

Holy Matrimony, the Church, and the Mystery of the Gospel
The Tragedy of Broken Vows: Addendum Three
ICCEC US Theological Commission
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Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.
1662 Book of Common Prayer

Because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning, it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.
 Matthew 19:8-9¹

What is divorce? When is divorce allowable? Does God approve of divorce? What does the New Testament teach about divorce? Does divorce hurt anyone, anymore? What if I divorced for the wrong reasons?

The Tragedy of Divorce

Divorce is a tragedy for all concerned: the couple, any children, extended family, and close friends. Divorce breaks vows, injures the couple emotionally and spiritually, and brings great hardship to the children. No one is the winner in a divorce. Christ cares about divorced individuals and he taught about divorce in the short time he walked the earth. This addendum will examine Jesus' teaching on divorce and the instructions of the Apostle Paul regarding permanent separation.²

Generally stated in weekly sermons and Christian marriage books that fifty percent of all marriages in the United States end in divorce and that the divorce rate in the church is as high as the general population, but other studies indicate that these numbers are not accurate. Contrary to these two popular talking points, a 2014 Census Bureau study indicates that between seventy-

¹ Unless otherwise noted all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

² For the sake of clarity the words, "divorce" and "separation" will be used interchangeably. The concept of legal separation is not found in the ancient world (see 1 Cor. 7:10).

five to eighty percent of marriages last a lifetime with divorce rates significantly lower between twenty-five to fifty percent for those with conservative religious convictions.³

Even with these lower divorce rate numbers, many people, Christian or non-Christian, are suffering from the pain and trauma of divorce. For example, one highly regarded study found that half of divorced women and one-third of divorced men were extremely angry at their former partners despite the passage of ten whole years. Their residual anger toward their former spouse became a long-term and dominant presence in their children's lives as well.⁴ The children especially suffer from the pain of divorce, they feel rejected by their parents, intensely lonely, and adrift in finding direction and meaning in their lives.

Jesus Teaches about Divorce

The main body of Jesus's teaching about divorce can be found in Matthew 19:3-9⁵ in a debate with the Pharisees concerning the conditions needed to divorce one's wife properly. The Pharisees approached Jesus to involve him in a first-century rabbinic debate about the interpretation of Moses' words on divorce recorded in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The dispute involved a proper understanding of the phrase, "some indecency in her." In the first century,

The school of Shammai says: A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her. . . . And the school of Hillel says. . . [he may divorce her] even if she spoiled a dish for him. . . . Rabbi Akiba says, [he may divorce her] even if he found another fairer than she. (Mishnah, *Gittin* 9:10).⁶

³ Wayne Grudem, *What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 10. Kindle Edition. Glenn Stanton, "FactChecker: Divorce Rate Among Christians" (The Gospel Coalition website); <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-divorce-rate-among-christians/>. Glenn Stanton, "Divorce Rate in the Church – As High as the World?" (Focus on the Family website); <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/divorce-rate-in-the-church-as-high-as-the-world/>. Lyman Stone and Brad Wilcox, "Research: Religious Americans Less Likely to Divorce" (Christianity Today website); <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/december-web-only/marriage-divorce-cohabitation-religious-americans-study.html>. Brian Hollar, "Regular Church Attenders Marry More and Divorce Less Than Their Less Devout Peers (Institute for Family Studies website); <https://ifstudies.org/blog/regular-church-attenders-marry-more-and-divorce-less-than-their-less-devout-peers>.

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage*, 13.

⁵ Note the similarities and differences in this pericope with other Synoptic Gospels: Mark 10:2-12 and Luke 16:18. Only Matthew 5:31-32, and 19:8-9 include sexual immorality as an exception to the total prohibition of divorce.

⁶ "The Mishnah was put in written form in the late second century or early third century AD, but it reflects earlier oral tradition, including much from before the time of Christ. With respect to this particular quotation, both Hillel (died AD 10) and Shammai (50 BC–AD 30) lived prior to Jesus's earthly ministry." Quoted in Wayne Grudem, *What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage*, 65.

The Pharisees are “testing” (19:3) Jesus attempting to pull him into a first-century liberal versus conservative debate: if Jesus agrees with Shammai, he appears too strict, and the people revolt. If Jesus stands with the Hillel group, Jesus is branded as too permissive, and the Torah lovers are offended. The Pharisees are siding with the Hillel school by focusing on the phrase, “for any cause” (Matt. 19:3). Jesus adeptly changes the discussion, he by-passes the debate and returns to God's original intention found in Genesis chapter two,⁷

Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh (Matt 19:4-6).

God’s Original Intention

Jesus is emphasizing God’s original intention behind the institution of marriage. First, the institution was invented by God which is why the institution has an inherent grip on our hearts whether we are Christians or non-Christians, “He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them” (v. 4). Second, God created marriage, we cannot change its definition or attempt to rid society of its importance. Marriage is the center of our lives because marriage was invented when we were created. “God made them male and female” (v. 4). Third, marriage is God’s invention therefore we must follow the design of the great Designer. God’s design is for the marriage bond to be an indissoluble, inseparable, lifetime bond. “So they are no longer two but one flesh”(v. 6). Last, divorce is not an option for God has united two individuals and he now sees them as one person, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (v. 6).

Amputation

Divorce is a painful event. Divorce not only destroys the spiritual, emotional, and physical bond of the couple, but the children feel guilty, isolated, listless, and directionless. Studies have shown that divorced spouses remain angry creating an undercurrent of deep-seated anger in the lives of their children. An anger that can last a lifetime. A divorced family is ripped apart creating a situation in which friends do not know how to react or respond to the family’s pain and disillusionment.

When Jesus used the word, “separate,” (19:6) he chose a strong word, *chorizo*, that indicates a divide, or a break, that is equivalent to an amputation, dismemberment, or a mutilation.⁸ Divorce is painful because it divides lives that God intertwined. Divorce is painful because it violates God’s intention for marriage—the creation mandate of a lifetime bond. Divorce is painful because the split usually involves sexual immorality (19:9). When the prophet Malachi (2:16)

⁷ Genesis 2:18, 21-23.

⁸ Grant R. Osbourne, *Matthew: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 704.

declared Yahweh's sorrow, "For I hate divorce," says the Lord, the God of Israel." The Lord does not hate divorced people, but the pain and disillusionment that divorce causes in the dissolution of families and the deterioration of society.⁹

Jesus Interprets Moses

The Pharisees protested Jesus's teaching regarding divorce by appealing to Deuteronomy twenty-four. "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away? (19:7). The Pharisees interpreted Moses' instruction regarding a certificate of divorce as approval of the practice. "The Pharisees seem to have thought that the very existence of legislation about divorce, within the law of Moses, meant that Moses was quite happy for it to take place."¹⁰ Jesus quickly corrected the Pharisees stating that a certification of divorce was a concession to a generation of Israelites who were hard-hearted toward the Lord. "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning, it was not so" (19:8). God's concession through Moses allowed divorce because of the sinfulness and hardheartedness of Israel, but God's original intention for marriage was a lifetime bond.

Bond of a Covenant Love

In many ways, Jesus is stricter than the rabbinic school of Shammai. Instead of looking for exceptions and excuses for leaving a marriage, the people of the Kingdom of God are called to display patterns of daily forgiveness, marital reconciliation, and mutual healing. Kingdom marriage is a covenant, not a contract. Steadfast love, not performance, is the basis for a marriage.¹¹ Therefore, the bond of a covenant love is not based on feelings. First, a genuine marriage covenant is an unselfish love that chooses to put the other partner first. Second, marital love is unconditional love, a love that promises commitment in the toughest of times. Third, steadfast love refuses to focus on the failures of the other spouse but deliberately chooses to love and forgive. Last, covenant love is a permanent love that does not create red lines, escape clauses, loopholes, and excuses for running away.

The Matthean Exception

In the Gospel of Matthew verses 5:32 and 19:9, Jesus allows for one exception to marriage being a lifetime, indissoluble bond: the other spouse commits sexual immorality. "And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality" (Matt. 19:9). Sexual immorality

⁹ Allen P. Ross, *Malachi Then and Now: An Expository Commentary Based on Detailed Exegetical Analysis* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016). Logos Edition.

¹⁰ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16-28*. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge), 2004.

¹¹ See Addendum One: "Holy Matrimony as Covenant Love."

contradicts the commitment to be faithful by breaking the command to “leave and cleave” to one’s spouse.¹² What does the phrase, “sexual immortality” mean?

The Greek word, *porneia*, is usually translated in modern English as pornography, but in the first century, *porneia*, maintained a broader meaning, commonly translated as sexual immorality, *porneia* includes adultery, prostitution, incest, fornication, homosexuality, bestiality, or any other sexual perversion. “But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matt 5:32).

Jesus’s words are hard words for a culture used to no-fault divorce laws and easy separations. Yet, the consensus of the church has forbidden divorce and remarriage even for the innocent party if this criterion is not met. Jesus’ admonition that an improper divorce is adultery because, in the eyes of the Lord, the first marriage is still valid runs against the grain of our culture.

It must be noted, that the offended partner is not commanded to divorce when their spouse is unfaithful, but divorce is allowed if the other spouse is persistently committing sexual immorality by rejecting correction, refusing to change their behavior, and engaging in ongoing unrepentant sexual sin.

Catholic Consensus

The Church Catholic agreed with the teaching of Jesus that sexual immortality was the only exception to the no-divorce mandate.

Justin Martyr (A.D. 151):

In regards to chastity, Jesus has this to say: ‘If anyone look with lust at a woman, he has already before God committed adultery in his heart.’ And, ‘Whoever marries a woman who has been divorced from another husband, commits adultery.’ According to our teacher, just as they are sinners who contract a second marriage, even though it is in accord with human law, so also are they sinners who look with lustful desires at a woman. He repudiates not only one who commits adultery, but even one who wishes to do so; for not only our actions are manifest to God, but even our thoughts. (First Apology 15) (a)

In these passages, Justin the Martyr taught that to indulge in lust is to be guilty of adultery of the heart. Whoever marries a divorced person commits adultery and whoever commits to a second marriage is sinning against God (while a former spouse lives). God does not, and the Church must not take into account human law when it violates God’s law. For the Christian, when Jesus

¹² John S. Feinberg and Feinberg, Paul D., *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway: 1993), 343.

forbids a behavior and culture allows for that practice, Jesus's teaching prevails. We need to remember that God judges motives and intentions, private thoughts, and outward actions.

Jerome (A.D. 398) declared:

Wherever there is fornication and a suspicion of fornication a wife is freely dismissed. Because it is always possible that someone may calumniate¹³ the innocent and, for the sake of a second joining in marriage, act in criminal fashion against the first, it is commanded that when the first wife is dismissed a second may not be taken while the first lives (Commentaries on Matthew 3:19:9).

Jerome restates the Jesus exception clause for divorce, If the other spouse commits sexually immoral acts (i.e., fornication) the offended spouse may divorce. Jerome emphasizes that a remarriage may not occur if the first wife is still alive.

Ambrose of Milan (A.D. 387) taught:

No one is permitted to know a woman other than his wife. The marital right is given to you for this reason: lest you fall into the snare and sin with a strange woman. "If you are bound to a wife, do not seek a divorce"; for you are not permitted, while your wife lives, to marry another (Abraham 1:7:59).

And Ambrose continues in another commentary:

You dismiss your wife, therefore, as if by right and without being charged with wrongdoing and you suppose it is proper for you to do so because no human law forbids it; but divine law forbids it. Anyone who obeys men ought to stand in awe of God. Hear the law of the Lord, which even they who propose our laws must obey: "What God has joined together let no man put asunder (Commentary on Luke 8:5).¹⁴

Ambrose affirms the consensus of the Patristic period, sexual relations are confined to marriage, and marriage assists you in avoiding sexual temptation. Believers cannot seek divorce while their wife lives, divine law forbids it even though civil law permits it. We are compelled to obey God's Law, not the civil laws that may contradict them.

John Chrysostom declares:

¹³ "Calumniate" means to make false statements.

¹⁴ Lifelong Union website, <https://lifelongunion.weebly.com/what-the-early-church-fathers-believed-about-marriage-divorce-and-re-marriage.html>

Do not turn your back on your wife because of her defects. Listen to what the Scriptures say, “The bee is little among such as fly, but her fruit is the chief of sweet things.” She is made by God. You are not condemning her, but rather the One who made her, what can a woman do?¹⁵

Ultimately, says John, to reject your wife is to condemn the God who made her.

In general, the Church Fathers condemned divorce except for the cause of sexual immorality, however, some fathers believed that remarriage was not allowed for any reason.¹⁶

The Pauline Exception

In First Corinthians seven, the Apostle Paul instructs the congregation about a series of problems that have arisen in that local church. A letter has been written to him, “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote,” (7:1) from a member of the church. The letter raises concerns about relationships within the community and various theological problems like eating food sacrificed to idols, spiritual gifts, and orderly worship. In First Corinthians seven, Paul addresses questions related to Christian marriage, reasons for divorce, and one’s position in life (7:1-24). Paul then addresses the betrothed and widowed and if they should marry in light of the urgency of the times, “this present distress” (7:25–40). Finally, Paul discusses food sacrificed to idols (8:1–11:1).

Once again, Paul affirms that marriage is an indissoluble, lifetime bond. “To the married, I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): The wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife” (7:10). “Not I, but the Lord” is an indicator from Paul that he is restating Jesus’s teaching.

The words, “separation and divorce” are synonyms in the Greek text, whereas, in Western societies, separation is time away for the couple to reevaluate their marriage and divorce is the formal ending of that marriage. In Paul, separation and divorce convey the same idea of the ending of a marriage. The reader should not interpret Paul as discussing two different things, but one thing, divorce.¹⁷

¹⁵ John Chrysostom quoted in *What the Church Fathers Say About...* edited by George Grube (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 1996), 76.

¹⁶ See Addendum Four on “Remarriage” for further discussions on this topic.

¹⁷ “Ancient Mediterranean culture did not have the modern institution of ‘separation’ as distinct from divorce.” Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1996), Kindle Edition. 358.

Paul reiterates what Jesus has made clear marriage is forever: “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery” (Luke 16:18). In making marriage a lifetime prospect, Jesus shows the world that in the Kingdom, two spouses no matter their struggles and disagreements, can live together under his Lordship and love one another for a lifetime. The God of reconciliation wants to reflect to the world through marriage that his heart of reconciliation can be lived through two individuals.

In the ancient world, families were devoted to particular gods whether Greek or Roman. If a family member changed gods, it brought about confusion, anger, and worry among the family members. The family feared retaliation from their gods for that family member deserting the “faith.” The family expected their circumstances to go wrong in their lives, businesses, farms, and relationships. Therefore, they would reject the family member who “converted” by ignoring them by withdrawing any support for their needs.

With this in mind, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:15, “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases, the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.” When a spouse converts to Christianity and the partner deserts them, the convert is no longer bound in that marriage and may seek a divorce—this is called the Pauline exception.

Some scholars interpret verse fifteen as saying that, “In such cases” can be translated as “in similar cases,” in other words, “in this and other similarly destructive situations.” What kind of situations? Situations that destroy a marriage where one spouse has abandoned their partner, neglected their physical needs, or emotionally withdrawn to the degree that the marriage becomes a form of “enslavement” (7:15).

What kind of situation could Paul be referencing? First, violent abuse of the wife and children.¹⁸ Second, lengthy verbal and relational cruelty. Third, constant threats of physical harm or actual physical abuse. Fourth, incorrigible drug and alcohol abuse. Fifth, pornography and gambling addictions where the spouse refuses help and denies any harm. In a culture where the therapeutic mindset (everything is about my feelings) has triumphed, the spouse being harmed needs wise professional and pastoral counsel before seeking a divorce for these reasons.¹⁹ We must remember that divorce is never God’s preference and is never obligatory.²⁰

¹⁸ In our current therapeutic culture, the meaning of “abuse” has expanded so widely that it can mean any kind of conflict or disagreement that causes me frustration. “He yelled at me,” becomes a form of abuse in today’s mindset. In Western culture, abuse has become the *de facto* third reason for divorce: adultery and desertion being the other two. Wisdom needs to prevail and all options exhausted before a divorce is pursued due to abuse. Abuse should be understood as a persistent action that brings great emotional and physical harm.

¹⁹ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

²⁰ Grudem, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 32. Constantine Campbell, “What Does the Bible Say About Divorce and Remarriage,” Theology in the Raw podcast with Preston Sprinkle (Season 2, Episode 1073).

Pastorally, the International Communion of the Charismatic Episcopal Church recommends receiving wise counsel from a Bishop or presbyter before a couple decides to divorce.²¹ The ICCEC has provided pastoral instructions for our Bishops to follow for assistance in determining whether a marriage is irrevocably broken.²²

Redemption

No marriage began in the worst circumstances: David rapes Bathsheba, and David murders Uriah, Bathsheba's husband. Bathsheba is taken into the palace and made one of David's multiple wives, and their first child dies because of the consequences of his actions.²³ The prophet Nathan confronts David, he repents, and the Lord displays his mercy and grace. David is forgiven. Our Lord God begins to redeem the situation and another son, Solomon, is born. Solomon becomes the heir of the covenant, a covenant that promises a son of David forever reigning on the throne.

Who is the ultimate heir to the throne of David? Jesus of Nazareth. Who is a distant grandmother? Bathsheba is mentioned as the wife of Uriah in the genealogy of Matthew, "And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah" (1:6). The worst beginning of marriage possible was redeemed by the Father and Bathsheba became part of the line of the Messiah. From devastation to glorification, our gracious Father redeems through Jesus Christ the mess we made of our lives and heals the brokenness caused by our sin.²⁴

Your marriage failed, your divorce did not meet the Biblical criteria for a proper separation, and you remarried knowingly violating Jesus's warning about committing adultery. What about your remarriage? Is God going to oppose you all your days? No, not necessarily. Repent of your sin, ask God for forgiveness, and by his grace he can make this second marriage radiate to the glory of God. Divorce is not an unpardonable sin. Christ can redeem any situation no matter how deeply we fail.

Conclusion

The original design for marriage is that of an indissoluble, lifetime bond that only be broken by death. If the bond is broken in God's eyes by sexual immorality, *porneia*, the departure of an unbelieving spouse, or other abusive situations, then divorce is permissible. Divorce and

²¹ "Canon One: Holy Matrimony," CECUSA Canons, pages 5-6.

²² Ibid.

²³ Carmen Joy Imes, "Did David Rape Bathsheba?" Disciple Dojo podcast. Carmen Joy Imes, "Did David Rape Bathsheba?: an interview with Dr. Carmen Imes, Remnant Radio podcast, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_RdkdEa-W_g . John Piper, "Did Bathsheba Sin with David?" Ask Pastor John podcast, Episode 1735 January 24, 2022.

²⁴ Timothy J. Keller, "Marriage, Divorce, and Singleness" audio sermon (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian, 1990).

remarriage are never morally obligatory. God desires that marriage relationships when troubled be reconciled, healed, and restored. A couple's freely forgiving, deeply loving, and gracious understanding of their spouse in times of relationship struggle is a witness to the world of God's redeeming love for us.²⁵

Husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:25-27).²⁶

²⁵ Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 342.

²⁶ See Addendum, Gospel