



Before getting into the text we're looking at today, I want to comment on this series in general. Many (maybe most of the) times, after preaching, I don't hear much from people. Some sermons, I might get a comment. But I've heard of more discussion and questions on this series than probably any other. Whether we were starting off chapter 5 with the Beatitudes, or we were moving into Daniel, or coming back into the remaining verses of Matthew 5. And, potentially, these sections have generated the most questions for people. And, honestly, I think that's one of the responses Jesus wants from us. If you walk away from these sermons and you have no questions or you feel no tension, you're probably not really listening to what Jesus is saying. While Jesus' statements are straightforward and cut to our hearts, we will begin to ask questions like, "Is Jesus *really* saying this or that?" Or, we'll think, "What about this or that scenario?"

These are good questions to ask. It is right and good to wrestle with Jesus' words to understand what he's saying. But, I do have a fear. My fear is that we could end up treating the Sermon on the Mount like how the scribes and Pharisees treated the Law. In other words, all we try to do is *figure out* what Jesus says so that we can know we're doing good. That goes against Jesus' purpose in the Sermon on the Mount. Whether a listener is a follower of Jesus or someone who was just listening in, curious who Jesus is, Jesus' point is to call each person to depend on him. Without Jesus, we can do nothing, but with him all things are possible. So, followers of Jesus are to hear the words and say, "I don't know how to apply this without you, Jesus. Empower me." Unbelievers should say, "I need God's forgiveness. Forgive me and change me!"

To trust, depend, and rely on Jesus is the ultimate application. Jesus is calling all of us to relationship with him. He doesn't simply want us to know the details of what we ought and ought not to do. He wants relationship with him to fuel everything we do. Do you see the difference? Let me give an example. As I hope you all know, I love my wife dearly. I enjoy time with her. I'm still amazed she even agreed to date me over 20 years ago. And I'm so grateful we still date and have fun together. But, let's imagine that we're back 20 years ago, and any time we'd get together, I'd just sit down with a pen and paper and write down everything she did. I'd log what she liked and didn't like. I'd recognize when her tone changed from happy to frustrated. Then, about a month in to doing this, I said, "I've figured you out! Now I know what I need to do to keep you happy. I know that if I do this or that, you'll always respond in ways that are positive." . . . What if I said that? How do you think Tracy would feel and respond? She would know that I was just treating her like a robot, not like a person. I wasn't genuinely valuing her. I was just figuring out how I could be the best and how I could organize circumstances under my control.

This example helps us to understand how the Pharisees and scribes viewed the Law. But it also helps us to see how we might be viewing the Sermon on the Mount. If you walk away from these sections saying, "I've figured it all out!" my question is, "But did you draw closer to the Lord in prayer? Did you realize your utter need for him to empower and grace you?" Remember, according to the first beatitude, we're

spiritually bankrupt left to ourselves. Without Jesus, no external obedience matters. So, please don't fall into the trap of the scribes and Pharisees. And, know this, if you walk away from sermons feeling tension inside, that's ok. That's probably good. We ought to be walking away from sermons praying, "Lord, teach me to know you more. Teach me to depend and rely on you more."

Now we come to the text today. Two little verses that have bred so many questions and feelings of tension! But, I pray that we would know our neediness and cling to the Lord who fills us and graces us and empowers us. And, through relationship with Jesus, I pray that God would show the world that he saves people, changes people and enables us to be a light to the world! With this said, the main idea of the sermon today is this: **Married Kingdom citizens (i.e. – followers of Jesus) are to give life-long honor, care, and love to their spouse.** This is very intriguing to me, Ventura. As Jesus is revealing to his listeners that he came to fulfill the Law, and even came to fulfill it through his followers, he reveals that to be a light in this world, and to live as a follower of Jesus, you humble yourself to be right with others. You kill lust and promote love of all people. And then Jesus highlights his concern about marriages. Marriage matters as we live in this world! Your witness and testimony in marriage is intended to be a light to the world – revealing you're a citizen of Christ's Kingdom. If you trust Jesus, he promises to empower you to grow in glorifying God even in your marriages. With this understanding, let's move into the scribes and Pharisee's teaching on marriage, and then we'll move into Jesus' statement.

1. The scribes and Pharisees manipulated the legalities of marriage to their personal desires (v. 31).

Read verse 31 again with me: ³¹ "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'¹ This teaching comes from Deuteronomy 24. This deals with specific laws regarding divorce. In ancient Israel, what was one of the punishments for adultery? You may know that stoning was one of the capital punishments for adultery. But, that wasn't the only consequence that could take place for adultery. God offered another way – a way that actually was intended to show mercy. If a man knew that there was "indecency" in her (which referred to adultery), he could then give her a certificate of divorce, and she would then leave. God goes on in this scenario to imagine that this woman gets married a second time (because in that cultural context a woman really wouldn't be able to survive without a man providing for her), but in this second marriage if this man died or even if he divorced her for sinful reasons; God states that this man cannot remarry this woman. The reason for that was because if the man divorced his wife the first time, he kept the bounty he received when they married. And, if he remarried her this second time, he'd become the owner of the estate she had.

This law is one of immense mercy because the woman is the one who sinned! She committed adultery, but God is allowing a certificate of divorce to enable her to find someone else who would care for her, and God is also protecting her from being taken advantage of by the first husband.

But what do the Pharisees and scribes generally do with this text of Deuteronomy? They don't take the approach of loving God and loving others. Instead, they turn the command in on themselves to make it fit their fancy. By the first century, there was a school of thought that followed Rabbi Hillel. When Deuteronomy 24 states that you could give a divorce certificate for some indecency, this school went so far as to say that if she burnt a meal or you simply didn't like her looks, you could divorce her. They also simply thought that Deuteronomy 24 was God's way of saying, "You can get a divorce for any cause as long as you give a divorce certificate." Now, this wasn't the only view in the first century, but this was a

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 5:31.

largely held view. And, when you hear this, you might be thinking, “This sounds like how Americans today think.” Yep. This thinking has been embraced for millennia, and I hope that you see how this thinking is purely selfish. The men are only thinking about what they can get out of, and how they can have whatever they want whenever they want it.

Yet, instead of promoting selfishness, **Deuteronomy 24 reveals a heart of protection, honor, care, and love.** Do you see that? Oh, and by the way, do you hear words common in current marriage ceremonies? To love, honor, and to protect come from ancient Judeo-Christian heritage. The man protects and cares for the woman here – even the one who committed adultery. She could remarry and find refuge somewhere else. The man honors her by still treating her as a human being created in God’s image. This all shows love because love is self-sacrificial.

In me saying this, I want to make a very practical statement for our day. Over the decades, there has been such shame associated with divorce that I think people have sinfully shamed victims in a divorce. I grew up thinking that if you were the one who got the divorce, then you were the one in sin. I treated Jesus’ teaching like the scribes and Pharisees. I had it figured out because it seemed obvious to me that if you got the divorce, then you didn’t want to honor the Lord. How grievous a belief. If anything, we see that Deuteronomy 24 reveals to us that God cares for the spouse who was sinned against, and God cares about the spouse who sinned. And, the spouse who gets the divorce is not always the one who is sinning. I know people who have pursued divorces or wrestled through getting one – and they don’t even want to think about divorce. But, they believe that divorce is the right and best answer.

You could say, “How could divorce be best?” Well, in Matthew 19, Jesus says that Moses gave a certificate of divorce because of humanity’s hardness of heart. Meaning, the divorce certificate came in because people are sinners, and through sin they destroyed the marriage covenant. Divorce papers merely affirm the relationship’s destruction. So, Ventura, please seek first to listen to people who either have been divorced or even going through a divorce. There is a heap of shame that many already feel. They don’t need false guilt if they’re the victims. They need people to weep with them and pray for God’s healing in them and their spouse.

This moves us into Jesus’ teaching on Deuteronomy 24.

2. Jesus declares that honor, care, and love are essential to God’s design of life-long marriage (v. 32).

In verse 32, Jesus reveals to us what Deuteronomy actually means: ³²But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.²

There are a couple of things I want to point out before getting to the bigger idea of what Jesus is saying here. First, you might wonder, **Why is the man emphasized and not the woman?** In that cultural context, the man would generally be the one to get a divorce, not the woman. He controlled estates, and cared for the homes. Having said this, I don’t think this means we can’t make application to women. However, I do believe the emphasis here is on men, in particular. The second question someone could have is, **Does the exception clause mean that divorce can happen only if there is sexual immorality?** Personally, I don’t think this is a helpful way to think. Some people might ask this question because

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 5:32.

they're wanting to excuse a sinful divorce. So, they're kind of like a child saying, "How close to the line can I get and still be ok?" Remember, all of these commands are to drive us to our need for Jesus – to grow in our relationship with him. Having said this, people can genuinely ask this question. And, if that's you today, I want to say that I personally do not believe that sexual immorality is the only legitimate cause. "But wait, Pastor Timothy, Jesus says it is right here!" No. Jesus is commenting on Deuteronomy 24. But he's not commenting on Exodus 21:10-11 where God speaks of a Jew marrying a slave, and God says in that marriage that the Master, who is her husband, diminishes her food, clothing and marital rights, the slave wife is free to leave. If this was the law in a slave marriage, I tend to think that would probably apply in non-slave marriage as well. In addition in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul speaks of an unbelieving spouse wanting to divorce a believing spouse. If the unbeliever divorces, Paul says that the believer is *free*. That was first century talk of being free to remarry. Yet, there's no sexual immorality, and here in this text, Jesus says that you're only free to remarry if there's been sexual sin. Do you feel the tension and confusion here?

And, at this moment, you could say, "Hold on! If there are more potential reasons than sexual immorality, people will just get divorced left and right." Really? I personally believe that if you think that, the you don't love your spouse. I don't stay with Tracy because she hasn't committed adultery. I'm not sitting around thinking, "When can I marry someone else. If she'd just commit adultery, then I'd be free." Then, I hear a sermon that says there could be more reasons, and I think, "YES! Now I have an excuse!" If you think this way, you don't love your spouse. And, if you have no love for your spouse, I believe Jesus is actually confronting you.

Remember, as I said earlier, God gave a certificate of divorce even to protect the victim. Whether it was the slave-wife of Exodus 21 – because she has rights in her marriage. Or, it's the husband whose wife committed adultery in Deuteronomy 24, God gave divorce for protection. And, Ventura, we need to realize and admit there are many people who need protection. There are many spouses who are oppressed. There are children in oppressive environments. There are people, in our church, who have been immensely abused by a spouse. They need support, not judgment. People who are experiencing utter neglect and removal of care from the spouse who promised to love, honor, and protect.

Let's not elevate marriage above the covenant. That might sound confusing. God only loves marriage insofar as it actually shines forth his glory! But where the covenant is broken and a human created in his image is being destroyed, then marriage has been marred to serve satanic ends. All of God's law is intended for the purpose of loving God and loving others. Don't put marriage before loving others and loving God. That's what the scribes and Pharisees did.

But Jesus emphasizes love, honor, and care. Do you see that? In last week's message, you saw that the opposite of lust is love. Well, **to not commit sexual immorality (which is any type of sexual activity outside of God's intention within the marriage covenant) – is a call to love.** I don't believe Jesus doesn't simply want people who aren't divorced and don't commit adultery. As long as you don't do these things you're good, right? Wrong! He's calling for love. We see that in this chapter, in all of Jesus' teaching, and even in Deuteronomy 24 itself. He's calling to honor our wives and also people, in general.

How do we see this calling to love in the command to not commit sexual immorality? And, why does Jesus pinpoint sexual immorality as a covenant-breaking action? Why is sexual sin so bad? Ventura, these are the questions we ought to be asking. To be transparent, I'm so immensely burdened by how sinful sex, pornography, self-gratification, lust, has made its way into Christian's lives, and it's in many ways tolerated by many Christians. When Paul says that there shouldn't even be a hint of sexual

immorality, some say, “Yes, that’s the goal, but I just can’t help myself.” Or, some say, “Yes, it’s bad, but don’t confront me on it and tell me how bad it is because then I’ll feel ashamed, and I don’t want to change just because I feel bad.” Hold on! Where’s the hatred and disgust for sin? God abhors sin, and God even says that sexual sin has a special abhorrence to him. Do you realize that the apostle Paul speaks of sexual sin as being a uniquely heinous sin? And, right now, please don’t simply think of those sexual acts that you think are particularly bad. The Greek word for sexual immorality refers to any type of sexual and sensual activity outside of the marital union between the man and the woman alone. God abhors this.

And now, you may still say, “But why?” And, that’s a great question. Ultimately it’s because God loves his glory, and he loves humans who are created for his glory. You see, we are created in God’s image, and we are also created as sexual beings. We have sexual urges and desires. That’s part of who we are as human beings. That’s not wrong. That’s God-given. Yet, many people direct these urges outside of marriage – which is utterly damaging. The sexual union is the most vulnerable union of all. In that vulnerability, there is to be no shame (see Genesis 2). There is also to be complete protection. Two people, loving and protecting each other and committing to care for one another. Yet, when you go outside of the marriage union, there’s no commitment to your spouse or to the people you went to through pornography or other means. Vulnerability is there, and instead of care and protection, there’s a molestation of the personhood of someone else. And you did that simply because you wanted what you wanted. You took what doesn’t belong to you, and you treated people like toys that you can pick up or throw away at will for your own consumption. Whereas, in marriage, instead of merely taking and treating people like toys, Christ’s disciples are to give of themselves, care for each other, and honor each other highly.

This is why I say Jesus calls his marriage kingdom citizens to love, honor, and care! To be a light in this world means we love our spouses! The world needs to see this. So, Jesus gets to the consequences of a broken covenant. In the end of verse 32, he says that if any man divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, he makes his wife commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

As I’ve stated before, in each section, Jesus uses hyperbole to bring across his point. That’s the same case here. There are Christians who have asked about their second marriage, asking if they’re constantly committing adultery because they were the ones who sinned in the marriage. I don’t think that’s the literal point of what Jesus is saying here. After all, look at the Deuteronomy passage again. In that passage, God makes room for the unfaithful wife to remarry. She has a certificate. Or, go to 1 Corinthians 7. A spouse divorces a Christian spouse for being a Christian, and Paul says they can remarry. Is the Christian constantly committing adultery? No.

The point Jesus is making through hyperbole is that the person who was the oppressive, sinning party is going to be held to account before God. The second marriage should have never happened because the first spouse ought to have been faithful to his covenant. God holds them accountable to that covenant, and they will be responsible before God in the judgment. This statement ought to bring fear to the listeners. To those who didn’t trust Jesus, but were just curious, if any were in sexual sin, they should be shuddering before Jesus and pleading with him for forgiveness! For Jesus’ disciples, they should be saying, “Lord, help us! We need you to empower us to live this way.” And, if you’re in either of these categories, you ought to be drawn to Jesus. There is both forgiveness and empowerment given through Jesus. Will you turn to him? Will you repent?

You may say, “But I’ve done so much bad.” Here’s what I know, Jesus took the just wrath that sinners like you and I deserved on himself at the cross. He took the punishment. He also lived the perfect life we could never live, and on the cross, he satisfied the punishment in the place of sinners! He’s risen from the dead, and he says that if you go to him for forgiveness and grace, he’ll give it. You will be reconciled to God. Now, let me ask you something: Does Jesus ever lie? So, even if you’ve done so much bad, he forgives! Will you turn to this one who promises to take you in and welcome you into God’s loving arms?

For the rest of you, if you claim to be a follower of Christ, how’s your thought life? What are your fantasies? What are you searching for on your screens? Are you physically acting in sinful sexual ways? Right here, I want to be explicit that I’m speaking to unmarried and married here. The author of Hebrews says the marriage bed is to be held in honor. I think that refers to those not married are to respect the gifts that exist within marriage alone, and those who are marriage are to keep it within marriage. I also want to be explicit to say that I’m speaking to both men and women here. Sexual sin isn’t only a man problem. It’s a woman problem, too. And, by the way, it’s increasing. Also, I’m speaking to young people, pre-teens and teens. I’m also speaking to everyone up through elderly. Sexual sin is not just a young person problem.

Listen, sexual sin is especially heinous to God. Is it that way to you? This past week, David shared with me from Malachi 2. I want to read to you some verses, and you can follow on the screen: ¹³ **And this second thing you do. You cover the Lord’s altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand.** ¹⁴ **But you say, “Why does he not?” Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.** ¹⁵ **Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union?**³

Husbands and wives, are you sitting here today tolerating sexual sin in your life? Can you resonate that you pray with tears before the Lord. You feel like he doesn’t listen. You sing in worship, but everything is dry. And you wonder, “Why doesn’t he hear me?” Could it be because you’re tolerating the sexual sin? You’re not making war with it. Maybe you treat it like a domesticated wild animal. You’ve taught sin to sit and stay at your wishes, but you don’t realize that someday it’s going to pull you down to Hell. Look at what the Lord says through Malachi! He doesn’t listen to you because you’ve been unfaithful to your spouse – the wife of your youth. Sexual fidelity is essential for God’s children because with this fidelity we show honor, love, care for another person – to the most significant degree.

And, in living that way, we reveal the honor, love, and care that God shows us over and over and over and over again. So, at this point, I want to give a couple concluding application steps for you to ponder. If you’re here today and you know you’ve been tolerating (and maybe even acting out in) sexual sin, here is what God calls you to. Please know that I know that each of these could sound like punishments, but they’re not. In Ephesians 4, the apostle Paul says that whatever is in darkness needs to be brought to the light. And, Paul says that whatever comes to the light *becomes* light. Meaning, as long as we remain in the darkness, the sin will fester and control. But if we take our sins to the light, God will transform! That doesn’t mean coming to the light is easy and painless, but it does mean that we are restored with God and others. This is a similar idea of the apostle John in 1 John 1. If we confess our sins, we have fellowship with God and one another. So, here are the steps I urge you to:

³ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mal 2:13–15.

- 1) **Confess to God.** Confess doesn't just mean, "God, I'm sorry," and then forgetting about it. To confess is to *agree with God* about the sinfulness of the sin. Ventura, pray and plead with the Lord to give you a hatred for sin. Go to him and agree with him that sexual sin is a devastating sin and you need his grace to forgive you and to grow you in hating sin and loving others. By the way, if the Lord is convicting you of sin, I want to add an encouraging thought. He's not given up on you! Also, do you want to love God much? Then Jesus says that he who is forgiven much loves much. If you refuse to admit and confess the sinfulness of your sin before the Lord, then you don't experience the great depths of his forgiveness, and you miss out on loving God more! You want to love God more? Experience his great forgiveness.
- 2) **Confess to your spouse.** "Oh no, I can't do that, Pastor Timothy. It'll break their heart. It's too bad." You've shattered the marriage covenant. You must. You've sinned again. There needs to be reconciliation. By you hiding, you're the person in Malachi, and God says he won't listen to you, which by the way is also what Peter says in 1 Peter 3. Confess to your spouse.
- 3) **Confess to safe believers in church.** "No way. What will they think of me?" Oh, how you need to be more concerned about what God thinks of you living in darkness right now. You are in danger! But he's urging you with arms of love to open up. He's calling you to the light. Jesus saved you to fulfill the law in and through you to love, honor, and care for your spouse. Will you follow the Lord? If you're a Christian you must. And, the apostle James says, "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed."⁴ And Paul states in Galatians 6 that the church is to function in such a way that we are to help one another caught in sin. Please, be open. Please, be transparent. Let's watch as the Lord transforms you to light as you come to the light. Will you trust him?

If you've been at Ventura for a while, your favorite benediction I read at the end of the service may be the one from Jude. God is faithful to keep us from stumbling and to present us faultless before the presence of God with great joy! It's a glorious benediction, right? Did you know that in that same letter, Jude is confronting people who are excusing sexual sin, and Jude says that Christians are to *hate* even the garment stained by sin. Ventura, **God can empower us to hate sin. God can empower us to love righteousness. Jesus promises to fulfill the Law even through us – to love our spouses and honor the gift of marriage. Married Kingdom citizens (i.e. – followers of Jesus) are to give life-long honor, care, and love to their spouse. Will you follow Christ into this glorious privilege?**

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jas 5:16.