorian prudish belief that we had to wait until we were married to experience intimacy. I have read, in fact, those who have been married say that perhaps, the best thing that you can do for your marriage is to have an illicit relationship.

Along with this came the suggestion of the open marriage. I remember reading parts of the book *Open Marriage*, written by a husband and wife, that suggested the best way to experience a fulfilling marriage, once married, is to be committed to some degree, but to continue to date and see other individuals. Now *that* made headlines.

The tragedy is that several years later, this same couple came back and said, “We missed the boat.” However, we never heard about that. They said, “We *now* believe the best thing for a marriage is to have a one man, one woman life-long commitment.”

This sounds remotely biblical, doesn’t it?

The bad news is that the church is sort of trailing along behind. It is now baptizing this free-wheeling philosophy into its own religion.

I read that there is a major Protestant denominational organization that is voting about this very thing. They are stating that we should make maturity, not marriage, the criteria for sexual

relationships. Perhaps I could quote this. They wrote, "It's time to rid the denomination of sexual taboos and view relations as a God-given gift to be enjoyed by everyone, including single men and women and teenagers."

By the way, where did this "taboo" come from? Did we make it up? Try I Thessalonians 4:3 on for size, where Paul writes,

For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality;

In other words, abstain from fornication, illicit relations outside of marriage.

Now granted, Jesus was speaking to a different culture than American in Matthew chapter 5, but there was similar corruption. In fact, during His day, there was a saying in the Greek world. The Greek philosopher Demosthenes spelled it out when he said, "We have mistresses for the sake of pleasure and we have wives for the purpose of having children."

I would have loved to have been married to that guy, wouldn't you?

Verus, the colleague of Marcus Aurelius, the Roman Emperor, said, "A wife must remember that her name 'wife' is a title of dignity, not of pleasure."

When Jesus Christ came on the scene and preached to these people, "No adultery," all the Pharisees said, "Amen! Preach it Jesus. We love this part of the sermon."

Why? Because the Pharisees were clean, right? They did not have mistresses.

Jesus Christ then says, in Matthew 5:28,

but I say to you that everyone who looks on a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

This is an issue of the heart.

Two key words

Now there are two key words in this verse.

1. The first key word is "lust".

The original word is translated in the New Testament, "to covet," meaning, "to desire for oneself".

2. The second key word is "look".

There are many words for look and this one in the Greek is "blepo," which means, "to look in order to

have". In other words, this means to look on a woman with the purpose; the intention of coveting her.

Jesus Christ says, "You're guilty of adultery."

It is possible then, to be viewed as a respectable Christian by other people, but as an adulterer by God.

Age, by the way, has nothing to do with this temptation. Station in life has no effect on this being a greater or lesser temptation.

I remember being marked by a former professor that I sat under. I was in his office and he was encouraging me to have purity in heart as I strove and directed my life toward the ministry. I knew him well and quipped back to him, "Oh man, it must be nice to push seventy years of age."

He looked at me and said, "Stephen, the older I get, the more difficult the battle becomes."

I studied under the ministry of another man, who was marked by his mentor, who was in his seventies. Having pastored for nearly fifty years, this older gentleman prayed in his presence, "Oh, God, keep me from becoming a dirty old man."

We might add "a dirty old woman" to this as well.

Jesus Christ tells us how to handle lust. Look at the next verse, Matthew 5:29.

If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

The word "stumble" is "skandalon," which means, "to fall flat on your face".

Continue to Matthew 5:30.

If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.

Let me stop at this point because I do not believe that Jesus Christ is literally suggesting dismemberment – so put the knives away. I also do not think He was threatening His disciples with hell. Jesus is saying something else.

"Hell," which is the word "geenna," was a reference to a literal place that was ongoing at that point in time, known as the Valley of Geenna, or the place called Geenna. It was the trash dump outside of Jerusalem. A fire was lit there and that fire was

perpetual. It burned the trash as the people came and deposited it in that dump outside the city.

Jesus perhaps, glanced in that direction, and said, "It would be better for you to lose a body part than to land in the trash heap; for your life to become absolutely useless than to become disabled by lust."

Jesus is literally saying then, when He talks about dismemberment, "Deal with it severely. Don't play with it. It's serious business. Cut it from you."

Solomon wrote, "Guard your heart." This literally means to post a guard at your heart and do not let anything in which would lead you into this kind of situation. He writes, in Proverbs 4:23,

[Guard] your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.

I have added to this verse in my Bible, the words, "or death." This is that serious to a life that would please God.

John Bunyan, who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*, also wrote a lesser known volume entitled, *The Holy War*. In this book, he describes man's soul – a picture of the inside of man – the heart. However, he refers to it as a city, "the city of man's soul". He talks about the assault that is hurled against man's soul on a daily basis and that there are five gates upon which this battle is unfurled. These five gates are the five senses. He tells in this story that man's soul must fight against the enemy, as it speaks through his ear-gate, as it paints beautiful, luring mirages before his eye-gate. The interesting thing is that Bunyan says the walls and the gates have been constructed by God and the enemy cannot get inside. The only way the city can be ruined is for someone on the inside to open the gate.

This is exactly what Solomon had in mind when he wrote, "Guard your heart."

A song that Marsha and I must have listened to about fifteen times on the way back from Atlanta several months ago, has rung in my ears as I have studied this passage. It starts with a very familiar children's chorus. Listen to the words.

*Oh, be careful little eyes what you see,
Oh, be careful little eyes what you see,
For the Father up above
Is looking down in love,
Oh, be careful little eyes what you see.*

*What appears to be a harmless glance,
Can turn to romance
And homes are divided;
Feelings that never should have been,
Awakened within,
Tearing the heart in two,
Listen, I beg of you;*

*Guard your heart,
Guard your heart;
Don't trade it for treasure,
Don't give it away;
Guard your heart,
Guard your heart;
As a payment for pleasure,
It's a high price to pay;
For a soul that remains sincere with a
conscience clear,
Guard your heart.*

*The human heart is easily swayed
And often betrayed at the hand of emotion;
You dare not leave the outcome to chance,
You must choose in advance,
Or live with the agony,
Such needless tragedy;*

*Guard your heart,
Guard your heart;
Don't trade it for treasure,
Don't give it away;
Guard your heart,
Guard your heart;
As a payment for pleasure,
It's a high price to pay;
For a soul that remains sincere with a
conscience clear,
Guard your heart;
For a soul that remains sincere with a
conscience clear,*

Guard your heart.

Guard Your Heart Against Divorce

Now Jesus will talk about divorce. Look at Matthew 5:31-32, in which He will deepen the meaning.

It was said, “Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce”;

but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

The last part of verse 32 is referring to a divorced woman who is divorced without cause.

The word “unchastity,” by the way, is the Greek word “porneia,” from which we get our English word “pornography”.

Let me paint a backdrop to give a better understanding of the revolutionary element in this teaching to Jesus’ hearers. While I am doing this, turn to Matthew chapter 19, where it is expanded for us.

Listen carefully to Deuteronomy 24:1, because this was the heart of the matter.

When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that 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 from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man’s wife,

This sounds clear enough. However, the problem was that Moses did not spell out what “indecency,” or “uncleanness,” was. This just says, if a man finds indecency, or uncleanness, in his wife, he can divorce her. What is indecency or uncleanness?

By the time of Christ, there were two rabbinical schools. There was the school of “Shammai,” which included the strict, letter-of-the-law people, and there was the school of “Hillel,” which included the kind of loose people. These two schools had debated for decades about what this uncleanness was and had come up with their own conclusions. Let me read some of their conclusions.

The strict school of “Shammai” said this uncleanness must be a particular evil about the wife; some unchastity; such as, fornication, perhaps. Whatever it was, it had to be a serious moral problem.

The school of “Hillel” came up with a rather interesting, loose view. Let me read some of this view. This may sound a little like America today. A man could divorce his wife:

- if he no longer felt warm toward her – whatever that means.
- if she dressed indecently, which they go on to explain means exposing her arms in public. We have come a long way on this one, haven’t we?
- if she spoke disrespectfully of his parents. This is a tough one! One cross word about Mom-in-law and this wife is out!
- if she spoiled his supper by putting too much salt on the food or if she burned the bread. How many wives would be out on this one? I imagine the cooking classes in Palestine were very popular!
- if he found another woman more attractive. This is giving a woman an awful lot of security, isn’t it? This sounds like America today.

By the time of Christ, which of these positions do you think was the people’s position? It was the “Hillel” all the way, not “Shammai”. As a result, divorce became so rampant that a Jewish husband could stand on his porch, call another Jewish man over, and in their presence say three times, “I divorce thee. I divorce thee. I divorce thee.” – and the marriage was over. Then, he would give her a certificate of divorce and go for wife number twenty-seven.

Jesus Christ comes on this scene and says, “Hold it just a second. Let Me deepen this.”

In fact, let us read Matthew 19:1-3.

When Jesus had finished these words, He departed from Galilee and came into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan;

and large crowds followed Him, and He healed them there.

Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him, and asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?”

Do you see what these Pharisees are doing? They are trying to put Jesus right in the middle of the debate. If He says, “No,” one of the schools is upset; if He says, “Yes,” the other school is upset. They are trying to pull Jesus in on this knock down, drag out argument.

God’s four principles concerning marriage

Jesus answered by going to which scripture? Did He go to Deuteronomy chapter 24, where they wanted Him to? No. He went all the way back to Genesis chapter 2, which He quoted in Matthew chapter 19.

Jesus, instead of answering man’s exceptions for divorce, reinforces God’s original intent for marriage. There are four of these. Let me give them.

1. First, there is the principle of creativeness.

Look at Matthew 19:4. Jesus’ first words in this verse, “have you not read,” really hurt because that is all the Pharisees did with their lives – read.

And He answered and said, “Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female,”

In other words, marriage is not society’s idea, it is God’s idea. Society did not invent the idea of marriage; they received this creative idea from God.

2. Secondly, there is the principle of severance.

Look at Matthew 19:5a.

“and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother . . .’”

In other words, a man shall leave his dependency on parents.

3. Thirdly, there is the principle of oneness.

Look at Matthew 19:5b.

““and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?””

The man is to literally be glued to his wife and become one flesh with her. This is the principle of oneness.

Now “one flesh,” means much more than physical oneness or intimacy. The Hebrew word for “one” is “echad,” and is used in the Hebrew “shaman,” or the prayer they gave to God. In this prayer, they said, “Our Lord is our God. Our Lord is ‘echad’.”

In other words, “Our Lord is One.”

This means that there are distinct personalities, but there is oneness in purpose; in direction.

So when Jesus says a husband and a wife are one, He means much more than some act. He means oneness in totality of being and purpose.

4. Fourthly, there is the principle of permanence.

Look at Matthew 19:6.

“So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.”

Jesus, rather than answering their exception question, is going back to the original design and saying, “God intended marriage to be permanent.”

The Pharisees then come up with a show stopper. Look at Matthew 19:7.

They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

Now these Pharisees have a problem in this because they have twisted scripture. Moses never commanded divorce, Moses permitted divorce.

Jesus reminds them of this in His answer. Continue to Matthew 19:8. They were not expecting this answer.

He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.”

This was not God’s original design.

Then Jesus reiterates their exception that He accepts Himself, in Matthew 19:9.

“And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality [porneia], and marries another woman commits adultery.”

In other words, “*This thing is for life!*”

I love the disciples’ response in Matthew 19:10. They are so human.

The disciples said to Him, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.”

In other words, if it is to last a lifetime, that may be too difficult, so, “I don’t think I can do it.”

The disciples got the picture that Jesus Christ was giving a very hard saying.

A summary of Jesus’ statements on divorce

Let me summarize Jesus’ sayings on divorce. Turn back to Matthew chapter 5.

This, by the way, is not intended to answer all of the questions about divorce and remarriage. I am dealing with Matthew chapter 5 particularly, and this exception clause.

1. Number one, divorce, when adultery is proven, is permitted by God, but it is never preferred by God.

I have dealt with people who have gotten divorced, refusing to listen to any reason, and they were divorced upon unbiblical grounds. I have dealt with people who had every reason to divorce and, instead, there was repentance on both parts and the marriage was permanently changed.

There is always the case where the spouse may not want to repent. I think the word “porneia” in these verses, literally deals with more than a one-time act. I think it is describing a lifestyle – an unrepentant, immoral lifestyle – and God allows an out.

2. Number two, divorce is permitted on the basis of two unrepentant sins.

I believe there are only two and these sins are:

- an unrepentant, immoral lifestyle;
- desertion.

I Corinthians 7:13, gives the second sin.

And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away.

The church was dramatically changing marriages. The woman in this scenario has accepted Christ. The husband has not and he is creating a very difficult situation. Jesus says, “Don’t leave him.”

Skip to I Corinthians 7:15.

Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases . . .

What is bondage? Look at the end of this chapter, I Corinthians 7:39, where the same original word is used.

A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes . . .

In other words, a wife can be remarried if her husband dies; she is no longer bound to remain a widow.

If the husband is an unbeliever and sends his wife away, the wife is also not bound. The implication is that they are free to remarry.

3. Number three, divorced people who have remarried upon biblical grounds; that is, there has been an immoral lifestyle or desertion, have every reason to anticipate God’s blessing in their relationship.

My exhortation to the body would be to put aside any judgmentalism. In fact, those of us who have never experienced this could never fully understand the trauma and the pain experienced by individuals who have gone through it.

I have dealt with men and women who have had an unrepentant spouse that has taken them through the dredges. They have been divorced and remarried and God is blessing them in a very special way. Do not try to figure out the hand of God. Let the body accept that.

4. Number four, divorced people who have remarried without biblical grounds, have a far greater chance of repeated divorce.

I am not suggesting that remarriage on unbiblical grounds is a sin that is unforgivable. It is like any sin. Jesus started, by the way, with murder, and then moved to lust, and then got to divorce.

The problem, and the reason the divorce percentages are so high, is that the second or third or fourth time around, when there are unresolved conflicts; conflicts that have not been dealt with in situation number one, then conflicts compound, not only in marriage, but in every situation of life. This makes divorce more likely.

I know a fellow who was part of a church for four years and was very involved. Trivial things then began to surface and he left the church in a huff. He went to the next church and was there for two years. He left there. Then, he went to the next church for one year. I would suggest that he will never commit to any church again, unless he deals with church number one. Why? Unresolved conflict in our lives cannot be forgotten – they must be dealt with. When they are dealt with squarely, then God’s hand can be seen and life can go on.

Application

Let me give some final statements by way of application.

For those who are married, whether it is the first, second, or whatever marriage, God’s ideal is permanency now. In fact, the Old Testament forbade a man, even if they returned to a right relationship with the Lord, to divorce their current wife and go

back to wife number one. Marriage is not a revolving door. God's design is for this marriage to meet His ideal standard.

Three things to stop

Let me give three things to *stop*.

1. First, stop asking, "What am I getting out of this marriage?" Instead, ask, "What am I investing in this marriage?"
2. Secondly, stop listening to your culture, ridden with soap operas, which determines its commitments by how it feels, rather than what God says.

Let me tell what John Adam and Nancy Williamson, in their book *Divorce: How and When to Let Go*, had to say about divorce. They said it in such a way that it was obviously unbiblical. They advised those considering divorce, "[Let] go of your marriage – if it is no longer fulfilling . . ."

What does fulfilling mean? It means it no longer feels good.

They continue, "Letting go . . . can be the most successful thing you have ever done. Getting a divorce can be a positive, . . . growth-oriented step. It can be a personal triumph."

My friend, I have never talked to a divorced individual who said it was a personal triumph.

3. Thirdly, stop asking God for a way *out* of the marital commitment and start seeking God for ways *through* the marital challenges.

Five things to start

I would suggest five steps to *start*.

1. First, start accepting God's ideal for permanency in marriage.

In other words, take it for granted – you are married. God designed it to work – accept that. Take the word "divorce" out of your vocabulary. That is not the ultimate threat and it will never help.

2. Secondly, start seeking biblical counsel.

Get another perspective on what is going on in your marriage and the reason it is the way it is. There is safety in a multitude of counselors, so seek it.

3. Thirdly, start being honest and willing to face up to your own contribution to your marital problems.

A lady comes in and says, "Oh man, you won't believe my husband," and unloads the truck. When she is finished, you get the idea that she married the worst guy on planet earth. Then, she makes the statement, "Well, he really wasn't this way before I married him."

My question is, "What does that mean? Did you make him that way?"

Face up to the fact that you *and* your spouse contribute to your marital problems. What part are you playing? If you cannot see it, then you need to sit down and think.

4. Fourthly, start challenging the simplistic idea that a divorce will solve your problems.

Are we ever getting this message today! If you feel this way; if you are even tempted to think this way, by the way, would you come to me or another biblical counselor first? I will call someone in our fellowship that has gone through the difficulty and trauma of divorce, and they will sit you down so hard you will hurt, if you think it will help your problems.

On the back of a *TV Guide*, I read an advertisement that said, "Order your divorce ring band today. Now is the time to celebrate your new beginning."

My friend, I have never known a divorced person who felt like celebrating over what had just happened.

5. Fifthly, start taking the initiative to build a path to your unloving spouse.

In other words, "Ma'am, *you* get the ball rolling." Or, "Sir, *you* get the ball rolling."

Do not wait to see if your spouse is going to move first. Do not say, "No, I don't want to move first."

This is not a game. *You* take initiative to build a path to your unloving spouse.

Common traits of adultery and divorce

Let me tell the reason I have dealt with adultery and divorce together. What do these two have in common? Let me give several things.

1. Number one, they affect more than one person.
2. Number two, they both can destroy a person's joy.

3. Number three, which I think Jesus had in mind in Matthew chapter 5, both of these begin in the heart.

I wonder how many today, are guilty of adultery in the heart. Perhaps you are already being tempted. You are already flirting at the job. You are already entertaining the thought. Jesus Christ said this is to be dealt with severely and immediately.

I wonder how many today, are guilty of divorce in the heart? Jesus Christ points to the permanency of the marriage.

Whatever situation you have been in, my friend, the blood of Christ can cleanse murder, adultery, divorce. However, His design is that we experience all that He intended, going all the way back to the early part of Genesis. Jesus says, "In marriage, follow God's design and God's ideal and there is not a chance it will work – there is the guarantee it will work."