

CONFRONTING CULTURAL CONTROVERSIES 13

“DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE”

We conclude this series today by exploring one more controversial issue: Divorce. It is not so controversial within our culture; instead being acknowledged and accepted almost as normal, even sometimes a preferential choice. But it is quite controversial in the Body of Christ. Though, most churches have grown to live with divorce as an inevitable reality for fallen human beings, and most have chosen to remain silent on the difficulties discovered in some of today's scriptures. The difficulties arise from the overwhelming Biblical rejection of divorce for human beings, and the preponderance of divorced people in our country, culture and in our churches.

The difficulty results largely from proper motives. We want to be sensitive to hurting people, divorced and divorcing people. But as Christians and Christian churches we also want to remain in harmony with the high moral value God places on the institution and sanctity of marriage. We hold these three balls in a perpetual juggling act (or attempt in my case); 1- God's Word regarding marriage, divorce and remarriage; 2- The cultural acceptance of divorce; and 3-, the people who are struggling with being or becoming divorced. Would you agree these are the basic parameters?

Let me try to bring some light to this subject. We don't need to spend any time discussing the divorce statistics, and tragedies in our culture. (Not the least of which notes that Born Again Evangelical Christians are now divorcing at about the same rate as those who claim no belief in God.) We are all aware of the frightening statistics, the overwhelming acceptance, and even the resultant dismissal disregard for the sacredness of Marriage found throughout our culture. So we'll begin by taking a look at the scriptures that address these questions, and conclude by considering how we as Christians and especially we as a church might respond more compassionately to those being affected by divorce.

There are too many passages to include them all, but let this dialogue found in Mark's Gospel be our text to open up this discussion today.

2 "Some Pharisees came and tried to trap him with this question: 'Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife?' 3 Jesus answered them with a question: "What did Moses say in the law about divorce?" 4 'Well, he permitted it,' they replied. 'He said a man can give his wife a written notice of divorce and send her away.' 5 But Jesus responded, 'he wrote this commandment only as a concession to your hard hearts. 6 But God made them male and female from the beginning of creation. 7 This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, 8 and the two are united into one. Since they are no longer two but one, 9 let no one split apart what God has joined together.' 10 Later, when he was alone, with his disciples in the house, they brought up the subject again. 11 He told them, 'whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery against her. 12 And if a woman divorces her husband and marries someone else, she commits adultery.'" Mark 10: 2-12

I don't have a particularly logical outline to bring you from these verses, but there are three principal truths I want to dig out. Here they are.

1. Moses narrowed the gap; and Jesus closed it further.

This principle relates specifically to the issue of women occupying a secondary status...(that might be an over-exaggeration)...in the culture of Moses, and even of Jesus. What Moses did by requiring men to provide a certificate of divorce was a huge leap for men in that BC culture. Prior to Moses time, (and even after), women were considered as property; of no greater value than livestock or belongings. Men could simply leave their wives whenever they wanted, for whatever reason they wanted...or for no reason at all. Moses' new law, quoted by the hypocritical Pharisees with their "Test" question to Jesus, was an advance for the status of women, though by today's standards it seems to pale in significance.

Jesus took it even further, by noting in verse 12 that a woman also had the right to divorce her husband, did you see that? Prior to Jesus, women were still largely considered property, but Jesus probably did more to elevate the status of women than any other person in history, certainly more than anyone in the centuries either side of his own.

He let the Pharisees know that women also had the right to divorce their husbands, he included women in his circle of disciples; he ministered to and was a recipient of their ministry throughout his lifetime. He loved women and treated them with great respect; especially Mary and Martha, and the woman caught in adultery, the woman at the well, and even the Syro-phonician woman who begged for crumbs under his table while reminding Jesus that even the dogs were already eating the Israelites scrapes. He is mentioned by Paul (that oft-accused chauvinist) as being the source of ending the enmity between Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, males and females; all are one in Jesus Christ. It is true Moses helped the situation, but Jesus brought it to greater completion. Oh, I know there is more to be done, even today, with equal pay for equal work, and equal rights for equal sacrifice, but don't overlook this first point, that Moses' and Jesus' conviction about divorce were both designed to be helpful to women in their culture and context.

2. Marriage is sacred, but the Marriage Covenant is not unconditional

These Pharisees, who sought once again to trap Jesus, were likely alluding to what had just recently happened with John the Baptist. He had just been be-headed for accusing Herod the King of being an adulterous pig for stealing and then marrying his brother's wife. Noting the end result John received, they undoubtedly were looking for a similar result with Jesus, the constant thorn in their conscience! But Jesus answered their question, with a question, and brought out this law quote from Moses. Even being forced to answer by quoting a law they were very likely breaking themselves and ignoring among their loyalists male friends, would have raised the heat in their already escalating dissonance with Jesus! Being reminded that Moses' new law was only in response to their forefathers (and their own) hard hearts (and heads) certainly didn't win him any new friends

But Jesus goes further, pointing them back to the beginning, literally. Back to Adam and Eve, the garden, and the institution of Marriage itself. Verses 6, 7, and 8 point the listening audience back to the fact that Marriage was the preferred relationship God created to house the love his two humans were about to experience with each other. He didn't create them to live alone, or live together, but to be married, and through the physical consummation of this relationship, they would spiritually become one flesh, not two!

That being said, he continues with what is most important here. Though marriage is a covenant and has an extremely high value, it is not the ultimate value and it is not unconditional! Listen carefully. Marriage was created for Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve were created before the idea or institution of Marriage was created. God cares more about the people involved in a marriage than He does about the institution of marriage itself. That fact is hard for many in the church to digest. We have placed such a premium on the institution of Marriage, and have revered the institution, and have done so out of love for God, and married human couples, I think we often forget this truth; that marriage is sacred, but people are more sacred, to God!

Jesus continues by noting that there are occasional occasions and sometimes tragic situations when ending the marriage is preferred, even by God, to continuing it unhealthily. We see this revealed in the metaphors painted by OT authors who noted that God sent the foreign wives sinfully married by wayward Israelites, back to their families, or even to other spouses, as God called Israel back to Himself. God literally divorced his children from their illegal and spiritually unhealthy wives, as a means of saving His beloved children. Do you see the point? I think that is exactly what Jesus is doing here.

He says quite clearly that divorce is a regrettable option when one party has committed adultery. Here comes the conditional part. We in the church have grown up and been taught, that the marriage vows are unbreakable. Yes they are sacred, but they are not unconditional, and that's what Jesus says, here. One of the conditions of the Marriage Covenant is faithfulness, (you know, the 'forsaking all others part'), and when that faithfulness has been broken, (through adultery) the vows are broken, and sometimes (though not always) that unfaithful broken vow is grounds for either husband or wife to seek a divorce, from the adulterous spouse.

Now, it is also interesting to note the word Jesus used here that is almost always translated adultery. There is a specific Greek word that is translated adultery almost exclusively. It is "moicheia". That is not the Greek word used by Jesus in the context of this story. He instead uses the Greek word "porneia" from which we get our English word pornography. This word "porneia" has a much broader and much more inclusive meaning than "moicheia". Its meaning can include sexual immorality, infidelity, unfaithfulness, lusting, and even idolatry. Why is this important?

I'm not trying to lower the almost non-existent standards for divorce, but to point out that the marriage vows are not unconditional, and there are more ways than just adultery, for a person to break the marriage covenant. We all know the practical reality of abused spouses leaving abusing spouses, whether there has been adultery or not. On the other side of the coin we also know that 'irreconcilable differences' has become the meaningless catch all to justify any divorce, but I want you to wrestle with me with what Jesus is apparently saying here!

God cares more about people than about marriage...God sometimes allows, sometimes prompts, people to get divorced, because the vows have been broken in many other ways besides adultery. This is as hard to say as it's hard to hear, I know, but we have to make room in our 'marriage, divorce, remarriage' box for some new truth.

If this is intriguing to you, I'd point you to a book I used in my research this week. I have not read it all, but enough to want to add it to my collection. It's called: Divorce: God's Will? by Stephen Gola. We better get to the last point.

3. Divorce is regrettable, and remarriage is allowable.

Divorce is a regrettable tragedy of living in a fallen world, with fallen people, even Christian people who intend faithfulness. God's plan is for married people to remain faithful to each other and to their vows throughout their lives until death do us part. Sometimes though, divorce is the lesser of two evils, and sometimes it may serve a greater purpose than the preservation of some institutional entity. Divorce may be a tool God uses (like so many other unusual tools) to bring people into a closer and more intimate relationship with Himself. That is God's ultimate purpose and value for humankind!

There has been some misunderstanding and even some erroneous teaching in the church throughout the decades regarding remarriage for persons who are divorced. Taken literally, Jesus' words in verse 11 and 12 of our text make it impossible for anyone, even those justifiably divorced to remarry as long as their spouse is still alive. This notion/teaching is perpetuated from a passage in Romans 7 where we read:

1 "Now dear brothers and sisters – you who are familiar with the law – don't you know that the law applies only while a person is living? 2 For Example, when a woman marries, the law binds her to her husband as long as he is alive. But if he dies, the laws of marriage no longer apply to her. 3 So while her husband is alive, she would be committing adultery if she married another man. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law and does not commit adultery when she remarries." Romans 7: 1-3

Here's the kicker...we normally assume and interpret this passage to apply to a couple who are divorced, since it mentions remarriage in the end, but no where does this passage mention this person as 'her ex-husband', only her husband. Meaning that, they were likely still married.

The central implication is that this example is mentioning a couple who are separated, in some sense, but not legally or finally divorced. Why else would Paul continue to mention her husband? Why do we assume that this principle applies to women or men making them 'married' till the spouse dies, even if they are divorced? I think that's wrong.

Another example from I Corinthians:

8 "So I say to those who aren't married and to widows – it's better to stay unmarried, just as I am. 9 But if they can't control themselves, they should go ahead and marry. It's better to marry than to burn with lust." I Cor. 7: 8-9

Who do we naturally assume Paul is referring to in verse 8? Those who have not yet married; and those who are widowed. But could it not also apply to those who have been married, but now are divorced? I think so. Why, because in just 15 verses he writes:

25 "Now, regarding your question about the young women who are not yet married. I do not have a command from the Lord for them..." I Cor. 7: 25

Do you see that? It not only makes 'common sense' that people who are divorced have the option to remarry, it makes logical sense when you piece together all I have said today. Marriage is important, and sacred, but its purpose is secondary to the salvation of individual person's souls. Divorce is allowed, and not just for adultery but for other acts of unfaithfulness, and other breaches of the wedding vows. And, remarriage is allowed and accepted for those who are divorced, even if their spouse is still living.

Once again, this is not the final word, just my current thinking to date. I hope two things: I hope it inspires you to think critically (and engage in your own study) about this important issue, and two; I hope each of you who has been divorced, or who are contemplating divorce; know that you have not, nor are about to commit the unforgivable sin. God loves us all...we'll have to leave it at that. So let us pray.

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