

Jesus and Divorce

Matthew 5:31-32; 19:1-9; I Corinthians 7:10-15

**A sermon preached by Dr. Calvin Warpula
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Today we come to a difficult passage in the Sermon on the Mount. Since early in the twentieth century, the United States has had the highest divorce rate of any modern society. Forty-eight of our fifty states now have no-fault divorce laws. Every year the divorce rates keep climbing. Divorce affects one million couples and one million children every year in our country. Divorce often brings severe emotional trauma, not only to the divorced but to their children. Studies have shown that adolescents from non-intact homes compared to teens from intact homes, are more likely to engage in premarital sex, and to use alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs.

God Designed and Created Marriage

Jesus speaks about divorce and remarriage because marriage, divorce and remarriage are moral subjects related to the laws of God. They are not just civil, legal themes regulated merely by the laws of the country in which one is living. Marriage is of divine origin. It goes back to the creational design in the Garden of Eden. It was created by God for the love, companionship, security, and procreation of mankind. Recently, some state governments have redefined marriage as a union of two persons of the same sex. However, marriage is not a government institution that can be changed by majority vote. Marriage is a universal, divine institution created and designed by God and it is not in man's authority or power to change God's perfect plan.

God is for healthy, happy, mutually-satisfying marriages. It is not enough for us to be against divorce, we must be for committed, loving marriages. The union of husband and wife is modeled after that of Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:22-32).

If I am to be true to God, I must faithfully deliver what God has said about marriage, divorce and remarriage. I am not here to please or satisfy any person

except the Lord God as revealed in his word. The conclusions and interpretations I present today are from many hours of study but they are my own. They do not necessarily represent anyone else in this congregation.

When they asked Jesus about divorce for any and every reason, he went back to God's original design in the creation story of Genesis chapters one and two. This is the ideal plan of God for the human race. In the beginning, God created one man and one woman and brought them together. The writer of Genesis commented in chapter 2, verse 24: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."

Jesus quoted this verse from Genesis and gave it his full endorsement and stamp of approval. Later, the apostle Paul wrote about marriage in Ephesians chapter 5 and quoted this verse as God's ideal will.

This verse says that a heterosexual (a male and female) marriage was to be one man, one woman for life. This marriage involves a leaving physically and psychologically of old ties of father and mother, a cleaving to one another, and a weaving together of one flesh (a physical, exclusive union that is indicative of a union also of the soul and spirit.). Jesus said, "What God has joined together, man should not separate." That joining together is called "one flesh." Anything that breaks that union is a sin against the man or the woman, against the family that may be involved, and against God himself. All divorce is sinful and necessarily involves the sin of one or both of the parties in the marriage.

This is the first book of the OT. In the last book of the OT, the book of Malachi, God says that he hates divorce. Hear him in chapter 2: [read vs. 13-16].

The Certificate of Divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-4

The only verse in the OT that speaks of a reason for divorce is in the fifth book of the law, Deuteronomy, chapter 24. Hear what God says there: [read vs. 1-4]. A man who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce to protect her from the charge of adultery against that first husband when she remarries. If the second husband divorces her, or he dies, and she is freed from the second marriage, then the first husband cannot remarry her. This protected the woman and kept her from being treated like chattel.

The law permitted the divorce. It was optional, not obligatory, but if there was a divorce, the law required the certificate of divorce. Otherwise, without that certificate, if a woman remarried she and her second husband could be accused of adultery against the first husband. The law said that adulterers would be stoned to death. This requirement that the first husband could not remarry the woman after the dissolution of her second marriage would make the man think several times

about the seriousness of the divorce because he knew that he could not marry her again. He would be very cautious then and this stringency would help to prevent frivolous divorces.

Jesus Speaks on Divorce in Matthew 5 and 19

Jesus spoke about divorce and remarriage in the Sermon on the Mount and in the discussion with the Pharisees in Matthew chapter 19. The Pharisees question about “divorce for any and every reason” was a cleverly designed trap to catch Jesus. Herod had killed John the Baptist because John had condemned his marriage to his brother Phillip’s wife, Herodias. The Pharisees hoped to get Jesus likewise condemned to face the same wrath of Herod. The Pharisees were also debating among themselves about the meaning of the divorce provision of Deut. 24. The Law said that “if a man puts away his wife for any indecency found in her” and about a second husband “finding dislike in her.” The Pharisees discussed what was this “indecency” and “dislike.” It could not be adultery because adultery was punishable by death (Deut. 22:22). During the time of Jesus, when the Romans ruled Palestine, the Jews did not have the right to put people to death without Roman permission. The Romans would not allow death for adultery. In the time of Jesus, among the Jews, then divorce for adultery occurred instead of death.

Two of the leading rabbis of the day debated the meaning of the divorce provisions of Deut. 24. Rabbi Shammi took a conservative position and said that the unseemly thing was something disgraceful related to sex. It could have been a woman exposing her body to another man, discussing sexual matters with men besides her husband, or sexual flirtation or talk with another man besides her husband. Rabbi Hillel, on the other hand, said that the indecency and the dislike referred to anything that a man found to his disfavor in his wife. According to him, a woman could be divorced if she went spinning in the street, talked to another man in the street, burned the dinner, wore her hair down exposed and not up in a bun or covered by a shawl, or if he simply found someone else he liked better. So in effect the Pharisees asked Jesus, “Do you agree with Rabbi Shammai or with Rabbi Hillel? What’s your view of what Moses commanded?”

In response, Jesus made it clear that Moses did not command divorce. Divorce was an option with Moses. He did command a certificate of divorce if the divorce was occurring, but he did not demand a divorce necessarily take place for any of the reasons that Rabbis Shammai and Hillel named.

Jesus then goes back to the original intent of God, to God’s ideal will in the Garden which was one man, one woman, for life. In the account of this story in

Mark chapter ten, the exception clause, “except it be for fornication,” is not named. Neither is it named in the one sentence account that Luke gives of Jesus’ teaching on divorce (Luke 16:18).

Matthew speaks of a man divorcing his wife, but it is interesting that Mark in his gospel applies all this teaching to the woman as well as to the man. Here what Mark says in chapter 10: [read vs. 11-12]. Note that the woman divorcing and remarrying her husband is guilty like the man divorcing and remarrying his wife. God is no respecter of persons or of gender. The principles of God for marriages apply to both husbands and wives. Note also in this Markan passage that the man commits adultery **against her**, that is, his wife. It would be the same vice versa, that the woman would commit adultery against her husband. This shows that the adultery is covenant breaking against the partner.

Matthew names the exception clause in both his passages discussing divorce (5:32 and 19:9). It is true that all Jewish, Roman and Greek societies allowed divorce when a man or a woman committed fornication against the marriage. They viewed that act as a deliberate, voluntary breaking of the marriage covenant and thus gave the other party the right of divorce and remarriage. Matthew specifically states what Mark and Luke understood. Matthew’s gospel is more of a formal church manual that spells out specifics that the other two do not. Matthew does not contradict Mark or Luke but only makes explicit what was implicit in their gospels.

In 5:32, to gain the proper interpretation, we should first read the sentence without the exception clause. “Anyone who divorces his wife causes her to become an adulteress. And anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.” Notice that Jesus does not in this verse say that the divorcing man is guilty of sin directly. He uses the passive verb and says that the man’s actions causes the woman to commit adultery or to become an adulteress. His divorcing action causes her to be labeled an adulteress because she is still united to the marriage and is thus not eligible for a second marriage. The divorce causes this to happen because in all ancient societies (Jewish, Greek and Roman) divorce implied the right of remarriage. There was no such thing as a divorce that did not give the right of remarriage to someone else. There was no such thing as enforced celibacy after divorce. All divorced people had the right to pursue another marriage. The woman in this case is caused to commit adultery because she seeks out a marriage partner. In the time of Jesus, a woman depended on a man for support, and oftentimes the only way a woman could survive without marriage was through prostitution, which, of course, was sinful. So the man’s action forces the woman to commit adultery against her first husband because she is forced by her own needs, both sexual and economic, to marry someone else.

Jesus continues to say that any man who marries the woman that is divorced

commits adultery because he has taken up with another's man's wife. In this verse then the sin is primarily committed first in the divorce, not the remarriage. God said in Malachi, "I hate divorce." It is divorce that causes the sin. Divorce is sinful in and of itself. It breaks a covenant that was made to last for life. It is being unfaithful to a promise or vow and it breaks that "one flesh" covenant. The remarriage later only adds to the original sin of the divorce. Jesus talks about the remarriage because it was unthinkable for all societies of that day to allow divorce but not remarriage. Remarriage was automatically a part of divorce. In other words, there was no such thing as allowing a divorce but forbidding a second marriage. Those who do this today are basing their interpretation on human tradition and not on the law of God. It is divorce that is sinful. Marriage itself is good and honorable (Heb. 13:4). The Bible says that a person should marry and not burn in lust (I Cor. 7:9). Those who forbid marriage are teaching the doctrine of demons (I Tim. 4:3).

Now when we read 5:32 with the exception clause it makes an exception to the charge of making the divorced woman an adulteress or the man who marries a divorced woman to be committing adultery. This means that the exception modifies the entire sentence and the consequences that follow. When a man divorces his wife because of *porneia* (the Greek word which means "sexual immorality") then that does not cause her to commit adultery and the one who marries the divorced woman does not commit adultery. This is true because the marriage has already been broken by her sexual immorality. The divorce formally recognizes what has in fact already occurred. The marriage bond or union was broken by sexual unfaithfulness.

Let's go now to chapter 19 and notice further what Jesus says. Without the exception clause, here Jesus places the blame on the man who divorces his wife. The man here is charged with adultery. In the OT, a man could not commit adultery unless the woman he was involved with was married to someone else. If she was unmarried, he could just add another woman to his polygamous marriage. Polygamy was permissible under OT teaching. It was probably like divorce: a concession to sin that God regulated. What God could not eradicate because of the sinful nature of man, he regulated. Jesus says now, however, under kingdom ethics that any man who divorces and remarries another woman commits adultery. Adultery here is the Greek *moicheia* which is a specific type of *porneia* which means that one of the partners is married to someone else. In this case, the first marriage is still intact and recognizable even though a divorce has occurred. He commits adultery because he has broken the covenant with his first wife. He is guilty of adultery because he is a covenant breaker.

This means then that adultery here is used of covenant breaking, not of sexual relations. Adultery in the OT and in the NT sometimes has a non-sexual

meaning. In Malachi, God speaks of the covenant breaking with the wife of your youth. God accused the Israelites of adultery against him when they worshipped other gods. James said that believers are adulterers and adulteresses when they love the world and the things in it (James 4:4).

The adultery in Matthew 19:9 consists of two things: divorcing and remarriage. Carroll Osburn in a thorough investigation of the present indicative verb “commits adultery” shows that it is a “present of general truth” and continuity of action is not necessarily under consideration [Carroll Osburn, “The Present Indicative in Matthew 19:9,” Restoration Quarterly 24, 4(1981):193-203]. This means that divorce and remarriage apart from the cause of *porneia* constitute an act of adultery, but they do not necessarily constitute a continuing state of adultery. Adultery occurs every time these two actions occur: divorcing and remarriage. The adultery is not something that happens sequentially when a couple has marital relations with one another. So to stop the adultery means to stop divorcing and remarriage, not to stop having marital relations with your new wife or husband.

Some people claim that a couple in such cases must divorce their present mates and seek to be reunited with their original mate. The original divorce and remarriage may have occurred years before and the first mate may even have remarried and have a family of his or her own. God never required in the NT that husbands and wives in legal, heterosexual marriages break up their homes and seek to be reconciled to previous mates. Nobody on the day of Pentecost or anyone in New Testament times was commanded by God to break up a legal, heterosexual marriage. That would be to be guilty of the sin of divorcing and remarriage all over again.

Divorce Is Optional, Not Obligatory, in Cases of Marital Unfaithfulness

It is important to note that Jesus does not require a divorce even in the case of marital unfaithfulness. Jesus gives permission for a divorce to occur under those circumstances but he does not demand it. Many times it may be better for a husband or wife to forgive the sin and save the marriage and keep the family intact, if indeed, it can be done. No wife or husband should subject themselves to habitual sin on the part of their marriage partner, but a one time occurrence does not demand that a divorce occur. Perhaps counseling, patience and forgiveness will restore the relationship.

The Apostle Paul Answered Marriage and Divorce Questions in I Corinthians Chapter 7

The apostle Paul spoke about the marriage relationship in chapter seven of I Corinthians. In this chapter Paul affirms the importance of a healthy, mutually-satisfying conjugal relationship between husbands and wives. In v. 8 Paul speaks to the desirability of celibacy under the current distress and crisis (v. 6). We do not know what this was but it appears to be some economic, political or spiritual distress or persecution that would possibly cause a married person to be less faithful to Jesus (vs. 29-35). Even under those conditions, it was better to marry than to burn with passion (v. 9, 27-28).

To the married, Paul says that they should not separate from each other. The word “separate” here when used of the wife (Greek *chorizo*) means to divorce. In the following verse, Paul shows that this is means when he balances his statement by saying that likewise “a husband must not divorce his wife.” If a divorce does occur, it is best for the mate to remain unmarried or else be reconciled to his or her mate (v. 11). The same word “unmarried” is used in vs. 27-28 where Paul writes: “Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned.” This shows that it is not a sin for a divorced person to marry. The ideal for the divorced person may be celibacy or reconciliation with a mate, but Paul goes on to say that if such a person marries, he or she has not sinned.

The ideal is not always possible. Sometimes Humpty Dumpty cannot be put together again. Scrambled eggs cannot be unscrambled. Sometimes we cannot repair, we can only repent. We can repent of our past sins whatever they may be, and begin life anew in Christ. There are no unpardonable sins except the ones we will not repent of. If we repent and turn to God, his grace covers marriage failures as well as all other failures.

In v. 12, Paul speaks about some things that Jesus never addressed during his ministry. He writes about a believer being married to an unbeliever. That would be common in pagan cities like Corinth where a husband or wife would be converted to Christ and his or her partner would not be. Marriage is not a Christian institution like the Lord’s Supper. Marriage is for the entire human race since creation, not just for believers. God recognizes the validity of marriages of believers as well as unbelievers and of those spiritually-mixed marriages where one is a believer and one is not. Here Paul writes that a believer should not divorce an unbelieving spouse if that unbeliever is content to live together with the believer.

In v. 15, however, Paul says that if the unbeliever is “not willing” stay together and departs, let him or her leave. “The believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances. God has called us to peace.” The word for “not bound” is the same word used throughout this chapter for “not bound to the

marriage,” and “divorced.” Paul extends the teaching of Jesus. The apostle addresses subjects Jesus never addressed, and he does so by the Spirit of God working in him. God develops the subject of marriage and divorce in the letters of the apostles. Here Paul, under the inspiration of the Spirit (v. 40b) says that desertion by an unbeliever is a reason for divorce without sin. This desertion would include long-term physical absence and physical abandonment. The unbeliever leaving may imply that his or her sexual needs are being met somewhere else than with his or her believing mate, and thus this may be an application of what Jesus said about *porneia* and divorce. “God has called us to live in peace” indicates that if an unbeliever is not satisfied with a believer that it would not be a peaceful marriage. God wants there to be unity and peace in a marriage.

Is Divorce Permissible for Other Reasons?

We have seen that according to the word of God that there are two cases where divorce and remarriage could occur without sin on the part of an innocent party. The first is *porneia* on the part of the offender and secondly desertion of the marriage by an unbeliever. Now this raises questions for us about other causes of divorce. What if a spouse shows that they are “not willing” (v. 13) to stay together by their behavior of physical abuse, financial irresponsibility, death threats, drunkenness or drug addiction, addiction to pornography, or disregard to fulfilling marital, conjugal rights?

These are serious questions and people face situations like this today. I certainly would not encourage anyone to stay in a marriage where his or her life was threatened. Survival is necessary to life. Some of these other problems may fall in that same category. If a believer is not bound if the unbeliever deserts him or her, then why would he or she be bound if a person is behaving like an unbeliever and is destroying the marriage through other ways than actual desertion? Is it possible that habitual drunkenness, or other addictions to destructive behaviors and the failure to fulfill God-ordained marital duties are the same as desertion or a form of desertion? These are matters for serious study and thought.

God’s Grace Is for Every Sinner

The grace of God applies to the sin of divorce and remarriage just like it does to every other sin. If a person is guilty of gluttony, does that mean that he

cannot ever eat again? No, it just means that he is not to overeat again. If a person is guilty of lying does that mean that he cannot ever talk again? No, it just means that he is not to tell lies again. If a person is guilty of fornication, does that mean that he cannot ever have sex again under any circumstances? No, it just means that he or she is not to engage in illicit sex again. If a person is guilty of divorcing and remarrying, does that mean that a person cannot ever get married again? No, it just means that he is not to divorce and remarry again.

We have seen that God's ideal is one man for one woman for life. Anything less than that is not ideal. We have seen that divorce and remarriage without guilt are permissible, not obligatory, when a partner is guilty of sexual unfaithfulness. We have seen that the sin of divorcing and remarrying can be forgiven if we turn to God to be born again, a new birth culminated in repentance and baptism into Christ. We have seen that no sin, even that of covenant breaking of a marriage, is unforgivable. This means that even those who are guilty of breaking a marriage by sexual misconduct can be forgiven if they will repent. Divorce is not an unforgivable sin. If God has truly forgiven a sinner, then we should not speak of them as "the guilty party" since in Christ they are now new creatures.

Of course, it is much better to be innocent than forgiven. Just because God forgives sin is no reason to use his grace as an opportunity to commit sin. God forgives any and all sins, if we repent, but that does not endorse or encourage sin. Grace does not give us the right to disregard the principles of God. A plastic surgeon can rebuild our face after we bathe it in sulphuric acid, but, please, just because a remedy is there, do not go through the pain, misery, and consequences of destructive behavior.

The good news of the gospel is that men and women who have committed every sin in the book have been and are being forgiven by the grace of God and the blood of Jesus shed at the cross. Saul killed Christians and yet he was forgiven and became the great apostle Paul. The Jewish leaders and their people called for the crucifixion of Jesus and yet they were forgiven when they turned to Christ for salvation. The Corinthians were guilty of drunkenness, greed, slander, fornication, and homosexuality and yet when they heard about the saving grace of God in Jesus and obeyed it, they were washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord. The good news of the gospel is that no matter how many times you have committed fornication, divorced and remarried, used drugs, lied, stolen, cheated, gotten drunk, been envious, greedy, or dishonored God and others in many other ways, you can be a "new creature in Christ." The church is a fellowship of forgiven sinners who have been cleansed and forgiven by God of every sin they have ever committed. "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9).

Today can be the first day of the rest of your life—a life freed from the

addictive powers of sin and a life filled with God's Spirit to live for the Lord. You can come today for baptism, for prayers, for restoration, or for whatever you need. Jesus is ready to meet you now. Let us help you in your response to his gospel and his grace. Come now, while we stand and sing.

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