

**St Augustine's Church. 17 April 05. Sermon on Divorce & remarriage –
Matt 5.31-32**

“The second unforgivable sin?”

Intro.

This sermon series - Looking at the SOTM is taking us a lot longer than we thought. And the topics we're covering touch places within us that are **very emotive**.....I think Jonathan and I are competing for the most tricky and controversial topics too!! – he's done the homosexuality and the pornography ones (from the Matt vs. on Adultery) and now its my turn – as today we consider some of what the Bible says re. **Divorce & remarriage**.

Well, this one is guaranteed to make me unpopular !

I've been doing a lot of hunting around on the internet this week, looking for things like Divorce Statistics, the teachings of various church denominations and so on.

And in my search I came across a whole host of websites with titles like :

Survive AnAffair.com

StopYourDivorce.com

SavingMyMarriage.com

All found through a divorce support blog.....then there were the ones which seemed to be run by lawyer types,[obviously out for your money]. Claiming they could” *do your divorce quicker and cheaper*”.....

At first I was quite surprised by the amount of sites and information available to ‘help’ those in the process of divorce, but quickly realised this for what it was; a **sad reflection** on our western culture and society today.

As a result of my search, I *could* quote you pages and pages of divorce statistics – from each State in the USA, from the ‘Bible belt’, even from *other* religions, from various church denominations and ‘*born-again*’ Christians..... but you'd quickly become bored as I think it would hold no surprises.....**until perhaps you realised that there is almost NO difference in the rate of divorce amongst couples who call themselves Christians, and those who do not**.....

Isn't that sad?

At least in the rich west there doesn't seem to be much difference anyway....

Jesus said we were to be **in the world** not of it, and yet we live in the same sort of house as our neighbour; we drive the same sort of car, our kids play with similar sorts of toys and computer games, we have similar incomes (I guess), it seems Christians have the same sorts of material luxuries, and now, the statistics tell us that **Christian couple's marriages fall apart and don't last any longer than their neighbour.....**

What a sad state of affairs!

The only *apparent* difference is that on a Sunday morning, when we join together to worship God, they might join together on the Golf course, or worship in the shopping malls!

Maybe, in the church, we're not offering the teaching and support that we should; maybe in the church, we are putting as much *pressure* on people and their time as their work does, so that couples don't get as much quality time together.....
.....something has certainly gone wrong somewhere.....

'Pastor'. complained the man visiting his pastor about his marriage problems, " I've only been married for a couple of years, but things seems to be getting really bad. Just a year ago I'd come home from work and it was great – my wife would bring my slippers, my dog would race around barking for joy.....Now it's the opposite: my dog brings my slippers and my wife barks at me".

'What's the problem?' the minister asked, "you're still getting the same service, aren't you? "

Those of you who follow happenings in GB will be aware that, just last week, Prince Charles married his so-called 'long-time Mistress' Camilla Parker-Bowles. Having some years before been divorced from Diana [who as you know was later tragically killed in a car wreck], there was much **controversy** surrounding the Separation and divorce, plenty of **gossip** about *her* alleged affair with one man, and *his* with Camilla.....and also controversy surrounding the fact that, when **King**, he would become head of the Ch. of England and so '*defender of the faith*'.....its a very **public** illustration of what is privately happening in too many of our homes these days.....and it forced the Church of Eng. to make a public response to the situation. The previous Arch of Cant – George Carey, himself an Evangelical, was quoted as saying '*Prince Charles and Camilla should marry*'.. And, like many situations, there were children involved. Princes William and Harry were only young then, but how must they have felt with all this going on?

I'm sure each of you here, will have had, if not first-hand experience of family break-up and divorce, relatives or friends who have gone through that painful experience.

Just the other day we met a father in Fish Creek Park who was separated from his wife and was out and about with their 5 yr old son. This guy spoke with much **anger** and **bitterness** about his soon-to-be-X, accusing her of all sorts of negative things relating to their son, and care and custody of him.....

And the church is not immune either.

IN my last full-time parish post, at one time there were 5 families affected by adultery and subsequently, divorce. All were Xians, all played a very active part in church-life, led house gps and so on. **11 children** were in the midst of that mess, and, as far as I am aware, not a single situation was ever reconciled. They all landed in the divorce courts, with the tragedy & pain which that brought. And the children experienced that too.....Apart from one, these affairs all began within the life of the church.....with wandering eyes and inappropriate working rel'ships and a lack of Will to do the right thing by their souses, yet as ministers we didn't see it coming.....

No wonder Jesus says that to even look lustfully at another of the opposite sex is committing adultery in the heart – he knew, he *knows* where that can lead....

It's not by accident that the verses in Matthew 5 on Adultery (27-30) and divorce (31-32) and oaths (33-37) sit there, side-by-side. They are all tied together. Adultery very often leads to dissatisfaction with one's spouse and subsequently separation and divorce; but the oaths taken on our wedding day – **our marriage vows made publicly and in the sight of God** are to be honoured for ever. Marriage is intended for ever, until one partner dies.....

So, then, what does the **Bible** teach about divorce, what does Jesus actually say?

Divorce was as **hot** an issue in Jesus' time as it is now. It was rife throughout ancient society in the first century, and was way too easy to obtain.

IN the Roman Empire, initially, the view of marriage was much *higher* than even the Jews held. There was **no** divorce recorded for c. 500 years. *But then the Greeks came along. Militarily*, the Romans **defeated** the Greeks, but not morally. The material richness of the Greek culture seeped into the Roman way of life and the young people esp. began to adopt those ways. *It was the Gk viewpoint towards marriage that began the changes.....*

They had the **ideal** of marriage that every husband should be loyal to one wife. But they all knew that was just not reality. In their culture, to all *rich* men there were three types of women -1. **courtesans** (rich, highly respected, beautifully dressed, well-educated – the finest companion for a man. You'd take them to a

business convention to make a good impression – to enjoy her wit and intelligence as well as her beauty)

Then 2. there was the **concubine** – she was there to live with, to have fun at the end of a busy day – she was your entertainment. She was important to you but she was not your wife.

And lastly 3. there was your **wife**. She ranked somewhere below the other two, yet was highly protected and treasured. She was never allowed to leave the home or risk any contamination with the outside world. She stayed at home to care for the children and household. She kept things together and was the centre of it all.....but it wasn't always a good place to be.

The historian Edward Gibbon wrote that one of the reasons the Roman Empire collapsed was due to the high divorce rate. Today, in America, divorce and remarriage is a national tragedy. About 50% of all marriages end in divorce..... .I wonder if the high divorce rate will bring about, or at least massively contribute to the eventual collapse of our Western society – [its just a thought.....]

So the morals of the Greeks infiltrated the morals of the Romans and they in turn affected the Jews.

The Jews though remembered their old laws and had their ideals of marriage and each rabbi would teach their disciples the old law and so it was passed on..... the ideal that **one husband has one wife for life** was *believed* though not always lived out.

Into this situation 2 schools began to develop. The followers of **Rabbi Shammai** believed the ideal worth fighting for, and the *only* possible grounds for divorce was **unfaithfulness**. They were respected for their idealistic views., but often laughed at for being 'unrealistic'.

Then there was **Rabbi Hillel**. He focussed primarily on the Deut 24 law that said a man shall divorce his wife on the grounds of unchastity or '*if she finds no favour in his eyes*'. So he interpreted *that* as being anything – if she put too much salt in the meal for example or burnt his toast, *that was grounds for divorce*. Or maybe if a husband was walking through the market place one day and saw an attractive young woman,[better looking than his wife], his wife no longer pleasing him therefore, then he had grounds for divorce.

You can imagine the man who told his friend ' I'm going to get a divorce.....my wife hasn't spoken to me in six months'.

"You'd better think that through again', the friend advised.' Wives like that are hard to find....."

As a result of these 2 schools of thought and teaching in ancient times, marriage became something different. Something *uncertain*. The very **safety** and **tradition** of family life suddenly was shaky.....and unsafe.....some girls even kept away from marriage because of its very uncertainty and potential insecurity for them as women.

And then, into this unstable situation – on the side of a hill one sunny morning, walks the person of Jesus.

As he talks and explains his beliefs (SOTM) he says (quote v 31-32). “ *anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to commit adultery, and anyone who marries a woman so divorced commits adultery.*”

Oh boy! Is he serious???

This is difficult preaching here.

There are people in *this* and every congregation that this subject touches. Is Jesus *really* saying what I think he's saying? We might be better off to skip this passage, and people do just that.....at other times this passage has been used to club people over the head with guilt. [Most of the time we may just shake our heads and walk away, we're so confused].

Divorce required no formality in Graeco-Roman circles; a written or oral notification sufficed. The first century poet Martial spoke of women who had been ten times divorced. It was very common. But Jewish teaching on the **strength** of the marriage bond was exceedingly high, not only in the OT but in rabbinic Judaism. *Divorce could only take place when a man found some indecency in his wife and put her away with a writ of divorce.* (Deut 24.1)

The plain meaning of Jesus' words is that divorce and remarriage is tantamount to adultery in the eyes of God. As you can see if you were to read Mtt **19**, Jesus takes his hearers back to the purpose for which marriage was instituted by God. **It was intended to be lifelong and exclusive.** That is the ideal. To fail to keep this ideal is to spoil God's plan for man and woman. **It does not mean that it cannot be forgiven**, or that a subsequent marriage cannot be happy and fruitful. Like the rest of the SOTM, whose key verse we have already agreed is

'be perfect therefore, as your Father in heaven is perfect' [5.48]

like the rest, these are ideals taught by and expected by Jesus of his followers . **It is the ideal way to live**.....yet, as we all know from personal experience, our *human* nature seems to be stronger than our *wills*, and we fall short of His ideal for us, every day. Nevertheless, this doesn't **preclude us from striving to live the Way He intended, and when we stumble and fall, saying sorry, asking God's mercy and forgiveness and starting over again.**

These words of Jesus assert that such a 2nd marriage – after the first has ‘failed’ can never bear testimony to the one-man-one-woman rel’ship for good and all, which marriage was intended by its Creator to be. **And that was a very shattering statement by Jesus, the new Moses**, going back behind the Mosaic concession in Deut 24.1 where a man might find ‘*something indecent about his wife*’ and so writes her a cert. of divorce,.....(incidentally, designed to restrict not facilitate divorce) Jesus referred back to the original purpose of God. In the Kingdom, as at the Creation, marriage is meant to be **exclusive and lifelong**..... the SOTM is a mandate for Kingdom people.

We get further clarification of what Jesus was saying when we look at that other ch in Matt’s gospel. In Mtt 19, we read of the Pharisees who were out to trap Jesus; they were trying to get him to side with either **Rabbi Shammai** or **Rabbi Hillel**, and therefore to show himself as a conservative or liberal in sex ethics. Jesus, as was his wont, *refused* to be drawn; Instead of talking primarily about divorce, he goes back to the purpose of marriage itself.....

He takes them straight back to the **Maker’s instructions** (Gen 1. 27, 2.24) and makes 6 strong points about marriage :

- ✓ 1, **It is designed by God**
- ✓ 2. It was meant to be **complementary**, ie. Male & female (JG talked about this in his recent sermon on homosexuality)
- ✓ 3. marriage was intended to be **permanent** ; “ the two shall become one flesh “.....the very physical words used to describe the union ; ‘*one flesh*’ and ‘joined’ (lit. ‘**glued**’) affirm the goodness of sexuality, one of God’s gracious gifts to His people, and not something Christians should disparage
- ✓ 4. Marriage is to be **exclusive**. The man is joined to his wife. He becomes one flesh with her. No way is he permitted to have a little flutter on the side, any more than she is. Both are pledged to find their fulfilment in the other, and so discover on earth a model, however inadequate, of the **permanent rel’ship between God and the believer which nothing can break**.
- ✓ 5. marriage is ‘**nuclear**’. Ie, it means ‘*leaving*’ as well as ‘*cleaving*’ – there has to be a substantial measure of distancing from the old generation in order to create the new. A fresh family unit is in the making.....
- ✓ 6. **marriage is not for every one...**

The disciples are perplexed at the rigour of Jesus’ teaching here. It seems far tougher than they imagined. But Jc is not legislating here – he is setting forth **God’s** purpose in marriage – he is going behind the conflicting moral rules on divorce, that were as beguiling as they are now. He is telling them what **God**

wants in marriage, and what **befits the kingdom**. If that seems tough, it is because marriage is a **gift** – it is something in which God joins people together..

Marriage creates the most profound bond between 2 people. It is the basic cell in all society. And Jesus stresses that God invented it and wants to preserve it. He does not want divorce..
 “I hate divorce” he says in Malachi 2.16.

But it happens. And in a moment we'll consider ‘what then?’

Incidentally, in the OT and in a figurative sense, the people of Israel are seen **as married to God**. Isaiah 54.5 tells us that God was the husband of Israel. We find the same thing in Jer 3.14. When the Israelites transgress and turn their backs on Him, they committed **spiritual adultery**; this they frequently did, yet in His mercy he forgave them. Time and again he provided a way back, though they refuted His laws and profaned His Holy name.

When Christ, the God of the OT ‘*put away*’ Israel for her adultery, He did not ‘remarry’. In effect the physical marriage to Israel remained until Jesus’ death on the cross.....

In one sense, Israel had become a *harlot*, even though she was married to God.....

So, just to clarify this point - when God entered into a covenant with Israel, He married her (Ex 24.7. Jer 3.14).....as a ‘wife’, Israel was both a Church and a kingdom. Christ was the God of the OT; when he was crucified he died and that marriage came to an end. **The affianced bride of Christ today is spiritual Israel** – the Church (Gal 6.16) Christ introduced the *new* covenant, which at His return (his 2nd coming) will establish the Kingdom of God on the earth. The gospel message itself is *about that kingdom*. Those resurrected into the K of God will constitute the **bride of Christ**, and will enter into a rel’ship that shall last forever, not in the temporary rel’ship which ancient Israel experienced.

The earthly marriage rel’ship then, is a *type* of the *spiritual* marriage that shall take place at the Resurrection. The divine marriage, of Christ and His Church, will last forever. There will be no divorce and remarriage in *that* antitype, Human beings need to realise this transcendental purpose. Therefore, there should be no divorce and remarriage in human conjugal union either.....

No matter what our past, we need – now – to learn God’s marvellous purpose of permanency of marriage in this physical life.

When you read verses from Eph 5. 22-33,[from which I have preached so many times at weddings,] Paul talks about our *submitting to each other* in marriage, out

of reverence for Christ, and that we are to *love each other* as ‘Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church.....”

In talking about God's design for us to be ‘one flesh’ in marriage, he likens that to Christ and the church “This is a profound mystery’ he says,

here is a picture of how it should be – as the church we are to be a **bride** of Christ, adorned for her husband.....and the one-fleshness in marriage is to reflect this. You cannot ‘*one flesh*’ with more than one person.....

Marriage for human beings teaches those called to the Truth to fulfil the role of Christ’s faithful wife for all eternity.

So, where have we gone wrong?

Well, It’s obvious that we’re not living as God intended us to live. His best for us in so many cases has ‘gone wrong’. – not just in marriage, obviously! But that’s what we’re talking about here.

We live in a have-it-all, have-it-now society, we are consumers in every sense; we want instant satisfaction, and we’re not necessarily prepared to work for it....we’re all part of the culture of immediate gratification that doesn’t consider long-term consequences.....all individualistic, rather than communal – many people have dropped rel’ships, even family ones, to pursue careers and comforts....

“ We live in a culture where everything is disposable” says Michelle Gauthier (founder of the Catholic organisation, *Defending Holy Matrimony*) “ everything is disposable including spouses and unborn children”

- If our house needs redecorating or we think we need to change the sofas for new ones, we just go out and buy what’s necessary,
- If we’re hungry we stop by a fast food restaurant, and drive through, getting our coffee and burgers on the way....
- We now use digital cameras and immediately have photos of the family downloaded and printed – within minutes if we want....
- We have cell phones which means we can reach someone and someone else can reach us immediately, wherever we are, at the touch of a few buttons.....

- We email instead of handwrite letters because its immediate – it gets to its destination in seconds, and we may even have a reply in a very short time too..

There are exceptions, I know. Of course there are. Not everybody in the ‘rich’ west **is** rich, or has enough money on which to live.....and that naturally brings many pressures into a home and on personal rel’ships.....It is our general style of and attitude towards living which I’m addressing here.....

And it’s a bit the same with marriage. Its *actually quite easy to get married – and its quite easy to get divorced too.....[.very easy to get divorced in ancient times too]*

It may be subconsciously, but do we apply similar ways of this consumerism to our marriages ? – our spouse is not quite being **how** we want them to be, not quite living up to our expectations...failing in some way, or continually annoying or something; we don’t meet eye-to-eye over so many issues.....we’ve become ‘*incompatible*’ now.....or we fall out over the kids too much...or we fight over money all the time.....actually we seem to *have* no time.....we don’t spend quality time together any more.....I don’t feel I really know him/her any more.....

What are the issues for you?

Then the D-word gets dropped into the conversation, a black cloud enters the home and hangs there, affecting everything.....close friends are consulted and expected to take sides.....

Well, this isn’t the place to go into all the whys and wherefores, the reasons and excuses, the grimy details of broken lives and homes, and children becoming wards of the state.....

I have 2 questions for us this morning –

- Where is the God of all Grace in this?
- And have we made Divorce The 2nd unforgivable sin?

We have heard the words of Jesus. We understand God’s ideal for the human race; we know we get it wrong.....”.for **all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” says Paul in Rom 3.23

.....oh, but wait - what does he say in the next breath? “ *and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*” V.24

It is by **grace** we are saved through faith – this is the gift of God, as Paul tells us in Eph 2. 8.....

We sin, we make mistakes. We get it wrong. [**And I know that in this sermon, I have not even touched on violence within marriage**] This is our human nature – not to say its an excuse for wrong-doing, but God knows and understands our human frailties. That is why he sent his son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins, to make it possible for us to come back to him and say ‘sorry’, he opened the way back to Himself through the blood of Jesus

No, Divorce is not the 2nd unforgiveable sin. You’ll be glad to know that! The Bible tells us there’s only one sin that cannot be forgiven – that is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit – let me briefly explain; , the Holy Spirit points us to Jesus and convicts us of sin ; if we then turn our backs and say ‘*no, I don’t believe that’ or I’m not interested*, you are **rejecting** Christ’s sacrifice for sin, rejecting the **only** way to receive true forgiveness, and therefore it is not possible for that sin to be forgiven.it’s rejecting His offer of Eternal Life which is a person’s freewill to choose.....

So, it *is* possible to be forgiven for divorce.

God’s best for those who are called to marriage, is that we **live faithfully with that one person ’till death us do part’**.....that’s how he intended it to be. If that irreconcilably falls apart, whether it happened before we came to faith in Christ, or sadly, since we became Christians, you can know God’s forgiveness.

What about the remarriage question then?

Oh, this is tough – very tough, I have struggled and struggled with this one during the past week.....

Jesus taught that to *remarry* is adultery..... that’s certainly a tough cookie to crack;

I *know* there are a number of people in this parish for whom this is the case – and they are living in a happy and fulfilling 2nd marriage now.....yet, it’s still a strict uncompromising teaching.....

You know, I really identify with Mark Twain here, when he said” It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it’s the parts that I **do** understand”

Personal experience tells me that there **are** circumstances where, because of unfaithfulness,[for which the Bible allows divorce] or violence or some other abuse, perhaps remarrying is blessed by God.

Pete and I are close to a couple where the guy was a victim of abuse from his wife in his previous marriage. He had become a Christian since marrying –his

wife was not interested. Eventually he was forced out of the marriage home and remained single for 12 years. He was then called by God into marriage with a Christian girl, who herself testifies in a compelling way, that God called her into this marriage, even specifically showing her the name of this man she was to marry . They now have a fruitful Ministry together, and it seems to me the Lord is really blessing them.

It is manifest in Matthew that Jesus *in principle is* against divorce and remarriage, and is probably very saddened at the ease and frequency with which it takes place today. With the exception of violence or unfaithfulness, it is not what is best for us, not what is best for Society as a whole.....

This mandate in Matt's gospel though is for Christian believers....Jesus shows us and teaches us how we are to live, yet when we go wrongThere **is** forgiveness, when we take our sinfulness and brokenness to the cross,

Is it possible to be reconciled to your former spouse when you're in a committed rel'ship with a new one now?

I don't know the answer to that.....and each circumstance has its own complications.....

But one *could* ask forgiveness from them – maybe a letter acknowledging your part in the breakdown of your marriage, acknowledging your own sin and failure, not laying blame –that's not what its about – just saying sorry, and asking their forgiveness. And by confessing your sin & saying sorry to God too.....this way, you open the gate to possibilities of forgiveness, and it gives the enemy no further foothold into this part of your life.

And If you're experiencing problems in your marriage right now, there are people who can help; counsellors, mediators, the Church, certain books can be helpful too.....we need to work harder at our marriages, cut out time for the other – make time in our busy diaries to have a meal outtogether, or go for a walk, or something else..... I don't have the answers. But God does, and He can help you

What is it **you** need to do today?

Just as I finish then – one last thought - **The married rel'ship is exclusive.** There should be no other person allowed into it – you must treasure and guard your rel'ship. but there **is** one exception In Ecc 4 v. 12, we read that “a *cord of 3 is not easily broken*’. actually one other person who should be invited in to your life together is the person of Jesus Christ. He can cement your marriage, be a firm foundation for you; help you to not only honour your marriage vows, but to be deeply fulfilled and in love with your spouse, *till death us do part.*

