



One Flesh One Covenant

Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

(Part 2)

by Dean Taylor

The prophet Malachi prophesied of a time when nations would weep and cry to God but would not receive an answer. He writes that the people, bewildered by God's silence, would then cry out to Him asking *why* He no longer responds to their prayers. The reason God gives for holding back His blessing is surprising—it had to do with the way they were regarding marriage and divorce. Much like the time that was prophesied in the book of Malachi, many Christians today across our nation are raising up their voice to God with “tears and weeping,” crying to God for revival. When the results do not come, we ask God—*why*? Revivalists often quote 2 Chronicles 7:14, “If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, **and turn from their wicked ways**; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.” Exactly what are the “wicked ways” spoken of here in 2 Chronicles? Certainly, it is more than divorce. But perhaps the prophet Malachi is providing us with some valuable insight into the heart of God on this matter:

And this have ye done again, covering the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it with good will at your hand. Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away (Mal 2:13-16).

These are hard words for the church of today. The Book of Hebrews tells us: “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (4:12). Throughout time, there have been many who have experienced the laceration of this two edged sword, following Christ literally *as lambs to the slaughter*. Enduring the savage beast of the Roman arena, the burning cross along the Thebes, or the drowning in Zurich, these precious saints clearly demonstrated their holy devotion to the world around them. Others, like the Apostle John, who after hearing the words of Christ *immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him*, must have also felt this divine sword pierce their

hearts, although they did not physically die. If truth be told, although free of the pain of burning crosses and severed limbs, many saints confronted with the austerity of their calling have surely looked upon the quick, sanctified vindication of martyrdom with longing, saying with Paul, "For me to live is Christ but to die is gain."

Whenever a soul has reached out and dared to take the words of Christ literally, the outcome has never resulted in anything less than a complete and radical change of life. In my own life, I have come across many brave saints who have taken the words of Christ seriously when He said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Mt 16:24-25).

For some, accepting Jesus' teachings on nonresistance meant leaving a promising career in the Army to face an uncertain future. For others, Jesus' words on materialism have caused them to deny themselves the "American Dream," and give up comforts and luxuries some would consider necessities. Countless others have walked away from a multi-generational inheritance within a strong community of people, full of wealth, comforts and security, all in exchange for a shameful disinheritance and a new identity as the stranger in the land. I have seen men give up positions as varied as trial attorneys, Catholic priests, contemporary Christian musicians, and corporate executives. I have seen men forgive murders, deny lawsuits and accept the plundering of their personal possessions. However, I must say that I have hardly seen any teaching more painfully misunderstood and more blatantly ignored than Jesus' commandments on divorce and remarriage. Furthermore, witnessing this flagrant disregard for God's Word in the world is one thing, but to see it so prevalent in the



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For the saints who have embraced Jesus' hard teachings on divorce and remarriage, the path has not been easy. Allowing the painful incision of this *two-edged sword* to truly effect their lives, they have chosen to follow Jesus in "the narrow way that leads to life." Others look on with astonishment and ask, "Whatever would cause a man to choose such a life—such self-denial? Is it necessary to take Jesus' words so literally?" Like the holy martyrs, they walk in an uncommon power to live out the precious commandments of their Savior, no matter the cost. As living testaments, they show forth a beautiful, living testimony of the very power and truth of God's Holy Word.

The few who do accept Jesus' teachings on divorce and remarriage have now found themselves in the vast minority. Witnessing the Church's greatest departure from this truth in the history of the world, these seekers have discovered that this realization, at least to some degree, changes the way they view the mainstream Church. After all, if Luke was accurate when He recorded the words of Jesus, "Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery," (Luke 16:18), then what are we to think of the wholesale abandonment of this teaching across Christendom? The tragic consequences of such a thought have led most to simply dismiss Jesus' teachings altogether. Still others, however, have begun to brave the challenge and to cry out to the Church for repentance.

Noted radio evangelist and author, John Piper, speaks of his difficulty in accepting Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage stating:

All of my adult life, until I was faced with the necessity of dealing with divorce and remarriage

in the pastoral context, I held the prevailing Protestant view that remarriage after divorce was Biblically sanctioned in cases where divorce had resulted from desertion or persistent adultery. Only when I was compelled, some years ago, in teaching through the gospel of Luke, to deal with Jesus' absolute statement in Luke 16:18 did I begin to question that inherited position. I felt an immense burden in having to teach our congregation what the revealed will of God is in this matter of divorce and remarriage. I was not unaware that among my people there were those who had been divorced and remarried, and those who had been divorced and remained unmarried, and those who were in the process of divorce or contemplating it as a possibility. I knew that this was not an academic exercise, but would immediately affect many people very deeply. I was also aware of the horrendous statistics in our own country, as well as other Western countries, concerning the number of marriages that were ending in divorce, and the numbers of people who were forming second marriages and third marriages. In my study of Ephesians 5 I had become increasingly persuaded that there is a deep and profound significance to the union of husband and wife in "one flesh" as a parable of the relationship between Christ and his church. All of these things conspired to create a sense of solemnity and seriousness as I weighed the meaning and the implication of the Biblical texts on divorce and remarriage. The upshot of that crucial experience was the discovery of what I believe is a New Testament prohibition of all remarriage except in the case where a spouse has died.

Review

As was discussed in Part 1 (April/May/June 2007) Jesus' prohibition against divorce stemmed not so much from a new teaching about divorce, but from reinstating God's original heart on marriage from the



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beginning. When Jesus was challenged about divorce, he took them back to a teaching about marriage. Quoting from Part 1:

"To these basics of marriage, Jesus added his profound, dominical explanation point— "Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh" (Matt. 19:6). The entire focus of the debate was resolved in this God-ordained fact. The Pharisees were asking about the various legalities of splitting the two individuals up. However, Jesus attempted to change their entire way of thinking, informing them that contrary to what they were thinking, the married couple remained no longer as two individuals that even could be split up, "they are no more twain, but one flesh."

A few years ago, in a teaching on divorce and remarriage, Bro. Rick Leibe used a very graphic illustration to help us better understand the concept of "the two becoming one." He took two lumps of clay, one of them yellow and the other blue, and began to knead the two together until eventually they became one large, bright green lump. When he was finished, he held the lump up and said, "Now, someone come up here and take out the blue clay." The point was clear, the change was irrevocable. Similarly, marriage fuses together two individuals into one—irrevocably.

The Divorce Question

For study purposes, the scriptures that deal with the issue of divorce and remarriage are generally regarded as: Gen. 2:24, Deut 24:1-4, Ezra 10:1-3, Mal. 2:6-16, and Jer. 3:1-14. In the New Testament they are: Mt. 5:31-32, 19:3-12, Mk. 10:2-12, Luke 16:18, Rom. 7:1-6, 1 Cor. 7:10-15, 1 Tim. 3:2, and Eph. 5:15-33.

The question that the Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce was, "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" After Jesus gave them the basics of



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the marriage covenant by accenting this “one flesh” theology, He boldly answered their question by stating, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” This alone should be sufficient to establish an absolute prohibition against divorce and remarriage. However, like the reply of the Pharisees, several questions naturally tend to come up.

What About The Old Testament Law Of Divorce?

The Pharisees seemed to understand that Jesus was indeed saying that divorce with remarriage was not permissible at all. However, being good students of the Law, they naturally questioned Jesus about the law of divorce found in Deut. 24, “Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?” To this Jesus responded, “Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so” (Matt. 19:7-8).

Like many of the Old Testament laws, Jesus further expanded this “Law of Divorce” to include the spirit and intent of the heart. Jesus’ focus challenged the way the Pharisees looked at marriage, and now He was even telling them that they had viewed the Mosaic Law incorrectly. One of the most common misconceptions held about the Deuteronomy passage has been that the Old Testament Law *instituted* a “Law of Divorce.” A closer look reveals that divorce was already happening; Moses did not *institute* “divorce,” he simply *regulated* it.

Adding to this misconception is a problem of translation. Although this misconception obviously predates the King James translation, it is possible to make a false assumption based upon some of the wording in our King James version. Look in your Bibles at Deuteronomy 24. It states: “When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she

find no favor in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house” (Deut. 24:1).

Unfortunately, the word “then” was not part of the original Hebrew, even in the “Textus Receptus,” from which the King James was derived. No doubt it was put there by the translators to allow the sentence structure to flow better. However, this addition actually changes the emphasis entirely. It creates a “Law of Divorce” which was not part of the original language.

As Andrew Cornes points out in *Divorce & Remarriage: Biblical Principles & Pastoral Practice*, this “divorce law,” instead of being a “Law of Divorce,” was actually a law regulating against a type of remarriage. When looked at in the original Hebrew, as opposed to a simple one-sentence, cause-and-effect law *commanding* divorce, it rather reads as a four-sentence regulation against putting a woman into this particular situation. “The circumstances under which the Law applies continue throughout the first three verses; the action to be taken—what the husband must (or must not) do—only comes in verse 4” (ibid).

Cornes gives the translation as:

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, (2) and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, (3) and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, (4) then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance (Deut 24:1-4).

Regardless of how the KJV reads, the context of the passage is instructive. The context reveals that divorce was already practiced by the Hebrews at this time. This passage *assumes* its existence in the regulation. The law was created as a way to protect the woman, not to reject her. It is important to remember that Moses gave the law as a response to *"the hardness of your hearts."* Again, this passage indicates that Moses did not *institute* divorce, he merely *regulated* against a type of *remarriage*. This passage provided at least three regulations: (1) It prevented the women from being traded and passed around like merchandise. (2) It curtailed remarriage for a woman in this condition. (3) It restrained the husband, causing him to know that he cannot just act indiscriminately about sending his wife away.

The Words Of Jesus...

Jesus spoke on the subject of divorce and remarriage in several places. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus began by defining the sin of "adultery" in the eyes of God, stating, *"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart."* To the Jewish man of this day, these words must have sounded absurd. According to Old Testament Law, a man would be found guilty of "adultery" only by taking *another man's wife*. For the man, everything else was merely "fornication," which was considered a lesser offense by Old Testament standards.

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tal oneness that Jesus stressed in the New Testament. In this way, polygamy was thereby tacitly allowed. However, Jesus was now focusing on the man's original union with his wife and going so far with it, that He said that even *looking* at another woman lustfully made a man guilty of adultery! Again, this would have been radical and absurd by the Jewish men of that day. To make matters worse, instead of softening these hard statements, Jesus went on to say that if the offending eye or hand was causing the problem, then it would be better (still not best) that we pluck them out or cut them off.

Concluding this severe train of thought, Jesus then touched on the subject of divorce and remarriage. To their surprise, Jesus added divorce and remarriage to His list of those things which were now being called "adultery." He explained that a man, by divorcing his wife, was guilty of *causing* her to fall into adultery if she should remarry. Because of this, he is therefore guilty of her adultery along with her. The only exception Jesus gives was if the woman was *already* guilty of adultery. In that case, then he, of

course, would not be held guilty of this adultery. However, concerning a remarriage, Jesus caps off his list of adulterers, including even the man who simply marries a woman who has been divorced:

It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery (Matt 5:31-32).

Similarly, in the Matthew 19 passage, Jesus repeated the Sermon on the Mount teaching saying,



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“And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery” (Matt 19:9).



...at the very least, a church-wide moratorium on remarriage alone could turn the tide of this epidemic completely around in one generation.

These ‘exception clauses’ of Matthew 5 and 19 will be discussed in more detail in the next issue. Here in Matthew 19, the sin of adultery is given both to those who would divorce a woman wrongfully, as well as to those who would marry a woman who has already been divorced.

In Mark, Chapter 10, the same scene that was recorded in Matthew 19 is in view; only this time we get to peek into the private discussions of the Apostles about the issue after they got home. This time, the topic of *remarriage* is more in focus. Mark also makes it clear that the sin of adultery applies to both men and women.

And in the house his disciples asked him again of the same matter. And he saith unto them, Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery (Mark 10: 10-12).

Finally, in Luke 16:18, stemming from a discussion about the Law, Jesus again focused on the sin of marrying a divorced person and stated, *“And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail. Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery” (Luke 16:17-18).*

To summarize, Jesus taught that:

- Divorcing a spouse for any reason except for fornication is to be guilty of *causing* your spouse to commit adultery (Matt 5:32, 19:9).
- Divorcing a wife *and marrying another* is adultery (Mark 19:11).
- Marrying someone who is divorced is adultery (Luke 16:18).

How Long Does The Sin Of Adultery Last?

Finally, concerning the sin of adultery, the question remains: Is this a one time sin, or is it an ongoing

sin? For example, is it like asking forgiveness for a lie you told years ago, or is it more like keeping something that you stole while asking God for forgiveness? John Coblenz, in his book *What the Bible Says About Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage*, touches on the Greek word used in Mark 10 saying:

“The Greek verb tense translated “committeth adultery” in Mark 10:11, 12 is present indicative, suggesting continuous action. It means “is committing adultery.” The adultery is not in the past only. It began when the second relationship began and continues as long as the relationship continues—the remarriage is ongoing adultery against the former companion as long as that companion lives.

These words are hard, and as I said in the beginning, I believe that I have hardly seen any personal cross more painful, misunderstood or ignored in the American Church today as Jesus’ teaching on divorce and remarriage. Sadly, the consequences have been devastatingly tragic, leaving victims suffering in the wake of the damage. Because of the magnitude of the situation, it almost seems impossible to regain the lost ground. Generations of families, churches and even whole denominations have been birthed into this inherited position. Yet I believe it is not too late to make a change. Once the problem is admitted, churches might differ on how to respond to it, however, at the very least, a church-wide moratorium on *remarriage alone* could turn the tide of this epidemic completely around in one generation. One thing is certain, ignoring the situation will not make it go away. May God open our eyes to the need, and give us the grace for the work. May His gentle sword cut away our burdens, define our path and enlighten our future. □

[In the next issue, we would like to discuss the “exception clause” in detail, followed in future issues by Paul’s view of divorce in the Epistles, and finally ending with a glimpse at divorce and remarriage in the early Church.]