

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

10 Is There No Way Out?

Scripture Reading

Deuteronomy 21:1 – 4, Matthew 5:31 – 32, 19:3 – 9, Mark 10:2 – 12 and Luke 16:18

Corinthian Confusion

Last week we looked at 1 Corinthians 7:10 – 16. It seems that there were at least some in Corinth who were advocating that Christians should not be married and there were those who even went so far as to say that believers who were married already should separate.

Paul's answer to them was clear and firm: separation is not on for believers: Jesus Himself said so and any couple who had wrongly separated must stay single or else get back together. But what about people who were saved after they were married? Could a believer stay married to an unbeliever? If the unbelieving partner is willing for the marriage to continue, Paul said, it must continue, but if the unbeliever wants to leave then the marriage is ended and the believer is free.

That teaching left us with some questions. Do verses 10 and 11 rule out divorce in any circumstances? Does verse 11 amount to a total ban on all remarriage after separation? Should a believer who is separated always seek reconciliation? Does verse 15 imply that a believer who has been abandoned by an unbelieving partner is free to remarry? We decided that to answer those questions we would need to look at what else the Bible has to say about divorce and remarriage, especially at what Jesus said. Although there will inevitably be some overlap, this evening we will confine ourselves to what the Bible has to say about divorce; next week we will consider teaching on remarriage.

God Hates Divorce

We do not know when the first divorce took place but by the time it gets its first mention in the Bible (Deuteronomy 22:19, 29 and 24:1 – 4) divorce is already a common practice, even among the descendants of Abraham.

The Bible is clear, God hates divorce.

"Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence."

Malachi 2:16

Nevertheless, with the introduction of the law, God regulates it rather than forbidding it outright. He acknowledges its existence and sets rules so that when it happens things will be done in an orderly fashion. In doing that He recognises the necessity of divorce in a sinful world. There are some who would go so far as to say that although God does hate divorce and it was never part of His original purpose for mankind He Himself is a divorcee: forced into separation by the adultery of Israel.

"The LORD said also to me in the days of Josiah the king: "Have you seen what backsliding Israel has done? She has gone up on every high mountain and under every green tree, and there played the harlot. And I said, after she had done all these things, 'Return to Me.' But she did not return. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it. Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce;"

Jeremiah 3:6 – 8

Question: Do you think this verse is relevant to our present study?

But There Are Circumstances...

In 1 Corinthians 7 we have already come across one set of circumstances where divorce is accepted by God: when an unbeliever married to a believer wishes that marriage to end. But are there any other circumstances in which divorce is acceptable or where a believer can take the initiative to divorce an unbeliever?

1 Corinthians 7:10, as we saw last week, would appear to say no to that but we did wonder if Paul might have been writing in response to the particular concerns of the Corinthian church and therefore not giving a ruling for every situation.

Deuteronomy 24:1 seems to allow that a man can divorce his wife if, “she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her.” That is how the Pharisees of Jesus day saw that verse and in fact some of them went further and said that it meant a man could divorce his wife for any reason so long as he did give her a divorce certificate. Jesus made clear in Matthew 5:31 – 32 that that particular view was wrong. He explained the meaning of Deuteronomy 24 more fully there and in the parallel passages of Matthew 19:1 – 9 and Mark 10:1 – 12.

The Lord Says

We can summarise the teaching of these three passages as follows

- Whoever divorces his wife causes her to commit adultery (Matthew 5:32)
- Whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery (Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9)
- Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery (Matthew 19:9 and Mark 10:11)
- If a woman divorces her husband and marries another she commits adultery (Mark 10:12)

Although it is not said specifically in Matthew 5 that it is when the divorced wife remarries that adultery is committed, it is implied and Matthew 19 and Mark 10 say clearly that it is in remarriage after divorce that adultery is committed.

Jesus also makes clear, by referring right back to the book of Genesis, that when two people marry they are joined by God and become one flesh.¹ That is how God said it should be from the beginning and Deuteronomy 24 does not represent a change of mind on God's part it: is merely a necessary regulation in view of the hardness of men's hearts. Furthermore, Jesus adds, those who have been joined by God should not be separated by man. The implication is that to do so would be an act of rebellion against God.

But I am curious as to why Jesus placed so much emphasis on the committing of adultery. What is the significance of that?

Adultery

In both Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 two distinct sins are mentioned. Sexual immorality or fornication covers any kind of illicit sexual intercourse including homosexuality, lesbianism and intercourse with animals or close relatives. It includes acts of adultery as we tend to understand it — intercourse outside of marriage — but in these verses a different word is used for adultery. The implication is that adultery is more than just sexual sin.

Adultery is violation of a marriage covenant by giving the place that rightly belongs to a husband or wife to another. You commit adultery when you break the promise of faithfulness and companionship to your husband or wife that you made before God. Because sexual intercourse is the ultimate expression of the marriage covenant sexual intercourse with someone else is the ultimate act of adultery but when God's word speaks of adultery the emphasis is not on the physical act, the emphasis is on what that act means: unfaithfulness, betrayal, a covenant despised.

By equating remarriage with adultery Jesus implies that even after a divorce has taken place the obligation of the marriage covenant still stands. We will have to come back to this next week when we consider what the Bible teaches about remarriage after divorce but for now we will note that by placing so much emphasis on the committing of adultery Jesus adds considerable weight to the overall thrust of His words which is that divorce is just not on.

The Pharisees Had It Wrong

So then, it looks like no divorce in any circumstances for believers: 1 Corinthians 7:10 – 11 is a good summary of what Jesus taught.

“A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried (to avoid compounding her sin by committing adultery) or be reconciled to her

¹ By referring back to Genesis Jesus also confirms that marriage is a creation ordinance and establishes that His teaching on divorce, which is based on that, applies to everyone, not just believers.

husband (repenting of her sin and fulfilling her obligation as a wife). And a husband is not to divorce his wife.”

1 Corinthians 7:10 – 11

The Pharisees who said a man could divorce his wife for any old reason so long as he gave her a certificate were wrong. Divorce remains, as it always has been, contrary to God's purpose for man and marriage and, when followed by remarriage, it involves adultery — except when the divorce has been occasioned by sexual sin (Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9).

Is There An Exception For Fornication?

What about that sexual immorality clause? Does it create an exception? Is divorce OK when a husband or wife has committed some sexual sin?

The clause, which is only recorded in Matthew's gospel, establishes that if a man divorces his wife because of sexual immorality he will not be committing adultery or causing her to commit adultery in remarrying. If that is the case then in those circumstances divorce has indeed ended the marriage covenant.

It may be that Jesus included this clause as an explanation of the meaning behind the words of Deuteronomy 24:1 “...she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her.” thereby clarifying the circumstances in which God tolerated divorce. The Pharisees had taken the words translated “uncleanness” to mean any impurity. Jesus said, “No it is only in the case of sexual immorality that divorce is to be tolerated.” In other words Jesus was not softening the overall thrust of His teaching but was making clear just how limited the exceptions are. The exception is not the thing He emphasised. What Jesus was emphasising by stating it is that a divorce may not take place for any other cause.

Questions For Discussion

- Why do you think immorality creates an exception to the no divorce rule?
- Why do you think Paul omits to mention this exception in 1 Corinthians 7?

Back To 1 Corinthians 7

We are now in a position to return to our first question in relation to 1 Corinthians 7. Do verses 10 and 11 rule out divorce in any circumstances?

The answer is no there are two, but only two, exceptions.

- When an unbelieving husband or wife divorces a believer it is acceptable for the believer to go along with the divorce. In reality he or she has no choice and in fact it might be more accurate to say that in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul is not so much establishing an exception to the no divorce rule as giving wise pastoral counsel to believers who have been abandoned by unbelievers. In the light of the other passages we have been looking at the unbeliever who initiates the divorce is acting sinfully and the believer must be sure that he or she has done all that can be done to fulfil his or her marriage vows.
- Divorce is acceptable when one partner has committed an act of sexual immorality. However, if divorce is permitted in the case of sexual sin, it is not commanded. Even fornication may be repented of and, if it is forgiveness and reconciliation is not only possible, it is what God expects to happen (Luke 17:1 – 10).

We must always remember that these are exceptions: accommodations to a sinful world. It is overwhelmingly clear that God hates divorce. When a couple enter into a marriage covenant they make a commitment for life which God expects them to honour, however difficult that might prove to be.

Not Married But Married Really?

Before we leave the subject of divorce we should understand what it actually means to be divorced in the light of this teaching.

Some take the view that if remarriage means adultery then in spite of a divorce having taken place the marriage still exists. They would say that once a couple have been joined by God they remain married in His sight.

That particular view is confusing and there are a number of arguments against it. The common understanding in Jesus' day would certainly have been that once a couple were divorced their marriage was ended and both were free to remarry. The words Jesus and Paul used for divorce are translated elsewhere, release, put away, send away, let go, set at liberty. Paul says that those who are improperly divorced are to

remain “unmarried” and Jesus says “what God has joined together, let not man separate.” which would become meaningless if it were impossible for them to be separated: it would have been more appropriate for Him to say “man cannot separate.”

My understanding of this is that when divorce takes place, even if it is for wrong reasons, the marriage is ended. Nevertheless God still expects the couple to do all they can to honour their promise. That may seem like splitting hairs but you will find it helpful when we come to apply what we are learning here in real life situations.

More Questions For Discussion

Are there any circumstances where you would encourage a believer to initiate divorce proceedings?

How would you advise someone who has been divorced for wrong reasons?

Next Week

Next week we will return to the passages we have been looking at this evening to ask, “What does God’s Word teach us about remarriage after divorce?”