

Sermon on the Mount

July 6, 2014

## **Title: God's "New Normal"**

Text: Matthew 5:31-32

Summary:

### **Normal: old and new**

#### **Normal: then and now:**

"Normal." We all know the word and we all know what it means. The dictionary definition of "normal" reads:

*conforming to the standard or the common type; usual; not abnormal; regular; natural.*

"Normal" feels right, seems right, seems obvious. It's just the way things are. Or is it?

The funny thing about "normal" is that it changes all the time. Sometimes what's "normal" changes very quickly. Most often it morphs imperceptibly. Look back over time, however, and you can see that things that were most decidedly unusual, abnormal, irregular or unnatural are now the "new normal."

#### **Whatever happened to that new car smell?**

Take for example buying a new (or new to you) car. "Normal" for that car includes:

- the new car smell
- having the car clean and waxed
- a shiny interior
- no dirt on the floor mats or rugs
- no scratches or dents

It doesn't take long to get used to that kind of "normal"!

But time goes by. Remember that "new car resolution" to wash the car once a week, whether it needed or not? And what about that rule stating that there will be no food or beverages in this car? You give it all a good shot, but over time your resolve gives way to other more practical approaches.

Then one day you come out of the grocery store and see a fresh scuff of white on your bumper. No note, no explanation. A few months later a truck kicks up a stone on a back road and you end up with a chipped windshield. Things happen.

At first every little scratch is almost enough to take you to the body shop for a new paint job. But over time the nicks and scratches, the sand on the floor in the back seat and the coffee stains in the front seat all conspire together to create a "new normal." You get in your car and never give them a thought. In fact, the car would seem strange to you if it didn't make certain noises going down the road!

It doesn't happen all at once. Instead, the car gets a little "older looking" in tiny increments, until one day you stand back, look at your vehicle, and realize that your brand new car is now a cheap trade! That's the power of "normal: then and now."

### **Marriage: then and now**

The same sort of thing happens to people, their relationships, even their societies.

Marriage is one of those things that has been around forever. As long as people have been having babies, men and women have had to figure out some way of being together. After all, it takes a long time to raise a child to adulthood, whatever the culture.

Every marriage begins like that new car: brand shiny new, full of hopes and dreams. But like the new car, marriages don't stay new. Over time they get dented and cluttered. It doesn't happen all at once, but the "normal" of the wedding day gradually fades into another normal: that of a relationship that may or may not be going anywhere. No wonder, then, that over half of the marriages in our society end up on a flatbed headed for the junkyard. It's just the "new normal" that we have all become accustomed to.

So what do we do? Let things take their course and go with the flow? Or does God have something radically different: God's New Normal?

## **Jesus Weighs In**

### **Normal in a broken world:**

Jesus wasn't afraid to wade into the topic of marriage. Listen to how He began the conversation in the Sermon on the Mount:

#### **Matthew 5:31 NIV**

**“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’**

Here a little background is helpful. In Jewish society a man could divorce his wife. A wife had no legal standing to divorce her husband. Jewish divorce law looked back to Moses and his provision for divorce as stated in Deuteronomy. Moses stated that "if a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her," then he could write her a "certificate of divorce" and send her away. (Deuteronomy 24:1 ff.)

In Jesus' day there was a great debate between rabbis as to just what constituted something so "displeasing" or "indecent" that a man could justifiably divorce his wife. In fact, later in Matthew's Gospel the Pharisees ask Jesus where He stood on this question.

### **Matthew 19:3 NIV**

**Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"**

Their question was designed to trap Jesus by getting Him to commit to one or the other of the two versions of the "new normal" surrounding the failure of people to live up to their marriage vows in their society. One group of rabbis held that man could divorce his wife if she burnt his food. The other group insisted that the only grounds for divorce was adultery. Neither position could solve the deeper problem of broken people in a broken world who experienced broken marriages.

So how would Jesus answer?

### **"In the beginning"**

Jesus responds by going back to God's original intention for human beings:

### **Matthew 19:4-6 NIV**

**"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."**

Sound familiar? Once again we find ourselves face to face with the fact that God created men and women to bear His image. This reflection of God happens most profoundly when a man and a woman join their lives together in marriage. In fact, Jesus goes so far as to say that God Himself joins them to each other!

Here is the "new car"! Here is God's original plan for men and women who marry. No talk here of break-ups or infidelity. The two become "one flesh." In other words, they become kin, family, just as if they shared the same DNA. This is God's original Creation Order as it applies to marriage.

How important is marriage from God's point of view? Jesus says:

### **Matthew 19:6b NIV**

**"Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."**

## **Normal: then and now**

Remember what I said about standing back one day and comparing your old, well-used car to the car that it was when you drove it off the lot? We talked about how "normal" morphed from brand shiny new to a car with dents and scratches, coffee stains, sandy carpets, and other issues.

Well, Jesus is forcing us to do the same thing with marriage. Instead of giving us some rules for coping in the old broken world of marriage and divorce, He calls us back to the car lot as it were. He confronts us with God's original purpose for us and our marriages.

We can tell how far our culture has fallen by how shocking and unrealistic Jesus sounds to us. Sure, we say, it's all well and good to say that people ought to try to make their marriages work. But let's be real: 60% of marriages *don't* work out. And the divorce rate among church people is essentially the same as for those who don't go to church. That's just the way it is; that's the "new normal."

And what's more, there isn't a one of us who hasn't been impacted by the reality of divorce in one way or another. Some of us are divorced. Some of us are divorced and remarried. Probably most, if not all, of us have family members who have experienced divorce. Many of us are the children of divorce. Divorce is the "new normal." How can it be any other way?

## **"But I tell you..."**

### **No Divorce!**

In answer to the question about where divorce fits into the Kingdom of God, Jesus has a simple answer: It doesn't.

### **Matthew 5:32 NIV**

**"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."**

Two people who have determined to follow Jesus and who have been reborn through His Spirit never need to even contemplate divorce. It is not part of the new reality of being remade in God's image. For them to resort to divorce is to go back to the old broken world from which God delivered them.

When we go shopping for a new car, we don't expect to see Happy Meal bags in the back seat or dents in the driver's door! We don't buy a new car with a blown engine. The same is true with the new reality of men and women celebrating marriage in God's New

Creation. God's Spirit has made us new people. And God's Spirit will help us grow a marriage that is stronger than anything this world can throw at it.

### **It takes two:**

Jesus offers one notable exception to His prohibition of divorce for His followers: "sexual immorality." In other words, if a marriage partner "walks off the map" and breaks the marriage vows, then the reality is that there are no longer two people reflecting God through their marriage. Jesus acknowledges that this happens in our broken world. In speaking of Moses' teaching on divorce He explains:

### **Matthew 19:8 NIV**

**Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning."**

As we all know, when someone checks out of their marriage, there is nothing that the other spouse can do. Marriage requires a 100% commitment from both husband and wife if it is to go the distance!

Jesus wasn't saying here that if your spouse commits sexual sin with someone else you should automatically seek a divorce. Jesus, after all, offered forgiveness to a woman who had been caught in adultery. We should certainly pursue reconciliation, and offer forgiveness to a repentant spouse. But if a person determines to walk away from the marriage, then we must accept the reality of their decision.

### **Living in God's New Normal:**

As followers of Jesus, we are living out God's Story, and not the story offered by our culture or our feelings. Our marriages are a vital part of that story. They are to be re-born and re-created by God's Spirit in the same way that we ourselves are re-created as God's sons and daughters.

Together, we reflect God into His world. He has put us together. And He can keep us together! By His grace we are living out God's New Normal.

So what about divorce? As long as this old world exists, relationships will fail, people will betray their marriage vows, and families will suffer divorce. When it happens, we are called to respond with the same love and forgiveness that God granted to us when He made us His children. Divorce is not an "unpardonable sin." It's just one more symptom of a world that needs remaking through God's creative power.

Regardless of your past, or your family's past, the most important thing is what you do next. Regardless of whether you are in your first marriage or your fourth, the most important thing is how you choose to live from this time forward. Will it be in the old broken constructs of this world, or will you choose to live in God's New Normal?

