

DIVORCE *ON TRIAL*

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Divorce on Trial

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FOREWORD

The Word of God offers the relationship of Christ and the Church as a picture of the relationship that is to exist between the husband and the wife. The Church is pictured in Scripture as the Bride of Christ. As the Head of the Church, He gave Himself to be the Savior of His Bride. Christ's love was a self-sacrificing love which showed no restraints in providing what was necessary for her welfare.

After describing this relationship, Paul wrote, "So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church" (Eph. 5:28,29). If husbands will fulfill their responsibilities to their wives in this way and if wives will submit themselves to their husbands just as the Church submits herself to her Head, the picture God intended this relationship to portray will be clear. Then the marriage relationship will be one of joy and mutual fulfillment. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

One of the great tragedies of our day is the many marriages that end up on trial in divorce courts. The breakdown of the family unit is one of the greatest calamities our society faces. A result often unseen by the casual observer is the shattered lives of children left floundering in a sea of turmoil and devastation, to say nothing about the agony experienced by the partners themselves. Divorce is always tragic and traumatic. When divorce invades the homes of Christians, it seems even more tragic because God has given in His Word the framework for the marriage relationship.

Divorce is a fact of life which believers must deal with in the Church if not in their own families. We must learn what the biblical

perspective is on this subject and submit ourselves to it.

The basic statements on divorce and remarriage in the New Testament are in Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7. The other passages in the Gospels are abbreviations, so you do not get the full import of the subject as you do in Matthew 19. Then in the epistles, Paul speaks to the subject in 1 Corinthians 7 to give additional revelation.

Let's examine the evidence offered by Scripture. Rather than letting our marriages go on trial, let's put *divorce on trial*. Let's carefully examine God's instructions about this subject and let Him bring in the verdict. After all, since He is the One who instituted marriage, only He has the authority to speak regarding its dissolution.

CHAPTER ONE

The Evidence by Jesus in Matthew 19

As the subject of divorce is brought to trial in the Scriptures, we first want to consider the testimony by Jesus in the Gospels. The Pharisees came to Jesus testing Him. Their purpose in coming was not to get a better grasp of the Biblical teaching on divorce, but rather to see if they could ensnare Jesus in what He said, to put Him on the spot and trap Him. When we understand the intent behind their question, we can appreciate what Jesus said to them.

Matthew 19:3 records, “And some Pharisees came to Him, testing Him and asking, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?’ ” The phrase “any reason at all” had its background in the positions taken by two different rabbinical schools of thought headed by two leading rabbis. One group, led by Rabbi Shammai, held that you could divorce your wife only where immorality was involved. The other school of thought, led by Rabbi Hillel, said that you could divorce your wife for any reason, and that is the background for this question. They are asking if He agrees with Rabbi Hillel when he says that any reason is a sufficient reason to divorce your wife. If she burns your dinner, obviously that is a good reason; if she does something you do not like, divorce her! In other words, any reason at all is a sufficient cause for divorce.

When Jesus responds to their question, the Pharisees try to get Him from the other side. So they are really not primarily interested in truth, but Jesus responds and gives them the truth nonetheless. “And He answered and said, ‘Have you not read . . . ?’ ” That ques-

tion, "Have you read the Scriptures?" is a blow to these Pharisees who prided themselves in their meticulous study and thorough knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus understands the motivation for their question. "And He answered and said, 'Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh?" ' " (Matt. 19:4). He takes them back to the book of Genesis and says in effect, "Don't you know what it says in Genesis? That is the answer to your question."

Marriage As a Permanent Relationship

It is indeed interesting that these men who studied the Old Testament Scriptures failed to understand the importance of what they were studying. Jesus was saying that if they understood the opening chapters of Genesis, that would answer the question of marriage and divorce.

The same would be true for us today. A lot of the problems we are struggling through about marriage and divorce would be answered if we understood Genesis 1 and 2. Note Genesis 1:27, the first passage that Jesus quotes: "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." So the basic statement is that God made a man and a woman. God made Adam and God made Eve. That ought to tell us something. He did not make one Adam and four Eves. He did not make six Adams and two Eves. He made one man and one woman. Jesus said that should tell you something about the intended relationship God has for a man and woman. He created them male and female.

After God created Adam, "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good for man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him' " (Gen. 2:18). Then down to Genesis 2:24: "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh." Here is the foundation for marriage. God established it at the very beginning when He created one couple—a man and woman—Adam and Eve. And His intention was that a man would leave his family, perhaps indicating that he is the head of the new family being established.

Likewise, a woman is to leave her family, a fact that is assumed because she is the helper fitted to her husband. They are both to leave their parents and come together in a new, unique relationship. “They shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). That is the basic relationship among mankind, a relationship that supersedes parental relationships because that intimacy of oneness is never experienced in the same way with parents and children as it is with husband and wife.

Jesus elaborates on this in Matthew 19. He quoted what we just read in Genesis 2:24 and then added, “Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (Matt. 19:6). So in answer to their question, Can you divorce your wife for any reason at all? Jesus said they must understand the marriage relationship—that God brings a man and woman together, and in His authority they are joined as one. To end that relationship, you must have someone who could supersede God’s authority. God has joined them together, it would take one with greater authority than God to separate them. Obviously, that answers the question because there is none greater than God. “What God has joined together, let no man separate,” means that when a man and a woman are joined together in a marriage relationship, God views them as having been bound together permanently.

These marriage relationships are established by the laws of the land which God has instituted through human government. When a man and woman meet the requirements of the laws of their land to be married, then God views them as having been bound together in a *permanent* marriage relationship.

Excuses Do Not Count. All kinds of excuses will be given as reasons for the termination of the marriage relationship. One excuse comes up very often. Maybe you have heard this one yourself. “I do not think God joined us together. Obviously this marriage has been a disaster from day one. God did not join us together; it was my mistake. I admit it.” Oh no! They do not have to wonder if God really joined them and their spouse together. When they were joined in marriage, they were joined with the authority of God behind it, because He is the One who instituted the relationship. So every person who is married is married under the authority of God and is bound permanently in that relationship.

The Jews had a problem which they are quick to bring to Him in Matthew 19:7: “They said to Him, ‘Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate and divorce her?’ ” They were referring to Deuteronomy 24:1–4, the basic passage on divorce in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 24 is speaking to another issue—the possibility of remarrying a former mate after you have been divorced and have married someone else. In addition to discussing this issue, that passage shows that divorce was permissible in the Old Testament.

Jesus Expands Teaching on Divorce. In Matthew 5 we have the contextual setting for the teaching that Jesus gives in Matthew 19. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is showing how His teaching goes beyond the teaching of the Old Testament and is more strict and binding. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery; but I say to you, that every one who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart’” (Matt. 5:27,28). Jesus reminds them that the Old Testament says not to commit the act of adultery, but He is providing further revelation and narrowing down the sin of adultery more precisely when He says, “But I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.”

He comes to the subject of divorce as explained in the Old Testament in Matthew 5:31,32. “And it was said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of dismissal;’ but I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” Just as He did in Matthew 5:27,28 with adultery, He also does in Matthew 5:31,32 with divorce; He carries it beyond what the Old Testament said and tells them that divorce is not a possibility except for immorality. This is further revelation to them.

Jesus explains in Matthew 19:8 why Moses allowed divorce: “Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.” The people, in their stubbornness and rebellion against God’s Word, resisted God’s plan when they divorced. And God permitted them to do that. He did not command them to divorce, but He permitted them to. There was an allowance there, but Jesus is saying that this was not God’s plan from the beginning. Jesus continues in Matthew 19:9, “And I say to you, whoever

divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” Now Jesus focuses on what the Pharisees really wanted to know: “What do You believe the Bible teaches about divorce?” In the Jewish system, the men did the divorcing. But we will see that the prohibition goes both ways when we study 1 Corinthians.

Let’s leave out the exception phrase for the moment—“except for immorality.” Why does Jesus say that if you divorce your wife and marry another woman you have committed adultery? It is because in Matthew 19:6 He had said, “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” He does not recognize that divorce. God never gave you the authority to dissolve that relationship. If you divorce your wife and marry someone else, you commit adultery.

The First Allowance for Divorce

Now let’s examine the exception phrase, “except for immorality.” The word translated “immorality” is *porneia*¹ or *pornos*², a word we carry over into English in words like “pornography.” It refers to sexual lewdness of all kinds. It can include adultery, homosexuality, or any kind of sexual unfaithfulness. Jesus says you are not permitted to divorce your wife for any reason except immorality. In other words, Jesus agreed with the strict interpretation of Shammai. When He says “except for immorality,” that is a reason for divorce in the Bible. In Matthew 5:32 Jesus said, “But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery.” There again is the emphasis on immorality being an exception.

One Who Divorces Unbiblically Is Responsible for Adultery. Notice also the phrase “makes her commit adultery.” A person is married usually because of the need to satisfy sexual desires. If a man decides he is going to divorce his wife because he feels they are incompatible, he puts her in the position of needing to satisfy those desires by entering into another marriage relationship. God says he is responsible. That does not take the responsibility away from the one who commits the adultery, but it says the one divorcing has become a contributing factor in that sin; and God holds him responsible for that as well. To say that he “makes her commit adultery” is a strong statement; but he has put her in a position where,

for the satisfaction of sexual desire, she will enter into another relationship which God says will begin with an act of adultery. She is responsible for her sin, but God says the husband who divorced her has been an instrument that caused that sin. The very act of divorce becomes sin, because when you make someone commit immorality, you have sinned! That is what God says happens when you divorce.

We will see in 1 Corinthians 7 that there is no divorce apart from the specific scriptural reasons. The only allowance for divorce is when marriage to another is biblically permissible. So immorality is an allowance for divorce and thus for remarriage. Immorality includes all kinds of sexual unfaithfulness, whether in heterosexual or homosexual relationships. A divorce is not required in these situations, but it is permissible. Where the divorce has been obtained for biblical reasons, marriage to another is possible. This is supported through the Old Testament as well.

Do you know what they did in the Old Testament when people committed immorality? They took them out and stoned them. That effectively ended the marriage relationship. For sexual immorality, people were stoned.

God's relationship with the nation Israel is constantly portrayed as a husband-wife relationship. Israel is constantly being unfaithful to her husband, Jehovah; and God reiterates again and again that it would be His prerogative to divorce her, to cut her off and have nothing more to do with her as a nation. This indicates that the immorality with Israel is a spiritual immorality—it is cause for breaking the relationship, which shows that it is permissible to divorce for unfaithfulness.

The prophet Hosea's marriage to Gomer is a picture of this; he marries a woman who is a prostitute, and she becomes an unfaithful wife. Hosea is told to go and restore her to her position—to do more for her than he would normally be required to do. That indicates that you do not have to divorce your partner if unfaithfulness has occurred.

The Significance of Matthew's Statements. Some interpreters make an issue of the fact that this exception is recorded only in Matthew. Mark and Luke do not record it. Since Matthew is a Jewish Gospel, they say the exception phrase has significance only in a

Jewish context. The problem with that interpretation is that if you take everything out of Matthew's Gospel which is not recorded in Mark's Gospel, you are going to cut out much of Matthew's Gospel because Matthew expands, and Mark does just the opposite, he condenses. The significant thing is that Matthew gives the most complete discussion of it anywhere. Naturally, he includes it in its broadest scope. According to Matthew, where sexual immorality has occurred, it is permissible to divorce that partner and to remarry. Divorce for a biblically acceptable reason implies the possibility for remarriage. I do not believe you can ever be divorced biblically without the option for remarriage.

Jesus Accepts the Strict Interpretation. It is almost amusing how the disciples respond to Jesus' answer. They realize Jesus has taken the interpretation of the strict school, and they are taken back a little. In Matthew 19:10, "The disciples said to Him, 'If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.'" In other words, "Wow, you mean I am bound for life except for immorality? O Lord, maybe it would be better not to get married." Jesus does not say, "Oh, that is foolish." He says, "You have got a good point there." Note Matthew 19:11: "But He said to them, 'Not all men can accept this statement.'" Some people really twist the Scripture. Some try to relate this statement back to Matthew 19:9 and say, "Not all men can accept this statement that you cannot divorce except for immorality." Obviously, that is not the true interpretation. The statement in Matthew 19:10 is what He is referring to: "It is better not to marry." Jesus was saying, "Not all men can accept this statement," the statement they had just made that it is better not to marry; "but only those to whom it has been given."

Matthew 19:12 then elaborates. "For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men," which was the practice in Biblical times for slaves; "and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it." He is referring to some like the Apostle Paul. He lived a celibate life so that he would be free from the cares of this life to proclaim the Gospel more freely. When you get married, you have responsibilities. A family is a burden. The married person cannot live like a single person and be out evangelizing every night. He has responsibilities to his wife and chil-

dren. Some have been given the privilege of being eunuchs. Paul says that is a better state in 1 Corinthians 7, but that does not mean that being married is not a good condition.

In summary, marriage is a relationship that is binding until death. But the first exception to this rule is Jesus' phrase, "except for immorality" (Matt. 19:9). He is saying that one situation that would give allowance for divorce is where sexual infidelity has occurred.

CHAPTER TWO

The Evidence by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7

Paul's Instructions for Marriage and Divorce

The first seven verses of 1 Corinthians 7 deal with what Jesus dealt with in Matthew 19:1–12, where the disciples said it would be good not to marry. Jesus responded in effect, “Yes, but not everybody can handle that.” Paul says the same thing in 1 Corinthians 7:1: “Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman,” referring to having a sexual relationship or being married. “But because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband” (1 Cor. 7:2). Not everyone can take the statement that it is good not to be married because some have the need for sexual fulfillment.

You may say, “How do I know if I am supposed to be married?” Well, let me give you the first indication. If you are married, you are supposed to be! That is not one of the things you go back and reconsider after doing it. There is no going back. Do not frustrate yourself with thoughts along that line. But if you are single and want to know if God wants you to get married, one of the positive indicators is whether you have a need for sexual fulfillment.

1 Corinthians 7:3–5 gives the responsibility of the husband and wife not to deprive one another of sexual fulfillment “except by

agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control” (1 Cor. 7:5).

Just on the side, let me throw in another idea. Today we have a lot of problems with immorality in marriage relationships. Something tells me that if you were as busy about the sexual relationship within the marriage as Paul talks about, you would not have any energy left to pursue other relationships. I mean, you have even got to come into an agreement to stop for a little bit of time to pray! Do not think I have gone off the track; that is what 1 Corinthians 7:5 says. It is one of my favorite verses! It is supposed to be because I am married. The first seven verses are saying that sex ought to be a key part of the marriage relationship. You say, “Well, we are married, but we do not need that stuff.” Baloney! God is always right. You may not know what your needs are, but God does; so take heart! Maybe you should memorize the first seven verses.

The General Principle—No Divorce. Paul begins his discussion of divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:10,11: “But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband . . . and that the husband should not send his wife away.” When he says, “But to the married I give instruction, not I, but the Lord,” he is saying that he is just repeating what Jesus taught—the husband should not divorce his wife; the wife should not divorce her husband. As all standard Greek authorities substantiate, the words translated “leave” and “send away” (1 Cor. 7: 10,11) are synonyms for divorce. That is the meaning for the words, and the context bears that out as well. The wife should not leave (divorce) her husband. The husband should not send away (divorce) his wife. Paul does not elaborate on what Jesus said about the phrase “except for immorality” because that has already been clarified. It is not necessary for every Biblical writer to repeat what every other Biblical writer says on a subject, because as God put His Word together we have the balance. We have Matthew 19, and we have 1 Corinthians 7. The general teaching of Christ on the subject was, “No divorce.” Paul substantiates that. The wife should not divorce her husband. The husband should not divorce his wife.

If Already Divorced Unbiblically. First Corinthians 7:11 brings in a parenthetical point that has been misunderstood, and I have wrestled with this over the years. “(But if she does leave, let her

remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband.)” Does this give the wife or the husband the prerogative of divorce as long as they do not remarry? No. “If she does leave” can be literally translated “if she has been separated,” or “if she has been divorced.” It is an aorist passive, something that has happened to this person. She has been divorced.

The situation in view is the same today as it would have been at Corinth. There were people who had already gone through a divorce. Maybe they were divorced five years ago, but the reason was not one for which the Scriptures allow a divorce. Now what is their situation? If immorality was not the cause, and if immorality or remarriage has not yet occurred by either party, then they have two options. They can either remain unmarried or they can be reconciled to their former spouse. You may feel that is hard. What if he did not know about this when he got a divorce? The grace of God is sufficient to enable him to function biblically. That has to be the case, and that is what Paul says.

The phrase “if she does leave” (if she has been separated or divorced) does not allow for a Christian to get divorced and say he just will not remarry. The command has already been given not to leave your husband or your wife. Do not get a divorce. But in cases where divorce has already occurred, the two options above are applicable. Divorce cannot be permitted for other reasons because in Matthew 5:32 Jesus said, “everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery.” Paul cannot come along and say it is all right to cause someone to commit adultery. In divorces that have already occurred, if it was not in the biblical pattern, remarriage is not a possibility.

Paul Gives Additional Revelation. Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 7:12, “But to the rest I say, not the Lord.” In other words, he is going to speak to an area now that Jesus did not address. He is not saying that this is not inspired. He is only saying that Jesus did not elaborate in this area—this is additional revelation.

Paul instructed further in 1 Corinthians 7:12: “But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away.” This is a married couple, but one is a believer and one is an unbeliever. He is not talking about a believer marrying an unbeliever; that is an unbiblical move in the first place (see 2 Corinthians 6:14).

He is dealing with two people who were married as unbelievers, but one of them got saved. What is the believer's responsibility? The believer might think he should divorce that person. *She is defiling me. She is a child of the Devil. We have nothing in common. I ought to be divorced from her. She hinders my being the type of Christian I should be.* That is not what God says.

What is true for the man is also true for the woman. "And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away" (1 Cor. 7:13). The believer should not divorce the unbeliever because the unbelieving partner is sanctified by, or receives benefits from, being married to the believer. If my wife were a believer and if I were not, she would be God's child. God would be taking care of her in a special way. Since I am the closest person on earth to her, I naturally would reap benefits from that because what directly affects her affects me. I would be receiving benefits from being in close proximity to a believer; the children would be as well.

The Second Allowance for Divorce

One other allowance in addition to the one Jesus gave is given in this passage for a biblical divorce. The second exception which allows for divorce and remarriage is found in 1 Corinthians 7:15: "Yet if the unbelieving one leaves [divorces], let him leave." "Let him leave" is a command. This is a situation where the unbeliever is unwilling to live with the believer. A person could go off on all sorts of tangents, but we are not talking about a believer who becomes obnoxious and tries to drive the unbeliever away. Obviously, that is unbiblical. A good example of this exception would be where two Muslims are married, but one of them becomes a believer in Christ. The Muslim wants to divorce the believing partner. In that pagan situation, obviously you either have to adhere to the Muslim religion and reject Christianity or be divorced. Paul says the believer is to let the unbeliever divorce him.

"Not Under Bondage." "The brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace" (1 Cor. 7:15). The only way I can understand the phrase "let him leave" and "not under bondage" is that there is freedom for remarriage. If this believer is still tied to the marriage relationship, there is no freedom. Romans 7 talks about not being under bondage after one of the part-

ners has died. Paul uses a different word for bondage there, but his word in 1 Corinthians 7:15 is even a stronger word than the one used in Romans 7. This brother or sister is not under bondage. So the second allowance for divorce and remarriage occurs when an unbeliever is unwilling to live with the believer and divorces him. The believer is not obligated to hold the unbeliever back; he is not obligated to fight the divorce if the unbeliever is unwilling to live with the believer.

Those two reasons are the only biblical reasons for divorce and remarriage—first, where one of the partners has been sexually unfaithful, and second, where an unbeliever is unwilling to live with a believer. There is no situation where a believer can divorce another believer because they feel they are incompatible, because they do not love each other any longer, or because it is just not working out.

Unfortunately, believers have followed an unbiblical course, and it has added pressure toward breaking up our marriages. You can tell what is going to happen in the Church by just observing what is happening in the world. Years ago we had the existential movement and neoorthodoxy where experience was the dominating factor in religious life and worship had to be dominated by your personal experience in worship. Do you know the battle the Church fights today? Experiential religion where the element is, “Did you get the good feeling you were looking for?” Experience supersedes the Word of God. The question was not, “Did you study and come to understand more about God and His character?” but rather, “What did you feel like when you were done?” The same thing has happened in the areas of marriage and divorce. As a result the world has grown more tolerant of divorce. The church has felt the pressure of divorce, and so we have tried to reinterpret Scripture so that we can be more acceptable with the world’s standard. In so doing, we have allowed an unbiblical option.

No Other Alternatives. One of the things that helps maintain a marriage is to know there are no alternatives. If there are no alternatives, we might as well determine to be the kind of husband or wife God says I am to be. When problems come, that is hard to do. That is why we must submit to the Spirit to have the kind of relationship God says we are to have.

But people often conclude, *Well, if it gets to be too difficult, maybe I ought to get out. So-and-so looks pretty good anyway!* So they create an

unbiblical option. Instead of being forced to follow through with what the Bible says, they take the easy road. The Devil is always there to provide an easy out. It is easy to rationalize, *Our marriage should not be this hard. There ought to be a little more zing in our relationship! She just does not turn me on any more. I do not have any feeling for her. I do not love her any more*, and on and on. But it is all irrelevant. You might as well put it out of your mind. God says it is not an option.

That really helps me because I do not have to sit down and decide whether I should fight it out and struggle through with it or decide maybe it is better to get a divorce. I just take away the one option because it is not really an option. The only option is to continue to pursue being the husband God wants me to be. That is a great asset. We have so much frustration and so many problems in our lives as believers because we try to make real options of unbiblical alternatives, and they are not options at all. For two believers, the only possible allowance *ever* for a divorce is sexual immorality. That does not mean you have to divorce your partner if there is immorality. But that is the only time you can ever consider it.

Malachi's Instructions. In the last book in the Old Testament, God is speaking to the nation Israel about their relationship to Him. This is the last thing He will have to say to the nation for 400 years until John the Baptist comes on the scene. Malachi is writing to them about their deteriorated spiritual condition. In Malachi 2:13, God says, "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." They are all so teary-eyed because God no longer accepts their worship, and they wonder what is wrong.

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. But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then, to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. 'For I hate divorce,' says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'and him who covers his garment with wrong,' says the Lord of hosts.

‘So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.’

In this situation the man is divorcing his wife because in Malachi’s time the wife could not divorce her husband. But by the time we get to Paul’s day, the situation has deteriorated, and the wives were divorcing their husbands as the husbands were their wives. But note God’s attitude toward it. God told them, “You have dealt treacherously” (Mal. 2:15). Why? When they got married, they entered into an agreement before God; and now they are dealing treacherously with that agreement, looking for a way to get out of it. And when they do that, God says He is the testimony against them. It does not matter how many friends they can bring to give testimony that the marriage is not working out, that the wife is not the kind of wife he really needs, or that the husband is not the kind of husband she should have. God says, “I am the witness against you. All other witnesses are canceled out.”

“ ‘For I hate divorce,’ says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘and him who covers his garment with wrong’ ” (Mal. 2:16). Then God gives the warning: “So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.” It is a serious matter to set yourself in opposition to God. So be careful with your spirit. It is interesting that He starts out dealing with the inside: Be careful what you are thinking about your husband or wife. Divorce is not an option. “I hate it,” God says.

CHAPTER THREE

The Verdict for Today

After considering the evidence of Jesus in Matthew 19 and the evidence of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7, we must not overlook the verdict rendered on the subject in 1 Corinthians 7. That verdict relates to our responsibilities today in light of this revelation God has given us. Some of you may have been divorced and are now remarried. Some of you may have been divorced more than once. What if you are in your second, third, fourth or fifth marriage? The number of times is not a relevant issue. What if you have been divorced and are remarried? First Corinthians 7:20 speaks to that issue. "Let each man remain in that condition in which he was called." In other words, God picks you up where you are. If you are married now, even if this is your fifth marriage, this is the marriage relationship you have; and God views that as binding.

The Past Is the Past

What you have done in the past is the past. Sin is sin, and we praise God for forgiveness. This sin is no more unforgivable than any other sin. So I think we need to be careful with the stigma we sometimes place on it. If you are in this kind of situation, that is where you are. What you did may have been wrong. You may think, *Maybe that is why this one is not working out. God is not honoring it. This is our third marriage, and maybe we ought to divorce.* No. God picks you up where you are. He recognizes the marriage relationship you are in now as binding. And so you go on from here. The past is

forgiven; praise God, it is past. It is just as forgiven as any other sin—covetousness, lying, stealing or anger; it is under the blood and forgiven. So God picks you up where you are.

You may say, “Yeah, but I was a Christian when I did that.” It does not make any difference at this point. But if you are not divorced now, be careful that you do not try to put God in a box and say, “Well, I will just get a divorce and get remarried, and then I will tell God I am sorry.” Our flesh is so perverted that sometimes we may do the wrong thing saying God will have to forgive us anyway because we are His children. He will forgive us; there is no doubt about that. But make no doubt about the fact that you will experience the discipline of God. You cannot pull anything over on God. You may say “David ended up with Bathsheba, and he came out of it all right. He committed immorality with her, murdered her husband, and then he got married to her; and beyond all that Solomon was their offspring.” But if you read about it, you will find that David did not get away with any of it. If this is where you are, praise God that you are forgiven for the past. So, however you got into this marriage, it is the marriage God wants you to stay in now. God recognizes it as binding. You must set about making it a Biblical relationship.

God Holds Us Responsible

What is our responsibility as a local church regarding divorce and church discipline? As we have seen, the Bible commands that there can be no divorce except for immorality or except where an unbeliever divorces a believer. If one believer is divorcing another, that indicates that at least one believer is in rebellion against the Word; and we have a believer in the process of making another believer commit immorality. Obviously, that is sin. Our responsibility, if we become aware of it individually, is to confront that person about the wrongness of his act and try to turn him back to the right course. If he does not respond properly, we are to confront him with another believer. And if he still is unwilling to correct it, then it is to be brought to the church. If he is still unwilling to listen, then it becomes necessary for us to disassociate ourselves from him completely. If he has set his course to rebel against the Word of God, that is sin just as much as anything else is. We cannot say that causing someone else to commit immorality is not sin. When God

says, "I hate divorce," and you say, "I am going to get divorced," that is rebellion against God. If we tolerate that, it spreads among other believers in the body.

Now that we understand what the Word says, we are responsible to obey it no matter how we may have resisted it up to this point. The exciting and positive side is that it is possible for anyone who is a believer in Jesus Christ to have the kind of marriage that is fulfilling and satisfying if you are willing to let God work in your life. But if there is an unwillingness, then we as a body of believers have the responsibility to deal with it in a biblical way.

End Notes

- ¹ *pornea*, a Greek word meaning prostitution, unchastity, fornication; used broadly of all kinds of sexual sin; see also Matt. 5:32; 15:19; Mark 7:21; Acts 15:20; Rom. 1:29; 1 Cor. 6:13; Eph. 5:3; 1 Thess. 4:3.
- ² *pornos*, translated fornicator, immoral person; see 1 Cor. 5:9–11; Eph. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:10; Heb. 12:16; 13:4; Rev. 21:8.

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