

**Marriage matters to the Master, Part 2 – Divorce**  
**From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”**  
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**Presented to Trinity Church of Teaneck, NJ**  
**On Sunday, October 11, 2020**

**Introduction**

I was walking through the Garden State Plaza the other day and saw something that I think is sad. The department store, “Lord and Taylor” is closing. The department store chain is in trouble. Apparently, there was a recent acquisition by another company that saved the chain, but many local stores are closing around the country.



The chain was started way back in 1826. It started when two men, Samuel Lord and George Washington Taylor opened their first store in the lower east side of New York City.

As a note, no, the store was not started by a religious tailor who wanted everyone to know that the Lord was his partner. It was two men named Lord and Taylor. You can run the math, but the store was an icon of American shopping for almost 200 years. So, it’s sad to see it struggling.

You ask, “Are you upset because you shopped there? No, I have to say, I didn’t shop there. Why not? Because I’m cheap. Lord and Taylor at one time represented quality merchandise for substantial prices. I tend to go to stores with lower prices.



Now, with any store closing, all the merchandise is on sale. So, if you walk by, you’ll see “Everything must go” signs. These kinds of sales start around 30% off. After some time, the prices go down to 50%. The more time, the more discounts. Eventually, the merchandise gets very picked over. Finally, the doors close. Anything left over winds up in some discount store.

Let’s use this as an illustration. I’m going to invent a store. I’m going to call it, “The Good Stuff Store”. This store features only the best products. Because it carries only the best, you can expect a premium price tag.

Around my store are all the other stores you're accustomed to.

- The discount store: The store that sells cheaper merchandise at lower prices.
- The Leftover store: The place where all the merchandise goes when other stores close.
- The Dollar Store: The store where nothing costs more than a dollar.
- Everything in the store is low quality.

Now, let me ask you a question: If you were to compare God to a store, which of these stores would it be?

Guess what? That was a trick question. Why, because God is not a store. Now, if he were a store, and if you chose "The Good Stuff Store", you would have been correct. God offers us only the best. However, God doesn't sell anything. He only gives wonderful things as gifts.

Sadly, lots of people *do* associate God with a store. And it's the discount store, the Leftover store, or even the Dollar store. Today, we're going to look at one example of what happens when people do that.

In the previous article, we learned that Marriage is a wonderful gift from God. You can learn why by reading that message. Sadly, we also learned that Marriage has come under attack over the years. It's attacked when people fail to see the value of the gift that God offers to humans through marriage.

Last time, we saw one attack: adultery. Adultery, we learned is so serious that even looking at another person with lust is a kind of adultery. Adultery is something that the Master, Jesus, takes seriously because marriage matters to the Master.

In this session, we'll see the attack take another form. Let's read:

It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5:31-32)

So, we see that marriage is still under attack. It's under attack with something I will call "Easy Divorce." At first, it looks like something different. But according to Jesus, Easy Divorce is really just another form of adultery.

To understand what Jesus has to say here, we need to understand two things.

- First, where does this problem come from?
- Second, what exactly does Jesus say about it?

Let's look first at where it comes from.

## I. Where does the problem come from?

### God is good – God gives us good gifts.

As you all know, I love to talk about God's grace. Grace reminds us that God is good, and he loves humans - That means you and me. God is generous – he wants to give us good gifts. That should always be the starting point.

### Sin Blinds our eyes to the value of God and his gifts.

As we said last week, marriage comes under attack when people fall into sin. Sin blinds our eyes to God's greatness, his goodness, and all the wonderful things he is. Once we lose that, we lose the ability to see the value of his gifts. Marriage, as I've been saying, is one such gift.



What does this look like practically? Here is how things are supposed to work:

- Man and woman meet.
- Man and woman fall in love.
- Man and woman decide to enjoy the wonderful gift of marriage.
- ***They promise, or make a covenant, to be partners for life.***

Then, sin comes in. Both partners start to age. One or both notice that there are others around who are younger and more attractive. Then there's the question of how a couple should approach the challenges of life. Both partners develop opinions that differ. They notice that there are others who appear to agree. Time brings other challenges and problems. It appears that another partner would solve those challenges and problems.

So, one of the partners, the man or the woman, makes a decision to break their promise, their covenant, and partner with another person. That's adultery.

Jesus warns us that it's not just the physical act of adultery - It's the sin that proceeds it. It's one thing to notice that there is something desirable about someone who isn't your partner. A godly person remembers the value of God and the value of his gifts. At that point, a godly person asks for God's help to turn away from sin.

It's another thing when people choose to look. They choose to consider. They choose to fantasize about what it would be like to break their promise. Jesus warns us that all of this is the product of sinful hearts, so even these behaviors are dangerous.

How dangerous? Jesus warns of the fires of Hell. That's very serious.

## Legalism

Here's where another factor comes in. It's a problem that Jesus runs into throughout his ministry. It's been a problem for the church ever since. ***It's called legalism.*** Legalism is the belief that a relationship with God can be reduced to a set of rules.

Here's how the rules work. They're divided into positive rules, and negative rules.

Positive: Do the things God likes, and he likes you. And he may do things for you. He may give you favors if you ask. Sometimes, people who practice legalism believe that following rules obligates God to give them things.

Negative: Do the things God doesn't like, and he dislikes you. In this case, God will do one of two things. He will say "no" when you ask for favors. Or he may do mean things to you.

Under pure legalism, a relationship with God is a set of rules - Nothing more, nothing less.

We began to discuss this earlier by going back to the book of Genesis. Let's quickly revisit that. This is review for many of our readers, but please bear with me.

### **Sin – being like God.**

When the Serpent tempted Adam and Eve, he told them something would happen if they disobeyed God: "...you will be like God..." (Genesis 3:5)

The Serpent told Adam and Eve that if they disobeyed God, they could be like him. What does that mean? I'm certain that Adam and Eve had no real idea. It just sounded good. In practice, this means two things (at least): First, people want the things of God (his power, authority, and possessions), but they don't want him. Generally, people who get into this state don't like God.

The second is very difficult to comprehend. If you hear it described, it seems impossible, but let's consider it.

To explain, let's ask the question: Who is God? Answer: God is the king of the universe. He sits on the throne of heaven. What does that mean? That means we, the created things, should all be obeying and honoring him (Among other things).

OK. So, if you become God, what does that mean? It means you're on the throne. Others should be honoring and obeying you. Your kingdom may be small, nothing more than a room. It might be bigger, depending on your abilities. This can be complex, so we'll talk about it more at a later time.

The big problem comes when you are forced at some point to bring God back into the picture. It doesn't take long to figure out that a world without God is a lonely and painful place. So, most people are forced at some point to acknowledge him.

Here's the problem: If you are God, what's the **other** God supposed to be doing? Answer: He's supposed to honor and obey **you**. He is supposed to serve you.

There was no better example of this than what happened only one generation after Adam and Eve. The first two children on the earth were Cain and Abel. Cain managed the plants on the farm - The fruit and vegetables. Abel managed the livestock and herds. We're told that it came time for offerings to be made to God. Here's how that went:

In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. 4 And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, 5 but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. (Genesis 4:3-5)

So, we have two men, Cain and Abel. Abel understood who God was. He understood how wonderful God was. So, when it came time to bring an offering to God, Abel took it from the firstborn of his flock. **He offered the best things he had.**

Cain, however, had developed a limited vision of God. So, when it came to offer something to God, we're told he just brought "some" of the fruits of the soil. **In other words, he didn't bring the best.**

This is where the store illustration comes in. Again, we probably shouldn't look at God as though he was a store because God doesn't sell anything - He only gives good things away.

However, I want to suggest that Cain thought of God as a kind of store. And he didn't think of God as the best store. Cain thought of God as a discount store. Cain clearly wanted something from God. He thought he could purchase it at discount. What did Cain want? We're not sure exactly, but one thing Cain wanted was approval. And because he offered God something less than the best, he didn't get it. Instead, Cain got **dis**-approval.

In other words, Cain approached God and essentially said, "I will give you whatever I want to give you. - **And you God will be happy with it.**" Cain believed that his paltry offerings obligated God to give him what he wanted. God was supposed to worship and serve Cain. God was supposed to tell Cain what a wonderful man he was. That's not what happened.

We've been through this before, so I won't read the whole story. The result was that Cain became very angry at God. Now again, if you believe you're God, and one of your subjects disappoints you - what do you do? **You punish that subject.**

Cain decided to kill his brother. I believe that when he decided to do that, he believed he was punishing God.

### **How this has developed over the ages.**

How has this developed over the ages? Sadly, because sin has infected the Human Race, there is no shortage of people whose vision of God is diminished. All of them believe they are on the throne of their lives. Some work directly to kick God off his throne. We're read about them in Psalm 2. That's why we have discussed the fact that our world is at war with its Creator.

However, I would say that most people do something else. They recognize that God is out there, and that they need to get along with him somehow. ***So, they attempt to develop a business relationship with God.*** One way to think about this is to say that these people view him as a store.

If you go through life and you don't think of yourself as needing anything, you don't go into a store. In the same way, people who consider themselves sufficient for life don't bother with approaching God. On the other hand, if you do decide you need something, you choose a store. This is what people do when they decide they want something from God. Once you choose a store, you go in and pick out what you want. You pay the price and get what you want. That's how many people treat God. What I'm calling a "price", practically speaking, becomes rules - Do this; don't do that.

Now, some people ***do*** view God as a premium store. People like this are willing to pay what they consider to be top rates for what they believe they're purchasing. In terms of rules, this may mean making a big donation to a religious organization.

But most view God in lower terms. To them, a relationship with God is like the "going out of business" sale. The discount starts small; like the 10% discount. This grows to bigger and bigger discounts. Eventually, God is viewed like the leftover store or even the dollar store. As we said, it boils down to rules - In this case, the rules get easier and easier and easier.

All of this is tragic. It's tragic because again, God is not a store. He is loving and generous and giving. He gives without asking anything for himself.

This is legalism - The reduction of a relationship with God to mere rules. So, when people fall into legalism; when they view God as a store, they miss the wonder of God. Sin is bad enough. But legalism further blinds people to who God is and what he offers to us.

## The Pharisees

This brings us to the Pharisees of Jesus' day. The Pharisees and Teachers of the Law were a tragically misguided group. More than any group of people, they should have seen the greatness of God. They should have seen the immense value of the gifts that he gives to humans. Sadly, they turned out to be a group of professional level bargain shoppers. They reduced a relationship with God to rules. And they worked hard to pick rules that they felt they could accomplish.

In an earlier session, we said that God's Word matters to the Master. It was under attack by all people, the religious leaders. They skipped some parts – The parts that didn't fit their rules. Marriage became a prime example.

Imagine that a spiritual bargain basement shopper has become a religious leader. He's married. It was fun at first, but all the challenges of life set in. His wife is aging. Other, younger women are looking good. Then one day, this man gets into an argument with his wife. There is no spiritual life in him. He is firmly seated on the throne of his life.

What does a god do when one of his subjects annoys him? Does he go all the way back to the story of Cain and Abel? Maybe it is not a coincidence that Jesus mentions murder before he mentions adultery? "No", the man thinks. What if I get caught? And anyway, as we described in the last article, this man has sat down each evening of his adult life and pulled out a checklist. "I didn't murder anyone today. Check" That means, he has followed the rules.

Should he just run off into the night with a younger woman? That's tempting, but somewhere down his list is the topic of adultery. Every night, right after checking off "No Murder", this man has checked "Didn't commit adultery." So again, he has spent years following the rules - At least in his mind. He believes God is obligated to bless him because he's followed those rules. He doesn't want to lose that blessing.

So he's got a big problem. He's upset with his wife. He wants someone younger.

Now, there is another way that a god can handle people who disappoint them. ***You can banish them from your kingdom.*** But this man remembers that he made a covenant to be married for life. What to do?

Then one day, this man runs into the following verse in the Law of Moses:

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... (Deuteronomy 24:1)

Notice that there is an ellipsis, the "dot, dot, dot" at the end of this sentence. That's because this isn't the whole statement. However, if you're a spiritual bargain-basement shopper who's

trying to find the smallest set of rules he can find, this is all you need. You ignore the rest. This statement appears to suggest that all you need to do to be rid of your spouse is to write up a certificate and send her away. All that needs to happen is for a man to be displeased. This is exactly what a bargain shopper is looking for.

However, it's not quite that easy. Even this abbreviated statement has a qualifier. "because he finds something indecent about her". What does that mean? The word that is used for "indecent" is just a little vague. Have you ever gone for a walk and stepped in something squishy? You then smell a terrible smell? The Hebrew word that is translated "indecent" here is the word you would use.

So, how does that apply to marriage? The ancient Hebrew teachers got to work to find out. After looking into the issue, they came back with two opposing schools of thought. One group said that a man can lean simply towards the word "displeased." Anything that displeases a man works. If your wife burned your eggs one morning, you could divorce her. This is what I'm calling "Easy Divorce" - Divorce for any reason.

The other group was stricter. They said that the word that we're translating as "indecent" meant that some sexual sin had been introduced.

However, both groups had a tendency towards legalism. They both saw God as a kind of store. The only disagreement was about the price you had to pay to receive God's blessings. The "sexual sin only" group saw God as the higher-priced store, but he was still a store.

## **Moving On**

So, we said we'd have two parts to our discussion. First was "Where does this problem come from?" This is how: People who fall into sin lose their vision of God. They then lose their vision of God's gifts. They then tend to see themselves as sitting on their own throne. Legalism creeps in. People view God as a store. When people who do this marry, it results in easy divorce.

So, how did Jesus respond to this problem? What exactly does he say about it?

## **II. What Does Jesus say about the problem?**

Here's what Jesus says:

It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5:31-32)

Recall that Jesus starts each statement in this section of Matthew with the phrase, “You have been told”, or in this case, “It has been said.” Remember, Jesus isn’t undermining the word of God. He’s correcting that fact that the Word of God has been misrepresented and misunderstood.

Because we’ve taken the time to see where this all came from, we can understand the first statement Jesus makes: “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’” Jesus is saying, “no, that’s not what it says.” People who say this are taking the statements of Moses out of context.

Imagine that you have an aging man. He married at a young age. His wife has been faithful to him. Maybe she’s been the mother of his children. One day, he decides he’s tired of her, so he kicks her out. He thinks he only needs to make up some reason and give her a piece of paper. She’s now out on the street with no one to take care of her.

This is heartless and cruel. It is the exact opposite of what God’s Word teaches. It’s deeply offensive to God. Jesus goes on to say that anyone who does something like this is really guilty of adultery. Anyone who does this makes his wife a victim of adultery. Anyone who marries such a woman unwittingly commits adultery.

Disciples of Jesus need to understand the wonders of the gifts that God gives to mankind. They need to revere those gifts, not make sorry excuses to escape their responsibilities. **To Jesus, there is no such thing as easy divorce.**

Now, here’s the big question: ***To Jesus, is there any such thing as a legitimate divorce?***

There’s some confusion on that question. In the passage we read, Jesus says, “except for sexual immorality.” In other places where this is discussed, there is no “except”. So, some people say there is no legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage.

To me, this is where grace comes in.

As a note, let me mention that this was so important to Jesus the Master, that Matthew records discussions about divorce on two separate occasions. One is here. We see the next one in Matthew 19. It’s discussed in more detail then, so we’ll cover it in more detail when we get to that passage. For now, we’ll look at the big picture, and I’ll express my opinions as someone who has studied this for a long time.

Let’s consider another situation where a similar principle comes into play. Jesus was once asked about doing work on the Sabbath. Here’s what he said:

He said to them, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! (Matthew 12:11-12)

Jesus says, Yes, the Sabbath is very important. However, if an animal was hurt on the Sabbath, you would help. You would respond to the pain and fear of an animal. If this makes sense, consider that humans are much more valuable than animals.

In the same way, Marriage is very important. Because of that, I believe that we should always try to save marriages. That’s a strong theme in the Bible. There’s a lot you can do if you ask for God to help. But sometimes, in a broken world, things come in that undermine the wonder of marriage and cause incredible pain. Sometimes, the damage is so great, the pain is so severe, that God in his grace allows people to exit.

There are at least two clear instances of this in Scripture. One, Jesus gives here: Sexual sin. The apostle Paul gives us another in the book of I Corinthians 7:15: Desertion by an unbelieving spouse. In these cases, I believe the Scriptures clearly teach that there can be a divorce. I also believe that after a time of healing, there can be a remarriage.

This position has been held by great Christian leaders like Martin Luther and John Calvin. I agree with those great men. Most evangelical Christian leaders today would also agree.

Now, here’s where Evangelical Christians debate. Are there other situations where someone can divorce and remarry? Again, I’m going to give a personal opinion.

Let’s take two extreme cases: First, a woman comes to me who is being beaten by her husband. She sincerely believes that her life is in danger. Based on what we just read in Matthew 12, and because we live in an age of grace, I would not require a woman to continue in a situation where her life is in danger.

Let’s consider an example on the other end of the spectrum. A couple comes to me. They say, “Pastor, the magic has gone out of our marriage – we need a divorce.” I would ask that couple to consider what would happen if they invited Jesus into their marriage. I would tell them the wonderful stories I’ve heard of people who have seen horrible marriages repaired when they approach their problems with Biblical principles.

In between those two extremes, I would listen carefully when hurting people come into my office, and I would attempt to apply principles of grace to their situation.

Again, today we’re having to settle for the big picture. I hope we can address this in more detail at a later time, because it’s a very important issue.

For now, let’s pull this all together.

## Conclusion

Marriage matters to the Master. Sadly, like many of the wonderful gifts that God gives us, marriage has come under attack. We must always start with the fundamental principles: God is good, and he gifts us good gifts. We must try to understand those gifts. If we lose our vision of who God is, we lose our ability to understand his gifts. If we let that happen, it's easy to fall into legalism. It's easy to treat God like he's a store where we go to buy things. Maybe we see him as a high-end store? Maybe we see him as something less? That's sad because that's not who God is.

Today, we're applying this to marriage. In our last session we learned that marriage is under attack by adultery. Today, we've learned that cheap divorce is another attack. And it's not really another attack - It's just an excuse to commit adultery.

God gives us good gifts. Sometimes, those gifts take some work and sacrifice if we are to enjoy them and honor them as they deserve. If we can do that with God's help, there is great reward. And remember, when we fail, there is always mercy.

Understanding these things is the path of a disciple of Jesus. Why? We close by being reminded:

***For the Master to be your master, what matters to the Master must matter to you.***