



Matthew 19:7–9

7 “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” 8 Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

Reflection

(Today's reflection is given by Craig Tubman)

Have you ever heard of the statement 'the spirit of the law'? Sometimes you'll hear someone comment during a sports game – that wasn't in the spirit of the law. In the history of Australian sport there is probably no greater example than in the 1981 World Series Cricket when Trevor Chappell bowled an underarm delivery on the final ball of the game to ensure the New Zealand team couldn't hit the winning runs. It caused an absolute uproar. Was it within the rules of the game? Yes it was. But was it in the spirit of the game? No it wasn't. Why? Because it didn't capture the heart

of competition the sport was meant to symbolise.

Rules can be good. They are needed, but it can also be easy to miss the point of the rules that exist around us. This is true in sport, in politics, in law and most certainly in God's law that we read throughout the bible.

Today's passage is a continuation of yesterday's discussion on divorce. Interestingly, rather than saying much about divorce itself, in verses 4-6 Jesus spoke more about marriage and how precious and valuable it is to God. So in today's passage there is an obvious follow on question from the disciples.

If God loves marriage so much and he

doesn't want two people who bind themselves in marriage to separate, then why in the world did he give provisions for divorce in the Old Testament? A great question! And Jesus' short but clear response shows that while this divorce law was from God, people were not using it in the spirit that it was given. Just like an underarm bowl is strictly permissible within the laws of cricket but in reality is extremely poor sportmanship that brings the whole game into disrepute; so people were making a mockery of the provisions for divorce in the Old Testament.

Let's look into it. Why was there a divorce law in the Old Testament? The answer from Jesus, "Because your hearts were hard." Jesus' answer shows what ethicists call a retrieval ethic. A retrieval ethic is based

on a presupposition that something has gone wrong. Something has happened that should not have happened and rather than just being limited to saying ‘well you shouldn’t have done that’, a retrieval ethic asks ‘now that we’re in this unwanted, undesirable situation, what is the best way forward?’

The laws in the Old Testament presuppose, both at the level of all humanity and at the level of the individual, hearts that are broken. In a perfect world there would be no divorce law because relationships would never break down! But you and I are aware and God is even more aware that this world is far from perfect. People are selfish when they should be selfless. We are proud when we ought to be humble. We envy rather than freely give. Our

rebellion against God really has messed things up – not just on some philosophical level but deep in our own hearts and identity. If you've ever said, 'well the world isn't perfect', then you have seen in some capacity the consequence of sin in our world.

So God in his goodness and driven by his love, gave provisions in the law to provide some way forward when good things go bad. It was because of your hardness of hearts that the divorce law was given Jesus said. In other words, it was not affirming the goodness of divorce but rather ensuring there was a retrieval ethic in place if the goodness of marriage became broken beyond repair.

But what seemed to be happening in the 1st Century culture was that men were using the divorce law to flippantly move

from one woman to another. Certainly this seems to be insinuated in the initial question asked by the teachers of the law in yesterday's devotion. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?'

There was no more prominent example of this at the time than Herod Antipas. On meeting his sister-in-law, King Herod decided that he wanted her as his wife. So he ordered she be divorced from his brother. Simultaneously he divorced his wife and the two got married. Just like Chappell's underarm bowling was not in the spirit of the game, this move from Herod Antipas (who was Jewish) whilst being technically within the rules, totally missed the spirit and power of marriage. Interestingly, whilst this was quite the scandal at the time, the only

person to speak against it was the prophet John the Baptist. The teachers of the law said nothing. It's hard to say whether the broader Israelite community had been using the divorce law in a similar fashion but it appears that some may have been.

Here in Matthew 18 Jesus is not ruling out the divorce law, but what he is doing is condemning the way it had been cheapened by (primarily) men who used it as a way to gratify their lustful hearts whilst claiming they had God's approval.

Jesus has clearly taught us that God loves the commitment, the personal change and growth that is required in a life-long married relationship. And that only in the very direst of situations is this to ever be broken. This means that a spouse not satisfying your

needs is no grounds for divorce. A spouse not giving you the support you think you need to achieve your goals is not grounds for divorce. A spouse's failing health is not grounds for divorce. A spouse's lack of sexual appeal is not grounds for divorce.

A marriage relationship is to mirror Christ and the church and that means loving the other when times are tough. It means showing patience, forgiveness and fidelity. We would do well to be wary of our cultures' slowly growing belief that marriage is primarily about your experience. That is, the belief that the primary role of your partner is to bring you personal satisfaction and happiness.

Of course, there is no doubt that a husband or wife can be the source of these

things, but that is not the goal of marriage. The goal of marriage is not to take but to give. The spirit of marriage is to provide an arena in which you can give yourself to another and continue to do so, even at cost to yourself. To end a marriage simply because your partner no longer makes you happy is an absurd concept in the bible's grand picture of marriage.

For richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; till death do us part.

The only grounds given for divorce in this section by Jesus is sexual immorality.

However a comment must be made here about the growing prevalence of domestic violence in our culture. Some Christians feel the pressure to stay in violent relationships because the bible only gives adul-

tery as grounds for divorce. This is not correct as 1 Corinthians 6 explores the topic of divorce further. But regardless of that, what must be said here is that if you are in a relationship that is violent then you must find a way to leave. Separation does not always lead to divorce, but it is the only way forward to stop a cycle of violence. You must protect yourself and the aggressive partner must be given the space to be rebuked, to receive whatever penalty the law may require of them, to repent and to change. If you are in this situation and you are part of our community here at Church Hill Anglican I urge you to speak to myself or Justin, Paul, Naomi or Matt and to seek help, to seek a way forward. We will be discreet, act in love and walk alongside you.

Coming back to our passage for today, one

great way for the church to witness to the world around us is to model Christ-honouring marriages. To show the nature of God's unfailing love in our own relationships. It's why here at Church Hill we run several marriage courses a year. Our next one is starting in October, and if you are married and haven't been to one I encourage you to look into it. We run these not because we assume that all our couples are struggling, although we know that all marriages face challenges, but rather because we want to keep providing foundations for healthy, life long, self-giving marriages. We don't think this just happens by chance but rather is something that needs working on and is worth the effort.

Think & Pray

Why not take some time today to consider your own approach to God's law. Are you a mere law keeper – you try and live your life to the letter of the law in the bible, but have missed the spirit of the law? That is, beneath those good actions of yours lies a heart that is often angry, jealous, envious or cruel? Do you live a life that has the appearance of righteousness but is far from God? In today's passage we see that Jesus calls you to more than this.

Or are you a law lover – that is, you seek to honour and obey Jesus but you also see the spirit that lay behind the laws and commands in the bible – summed up by Jesus himself as: loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and loving your neighbour as yourself? Whatever your relational status, Jesus calls us to be men

and woman who love the law he's given. To see his decrees as sweeter than honey and as a light to our path. To not see obedience to Jesus as oppressive but rather liberating as we start on the path of true humanity and self to become like our loving Lord and saviour.

Take some time today to check your heart and pray to God.