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SERIES: The Good News, as reported by Matthew

SERMON: **A Sermon for the Ages: Hard Sayings on Adultery, Divorce, and Remarriage**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 5:27-32

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

My sermon this morning is going to make some of you uncomfortable; in fact, it has already made me uncomfortable. But I think it is a message that needs to be heard and taken seriously. The title, "Hard Sayings on Adultery, Divorce, and Remarriage" pretty well describes today's Scripture text, Matthew 5:27-32. Listen carefully to these words spoken by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

You have heard that it was said, "Do not commit adultery." But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

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 marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

One way to deal with this passage is to denounce the twin plagues of adultery and divorce that have shattered so many lives, call people to repentance, and threaten them with hell-fire if they refuse. And frankly, I don't know how one could be honest with this passage *without* doing that, for Jesus clearly was calling for radically changed hearts and radically changed behavior, and twice in this passage He Himself mentions the dangers of hell.

But that alone would not do justice to Jesus' purpose in this passage. I believe He also intended to strongly affirm moral purity and strongly affirm Christian marriage. You see, there is bad news in the Gospel as well as good news. The bad news is that sin wrecks everything; the good news is that Christ died for sin and through Him we can have forgiveness of sin and find the motivation to live holy lives.

Last Lord's Day we saw that two of the characteristics of the righteousness that God demands of those entering the Kingdom of heaven are that they refuse to make God's demands less demanding and refuse to make His permissions more permissive. We are going to see this morning how much that has been done in respect to God's laws about adultery, divorce, and remarriage.

In both of the paragraphs I just read Jesus informs us that adultery is a lot bigger problem than many of us like to admit. It's not just a problem for street walkers and their johns. It's not just glorified in Hollywood productions and cable TV, even network TV. It's not just practiced by worldly business people, rock stars, and professional athletes. It's a problem that affects the

lives of millions of seemingly decent, upstanding, happily-married people, even church people, even church leaders.

The reason I say that is twofold. First, God says that adultery can be mental and emotional, as well as physical. And second, some decisions to remarry, though legal (and perhaps even blessed by the church) involve adultery. Some of you may fear that your toes will be stepped on this morning. Maybe they will be, but Jesus is the one doing the stepping, and He never steps on toes without offering relief from the pain. And if you accept His relief (it's called grace), you're going to be better off than if you hadn't felt the pain of His words in the first place.

Adultery can be mental as well as physical.

The accepted religious view of adultery. The religious leaders of Jesus' day recognized that adultery is sin. Of course, they didn't have much choice, for the Seventh Commandment is pretty unambiguous: "You shall not commit adultery." I will give them credit for at least affirming the most basic understanding of this commandment. In doing so they are way ahead of many of today's educators, advertisers, TV and movie stars, comedians, novelists, even religious leaders. Adultery is sadly viewed as quite acceptable behavior in much of our society; at the very least it is assumed to be inevitable.

But even though the rabbis didn't deny that adultery is sinful and forbidden, they fudged by limiting its definition to "sexual intercourse by a married person with someone who is not one's spouse." Thus they excluded from their definition sex between unmarried persons, emotional affairs, other kinds of "fooling around," and, of course, sexual fantasy, a favorite indoor sport, then as now. Frankly, friends, I suspect the rabbis might have been quite comfortable with President Clinton's double-talk about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. His claim that he did not have sex with "that woman" (just because there had been no normal intercourse) is the very kind of moral hair-splitting these religious leaders specialized in.

And lest you think the rabbis are alone in their sophistry, I have personally talked to Christian singles who think that getting naked together doesn't violate the Seventh Commandment so long as there is no intercourse. Sex educators, motivated by a former Surgeon General of the U.S., routinely tell public school students that mutual masturbation is an acceptable and safe alternative to having sex (I doubt if it's even safe physically; I *know* it's not safe spiritually and psychologically). Hopefully most of us can see through such thinly-veiled excuses and see such behavior for what it is—a clear violation of God's call to sexual purity. But just in case we can't, Jesus helps us by taking the discussion to a whole new level.

Jesus's teaching on adultery. He goes so far as to say that one doesn't have to have any kind of physical contact with another person to be guilty of sexual sin. If a man looks at a woman lustfully he has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Ouch! What are we supposed to do with this, for I dare say there isn't a man in this room who has not committed adultery according to Jesus' definition. And I doubt if there are many women who haven't also been guilty of at least an occasional forbidden fantasy.

We're going to ask and try to answer a number of questions this morning.

1. What constitutes mental adultery? The term for “looks” here in Greek (“anyone who looks lustfully”) is a present participle that refers to a continuous process of looking. He is not speaking of an incidental or involuntary glance but of intentional and repeated gazing. It's a rare man indeed who is not going to notice a beautiful woman, especially if she is dressed provocatively. Noticing is not sin, nor even appreciating her beauty. But turning around and following her down the street, undressing her in his mind, *is* a violation of the Seventh Commandment.

No doubt someone is asking, “Just when does the look turn to lust? Are the first five seconds free? Or is it OK to look so long as you don't fantasize about it afterward?” Frankly, I wonder if the very asking of such questions may not reveal a Pharisaical heart—the kind of heart that is looking for loopholes in God's laws rather than seeking purity of heart and mind. It's almost impossible to quantify lust, but most of us know in our own consciences when we are appreciating beauty and when we are lusting. The tragedy of long, lustful looks is that they are often indelibly imprinted in the mind, waiting to be called up in a moment of idleness and relived in the imagination.

2. Are men the only ones guilty of mental adultery? I'm sure it hasn't escaped your notice that Jesus addresses men here. I think there is good reason for that. First, Jesus is principally directing his teaching to the Apostles, and they are all men. Furthermore, men are clearly more susceptible to the sinful look because they are so visually oriented when it comes to the sensual. However, I do not believe Jesus meant this teaching to apply only to men.

Women may be less susceptible to lustful looking, but they can actually be more guilty of *inciting* lustful looking. As one scholar astutely observes, “If lustful looking is so grievous a sin, then those who dress and expose themselves with the desire to be looked at and lusted after . . . are not less but perhaps more guilty.”ⁱ Besides, women are certainly very susceptible to emotional affairs.

3. Is mental adultery as serious as physical adultery? Absolutely. “You can't be serious, Pastor. No one ever got pregnant from mental adultery. No one ever got an STD from lust. Rarely is anyone murdered because of jealousy over mental unfaithfulness.” But I beg to differ with you. I think a case can be made that no one ever committed physical adultery without first committing mental adultery. So if you look at root causes, every one of those consequences—unwanted pregnancy, STD's, even many murders—can probably be traced to prior lust in someone's heart.

4. What is the solution to mental adultery? Jesus provides a simple solution. “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.” Now that's what He *says*, but what does He *mean*? I can hardly think He means for us to take this literally, because even blind men

experience lust. One of the early church fathers, a theologian named Origen, struggled so much with lust that he decided to have himself castrated, but he discovered too late that even that drastic act did not eliminate the problem for him. Neither escapism nor physical mutilation nor forced celibacy is the answer, because the heart of the matter is in the human heart.

I think Jesus means that we should be willing to give up whatever is necessary, even the most cherished things we possess, if doing that will help protect us from evil. In other words, sin, especially sexual sin, must be dealt with radically. We dare not toy with lust.

Let me share some practical ways this can be lived out. I'll go back to a story in the news some years ago. Several Christian men were working for a magazine publisher in Iowa when that publisher took on the printing of Hustler Magazine. It was a very lucrative contract for the company, but these men refused to work on the printing presses because they didn't want to look at such filth. The result is they were fired; they lost jobs they had for more than twenty years. That's refusing to toy with sin and paying a heavy price for it.

There are many Christian families who refuse to have cable TV in their homes (and a few who refuse to have any TV at all!) because they don't want the lustful influences that are so common in the media. I know men who have turned down lucrative sales jobs that involved out-of-town travel because they found the temptations too great. Others have moved out of town to get away from an emotional affair. Some women avoid soap operas and romance novels entirely because they know they can be drawn into mental adultery through these avenues. Many Christian men have engaged Covenant Eyes, a computer service that sends a list of all websites visited to three accountability partners every month. These are all positive illustrations of dealing radically with sexual sin.

5. Is pornography really that bad? Let me address for a few moments a problem that is plaguing many men today and placing many marriages at risk. It used to be that a man had to go on a search for pornography, but today it comes searching for us. Unsolicited emails can contain the vilest kinds of filth, and it's available on-line anytime, anywhere.

Pornography is filling some men's minds with celluloid images that are dangerous because of the very reason Jesus gives here—they generate lust in the heart. Furthermore, no wife can compete physically with the surgically altered and airbrushed bodies that make up these images. She can't even compete psychologically. Those women are always available, they never talk back, they make no demands, they don't have a mind of their own, there is no give and take, only give.

Three of my best friends in the Free Church, fellow pastors, have had to leave the ministry just in the past five years because of addiction to internet pornography. Thankfully, all three of them have dealt with their addiction, have been restored by their churches and will, I hope, be returning to ministry, but they have paid a heavy price, as have their churches.

So, friends, if, according to Jesus, adultery can be mental and emotional as well as physical, I ask you, "Are you ensnared in some form of adultery that you need to break free from once and for

all? Have you deluded yourself into thinking it isn't sin?" Think again! Christians need to deal radically with this sin. If you are addicted and simply cannot free yourself from it, then, by all means seek treatment. Begin by talking to your best friend or your pastor or a counselor. That person may prescribe more radical steps. But whatever you do, don't continue to ignore it!

Adultery can result from illegitimate divorce.

Allow me to read Matt. 5:31, 32 again:

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 marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

The accepted religious view of divorce. The religious leaders of Jesus' day taught that a man's right to divorce his wife was limited. That is, a man couldn't just say, "I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you," as is the case in some Muslim countries today. Rather he had to give his wife a certificate of divorce; in other words, he had to go through the courts and get a judge to make it legal. The Pharisees viewed themselves as noble for giving this wonderful protection to women, but the fact is this position on divorce was a huge move away from God's original intent regarding marriage. God said in Genesis, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." And Jesus added, "What God has joined together let no man separate." God's original plan and design was for marriage to be one man and one woman united together for as long as they both live.

Now the religious leaders gleefully latched onto the fact that in the OT God Himself mentions the need for a certificate of divorce, which is true, but I want you to see how they twisted and misused that fact. Look at Deuteronomy 24:1-4:

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.

Now if you remove all the conditional clauses and all the extraneous issues from this passage, the bottom-line teaching is that a man and a woman cannot reconcile and remarry after divorcing one another if there has been an intervening marriage. In other words, God says there can be no musical chairs in marriage. Don't think you can leave your wife, try another one out, and if the grass on the other side of the fence isn't really as green as you thought it would be, go back to the first one. God doesn't allow it.

That's basically the whole point of this passage. It doesn't encourage divorce; it doesn't actually even explicitly grant divine permission for divorce; it simply acknowledges that divorce happens

and forbids reconciliation after an intervening marriage.

But the rabbis twisted it to claim that all that was needed for divorce to be acceptable is a legal document. Further they claimed that the “indecency” mentioned in the Deuteronomy passage could be something as minor as burning the husband’s food. So long as the husband writes her a certificate of divorce, he’s in the clear. But Jesus will have none of it.

Jesus’ teaching on divorce. On the contrary, Jesus says, anyone who divorces his wife (with one exception, which we will address in a moment) causes her to commit adultery and causes the man who marries her to commit adultery. (Once again I would suggest to you that the same principle applies to women who divorce their husbands. Probably the only reason they aren’t specifically addressed here is that in those days women generally had no standing in court and therefore didn’t have the legal option of divorce).

1. Why does most divorce lead to adultery? Simply because divorced people tend to remarry, and though divorce itself doesn’t constitute adultery, remarriage after an illegitimate divorce *does*. You see, if a divorce is not legitimate, then the two individuals are still married in God’s eyes. Therefore, if one of them remarries someone else while still married in God’s eyes, that clearly constitutes adultery—both for the divorced person and the new partner.

Let me pause here and answer a question that may come to some minds: “Does the new marriage put the couple in a constant state of adultery, or is the adultery limited to the first time they come together?” I am inclined to accept the latter option. If they are living in a constant state of adultery, we are in essence saying that they cannot *not* sin, because (1) if they sleep together they are committing adultery, (2) if they don’t sleep together they are violating 1 Cor. 7, which says that husbands and wives are not to deprive one another, and (3) if they divorce each other they are compounding sin with more sin. I discuss the issue more thoroughly in a paper I have written, entitled *Divorce and Remarriage*. You can access it at <http://www.fefcwichita.org/pdfsermon/2007/Divorce%20and%20Remarriage.pdf>, or call the church office for a hard copy or an email attachment.

But Jesus mentions one important exception to His no-divorce position:

2. What is the one exception Jesus mentions? There is a situation under which Jesus does not consider a remarriage while one’s spouse is living to be adulterous. He says, “except for marital unfaithfulness,” that is, if the divorce is due to sexual sin on the part of one’s partner.

The Greek term translated marital unfaithfulness is *porneia*. A few interpreters have restricted the meaning of this term to unfaithfulness during the Jewish betrothal period, and since we don’t have anything exactly like that today, they deny that there is any exception to the “no divorce” rule. However, the fact is *porneia* is a very broad term referring to all kinds of sexual sin, including adultery, fornication, bestiality, homosexuality, exhibitionism, Clinton’s behavior, you name it. Even chronic addiction to pornography I believe fits the definition (after all, the very term for porn comes from that same Greek word). What Jesus is saying is that if a person’s

spouse is guilty of *porneia*, then the categorical prohibition of divorce no longer applies.

But please understand that God doesn't command divorce even when there is marital unfaithfulness. Nor does He encourage it. He merely permits it. As a matter of fact, I believe God's choice in most such situations would be for spouses to forgive and reconcile, so long as there is genuine repentance and a clean break from past immoral behavior. But He does allow for divorce in such a case, and I believe He also allows for remarriage by the offended party.

Sadly today there is virtually no interest in Jesus' teaching on divorce in secular society, and very little even in the church. In its place we have instituted no-fault divorce, which allows a marriage to be dissolved for almost any reason. No-fault laws today are so lenient that, as one Michigan state legislator said, "it is easier to divorce my wife of 26 years than to fire someone I hired a week ago." The result has been skyrocketing divorce rates.

3. Are there any *other* exceptions? I do not want to get too far afield from today's text, but I will mention that the Apostle Paul *may* allow for two other possible exceptions to the marriage-for-life principle, but both are rare. He seems to grant an exception in the case where two unbelievers marry, one converts to faith in Christ, and the other demands a divorce because he can't stand being married to a believer. Here is Paul's instruction regarding this situation from 1 Cor. 7:15: "If the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace."

In addition I believe Paul may grant the bare permission to divorce (but not permission to remarry), in cases where the marriage has become so degrading to one spouse that he or she is willing to choose a life of celibacy as an alternative (1 Cor. 7:10-12). I don't have the time this morning to explain these situations in detail, but they are also discussed in the paper mentioned previously.

4. What should we do about Jesus' teaching on divorce? I think we need to go back to the blueprint. God's plan is, by definition, the best plan. How could it be otherwise? If He is the God of Scripture—the infinite, eternal, omniscient God of wisdom and power and love—would He devise a plan that would be harmful to His children or limit their fulfillment? Would He demand permanence in marriage if that permanence interfered with our welfare and our happiness?ⁱⁱ

But, you say, there's nothing happy about *my* marriage. It's miserable! Do you mean to tell me that God wants me to stay in this prison for the rest of my life? Of course not! God doesn't want you to be in a miserable, unhappy marriage for even five more minutes! But there is an alternative to ending a miserable, unhappy marriage—that's to seek healing for it. And believe me, there are a number of couples here this morning who have seen their marriages healed. I'm talking about marriages that were once in very serious trouble but today are solid, happy, and fulfilling. Why should we be surprised at that? Our God is a reconciling God. In 2 Cor. 5:17 we read, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

I'm going to ask for a response from some of you this morning. I want you to testify about your faith—not verbally but by standing. If your marriage was once so troubled that you seriously thought about divorce, but God has healed your marriage to the point that divorce is now out of the question, would you be willing to stand right now as a testimony to God's grace in your life?

Back in 2004 I preached a message entitled, "*Why God Hates Divorce.*" I offered four reasons:

1. Because divorce violates His perfect plan for His highest creation.
2. Because divorce involves the breaking of a covenant, and promises are very important to God.
3. Because He loves people and doesn't want them to suffer the pain that divorce inevitably produces.
4. Because He loves children, and children are devastated by divorce.

Today we have talked about a fifth reason: because it frequently violates the Seventh Commandment against adultery.

But I also made it clear in that sermon that divorce is not the only thing God hates. Divorce is not a unique sin that makes a person unredeemable in the sight of God or unusable in the church. Furthermore, while God hates divorce, He does not hate those who have suffered divorce. Some of you may have been abandoned by a spouse; others may be victims of chronic unfaithfulness; still others may have felt trapped in a degrading marriage and feel as though you have no choices. This much I know for sure—no one in this room ever enjoyed divorce; it is always a painful alternative. Please believe me when I tell you that far from hating you, God loves you, we love you, and we want to help you begin where you are today to make the most of the rest of your life. You don't have to be just a survivor; you can be a triumphant Christian!

Even if you are the guilty party who destroyed your own marriage, that sin too is forgivable, and God's grace is available to you. I cannot, of course, promise you that the negative consequences of your action will be removed, but the guilt can be. In other words, I can't promise that your spouse will return or that your children's attitude toward you will improve or that your reputation will be regained, but God has good purposes for your life if you will allow Him to have control from this point on.

Conclusion: Friends, the marriage covenant serves as a symbol for the spiritual covenant between God and His people. All marriages whether civil or religious include the recitation of some kind of vows—statements and promises of mutual commitment before God and man. When a man and a woman marry, they do not say, "Till divorce parts us," they say, "Till death parts us." They almost always promise to stay together "for better or for worse." And God takes covenant-keeping very seriously. You said that once—on your wedding day! How about telling your spouse once more, and how about telling your kids that they don't have to worry about you and your spouse splitting up. You're in this for the long haul!

Let's pray. Father, we come to You today as sinful people who are helpless and hopeless without Your grace and forgiveness. As You spoke through the prophet Jeremiah, "My people have committed two sins—They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their

own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.” We acknowledge that we tend to look for the satisfaction of legitimate needs in illegitimate places. Lord, help us to return to You, the spring of living water, and to abandon our own devices to achieve satisfaction. Thank you, Father, for marriage, which you have provided as a wonderful gift to your children.

Father, I pray that many couples today might make new covenants with you to stay together and allow Your Spirit to make their marriages better than ever. Just as You raised Jesus’ lifeless body from a cold tomb over 2000 years ago, we ask You to resurrect many dead or dying marriages in our church family.

I pray, too, for those who wish to be married but have not found a partner. I pray for those who have lost a spouse and grieve in loneliness. I pray for those who have suffered divorce and pray that they might accept Your compassion, forgiveness and healing. And I pray that all of us may flee immorality in order that Christ might be magnified in our lives. In the powerful name of Jesus, Amen!

i. Arthur Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 83.

ii. Jesus answered that question emphatically later in the Sermon on the Mount. “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:9-11). And marriage is one of the greatest gifts God has given to His creation.