

Matthew 5:31,32

Why Divorce makes one Sin Against the Seventh Commandment

LITURGY

Singing:

Ps. 119:1,4

Hy. 7:1,7,9

Ps. 119:12,14

Ps. 25:7,8,10

Hy. 48:3,4

Reading:

Matthew 5:17-32

Matthew 19:3-12

Beloved brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ,

When a man and woman marry they promise that they will never forsake each other, but will be true to each other always, in good days and bad, in riches and poverty, in health and sickness, for as long as they both shall live. Statistics tell us that a high percentage of couples do not keep that promise. If the marriage does not meet their expectations they go their separate ways.

From a Christian perspective, are there any instances in which a husband or a wife is permitted to divorce his or her spouse? And if divorce happens, does a man or woman caught in such a predicament have the right to remarry?

In the first centuries of this era, the Christian Church opposed remarriage because it was considered equal to committing adultery. In the fourth century two church councils made very strong statements on the subject. The one Council (The Council of Elvira, A.D. 306) insisted that women who deserted their husbands without any reason, and subsequently remarried would never again receive communion, even on their death bed! And those who remarried because of their husband's adultery would be barred from the Lord's Supper until their first husband's death! The second Council (the Council of Arles, A.D. 314) made it clear that husbands who left adulterous wives were forbidden to remarry.

Things have changed drastically over the years, haven't they? Nowadays, churches are divided as to how they should proceed with the whole matter. In 1990 a book appeared on the market suggesting *four* Christian views on divorce and remarriage.¹ The first author argues that both divorce and remarriage are never permitted. The second writer reasons that divorce can happen, but it does not give someone the option to remarry. The third suggests that

¹ H. Wayne House, Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views

divorce and remarriage are permissible for adultery or desertion. And the fourth argues divorce and remarriage are okay under a variety of circumstances. Who is right and who is wrong?

It is remarkable that in dealing with the issue of divorce and remarriage people will often advise you to look at a book written by a particular author; or that you take into consideration what a well-known scholar has written on the topic. That's all very good and well – what others have to say can be very helpful and useful in coming to a deeper understanding of Scripture. But what we need to realize is this: neither tradition, nor the views of 100 Reformed authors put together, nor what the majority of Christians may think, nor our own circumstances, nor what we would wish for others is the final test.

We simply have to read what Scripture says. Let us listen to what the Word of God teaches us in our text, without trying to make it say what we want it to say. Our theme is as follows:

Jesus Christ Teaches Why Divorce makes one Sin Against the Seventh Commandment

1. This Teaching Is Very Exacting

2. This Teaching Has One Exception

The two verses of our text do not represent the sum total of our Lord's instruction on the matter of divorce and remarriage. The issue is addressed more than once in the Bible. To list a few of them will help us understand what Jesus taught in Matthew 5:31,32.

Speaking about the binding character of the law, the apostle Paul makes the following analogy in Romans 7:

by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man.

By making this parallel Paul assumes that just as marriage is binding for life so the law is binding for life. Nothing may break apart what God has put together with his glue. The same apostle writes in 1 Corinthians 7:10,11:

To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

What Paul teaches is completely in line with what our Lord Jesus Christ teaches in Luke 16:18. Speaking to the Pharisees he says:

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

Jesus' remarks to the Pharisees are also made to his disciples. Mark 10:11,12 tells us what he said,

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."

Notice that in both Luke and Mark everyone who divorces and remarries commits adultery. There is nothing in these gospel accounts suggesting that Jesus permitted divorce and remarriage for one exception or another.²

Is then our text a bit more lenient and less restrictive? Let us hasten to examine it for ourselves. Our Lord Jesus makes his remarks on divorce and remarriage in a discourse which has been called the Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon he attacks many of the fallacies in the opinions of Israel's leaders. Even though the scribes and Pharisees seemed to observe the law very meticulously and to the minutest detail, they were actually robbing God's commandments of their power and depth. Thus they also limited the scope of the commandment, "*You shall not commit adultery*" to the act of adultery. As long as you did not get into bed with someone other than your wife you were scot free. You hadn't sinned against the seventh commandment. But Jesus taught differently. He showed to them that the meaning of God's command was much broader than a mere prohibition of sexually immoral acts. Just as the forbiddance of murder includes angry thoughts and insulting words, so the prohibition of adultery includes lustful looks as well as the matter of divorce and remarriage.

The rabbis of Israel taught, "Let him who divorces his wife give her a certificate of divorce"; but they were divided as to how they should apply this rule. Two schools of thought had developed. The supporters of the one school believed the only ground for divorce was adultery. The other school recognized a number of reasons for divorce. In fact, they allowed a man to put away his wife for the most absurd and trivial reasons. If a man's wife didn't cook the meal just right he had grounds for divorce. If a husband lost interest in his wife or he fell in love with another woman, he was justified in getting a divorce.

At one point the Pharisees ask Jesus directly what he thinks about this matter in order to trap and entangle him in their ongoing debates. We read about it in Matthew 19. How does our Lord Jesus Christ respond? He replies by stating the truth of marriage. The essence of marriage is that a husband and wife are not two individuals living in the same house, but they are one flesh. And since the LORD has made the marriage bond such a strong one, Christ expresses this law concerning divorce: "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." Well, with those words the trap snaps shut on Jesus. "How can you say this, you rabbi from Nazareth? Don't you know the law? For if you say no divorce, 'Why then... did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?'"

The law the Pharisees had in mind, referred to by Jesus in our text, is found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. However, the Pharisees did not really understand what the Lord meant when he said through Moses, that a man was to write a certificate of divorce. They took it as an approval of divorce and remarriage. But, as Christ points out in Matthew 19, Moses did not approve of divorce, but he allowed it only because of the hardness of Israel's heart.

Israel had hardened their hearts against the Lord and his ordinances. They had made allowances for a man to divorce and remarry. If a second marriage did not work out a man could return to his first wife. When Moses deals with this matter he isn't giving the people a lesson on divorce, but he is explaining the meaning and application of the *eighth* commandment: *you shall not steal*.

Moses, as a servant of God, takes note of what is happening in Israel. Men are divorcing their wives because of some uncleanness. These divorced women are marrying other men. They,

² William Heth, in Divorce and Remarriage edited by Wayne House, p. 108, 109.

in turn, are divorced by their second husbands. In such cases, Moses forbids a return to the first husband because it amounts to stealing. Do you hear what the LORD God is saying in Deuteronomy 24? He forbids men to steal the honour of a woman. Women are not articles to be acquired and disposed of at will. They are not items that can be exchanged at a "used women store". Women are God's gifts to men and must be honoured as coheirs of the grace of life.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shows his disciples how the Pharisees have twisted and garbled the meaning and intent of the Mosaic law, misusing it for their own purposes, thereby violating the *seventh* commandment: *you shall not commit adultery*. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 gives no grounds for divorce. Instead, it outlines a certain set of procedures when a divorce has taken place. At the very most a concession is made for man's sinful behaviour and a current practice is tolerated. In the same way allowances were made for polygamy – for the *wrong* practice of one man having several wives.

Brothers and sisters, what was tolerated in the Old Testament is abolished by Christ since it is a sin against the seventh commandment. Therefore he adds, "But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

Christ's argumentation is quite striking. Until that time no one gave much thought to what happened to the other party after the divorce. As long as your own reputation remained unblemished and untainted! But Jesus lets his disciples know that the marriage bond is so strong that divorce does not liberate us of all responsibilities. A man divorcing his wife is not only liable for the wrong action of divorce but he is also held accountable if his wife remarries. He *causes her to become an adulteress*. Why is that? The answer is rather straightforward. When you get married you commit yourself to your spouse for the rest of your life. On your wedding day you make a vow and you are held to that for "as long as you both shall live". To allow anyone else to come in between your relationship is to commit adultery.

Marriage is terminated by death alone. A man may not divorce his wife as long as he lives (Deuteronomy 22:29). Anyone who tries to break up what God has put together fails. The legal procedure of the Jews, the Romans or of our modern society does not dissolve or annul a marriage bond: that is why a second marriage is called adultery. For Jesus adds, "anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery". By marrying a divorced man or woman, you are taking one who has made lifelong vows and promises to someone else.

This needs to be stressed in a time when husbands and wives think they can go their separate ways once they get divorced. When a marriage breaks down and it looks like the possibilities of reconciliation are very slim it is understandable that a spouse would want to say "If you don't shape up and change, just get right out of my life; I don't ever want to see you again. Let's get a divorce and get on with our own lives. Then you're free to remarry and so am I". But Jesus warns, that's not the way it works. Don't initiate divorce, thereby opening a possibility of sinning against the seventh commandment! If divorce happens, because you are forced into it by an unfaithful spouse, don't even consider remarriage as a viable solution.

Is this an easy teaching? No, especially not when the rest of society and many in the church say it's okay. Even the disciples had difficulty with it. Listen again to what we read in Matthew 19:10, "The disciples said to him, 'If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.'" It would be hard to understand their difficulty if Christ was allowing remarriage after divorce in certain situations. For then he would be merely expressing views

that were already taught by some of the Pharisees. Nevertheless, in replying to the disciples' surprised reaction Jesus goes on to teach the positive value of singleness. "Jesus replied, 'Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven'" In other words singleness can be voluntary (made themselves eunuchs) or it can be thrust upon someone because they were forced into a divorce against their will (who have been made eunuchs).

Beloved, all of us are responsible for what happens in the church. It is here, on this issue, that the obedience of the people of God to the truth of the Word of God is put to the test. Shall we practice what Christ teaches?

2. We come to our second point: the exception to this teaching. We have not analyzed every aspect of our text as yet. Jesus says, "Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress". First of all, we need to know the meaning of "marital unfaithfulness". The word that is used in the Greek language covers a wide range of unlawful sexual activity including premarital sex, prostitution, incest, and homosexuality. The word (*porneia*) does not normally mean adultery. Another term is used for that (*moicheia*). Yet such unchastity and marital unfaithfulness involves sin against the seventh commandment.

Does the "exception clause" leave room for divorce and remarriage if there is some form of marital unfaithfulness? As stated in the introduction, until recently many Reformed Bible interpreters have argued that it gives room for the formation of new relationships. But over the years the basis for permitting remarriage after divorce due to marital unfaithfulness has changed somewhat. For example, Martin Luther felt that since the adulterer was stoned to death in the Old Testament, the adulterer in the New Testament should be considered "as if dead", and in this way the "exception clause" opens the possibility of remarriage. The Westminster Confession of Faith follows Luther's interpretation. Chapter 24 Article 5 reads:

In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce, and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.

The reasoning of Luther and the Westminster Confession is not convincing. In the Old Testament adultery was punished by physical death. Usually physical death in the Old Covenant is equated to excommunication in the church of the New Testament. That would mean adultery in the New Covenant automatically results in spiritual death. If this is true, one who has committed adultery should be excommunicated and the marriage terminated. But if the adulterous person repents, a new marriage would have to be solemnized. You see, the "as if dead" argument is filled with problems. Moreover, when the apostle Paul writes in Romans 7 about the binding character of the law he makes an analogy to marriage whereby he assumes it to be for life, "But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man." It would be incorrect to deduce from this text that Paul is talking about spiritual rather than physical death.

Consistent with other passages of Scripture, our text teaches that remarriage is forbidden as long as one's original spouse is living because he or she is still in reality the wife of the divorcing husband.³

³ David Engelsma, Marriage: The Mystery of Christ and the Church, p.115 and Andrew Corves, Divorce and Remarriage, p.200.

The most accepted way the "except for marital unfaithfulness" clause is used as an argument permitting divorce and remarriage is to have it read in the light of Matthew 19:9 which reads, "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." The suggestion is then made that the exception clause applies to both the act of divorcing as well as to the act of remarrying because of the words "and marries another".

Here is where we have to turn away from any and all interpretations which suggest that Jesus is allowing for divorce and remarriage when a man or woman commits adultery of some sort, because the ground and foundation upon which the arguments are built is rather shaky. We cannot simply take what is written in Matthew 19:9 and transfer that to Matthew 5:32. Moreover, the grammar of Matthew 19:9 connects the phrase "except for marital unfaithfulness" most intimately with the act of divorce only.⁴

It's high time we get to the meaning of the "except for marital unfaithfulness" clause. The answer is not as complicated as it appears to be. Remember, Jesus is spelling out sins that violate the seventh commandment. In that context, the "except for marital unfaithfulness" clause means nothing more than: divorcing an unchaste wife does not make her an adulteress, for she has already made herself an adulteress. As someone wrote, "The exception clause is simply a matter-of-fact recognition that if the wife has already committed adultery, her husband cannot be held guilty of driving her into it by divorcing her. She is the one who will be held guilty of violating the seventh commandment in this situation, not he."⁵

But what if your spouse commits adultery? Does that make reconciliation or forgiveness impossible? No. Even adultery can be covered by the blood of Christ, so that the two remain one in marriage. If by the grace of God the unfaithful wife repents of her adultery, the Christian man should forgive her and take her back.⁶ Therefore, a husband or wife caught in the thick of marriage problems should never initiate divorce. In this way the possibility is still open for forgiveness and reconciliation. Thereby we reflect the love which Christ has shown to us.

Brothers and sisters, it probably would have been easier to have left this text alone, or to have gone along with the main flow of interpretation. The content of this sermon is controversial and touches people's emotions at a deep level. More than ever before members of Christ's church are experiencing the unhappiness, loneliness and hurt of divorce. Yet the circumstances of our friends, relatives or fellow members do not give us permission to make what Christ taught as an exception to a rule into a licence for divorce and remarriage on a varied number of grounds.

To go through a divorce causes as much grief for a faithful spouse as does the death of a loved one – perhaps more. It's not easy to hear that a second marriage is impossible for as long as a husband or wife is still alive. Therefore we, as congregation, must be sensitive to

⁴ Many Reformed writers have followed John Murray's understanding of Matthew 19:9. He argued that the "except for marital unfaithfulness" clause applies to both divorce and remarriage. In their book Jesus and Divorce William Heth and Gordon Wenham expose grammatical flaws and weaknesses in Murray's interpretation and conclude, "The construction basically indicates that we are dealing with two conditional statements, one that is qualified and one that is unqualified, or absolute:

1. A man may not put away his wife unless she is guilty of adultery
2. Whoever marries another after putting away his wife commits adultery. (see p.117)

⁵ William Heth, in Divorce and Remarriage, edited by Wayne House, p. 93

⁶ David Engelsma, Marriage: The Mystery of Christ and the Church, p. 91.

those who are divorced, and to those whose marriages are going through extreme difficulties. You and I should surround such individuals with the same comfort and support we give to those who lose a family member through death.

Let those who must remain single after divorce take comfort and encouragement from the Word of God. Marriage does not create a utopia, give you all you need, or have a fairy tale ending – living happily ever after. Marriage belongs to the form of this earth which will pass away. Therefore, rather than focusing on all the things you miss and must do without, concentrate on devoting your time and energy for service in the kingdom of God.

The church bears witness to the world when its members are content in whatever state they find themselves. Dedicating ourselves to the service of the Lord in our marriage and in our singleness keeps us busy with deeds which have value into all eternity. Beloved, let your hearts be filled with the matters of God's kingdom, and joy in the Lord will fulfil your deepest longings.

May the Lord graciously provide us with the insight to do his will. Amen.

Peter G Feenstra