

2008-10-25

Matthew 5:31, 32 *Divorce*

Jerry Arnold

We are going to have a word of prayer. "Loving Father in Heaven, we come to You now seeking Your help. For we have all read and understood that Your Word is holy. We are about to open Your Word, and who are we to try to understand this sacred text without Your help? So we pray Heavenly Father for You to teach us. We plead with You, please direct us in our thoughts, direct us in our emotions, direct us in every way. And we pray that we will truly have an experience with You today that changes us forever. And we pray this in Jesus' name, Amen."

Please be seated. Our second child is named Jeremy and he was just a baby when this story took place. He was a baby in my wife's arms, and then we had Hannah who was older. And she was a little toddler who would often be in arms with mother as well, sometimes both of them at the same time. And Karen began to get a growth on her wrist, on her left wrist. It kept getting larger and larger until it stuck up at least a half inch and it was probably about the size of a quarter at its base. And it just made this mound right there. It didn't hurt unless she bumped it into something or pressed it with her finger. But we knew something was there. It hadn't been there before and it didn't look right, and so we decided we needed to take her to the doctor.

So we took her to the doctor and the doctor diagnosed it as a ganglion cyst. And then he said that the way they'll take care of it, is that they would perform surgery, they would remove it. Her arm and hand would be heavily bandaged. She would have to have some type of therapy afterwards, long and short of it, it would be six month process. Six months in which she would not be able to use her left arm to pick up the children or to do normal things that she would need to do as a mother. Well, we were concerned about that. In fact, we were concerned on several levels: one, the amount of time; another, the extensiveness of it, the length of it, and just to be honest with you, the cost of it. Could we afford it?

So we kind of looked at the doctor and said, "Well is there any other way?" And the doctor said, "Well, you know, a hundred years ago they used to take care of them by slamming the wrist with a heavy book." Ah, hey, we've got books at home. We had more books than we had money, and time. So we went home. And I don't know if you've ever seen an Adventist Bible Commentary? There are about three inches wide, eight and a half by eleven, and they are pretty heavy. So we setup a system, tried to make it as painless and effective as possible at the same time. So we laid a book down on the dining room table, and Karen laid her hand or wrist over that book. Then we placed another book on top of it so it was balanced there. Then I took a rather large Commentary, and with two hands, I said, "Don't look," came down with a pretty strong force with both arms. Wham! When we were done, we pulled the books off, and lo and behold, the cyst was gone and it never came back again. It was gone!

Now it kind of reminds me of the story that said "If your only solution is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail." So you know, in our medical world I am thinking, maybe there is more use for these commentaries than what we've had? But one thing was interesting. What had been done a hundred years before as a matter of course was a rather simple procedure and it was taken care of. But over time, medical science had complicated that thing until we were looking at thousands of dollars and months of inconvenience to have the same thing done. Do you realize that is very possible that the same principle can take place in studying the Word of God? If we go back to what it meant to the people who first received it, we'll discover that it is pretty clear, pretty straight forward, and it makes sense. But over time, we can take and complicate it so much that not only does it not make sense, but it can become very hurtful, very costly, and take a long time to recover from.

Specifically today, we are going to study the topic of divorce. And I would like for you to turn in your Bibles to Matthew 5 verses 31 and 32. As you know, those of you who are regulars, we have been studying the Sermon on the Mount for some time. And we just keep picking away a couple of verses at the time, seeing what we can learn. And today we've come to the part in Jesus' presentation where He talks about "divorce." In verses 31 and 32, He

says: “Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.”

Now this passage and a couple of others that we are going to look at have caused a lot of pain in people’s lives. There doesn’t seem to be any room for movement. It’s pretty straight forward, except for sexual immorality, you cause a person to commit adultery. Now before we proceed, let’s remind ourselves of some things we have learned. Jesus is speaking in the context of saying, “Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you cannot enter into heaven.” He begins by giving an example. “You have heard of old, thou shall not murder.” And then He talks about being angry with a brother. Then He comes along and He says, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘you shall not commit adultery.’”

Then we studied about adultery. In that passage about adultery, Jesus said, “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off.” We all agreed, after studying it carefully that Jesus did not mean that literally. But He was applying the theology of the scribes and Pharisees in a practical way. If they think that sin is only external, then cut your body parts of that are sinning and you will be okay. Well remember, in the context of this, Jesus is dealing with the teachings, the popular teachings of the scribes and the Pharisees. And so, He is going to talk about divorce in that context. Let’s look at what happens in Matthew 19 verses 1-10, a related passage. “Now it came to pass when Jesus had finished these sayings, *that* He departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there. The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for *just* any reason?”

“And He answered and said to them, ‘Have you not read that He who made *them at the beginning* ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.” “They said to him, ‘Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?’ He said to them, ‘Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.’” “His disciples said to Him, ‘If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry.’”

Look at Mark chapter 10. Mark records the same experience, but he will add a couple of ideas, or couple of words that help feather out a couple of ideas I should say. Mark 10 beginning with verse 1: “Then He...” that’s Jesus, “... arose from there and came to the region of Judea by the other side of the Jordan. And the people gathered to Him again. And as He was accustomed, He taught them again. The Pharisees came and asked him, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ testing Him. And He answered and said to them, ‘What did Moses command you?’ They said, ‘Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her.’ And Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. But from the beginning of the creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh, so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.’”

“And in the house His disciples asked Him again about the same *matter*. So He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.’” Those are the three main passages regarding adultery in the New Testament where Jesus is speaking. And from those three a whole theology has build up. A theology that, to be honest with

you, is narrow in its approach, it is not scriptural in its application, and at the least, it's extremely painful to the people who have been involved in divorce. We are going to seek today to understand what the scriptures mean and what is going on in these passages. Please turn back to Matthew 5 verse 31. Jesus says, "Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'" Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament passage of Deuteronomy chapter 24 verse 1. In fact, let's go there. Let's look at it, Deuteronomy chapter 24 verse 1.

If you are not sure where Deuteronomy is, go all the way to the front of the Bible and go to the right five books, and you'll come to Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is the last book of Moses. In verse 1 Moses wrote this: "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house ..." Then it goes on. The concept is if a man who is married to a woman finds some type of uncleanness in her, the NIV says, "indecent." The other versions have the same thing, "indecent, uncleanness" along those lines. The context is, not that she has committed adultery. Because if she had committed adultery that was a capital crime. That would result in her death. So it's some type of uncleanness that is not adultery. If a man finds his wife doing that, write her a bill of divorce.

It is from that verse that a whole theology has been formed in the Jewish thinking. We will come back to that thought in just a moment. First of all, we have to look at what this passage is about. Note: we did not end verse one with a period. It ends with a comma, it goes on. One of the mistakes we make as readers of the Word of God, is we will read a phrase, or we will read a text, and we will develop a whole theology around it, and take it out of its context. I am going to show you here that the emphasis in Deuteronomy 24 verses 1-4 isn't even about divorce. It's not whether you can; it's not whether you can't. It says if it happens, write a bill of divorce. There is another emphasis that is being emphasized here.

Verse 2, "When she has departed from his house and goes and becomes another man's *wife*, *if* the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, *then* her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance." You see, this is not a study on divorce in this passage; it is the study on re-marriage. It is saying, if a man is displeased with his wife and divorces her, and she goes and marries another man, if he is displeased with her and divorces her, she can't come back to the first one. If the second husband dies, she cannot come back to the first one.

Now, I have no idea what the Bible teaches other places about. I am not here to study that with you today. The point is, Deuteronomy 24 verse 1, the emphasis is not on whether you can or can't divorce. The emphasis in that passage is what to do with the first wife if she comes back. You can't have her, according to the Law of Moses. Now the people in Jesus' day had taken verse 1, and they had created a whole theology around it. Let's look at it. Go to Matthew 19 verse 3. It says this: "The Pharisees also came to Him..." so they come to Jesus "...testing Him." Now that doesn't mean they have a question they really want to know the answer for. That means they have something they are hoping to trap Him in. And let's just be candid here. This story takes place in the region of Herod. Herod, as you know, was the instrument used by his wife, Herodias, to behead John the Baptist.

John the Baptist had said to Herod, "The woman you are with is not your wife; it's unlawful for you to be with her, your divorce was not real..." and all that kind of stuff. It cost John his life. This takes place in the same area. The scribes and the Pharisees know that. They are trying to get Jesus to come down strong either for divorce or against divorce. Because if He comes down against divorce, they are going to come out with Deuteronomy 24 verse 1 that

says but we can get a divorce. If He comes down too lax on it, they are going to say then, "Well John the Baptist was a false prophet." They think they've got Him. They are not interested in really understanding the issue. They are trying to trap Jesus. Verse 3, "The Pharisees also came to Him testing Him and saying to Him, 'is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?'" The question is not, "Can you explain to us the reasons for divorce?" The question is, "Can a man divorce his wife for any cause?"

Now the reason I know that is because, King James Version says, "every cause," New American Standard Bible says, "any cause," NIV says, "any and every reason." There was an actual theology developed two decades before Jesus that was called, "any cause divorce." Based on Deuteronomy 24 verse 1, there was a whole philosophy that developed known as the Rabbinic School of Hillel. Hillel was a very liberal school, counter to that was Shamai. So you had two rabbinic schools that were in opposition with each other. If you are a little discouraged with religion because it seems like there are always two groups fighting each-other, it's been here a long time. Two decades before Jesus, the School of Hillel, their philosophy was, according to Deuteronomy 24:1, a man could divorce his wife for any cause. In their own writings they said, "If you wake up one day, and you looked at your wife, and you realize she has more wrinkles than she did when you got married, you can divorce her." That's any cause.

If she burns your meal or talks bad about your parents, that's any cause, you can divorce her. If you see a woman that's prettier than her, that's any cause, you can divorce her. Now I want you to know, in a male dominated culture like theirs, that was a very popular teaching. A man just lifted his finger to his wife, "Hey, hey, any cause, any cause and you'll be out of here." Very popular teaching!

The other school, the School of Shamai said, "No. Moses is talking about indecency and uncleanness of some sort." They were unable to define exactly what it was, but they disagreed with "any cause." The specific question to Jesus is, "Can a man divorce his wife for any cause?" And Jesus says, "Only for immorality, only for that." But, what He doesn't address is what was commonly accepted for divorce. You see Jesus does not condemn divorce. He condemns the any cause, or any reason for divorce. Now I want to go to school with you today. I want you to listen carefully to what I'm going to say. I want you to follow this logically and practically with me.

In Acts chapter 15, we call that chapter, "The Jerusalem Council." Paul had been out there winning Gentiles to the Lord, and they were converted to Jesus Christ. They were joining the church. Then Jews were coming in and trying to convert those people to Judaism, and there was a big conflict. These new converts to Christ were being told, "You have to be circumcised." They were told, "You have to have this ritual and that ritual in your life," and it was a big conflict. So in the Jerusalem Council, Paul presents to the leaders of the church, the conflict. Now, that's the setup. Here is something to consider: We are here today on Sabbath because we believe the Sabbath is the day God blesses us to worship Him on. We should worship Him every day, but you understand what I'm saying. This is a holy, sacred, twenty-four hour period. And we keep the day onto the Lord, the seventh day, according to the fourth commandment.

Now as a Seventh-day Adventists, we are encouraging family, friends, neighbors, other people that this is an important issue. "God will bless you if you keep the seventh day," and we also say "It's a part of His commandments." Now, if you take the New Testament by itself, and you don't use the Old Testament, you'll discover you have a very thin argument for Sabbath observance. It's a very thin argument. In fact, when we come to Acts 15, the directive given to the Gentiles was very simple. "No food offered to idols, no meat with the blood in it or that's been strangled, and avoid sexual immorality." That's all they were told by the church; that's all that they had to do. And an argument comes to us from our Sunday keeping brothers and sisters, is that, "See, they didn't say a thing about the Sabbath. Apparently, they didn't expect them to keep it. We are Gentiles, grafted in, we don't need to keep the Sabbath. Sunday, in honor of the resurrection, is our day."

What is our response to that? Our response to that is very simple. It's an argument of silence. We say, "No, they were keeping the Sabbath, it was no issue." Right? They were keeping the Sabbath, it was no issue. They didn't have to write about it. The same is true with divorce. There were certain things that everybody understood, Jesus Himself included. Everybody understood there were certain reasons for divorce. And so Jesus does not include them in this conversation because they are not an issue. And so the question is, what were those reasons, and are there other reasons? The answer to that is -- absolutely there is. You see, one of the things we must seek to do when we study God's word, we have got to go back to the people who heard it. What is going on in their culture? What is going on in their lives? What does this mean to them? When we understand that then we can make an application to ourselves.

Most of us read it in October 2008, and we say, "Ah, He is speaking that to us right now." And He is, but He is not, if you understand what I mean. So, what was the understanding of the people in Jesus' day? Let's go to Exodus chapter 21, and I'll show you the reasons for divorce given in the Old Testament. Many people are not aware of these reasons. And most arguments in Christianity do not include them. But I'll tell you, they are part of the Word of God, and you will see in a very practical way the importance of them. Exodus 21, verse 7: "If a man sells his daughter to be a maidservant, she shall not go out as the men servants do."

Now there are a couple of things here that are working for us. First of ladies, I apologize, but 1400 years before Jesus, that's the culture. That's the way it was. A man could sell his daughter, all right? That's just the way it was. Don't lose the rest of the text just because of that. Hold on, it gets better for you. But what does it mean, "...she shall not go out?" Go to verse 2, same chapter. Verse 2 it says: "If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing." So a man that is sold to be a servant serves for six years. In the seventh year, he is free. He goes out. But a woman who is sold to be a servant, she serves the rest of her life. She is not free to go out except, it's going to tell us how and when. There is a reason, because she is going to have different relationship than the man is.

All right, let's go back to verse 8. "If she does not please her master who has betrothed her to himself..." Now, "troth," many of you recognize from wedding vows. "I give thee my troth!" We don't say it so much anymore because it sounds kind of funny, you know, like, what's this troth, you know, 'what is he doing with a troth?' But "troth" is old English. It means "love." "Betroth" means "beloved." "I give you my love." A "betrothal" is an engagement. So we are not talking about just a male servant here, this is a female servant in a different relationship. "If she does not please her master who has betrothed her to himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people since he has dealt deceitfully with her."

So something about this, he's offered her his love, so forth and so on, he refuses to give it, she can be redeemed. But, he cannot sell her to a foreign people. So it wasn't all bad, was it ladies? All right, verse 9, it says: "And if he has betrothed her to his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters." Now note this: "If he takes another..." what's the next word? "...wife." What was the woman considered? A wife! "If he takes another wife, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, and her marriage rights." "He shall not diminish her food, clothing and marriage rights." That is talking about emotional and physical well being of the lady. It goes on to say, "And if he does not do these three for her, then she shall go out..." how? "Free!" For fourteen hundred years prior to Jesus, every Jew understood that and they practiced it.

If a woman was not receiving from her husband food, clothing, and love, or emotional and physical support; if she was not receiving that she could divorce her husband. Now, you may be wondering, "Wait, wait, wait, it's a male dominated culture." It was, but the courts recognized this and I'll tell you how it worked. You could only get a divorce back then ladies, if the husband agreed. So here is what would happen. A lady would go to court and

present the neglect. If the court agreed with her, they would say to the husband: "All right, do you agree with this?" If he said, "No," they would have him bitten until he agreed. They were very persuasive, and she would be free. In the days of Jesus everybody accepted this, everybody understood it. It's not even an issue. It's the argument of silence that we use about the Sabbath. It was accepted norm that you could divorce for emotional and/or physical neglect.

Now the apostle Paul is going to affirm this idea, and then he is going to add another reason for divorce. Let's go to First Corinthians chapter 7. Paul is dealing with marriage here. Paul says, he is answering some questions obviously, he says: "Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me; it is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband." Now notice this, he is going to affirm the Old Testament concept. "Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her and likewise also, the wife to her husband." So Paul is reiterating what is already understood in his day. Part of this marriage vow, part of the marriage contract was to love, honor and keep. We use the same phrases today. Those phrases come to us from the Old Testament Jewish beliefs.

And if a man did not love, honor, or keep, the wife was free to divorce. And Paul is saying, "I agree with that, so husbands render affection to her, and wives, render affection to him." "The wife does not have authority of her own body but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. But I say this as a concession, not as a commandment." And he goes on, "For I wish that all men were even as I myself. But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that." What is he talking about? Being single! He is saying life is a lot easier if you are single. Well, good for him. I'd rather be married. And that's what God has put in my heart, and possibly in yours too.

Verse 8, "But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am; but if they cannot exercise self-control let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion." Another verse! If you are divorced and you are in love with a person or believe that you are in love with a person, and you are not sure if you should marry them or not, this is the text to pray over. It's better to marry than it is to burn with passion. Pray about it. Look at verse 10. "Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her husband remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife." Okay, so he is saying: "Okay, this divorce thing, it's serious. Let's not just be willy-nilly about it, let's be careful about it."

But then he is going to go right on and give another reason for divorce. Verse 12: "But to the rest I, not the Lord say, if any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her." That was a question they had. "I am Christian now. My wife is not a Christian. Should I stay with her? Christians are not supposed to have fellowship with darkness..." You know, light and darkness and all that kind of stuff, "...Yeah, stay married" he is going to say. He's going to do it, now the woman's side. Verse 13: "And a woman who has a husband, who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him." So you have a woman, and her husband is not a believer. If he is willing to stay, fine! Stay married. Now he is going to wrap that argument up, in verse 14: "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy."

Here is what he is saying: If you are a believer and your spouse is not a believer, but they are willing to stay with you, there is a chance you will win them to the Lord. And definitely there is a better chance you'll win the children to the Lord. So stay in the marriage if you can. Now here is the reason to get out. Verse 15: "But if the unbeliever

departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace.” Paul is adding abandonment to the list for divorce, “You are no longer bound.” Now in the concept of love, honor and keeping, and abandonment, we would also logically and practically imply the concept of emotional or physical abuse. And essentially, what we discover when you put all the texts together regarding divorce in the Bible, Jesus says: “You can divorce if adultery has taken place.” Moses and Paul say emotional and physical neglect are causes for divorce and that’s affirmed by Paul. Paul also adds abandonment and of course abuse is a part of all of it. It’s included in the neglect idea.

Now let me share with you what’s happened. Some of you have gone through the horrific experience of a divorce. And not only do you have all of the emotional turmoil of that rejection, and of all the pain that’s associated with it, but many of you have had the bonny finger of a church members pointed at you. And this cloud of guilt, and this cloud of doubt, and this cloud of “Where do I turn, what do I do; condemned by my friends and family, condemned by God, where do I go?” Well I want you to know brothers and sisters that God is far more understanding than the church has been. God is more merciful than the church has been. We have taken a few texts just like Pharisees did, and we have misapplied them and said, “This is it, this is the only situation, this is the only cause.” It is time that we started using all of the Scripture; and it is time that we started using some common sense. Common sense and holiness go together.

There are some of us who maybe thinking about divorcing the person we are with. And the Bible is very clear. Please don’t do that, try not to do that. If your life is not in danger, if your emotional health is not in danger, I mean if he is just a jerk, or if she is a jerk, and you know, humble yourself before God. Plead with Him for wisdom. Love them as an unbeliever; try to win them to Jesus Christ. But you’ve got to be there yourself first. And perhaps you can save that home, and save your spouse, save yourself, and save your children. I don’t know where you are in your experience today. I don’t know how you find yourself in this story. But I do know this: Some of you do not know Jesus as your Savior. This would be a great time to take care of that. All you have to do is say, “Yes” to Him. He’ll come into your heart. And you will have a Savior. Some of you know Him, but you need a deeper experience, you long for deeper experience. Ask Him, He will help you.

And here is what I see will happen when the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts. I believe those of us who are not divorced would be able to minister kindly, patiently, lovingly to those who are. And we will not condemn them and make them feel like second, and third and fourth class citizens, and a total failure and a washout spiritually. And I believe that those of us who are married and are struggling in marriage, with a Holy Spirit in our lives, there is a chance we can save that marriage. There is a chance. But I want you to know. None of us can be as patient and kind as we need to be, and none of us can be as loving in marriage as we need to be; we all need Jesus Christ. And so really, that’s what it boils down to. Do you want to walk out of here with Christ? Do you want to walk out of here closer to Christ than when you came?

If that’s your desire, I’m going to ask you to stand right where you are at. “Loving Father in Heaven, I pray first for my brothers and sisters who have been lashed by the tongues of the church when they’ve struggled through a divorce. I pray for them Lord. Please bring healing to them. And Lord, I pray for the marriages that are struggling right now. Please bring healing to them, and victory in Christ. And Lord I pray for all of us that Jesus would live and reign in our hearts. And we can all be headed towards heaven, our ultimate goal. And we pray this in Jesus name, Amen.”

