

Feb 19/23 (Leader's Guide)
Marriage and Divorce Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-9

1. Reflect briefly as a group on our current cultural perspectives on marriage and divorce. What does our culture see as the purpose for marriage? How is divorce approached in our culture?

This is simply a question designed to have your group begin to discuss the perspectives on marriage and divorce that exist in our culture. This will aid you later in the conversation to apply Jesus' words to our own culture. This is a question that could take up the whole time, so simply get everyone talking, paint a few broad brush strokes and move into the study.

Either here or later in the conversation you may get someone sharing their own story or someone they know that will perhaps make it difficult to have a free flowing conversation about what Jesus is actually saying for fear that we would add to the pain of the particular story we are hearing. There may be wisdom in preparing a response should something like that come up. Perhaps something like: I am so sorry you have had to / are navigating such a difficult situation. We are here for you in that. It may be difficult for us as a group as we consider our friend's situation to wrestle honestly with this text but I think if we do we will be better placed to support not only in this situation but in whatever others we will face through the course of our lives."

Read Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-9

Into the culture of his day Jesus speaks a word of truth and a word of love. In this study we will explore how his culture would have understood his words and then prayerfully reflect on what word of truth and word of love our hearts need to hear.

A word of truth

2. (vs.3) **Read Deuteronomy 24:1-4a.** What do you think is the heart of this law? In light of their question how were the Pharisees interpreting it?

This was considered the lex talionis of marriage law. Lex Talionis referred to the biblical phrase – and eye for an eye – a tooth for a tooth. This was a law designed to curb vengeance, for the human tendency is not only to have the other return what they have taken but to also exact our pound of flesh. No Lex Talionis said, the punishment must fit the crime.

Deuteronomy 24 was the lex talionis of marriage law. It was brought at a time where men were divorcing their wives on a whim. This law was designed to protect women and curb hasty divorces. The law protected women by requiring a certificate of divorce. It had to be written in the presence of two witnesses stating the agreed upon reason for divorce so that the rumour mill or his disparaging

comments wouldn't ruin her reputation. Her dowry would be returned and she was free to remarry. There was some degree of protection here for women.

It curbed hasty divorces for law contained all these "if-then" statements designed to stop a husband from hastily divorcing his wife and then remarrying her at another time. "Are you sure?" The law asked – "You aren't getting a do over here"

This was the only text in the Hebrew scriptures that had anything to do with divorce so it became the "go-to" text for discussing the grounds for divorce. By the time of Jesus there was fierce debate between liberals and conservatives as to what it might mean.

The conservatives followed the interpretation of Rabbi Shammai who focused on the grounds for divorce. If you find something "indecent" in her, which he took to refer to adultery.

The liberals followed the interpretation of Rabbi Hillel who also focused on the grounds for divorce. If you find "something" indecent in her, by his focus on something (anything), his grounds for divorce covered the gamete. Essentially anything that caused annoyance in the husband was grounds for divorce.

The Pharisees took a text designed to protect women and curb hasty divorces as not only licence to do it, but as a command to do so. Every divorce then, had godly sanction.

3. (vs. 4-6) **Read Genesis 2:18-24.** The Christian perspective of marriage arises from these verses that Jesus reaffirms here in Matthew. From these verses what can we say about God's created purpose for marriage? (Be as exhaustive as possible)

- A. It's foundation is friendship. It is given in response to the first "not good" of creation. It is not good that humanity be alone, I will create a companion suitable.*
- B. Leave mother and father. It is a relationship that takes precedence over other familial relationships.*
- C. Hold Fast. It is about a covenant. Covenants are future oriented, they are "I will" promises.*
- D. Exclusive. One man, one woman.*
- E. Leave and Hold Fast. There is intended to be a public covenant making ceremony.*
- F. It is by God's design - we don't have the freedom to redefine it.*
- G. Two become one. There is a permanence to marriage.*

4. (vs. 3-4) Why do you think that Jesus points them to this passage in response to their question about the grounds for divorce?

Created intention trumps concession. What must be first and foremost in any discussion of marriage and divorce is God's created purpose for it.

5. (vs. 7 – 8) What pieces of your answer to number three needs to be heard in our culture?

This question is meant to tie your discussion in number one with your discussion of number three.

I would suspect that if it hasn't already this is where the "well what about this situation" will come up. This will likely be around matters of abuse, addiction and neglect. With adultery and desertion (1 Cor 7) being the only explicit grounds for divorce it leaves us needing to navigate with care. We would never want to sacrifice truth for love (for that leaves us with licence), nor would we want to sacrifice love for truth (for that leaves us with self-righteous judgment and makes our hearts cold to those facing marriages that have become a living hell).

I think the word should be get out, get help, speak up. Allow community to come around you to support you as you seek to find healing and restoration. As we do we must never get out of earshot of Jesus' words – what God has joined together let no one put asunder, or let no one amputate. If you went to your doctor with a wound on your leg and she said, I know how to deal with that, we'll amputate. Hang on hang on you would say can we try some other options first? I suspect with these words Jesus is inviting us to take a similar approach to marriage. Just as amputation is a last resort for a wound on our leg, so divorce should be a last resort for a broken marriage.

A word of love

6. In the sermon Tim pointed out that Jesus' words revealed deep compassion for women. How do you see his response as sowing the seeds for a radical shift in marriage relationships?

Here is the unedited section of that part in the sermon that can provide some basis for your discussion of this question.

Well first we must see his deep compassion toward women – not only in his limiting the grounds for divorce – but when he does affirm adultery being the only ground Moses had in mind – he phrases it in a way no one else would – remember this is a culture where only men were considered the victims of adultery – he says – if you divorce your wives – you make her an adulterer – if you marry another you are an adulterer – he is putting all the responsibility on men - in a sermon on this text Darryl Johnson points out - for the first time in history men are being forced to come to terms with how their choices and actions effect women – in other words – persons not property.

7. With the word of truth that Jesus speaks there is the real danger of feeling abandoned in our pain, judged in our failings, or crushed by an ideal. What loving word of Jesus do we need to hear in each of those possible responses?

Here is the unedited section of that portion of the sermon to help navigate this question:

If you are or have gone through a divorce – it is likely one of the most painful experiences of your life – a death without a grave – a wound that touches the deepest recesses of your heart – hear this – Jesus is with you in that sorrow – in Jeremiah 3 – God describes himself as going through divorce – his people have rejected him – gone after other gods – broken the covenant – Jeremiah reflects the agony – anger – sorrow – loss – yearning – all of which you have or are likely going through – He is with you – he is with you...

Jesus' word of truth may feel like judgement upon your situation – what is his word of love to those of us who have been divorced - the story of King David may help us here - he begins a marriage in an utter mess – uses his power to gain another's wife – gets her pregnant – kills her husband to cover it up – marries her – nothing could be further from God's design - but David is brought to repentance - God blesses - restores the marriage – out of that comes Solomon – part of the lineage of Jesus – and in Matthew's genealogy he draws attention to this – he says and David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah – instead of trying to sweep it under the rug – Matthew highlights an abusive scandal in Jesus' lineage - telling us so beautifully – powerfully - clearly – that God is able to redeem and bring good out of all circumstances – if your story like mine includes divorce – let us seek his face – in repentance long for healing and redemption – for he is full of grace and mercy.

Jesus' word of truth may feel like a crushing ideal – what is his word of love in that – well every time marriage is mentioned in the new testament we are pointed to God's love of us in Jesus – love as I have loved you – thanks – that just crushes us even more – I can't love the way Jesus loved me – ah but in that we are not only given a picture of marriage's fulfillment we are given the resources of heaven to live into it.

As we are called to live into the covenant of marriage – to live into the I will – we are drawn to behold a God who is faithful – who will never leave us nor forsake us.

When the healing of our marriage requires an acknowledgement of our wrong – we are drawn to behold a God who knows we are far worse than what we will likely acknowledge – and yet freely loved and forgave us at the cross.

When the healing of our marriage requires forgiveness of what the other has done - we are drawn to behold a God who has forgiven us of far more than what we are being invited to forgive in that moment.

In this difficult terrain Jesus speaks a word of truth and a word of love – inviting us to live into a new humanity in synch with his kingdom – lavishing upon us the

resources of heaven – the power that raised Jesus from the dead – the Spirit that brings his love home to our hearts – has been poured out upon us in Jesus - so go to him – go to him in prayerful yearning – that wounds would be healed – power brought to bear in your struggles – his love and forgiveness flowing into and out of your heart – the we might step more and more into the love and flourishing he intended when he gave the gift of marriage.