

## **FM: Growing a Strong Marriage Creates a Healthy Family 12: “BALANCING DIVORCE”**

*"Suppose a man marries a woman but later discovers something about her that is shameful. So he writes her a letter of divorce, gives it to her, and sends her away."*  
Deuteronomy 24:1

I have been fairly athletic my whole life. We grew up on the farm with a hoop in the hayloft, for winter basketball, and one on the garage for summer. We played some baseball, and football, only because soccer hadn't found its way to Beadle County back then. But one of the things I have never been able to conquer, or even begin to learn is juggling. I have pretty good hand eye coordination, but I just could never master the fine art of juggling.

This morning as we address the final subject in this Marriage Series; DIVORCE, I feel somewhat like I'm being forced to demonstrate juggling, here in front of this illustrious audience! Understanding divorce, in as much as is humanly possible for us to do so, feels to me, like trying to juggle three balls at the same time!

The title of my message is Balancing Divorce. I want to visit with you about this important subject, by considering, and balancing, 3 separate, yet related, 'balls'; aspects of this one subject. It might require a mental juggling act on our parts, but I'm game, are you? You are wisely cautious, though I promise not to start throwing balls, or hoops or bowling pins, or chainsaws your direction, at least in the next few minutes!

We begin by considering;

### **1. THE BIBLICAL STANDARD REGARDING MARRIAGE**

*"This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." Gen. 2:24*

*"For I hate divorce!" says the LORD, the God of Israel. "To divorce your wife is to overwhelm her with cruelty." says the LORD Almighty. "So guard your heart; do not be unfaithful to your wife." Mal.2:16*

We begin with the Biblical Standard, because for my money, that is the only standard that really matters! And that standard is pretty clear; though it seems to exist in a cultural vacuum sometimes.

Like with so many examples we might cite, our 21<sup>st</sup> Century world seems bent on bending the Timeless Biblical standards to make them more easily fit our relativistic reality. The Biblical standard or model is simply: “One man, one woman, one life”! How archaic, does that sound these days? How inhibiting, how limiting, how judgmental, how old fashioned, how foolish, how impractical, how exclusive and how intolerant of us to so narrowly define the standard! Well, I guess we could just take this ball out of the rotation. Juggling 2 balls is still juggling, right? Wrong!

That Biblical standard exists as the one unchanging focal point, on an ever-changing cultural and societal moving target. Even the times in which the Bible was written evidences varying standards. Prior to Deut. (our text for today) any man could divorce any woman for any reason; or no reason at all! The effort that God put forth to give the poor women at least some proof of their divorce, an acknowledgement that they were married, was a huge concession and anti-societal in nature and scope. It seems small compared to how far we have “evolved” today, but it was nonetheless, huge!

It is most interesting to note Jesus and his response to a couple questions, posed not by sincere seekers looking for truth or insight, but in vain attempts to trap the Savior in their own petty “bru ha ha’s” about this controversial subject. Some branches of the Jewish leaders permitted divorce for almost any reason, others only in the case of adultery. When asked his take on the subject, Jesus refused to lower himself to their level, (a brilliant strategy in many arguments) and instead turned their hearts to consider this very Biblical standard we have been discussing. One Woman, one Man, one Life!

With all the tragic conflicts of life with life, we are forced to deal with in this world, we still can’t change the standard, it is not up to us. Moving the finish line back 10 yards, cheapens all who run the race, and nullifies any ‘winner’ who wins that compromised race.

Divorce is one of those tragic phenomena's of life, that none of us like, none of us would ever intentionally or callously, or flippantly, choose. Yet here it is, the elephant in the room no one wants to discuss, a huge part of our existence, one of the many balls we are given to juggle, and to accomplish that mission, we can't change the rules. One Man, One Woman, one Life.

That being said, we move to ball number two:

## **2. THE LEGAL ALLOWANCE FOR DIVORCE**

*You have heard that the Law of Moses says, 'A man can divorce his wife by merely giving her a letter of divorce.' But I say that a man who divorces his wife, unless she has been unfaithful, causes her to commit adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." Mt. 5:31-32*

This is one of those conversations I was just mentioning. Jesus, as he often does, reinterprets the "letter of the law" or the "literalness of the law", to help us get at the spirit or 'original intent' of the law; because that's where the 'life' is! Most laws have a contextual nature to them, and to apply them indiscriminately, serves neither the lawmaker, nor the law recipient. To think that somehow proving your spouse was 'unfaithful' is legally justifying your decision to 'kick him/her out', falls far short of that standard we just discussed, and fulfills only the letter of the law, not necessarily the spirit.

The spirit of this 'allowance' mentioned by Jesus, was an attempt to salvage something of the life for the woman, whose unmarried, divorced life almost certainly meant a life on the streets as a prostitute, or returning home to a now disgraced Jewish household, or being added to some 'harem', all of which rendered her virtually worthless.

I know that I, and many of you, have applied this 'allowance' to many situations we have encountered, in our families, in our workplaces, in our church. Certainly, I would be the first to 'liberally' interpret the word "unfaithful" to include abuse, or neglect, or actual adultery, and thereby advocate, even insist that a marriage be dissolved instead of living in those unimaginable, even dangerous, circumstances.

Sometimes divorce, regrettable and sad as it is, is the **lesser evil** than living with an unfaithful (with all the aforementioned definitions) spouse.

I must say one more thing, and I mean no disrespect to those of you who are divorced, and I make no judgment on your decision to divorce, but I feel I must state that one of the cultural influences we have allowed to enter into our consideration of this important subject, is that 'adultery' inevitably leads to a divorce. I know that is the 'allowance' mentioned by Jesus, but I also know that even adultery, as terrible and tragic as that reality is, does not have to automatically lead to an inevitable divorce! It may sound strange to our culturally colored ears, but even unfaithfulness, can be a tool used by God to make people holy! So let me review the two balls we got going in the air right now. God's ultimate, timeless standard is One Woman, One Man, One Life, and, secondly, Jesus renders that there is a biblical allowance for divorce, and that allowance is 'unfaithfulness'; with all its varied definitions. Which leads us to #3:

### **3. THE OVERARCHING GRACE FOR FALLEN SINNERS**

*"Jesus replied, Moses permitted divorce only as a concession to your hard-hearted wickedness, but it was not what God had originally intended." Mt 19:8*

This is the ball I could hardly wait to throw into the mix. We are all broken people with hard hearts full of all kinds of wickedness, and as Jesus reminds us, the allowance for divorce that Moses and even Jesus render, is not what God originally intended. And it's so easy for us who are not divorced to apply the letter of the law in this tragic conflict of relationships, that we often self-righteously fail to see that we are just as broken, even if we've been faithfully married 50 years! Do you see that?

Grace is God's business, and we need look no further than Jesus' experience with the woman "caught in the very act of adultery". You talk about grounds for divorce. But does this story sound fishy to you at all? What about the man...she probably wasn't committing adultery alone! My guess, he was in the crowd who brought her to 'trick' Jesus. And what does Jesus?

He surveys the crowd, sees through the pharisaical smokescreen of deceit and slowly, scratches something in the dust...and then speaks, to...us: "Let those who are without sin, cast the first stone." He then resumes his writing, only to arise momentarily to find only the battered woman standing alone in his holy presence. He pronounces forgiveness and sends her to 'sin no more'. Live better!

My friends, divorce is tragic, adultery is terrible, abandonment is torturous, abuse is inhumane...but God's Grace is sufficient. The allowance for divorce was made because God knew his creation. From the first fig leaves in the garden, he knew he was going to have some trouble with us, and we've provided more than he expected! But he hasn't given up on us. In all our varied and multiple brokenness, God makes one allowance after another, provides one offer of forgiveness after another, writes gently and patiently in the sands of our soul. What is he writing on your heart today?

Have you been divorced, and never felt forgiven? Today, God writes in your sand..."I forgive you...go and sin no more...live better". Have you been looking down your nose at those whose marriages fail, while yours continues? Maybe you need to add another ball to your balancing act, maybe God writes in your sand: "humility...might serve you well". Maybe today you are living in the present reality or past haunting of a divorce you didn't choose, didn't want...couldn't prevent. God has a message for you too! "I love you...and all that you have in **Jesus**, is more than you **don't** have in this world!"

Divorce is a tough subject, and tougher experience. No one emerges unscathed. But today, Jesus' message written on the sand of our heart is simple: "Neither do I condemn you...go and sin no more...live better! Cut yourself some slack, juggling isn't easy for anyone...but getting dumped on by God's grace...is pretty cool! Let us pray.

## **BUILDING A GODLY MARRIAGE 12**

### **“BALANCING DIVORCE”**

*“Suppose a man marries a woman but later discovers something about her that is shameful. So he writes her a letter of divorce, gives it to her, and sends her away.”*  
Deuteronomy 24:1

#### **1. THE BIBLICAL \_\_\_\_\_ REGARDING MARRIAGE**

*“This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.” Gen. 2:24*

*“For I hate divorce!” says the LORD, the God of Israel. “It is as cruel as putting on a victim’s bloodstained coat,” says the LORD Almighty. “So guard yourself; always remain loyal to your wife.” Mal.2:16*

One \_\_\_\_\_, One \_\_\_\_\_, One \_\_\_\_\_.

#### **2. THE LEGAL \_\_\_\_\_ FOR DIVORCE**

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#### **3. THE OVERARCHING \_\_\_\_\_ FOR FALLEN SINNERS**

*“Jesus replied, Moses permitted divorce as a concession to your hard-hearted wickedness, but it was not what God had originally intended.” Mt 19:8*

All that you have in \_\_\_\_\_ is more than you \_\_\_\_\_ have in this world.

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#### **Study Guide:**

1. Which of the scriptures used in this message do you find most difficult to understand? Which do you find most helpful?
2. Share with the group some of the most painful divorce situations you have experienced or heard of?
3. How can we find a balance between what the Bible says about divorce, and what our culture is currently teaching (experiencing) related to divorce?
4. What do you make of the progression from the OT law, to Jesus' reinterpretation, to some of Paul's teachings about divorce? (1 Cor. 7:10-20)
5. What about God's grace, how do we balance that with the rest of what we read in God's word? We like to emphasize God's grace, but when, where and how does God's law, God's justice, and God's word intersect with God's grace; especially as it concerns this subject?