The Constitution of the Kingdom

A 33-Session Journey through the Sermon on the Mount & the Sermon on the Plain

SESSION FOURTEEN — Divorce and the Protection of the Vulnerable

Part Three: The Greater Righteousness · Texts: Matthew 5:31–32; Luke 16:18

The Texts

> **Matthew 5:31–32** *It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery…*
>
> **Luke 16:18** *Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.*

The Hardest One Yet, and How It Has Been Used

We come now to a teaching that has been used, more than almost any other in the Sermon, as a bludgeon. These few verses about divorce have been wielded to shame people who had already been through the worst season of their lives, to bar them from the table and from ministry, and — worst of all — to trap people, especially women, inside marriages that were destroying them, by telling them that to leave would be to sin.

So before we read a single word, I want to be honest about that, and I want to say plainly: that is not what we are going to do here, and I do not believe it is what Jesus was doing either. Because when you understand the world he actually said these words in, you discover something that will surprise you — what sounds to our ears like a harsh rule against divorce was heard, in its own time, as good news: a shield raised over the defenseless. It is long past time we heard it that way again.[1]

Let's search the Scriptures together — gently, and with our eyes open.

A Word Before We Begin — for the Wounded

And a word, first, for some of you — because in a room this size, many of us have walked through the grief of a divorce, or we love someone who has. Hear this before anything else: this passage has too often been turned into a verdict on your worth, and that is a lie. Whatever else this session holds, it is not a judgment on your place at this table or in the heart of God. You are fully welcome and fully beloved. Stay with me — because the word Jesus actually spoke is far more merciful than the one many of us were handed.

The World Jesus Spoke Into

[1] Unless noted, Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVue), the base translation for this course. Parallels appear at Luke 16:18 and Mark 10:11–12, with the fuller, creation-grounded teaching at Matthew 19 / Mark 10. The "certificate" in view is Deuteronomy 24:1–4.

To hear this rightly, you have to know the world it was said in. In Jesus' day, divorce was almost entirely a man's power. A husband could divorce his wife; a wife, in most cases, could not divorce her husband. And the great debate of the day — between the rabbinic schools of Shammai and Hillel — was not whether a man could divorce, but on what grounds. The school of Shammai said: only for something grave, some serious breach. But the school of Hillel had grown far more permissive — a man could divorce his wife, they taught, for almost any reason at all. If she burned his dinner. If she spoke too loudly. Some said: if he simply found a woman he liked better.[2]

Now put yourself in that world and feel the weight of it. Under that loose reading, a man could hand his wife a slip of paper and be rid of her on a whim — and a discarded woman was often left with nothing. No income. No standing. Shamed in the eyes of her community, cut off from support, sometimes driven to desperate measures just to survive. That is the world into which Jesus speaks these words.

Not a Snare, but a Shield

So hear what Jesus is actually doing, because it is nearly the opposite of how we have been taught to hear it. He is not tightening a snare around unhappy couples. He is raising a shield over the vulnerable. By refusing the easy, casual, male prerogative of divorce-on-a-whim, Jesus is saying, with all his authority: a wife is not disposable. You do not get to discard a human being because you have tired of her. The certificate of divorce he mentions comes from the Law itself, from Deuteronomy — and there it had begun as a kind of protection: it at least formally freed the woman, kept a man from simply throwing her out with nothing. But over the centuries that protection had curdled into a tool of male convenience, a rubber stamp on a man's change of heart. And Jesus drives the whole question back past the certificate to God's original intent — that persons are not things to be used up and thrown away.[3]

Do you hear the echo of last session? It is the very same conviction. A human being is never a thing. Divorce-on-a-whim is simply the marital form of treating a person as disposable — and Jesus will not have it.

Marriage as Covenant

Underneath the protection is a vision. In the fuller version of this teaching, Jesus reaches back to the beginning — "the two shall become one flesh" — and grounds marriage not in contract but in covenant. A contract is a deal you keep while it serves you; a covenant is a binding of two

[2]In first-century Judaism divorce was chiefly a male prerogative, and the rabbinic debate between the schools of Shammai and Hillel concerned its grounds: Shammai permitted it only for grave cause, Hillel for almost any displeasure ("even if she spoiled a dish"). Under the lax reading a wife could be discarded at a husband's whim, often left destitute and shamed. See Amy-Jill Levine on the social vulnerability of divorced women, and Davies & Allison and R. T. France on Matthew 5:31–32.

[3]The certificate of divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1) functioned originally as a limited protection for the woman, formally freeing her. Jesus drives the question back past the certificate to God's intent in creation — "the two shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24; cited at Matthew 19:5) — marriage as covenant rather than a contract of male convenience: persons are not disposable.

lives, meant for permanence, in which each is committed to the other's flourishing rather than to their own convenience. That is what marriage is meant to be in the Kingdom.

Which means divorce, when it comes, is a genuine grief — the tearing of something that was truly joined. Notice: Jesus does not shrug at divorce. He takes it with great seriousness — not to condemn the people in it, but because he takes persons, and covenants, and the wounds of a torn life seriously. To grieve a divorce is not weakness; it is honesty about the weight of what was broken.

The Exception, and the Danger of Rulebooks

You will notice Matthew includes an exception — "except on the ground of unchastity" — while Luke and Mark state it more absolutely. Interpreters have argued about that difference for two thousand years, and we are not going to settle it at this table tonight. But we must not miss the thing that matters most: Jesus is not sitting down to write an exhaustive legal code for every marital situation that will ever arise. He is making a prophetic protest against the casual discarding of persons.[4]

And here is the trap we have to avoid. If we take his protective, prophetic word and grind it into a rigid rulebook — parsing exactly which grounds "count," ruling this person in and that person out, standing at the door of the Kingdom with a clipboard — then we have committed the very error he spent this whole Sermon resisting. We have turned the heart of the law back into cold legalism. We have taken a shield made for the vulnerable and beaten the vulnerable with it.

When Ending Is the Faithful Thing

And that brings us to the hardest, most important thing I have to say, and I want to say it as clearly as I possibly can. Because the entire purpose of this teaching was to protect the vulnerable, we betray it — completely — the moment we use it to trap the vulnerable. Hear this plainly. When a marriage has become a place of harm — where there is abuse, violence, the steady crushing of a human being — the covenant has already been broken, and it has been broken by the one doing the harm, not by the one who leaves in order to survive. In that case, ending the marriage is not the sin. It may be the most faithful, most protective, most life-preserving thing a person can do. Jesus never came to keep anyone in danger. A word he spoke to defend the vulnerable must never, ever be twisted into a chain that holds them in harm. If you are in such a place tonight, or you love someone who is, hear the Kingdom's word over every misused verse: your safety and your life matter to God more than anyone's abuse of Scripture.[5]

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[4]Matthew includes an exception clause, "except on the ground of unchastity" (porneia; 5:32; 19:9), which Mark and Luke lack; its interpretation has been debated for centuries. Jesus offers a prophetic protest against the casual discarding of persons, not an exhaustive legal code; reducing it to a rulebook for adjudicating who may divorce reinstates the very legalism the Sermon resists.

[5]Because the teaching was given to protect the vulnerable, using it to trap the vulnerable inverts its purpose. Where a marriage has become a site of abuse or violence, the covenant has already been broken by the abuser; ending it can be the faithful, life-preserving course. Scripture never requires anyone to remain in harm; safety and life are goods God defends.

Grace for the Divorced

And for everyone who has already walked the long, hard road of a divorce — hear the gospel now, and hear it clearly. Divorce is not the unforgivable sin. It does not disqualify you from the Kingdom, from ministry, from the table, or from the tender regard of God. Whatever you carry out of it — grief, guilt, relief, or the shame that other people laid on you — you are fully beloved and fully here. God was never far from you in it, and God is not finished with you now. The same Jesus who stood between a discarded woman and a world that would throw her away stands with you. Come to the table. There is room for you in the current.

Freedom for Others

Put it to our thread, and it turns out to be the whole heart of the passage — because this teaching simply is freedom for others: the refusal to treat a person as disposable for the sake of my own convenience. The greater righteousness here is a love that does not discard. So ask with me: where am I tempted to treat people as disposable — in marriage, yes, but also in friendship, in this community, in every relationship I could walk away from the moment it costs me something? And how do we become a people who neither throw others away nor trap them in harm — who hold faithfulness and protection together, the way Jesus did? *Freedom for others may cost us the convenience of walking away, and the smug comfort of a rule we can use to judge — what can we lay down?*

Around the Table — For Discussion

- This teaching has been used to shame and to trap people. What changes when you learn that Jesus spoke it to protect the vulnerable, not to snare them?
- In Jesus' world, a man could discard his wife on a whim and leave her destitute. How does knowing that context change what you hear in these verses?
- Marriage as covenant, not contract — a binding to the other's good rather than your own convenience. Where do you see relationships today treated as disposable contracts?
- We said a word meant to protect the vulnerable must never be used to trap them in harm. Why is that distinction so important — and where have you seen it ignored?
- Freedom for others may cost us something. Where are you tempted to treat a person as disposable — and what would covenant faithfulness ask of you instead?

This Week — A Practice

Two movements, and both in the spirit of grace, not judgment. First, look for the disposable. Find one relationship you have quietly kept "disposable" — someone you are ready to walk away from the moment they become inconvenient or costly — and practice covenant faithfulness toward them this week: show up, stay, honor them as someone not to be thrown away. Second, be a place of grace. If you carry shame about a divorce — your own or a loved one's — receive the grace Jesus actually offers, and refuse the shame others handed you. And if you know someone the church has shamed or tried to trap, be for them a small, sturdy piece

of the Kingdom's mercy this week. Then bring back what you found. This Kingdom, like all the rest, is learned in the doing.

Looking Ahead

Next session, the fourth contrast, and a gentler one after these two hard roads: "you have heard 'you shall not swear falsely' — but I say to you, do not swear at all… let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no.'" We'll ask what it means to be a person so simply truthful that you never need to swear an oath — because your plain word is already good.

Benediction

So go this week and refuse to throw people away. Hold your covenants — in marriage and in friendship and in this community — as bindings to another's good and not deals of your own convenience. Never use a word of Scripture to trap someone God means to protect. And if you are carrying the wound of a marriage that ended, hear it one more time: you are beloved, you are welcome, and God is not done with you. Blessed are those who will not treat a person as disposable, for they are guarding, in every relationship, the sacred worth Jesus came to defend.

Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.

Blessings,
Pastor Mick Finch

SESSION FOURTEEN

Introduction Video Script

Single presenter, to camera · target 5–6 minutes · warm, steady, unhurried

[Begin still. Gentle, honest.]

Welcome back to the table. We come today to a teaching that's been used, more than almost any other in the Sermon, as a bludgeon. These few verses about divorce have been used to shame people who've already been through the worst season of their lives, to bar them from the table, and — worst of all — to trap people, especially women, inside marriages that were destroying them, by telling them that to leave would be to sin.

So before we read a word, I want to be honest about that. And I want to say plainly: that is not what we're going to do here, and I don't believe it's what Jesus was doing either. Because when you understand the world he actually said these words in, something surprising happens — what sounds to us like a harsh rule against divorce was heard, in its own time, as good news. A shield raised over the defenseless. And it's long past time we heard it that way again.

[For the wounded.]

And a word first, for some of you — because in a room this size, a lot of us have walked through the grief of a divorce, or we love someone who has. Hear this before anything else: this passage has too often been turned into a verdict on your worth, and that's a lie. Whatever else today holds, it is not a judgment on your place at this table or in the heart of God. You are fully welcome and fully beloved. Stay with me — because the word Jesus actually spoke is far more merciful than the one a lot of us were handed.

[The world.]

To hear this right, you have to know the world it was said in. In Jesus' day, divorce was almost entirely a man's power. A husband could divorce his wife; a wife usually couldn't divorce her husband. And the big debate of the day — between the schools of Shammai and Hillel — wasn't whether a man could divorce, but on what grounds. Shammai said only for something serious. But Hillel had grown very permissive — a man could divorce his wife for almost any reason. If she burned dinner. If he found someone he liked better.

Now feel the weight of that. Under that loose reading, a man could hand his wife a slip of paper and be rid of her on a whim — and a discarded woman was often left with nothing. No income, no standing, shamed, cut off, sometimes driven to desperate measures just to survive. That's the world Jesus speaks into.

[Shield, not snare.]

So hear what he's actually doing — it's nearly the opposite of how we've been taught. He's not tightening a snare around unhappy couples. He's raising a shield over the vulnerable. By refusing that easy, casual, male power of divorce-on-a-whim, Jesus says, with all his authority: a wife is not disposable. You don't get to discard a human being because you've tired of her. That certificate of divorce comes from the Law, from Deuteronomy — and there it started as a protection, something that at least freed the woman. But over time it had curdled into a rubber stamp on a man's change of heart. And Jesus drives the whole thing back to God's original intent: persons are not things to be used up and thrown away. You hear the

echo of last week — a human being is never a thing. Divorce-on-a-whim is just the marital version of treating a person as disposable. And Jesus won't have it.

[Covenant.]

Underneath the protection is a vision. Jesus reaches back to the beginning — "the two shall become one flesh" — and grounds marriage in covenant, not contract. A contract is a deal you keep while it serves you. A covenant is a binding of two lives, meant for permanence, where each is committed to the other's flourishing instead of their own convenience. Which means divorce, when it comes, is a real grief — the tearing of something truly joined. Notice — Jesus doesn't shrug at divorce. He takes it seriously. Not to condemn the people in it, but because he takes persons and covenants and torn lives seriously.

[The exception, and the trap.]

Now, Matthew includes an exception — "except for unchastity" — and Luke and Mark state it more absolutely, and people have argued about that for two thousand years. We won't settle it tonight. But don't miss the main thing: Jesus isn't writing an exhaustive legal code for every marriage that will ever exist. He's making a prophetic protest against the casual discarding of persons. And here's the trap we have to avoid: if we grind his protective word into a rigid rulebook — parsing which grounds count, ruling people in and out, standing at the Kingdom's door with a clipboard — we've committed the very error he spent the whole Sermon resisting. We've taken a shield made for the vulnerable and used it to beat them.

[When ending is faithful — clear and firm.]

And that brings me to the most important thing I have to say, and I'll say it as clearly as I can. Because the whole point of this teaching was to protect the vulnerable, we betray it completely the moment we use it to trap the vulnerable. Hear this plainly: when a marriage has become a place of harm — abuse, violence, the steady crushing of a person — the covenant has already been broken, and broken by the one doing the harm, not by the one who leaves to survive. In that case, ending the marriage is not the sin. It may be the most faithful, most life-preserving thing a person can do. Jesus never came to keep anyone in danger. A word he spoke to defend the vulnerable must never be twisted into a chain that holds them in harm. If that's you tonight, or someone you love, hear the Kingdom's word over every misused verse: your safety and your life matter to God more than anyone's abuse of Scripture.

[Grace.]

And for everyone who's already walked that hard road — hear the gospel. Divorce is not the unforgivable sin. It doesn't disqualify you from the Kingdom, from the table, from the tender regard of God. Whatever you carry — grief, guilt, relief, shame others laid on you — you are fully beloved and fully here. The same Jesus who stood between a discarded woman and a world that would throw her away stands with you now. Come to the table. There's room for you in the current.

[The thread and practice.]

So here's our question this week — freedom for others: where am I tempted to treat people as disposable — in marriage, yes, but also in friendship, in community, in every relationship I could walk away from the second it costs me something?

Two things to practice, both in grace, not judgment. First, look for the disposable — find one relationship you've quietly kept ready to discard, and practice covenant faithfulness toward that person this week: show up, stay, honor them as someone not to be thrown away. Second, be a place of grace — if you carry shame about a divorce, receive the grace Jesus actually offers and refuse the shame others handed you; and if you know someone the church has shamed or tried to trap, be a small, sturdy piece of the Kingdom's mercy for them.

Next time, a gentler one after these two hard roads — oaths. "Let your yes be yes and your no be no." What it means to be a person so simply truthful you never need to swear at all.

[Slow. Land it — tender.]

For now, go and refuse to throw people away. Hold your covenants as bindings to another's good, not deals of your own convenience. Never use a verse to trap someone God means to protect. And if you're carrying the wound of a marriage that ended, hear it once more: you are beloved, you are welcome, and God is not done with you.

Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.

Let's search the Scriptures together.

Blessings, Pastor Mick Finch.