

2023 Theme - Focus On What Matters

Sermon Series - Focus on Your Witness

Sermon Title - Divorce: The opposite of sacred and special!

Sermon Text - Matthew 5:31-32

Sermon Presenter - Pastor Larry

Introduction:

“Where sin runs deep, Your grace is more, Where grace is found is where You are, And where You are Lord, I am free, Holiness is Christ in me!” Aren’t you glad that God’s grace is found where you are? And I mean wherever you are! You may have crossed a line when it comes to God’s Holy Law, or more than one line, but if we’re honest, all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God! The question is whether or not you will humbly receive God’s offer of Grace, mercy and forgiveness! Having said that, I want to tell you that the intent of God’s law is wholly and perfectly good and is intended to lead you into God’s perfect plan for you! Today is another tough subject for us to grapple with in our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, but it is so important that we understand the ramifications of what Jesus was teaching and at the same time remember His offer of grace for us if we have failed! And we need to take Him up on His offer of power to do better! Let’s pray and ask God’s Holy Spirit to teach us. Pray!

It’s good to be back with you on this Memorial Day weekend! I pray you and your family will have a wonderful day tomorrow with family and friends, but I also pray that we will not forget the brave men and women who gave their lives protecting the freedoms we enjoy. So at least take the time to include in your blessing over your meal a prayer for the families of those who have empty seats at the table because of sacrifices made in service to our country and give thanks for the sacrifices made many years ago! It’s the least we can do! Amen? Amen! And you might even take this opportunity to pray for peace around the world! Miracles of peace do happen. I believe that my wife’s uncle, who died at Guadalcanal, in WWII, would be thankful to see the friendship that now exists between the U.S. and Japan and that his sacrifice was not in vain. Debbie and I took some vacation time to go and see our son and his family in Japan. We got to meet our daughter in law’s family for the first time and of course see our little granddaughter. It was a blessing! Thank you so much for allowing me that time off! You all are the best!! I appreciate Jay holding the fort down as he does even when I’m here! And I appreciate Andrew filling in for me and doing such a great job with some very difficult topics, murder in the heart, and adultery in the heart! Today we continue to focus on a section of our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount that deals with our witness to the world! I hope you’ve been able to see just how relevant Jesus’ message in His Sermon on the Mount is to our lives! The words Jesus spoke:

“You’ve heard it said, but I say to you...”

indicate just how important our mental, emotional and spiritual attitudes are in life. Andrew talked about the very graphic illustration Jesus used to point this out! Remember?

Matthew 5:29 If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

Matthew 5:30 And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

If you could fix a spiritual condition with physical surgery, then you would be smart to get it done! The problem is you can't fix a spiritual condition with physical surgery! You have to notice the language Jesus used. He said, "If your eye causes you to sin," and "if your hand causes you to sin." He says if, because the physical eye and the physical hand may carry out the sin, but they don't cause the sin! The eye and the hand receive instructions from your brain, which houses your spiritual heart, so the cause of sin is hidden somewhere in there! Here He uses the example of adultery. The "you shall not commit adultery" command was intended to bring true love to the marriage relationship. Without the principle found in this command, things like faithfulness, true intimacy, genuine love, respect, trust, longevity, becoming true soul-mates and experiencing lasting commitment are all sacrificed! Once again, the teachers of the law and the religious leaders had ignored the intent of the law and were using the letter of the law to get around the intent of the law, as Andrew so ably pointed out. Here's what was happening...

God wanted people to realize how sacred and special the marriage relationship and covenant was. Divorce is the opposite of sacred and special, thus the title of our sermon for today! God wanted people to honor their marriage commitment for a lifetime. He did not want them to leave their spouse or to take another person's spouse. But the intent went further than that, He didn't want them coveting and lusting for another person's spouse. The marriage commitment, the marriage covenant was extremely important to God! It was sacred and special! So Jesus now turns His attention to what can happen to marriage when we ignore the intent of God's law in the attitudes of the heart, divorce! And let me remind you why the attitudes of the heart are so important...

Attitude is not Exempt (from the law or judgment)

Attitude reveals Intent

Attitude Affects Action

Is it your attitude to live for me, myself, and I, or is it the intention of your heart to live for Christ and those He has called you to serve, and if you're married, especially your spouse?

With that in mind, let's see what Jesus tackles next in His sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:31-32. Jesus points out...

Matthew 5:31 "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'

Matthew 5:32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Jesus' Point - The Intent of the Law was to protect the Sacred and Special Relationship of Marriage

I want to say this up front: Jesus was not trying to be legalistic and condemn everybody who had ever broken a commitment, but He was trying to point people, especially the religious leaders and teachers of the law, to the intent of the law. The intent of the whole law is about our relationship with God and with one another! And if this is the case, and it is, then that elevates commitment in those relationships to an extremely important status! You might remember, when Jesus was questioned by a teacher of the law about what laws were the most important, Jesus responded with this...

Matthew 22:37 Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'

Matthew 22:38 This is the first and greatest commandment.

Matthew 22:39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

Matthew 22:40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

So if all of the other laws and everything the prophets had written about hinges on these two things, you can see why commitment is so very important. Without commitment, relationships, and especially the marriage relationship, can't grow and thrive. Without commitment, relationships lack the trust, and the genuine love needed for a strong foundation. This is the second time in His sermon Jesus used marriage as an example. Jesus tells them what they've heard, but then goes on to tell them things that He hoped would help them see the intent of the law and to stop trying to find "letter of the law technicalities" to get around the intent of the law. So here's what was happening. The teachers of the law were teaching that as long as a man gave his wife a certificate of divorce, he could divorce her for any reason. Jesus called them out on this one! The world back then was male-dominated and the rights of women were many times totally overlooked. Jesus point blank said if the man divorced an innocent woman, he was guilty of breaking the marriage commitment and the man was guilty of causing her to break the commitment. Thus breaking the command against adultery. When you go back and look at the force of the Greek language here, you find that it's very difficult to actually translate this into English. Respected scholar and commentator, Frank Stagg, put it this way:

"Jesus says that for a husband to divorce an innocent wife is to victimize her and her second husband should she remarry. It is to treat an innocent woman the way an adulteress is treated and to force a stigma upon her and her subsequent marriage."

Now, someone may ask this question: "What if my spouse is guilty of adultery?" Ok, Jesus already said in this passage, "except on the grounds of adultery." So you have the right to divorce in that circumstance. You have the right, but that doesn't automatically mean you should! What I'm I saying here? If you have a spouse that realizes they've broken their sacred commitment and they are truly sorry, repentant, and desire to reconcile, you need to pray long and hard about the possibility of reconciliation. I've counseled with people who have made that mistake who are so broken, devastated and deeply repentant! I've seen times when the

offended spouse refuses to offer forgiveness, and divorce happens. I've also seen times when the offended spouse offers forgiveness and reconciliation took place and the relationship was restored and they went on to build a beautiful marriage! And when you're making your decision on whether to forgive or not, think about the reconciliation that was given to you by Jesus Christ when He forgave you of your sins against God! He did that because you were truly sorry and asked for His forgiveness! When you were broken, ashamed, and fearful, He renewed you, cleansed you, and gave you peace! While we were in Japan, we attended a Japanese Baptist Church. The Pastor spoke on forgiveness. My son translated this part of the message for me. The Pastor said that his parents faced a situation of infidelity. They stayed together, but were no longer close. Years later, when his dad was dying, he told his mom, you should talk to him and forgive him. She said, I forgave him a long time ago! When he told his dad what she said, his dad wept with joy! Folks, if you have forgiven someone, make sure they are aware of that, not only with your words, but with your actions!

If your spouse is truly repentant, while not easy, you can rebuild a beautiful relationship. Now, I know there are times when someone is not genuinely sorry. Maybe they're just sorry they got caught, and they have a pattern of behavior that indicates multiple infractions, and subsequent deception. If that's the case, and there's no repentance, that puts things in a different light. And then there's other things like physical, verbal, and emotional abuse. It's not healthy to stay in a marriage where the spouse is continually breaking their commitment to love, cherish, and protect, and are abusive. I get that! But apart from those things, it is better to keep your marital commitment. And I counsel folks who have to leave an abusive situation, to continue to pray for the abusive spouse that they might come to Jesus in true repentance and cry out to God for forgiveness! Again, there are occasions where seeking a divorce is necessary, like when you are protecting yourself or your children from an abusive spouse. However, with that said, divorce should be the exception to the rule, not the rule. In many cases today divorce is the road easily taken...

"I just don't love him or her like I used to." "We're just not compatible." "We don't even like the same things." "She's a great mother, he's a great father, and all that, in fact we're great friends, just not great lovers." "I just don't have feelings for them anymore."

Let me just say this: If you simply base your marriage on feelings you're going to end up in trouble. Feelings come and go. Some people are looking for that "butterflies in the stomach" feeling they had when they were a young teenager and had their first crush! But marriages that last a lifetime move way past those kinds of feelings and develop a much deeper satisfaction in the relationship based on a lifetime of commitment and faithfulness! Others say things like...

"Our careers are going in different directions and we've decided it's best we go our separate ways."

Or this very misdirected thought...

“God called me into the ministry and my wife did not accept it so I left her. Besides, the girl I’m seeing now really supports me in my ministry.”

Wow, what are you teaching others about commitment and about God? What kind of Christian witness is that? It's not!

In marriage you need to first and foremost, focus on your witness to your spouse, and your children. You then need to realize that as a Christian couple, your marriage will either be a good witness or a negative witness to those around you. So many Christians simply don't understand the impact their marriage relationship has on their witness to the world. Think about it this way: if your marriage is falling apart, it may not be fair, but people in the world may say or think something like this: “If the God thing is not working for them and their marriage, then I don't suppose it really works anyway.” Look, I understand and have known people who have done all they can do in a marriage, but the other spouse refuses to work on the marriage, doesn't really care about the marriage or the witness, and in that case the committed Christian needs to focus on their witness by taking the high road even if an unwanted divorce takes place. They can still have a good witness to their family and the world by the way in which they handle things! But on the other hand, I've known people who say they are Christ followers, who could care less about their marriage relationship or their witness to their spouse, family or friends in their marriage. That person is blind, and has been deceived by Satan to think that their marriage relationship and their marriage commitment does not affect their witness. It does. And here's something to think about: usually when we first get married we are focused on the good. Sometimes our focus changes and we begin to focus on the bad, the negative. Satan wants us to focus on the negative! His goal is to destroy marriages and families!

Oh and by the way, I said usually when we first get married we are focused on the good, but that's not always the case. I've got a question for you. “Why did you marry in the first place? Was it because you wanted to love them, complement them, help them be all God created them to be, protect them, build them up, cherish them, and be there for them for life, for better, for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health? Or was your intent selfishly motivated? “What's in it for me? How can you meet my needs? How can you be all that I ever dreamed of? How can you help me meet my goals in life?” That kind of attitude causes a person to make unrealistic demands on a marriage. That kind of attitude requires that the other person always live up to your unrealistic expectations and when they don't, they experience your displeasure, your disgust, and many times your wrath! And some people actually keep a list of things they don't like about their spouse, and if it's not literal, it's definitely in their minds! I know this because of how quick they can recite the list of their grievances in counseling. And some of the lists are pretty extensive and thorough! Paul said this in 1 Corinthians 13...

1 Corinthians 13:4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

1 Corinthians 13:5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

To combat this kind of thing from developing, I encourage young couples to work on their marriage so it can become so amazing you would never even think about breaking your vows. Not that you won't ever be tempted by Satan, because he is always going to tempt, but, as Andrew pointed out, you just have to shut the door and keep on shutting the door to temptation! And it is not that you won't have any problems, issues or difficulties when you work at your marriage, but the love bond that you will build helps you to overcome the issues and difficulties! Many lies have been perpetrated on couples today! For example:

If it's true love, everything should be spontaneously great. True love doesn't take work, it just happens.

Just live together, if it doesn't work out that's okay, keep looking, the perfect mate is out there somewhere.

Regardless of how good a person your spouse is, if you're not happy it would be better for you to just leave.

It's interesting how people accept the reality that for you to be successful in education, sports, career, or even hobbies, you've got to be committed to work hard at it! But when it comes to marriage they just think it should just happen without any effort. In fact, how many years do people go to school to prepare for a career? Sometimes, counting grade school, college and graduate school, it can be close to 20 years! All for a job! But how much preparation do people give to marriage? Most of their preparation is for the ceremony, and zero for the marriage itself. Some people balk at the two sessions I require before I will perform a wedding!

Bottom line is this: Work on a marriage is very rewarding work! It leads to developing true love. I've met couples who've been married for 60 years plus and while I'm sure they would tell you they were in love when they got married, the depth of true love that those couples have after that many years is so deep, powerful and oh so strong! Those couples have reached a level of intimacy that is not simply a physical attraction thing and didn't just happen, it was developed and nurtured!! It's a "I love everything about you" kind of attitude. And they've learned that it's the little things that many times make the difference. I encourage couples to take the time each and every day to let the other person know you love them and are thinking about them. I believe with all of my heart the reason Jesus put so much emphasis on commitment in marriage is because when two people are truly committed to build a strong, healthy and beautiful marriage, they can, with His help, create a human relationship that can mirror the relationship God desires to have with His Bride the Church! Listen to Paul's words in Ephesians 5...

Ephesians 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her

Ephesians 5:26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, Ephesians 5:27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

Ephesians 5:28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

God compares His relationship with the church to marriage! And aren't you glad that God didn't say "Husbands love your wife if she is perfect!" He actually said to love your wife as Christ loved the church! The church is not a building, it's people, you and me. Aren't you glad God loves us even though we are not perfect? You see, God is always faithful in his commitment to you and me once we accept Him as our Savior, and become members of the body of Christ! We, on the other hand, are not always faithful in our walk with God. And sometimes, a person may want out of their commitment they made to God. You may ask him for a divorce, but he won't sign the papers! You can separate yourself from him when it comes to fellowship, and reject his desire to be Lord of your life, because He won't force His love or fellowship on you, but once you accept Jesus as your Savior, He will never forsake you, He will not leave you, and He will be with you even to the end of the age! He is faithful even when we are not!

And remember this: divorce is not the unpardonable sin! Murder in the heart or adultery in the heart, or even the actual physical acts are not the unpardonable sin! Rejection of The Holy Spirit, refusing to accept the grace and forgiveness offered by Jesus, and then drawing your last breath is the ultimate sin! If you are alive and breathing and have any desire to know Jesus and have His mercy then it's not too late for you! And regardless of your past mistakes there is forgiveness in Jesus!!! Satan wants you to live in guilt, shame and regret, but God wants you to live in His forgiveness, His righteousness, His Freedom, His peace and to have His power to overcome the sin of unfaithfulness! Whether in your relationship with Him or in your marriage relationship! By the way, the Bible says God hates divorce not divorcees.

Jesus' Point: God Hates Divorce and for good reasons?

I believe Jesus was trying to remind His disciples and those who had gathered around to listen to His message that regardless of the loopholes the religious leaders had created, God had made it clear in Holy Scripture that God hates Divorce. Back in the Old Testament book of Malachi we read this...

Mal 2:15 Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.

Mal 2:16 "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel,

Why does God hate divorce?

Divorce has consequences!

Gary R. Collins, speaking of God's dislike of divorce, stated this...

"He's not alone. Hundreds of thousands of former husbands and wives hate divorce, and so do scared kids whose parents have separated, grown-up children who still bear the scars of family breakups, grandparents who smiled proudly at the wedding of their offspring then watched with agony as those once-happy marriages disintegrated in anger, distrust, and sometimes hatred."

I've never had anyone who has experienced divorce tell me divorce was fun, painless, and without consequence. Notice again that the verse said...God hates divorce, not the divorcee! He certainly may not be pleased with the actions or decisions of one or both parties involved, but make no mistake about it, He loves them none-the-less. Listen to what He says a few verses later in Malachi . . .

Mal 3:7 Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty.

That's love! God was willing to forgive those who had been unfaithful to their covenant with Him! But that doesn't mean that it didn't matter that the people had done what they had done! It did! There were tough consequences for the people of God when they were unfaithful to Him. And the same goes for unfaithfulness in the marriage covenant! Just because God is a loving and a forgiving God doesn't give us the green light to sin and just ask for forgiveness later. Consequences in this life must be considered. And if your attitude is one that says "I'll just do this and ask forgiveness later" you may be on thin ice. Why? Because forgiveness follows true repentance. True repentance is accompanied with Godly sorrow and turning away from sin! If you are playing games with God, He knows! Paul gave this wisdom to the Church at Corinth...

2 Corinthians 7:10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

2 Corinthians 7:11 See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done.

Why does God hate divorce?

Because divorce hurts everyone involved and God hates for people to get hurt!

When people ask me to perform their marriage, I ask them if they've been married before. If they have, I ask them what happened. Why do I do that? Because I want to help them in the pre-marriage counseling to figure out how not to repeat the same mistake all over again and get hurt again! And I ask them if there is a spouse still wanting to reconcile their previous marriage. If there is, then I respectfully decline to do the wedding. I don't want to be the one responsible for closing the door to the spouse who wants to reconcile. If there's no hope of reconciliation then I work with the couple to make sure they are committed to make this marriage one that honors God and will last the rest of their lives. I then counsel them to find ways to grow their marriage so strong that it will minimize the chance of divorce ever happening again.

Now if you're single you might think none of this applies to you. Let me say this to you. If you are thinking you might get married someday, this message applies to you in this way: You should commit yourself to becoming the kind of person that would make a great husband or wife. And the best way to do that is to grow in your relationship with Christ. Also, you should be committed

to the concept of marriage by living a lifestyle that honors the sanctity of marriage even before you get married. Living in purity! Why? Because the things you do when you are single will affect your future marriage. Like it or not you will bring those things into your marriage. Past behaviors can be forgiven but still have an effect on future relationships. Not that they cannot be overcome, they can, but it's not easy and most people would take a redo on past behaviors if they could. You can learn from past mistakes, but some mistakes do leave scars. Keeping Jesus number one in your life as a single person will prepare you to have the right priorities when you do get married! And let me say this, the right priorities in marriage would be for Jesus to still be the number one priority in your life. What does that look like in marriage? Let me put it this way: my wife doesn't want to be the most important person in my life! She wants Jesus to be in that position, because as long as He is number one, she knows she'll always be next in line, second only to Jesus. She knows that Jesus will tell me that she should always come right after Him and be a priority over everything else! And I want Jesus to be her number one for the exact same reason! I believe the following would be a good priority list for all of us...

God

Spouse

Children

Others

Job

Hobbies

Now I want to ask you one last question...

If it's not God's will for divorce, why does it happen? Somebody's got a hard heart!

Mark 10:2 Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

Mark 10:3 "What did Moses command you?" he replied.

Mark 10:4 They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."

Mark 10:5 "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied.

The truth is when divorce happens, one or both have allowed their hearts to become hardened. Somewhere along the line, one or both decided (consciously or not) to neglect the marriage relationship. Other things became a priority. How many husbands or wives do we have who are married to their jobs? What are you working for anyway? Is it really for your family? Some sacrifice their marriage and their children on the altar of busyness. Some on the altar of success. Some on the altar of pleasure and addiction! And some on the altar of unforgiveness! Let me say this: If you have been divorced, you are not a second class citizen in the kingdom of God and I'm sure you would have some pretty good advice for those who are considering divorce. I realize that some of you didn't want divorce but the other person had made up their mind to leave! Some of you may have had to leave because of abuse, addiction, or habitual, unrepentant unfaithfulness! And there may be someone here who would say, "Pastor Larry, it

was totally or mostly my fault!" Well I want to remind you that God's Word says very clearly that...

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

And if you are remarried, ask God to help you take steps to insure that you don't make the same mistake again! So whether you are single, married, divorced, or divorced and remarried, I want to encourage you to ask God to help you understand how important the marriage commitment is and that it really does have an impact on your witness to the world, good or bad. Understand that divorce is not the unforgivable sin, but there are consequences that are extreme so we should pray and ask God to help us avoid divorce if at all possible, and if not, to remember that God will never leave us or forsake us and will walk with us through every circumstance in life! Let me end with this beautiful passage about God's faithfulness to us through the hardest times in life...

Lamentations 3:19 I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall.

Lamentations 3:20 I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.

Lamentations 3:21 Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:

Lamentations 3:22 Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

Lamentations 3:23 They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Lamentations 3:24 I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."

Lamentations 3:25 The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him;

Lamentations 3:26 it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.