

**“FOLLOWING THE KING – 56”**

***Matthew 19:1-12***

Jesus' journey towards Jerusalem continues. He's moving out of the region of Galilee, where he has spent most of his life and ministry so far, into the area of Judea, following his destiny, moving towards his inevitable death on the cross. As he has been teaching and preaching, he has talked about the coming Kingdom of God. And he has offered glimpses of what this Kingdom might look like – a Kingdom in which men and women are able to live as God wants them to, in which creation is wholly under God's sovereign will and the powers of evil are left impotent and defeated. But he has also begun to spell out the implications of all this for those who really do want to take him and his message seriously. Following Jesus is no easy ride. It is not for the faint-hearted and uncommitted. If you want to get the best out of it, it means giving your best, giving your all. Jesus has already said that as he has challenged people to “*take up their cross*” and follow him. And he has been answering some of his disciples' questions about what life in the Kingdom might be like for them, particularly how it will affect relationships between people, which is what took up most of the previous chapter.

Now he has to deal with some other questions – this time not from his close friends and disciples, but from those who mostly seem to have been his opponents. Matthew tells us that the Pharisees had come to test him, not, I suspect, to try and catch him out, but because the issue on which they questioned him was, then as now, a very lively subject for debate, as we shall see in a few moments. The issue is divorce and that is a very difficult issue to come to terms with for many Christians. Some of you here this morning have painful, first-hand experience of it. Most of you will, like me, have members of your own family who are divorced, or struggling with the prospect of it.

When you are at theological college, the issues seem very clear cut. You can write the essays on subjects like this in a kind of secure vacuum. You come out of college with your views all sorted out – then you meet real people and see the pain and the distress caused by divorce, you see that it is not easy, you see that the answers are not what you expected them to be (even if you get to the point of finding answers!).

As we've just said, both within the Church and in the wider society of which we are a part, divorce is a subject of great debate: maybe not quite as difficult an issue as it was even fifty years ago, but one which is pretty lively still. The Government of the day frequently feels the need to restructure the law on the subject. The Church sets up commissions and working parties all over the place to try and come to some conclusions about it. The implications are far-reaching and affect children, the benefit system, housing needs, the legal system (lawyers are probably the only ones who really to benefit from divorce, it seems to me): in church it affects notions of leadership and responsibility. We often hear statistics which may

shock us with the high incidence of divorce in society and in the Church and we wring our hands and say that it's not the way it should be.

In Jesus' day the debate was just as fierce. According to one commentator, the frequency of divorce was an open scandal. By the end of the Old Testament era, Malachi was having to remind the people of Israel that God hated divorce (*Malachi 2:16* – “*I hate divorce, says the LORD God of Israel.*”). Even the Pharisees were split over the issue. In Jesus' day there were two main schools of thought among the Rabbis, both based on an interpretation of *Deuteronomy 24:1-4*, to which we shall return in a bit. Those who followed the teaching of Rabbi Shammai held that divorce was acceptable only in the case of grave sexual sin. Rabbi Hillel, on the other hand, was of the view that anything which the wife did which displeased the husband provided suitable grounds for divorce – even burning the dinner! The great Jewish writer Josephus, who was himself a Pharisee and was divorced, made it clear that he considered divorce permissible “*for any causes whatsoever*”. That was, of course, for the man. The woman could not divorce the husband, which is why what Jesus says in *Mark 10:12* (“*If she divorces her husband ...*”) would have been such a ground-breaking declaration for the Jews (although it was not unheard of in the Greco-Roman world).

No doubt with this debate in mind, the Pharisees approach Jesus to ask his views on the subject and to test just where he stood. Was he a Shammaite or a Hillelite? How did he understand the things that Moses had said in *Deuteronomy 24*, the only real mention of divorce in the Jewish law code? (There are a few bits in Leviticus and Numbers, but they refer to the priests.) Jesus' reply here is, despite some difficulties of interpretation, the most authoritative statement on the subject in Scripture. In it he says four things.

## **1. GOD HAS AN IDEAL (vv4-6)**

Jesus begins his reply with a clear statement of what is the ideal which God has set out. It is based on the creation pattern and on the idea of a covenantal relationship. For most Christians, the basis for marital relationships is to be found in *Genesis 2:24* – “*That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.*” There are two influential views about this. One, which is expressed by the scholar Donald Carson, says that the marriage bond was intended by God as a part of creation itself. Although he argues his case fairly persuasively, Carson's idea seems to me to be rather shaky in that it obviously excludes single, unmarried people. If it is God's creation wish that everyone should be married, it seems that those who aren't must be in some way unfulfilled or imperfect – which I don't believe is the case; and I don't believe the rest of the Bible teaches that either.

The other view is that marriage is a God-ordained covenant. This view is argued by David Atkinson, and he says that it is to be emphasised over against the Church's (and society's) usual emphasis on the "externals" of marriage, such as the legalities and the ceremonies. The covenant is "*a personal relationship within a publicly known structure, based on promises given and accepted.*" Relating that to *Genesis 2:24*, which Jesus quotes here, we see the public declaration and social dimension in the "leaving" of father and mother; the "*word of committed love-faithfulness*" in the "uniting" or "cleaving"; and the completion of the covenant in the "*becoming one flesh*". And, as Jesus adds, in words that are repeated in the Christian wedding service, "*what God has joined together, let man not separate.*" This is, in theory, an indissoluble union, a covenant between two people made in the presence of God.

As I say, that's the theory. That's the ideal which God sets before us – marriage as a sacred covenant that, once entered into, should not (some would say **can** not) be put aside. Whether you accept the view of Donald Carson or the view of David Atkinson, it is clear that this is a high ideal. Marriage is very important, very significant – a sacred act which is part of God's plan for humankind. It is not, as the wedding service reminds us, to be entered into lightly. Nor is it to be cast aside lightly. There are those, as I've just said – usually to be found in the Roman Catholic church – who say that marriage is a sacrament and whatever else happens the marriage cannot be dissolved. You can be separated, divorced or whatever, but God still looks on you as married. The arguments about the merits or otherwise of that stance are what led to the formation of the Church of England in the wake of Henry VIII's attempt to sort out his own marital difficulties.

## **2. GOD RECOGNISES HUMAN FAILURE (v8)**

However, although that is the ideal, it doesn't always work out. We human beings are not too good at getting God's ideals right in our lives in all sorts of ways. So, because of what Jesus calls here "*hard hearts*", God has permitted a way out. Jesus tells the Pharisees what they think they already know, that Moses permitted divorce – but notice that Jesus says "*permitted*" in answer to the Pharisees' "*commanded*".

Now, there is no explicit law about allowing divorce in the Old Testament. The passage from Deuteronomy from which the Pharisees are quoting here is about divorced women re-marrying their former husbands.

*If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to*

*marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.*

However, it is obvious from what is said that divorce was permitted – and so was remarriage. If that were not the case, there would have been little point setting out this law.

What the Pharisees' question turns on is what is meant by the phrase "*becomes displeasing to her because he finds something indecent about her.*" Shammai said this could only mean sexual misconduct (it wouldn't have been adultery as that was punishable by death). Hillel said that "*indecent*" could mean that she didn't cook properly, and even that she wasn't as pretty as someone else the husband had seen! Others have suggested that it might have been some deformity which prevented her having children. Whatever it is, there is clearly some scope for the marriage to be terminated and for the husband to write her a certificate of divorce.

There has to be a good reason, for a start. The problem with that – as was the case in Moses' day, as was the case for Rabbis Hillel and Shammai, as has been the case down through the centuries – is that no-one really agrees on what is a good reason. Even if you get all the books that have been written on the subject by Christian scholars and pastors and teachers, you'll still find a huge spectrum of opinion. And I'm not going to offer one now. Each case is different, and, as I said earlier, what is written in the theological college essay or preached from the pulpit can often fail to take account of the fact that the church is made up of real people, each one different and unique. When I was at college I wrote the definitive essay on this subject. I had it all worked out and it was all about as biblical as you can get. I knew exactly what I was going to do about those in my congregation who were divorced or thinking about it. Then I started in ministry and met them – two divorcees on my first diaconate. And they didn't quite fit into my neat scheme.

Two things to note about this. Firstly, the Hebrew word for "*divorce*" here (and elsewhere) is based on the word which means "*cut down, destroy, behead*". It strongly implies damage, and painful damage at that, the cutting asunder of a living thing. Divorce is a painful, damaging business for everyone involved – make no mistake about that: not only the two people directly involved, but those who are close to them as well. The second thing is that, although the ideal has been compromised, God is still anxious that things should be properly regulated. The people of Israel were to use a certificate of divorce, the whole thing was regularised so that the woman would not end up vulnerable and at the mercy of gossip or even physical mistreatment.

God has set out his ideal. He really wants husbands and wives to stick the course, to strive for the ideal of being one flesh for good. But, human nature being what it is, there will be times of failure and there will

be problems – sometimes problems that cannot be resolved. So he makes a way of escape. He has compassion on those who fall short of the ideal and provides the means to limit the damage. Isn't that what salvation is all about? God wanted us to remain perfect, just as we were created. But sin and evil entered the world, we started to mess things up. So Jesus was sent as a way of escape, a way to limit the damage caused by men and women who found themselves unable to live up to the ideal. When you are tempted to criticise those whose marriages are foundering, those who find themselves having to terminate the relationship, just remember what God has had to do for you in Jesus Christ.

### **3. A CONDITION IS ATTACHED (v9)**

But Jesus doesn't want this to be seen as an open invitation to get rid of your partner just because she always gives you sprouts or because she won't squeeze the toothpaste from the bottom of the tube, like Hillel did. He says that the only real grounds for divorce is what the NIV translates as "*marital unfaithfulness*". If that condition is not met, then remarriage is tantamount to adultery. In *The Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus says that "*anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress*", because in those days as woman would have to remarry to survive: it is taken for granted here.

The big question, though, is what "*marital unfaithfulness*" actually is. The Greek word is one which causes problems wherever it occurs (it's also a bone of contention in the homosexuality debate) – and the word is *porneia* (it's the root of our word "pornography" – writing about sex). There's no doubt that it means some kind of sexual immorality, but it does us no good to try and pin it down to one or other particular act because there is much more to the word than just adultery. But it cannot be taken to mean anything wider than sexual immorality, as some have tried to suggest – even the NIV translation leaves it open to some doubt.

Now, there are other places in the Bible where it seems that there could be other grounds for divorce. We haven't got time to go into all the arguments this morning, but there's a good case to be made for the *Deuteronomy* passage referring to cruelty. And in *1 Corinthians 7*, it appears that St Paul is talking about desertion. It's interesting that Thomas Cranmer, the architect of the *Book of Common Prayer* and the theologian who laid the basis for the doctrine of the Church of England, had intended to include provision for divorce in cases of adultery, malicious desertion, prolonged absence without news, attempts against the partner's life and cruelty. I believe that compassion forces us to accept that in some cases, divorce is inevitable even when actual adultery has not occurred. But whatever happens, it is to be seen as a last resort, when all other avenues of reconciliation and mediation have failed, and there is no other human

course of action. Once again, remember that Jesus says “*Moses permitted ...*” not “*Moses encouraged*” or “*commanded*”.

Let me quote you some words from John Stott’s book, *Issues Facing Christians Today*: “*Jesus’ reason for adding the exceptive clause was to clarify that the only divorce and remarriage which is not tantamount to adultery is that of an innocent person whose partner has been unfaithful, for in this case the unfaithfulness has already been committed by the guilty partner. Jesus’ purpose was emphatically not to encourage divorce for this reason, but rather to forbid it for every other reason.*”

#### **4. THERE IS ACCEPTANCE OF THE DIFFICULTIES (vv10-12)**

But Jesus adds one more thing, this time in response to the disciples’ observation that this is pretty hard stuff to take on board. It would be best just not to bother with getting married, they say. Once again, there is a great deal of debate as to what Jesus means by “*this word*” (v11). Is he talking about the idea of marriage itself, about the disciples’ response, about the actual teaching on divorce, or what? Well, whatever he is talking about – and it may well refer to the whole lot – he is acknowledging that it is tough. No-one goes through their married life without problems of one sort and another (whatever they may claim!). Everyone has to grapple with these problems and that needs to be spelled out pretty clearly, especially in a climate where self-gratification is the name of the game and where getting married is, for some people, like going shopping. In an interview that Rick Wakeman gave to *Cross Rhythms Magazine* a few years back, he said (after he had recommitted his life to Christ after his third marriage – and now that has ended) that the church ought to make it harder for people to get married, so that they didn’t enter into it so lightly – and leave it so lightly.

And just as each individual person is different in God’s sight, so each couple is different. Things may be going OK for you in your marriage – but that doesn’t mean that everyone is in the same situation. You may have no idea of what is going on under the surface in someone else’s marriage, so be sensitive, be compassionate, don’t be dismissive or condemnatory.

Whatever else comes out of this passage, you can use what has been said as a stimulus to pray. Pray for the married couples in this fellowship – those who seem to be getting along OK, that their marriages will be protected; those who are struggling, that they will find help. Let us be more supportive of one another – that is, I must confess, an area where this Church has failed some of you, and I am truly sorry for that. Let us be accepting of those who have had to go through the trauma of divorce and help them in their

attempts to rebuild their lives, come to terms with the hurt and keep close to the One who truly loves them.

And for all of us, whatever our situation, Jesus' response to this question reminds us that God's ideals are tough – that is, in a sense, what assures us that they are worth striving for. But they are not totally unattainable. At least, we have the help of the Holy Spirit in our attempts to reach up to them. And when we fail, as we so often do, there is always grace and compassion from the God who loves us and cares for us. Apart from what he said in his teaching, what Jesus did for us on the cross is a powerful reminder that God has given us a way of escape from the inevitability of failure and guilt and judgement. Let us never forget that.

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**Questions for discussion**

1. Why was the Pharisees' question a testing one for Jesus?
2. What does Jesus mean by "*your hearts were hard*"?
3. What principles can you discover about what God intended for marriage in *vv4-6*? How would you communicate them to today's culture?
4. In *Mark 10:11*, Jesus gives no exception to the rule he states here? Why do you think there are the two different accounts?
5. How far should the Church pursue a no-divorce rule? Is it any different for Church leaders?
6. In what ways can we help those whose lives have been affected by divorce?