

Hearts of Stone

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Matthew 5:31-32

February 14, 2016

I chose to preach on this divorce passage months ago. I didn't give it much thought that these two verses would fall on Sunday, February 14th. Then, earlier this week, it hit me. I'll be talking about divorce on Valentine's Day. Oh, joy!



On second thought, talking about divorce and marriage on Valentine's Day may not be such a bad idea, after all. Everyone here has been impacted by divorce, whether directly or indirectly.

It's in everybody's best interest for us to talk about divorce and marriage. In a culture that has become cynical about marriage, we would do well to explore God's good intentions for marriage and family life.

Talking about divorce may be painful for some of you. Feelings on the subject lie close to the surface. But since there is more to be gained by talking about divorce than a conspiracy of silence, I press on.

First, I must come clean with you regarding this passage. I have avoided preaching on Matthew 5:31-32 in the past. For the longest time, I didn't understand Jesus' point. His teaching seemed, on the surface, to be harsh and severe-sounding. Somehow I missed his point entirely.

Jesus begins his teaching, "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce'" (Matthew 5:31). Jesus' reference to "anyone who divorces his wife" is a clear indicator that he is directing this portion of his sermon to husbands. Divorce, in those days, was exclusively at the discretion of the husband. Wives could not file for divorce. Divorce was solely a husband's prerogative.

Jesus' reference to "a certificate of divorce" harkens back to Mosaic Law in the Old Testament. Husbands were

divorcing their wives in those days far too easily. So, Moses laid down a regulation that required husbands to give just cause for seeking a divorce and producing divorce papers to protect his wife from further scandal. The law read, “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent in her, he can write her a certificate of divorce...” (Deuteronomy 24:1).

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him, because he finds something indecent about her, he can write her a certificate of divorce... Deut. 24.1

Two schools of thought coalesced around the meaning of the phrase “something indecent.” The conservative Shammai School, as taught by Rabbi Shammai, regarded this phrase as referring exclusively to adultery. The Shammaites believed the only justifiable grounds for divorce was adultery itself. The liberal school of Hillel, following the lead of, you guessed it, Rabbi Hillel, argued that some indecency could refer to most anything. A husband could divorce his wife if she developed wrinkles or cooked a bad meal. I kid you not. Rabbi Hillel said you were justified in divorcing your wife even if she burnt the toast!

The Pharisees of Jesus’ day, acting much like religious lawyers, argued back and forth over what had to be wrong with the wife for the husband to exercise his divorce rights. You can guess which school of thought predominated. It was the Rabbi Hillel divorce-on-demand approach to marriage.

Each of the six antithetical sayings in Matthew 5 is introduced with some variation on the theme, “You have heard that it was said...but I say to you.” After Jesus references this original Old Testament command, he illumines its intended meaning with the words, “But I tell you any man who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery and any man

who marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matthew 5:32).

The Pharisees thought they were innocent of any wrongdoing so long as they issued their wives a bill of divorce. Wrong, Jesus says. You are guilty of divorce even when you follow the letter of the law. He places the responsibility for divorce where it rightly belongs—on husbands who were initiating divorce proceedings.

Some Christians interpret this passage as a rule to regulate every instance of marriage after divorce. Some clergy, on the basis of this passage, refuse to marry divorced people unless there was adultery the first time around based on this passage. Some divorced people have been shabbily treated in the church as a result of interpretation of these verses.

Here’s the problem as I see it. Jesus doesn’t enumerate the meaning of his “except for sexual immorality” clause. The Greek word Jesus uses for sexual immorality, *porneia*, can refer more narrowly to sexual infidelity or more broadly to marital unfaithfulness. If we try to parse this word beyond what Jesus does here, we run the risk of falling into the same trap the Pharisees did. Time and again, the Pharisees become legalistic about Old Testament Law. Jesus’ purpose here is not to lay down an ironclad law to regulate every divorce. He’s challenging these Pharisees who think they are in the clear just because they issue their wives divorce papers.



One rule of Biblical interpretation is to compare Scripture with Scripture. If we are confused by what Jesus says about divorce, we look for other places where Jesus addresses the same topic. Jesus talks about divorce on one other occasion in Matthew’s gospel. The Pharisees ask Jesus, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife *for any and*

every reason” (Matthew 19:1). They want to know whether Jesus sides with Shammai or Hillel on the divorce question.

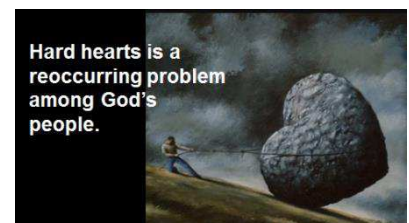
Jesus’ reply is striking. He ignores their question altogether. “Haven’t you read that at the beginning ‘God made them male and female’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh.’ Therefore, what God has joined together let no one separate” (Matthew 19:4-6).

Jesus isn’t interested in debating the legalities of divorce. He would much rather talk about God’s original intention for marriage. God’s purpose from the beginning was the union of one man and one woman in the covenant of marriage.

The Pharisees ask Jesus a follow up question: “Why then did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” (19:7). Jesus answers, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard” (19:8).

Jesus identifies hard-heartedness as a root cause in divorce. Couples can develop hardened hearts toward each other.

Hard-heartedness turns out to be a recurring problem among God’s people (Mark 6:52; 8:17). Hard hearts are a contributing factor in marital breakdown and poor family relationships. God wants His people to develop soft hearts so that God’s forgiveness and mercy can take root and grow.



Hardness of heart starts small. It begins as a root of bitterness. The writer of Hebrews warns, “See to it that no

one falls short of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness grows up to defile many” (12:15). Little by little, we allow bitterness to poison family relationships. Don’t let bitterness spoil marriage and family relationships.

When I went to seminary to prepare for this pastoral vocation, Chris and I moved into an apartment near the school. The first night in our apartment, we were awakened by a frightening sound. The train that whizzed by our apartment was so loud that it rattled the windows. Its whistle was so deafening that it brought us to a full and upright position. We awoke the next morning convinced we couldn’t make it through another night. But here’s the interesting thing. We eventually we got used to the sound. In fact, the train noise became rather soothing. People who visited our apartment would comment on the loud train. “What train?” we would ask. We got so used to the sound that we didn’t even hear it. We became hardened to its sound.

Truly, if you
hear his voice,
do not harden
your hearts.
Heb. 3:7-8



The same hardening process can happen when God speaks to our hearts and we don’t respond. Our hearts become hard to the things of God. “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Hebrews 3:7-8).

You may be in a marriage or in a family relationship where your hearts have become hard. God wants to soften your heart. God offers through the prophet Ezekiel, “I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (36:26).

We want to invest more resources in this church to strengthening marriage. In a weakening marriage culture, healthy marriages are highly attractive to people.

In advance of this sermon, a few of us prepared a card to acquaint you with marriage resources. There are books to read and online resources available to enrich your marriage. There are counseling resources to assist you if you are struggling in your marriage. Most couples decide to seek help only after it's too late. There are couple's small groups and weekend marriage conferences identified here. There's information on our next Marriage Ministry event.

Our leadership has been sensing that God is calling our congregation into a season of renewal. God wants to bring renewal to people in every stage of life, including married couples. When two flawed people come together in marriage, it's not going to be easy. Jesus Christ gives us greater capacity to love each other. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

I've been studying renewal in American history. I'm struck with how confession and forgiveness were catalysts in America's Great Awakenings. Renewal ensues from couples who confess and seek restitution with each other.

During the 1st Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards was presiding over a prayer meeting for 800 men. During the meeting, a woman passed a message to Dr. Edwards asking the men to pray for her husband. The note described her husband as "unloving, prideful and difficult." Edwards made the bold decision to read the note aloud to the 800 men. He asked the man who had been so described by his wife to raise his hand so the whole assembly could pray for him. Three hundred men raised their hands.

God will bring renewal if we acknowledge ourselves to be "unloving, prideful and difficult." Is there bitterness toward your spouse or someone in your family? Don't let your hearts become hard. Ask God to soften your heart.

Resources for Marriage

UPCOMING Marriage Ministry Event:

What: “Married Night Out at the Movies”

When: April 1st, 7:30-9pm

Where: The Great Hall at Vienna Presbyterian Church
124 Park St., NE
Vienna, VA 22180

Why: Evidence shows that couples that watch and discuss five popular movies about marriage within the first three years of marriage have a significantly increased chance of remaining married (see <https://www.rochester.edu/news/divorce-rate-cut-in-half-for-couples-who-discussed-relationship-movies/>).

Who: You – and your friends – and...

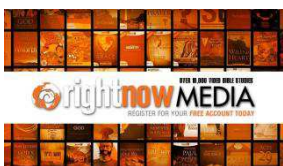
Glenda and Stuart Hoffman, who gained critical acclaim for their comedic performance at the Not-so-Newlywed Game, will be back to show film highlights, debate their hidden meaning, and provoke discussions that have been proven to promote healthy marriages.

Weekend to Remember Marriage Conference:

www.familylife.com (use “VPC” group code at any conference location for discount)

Books

- *Boundaries in Marriage* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend
- *Covenant Marriage: Building Communication and Intimacy*, Gary Chapman
- *The Five Love Languages*, Gary Chapman
- *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*, Tim Keller
- *Making Marriage Simple: Ten Truths for Changing the Relationship You Have into the One You Want*, Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt
- *Love & Respect*, Emerson Eggerichs
- *Rescue Your Love Life: Changing the 8 Dumb Attitudes and Behaviors That Will Sink Your Marriage*, Henry Cloud and John Townsend
- *Sacred Marriage: What if God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?*, Gary Thomas



RightNow Media viennapres.org/adult-ministries/

VPC has a membership with RNM, which is a “Netflix for Christians” offering over 10,000 videos to stream at no cost for our congregation. There are marriage videos by Gary Smalley, Andy Stanley, Matt Chandler, Francis Chan, Drs. Les & Leslie Parrott and many others! For information contact Deb at deb.crumbliss@viennapres.org.

Marriage in Crisis/Don't Know Where to Turn?

Contact your pastoral staff at VPC: Church phone: 703-938-9050

Email: peter.james@viennapres.org glenda.simpkinshoffman@viennapres.org
david.jordanhaas@viennapres.org