

***No 5 Looking at marital conflict Matthew 5:31 & 32***

Jesus is giving his disciples teaching that will help them understand their place in his kingdom and in their world. Marital conflict is never easy to deal with as there will always be pain involved. Any wedding day is full of love and hope so, when it goes wrong, ways forward are not always easy to find. But the fact that Jesus addresses the issue means that he is deeply concerned about the preservation of the marriage relationship. After all, it is the relationship that describes the bond between Jesus and his church.

This is not an easy issue to discuss in a small group. There may well be people whose lives have been painfully affected by the breakdown of a marriage either as children or spouses. There have been many different views on marriage, divorce and re-marriage down the ages of church history so we are unlikely to come up with a definitive view in one group session. In fact, many churches do not have a clear policy preferring to deal as sensitively as they can with each situation as it arises. Not many scenarios are clear cut.

Again, Jesus uses the antithesis mode of writing to make his point – ‘you have heard, but I say’. First century Judaism had taken legalism to a new height and Jesus was taking his listeners back to what God intended in the first place. Divorce was an issue in 1st century Palestine and Jesus wanted to speak into it.

1. Do you think that our current option of no-fault divorces has made society a better place?

Has it taken the confrontational aspect out of divorce cases?

Has it made it easier to get out of a marriage that isn’t working?

Has it made it easier to preserve some aspects of family life together?

In Matthew 5, Jesus is alluding to Moses’ pronouncement on the issue of a certificate of divorce. (Deut 24:1). Divorce was common in the ancient world and God brought in the certificate of divorce for three reasons.

1. Protect the sanctity of marriage
2. Protect the woman from a husband who might simply send her away
3. Document her status as a legitimately divorced woman.

By Jesus’ time the debate about the word ‘indecency’ in Deut 24:1 was a real issue. The discussion assumed that divorce was both necessary and legal. The more conservative people argued that divorce was possible only for unfaithfulness. The more liberal view was that a woman could be divorced ‘even if she spoiled a dish for him’. Later rabbis declared that divorce was ***required*** when adultery was committed.

1. It was argued that divorce produced a state of impurity that, as a matter of legal fact, dissolved the marriage.

Should this be our approach?

How does grace and forgiveness fit with this idea?

Jesus goes back to the original intention for God’s institution of marriage. Namely a permanent union of a man and a woman into one (Genesis 2:24). God ‘hates’ divorce (Malachi 2:15 & 16) only because it is short of the model he set up in Genesis. It doesn’t say God hates divorcees – that would be contrary to God’s character. He hates it because he knows the pain it will cause.

1. How do we work out God’s hating of divorce?

Should we be clearer on God’s idea of marriage?

Have we drifted too near the current view that a divorce can be easily obtained?

Does this ignore the emotional damage caused by a separation?

As with Moses, Jesus allows for an exception. Even though God sees marriage as permanent, sometimes the marriage bond has been violated to such a degree that a spouse has already torn the marriage apart. We must face the reality that marriages become unsustainable because of the sexual sin of one or both partners. No one sets out on their wedding day wondering when they will divorce – they start their married life in a atmosphere of love and hope. But things can go horribly wrong.

1. How should we help those who are going through difficult times in their marriages?

Should we try to restore their relationship?

Do we get to a point where the breakdown appears to be irretrievable?

The more general point is that God created us to be in relationships – one of those is in marriage.

How do we make sure that all our relationships are nurtured and valued?

So, divorce can happen if there has been unfaithfulness. But if we look at 1 Corinthians 7:3 to 5 the reasons expand. It talks about the duties of the husband to the wife and vice versa. The Old Testament vows assume the husband will support the wife with food, clothing and love. Paul recognises the right for divorce if a husband ‘neglects’ his wife.

1. Do we do enough to both start and maintain good marriages?

What can the church do to help?

Do we sometimes assume that married couples will just keep going without giving support?

It should be noted that, in the first century, both Jewish and Roman divorcees would be expected to re-marry. A Roman citizen who did not get married within 18 months of a divorce could be prosecuted under law. Re-marriage has been an issue in the church from the beginning. If we take Jesus’ statement in verse 32 at face value then it is forbidden – it amounts to adultery.

But when we were looking at lust last week, we noted that Jesus did not mean we should literally gouge out the eye that was the start of lust nor cut off the hand that took it further. Jesus’ statement in v32 clearly liberates the victim of marital unfaithfulness to re-marry. This was to counter the prevailing Jewish situation where wives could be dumped for trivial reasons.

1. 1 Corinthians 7:39 gives the widow freedom to marry even though she should be cautious. Some would argue that a husband who is maritally unfaithful (Matthew 5:32) has ‘widowed’ his wife by his actions.

Do you agree?

In both OT and NT God is on the side of the victim of marriage breakdown.

1. Discuss how we can show the true Christian dynamic of love in these situations

Do we too easily chuck in a dogmatic opinion about a particular couple without knowing the true situation?

***REFLECTION***

***It would be good to take some time to pray for married couples in our church community.***

***Maybe we could also look out for a couple we could support.***

***Let’s also pray that all our relationships will be characterised by love and generosity.***