

February 13-17, 2023 Edition

The Year_(s) Of ^{Following} Jesus Part 59

Jesus On Divorce- You Might Be Surprised

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' 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. Matthew 5:31-32 (NIV)

Reflection: Last time we looked into the Sermon On The Mount we focused on lust & adultery... this week we're looking at divorce. Wow... what a fun couple of weeks this has been, huh? Maybe you're wondering why we're even talking about this stuff... well I made a deal with Jesus back when I first started preaching.

I watched as preachers sometimes used their pulpit to "preach at" individual people and topics. Now I'm not saying they were wrong... but I just didn't feel like that was what Jesus was asking me to do. So I promised never to use my sermons to attack (or address which is what I imagine most preachers who do this consider it) specific people or circumstances that arose during my week. But I also promised to never shy away from talking about something that was came along in the course of a lesson series just because an event from the prior week would make that uncomfortable.

So during this series on the sermon on the mount I have had to preach on lust, adultery & divorce because Jesus deals with it. But what was He saying? Well now, that may surprise you. We'll get to Jesus' views on divorce in the coming days but for today I want you to ask yourself if you listen to the gentle guiding voice of Jesus? Do you ask Him for wisdom in the things you do and the decisions you have to make? James (Jesus' brother) said this in James chapter 1:

If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought.

If you don't have wisdom... ask for it. Then the Bible says, if we follow through and do the wise thing we get even more wisdom. If we don't do the wise thing, the opposite happens and wisdom will always seem just out of reach.

So today let's just ask God for help with direction in our lives and the decisions we make. Maybe it will revolve around the topic of divorce and maybe it won't... but either way, when you hear from God do what He says.

Prayer: Father, give me wisdom in the areas of my life where I am making decisions. And then give me the wisdom and courage to actually do the wise thing. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Tuesday:

Suppose a woman was divorced by her... husband because he found something disgraceful about her. He wrote out divorce papers, gave them to her, and sent her away. Deuteronomy 24:1 (CEV)

If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights. If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money. Exodus 21:10-11 (NIV)

Reflection: Divorce is such a messy subject. I mean, forget about the mess that is brought on by the subject itself in the lives that it destroys. Add to that the mess that well meaning (I have to believe they are well meaning even with the enormous amount of pain and guilt they cause) religious people who think they speak for God add to this painful subject. It is true, the church often shoots its own wounded.

In order to understand what God thinks of divorce I think we need to look at divorce in ancient Israel under the law of Moses. Above you read the two most important texts in the Old Testament when it comes to divorce. From these 2 scriptures the Jews were allowed 3 grounds for divorce: unfaithfulness, abuse & neglect.

Now divorce was never part of God's plan for marriage. I don't think it's ever the plan either for a man or woman as they walk down the aisle and make their holy promises to each other and to God. So why did God allow divorce in ancient Israel?

God knew what I'm sure you've noticed in your own life. People are FAR from perfect. We often let selfishness and our own motives or agendas get in the way of what's right... even when that selfishness/agenda/motives cause us to break our vows. God knew that it takes two to tango and even if one spouse did everything right (which isn't possible) if their spouse was hellbent on being unfaithful, abusive or neglectful then the marriage would become toxic and destructive. So He made provisions that would make it possible for divorce to occur whenever one of these three "grounds" were found.

Now as brutal as Moses' law may seem to some people... it was actually a HUGE step forward in justice... especially for women. Under the Hammurabi code (which was the ONLY law code in the ancient world at the time Moses wrote out the legal code for Israel) women were stuck most of the time. A woman couldn't divorce her husband for any reason, but a man could divorce his wife for no reason at all. And at any point in her lifetime if he chose to return she was married again. Even if she had remarried. That meant nobody would remarry a woman whose first husband was still alive because everyone knew the first husband could come around at any time and "claim his property".

Moses comes along and makes it possible for women to divorce their husbands if their husband was unfaithful or if he broke his vow to provide and protect her through neglect or abuse. If a woman could prove one of these three things then both she and her husband were given a "certificate" of divorce. Basically it said you are now free to marry anyone you choose... you were free from the marriage.

In reality Moses' law and the certificate that he ordered must be a part of any divorce was to protect the woman who in the ancient world would have been out of luck without that certificate. That's the way that God's people handled divorce up until just before Jesus was born. What happened then you ask? Check back in tomorrow and you'll find out. For today spend some time thinking about the vows of marriage that were important to God (whether you're married or not), the vow to be faithful, to protect and provide. How are you doing at living up to those vows with the people you are closest to?

Prayer: Father, teach me what it means to be faithful, to provide for and protect the people who are close to me. Sometimes I get so caught up in what I want/need that I forget to think about others. Today I want to see other people's needs just as clearly as I see my own. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Wednesday:

Suppose a woman was divorced by her... husband because he found something disgraceful about her. Deuteronomy 24:1 (CEV)

Reflection: In ancient Israel there were 3 grounds for a person to get a divorce: unfaithfulness, neglect or abuse. This is the way it was for 3,500 years. But then about 30 years before Jesus was born something new happened.

Rabbis loved the Bible. They loved every word. They would analyze and talk about each word. There was a Rabbi about 30 years before Jesus was born named Rabbi Hillel. He looked at that passage we just read from Deuteronomy 24 and in the Hebrew what it literally says is, if a woman is divorced by her husband because of "a cause of unfaithfulness". For 3,500 years everyone (including the guy who wrote the law) took that to mean one thing... unfaithfulness. But Rabbi Hillel looked at that and wondered why Moses threw in that little phrase, "a cause". Why didn't he just say unfaithfulness? There must be a reason, reasoned Rabbi Hillel.

He came to the conclusion that Moses meant there were two reasons in Deuteronomy 24 that would allow for divorce. Unfaithfulness of course was one but the second that he had found was, any reason at all. So you had a new reason (which in reality was an infinite number of new reasons) for grounds for divorce.

Now Rabbi Hillel was a man. All the Rabbis in his school were men. They decided that this new kind of divorce was only available to one gender. Want to guess which gender that was? Ding ding ding ding... survey says... MEN!

The only problem with this kind of divorce was that it was expensive for the man. If he could prove unfaithfulness or neglect or abuse then he didn't have to give his divorced wife any money. But with this new kind of divorce, although it was easy to get and you didn't have to prove anything the man did have to give the woman the marriage dowry back. Even so by the time Jesus comes along 30 years later it was the most common kind of divorce in all of Israel.

Now you may think you've never heard of this kind of divorce... but if you've spent much time in church I'm thinking you actually have... even if you don't know that you know of it. Because there's one time in the New Testament where someone pretty famous considers this kind of divorce.

When Mary (the mother of Jesus) finds out she's pregnant Joseph doesn't believe her until the angel comes to him and convinces him that Mary didn't cheat on him. But until that happened the Bible says this:

Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. Matthew 1:9 (NIV)

That phrase, "divorce her quietly" was a technical term in Israel that meant Joseph was going to get an "any cause divorce". Which was actually quite noble of him since he literally could have proven unfaithfulness and not had to give Mary a cent.

By the time Jesus grows up and starts His ministry this argument has become a **HUGE** deal in Israel. Every question answered or statement made by Jesus about marriage would have had this concept as a backdrop... so I'm thinking that every statement He made or question He answered about divorce has to be looked at in light of the whole "any cause divorce" controversy. We'll talk more about that tomorrow... but for today, let's think about areas where we use God's words to further our own agendas. If we're not careful we'll use God's words as a club to hurt others or as a crutch to allow us to do whatever we want using the Bible to justify our selfish actions.

Prayer: Father, I want to live my life the way You've designed me to live it. I want to use Your words to be a blessing to others and to bring blessings into my own life. Show me where I'm falling short in that goal. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Thursday

Some Pharisees came and tried to trap him with this question: "Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife for just any reason?" Matthew 19:10 (NLT)

Let no one split apart what God has joined together. Matthew 19:6 (NLT)

Then why did Moses say in the law that a man could give his wife a written notice of divorce and send her away? Matthew 19:7 (NLT)

Jesus replied, "Moses permitted divorce only as a concession to your hard hearts, but it was not what God had originally intended. And I tell you this, whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery- unless his wife has been unfaithful. Matthew 19:8-9 (NLT)

Reflection: Yesterday we talked about Rabbi Hillel and his interpretation of the classic scriptures/texts in the Old Testament on divorce. Today we're going to talk about 2 other Rabbis who disagreed with him.

When Rabbi Hillel introduced "any cause divorces" about 30 years before Jesus' birth there was another famous Rabbi, Rabbi Shammai who disagreed. He said that Rabbi Hillel's interpretation of those texts was flawed and that there was no such thing in the Bible as a "any cause" divorce. It all revolved around this one passage of scripture from Deuteronomy 24. After that everyone split into two camps... you were either a Hillel or Shammai follower when it comes to divorce. And everyone wanted to know who you followed.

Alright... so one day a religious leader comes to Jesus and asks Him this question:

Some Pharisees came and tried to trap him with this question: "Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife for just any reason?" Matthew 19:10 (NLT)

I don't know about you but it seems to me that this guy is asking a very specific question... are you a Rabbi Hillel guy or a Rabbi Shammai guy? Do you buy into "any

cause divorce" or not? You can read the whole exchange... Jesus basically says that there's only one reason to get divorced which is for unfaithfulness. But is that what He's really saying? In other words, is Jesus now saying that the abuse and neglect grounds that the law of Moses allowed are now no longer allowed?

I don't think so (just to be clear there are a lot of people WAY smarter than me who disagree... but that's never stopped me before so why should I let that stop me now?). There is no way a religious expert on the law of Moses would ask Jesus if it were legal to follow the law. I don't think Jesus is striking down the two grounds of divorce from Exodus 21 (abuse and neglect)... I think He was having a discussion about Deuteronomy 24 and only Deuteronomy 24. Is "any cause divorce" something that God meant to include?

If that's what's going on here, Jesus says, "nope".

He's siding with Rabbai Shammai. He's saying in this case... in Deuteronomy 24 there is only 1 grounds for divorce- unfaithfulness. And to go further He says, anyone who obtains this kind of divorce is straight out wrong. But He NEVER says (again... in my opinion) that the other two grounds of abuse and neglect are now off the table. In fact... later on in the first century the apostle Paul would write to the church in Corinth and say this:

But if the husband or wife who isn't a believer insists on leaving, let them go. In such cases the Christian husband or wife is no longer bound to the other. 1 Corinthians 7:15 (NCV)

Paul is basically saying that the Christians in Corinth can get a divorce in this instance for the grounds of neglect. Now I don't think Paul is saying that he disagrees with Jesus. Paul would NEVER disagree with Jesus. Paul just never seems to consider that Jesus' words about "any cause divorce" have anything to do with the other grounds for divorce that God's people had been following for 3,500 years.

So what does that mean for me? For you? What does this mean for those who have been hurt by the pain of divorce? What if you were the cause? What if you weren't? What if you got a divorce in the past for "any cause" and now you're wondering how God feels about you? We'll focus on that tomorrow (although I will tell you I believe the answer is very good news).

Prayer: Father, forgive me for the times I've judged myself or others. Rescue me from the dangers that are involved in forcing my way of looking at things on others. In Jesus Name, amen.

Friday:

I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her (unfaithfulness). Jeremiah 3:8 (NIV)

And I will give you a new heart with new and right desires, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony heart of sin and give you a new, obedient heart.
Ezekiel 36:26 (NLT)

Reflection: So what does all of this mean for those who have been crushed by the pain of divorce in their lives? If you've spent much time in some kinds of churches (like the one I grew up in where well meaning people ended up hurting those who were already crushed by the pain, guilt, regret and shame that go along with divorce) you've probably heard the verse from Malachi 2:

"For I hate divorce!" says the LORD, the God of Israel. "To divorce your wife is to overwhelm her with cruelty," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. "So guard your heart, do not be unfaithful to your wife." Malachi 2:6 (NLT)

I don't disagree. God HATES divorce. And do you know why? Well, obviously there's all the pain and suffering it brings in this world. But there's also this little talked about fact from Jeremiah 3:8 that we read above:

God is a divorcee.

God knows all about the pain of unfaithfulness. He knows all about the shame of having someone walk out on Him when all He's done is love us and care for us. He knows all about the abuse that can be heaped on someone when all He's done is love us.

When you look at it from this perspective... all of us have gone through divorce. Sometimes Christians who have never been through a divorce can look down with arrogance and judgment at those who have. But God says that we've all been unfaithful. We've all neglected and abused our covenant with Him. We are, all of us, divorcees in the strictest sense when it comes to our spiritual relationship with God.

But God wants to heal us. He wants to forgive us. There is no pain He cannot heal and there is no sin He cannot forgive. Maybe your problem is the pain and shame that goes along with divorce. Maybe you need God's forgiveness or healing or both in your life.

Maybe your problem is that even though you've never had to suffer through the betrayal and shame of a divorce you are guilty of creating a class of second class Christians that you look down on and increase the shame and regret of those who need your love and forgiveness more than you can know.

No matter what the reason... God will give you a new heart and a new future. You just have to ask.

Prayer: Father, remove my stony heart of sin. Replace it with a soft heart that hurts when You hurt. Make me more like You. In Jesus' Name, amen.