

# Divorce and Remarriage

The problem of divorce is a massive one. According to some statistics compiled over the last 50 years, the number of divorces has increased by 700%. In many parts of the country, 50% of all marriages end in divorce. Additionally, by the year 2000, half of all American children will not have been raised in a traditional two-parent home. In the minority community, we've already passed those milestones.

All of this has been worsened by legislation allowing no-fault divorce. Even though divorce is always somebody's fault, in a no-fault divorce, the court doesn't concern itself with placing blame. So, a husband and wife divide their property and their children, pay their lawyers a nominal fee, file the papers and that's that. Divorce granted. Another till-death-do-us-part commitment bites the dust.

In a society that has so cheapened the value of marriage, I think it is vital that we re-examine this institution from a biblical perspective. Let's begin at the beginning.

## Why Did God Create Marriage?

I can identify three reasons--and only one of them has anything to do with making us happy.

The first reason for marriage is procreation. You may ask, What's the big deal about having babies? Isn't the world crowded enough? The point is not to fuel a population explosion, but to disperse the influence and authority of God. Remember what God told Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28: Be fruitful and multiply so that you will have dominion over the earth. Dominion literally means a territory under one government. As God's people multiply and scatter, God's influence and authority follow. My goal is to raise my children in such a way that whether they wind up living in Baltimore, New York or Los Angeles, God relocates with them. The Lord's instruction to Adam and Eve was to populate the world with children who, because of their commitment and dedication, would express God's character and expand His kingdom.

The second purpose of marriage is to provide a divine illustration. The relationship between a husband and wife is meant to serve as a working model of the link between Christ and the Church. That's why the bride/bridegroom analogy appears so frequently in scripture. Thus, a bad

marriage is really a bad illustration. Divorce is a complete departure from the pattern. The third reason God created marriage--and the one that has to do with happiness--is self-realization. God said about Adam, It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a helper suitable for him. (Genesis 2:18) God knew that Adam lacked something vital, and put His finger on the perfect solution: Eve. Marriage is God's way of fulfilling what you lack.

This is the reason why husbands and wives are so different. If you were identical, one of you would be unnecessary. He provides you with a partner as unlike yourself as needed to create the kind of balance that brings wholeness. A couple bonded together in Christ can accomplish far more together than either could achieve alone.

Thus, we can see that, from the beginning, God has high purposes for pairing us up. In order to fulfill His plans, the bond between a man and wife had to be made strong--in fact, virtually indestructible. Marriage had to be more than an arrangement between two people.

## **About the Marriage Covenant**

Consider this key passage of scripture:

And this is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. Yet you say, for what reason? Because the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. (Malachi 2:13- 14)

Every concept discussed in this book depends on our understanding of that seemingly innocuous Hebrew word: covenant.

Most of us think of covenant as another word for contract. In a contract, both parties spell out the specific terms of their agreement. When they ratify the document with their signatures, a legally binding pact is the result.

A covenant, on the other hand, adds an additional ingredient to the mixture: a relationship. A contract outlines how people will perform services or make payments. A covenant specifies the terms under which the parties relate with one another.

For example, the new covenant, referred to in Luke 22:20 (. . . the new covenant in my blood . . .) refers to God's creation of the Church as His means of reaching the world. He establishes the terms of His relationship with His people. What does this new understanding of covenant teach us about the bond of marriage?

1. It is crucial to keep in mind that marriage is a legal relationship established by God.

Remember Malachi 2:14?

. . . the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth . . .

The Hebrew word for witness means a legal accuser. The Lord has seen what you have done as a breach of the law, and has taken the stand against you. He has entered the heavenly courtroom and has indicted you because you are divorcing your mate.

Marriage is a covenant made under the jurisdiction of divine law. Men can make and break human covenants, but only God has authority over the divine. That explains why Jesus said, What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate. (Matthew 19:6)

How interesting that we want God to marry us, but men to separate us. We want God to bless the marriage, but when trouble strikes, we call the lawyers and head downtown.

The major problem with this plan is that God does not recognize the actions of an earthly judge who acts in defiance of divine authority. When a human being in a black robe bangs a gavel and says, Divorce granted, God does not automatically nod in agreement. If the grounds for divorce don't measure up in God's eyes (and we'll examine those standards later), the Lord will ignore the judge's decree, leaving you--from God's point of view- just as married as ever.

This explains what Jesus meant when He said that if a man puts away his wife and marries another woman, he is committing adultery. On the basis of divine law, God still sees the first marriage as valid.

2. The marriage covenant functions under authority.

Since covenants govern relationships, they always deal with the issue of authority. Without a hierarchy of authority, chaos is the result.

The chain of command for the family is described in I Corinthians 11. God is over Christ, Christ is over every man, and the man is over the woman. Though both spouses are under God, the woman is to submit to the leadership of the man. Children are to submit to the authority of their parents. The bottom line is this: God is the ultimate authority in a marriage because it's a divine institution. Our desires, disagreements and discontentment are secondary issues.

3. Like all covenants, the marriage covenant is broken under the penalty of death.

When you break any covenant of God, you die on the spot, immediately. You may have been divorced for years and thinking to yourself, I'm alive and well! I'm sorry. You died.

Let me illustrate what I mean.

. . . and the Lord God commanded the man saying, from any tree in the garden you may eat freely, but from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat. For in the day you eat from it, you shall surely die. (Genesis 2:16)

Did Adam fall down dead the moment he bit into the fruit? No. But he was excommunicated from the garden. He was removed from the presence and the fellowship of God. His world crumbled. He didn't die physically, but he did die.

Remember the spiritual definition of death: separation. You exist eternally from the moment of conception. Even after you die physically, you continue to exist either in heaven or hell. When you break a covenant with God, you are immediately separated from Him. And once separated, you are dead.

4. There is a cause-and-effect connection between our faithfulness to the covenant and our relationship with God.

Our text, Malachi 2:13-14, demonstrates this action/reaction principle.

The people weep and groan because God ignores their offerings. That's the effect. The cause is identified in verse 14: dealing treacherously with (i.e. divorcing) the wife of your youth. Does the New Testament support this idea? Check out I Peter 3:7 for the answer:

Husbands, dwell with your wives according to knowledge as with the weaker vessel, for she is a woman, and grant her honor as a joint-heir so that your prayers may not be stopped.

Satan is adept at convincing us that spiritual death is not immediate and perhaps not even a reality. In fact, it is literally the oldest trick in the Book. Way back in Genesis 2:4, there is the serpent telling Eve, You surely shall not die. That lie has worked again and again and again. People are eager to believe they can break God's covenant and not die. But Satan's lies have no effect on God's truth.

5. The marriage covenant is a means of transferring blessing.

Deuteronomy chapter 28 helps us understand this idea. Now it shall be, if you will diligently obey the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you if you will obey the Lord your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country. Blessed shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground and the offspring of your beasts, the increase of the herd and the young of your flock. . . (Deuteronomy 28:1-4)

The list of blessings continues throughout the first half of the chapter. Then, we read:

But it shall come about that, if you will not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes which I charge you today, that all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. (Deuteronomy 28:15) The balance of the chapter lists curse after curse. Basically, God says, it's up to you. If you stay in the covenant, you get the blessings. If you abandon the covenant, you trade the blessings for the curses. A parallel is found in the New Testament, where children are promised long life if they honor the covenant with their parents by being obedient. (see Ephesians 6:-13)

Obviously, God takes His covenants seriously. That's why He tells us so clearly in Malachi 2:16, I hate divorce. It has nothing to do with two people living apart. It's not a matter of what becomes of the children or how to make ends meet financially. God hates divorce because it represents the breaking of a covenant.

## **Grounds for Divorce**

So, when is a marriage legitimately dead? What ends a marriage in the eyes of God?

Those were the questions posed by the Pharisees to Jesus in Matthew 19:3. They wanted to know, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?

The question was the result of a debate taking place at the time between two prominent Jewish scholars. On one side, there was Rabbi Hillel who argued that a man can divorce his wife for any cause--burning supper, getting wrinkles on her face, whatever. Then there was the school of thought headed by Rabbi Shamai, who said that divorce is only permissible on the grounds of immorality. The Pharisees brought the question to Jesus to see which side he would take. Their aim was to turn his choice into a trap.

Notice that Jesus began His response by turning to the Scripture, the best authority.

Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female? For this cause a man shall leave his mother and father and shall cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. Consequently, they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate. (Matthew 19:4-6)

Though we examined this passage earlier in another context, let me point out some additional thoughts brought out by the text. First, God created them. Second, He married them; He joined them together. Third, He identified them as one flesh.

Jesus' response was very shrewd. The Pharisees were looking for a comment on divorce. The Lord demonstrated that you can't have an intelligent discussion about divorce until you have a divine understanding of marriage. What God has joined together, let no man separate.

The Pharisees challenged Jesus.

Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate and divorce her? (Matthew 19:7)

They surely thought they had Jesus this time. If God tied the knot so tightly, they reasoned, why did Moses make divorce seem so easy?

The answer is found in the source of their argument, Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which says that if a husband found uncleanness in his wife, he could send her away.

Note the subtle difference in meaning. The Pharisees are asking why Moses commanded divorce. Jesus replies that because of the hardness of heart, Moses permitted it. (Matthew 19:8) According to Jesus, Moses relented in the face of stubborn disobedience. But He goes on:

. . . from the beginning it has not been this way. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife except for immorality and marries another woman, commits adultery. (v. 8-9)

By Jesus' logic, not only is the man who divorces his wife committing a sin, he is starting a cycle of sin that will involve several others. If this man's wife remarries, he has caused her to commit adultery by forcing her into a position of needing the security and safety of a new husband. The man who marries that ex-wife also commits adultery. And so on, and so on . . . See how complicated it has become? Three or more adulterers are mired in sin as the result of irreconcilable differences.

You may now be wondering why God would ask you to stay committed to a relationship plagued by these irreconcilable differences. Simply because, from God's perspective, no differences are truly irreconcilable. Painful and frustrating, perhaps, but not irreconcilable.

Remember, the marriage relationship is a model of Christ's commitment to His church. Where would you be if the Lord divorced you every time you went astray? Would any of us have a chance of salvation if He dealt with us this way? Marriage is a lifetime process of growth, development and problem solving. Anyone who believes otherwise has been reading too many fairy tales.

## **How the Covenant is Compromised**

Since, as we have seen, Jesus only allowed for divorce on the grounds of immorality, it is important for us to understand exactly what He meant by that word. Leviticus 18:3 gives us some clarification of the kind of immorality that terminates the marriage covenant in God's sight.

You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes, you are to perform My judgements and

keep My statutes to live in accord with them. I am the Lord, your God. You shall keep My statutes and My judgements by which a man may live if he does them; I am the Lord.

Before I get into the specifics, let me point out the principle behind them. God says He doesn't care what they do in Egypt, and He doesn't care what they do in Canaan. You are to obey His statutes. If I could update and paraphrase this passage, it might read something like this: I don't care what they're offering downtown. I don't care if they come along with no-fault divorces; those are Egypt's and Canaan's statutes, not Mine. You live by My laws, not theirs. The truth of this applies not only to marriage, but to every aspect of our lives. And if we keep His laws, we'll live. We won't suffer from the kind of death I've been talking about throughout this book.

In Leviticus 18, God goes on to describe the kind of behavior sure to bring about spiritual death and destroy the covenant between a man and wife. To summarize, He specifically forbids incest, adultery, immoral behavior with children, homosexuality and bestiality. The details are all laid out in this passage; they are unmistakably clear. In the New Testament, the Greek word for immorality is *pornea*. This is the root of the English word pornography, and refers to any kind of sexually deviant activity.

Immorality without repentance breaks the covenant between a husband and wife and legitimizes divorce in the eyes of God. Paul expands on Jesus' teaching on divorce in his letter to the Corinthians. He writes:

. . . if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. (1 Corinthians 7:12-15)

Here, Paul teaches that a believer who is married to a non-believer is not obligated to maintain the marriage relationship if the unbeliever elects to leave. Of course, this presumes that the believer has done everything possible to live a holy and exemplary life before the unsaved spouse, and has not driven the unbeliever away by failing to exercise their biblical role properly.



When Paul says the believer is not under bondage, he means that the individual is no longer bound by covenant to that relationship and is free to enter another one--provided the new husband or wife is a Christian. (See II Corinthians 6:14) Paul also teaches that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come. (II Corinthians 5:17) With new birth begins a new life. Thus, a person who divorces a mate prior to becoming a Christian is allowed to remarry.

## **The Verdict of the Church**

Who has the authority to determine when divorce is legitimate in the eyes of God? The Bible is quite clear about how legal disputes (and the breaking of a covenant is a legal dispute) between believers are to be dealt with.

Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, matters of this life? If then you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren, but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers? Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? (I Corinthians 6:7)

If my neighbor happens to be my spouse, where do I take my case? Paul's answer is to go before the Church Court. The apostle presumes that the Church will develop and operate its own system of binding litigation for believers. What goes on in courtrooms downtown is governed by man's law; the Church Court, however, answers to a higher authority.

Thus, the church has been charged and empowered by God to render judgement on His behalf, based on the authority of Scripture.

This brings us to two important questions: how are courts to be established in the Church? And once they are established, how should courts judge divorce cases?

The book of Exodus is a good place to begin answering our questions. There, we can see the theological roots of ecclesiastical courts.

Here's the situation: Moses, as Israel's judge, had the only game in town; every dispute came directly before him. With two million people to serve, the litigants lined up from dawn to dusk and poor Moses was working himself to death.

Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, recognized the problem and provided the answer.

The thing you are doing is not good. You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me, I shall give you counsel, and God be with you. You will be the people's representative before God and you bring the disputes to God, then teach them the statutes, the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do. Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain, and you shall place these over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you and they will bear the burden with you. (Exodus 18:17-22)

A system of lower courts was put in place--similar to our municipal, state and federal courts--answerable, ultimately, to the Supreme Court. Cases move from lower to higher courts by means of an appeal process. This is exactly what the Church is supposed to have.

Let's move into the New Testament and see how the court operates.

And if your brother sins, go reprove him in private. If he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer. (Matthew 18:15-17)

If a fellow-believer has done something wrong--legally, personally or maritally--you start with the lowest court and work your way up. If the process fails to bring about restoration (which, of course, is the goal), then we are no longer to view our rebellious believer as a Christian; he is now listed under the heading of sinner.

Let me give you an example of how this Church Court works: A lazy husband quits his job, refuses to look for another, and squanders the family

finances that still remain. In the meantime, the wife and children barely have enough to live on. The wife explains her concerns and asks him to take his family responsibilities more seriously. No response.

After the wife informs the church leadership (elders and deacons) about what is going on, two or three representatives of the church are sent to the home to talk with the husband. He very casually explains that he disliked his job and needed some time to do as he pleased. When challenged about the family's lack of food and imminent eviction from the home, he informs the visitors that they should keep their noses out of his business and asks them to leave.

The matter is then brought before the leadership of the church, who may elect to bring the matter before the entire congregation. Either way, the same authority is consulted: the law of God. The Word tells us that if a man will not work, he shall not eat. (II Thessalonians 3:10) Elsewhere we're told that a man who doesn't take care of his family has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (I Timothy 5:8) By abandoning his responsibility and refusing to repent, the husband has made the church's response inevitable. One last effort should be made to win the man to repentance. If he still does not respond, scripture teaches that he is to be treated as an outsider.

Under these circumstances, the church has the authority to determine that this man has denied his faith and broken the covenant with his wife. Based on the guidelines in I Corinthians 7 (the unbeliever who elects to leave), the church can declare that the wife is, in God's eyes, legitimately divorced and free to remarry if she chooses.

Of course, the church also has the responsibility to do everything possible to facilitate a reconciliation, even to the point of orchestrating a temporary separation. (See I Corinthians 7:10-11)

You may ask, Where is God while these church members are rendering such weighty decisions? For the answer, we turn back to Matthew 18:18-20:

Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by my Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst.

This passage is often misquoted by those with a name it and claim it mentality--people who believe God will give us anything we want if we can get somebody to ask with us. But look at the context. This verse is talking about the legal process. It is as though God is saying, If you will agree to act on My Word regarding how sin is to be dealt with, then I will honor your verdict when you request that I do so.

Another frequently mistreated phrase is found in this passage: Where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst. Many take this to mean that if the attendance at your prayer meeting or church service exceeds one, God is there. That may be true, but it is not the point of this verse. Again, consider the context. When we gather in His name to make judgements in accordance with His word, He is with us. God stands beside us, adding His endorsement to the decisions rendered by the lower courts He established.

Can you grasp the significance of this passage--especially in light of the context in which we find it? The Church is given absolute authority in applying the Scripture, and absolute assurance that God will back the decisions they hand down, as long as they are rooted in His word.

However, there is an even more compelling reason to turn to the church instead of the courts when a marriage falters. Troubled marriages are the by-products of troubled people. A judge can do nothing but recognize that you've given up on your marriage and endorse the surrender. But, by God's power, the Church can offer new life. When problems are brought before the Body, believers can offer love, support, encouragement, fellowship and the super- natural saving power of God through Jesus Christ. There's nothing downtown that can even come close!

Let me repeat, lest you miss the point: God's intent is life- long marriage. Even if your grounds for divorce are legitimate, don't be too quick to cling to your rights. Genuine love and heart-felt forgiveness are far more Christ-like than calling it quits. Remember that even in the face of betrayal and in the process of being murdered, Christ said, Forgive them, for they know not what they are doing. (Luke 23:34) Where would we be if He had exercised his rights?

Perhaps you and your mate started off on the wrong foot. Or maybe you started off on the right foot and it's gone wrong. Either way, if your relationship is less than ideal, don't let it deteriorate a moment longer. Let today be the turning point. Seek qualified Christian counseling together. Take the time to renew your vows and reinforce the covenant between you and your spouse--and between you and the Lord.

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