

## **Singleness, Marriage, Divorce, Matthew 5:31-32, July 11<sup>th</sup>**

Gracious Father, now give us diligence to seek you, and wisdom to find you. May our ears hear your voice, our eyes see your goodness, and our tongues proclaim your name as we commit our lives to pleasing You. Amen.

### **Singleness, Marriage, Divorce.**

The Kingdom Lifestyle we are exploring. Jesus teaches his followers, having responded to his call, what it means to live in the kingdom, and what the resources of the Kingdom can help bring about. Jesus has covered well known topics: anger, contempt, lust, marital faithfulness, and now he chooses to discuss marriage and divorce.

Divorce affects many directly and indirectly. It can be one of the most painful experiences in life. Psychologically, trauma of divorce is often as bad and can be worse than bereavement.

The church should bring hope to all those who have experienced this great pain. The Christian calling is to 'bind up the broken hearted, to comfort all those who mourn'.

To those badly hurt by divorce, church is a hospital.

A divorcee needs all the support and encouragement that a Christian community can provide. All who have been divorced need open ears to listen to their griefs and their hopes.

Single parents need to share their burdens with other families, esp when there are no grandparents nearby. For such parents, the Christian community should provide an alternative network of care and support. (summary of thoughts from New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology, IVP, p.317).

To those who acknowledge that they were responsible for the pain of divorce, the church is a community of forgiven sinners. Divorce is not an unforgivable sin.

To those who experience despair through divorce, the church is a community of hope. God loves us and he wants to bring restoration, healing, to bind up the reeds that are bruised, and he will not put out the smouldering wicks, as Isaiah 42 reminds us.

Divorce was a live topic in Jesus day.

There were two schools of thought grounds for divorce. These revolved around the meaning of Deuteronomy 24. "a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her ... he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and after she leaves his house, she becomes the wife of another man ..."

In the school of thought led by Rabbi Shammai – 'something displeasing' meant a serious sexual offence.

The other school led by Rabbi Hillel, the husband could divorce his wife “for any and every reason’. This ‘any and every reason’ could include gossiping in the street, no longer being beautiful, and bad cooking.’

Yet we note that Jesus, when asked about divorce, he began with talking about marriage. And so do we.

a) **Singleness**

But as we start with marriage, we must start with singleness.

To be single, is a valid way to be a Christian today. Paul not only recognizes but affirms singleness, shown in the words 1 Cor 7. Jesus himself was single. ‘We cannot forget the saints throughout church history whose singleness has been part of their faith and singleminded pursuit of God.’ (Shane Claiborne, Common Prayer, p.166)

Everyone is single at some stage in their lives. By single, it may not be only when you are young, it may be at any age; it may be through experiencing same sex attraction and you have committed yourself to live a celibate life; it may be as a person you have become single for a second time, through being a widow or widower or through divorce.

There is a poem used sometimes at Weddings called ‘This Day I married my best friend’ – in it, there is a sentence, “We used to feel vaguely incomplete, now together we are whole.” There are various songs and films, which speak of ‘you complete me’ when we find that person to marry.

It is possible as a single to feel, we have a ‘half life’ and not ‘a full life’, perhaps due to church at times being so marriage focused; or perhaps the language our parents used – with good intentions such as ‘when you grow up and get married’ suggesting that you are missing something if you haven’t done both; or simply what we encounter in life – when we feel lonely in our tougher moments and wish we had someone by our side to share life, or when we come home to an empty flat with no one to tell about the highs and lows of the day. For those of us, who have been married and are no longer, we may feel that our wholeness has been destroyed, and that we are back to being half a person.

Rob Bell : “If you are single, and you have been sent messages or its been hinted at, or even said to your face, that you are somehow missing something, that you aren’t good enough, that you don’t fit – that is not true. It is not just that you are fine single. The premise of the scriptures is that you are able to connect with God and serve God, in ways that those who are married can’t.” (Gumbel, Jesus Lifestyle, p. 71).

Singles are not half people – they are whole people.

“Whether single or married, whether you have children or not, whether you live alone or with others, we are ‘whole’, each one of us is a whole, complete person, made in the made of God, loved by him, to reflect his glory.” (Wharton, Singleminded, p 21).

Remember what Jesus said: I have come that they may have life and have it to the full. That is the life we are offered in Jesus Christ – a full life, a complete life, a whole life. Not life which will *only* be complete when we find the missing other half of ourselves... Life can be full and complete now, and whole right now, because it is life in Christ.

To be single can be difficult as Paul points to, in v9. For some they can live with it, others cannot.

Sometimes the difficulty can be the length of time being single. Mike Pilavachi, founder of Soul Survivor, a single man shares:” For some of us, our calling is to celibacy for life. For others it is a season. For some of us, we thought it was a season and it ends up for life.”

In 1 Cor 7, v7, Paul mentions a gift. This has been called in churches a gift of singleness. Note what it does not say. It does not say ‘if you have the gift of singleness, you will be perfectly happy to never get married.’

Now, if Paul means, some have the gift of marriage, others the gift of singleness – no married person thinks – well this is a bit hard, I’m off. They make the best job of being married they can. Similarly to be single, it is to do the best job you can within your current circumstances. One day – like those married – all is fine and good, and the next, it is a struggle and hard work.

Secondly, it has been suggested that if we have the gift of singleness, we will be free from sexual desire. Again that is not indicated anywhere. Jesus was tempted in every way. So singles and marrieds will be tempted with sexual desire.

Joshua Harris, a writer, when he was asked by some single people, when their turn for marriage will come, replied “If you’re single, I believe that God wants you to see that your story *has* begun. Life does not start when you find a spouse. Marriage is wonderful, but it is simply a new chapter in life. It’s just a new way to do what we’re all created to do – to live for and glorify our Creator.” (Wharton, *ibid.*, p.39).

There is so much more that can be said. A closing comment.

The way we need to look at it, is that as single people, we are whole by ourselves, it is not true that we are incomplete unless or until we get married. We are children of God, made in his image, and that is just the same, whether we are single or married. However when people get married, two whole people come together and a new ‘whole’ is created – the marriage unit is greater than the sum of its parts.

## **b) Marriage**

The decision to get married is a voluntary one.

But the choices open to you before you are married, and those open to you once you are married, are different.

Before you are married, you are free to choose anybody.

Bishop Sandy Millar said “when you get married, the moment for choosing is over!”

On that wedding day, a couple can look at each other and think – say – you are the person God has called me to marry.

It is important to take care over the choice of a marriage partner. Yet we need to be prepared to take risks. It is not a failure to go out with someone and then for the relationship to not end in marriage. It is not a failure to have a broken engagement – as the couple realize it is better to not get married even at that late stage. I think in the church, it should be okay to accept an invitation to go out for a drink or a coffee and not see this as the first step along the road to marriage. There needs to be time to get to know each other.

Jesus had the highest view of marriage.

In his words, he pointed to creation and made four points.

First, **marriage involves one man and one woman for life**;

Secondly **it entails leaving parents**. So this means a clear public act, which breaks the links with the parents – the children who have left the parents are still called to honour them, yet there is a new centre of gravity, a new family unit has been formed and the first responsibility and loyalty are to that unit.

Third, there is **a uniting and a personal commitment** – the word used implies passion and permanence. The bond between the man and woman is to be deep and lasting.

Fourthly, **‘the two will become one flesh.’** Leaving and uniting are active words, but ‘becoming one flesh’ is something that happens to the couple, they are joined by God. Union takes place at the deepest level, and sexual intercourse facilitates that union, and symbolises the union.

“The intent in marriage is a union of two people that is even deeper than the union of parents and children or any other human relationship.” (Dallas Willard).

Willard, Divine Conspiracy, p188 (Kindle).

Jesus' model is the best and the most beautiful. There is an order – you leave, you cleave, and within that context, sex takes place.

The world communicates or suggests another order – it begins with sex, then co-habitation, then a child, then engagement, and then further down the road, perhaps marriage...

Jesus then says – ‘what God has joined together let man not separate’. Words that will be repeated this coming week in the wedding ceremony for Pieter Jan and Tiana. The

fundamental rule: marriage is permanent and divorce should be ruled out, not because marriage cannot be broken, but because it ought not to be broken. As Swiss Theologian Karl Barth said: "To enter marriage is to renounce the possibility of leaving it."

This is not to say, to avoid divorce is easy. American Pastor Rick Warren says: "I would be divorced today if it weren't for Kay and my stubborn persistence. We said 'Divorce is not an option for us'. We locked the escape hatch on our marriage the night we got married and we threw away the key.

When we celebrated our twentieth wedding anniversary, we liked to say to others, that we've had 17 great years, the first three years were hell on earth." Quoted, Gumbel, p94.

A couple who were married 53 years were asked what their secret was:  
"We waited until we were really sure we were the ones for each other;  
We made our marriage a priority;  
We nurtured it, developed it.  
We fed our marriage.  
Whenever we got stuck, we didn't stay there long: we were not too proud to get help, and we needed it many times.  
The last thing is that we really committed ourselves to Jesus Christ in our individual lives.  
We were committed to Christian causes that made life more exciting.  
We had a larger vision and not just our little union."

(Quotes from Gumbel, *ibid.*, p.94-95)

Those of us who are married, need to invest and continue to build strong marriages. We need to see this as the highest priority in our life, after our relationship with God. One such resource is the Marriage Course, written by HTB, which covers practical tools and topics, such communication, shared values, conflict, commitment and so on. It is free online – 7 videos, with questions to discuss as a couple – a chance to invest and refresh and grow deeper as a couple...

Marriages, however, can become dry or dead. But when Jesus is teaching, he always has in mind the resources of the kingdom – the empowering presence of the Spirit.

Paul, when he calls on the believers, to be 'filled with the Spirit' in Eph 5, his following statements are a list of fruits which follow. One of these is submission to each other, and in that point, he mentions how to serve each other in marriage, in work and parenting. Being filled with the Spirit, helps our marriages to be all they can be...

"One of the visible fruits of the coming of the Holy Spirit is the revival of dead or dried up marriages. The Holy Spirit wants to repeat for every couple the miracle of the wedding of Cana. The Spirit wants to transform the water into wine – the water of routine, of lowered expectations, of coldness into the heady wine of newness and joy."

(Cantatalessa quoted in Gumbel, p.97).

**c) Divorce.**

‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce’. Jesus teaches that divorce as then practiced in many circles, was unacceptable. We note, he also mentions remarriage, which he sees as possible in certain circumstances.

Jesus says that divorce was only allowed – ‘because your hearts were hard’. God did not originally intend marriage to end in divorce. The ultimate ground for divorce, Jesus is saying, is human meanness – hard heartedness.

Jesus mentions ‘marital unfaithfulness’: the Greek word used, could mean sex that happened before marriage which was discovered later by the husband; more often the word means adultery. Adultery meant a new union was formed – through sex – and therefore divorce was a recognition that the marriage had been ruptured, through the adultery.

Paul in 1 Cor 7. He affirms also the permanence of marriage yet he suggests another example that ends marriage. If an unbelieving partner leaves and will not be reconciled, then the believer, with a clear conscience, can let him or her go.

Jesus and Paul point to the permanence of marriage.

Divorce is different from separation. At times, when the relationship is struggling so much, or there has been significant failure, or it is for the safety of the spouse or and the children, a time apart – separation – may be a necessary even wise and good decision. This time may be for a significant period. It may be that such time is necessary to help restore the marriage for the long term.

Jesus knew the damage of divorce, the great pain it causes. Tearing apart what God has joined together causes great damage to at least one of the partners and usually both. Willard: “Individuals involved can never be the same – whether or not a divorce was, everything considered, justifiable.” Willard, Divine, p.189.

If there are children in the relationship, they may be seriously affected. A member of HTB wrote to Nicky Gumbel. She shared:

“My experience of my parents divorce was not only deeply painful, having lifelong effects for me and my sibling, I also felt ashamed and that the church considered us shameful. Yet we were the innocent bystanders.

“The legacy of divorce for children is massive and cannot be emphasized enough. ... The legacy of our parents’ divorce was extremely hard to shake off. Yet God’s amazing grace helps me with this still on a daily basis, and my parents divorced over thirty years ago. It is by this grace that I chose marriage for myself...” (Gumbel, *ibid.*, p.102)

Jesus in his words also “knew the resources of the kingdom of the heavens were sufficient to resolve difficulties between husband and wife and to make their union rich and good before God and man – provided, of course, that both are prepared to seek and find these resources.” Williard, Divine, p.191.

Jesus said hard heartedness make divorce necessary. “But kingdom hearts are not hard, and they together can find ways to bear with each other, to speak truth in love, to change – often through times of great pain and distress – until the tender intimacy of mutual, covenant framed love, finds a way for the two lives to remain one, beautifully and increasingly.” Willard, *ibid.*, p. 192.

For those who are married, it is essential we do all we can to avoid divorce. Even if the legal process has began, it is never too late. If your partner is seeking to divorce you, it is important to explore every possibility of reconciliation, if it is safe to do so. Reconciliation is always a possibility even at the very last moment.

Yet for some couples, divorce takes place. Both have done all they can. Or one has tried and the other has not.

If you are not at this stage, but your marriage is experiencing difficulties, get help early. People often find it hard – think it is a failure – to admit their marriage is under pressure. Do not wait until there is a crisis.

As Christians we have to do everything in our power to avoid divorce and bring about reconciliation .

But as a last resort, we may need to concede reluctantly and divorce. Some couples, or one partner in the relationship, may have tried all they can, over a period of years, yet the marriage sadly could not be restored or it was unsafe to do so.

#### **d) Conclusion.**

Some final thoughts.

Whatever we feel about divorce, we need to draw alongside those who face marriage problems, with compassion, understanding and without being judgemental. We have not see the struggles to restore, to work things out, the pain, the attempts to move forward.

People who experience divorce may use words like ‘broken hearted’ – a divorce is crushing. Divorce involves unimaginable pain.

Jesus said: He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted.

Psalm 34 – The Lord is close to the broken hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

The Lord is close to those who are suffering the pain of divorce.

Church, a community of those who are single, those who are married,  
a place where both singles and marrieds are whole in Christ,  
where those divorced can be comforted.

Church a place of grace, forgiveness, healing and transformation.

Shall we pray.

Prayer.

Our closing prayer – is an ancient one...

“Thanks be you thee my Lord Jesus Christ,

For all the benefits and reconciliation thou has given to me

For all the pains and insults thou hast borne for me

O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,

In my singleness, in my marriage,

Give me afresh your Holy Spirit, that

I may know thee more clearly

Love thee and others more dearly

And follow thee more nearly,

Day by day. Amen.