

Transcript of Sermon By
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First Baptist Church
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No Ordinary Relationships: Great Expectations

Matthew 5:31-32

Morning Prayer:

Almighty God, Creator of all people and all nations, we thank you for placing us within families and for giving to us those who care for us until we are old enough and able enough to care for ourselves. For those whose nurture has taught us to trust, we give praise. For those who have surrounded us with lives of faith that we might know Christ ourselves, O God, there is no adequate word we can speak. We give thanks that in the order of families, you have included marriage. Bless all of those who have taken a vow, one to another. Make strong the commitments and virtues that draw husband and wife together. With joy, we lift up those who find their vows easy and peaceful. For those who find their vows difficult and joyless, we pray that your spirit might bring to each mind a memory of the reason they entered into these vows, and in these memories, may couples find the sparks necessary to rekindle affection and reaffirm commitment. For those who find marriage a burden, we pray that you would surround them with friends of wise counsel and true wisdom. May they not feel abandoned by you or cut off from your love. In moments of deepest need, may the wellspring of your grace prove more than sufficient for your needs. Forgive the mistakes that we have made in any of the tender relationships of life. Grant us hearts to both apologize and forgive. Give us eyes to see the goodness of what you have planned for us in our homes and the courage to live up to that with all of our hearts. Bless every commitment voiced within the hearts of this congregation as we pray. Bless every aspiration for true love in our homes. And above all, plant within us the spirit of your son, Jesus, who teaches us to pray: *Our Father, who art in heaven hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.*

Meditation Text:

Prevention and redemption rather than judgmental condemnation must be the church's approach (to divorce).

—Clyde Tilley in *The Surpassing Righteousness*

Last July, when I was planning preaching for this year, I discussed it with the other members of the church staff, and we talked about the need to encourage relationships. We talked about the need to give people a sense of God's promise, hope, and instruction from scripture on what good relationships are.

Actually, I was on sabbatical. You are so gracious to give me that month every five years. I was by myself in the mountains of Tennessee, and I could see this sermon coming. I knew if I was going to preach on relationships, I would have to preach on divorce. Now, several months later, standing here before you, the question that keeps running through my mind is: *What was I thinking?* You know that I say that in jest.

Is there a family that is not in some way touched by divorce? If you have not been, then you are very fortunate. I think most of us have had someone that we care about very deeply who has been through divorce. It seems to me the best thing I can do as a pastor is to try to put a pastoral word on these words of Christ which are so brief, short, and stern.

Let me say to you that this is a sermon and it is not a lecture series. It is impossible to touch every circumstance or every variation on what a person's personal situation may be. I confess in the beginning that I am trying to hit a couple of key things I think are important based upon this passage. Other things may be left to be discussed and I would be more than happy to discuss them with anyone anytime. If you hear something in the sermon today, and you feel like I have left out something that particularly applies to you and it would be important to have a conversation about it, let me know. Let's find a way to have that discussion. This is more summary than it is exhaustive.

As is typical when facing one of the more hard passages of scripture, I often revert to points. If you need to count points, there are going to be four.

1. If we read Matthew 5:31-32, any discussion about it simply must take into account the role of women and how divorce was understood in First Century Palestine. If you think that what Jesus is addressing in the ears of the people who are gathered around him is the same thing as we understand as divorce today, you would be really off base. You have probably heard this many times before, but women were little more than property. It was an exceptionally rare circumstance where a woman could initiate divorce.

I do know of one, and it is always a favorite for me. A tanner was the lowest socio-economic scale person in First Century Judaism. It was largely because it was such a disagreeable profession. The smell of the hides and the materials used were just overpowering. If a man became a tanner after he got married, the wife could divorce him. Basically, she would say, "You didn't smell that way when I married you." But that is one of the very few reasons that a woman could initiate divorce against a man.

When Jesus talks about the "certificate of divorce," the certificate did two things. One, it freed the woman so that someone who might be looking for a wife would know that she was not somebody else's claim. She was indeed free to remarry. It also prevented the man from

repossessing his wife. This is like a car. If the woman did not have a certificate, the man could say, “You have run off.” He would take her back, and she would have no choice.

Let’s say you have Neighbor A and Neighbor B and they are both married. Neighbor A has an affair with wife of Neighbor B. Neighbor A is committing adultery against Neighbor B, but he does not commit adultery against his wife. The wife had no standing. When Jesus is seated at the Sermon on the Mount and is telling the crowds these things, he is letting men know in that culture that they bear a responsibility for the consequences of what happens. If I live in that time and I offer my wife a certificate of divorce and she is sent off against her will and remarries, in her heart, that is going to feel something like a lack of faithfulness. She is forced to go to another man because she no longer has her first husband. Jesus’ word to that man is, “You have made your wife commit adultery, and the person she is married to is committing adultery, too.”

So, again, if you do not understand this word of Jesus against the hardness of the First Century Jewish male heart in taking partial responsibility for what the consequences are, you are going to miss much of what Jesus has to say.

It is possible to distill some principles out of this that would apply to us in our understanding of divorce, but for the sake of today’s message, I am going to leave that part right there, and I want to move on to what I would classify as Part Two.

2. There are a number of repeated phrases in Matthew 5. Jesus says, “You have heard it said,” and he tells something that was commonly taught. He says, “but I say to you . . .” and it is a harder teaching. In each one of these instances, Jesus gives an example where the people of God choose to be directed by God’s love instead of the circumstances. Do you follow what I am saying? He is saying that, no matter what the circumstances may be, a person who is a part of the family of faith (people who listen to the spirit and heart of Jesus Christ) are going to be directed by Christ’s love and not by what has taken place around them. “So you have heard it said, ‘You shall not murder,’ but I tell you if you call your brother a fool, you are liable to the fires of hell.” Essentially, Jesus is saying, “I don’t know what you have against your brother, but there should not be anything that would be bad enough that you would not continue to love your brother in such ways you would not use that kind of term.”

“You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ I tell you if someone strikes you on your cheek, turn the other cheek to them as well.” Jesus is saying that even if somebody is bad enough to you that they strike you, the response is not based on what they have done to you but on who you are. As a child of God, in order to let love rule the day, you turn the other cheek.

It should not surprise us that when we come to the topic of divorce, Jesus’ expectation is, though not stated explicitly, if there is a marital relationship that is so difficult, the love of God in Christ should somehow be able to overcome that. We should never go into a situation like that and assume that the circumstances are going to dictate the outcome to people who love like Christ loves. Am I making my point? Do you follow me on this. Love dictates; love wins—not the circumstances.

I want to take a few minutes here to mention circumstances like abuse—physical abuse, emotional abuse. Do not hear me counseling and saying to a woman, “You should stay in that because your love should overcome what is going on there.” I think if Jesus were to confront a couple where this kind of abuse is going on, his word would not be to the wife, “Shame on you for not loving your husband enough to stay in that.” His word would be to the husband, “What are you thinking? Do you not love your wife any more than to treat her that way?” Let’s not try to take this and think that it implies, in the most dire of situations, that the failure is on a person because they cannot overcome the other person’s terrible attitudes, actions, and abuse. In general principle, this should be true. Our love in Christ, if demonstrated in a marital relationship, should overcome whatever circumstances might get in the way.

3. We would be mistaken if we get this far and think that Jesus does not really mean this. In another verse, Jesus goes back to creation and talks about what God’s intention is in creation. God’s intention in creation is a man, a woman, and a lifetime.

I read a very powerful statement. I wish I had come across it before I had chosen the meditation text for today because I would have used it instead. *Every marriage may not be made in heaven, but marriage is.* That is a pretty good way to look at it. Every marriage may not be made in heaven, but God’s plan for marriage is, indeed, a part of God’s original order of this world.

Would we expect Jesus to counsel us to do less than what God’s highest expectation would be? Do we really think Jesus is going to say, “Look, this is God’s purpose and we are going to cut 30% of that off and you can shoot for a 70 on this.” No. Jesus wants us to live up to the highest of God’s expectations.

The further I got into the preparation of the sermon, the less I liked the word *expectation*. It is not only an expectation, but it is also the highest of God’s gifts and the highest of God’s aspirations for us. Would we really think God would want less than that for us? I don’t think so.

If one of us could become God, and we were able to choose to create the world over, which one of us would create the world in such a way so that this was not the highest understanding of what a basic relationship between a man and a woman ought to be? Would we create the world with less? I don’t think so.

A few months ago in a sermon, I used the story of the star thrower written by Loren Eiseley. In the same book in which he tells the story of the man casting starfish back into the sea, he has a wonderful story about being with a group of naturalists. They are in the Rockies, looking for different kinds of specimens. They are going to spend the night in an abandoned cabin. As they go in, they recognize there are some animals in the cabin. They hear something over on a shelf. The man reaches in to see what he can catch, and he comes out with a male sparrow hawk. But there were two. He captures the male, but in all the excitement, the female escapes and flies out a hole in the roof and takes off.

He puts the male in a small box and keeps it overnight. The next morning as they are having breakfast around the campfire there in the Rockies, he begins to feel guilty about having

captured this male hawk. He decides to let it go. The hawk has been in this tight little box all night. He puts it on the ground, and it is almost as if the bird does not realize he is free. This is what he says: “In the next second after that long minute, he was gone. Like a flicker of light, he vanished with my eyes full on him but without actually ever seeing a wing beat. He was gone straight into the towering emptiness of light and crystal that my eyes could scarcely bear to penetrate. For another long moment, there was silence. I could not see him and the light was too intense. Then from far up, a cry came ringing down. I was young then. I had seen little of the world, but when I heard that cry my heart turned over. It was not the cry of the hawk I had captured, for by shifting my position against the sun, I was now seeing further up. Straight out of the sun’s eye where she must have been soaring restlessly above us for untold hours, hurdled his mate, and from far up, ringing from peak to peak of the summits over us, came a cry of such unutterable and ecstatic joy that it sounds down across the years even now. I saw them both. He was rising fast to meet her. They met in a great soaring gyre that turned into a whirling circle and a dance of wings. Once more, just once, their two voices joined in a harsh, wild medley of question and response, struck and echoed against the pinnacles of valley, and then they were gone forever, somewhere into those upper regions beyond the eyes of men.”

We have heard stories of animals that mate for a lifetime, animals that will die of grief from the loss of a mate. If God has placed within the heart of his small creatures this sense of fidelity, watching, waiting, flying above, and not knowing if the mate will ever come back, has he not placed within us an understanding of what his highest good is? Would he not want that for us as well? We know the answer is yes.

4. I talk to people who have been divorced and are now remarried for five years, ten years, or thirty years. Often they will say when they run by this passage, there is still a nagging sense that maybe they are doing something that displeases God, even though they love a mate with all their heart. It is a hard word to hear. What do we say about that?

When I read the entire chapter and I look at what Jesus talks about in turning the other cheek, or it is the same thing to lust after a woman in your heart as it is to commit adultery, when he talks about divorce, I do not hear Jesus being as much concerned about the consequences of past actions as he is about our commitments to the current relationships we are in. There is nothing in what he teaches that says that to have done something in the past is to bring us to a place where our lives are beyond redemption, and that somehow we live in a constant state of sin. What he wants for us is to look and hear the teaching, to understand what the commitment is, and to live that way moving forward. This is what he wants.

I think Jesus is clear enough that he understands that we cannot go back and undo those things that have occurred in the other part of our life, but what we can do is from this moment forward live in the kind of love, commitment, expectation, and aspiration that God wants for us as God’s highest.

Would Jesus withhold grace from someone who had divorced years ago and remarried in a loving, Christian, and good relationship? I don’t see it. When we understand what the First Century world was dealing with, when we understand what God’s intention for us is in creation, and when we understand that love is the greatest power to deal with in all relationships so that

love might be triumphant, I think what Jesus is saying to us from here fore out is, “Now you know. Always set this as the standard.”

If you or I could somehow become God and could re-create the world, would we create a world where the opportunity, where the gift of God, where the expectation of God was less than that? Of course not.

So we expect Jesus to voice the highest, and we also understand Christ to be full of grace, ready to receive us when we fail. His grace is sufficient for our every need.

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