

DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE

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Introduction

There is considerable misunderstanding and confusion among Christians about what the Bible teaches regarding divorce and remarriage. Opinions vary from complete prohibition to unhindered permission. A few insist that remarried Christians must divorce and reunite with their first spouse or remain single, even if children were born in the second marriage.

Much good material has been written upholding the marriage ‘institution.’ The objective is certainly a noble one – to counter the encroachment of divorce within the Christian community and its devastating effects on children and society. But, in the process of undergirding the institution of lifetime marriage as God’s ideal, multitudes of victims of destroyed marriages have been placed in an unbearable state of condemnation, being ostracized from Christian fellowship or denied leadership roles in the local church. Christian divorce is portrayed as a crime by some well-meaning ministries. Divorced Christians are made to feel like second class citizens in many churches, in a state of lifetime condemnation and guilt. Some feel condemned to a life of loneliness, either after divorce or within a marriage to an unfaithful spouse. Some have even abandoned the Christian Faith in order to get relief from a seemingly unbearable situation. A theology that creates so much misery among Christians ought to be reviewed with a critical eye to be sure it is consistent with God’s character, His revealed will, and a sound and balanced understanding of the Scriptures.

There is an important principle found in Scripture that ought to be a check against all doctrinal conclusions. *“I am the LORD, I do not change.”*¹ *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”*² God’s unchangeable character is the standard of morality and the basis for all of His moral laws. Nothing God commands is arbitrary. Everything He commands is consistent with His character. What is morally right and morally wrong does not change, even though the application of His morality may appear different in certain unique situations. Therefore, what He originally intended with marriage at creation, what He commanded under the Law of Moses, and what Jesus and the Apostles taught must all be consistent in principle. There may be differences in

¹ Mal. 3:6

² Heb. 13:8

specific details as the eternal principles are applied to different historical situations. God's ultimate goal is to conform all things to His character.³ Therefore, His instructions to His people at any time in history have this purpose in view.

Any attempt to discern the unchanging will and purpose of God in the area of marriage must harmonize all of the biblical data from Creation, the Fall, the Law of Moses, the teaching of Jesus, and the teaching of the Apostles. Any perspective that cannot account for and harmonize all of Scripture in a coherent whole based on the same unchanging principles is incorrect and extreme. We know when we have arrived at the right perspective when we are able to see perfect harmony in all of the biblical teaching on the subject, and understand WHY different details were given under different circumstances. This consistency involves not only the ideal marriage and family, but also the effects on divorced Christians. It is not enough to claim that the New Testament teaching supersedes the Old Testament teaching. This is an excuse for not doing the hard work of harmonizing Scripture, or imposing one's own perspective on the Scriptures. The same God who does not change gave the Law of Moses and the Law of Christ. One must provide a reasonable explanation of God's principle and how that unchanging ideal has been worked out for Old Testament Israel and for Christians. The purpose of this study is to:

- discern the unchanging principle God intended with marriage.
- show how this ideal fits within all of the teaching of Scripture on this subject.
- expose both extremes as equally unbiblical – that which condemns multitudes of Christians to a life of loneliness or guilt, or permits promiscuous (adulterous) behavior among Christians who divorce and remarry for the wrong reasons.

The Jewish leaders demonstrated both extremes: legalism (for others), and excessive permissiveness (for themselves). *"For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers."*⁴ Christians need to guard against the Pharisaic self-righteous attitude, making pontifications which result in "binding heavy burdens" on other believers and asking them to carry a load that they themselves do not carry. Being condemned to a life without the intimacy in marriage that God ordained, either after divorce or within a marriage to an unfaithful spouse, is indeed a heavy burden on a significant portion of the Christian community. It is a burden that Jesus Himself said only a few are able to bear, and that only those who are equipped to live a celibate lifestyle should do so.⁵

³ Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10

⁴ Matt 23:4-5

⁵ Matt 19:10-12

Chapter 1

The Purpose for Marriage

In Romans 1, Paul stated that God's attributes can be known by admiring His handiwork in creation. Since marriage was a part of the original creation which God said was "very good,"⁶ it too is an expression of God's attributes.

Without question, the model for a Christian marriage which accurately reflects God's character is the union of one man and one woman for life. This has always been God's highest ideal, both under the Law of Moses as well as the New Covenant. Male and female were created "in the image of God" to reflect God's nature. The Godhead is the epitome of eternal unity. The husband and wife becoming "one flesh" is an expression of God's unity. And the lifetime commitment within marriage demonstrates the eternal nature of God's unity. In a perfect world which always reflects God's nature, there would be no divorce.

It is certainly valid to appeal to the creation account to demonstrate what marriage ought to be – the union of one man and one woman for life. But before we ask, "What did God design marriage to look like?" we need to ask, "Why did God create marriage?"

Gen 2:18-24 NKJV

18 And the LORD God said, "***It is not good that man should be alone***; I will make him a helper comparable to him." 19 Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name.

20 So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him.

21 And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place.

22 Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man.

23 And Adam said: "This is now bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man."

24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

⁶ Genesis 1:26-31

Those who claim that marriage was created by God to join one man with one woman until death are mistaken. Death was not part of the original creation. Marriage was instituted in a perfect environment before death and the effects of sin entered. Everything God created was “very good.” There was no sin, no curse, and no death when God created male and female and joined them in marriage. Therefore, the first marriage was not “until death,” but forever.

The consequences of sin damaged the first couple’s relationship with God and with each other. Any appeal to what God intended when He created marriage must be tempered with the realization that it was a much different world before the fall of mankind. Sin brought death, and radically altered all marriages that now exist under the curse. This sub-standard condition for marriage will remain until the curse is lifted from the creation at the resurrection of the just.⁷

Gen 3:16-19 NKJV

16 To the woman He said:

*“I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children; **Your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you.**”*

17 Then to Adam He said,

*“Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it’: “Cursed is the ground for your sake; **In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life.**”*

18 Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, And you shall eat the herb of the field.

*19 In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread **Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.**”*

The curse affected marriage in four major ways.

- It placed the wife in a subordinate role to her husband.
- It selected the man for hard labor to provide for the wife.
- It barred both from the paradise environment God designed for them.
- It ends all marriages through death, by cutting off access to the tree of life.

When God created the woman and joined her to Adam in marriage, she was “comparable to him” and a “helper.” The man and woman were partners. The curse altered the marriage relationship, separating the responsibilities of each partner, and assigning their roles within the fallen creation. In a perfect world, without the burden of

⁷ Rom. 8:19-25

the curse, every couple would have achieved 'one flesh' – equality and complete unity in mind and body that genuinely reflects the image of God which male and female were created to portray. And this condition would be eternal. But under the curse the wife was forced into a subordinate role and the husband was forced into difficult labor to provide for the wife. This was certainly not God's ideal, nor is it the ultimate destiny of faithful husbands and wives. But, within our temporary state of living under the curse, it was deemed necessary by God. The man and his wife were also barred from the paradise God created for them in which all their needs were provided as they communed with God. Their marriage was destined to end through death. Every marriage will end because of sin. *"For dust you are and to dust you shall return."*

Not only did man's sin necessitate changes in the relationship between husbands and wives, but also required dramatic changes within the Godhead itself. Jesus was equal with the Father.⁸ Yet, He willingly took a subordinate role to the Father, becoming fully human in order to enter the creation and redeem it from sin and the curse. Jesus now remains at the right hand of the Father as our intercessor until the day we no longer need one. The changes within marriage as well as the changes within the Godhead itself were necessitated by sin in order to ultimately repair what man destroyed, and to achieve the best possible outcome – the redemption and restoration of a remnant of mankind. That only a small portion of humanity will ultimately be redeemed and restored is not the ideal situation. The Bible says that *"God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."*⁹ Yet, the best possible outcome, where mankind is allowed free will, is that only a minority are saved, because only a small minority choose life.

The second critical observation from the creation account concerns the primary reason the woman was created and marriage instituted in the first place. It was not because God wanted man and woman to uphold and defend an institution He created called, 'marriage.' It was for the wellbeing of the individual who needed companionship and intimacy. God clearly stated his reason for marriage. *"It is not good that the man should be alone."*

We are well advised here to remember what Jesus said about another institution – the Sabbath – when rebuking the Pharisees for their lack of spiritual discernment and legalism. *"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."*¹⁰ His point was that upholding the institution of the Sabbath was not God's ultimate goal, but the wellbeing

⁸ Phil. 2:5-8

⁹ 2 Peter 3:9

¹⁰ Mark 2:27

of the people for whom it was designed by God. Thus, understanding God's purpose and nature is absolutely essential to the proper application of the Sabbath commands. The Sabbath was to serve man's needs, not man serve the Sabbath's requirements. The Sabbath provided something man desperately needed – rest and refreshment. Jesus and His disciples broke the legal regulations regarding the Sabbath while at the same time upholding its original intent.¹¹ Why? Because the underlying principle was what God was really concerned with, not outward legalism.

Genesis informs us that the marriage institution is essentially the same as the Sabbath institution – for man's overall benefit. God joined the woman to the man in marriage because *"it is not good that man should be alone."* God's ultimate reason for marriage must be paramount when applying our theology to a given situation. When we stress God's perfect ideal within marriage – one man for one woman for life – we ought to be honest enough to admit that His primary concern in marriage was to remedy **aloneness**. The whole point of marriage was so that Adam would not be condemned to a life of solitude and loneliness, without enjoying the kind of unity, companionship, and intimacy that God Himself enjoyed within the Godhead. God intended marriage as the cure for aloneness, not the cause of it! If our theology of marriage and divorce condemns a multitude of innocent Christians to a lifetime of aloneness, we ought to be discerning enough to realize that there is something seriously wrong with our theology. God's perfect ideal within marriage – one man for one woman for life – does not supersede the original intent for marriage. When the application of legal regulations completely undermines the original intent for that very law, the end result is counterproductive. It is our present circumstance, living temporarily under the curse, which creates the apparent tension between the purpose for marriage and the ideal marriage.

Many who condemn remarriage of the divorced point to Jesus' explanation for divorce under the Law, which God permitted it because of their "hardness of heart." They conclude that a Christian is never free to remarry except when the spouse dies.

1 Cor. 7:39

39 A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.

This passage is held up by some as the only reason for remarriage according to God's original intent. Yet, they fail to consider that death was not part of the creation when God instituted marriage. Remarriage of widows was never God's original purpose. It is a concession to life under the curse, which brings about death. We ought to ask why it is

¹¹ cf. Ex. 16:26-30; Ex. 31:12-17; Num. 15:32-36; Mark 22:23-28

permitted to remarry after the death of a spouse (caused by “the wages of sin”) but not permitted to the victim of divorce on the same grounds?

Under the present curse which brings about death, God permits more than one partner in a lifetime. Why did God permit widowed people to have a second spouse? Because *“it is not good that man should be alone.”* The death of a spouse reintroduces the original problem that marriage was intended to resolve. Having successive marriage partners in a lifetime is not what God intended when He created marriage. But it was a concession to man’s rebellion and hardness of heart which has brought about the present state of affairs – death. This concession was granted by God because of His original concern for man’s wellbeing – to remedy aloneness which is “not good.” Remarriage of widows and widowers is a necessary concession to reality within a cursed environment, in order to maintain God’s original gift to man – a companion. Therefore, when we consider the Scriptures that deal with divorce, we must not lose sight of God’s purposes. He always acts according to His purpose. He never gives regulations that are inconsistent with His purpose. Understanding His purpose in marriage is the first step to understanding the regulations and restrictions He has placed upon this divine institution.

Chapter 2

The Law of Moses

The Apostle Paul wrote that the experiences of Israel under the Law were written for the learning of Christians, so that we might glean important principles applicable to ourselves.¹² He also wrote, “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.”¹³ The Law of Moses provides both “comfort and hope” for the Christian, according to Paul. And this applies to those who are divorced and those who are married to an unfaithful partner. But it also provides restraint and condemnation for the one who divorces his wife for improper reasons, to “deal treacherously with the wife of his youth.”¹⁴

There are three primary passages dealing with divorce in the Law of Moses. The first concerns Israelites’ taking wives of conquered peoples (Gentiles).

Deut. 21:10-14

10 “When you go out to war against your enemies, and the LORD your God delivers them into your hand, and you take them captive, 11 and you see among the captives a beautiful woman, and desire her and would take her for your wife, 12 then you shall bring her home to your house, and she shall shave her head and trim her nails. 13 She shall put off the clothes of her captivity, remain in your house, and mourn her father and her mother a full month; after that you may go in to her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife. 14 And it shall be, **if you have no delight in her, then you shall set her free**, but you certainly shall not sell her for money; you shall not treat her brutally, because you have humbled her.

This passage appears at odds with God’s commandment that the Israelites not marry any foreign wives.¹⁵ The apparent conflict is resolved, however, by noticing that the prohibition was out of concern for the mixing of Israel with a foreign nation which would certainly result in Israel’s pollution with paganism. Boaz’s marriage to Ruth, a Moabite, is portrayed in Scripture as an honorable and merciful thing. Why? Because Ruth had become devoted to Israel’s God, and had totally abandoned her pagan roots.¹⁶

¹² 1 Cor. 10:1-12

¹³ Rom. 15:4

¹⁴ Mal. 2:15

¹⁵ Deut. 7:1-6

¹⁶ Ruth 1:15-17; Ruth 2:10-12

This ought to serve as a reminder that specific regulations must always be viewed within the context of the original purpose, and never forced beyond that intent.

In the above passage, the foreign wives were captives of conquered peoples. The reason she was to “*mourn her father and mother*” was because the pagan nations were not just defeated but utterly destroyed and driven from the land. She was absorbed into Israel as a slave. Putting off her old clothes, shaving her head, and trimming her nails symbolized that she could bring nothing with her from her old life. That included the worship of idols. Once she had been completely stripped of her old identity she could become the wife of an Israelite. The mixing of Israel with pagan cultures was forbidden. But, when the old culture was destroyed and stripped away, it was permitted. We see here that understanding the principle behind the regulation is critical to making proper application in specific circumstances.

Israelite men who took foreign slave girls as wives were permitted to divorce them for just about any reason, merely if she no longer delighted him. This permission was granted because a foreign wife may not adapt well to life in an Israelite home, observing the Law of Moses and the worship of the one true God. Divorce was permitted in these cases for any reason the husband deemed justifiable. He was the judge and jury, and could act to divorce her without any higher authority. Yet, even when divorcing such a wife, he was required to do it in a manner that was not unduly cruel or hard on her. He could not sell her as a slave. Marrying her removed the status as a slave in Israel, and guaranteed her freedom if he should divorce her. She was in some sense “sanctified” by the Israelite husband – a principle Paul later applied in a New Testament context.¹⁷

Did an Israelite man and his foreign wife become “one flesh” in God’s sight? Were they joined together by God? Of course. Yet, divorce was still permitted in these marriages that God had joined together. What constituted a just cause for divorce was not stated. But it was expected that behavior in conflict with an Israelite’s call to be a worshipper of the one true God, and observe the Law of God, would certainly be just cause. Being faithful to God’s Law superseded the institution of marriage in this case. But, even when the Israelite man divorced such a wife, he was forbidden from selling her as a slave or treating her with indignity. Why? Because doing so was contrary to God’s character. Yet, there is no hint that divorcing her was in conflict with God’s character.

¹⁷ 1 Cor. 7:14

In the case of an Israelite man marrying an Israelite woman, (where both are the covenant people of God), divorce and remarriage was also permitted, but with stricter regulations.

Deut. 24:1-4 (LXX)

1 And if any one should take a wife, and should dwell with her, then it shall come to pass if she should not have found favor before him, because he has found some unbecoming thing in her, that he shall write for her a bill of divorcement, and give it into her hands, and he shall send her away out of his house.

2 And if she should go away and be married to another man;

3 and the last husband should hate her, and write for her a bill of divorcement; and should give it into her hands, and send her away out of his house, and the last husband should die, who took her to himself for a wife;

4 the former husband who sent her away shall not be able to return and take her to himself for a wife, after she has been defiled; because it is an abomination before the Lord thy God, and ye shall not defile the land, which the Lord thy God gives thee to inherit.

This passage adds something to the former one in the case of an Israelite wife. Both passages state that the cause for the divorce is the same (he finds no favor or delight in her). In the case of foreign wives, this is not qualified. Anything that he judged to be improper was grounds for divorce. But, in the case of an Israelite wife, the displeasure is qualified – “because he has found some unbecoming thing in her.” The word in the Hebrew text means “shameful exposure.” It refers to any inappropriate behavior that might bring shame upon her husband.

This passage also gives the procedure for executing a legitimate divorce in God’s economy in order to secure God’s stamp of approval. The offended husband was to do three things: write a “bill of divorce” which outlined his wife’s offenses and legitimate grounds for divorce, hand deliver it to her, and send her away (physically separate from her). Once he did this, he was divorced in God’s sight, with God’s approval.

That the man could remarry after divorcing his unfaithful wife is evident in verse 4. But He was prohibited from remarrying his former wife if she married another man after his divorcing her. This command, and the acknowledgement that she had become another man’s wife, would be superfluous if he could not remarry. Remarriage is assumed in this passage; and it is not condemned.

A third passage deals with premarital sex between a couple that is not engaged. When a couple has had premarital sex, they must marry under the Law of Moses. The

husband's right to divorce under the Law of Moses was terminated. He must marry her and could not divorce her for any reason.

Deut. 22:28-29 NKJV

28 "If a man finds a young woman who is a virgin, who is not betrothed, and he seizes her and lies with her, and they are found out, 29 then the man who lay with her shall give to the young woman's father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife because he has humbled her; he shall not be permitted to divorce her all his days.

This passage forbids divorce even if the wife later behaves improperly or lewdly. The husband is himself at fault in this case for contributing to her improper behavior by having sex with her without marrying her first. Being bound to a wife without recourse was punishment for deflowering her without properly marrying her first. Here, the removal of recourse (the possibility of divorce and remarriage) is portrayed as punishment. This ought to give pause to those who view such recourse (divorce and remarriage) as always being sinful.

After the return from the Babylonian captivity, many of the Jews took foreign wives from the people who had settled in the Land of Israel while the Jews were in captivity. When Ezra the priest returned to assist the work, he was horrified. At his command, all the Israelites divorced their foreign wives, and made a covenant that they would not take pagan wives.¹⁸ In this case, a higher principle – God's prohibition on marrying foreign wives – trumped the marriage covenant.

Even in Solomon's case, there is no hint that God was displeased at the number of wives Solomon took, but only because he married foreign pagan women who turned his heart away from the Lord. Ezra instigated the mass divorce of pagan wives because he understood this principle, and that Israel's continued devotion to God undistracted was far more important than the marriage covenant.

In summary, the Law of Moses permitted divorce for any reason the husband felt was justified when the wife was a pagan foreigner taken into slavery. For all others, divorce and remarriage was permitted as recourse for a man when his wife acted improperly, anything that brought public shame upon her husband. Divorce under certain conditions is consistent with God's character, as demonstrated in how God deals with an apostate, divorcing them and casting them off forever.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ezra 10

¹⁹ Heb. 6:4-8; Heb. 10:26-31. The Greek word for "apostasy" (αποστασια) is the feminine form of the word for "divorce" (αποστασιον).

Chapter 3

Divorce in the Prophets

The 'divorce clause' under the Law of Moses came to be widely abused by the Jews. Indeed, there were legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage under the Law of Moses. But, some rabbis taught that virtually anything the husband did not like about his wife could be grounds for divorce and remarriage even when the wife was an Israelite. That is, they interpreted the clause "because he has found some unbecoming thing in her" as meaning pretty much whatever he wanted it to mean. Usually, the abuse of the divorce regulations was because he lusted after someone else. Rather than commit adultery, he thought he could use the divorce clause in order to put away his first wife so he could marry the woman he lusted after. This activity put many Israelite women in a very awkward position, with the threat of dismissal at the whim of their perverted husbands. And there were no shortage of husbands who took advantage of the divorce clause within the Law of Moses in order to replace their wives with a younger or more beautiful one. This evil practice became a plague on Israel in the years just before Christ. The prophet Malachi addressed it in the following words.

Mal. 2:13-16 NKJV

13 And this is the second thing you do: You cover the altar of the LORD with tears, With weeping and crying; So He does not regard the offering anymore, Nor receive it with goodwill from your hands. 14 Yet you say, "For what reason?" Because the LORD has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, With whom you have dealt treacherously; Yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant. 15 But did He not make them one, Having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, And let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth.

16 "For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce, For it covers one's garment with violence," Says the LORD of hosts. "Therefore take heed to your spirit, That you do not deal treacherously."

This passage is frequently used to claim that God hates all divorce, and that to divorce one's wife is to "deal treacherously" with her. Yet, such an interpretation creates a paradox within the Old Testament itself, and a contradiction within this very chapter. When Malachi wrote this, Israel was under the Law of Moses which permitted divorce and remarriage according to the guidelines already discussed. This very chapter is loaded with chastisement for Israel's ignoring the ordinances found within the Law of Moses. Note that the chapter begins with a rebuke of the priests who were charged with

teaching the people to obey the Law of Moses. Yet they had perverted the Law. And God was angry with the priests who twisted God's regulations regarding divorce for their own twisted purposes, and taught Israel to do the same.

Mal. 2:4-9 NKJV

4 Then you shall know that I have sent this commandment to you, That **My covenant with Levi**²⁰ may continue," Says the LORD of hosts.

5 "My covenant was with him, one of life and peace, And I gave them to him that he might fear Me; So he feared Me And was reverent before My name.

6 **The law of truth** was in his mouth, And injustice was not found on his lips. He walked with Me in peace and equity, And turned many away from iniquity.

7 "For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, **And people should seek the law from his mouth**; For he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.

8 But you have departed from the way; You have caused many to **stumble at the law**. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi," Says the LORD of hosts.

9 "Therefore I also have made you contemptible and base before all the people, Because you have not kept **My ways** But have shown **partiality in the law**."

10 Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why do we **deal treacherously with one another By profaning the covenant of the fathers**?

11 Judah has **dealt treacherously**, And an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem, For Judah has profaned **The LORD's holy institution which He loves**: He has married the daughter of a foreign god.

This entire chapter is about how the priests, who were charged with teaching the Law of Moses to the people, had polluted and corrupted it. This caused the people to "deal treacherously with one another,"²¹ and "dealt treacherously ... with the wife of your youth."²² Malachi continues: "Your words have been harsh against Me," Says the LORD, "Yet you say, 'What have we spoken against You?' You have said, 'It is useless to serve God; What profit is it that we have kept **His ordinance**...'"²³ This is followed by the assurance that God had taken note of those who "feared the Lord" – those who observed God's Law as it was intended and did not pervert it or ignore it. He left them with this final warning: "Remember **the Law of Moses**, My servant, Which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, **With the statutes and judgments**."²⁴

²⁰ The priesthood under the Law of Moses

²¹ Verse 10

²² Verse 14

²³ Verses 13-14

²⁴ Mal. 4:4

It is abundantly clear that the “divorce” which God said He “hated” was only one in which the husband dealt “treacherously” with the wife of his youth by perverting the intent of the Law of Moses. That is, he dismissed her without just cause. In effect, he took liberties with the conditions of divorce in order to satisfy his perverted desires to replace his wife with another woman he lusted after. In all cases where God condemned Israel in Malachi, He did so because they ignored the Law of Moses. He did not chastise them for doing what it required regarding divorce.

Those who use this passage to condemn all divorce twist it in such a way that it makes God contradict Himself, giving guidelines in the Law of Moses for divorce and remarriage, and then condemning Israel for following that very Law! That is an absurd interpretation. When God said to Israel through Malachi, “*Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, Which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, With the statutes and judgments,*” He was commanding them to obey all of the Law (both spirit and letter), including abiding by the limitations on divorce and remarriage contained within the Law. They were forbidden treachery to their wives by divorcing them for unjust causes to marry another whom they lusted after. The activity God condemned in Malachi was already implicitly forbidden by the Law of Moses by the qualifier outlining the just causes – improper behavior that brought shame upon the husband.

To say that God hates all divorce, and that all divorce is sin, is to make God a sinner. He is the one who permitted divorce and remarriage under certain guidelines. And He also exercised His own right to divorce generations of Israel that “fornicated” and acted lewdly with the pagans.

Isa. 50:1 NKJV

1 Thus says the LORD: “Where is the certificate of your mother’s divorce, Whom I have put away? Or which of My creditors is it to whom I have sold you? For your iniquities you have sold yourselves, And for your transgressions your mother has been put away.”

God Himself exercised the very same right given to every husband under the Law. Notice also that God bound Himself by the same Law of divorce which forbids selling a divorced wife into slavery. He said that their slavery was their own doing, not His.

The whole nation of Israel has a covenant relationship with God. Yet the majority have been rejected by God and will not be raised to inherit the Kingdom (having been divorced by Him), as the “Olive Tree” parable in Romans 11 proves. This is proof that ‘divorce’ for the right reasons is justified within the character of God. The Law of Moses which permits divorce of those who have acted lewdly is consistent with God’s character and with His own actions.

It is no coincidence that idolatry in the Old Testament is almost always referred to metaphorically as “fornication.” In the Greek Old Testament, the word “fornication” is used 39 times, almost exclusively referring to idolatry. Even in the New Testament, the Greek word “apostasy”²⁵ (αποστασια) is the feminine form of the word “divorce”²⁶ (αποστασιον). God reserves the right to ‘divorce’ His people for ‘fornication’ in both the Old and New Testaments. Under the Law and under Jesus’ teaching, the very same recourse God reserves for Himself was also given to man.

²⁵ 2 Thess. 2:3

²⁶ Matt. 5:31; Matt. 19:7

Chapter 4

Divorce & Remarriage According to Jesus

Many Evangelical Christians acknowledge that Jesus authorized divorce and remarriage when one's spouse has committed adultery. Yet, some even deny this. The most extensive passage dealing with divorce in the Gospels is found in Matthew 19.²⁷

Matt 19:3-12 NKJV

3 The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?"

Note carefully the question Jesus was asked to answer. The clause "Is it lawful..." asks Jesus His understanding of the Law. God through Malachi had chastised Israel for perverting the restrictions on divorce contained in the Law, and consequently many a Jew had "dealt treacherously with the wife of his youth." When he lusted after another woman, he simply exercised the divorce clause in the Law of Moses, and married someone else. In this way he outwardly kept the Law, but inwardly he was guilty of adultery.²⁸ The question posed to Jesus concerned whether or not He agreed with the Pharisees' liberal interpretation of the divorce regulations within the Law. Everything Jesus said in response dealt with whether "just any reason" was legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage under the Law.

To their question, "Is it lawful to divorce for just any reason?" Jesus pointed them back to the books of Moses.

4 And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' 5 and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?"

6 So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

²⁷ Mark and Luke also include this discussion, but in an truncated form. Neither mentioned the exception for fornication found in Matthew. Yet, this was part of Jesus' answer. That Mark and Luke did not include it does not mean He did not say it. Matthew's fuller account must be included.

²⁸ This is also what Jesus dealt with in Matt. 5:28, "whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

From the Genesis account Jesus noted that *“they are no longer two but one flesh.”* Jesus then made a logical deduction: *“Therefore, what God has joined together let not man separate.”*

Many Christian interpreters assume this prohibition against terminating what God has joined means that all divorce is forbidden (because all marriages are joined by God). But this is an unjustified inference. Remember, under the Law, as interpreted by Malachi, certain divorces were sanctioned by God but others were not. Those sanctioned by God do not constitute man putting asunder what God has joined. Only divorces that were not sanctioned by the spirit and intent of the Law, abuses of the Law, constituted man’s putting asunder what God had joined. God ordained divorce under certain guidelines consistent with His character, and even used them Himself to divorce generations of His covenant people. (He also divorces the apostate in the New Testament). Therefore, when a man divorced his wife for a legitimate cause (in agreement with the spirit and letter of God’s revealed will), **it is God who severs the marriage bond by the proper application of His commandments under the proper authority.** The implication of Jesus’ remark is plain. When a man divorces his wife for an unjust cause, that man is presumptuously separating what God has joined. Such a divorce is not a real divorce in God’s sight, because it does not have God’s authority behind it. The “certificate of divorce” that such a man writes is meaningless and invalid in God’s sight.

God creates the union at the time the marriage is physically consummated through the act of intercourse. To engage in intercourse is to consummate a marriage. Intercourse was to be done only within a covenant relationship. All Jewish marriages were considered consummated when the groom had intercourse with the bride, and not before. Conversely, having sexual intercourse prior to marriage forced the man to take the woman outwardly as his wife, and give her all the benefits and security of a wife. And this is why the Apostle Paul quoted the same passage to stress the confusion created if a Christian hires a prostitute. *“Do you not know that your bodies are members of [one flesh with] Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them **members of a harlot?** Certainly not! Or do you not know that **he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her?** For **‘the two,’** He says, **‘shall become one flesh.’**”²⁹ The term “members of” refers to the covenantal ‘one flesh’ relationship that God instituted. A Christian who hires a prostitute has married her in a covenant relationship according to Paul! Intercourse is the consummation of a marriage.*

Jesus merely pointed out that Jews under the Law had no right to divorce their wives (who were also God’s covenant people) *“for just any reason,”* and that doing so meant

²⁹ 1 Cor. 6:15-17

they were presumptuously separating what God had joined through sexual union. Obviously, if a Jew had obeyed the spirit and letter of the Law, having divorced his wife for legitimate reasons and with proper motives, God Himself separated what He had formerly joined through the proper exercise of His own regulations on divorce.

At this point, the Pharisees sought to defend their own liberal point of view, and most likely their own 'treacherous' dealings with their wives.

7 They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?"

8 He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so."

With these words, Jesus justified Moses' permitting divorce for many legitimate reasons. Jesus explained this fairly liberal divorce policy as being necessary under the Old Covenant because of their "hardness of heart." This clause is found in the books of Moses in reference to Israel. Yet, the remedy proposed for it was the "circumcision of the heart," something that came with the New Covenant.³⁰

Divorce and remarriage under the Law for a variety of reasons was foreign to God's original intent. Yet, it was part of God's Law because it accommodated the fallen state of mankind. But, under the New Covenant, Jesus gave a higher standard, limiting divorce and remarriage of His covenant people to fornication only.

9 And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for fornication, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."

The original question dealt with the interpretation of the Law. And in interpreting the Law, Jesus pointed them back to original intent found in Genesis. Viewing the Law through God's original intent keeps people from abusing the Law. However, in the above verse, Jesus clearly went beyond interpreting the Law, giving His own Law which superseded the Law of Moses. The words, "And I say to you..." imply His authority to legislate. Jesus certainly disagreed with their liberal interpretation of the Law of Moses assumed in the original question: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?". But He went beyond merely taking a conservative view of the Law, giving His own Law. Legitimate grounds for divorce were greatly narrowed by Jesus regarding God's covenant people – fornication.

³⁰ Deut. 10:16; Deut. 30:6; Jer. 4:4; Rom. 2:28-29; Col. 2:11

Some have supposed that the clause, *“except for fornication,”* means adultery is the only possible reason for divorce. The Greek text does not support this. The word “except” is not in the text. Literally, the text reads, *“whoever may divorce his wife (not for fornication) and marry another is committing adultery.”* The parenthetical clause, “not for fornication,” provides an exception to the general rule. But the language does not absolutely require that it be the only possible exception. It is the English translations that give this false impression, not the Greek text.

It is important also to note that the word “fornication” is a much broader term than “adultery.” “Adultery” refers only to a married person having sexual relations with someone they are not married to, or with someone who is married to another. Had Jesus meant only “adultery” He would have said so. “Fornication” is broader, and includes idolatry. The Greek Old Testament uses this Greek word far more frequently to refer to idolatry than to sexual impurity. And Jesus hearers were quite familiar with the Old Testament usage of this term. Therefore, limiting “fornication” to “adultery” is a mistake. It often refers to extreme unfaithfulness to God, particularly regarding pagan practices and witchcraft.³¹

Some claim that the exception clause pertains only to divorce and not to remarriage. That is, divorce is permitted for the cause of fornication, but not remarriage. The divorced person must remain single. However, that interpretation is wrong, as proven by the context. Note Jesus’ words: *“And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for fornication, and marries another, commits adultery.”* Jesus’ statement condemns the man for committing adultery. And the exception clause, *“not for fornication,”* releases the man from the condemnation if his wife has engaged in fornication. But, if he merely divorces his wife without remarrying he is not committing adultery, regardless of the cause! He can only commit adultery if he marries (and has intercourse with) another woman while he is still married to his first wife. Therefore, the exception clause is useless and does not exempt him at all if it pertains only to divorce. It must refer to both divorce and remarriage together in order to exempt the man from the potential result, committing adultery. Therefore, in Jesus’ reply it must be assumed that remarriage is the extended result of divorce in Jesus’ teaching on divorce. The exception clause essentially means that a man who divorces his wife for fornication and marries another woman is NOT committing adultery living with his new wife. Otherwise, the exception clause would be entirely meaningless, since no adultery is committed if he only divorces and does not remarry.

³¹ 2 Chron. 21:11; Ezek. 16:26,29 LXX

Likewise, the following statement is taken out of context, misunderstood, and misapplied: *"and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."* This refers to the woman within the context of the original question and Jesus' answer to it. That is, it refers to the woman who has been divorced *"for just any reason"* (apart from fornication). The one marrying a woman in this condition is committing adultery because God has not severed the previous marriage bond because His conditions have not been met. She is still married to the first man. Consequently, a man marrying a woman who is not properly released according to God's standards is having sexual relations with another man's wife. It all hinges on whether *"what God has joined together"* has been severed by man or by God. If it is by man, it is not legitimate, and any further marriages are a continuous state of adultery. But, if the former marriage has been severed by God, then a second marriage is not adultery. And, as we will see, this is consistent with Paul's teaching as well.

Jesus' more stringent restrictions on divorce and remarriage (only for fornication) concerned the disciples greatly.

10 His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry."

11 But He said to them, "All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given: 12 For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it."

The disciples reaction to Jesus' stricter requirements was that it was better to remain single with such tight restrictions on divorce and remarriage. Yet, Jesus made it very clear that being celibate was a unique lifestyle that few people could tolerate – those without the functioning physical equipment, either by birth or mutilation, and those who had chosen a celibate lifestyle (like Paul). Jesus answer acknowledged that in most cases, a completely celibate lifestyle is simply not possible. People forced to refrain from marriage, while not being emotionally and sexually equipped to do so, will almost certainly fall into sexual immorality, and possibly apostasy.

Jesus' response to the disciples clearly recognizes God's original design in marriage, that *"it is not good for man to be alone."* His answer to the disciples shows that God does not require celibacy for those unable to bear it. He does, however, absolutely forbid fornication. And since marriage is the solution to avoiding fornication, we have every reason to expect that even in cases of wrecked marriages, God's will is not forced celibacy which drives people to fornication and apostasy. Forced celibacy is indeed

binding a heavy burden around the neck of Jesus' disciples when there is no possibility of restoration of a marriage.

*"Rightly dividing the Word of truth"*³² was the task of the priest under the Law,³³ and it is the task of the elders under the New Covenant.³⁴ It requires harmonizing all of Scripture, checking one's interpretations against God's character, bringing balance in the application of doctrine to individual cases, and making sure that our theology does not bulldoze over wounded believers, leaving them without recourse, ripe to be picked off by the roaring lion.

³² 2 Tim. 2:15

³³ Mal. 2:6-7

³⁴ Titus 1:9

Chapter 5

The Corinthian's Concerns

The Apostle Paul's instructions to the Corinthians on celibacy, marriage, and divorce have been greatly misunderstood and misapplied. The misunderstandings stem from the failure to grasp Paul's reliance on Jesus' former teaching, and ignorance of the question he was answering. That Paul was responding to a specific question the Corinthians had sent to him is clear from his opening words in chapter seven of 1 Corinthians, "*Now about that which you wrote to me, ...*". The question is not stated, only Paul's response. The interpreter must reconstruct the question based on inferences from Paul's answer.

Unfortunately, our English translations were made by men whose theological bias has blinded them to certain eschatological qualifiers in Paul's response. These eschatological statements demonstrate that Paul was addressing a question concerning marriage within the end times spoken about by Jesus.

Jesus instructed His followers to watch for the signs of His coming described in the Olivet Discourse.³⁵ He also warned that in the last days, family members would betray one another, causing their deaths. "*Now brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end shall be saved.*"³⁶ Since the Corinthian believers had been converted from paganism, some of them were still married to pagans. This would present a very precarious situation for them if the end time scenario began fairly quickly. What should they do? Perhaps they should divorce the unbeliever. Another concern was whether believers ought to consider starting a new family in light of the impending great tribulation. They wrote to Paul for guidance.

In Greek culture, a young virgin was frequently promised to a man by means of a contract made with her father. Once she came of age, she was contractually obliged to marry him. Likewise, a man who had such a contract for a virgin was obligated to her father to marry her. Yet, besides the warning concerning betrayal by family members, Jesus had given another stern warning for those contemplating starting a new family during the days of great tribulation. "*But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight may not be in winter. For in*

³⁵ Mark 13:24-37

³⁶ Mark 13:12-13. See also: Matt. 10:21; Matt. 24:10

*those days there will be tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, nor ever shall be. And **unless the Lord had shortened those days**, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake, whom He chose, **He shortened the days**."*³⁷

Paul referred specifically to "the time that has been shortened" in his answer, virtually quoting the above passage. This shows that the original question concerned the end times, which the early Christians expected could begin within their lifetimes. He stated plainly that certain parts of his answer were intended specifically for that time period. Yet, he stopped short of saying that it was imminent.

Below I have reconstructed the Corinthian's letter to Paul based on these assumptions. I have followed this with my own translation of his answer (1 Corinthians 7) from the Greek text. To shorten the length of this paper, and make it easier to follow, I have reduced my commentary to footnotes.

The Inferred Letter of the Corinthian Elders to Paul

Dear Beloved Brother, Paul,

*You taught us about Jesus' warnings that family members will betray one another in the approaching last days. As you know, many of our members are married to spouses who worship idols and do not follow the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. Some are of the opinion that we ought to divorce such spouses, a principle that is also consistent with Moses' teachings and Ezra's application of it.*³⁸

Also, some of our men are contractually betrothed to virgins who are becoming of marriageable age. Yet you taught us that Jesus also warned about starting a new family during the end times, that 'woes' await wives who are pregnant and nursing. Some of these brothers believe they must remain single, thereby preserving the virginity of their betrothed virgins, and sparing them such anxiety. It seems to us that if the end is near, it is best to follow your own example, to be unmarried until Jesus comes. Please advise.

*Yours in Christ,
The Elders of the Church of Corinth*

³⁷ Mark 13:17-20 NKJV

³⁸ Deut. 7:3-4; Ezra 9-10

Paul's Response

Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother,

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.³⁹

Human Marriage is Necessary for the Christian to Avoid Fornication

1 Now about that which you wrote to me, it is indeed best for a man not to be touching a woman. 2 But because of fornication, each⁴⁰ man must have himself a woman. And each⁶ woman must have herself a man.⁴¹ 3 The man must be giving to the woman [his] conjugal obligation, and similarly also the woman to the man.⁴² 4 The woman does not have sovereignty over her own body, but the man. Yet, similarly also, the man does not have sovereignty over his own body, but the woman. 5 Do not deprive each other unless by agreement for a specified time, so that you may seclude yourselves for fasting and prayer, and then you should resume this [conjugal obligation] so that Satan may not tempt you through your weakness.⁴³

The Superiority of Celibacy

6 I am saying this by indulgence, not by command. 7 I wish all men to be as I myself [am].⁴⁴ But each has his own gift from God, one like this, another like that.⁴⁵ 8 Yet I am saying to the unmarried and to the widows, it is indeed best for them if they should remain like me.⁵ 9 But if they are unable to restrain⁴⁶ they must marry. It is better to marry than to be burning.⁴⁷

³⁹ 1 Cor. 1:1-3

⁴⁰ "hekastos," superlative of 'hekas': each and every. Paul seems to leave no exceptions except for those who have the gift of celibacy, which he deems superior.

⁴¹ Paul seems to both justify his own celibate lifestyle and commend marriage. That celibacy is a superior way of life was stated also by Jesus in His comments about eunuchs, (Matt. 19:10-12). But, He too acknowledged that this was only for a few who had such a gift, who were "able to receive it." For those who did not have the gift of satisfaction in a celibate lifestyle, Paul commands all others to marry in order to avoid fornication.

⁴² On the same grounds as the previous statement (to avoid fornication), the conjugal obligation must be met by both spouses as necessitated by the sexual needs and desires of the other.

⁴³ Lack of self control.

⁴⁴ Celibate

⁴⁵ This statement is clearly a reference to Jesus' reply to His disciples in Matt. 19:10-12

⁴⁶ Their sexual needs

⁴⁷ With passion

Jesus' General Rule for Christian Marriage

10. I, (not I, but the Lord⁴⁸), command those who have entered marriage:⁴⁹ The woman is not to separate from the man. 11. Yet, if she has [already] separated, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to the man.⁵⁰ And the man must not divorce the woman.⁵¹

Practical Exceptions to Jesus' General Rule

12. I, (not the Lord⁵²), say to the rest⁵³: If any brother has an unfaithful⁵⁴ woman and she is content to cohabit with him, he must not divorce her. 13. And if any woman has an unfaithful¹³ man and he is content to cohabit with her, she must not divorce the man. 14. For the unfaithful man has been sanctified in the woman. And the unfaithful woman has been sanctified in the brother, (otherwise your children are unclean; but now they are holy).⁵⁵ 15. But if the unfaithful one departs, let them depart. The brother or sister has not been enslaved⁵⁶ in such cases – God has called us unto tranquility.⁵⁷

⁴⁸ Paul was reminding them of Jesus' own commandment regarding divorce: that it was forbidden for God's people except on grounds of fornication (Matt. 5:31-32 & 19:1-9).

⁴⁹ Here Paul addresses a Christian couple. He deals with mixed marriages later

⁵⁰ This presupposes that she has not also remarried. The Law of Moses made such a return to a former husband an "abomination to the LORD" (Deut. 24:1-4).

⁵¹ This was Paul's interpretation of Jesus' previous commands recorded in the Gospels. That Paul did not mention the 'exception clause' for fornication (Matt. 5:32 & Matt. 19:9) is not problematic since his readers were already well acquainted with it. Jesus' remarks only concerned married couples who were both in a covenant relationship with God. Paul assumes this as well by commanding both the man and the woman, and reminding the couple of what Jesus commanded.

⁵² Paul was not saying that the following instructions were merely his opinion, making them optional (as is supposed by many), but that Jesus did not address the following issues specifically. These commands were new revelation, given through Paul to Gentiles, necessitated by the spread of the Gospel beyond Israel, God's covenant people.

⁵³ Paul distinguished "the rest" in verses 12-16 (faithful believers who are married to an unfaithful spouse) from Jesus' commands to "those who have entered marriage" (vss. 10-11). This distinction implies that Jesus' general rule (no divorce) is limited to couples who both are faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. That would include couples who both became believers after marriage, or two people who entered marriage as disciples of Jesus Christ. This is consistent with Jesus' words in the Gospels spoken to Jewish people who had a covenantal relationship with God.

⁵⁴ The Greek word can mean either "unbelieving" / "untrusting" (active sense), or "unfaithful" / "untrustworthy" (passive sense – see Prov. 17:6 LXX). Thayer's defines it as, "unfaithful, faithless, (not to be trusted, perfidious)." Here it may mean either an unbeliever (who overtly denies Christ) or one who is unfaithful or untrustworthy (one who denies Him in action and lifestyle). Either way, it is not the 'profession' of faith that is critical, but the life of obedience to Jesus Christ which distinguishes one from the other.

⁵⁵ Paul had in mind God's ultimate purpose for joining man and wife in "one flesh" as stated by Malachi: "But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring." (Mal. 2:15). Paul's point is that God is able to raise up godly offspring with one faithful parent who can instruct and pass on God's Word to children even within a mixed marriage. Timothy is a good example of this. He knew the Holy Scriptures "from a child" thanks to his Jewish mother and grandmother. Yet, his father was a Greek unbeliever (as is evidenced by Timothy's being uncircumcised – Acts 16:1-3).

⁵⁶ The Greek word means to have been placed in a state of servitude or bondage.

⁵⁷ God has called believers to a place of rest and peace, not to being bound forever to an unfaithful spouse who is not content to live in matrimony with the faithful believer. Some commentators infer that this state of peace and being unbound means the faithful believer is free to remarry. Others disagree. However, see verses 27-28.

16. *Because, how could you know, woman, whether you will rescue the man? Or how could you know, man, whether you will rescue the woman?*⁵⁸

Remaining True to One's Gift and Calling

17. *Now accordingly as the Lord has equipped⁵⁹ each one, accordingly as God has called each one, this [path] he should walk. And this is what I am prescribing in all the churches.*⁶⁰

Jew or Gentile?

18. *Was anyone called having been circumcised? Don't become uncircumcised. Was anyone called in uncircumcision? Don't become circumcised. 19. (Circumcision is not important, and uncircumcision is not important, but observing the commandments of God [is what is important]).*⁶¹

Slave or Free?

20. *Each one, in the calling with which he was called, remain in this. 21. You were called a slave? Do not be concerned. But if you are able to gain freedom, do it. 22. (For the slave who was called in the Lord is the Lord's free man. Likewise, the freeman who was called is Christ's slave. 23. You were purchased with [great] cost; do not become slaves of men.)*

Single or Married?

24. *Brothers, each one in whatever [state] he was called, in this remain with God.*⁶² 25. *Yet about⁶³ [female] virgins⁶⁴, I do not have a commandment from the Lord, but I am giving my opinion⁶⁵ as having received mercy from the Lord to be faithful. 26. I advise, therefore, this ideal to be followed⁶⁶ through the impending⁶⁷ distress⁶⁸ – it is good for a man to be like this:*

⁵⁸ Paul explains his reasoning for the requirement in verses 12-13, that a faithful spouse must remain with an unfaithful one as long as the unfaithful spouse is content to cohabit. The unfaithful spouse is a mission field for the faithful spouse.

⁵⁹ Once again Paul refers the reader to Jesus' instructions concerning celibacy (cf. v. 7 & Matt. 19:10-12).

⁶⁰ Paul brings to bear two considerations for those contemplating marriage. The first has to do with whether one is equipped by God for celibate life or married life. The second is the calling one has received from God. Paul advises that one ought not deviate from his God-given abilities and calling. However, Paul does allow such deviation as described in the following verses. Most likely the deviation is acknowledged as people's abilities may change as they mature in the Christian Faith.

⁶¹ See Rom. 2:12-29

⁶² This does not refer to marital status, but to one's God-given abilities, whether to be celibate or married.

⁶³ "Concerning." Here Paul is viewing "virgins" as a third party, not being addressed directly. His instructions deal with what the "brothers" were to do "about virgins," rather than instructing virgins directly. The commands are directed to the men regarding whether they ought to take a (virgin) wife or to remain celibate.

⁶⁴ The Greek word "virgins" (parthenos) is feminine and refers to females exclusively when speaking about sexuality.

⁶⁵ Paul's advice was based on his supposition that the Great Tribulation would begin soon, as indicated by the following verses. Yet, he made it very clear that he had not heard from the Lord specifically in this regard.

⁶⁶ The Greek word means "to begin below," that is, this ideal is to be followed in the future (during the impending distress).

⁶⁷ Or "threatening"

27. *Have you been bound to a woman? Do not seek a divorce. Have you been divorced⁶⁹ from a woman? Do not seek a woman. 28. However, if you should marry, you have not sinned. (Also if the virgin should marry, she has not sinned). Yet, these will have tribulation⁷⁰ in the flesh, and I am [trying to] spare you.*

29. *But I say this, brothers, that the time which has been shortened⁷¹ still remains⁷² [ahead], so that those having women should be as not having [women],⁷³ and the lamenting as not lamenting,⁷⁴ and the rejoicing as not rejoicing,⁷⁵ and those buying as not possessing,⁷⁶ and those using the [present] system as not abusing it, because the structure of the [present] system is passing away.⁷⁷ 32. But I want you to be without anxiety. (The single man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he will be pleasing to the Lord. 33. But the married man is anxious about the [present] system, how he will be pleasing to the woman. 34. The same distinction applies to the virgin and [married] woman. The virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy in body and in spirit. Yet the married woman is anxious for the things of the [present] system, how she will be pleasing to the man). 35. I speak this for your own benefit, not*

⁶⁸ The Greek word means to be “pressed,” and here refers to impending persecution, as Jesus warned in Matt. 24:9-12.

⁶⁹ Literally, “loosed from.” This term refers to divorce of an engagement (Matt. 1:19) or a consummated marriage (cf. Matt. 19:7 & Deut. 24:1). The word “loosed from” regarding marriage always refers to divorce in Scripture, never to death. The Greek word frequently means ‘break,’ ‘destroy’ or ‘demolish,’ (see Matt. 5:19; John 2:19; John 5:18; Eph. 2:14). When Paul spoke of widows being released from the marriage bond, he said they were “free of” the marriage, not “loosed from” the marriage bond, (Rom. 7:3; 1 Cor. 7:39). Here, Paul used the same root word in the previous sentence where it clearly meant divorce. When he said for a married man not to “seek to be loosed” he was not referring to the death of his wife, but divorce. Therefore, when he referred to those already “loosed from a woman,” he meant Christians who were already divorced. Paul advised that they remain single in the impending distress, but he also permitted their marriage, and declared them innocent if divorced people remarried.

⁷⁰ Jesus warned about the enormous trouble that awaits those trying to start a family during the time of tribulation. “But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! ... For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.” (Matt. 24:19,21).

⁷¹ Literally, “the time that has been shortened.” This is a reference to Jesus’ statement that the time of Great Tribulation has been shortened for the sake of the elect, (Mark 13:20). It is a clear reference to the Great Tribulation. Paul’s instructions in verses 25-40 are specific for believers living through this time of great trouble.

⁷² The coming of the Great Tribulation was impending, and “remaining” to be fulfilled. Paul supposed that it was near. And his advice was not to settle down in the present system of things (fashion of the world). His instructions are much more relevant for us who live in the last days.

⁷³ Within the context of the Great Tribulation, and the need to flee quickly to safety, Jesus warned His followers to “remember Lot’s wife” (cf. Luke 17:32 & Luke 21:36). Those with wives must not allow familial relationships to interfere with the commands to flee when the signal is given.

⁷⁴ With Jesus’ return impending, it is pointless to lament for the dead since the resurrection will be impending. (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

⁷⁵ Newlyweds who were rejoicing may only have a very short time to do so if the impending Great Tribulation overtakes them.

⁷⁶ Those investing in lands or possessions would lose them all at the Great Jubilee, when the inheritance will be Christ’s and distributed and inherited according to His judgment.

⁷⁷ Paul again refers to the impending second coming. (cf. Romans 8:18-25; Hebrews 12:25-29)

that I should be placing a noose around you,⁷⁸ but toward excellence and undistracted devotion to the Lord.

Couples Already Engaged

36. Now, if anyone is acting audacious⁷⁹ towards his [betrothed] virgin, and if she could pass the prime [of childbearing age] and it becomes pressing, he should do as he wishes. He does not sin. They should marry. 37. Yet, the man who has taken a settled stand in his heart, not having necessity, and having power over his desires, and has determined this in his own heart – to preserve his [betrothed] virgin⁸⁰ – does better. 38. So also, the one consummating the marriage of his [betrothed] virgin does well. And the one not consummating the marriage will do better.

Widows of Faithful Husbands

39. A woman is bound by law for as long as her man lives. Yet, whenever her man falls asleep,⁸¹ she is free to marry whomever she pleases, only in the Lord. 40. However, she is advantaged, in my opinion, if she remains as she is. And I seem to have the Spirit of God [in this regard].

We ought to view Scripture as reflecting God’s nature and character. Every passage must be understood to reflect God’s ultimate purposes. And every regulation must be interpreted within the context of the historical situation it was addressing, and with all previous revelation considered. We run into trouble when we lift verses out of context, when we assume that some particular statement is a universal truth, ignoring the particulars of the situation to which it was addressed.

We have seen that God’s primary concern in marriage was to remedy aloneness. We have seen that He has made provisions for the effects of the curse, allowing remarriage of widows. We have seen that Jesus Himself permitted divorce and remarriage of believers under certain very painful circumstances. Paul also permitted divorce and remarriage of an abandoned believer. And he permitted remarriage of a person who has already been divorced, all without sinning.

⁷⁸ All of these instructions were Paul’s attempt to spare believers from unnecessary trouble if the Great Tribulation should overtake them. This is consistent with Jesus’ warning that families would be a snare to many believers in the last days, being betrayed by loved ones, (Micah 7:5-7; Matt. 10:21, 34-39; Matt. 24:10; Mark 13:12; Luke 12:51-53; Luke 21:16).

⁷⁹ A man is showing attention towards his fiancé [virgin] that he desires to consummate the marriage.

⁸⁰ A man who has determined not to consummate the marriage to the virgin to whom he has been betrothed, and has determined to preserve her virginity for her own sake (because of the “woes” Jesus warned about for pregnant and nursing women in the impending Great Tribulation), has done better both for himself and for the virgin to whom he is engaged. He has spared them both the grief of which Jesus warned.

⁸¹ The “sleeping” metaphor for death implies the hope of the resurrection of the righteous. It is used in Scripture only of believers (Matt. 27:52; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; Acts 13:36; 1 Cor. 11:30; 1 Cor. 15:6,18,20,51; 1 Thess. 4:13-15; 2 Pet. 3:4). Therefore, this statement only addresses a woman married to a faithful believer, not one married to an unbeliever.

Paul stated that every Christian man must have a wife, and every Christian woman must have a husband to avoid fornication. He said that *“it is better to marry than to burn.”* The exception is given for those with the gift of celibacy, and this is especially encouraged for the time of tribulation just before Jesus’ returns.

Jesus said that not everyone is able to live a celibate life, but only those so gifted. Why then would we expect God to forbid remarriage when the restoration of a marriage is utterly impossible? Such is inconsistent with both the character of God and with His revealed will in Scripture. And those who condemn divorced people to guilt or a life of aloneness are *“binding heavy burdens”* upon Jesus’ disciples, and causing them to commit fornication, putting them in danger of apostasy.

Can Divorced Men be Elders and Pastors?

Many conservative Christian churches teach that men who have been divorced are not eligible to serve in leadership in the local church. This idea comes from a misunderstanding of one clause in Paul’s list of qualifications for elders.

Titus 1:6-9 NKJV

6 if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. 7 For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, 8 but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, 9 holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.

The underlined part above literally reads in the Greek: *“ει τις εστιν ανεγκλητος μιας γυναικος ανηρ,”* (if anyone is an unimpeachable man of one woman). Two important points need to be addressed. What exactly is meant by the clause, *“a man of one woman?”* And how is one judged *“unimpeachable”* in this case?

First, *“a man of one woman”* is a bit vague and can mean several different things.

- A man who has been married only once
- A man who is not a polygamist, having only one wife at a time
- A man who is fully devoted to one woman, not a flirt, not a skirt chaser, not a single man *“playing the field,”* or someone with a wandering eye

Clearly, a polygamist cannot be *“a man of one woman,”* and is therefore disqualified. But those who hold that the clause means *“a man who has been married only once”* are by inference excluding widowers who have remarried. If this clause does not disqualify

remarried widowers, it cannot disqualify divorced and remarried men either, merely on the grounds of counting the number of marriages. Also, if Paul's statement merely meant that they had been married only once, both widowers and divorced men could serve as elders as long as they were not remarried. The problem with this interpretation is its inconsistent application to divorced men and widowers.

The context of Paul's statement shows that the third option is the correct one. "*A man of one woman*" refers to a man who is fully devoted to his wife. He is not a flirt, not a skirt chaser, not a single man "playing the field," or someone with a wandering eye. All of the other qualifications listed by Paul deal exclusively with an elder's *present character* and abilities. None deal with a man's history, particularly prior to his conversion. The qualifications all concern things that are under his control and make his character apparent. The Greek word "εστιν" (is) in the first clause is a present tense verb of being. It points to a present state, not to past history. He is NOW "a man of one woman." This is consistent with the other present tense verbs, "having [now] faithful children ...". This criterion excludes men who show any signs of less than 100% devotion to their wives, or any interest in other women besides their wife.

The adjective "unimpeachable" is only used in Scripture in reference to moral failure, never to mere circumstances. It is clear from Jesus's words that a man who has been divorced from a wife guilty of fornication (sexual, idolatry, or witchcraft) has not failed morally by divorcing the unfaithful spouse and remarrying another. He is the victim of circumstance. Therefore, he is "unimpeachable" in this regard even though he is divorced and remarried.

Such a man is qualified to be an elder or serve in any other capacity as long as he meets the other requirements. A divorce is not an automatic disqualifier from ministry. Whatever his marital history, he must now have a proven character as "a man of one woman." Judging this qualification means more than counting his marriages. It deals with how he treats his wife and how he treats other women in both public and private. This is the measure of his character, and the criteria by which he should be considered qualified or disqualified to serve in local church leadership.

Chapter 6

Divorce & Remarriage According to the Early Christians

Many have appealed to the writings of the early Christians as evidence that all divorce and remarriage was forbidden by the Apostles. But those who do are not typically honest with the early Christian literature. One often quoted passage is from Justin Martyr's First Apology.

*“Concerning chastity, He uttered such sentiments as these: ‘Whosoever looketh upon a woman to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart before God.’ And, ‘If thy right eye offend thee, cut it out; for it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of heaven with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into everlasting fire.’ And, ‘Whosoever shall marry her that is divorced from another husband, committeth adultery.’ And, ‘There are some who have been made eunuchs of men, and some who were born eunuchs, and some who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake; but all cannot receive this saying.’ So that **all who, by human law, are twice married, are in the eye of our Master sinners**, and those who look upon a woman to lust after her. For not only he who in act commits adultery is rejected by Him, but also he who desires to commit adultery: since not only our works, but also our thoughts, are open before God.”⁸²*

A careful reading of Justin's words in no way conflicts with our interpretation. Justin was careful to confine Jesus' condemnation of divorce and remarriage to "human law." That is, he was referring to Roman law which permitted many marriages for many reasons. He was not in any way saying that multiple marriages under the Law of Moses were sinful, because these are not by "human law," but by God's Law. The same would apply to those authorized by Jesus' exception clause for fornication. The statement Justin quoted from Jesus, "Whosoever shall marry her that is divorced from another husband, committeth adultery," implicitly includes the exception for "fornication" Jesus mentioned. Justin was not contradicting Jesus, but affirming Him.

In his second Apology, Justin affirmed Paul's instructions regarding a Christian's divorce from an unfaithful spouse as a good and honorable thing. In fact, in the case Justin cited, he went beyond Paul and even allowed for a Christian wife to initiate the divorce because the husband was exceedingly unfaithful. The Christian wife originally remained with the unfaithful husband according to Paul's instructions in order to give

⁸² Justin, First Apology, XV

him time to repent of his wickedness. But, when it became apparent that he was never going to repent, she divorced him on biblical grounds. Justin presented this case as a legitimate Christian divorce on proper grounds!

“A certain woman lived with an intemperate husband; she herself, too, having formerly been intemperate. But when she came to the knowledge of the teachings of Christ she became sober-minded, and endeavored to persuade her husband likewise to be temperate, citing the teaching of Christ, and assuring him that there shall be punishment in eternal fire inflicted upon those who do not live temperately and conformably to right reason. But he, continuing in the same excesses, alienated his wife from him by his actions. For she, considering it wicked to live any longer as a wife with a husband who sought in every way means of indulging in pleasure contrary to the law of nature, and in violation of what is right, wished to be divorced from him. And when she was overpersuaded by her friends, who advised her still to continue with him, in the idea that some time or other her husband might give hope of amendment, she did violence to her own feeling and remained with him. But when her husband had gone into Alexandria, and was reported to be conducting himself worse than ever, she — that she might not, by continuing in matrimonial connection with him, and by sharing his table and his bed, become a partaker also in his wickednesses and impieties — gave him what you call a bill of divorce, and was separated from him.”⁸³

Justin continued relating the story of how her former husband brought charges against her as a “Christian” and against her Christian pastor, Ptolemaeus, who apparently had advised her to divorce this wicked man. She deemed remaining his wife and sharing his bed to be partaking in his wickedness. Paul’s instructions were for the believing wife not to depart from an unfaithful husband because she might bring him to repentance. Yet, Justin seems to have seen a limitation even on this when it becomes clear that such will never be the case. Justin in no way condemned this woman’s actions, but rather condemned the Romans for persecuting her and her pastor who advised her.

We find also in Irenaeus an explanation of Jesus’ remark in Matthew 19 regarding why Moses permitted divorce in the Law. Irenaeus wrote that the Apostle Paul made the same kind of allowances for difficult circumstances for New Testament believers.

“And not only so, but the Lord also showed that certain precepts were enacted for them by Moses, on account of their hardness, and because of their unwillingness to be obedient, when, on their saying to Him, ‘Why then did Moses command to give a writing of divorcement, and to send away a wife?’ He said to them, ‘Because of the hardness of your

⁸³ Justin Martyr, Second Apology, II

hearts he permitted these things to you; but from the beginning it was not so;’ thus exculpating Moses as a faithful servant, but acknowledging one God, who from the beginning made male and female and reproofing them as hard-hearted and disobedient. And therefore it was that they received from Moses this law of divorcement, adapted to their hard nature. But why say I these things concerning the Old Testament? For in the New also are the apostles found doing this very thing, on the ground which has been mentioned, Paul plainly declaring, ‘But these things I say, not the Lord.’ And again: ‘But this I speak by permission, not by commandment.’ And again: ‘Now, as concerning virgins, I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful.’ But further, in another place he says: ‘That Satan tempt you not for your incontinence.’ If, therefore, even in the New Testament, the apostles are found granting certain precepts in consideration of human infirmity, because of the incontinence of some, lest such persons, having grown obdurate, and despairing altogether of their salvation, should become apostates from God, — it ought not to be wondered at, if also in the Old Testament **the same God permitted similar indulgences for the benefit of His people**, drawing them on by means of the ordinances already mentioned, so that they might obtain the gift of salvation through them, while they obeyed the Decalogue, and being restrained by Him, should not revert to idolatry, nor apostatize from God, but learn to love Him with the whole heart.”⁸⁴

Irenaeus’ point was that Paul did precisely what Moses did in the Law – made allowances for God’s people living under the curse, recognizing human frailty, keeping people from despairing to the point of apostasy by making allowances for divorce and remarriage under certain distressing conditions.

There is an interesting early Christian document from the second century called, “The Shepherd of Hermas.” This work contained parables and visions, no doubt written to relay the current theology in an entertaining fictional form, similar to Pilgrim’s Progress. It was held in high regard by many Christians. The following passage gives a fictitious account of Hermas’ dialogue with an angel regarding divorce. Here we find the same thinking found in Justin’s account of the Christian wife who divorced her philandering husband. A believer who remains yoked together with an adulterer or idolater is participating in the sin of the unfaithful spouse. While this is not explicitly taught in the New Testament (except perhaps by inference in 2 Thess. 3:6), it is a principle found throughout the Old Testament.

“I charge you,” said he, “to guard your chastity, and let no thought enter your heart of another man’s wife, or of fornication, or of similar iniquities; for by doing this you

⁸⁴ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book IV, ii

commit a great sin. But if you always remember your own wife, you will never sin. For if this thought enter your heart, then you will sin; and if, in like manner, you think other wicked thoughts, you commit sin. For this thought is great sin in a servant of God. But if any one commit this wicked deed, he works death for himself. Attend, therefore, and refrain from this thought; for where purity dwells, there iniquity ought not to enter the heart of a righteous man."

I said to him, "Sir, permit me to ask you a few questions."

"Say on," said he.

And I said to him, "Sir, if any one has a wife who trusts in the Lord, and if he detect her in adultery, does the man sin if he continue to live with her?"

And he said to me, "As long as he remains ignorant of her sin, the husband commits no transgression in living with her. But if the husband know that his wife has gone astray, and if the woman does not repent, but persists in her fornication, and yet the husband continues to live with her, he also is guilty of her crime, and a sharer in her adultery."

And I said to him, "What then, sir, is the husband to do, if his wife continue in her vicious practices?"

And he said, "The husband should put her away, and remain by himself. But if he put his wife away and marry another, he also commits adultery."

And I said to him, "What if the woman put away should repent, and wish to return to her husband: shall she not be taken back by her husband?"

*And he said to me, "Assuredly. If the husband do not take her back, he sins, and brings a great sin upon himself; for he ought to take back the sinner who has repented. **But not frequently [repeatedly]. For there is but one repentance to the servants of God.** In case, therefore, that the divorced wife may repent, the husband ought not to marry another, when his wife has been put away. In this matter man and woman are to be treated exactly in the same way.*

Moreover, adultery is committed not only by those who pollute their flesh, but by those who imitate the heathen in their actions.** [Idolatry & witchcraft] Wherefore if any one persists in such deeds, and repents not, withdraw from him, and cease to live with him otherwise you are a sharer in his sin. Therefore has the injunction been laid on you, that **you should remain by yourselves, both man and woman, for

*in such persons repentance can take place. But I do not," said he, "give opportunity for the doing of these deeds, but that he who has sinned may sin no more. But with regard to his previous transgressions, there is One who is able to provide a cure; for it is He, indeed, who has power over all."*⁸⁵

This passage is interesting in that it shows a blending of what Jesus taught on divorce, (that when fornication is involved, it is legitimate grounds for divorce), and Paul's instructions for a mixed marriage. It takes Paul's instructions regarding a spouse who is "without faith" or "unfaithful" and applies them to a professing Christian. It seems at least this author understood the term "without faith" (or "unfaithful") to apply to a professing Christian. This author went beyond the recorded words of Jesus and Paul by absolutely requiring a divorce in such cases so that the innocent party does not partake in the sin of the unfaithful spouse. Note also that both physical adultery and idolatry (which Scripture also calls "adultery" and "fornication") require divorce. This shows that Jesus' exception clause, "except for fornication," was understood in both the physical and the spiritual sense. Finally, notice that the purpose for remaining single was to allow the sinning spouse time to repent. However, this was limited to one repentance only. Afterward, the limitation to remain single so that the offender could repent no longer applies. In other words, if the offending spouse is unfaithful again after repenting, the faithful spouse is not required to remain single anymore, because no allowance is made for repeated repentance of the sinning spouse.

While the writings of the early Christians are certainly not authoritative, they do provide many clues to how the early Christians understood the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles on this subject. Keep in mind that they had much oral Apostolic tradition which we do not possess.

As time passed, and the generation that knew the Apostles died off, we find later writers taking a more hard line against divorce and remarriage. Tertullian had monastic tendencies, even instructing his wife that she must not remarry after his death, and that doing so was sin. The tendency to become more and more legalistic about marriage eventually forced complete celibacy on the Roman Catholic priesthood. This unbiblical legalism has bred blatant homosexuality, fornication, and sexual abuse within the Roman Catholic priesthood. Such things were not commanded by God, but borne out of a 'Pharisee' mindset, going beyond God's commandments into a pseudo-piety. God Himself is merciful and gracious. He acknowledges man's weakness and the difficult situations created even for innocent spouses, making allowances for divorce and remarriage. Religious people embellish God's commandments, "*binding heavy burdens*"

⁸⁵ Shepherd of Hermas, Book II, Commandment 4

around the necks of Jesus' followers to the point that many have abandoned the Faith in order to gain relief from an unbearable situation. It is better to allow for human frailty, as did Moses, Jesus, Paul, Justin, Irenaeus, and Hermas, than to raise the bar higher than most can tolerate in this cursed world. This is why Jesus said to His disciples, "**All cannot accept this saying** [living a celibate lifestyle], **but only those to whom it has been given**: *For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. **He who is able to accept it, let him accept it.**"⁸⁶ That is, those who are able to be celibate and bear aloneness should do so. But we must not condemn or bind with heavy burdens those who cannot tolerate a celibate life when God gives them recourse and relief. This is why Paul wrote, "*Are you loosed [divorced] from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But even if you do marry, you have not sinned.*"⁸⁷ The teaching of the Law, Jesus, and Paul is consistent. It is evolving Christian legalism that has bound and condemned so many Christians who God has released and justified.*

⁸⁶ Matt 19:11-12

⁸⁷ 1 Cor. 7:27-28