

Law, Gospel, Divorce and Remarriage

October 20th, 2013

Luke 16:14-18

"¹⁴The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. ¹⁵And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God. ¹⁶"The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. ¹⁷But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void. ¹⁸"Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery."

Verses 16-17 are a microcosm of the complexity that runs throughout the Word of God concerning the law. The Bible portrays the law of God on the one hand as something deadly, and on the other hand as something precious and life-giving. For instance:

"For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them"" (Galatians 3:10; cf. Romans 3:20, 4:15).

"¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"" (cf. Romans 13:8-10, 8:3-4).

So we must be careful to avoid sweeping positive or negative statements about the law without an awareness of this complexity, which arises because of the different aims that God has for the law. I tried to strike that balance two Sundays ago from verses 16-17. We made two key points:

1. From verse 16, we saw that the law served a short-term purpose, preparing the way for Jesus (cf. 24:27). The law was given not, not as a way to earn salvation, but as a pointer to the coming redemption that would be found in Jesus. In that sense, it was "until John". The Pharisees missed this aim and, seeking to justify themselves through their meticulous rule-keeping, were reaping for themselves the spiritual destruction that Paul speaks

of in Galatians 3:10 (cf. Romans 9:31-32, 10:4). When you try to earn or initiate a relationship with God through works of the law, it brings death and wrath.

2. But, this doesn't mean that God's law is going away (v.17), at least not in its long-term aim of showing us how our loving, wise, benevolent God made life to work best. With the proclamation of God's Kingdom in Jesus, the message is loud and clear (though it was present in the Old Testament in shadows) that we are free from the law as a way to win merit from God, but we are not free from that law as a way to please God, as Paul says in the Galatians 5 quote above).

By Christ's finished work, what the law calls for -- living in harmony with God and His will, which Jesus reveals to be a life of love -- can actually take place through the work of God's Spirit. God's Spirit works in us -- like a branch connected to its life-giving vine, John 15:1ff) -- the fruit of obedience to God's revealed will, which is the fulfillment of the righteous requirement of the law (cf. Romans 8:4). So the law of God, then, understood this way (not as a way of earning merit, but of expressing love), becomes precious and beautiful in showing us how we can best magnify His worth with our lives. And so not a dot of the law, in its long-term aim (ie, love for God and others) is void, but rather is fulfilled for us (in Christ) and in us (by His Spirit alive and active in us).

When the Word of Christ is dwelling in you richly, when with unveiled face you are beholding the glory of the Lord, then what you want is to live wholly for Him and His fame. And when you ask, "How can I live

for Him?”, the answer is, “Look at the will of God revealed in His law.” The gospel frees you from the law, to fulfill the law.

Grappling with the Seventh Commandment

That brings us to verse 18, where Jesus applies His teaching on the law to a specific commandment: the seventh commandment, prohibiting adultery, and positively, celebrating and treasuring marital faithfulness. "18Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." And this is difficult, because it's a painful issue for many in this room. This is not abstract, philosophical, doctrinal problem. It's real, live, raw, pain.

But I won't truly be honoring that pain by softening the commandment of Jesus. We glory that in Christ, there is grace and forgiveness for every sinner who wants it, no matter the sin. Our reflection on God's law should show us that we are *not* being gracious when we minimize the moral standards of God, because by doing so we rob others of the knowledge of the safe, liberating, joyful path that God's Word gives, and of the knowledge of the good God who laid that path. And He says here, loud and clear, that divorce and remarriage is a sin.

Let's consider: 1. Why does Jesus say this here? 2. How absolute is this prohibition? 3. How do we apply this command today?

The Pharisees' Hypocrisy

To sum it up, I believe Jesus makes this remark here in the context of His discussion of the law because of His ongoing conflict with the Pharisees. They are ridiculing Him (v.14), and we know from the context of Luke that a big reason for their disdain for Jesus was His practice of welcoming sinners (see 15:1). They see Jesus as compromising on God's law, because of the way He is associating with

such notoriously lawless people. And so they have insulted and ridiculed Jesus as being an enemy of God's law.

And in verse 18, it's likely that Jesus is taking aim at their hypocrisy. Because as committed to and concerned about the law as they say they are, they have been consistently sanctioning (and getting rich off of?) the violation of the seventh commandment. Seizing on a passage in Deuteronomy 24, referring to a man giving his wife a certificate of divorce if he finds in her "some indecency", they had begun to define "indecency" as broadly as if she over-cooked your food, or if you found someone more attractive, you could write her a certificate and be done with her. It made a mockery of the one-flesh union which describes the first marriage in Genesis 2.

And so Jesus is saying to them, "You lovers of the law, you who would ridicule Me as a law-breaker, understand: I am not here to nullify the law. Not a dot of the law, including the law against adultery which you seem to care nothing about in your reckless disregard for the sanctity of the marriage covenant, will be void. I affirm and uphold the seventh commandment. What about you?" It was another loving admonition, urging these men to repent of their hypocrisy.

How Absolute is this Prohibition?

Secondly, then, how absolute is this command? Jesus has come to seek and to save the lost, He has come to give His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins, so that the judgment of the law might not fall on us who cling to Jesus by faith. But His intent is not to relax the commands of God, because the moral will of God expressed in the law is good and is given to increase our joy in Him. And so Jesus demands (and Paul affirms in Romans 7 and 1 Corinthians 7 explicitly, and Ephesians 5 implicitly) that husbands and wives remain faithful to their marriage vows. If not, they are guilty of breaking the seventh command.

But is this true of every divorce and remarriage? These words are *very* strong: "18Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." Jesus could not communicate more forcefully how strongly He affirms the law; He is going even beyond Moses in this regard, who made provision for divorce because of human sinfulness (Mark 10:5), aiming to restore the original intent of marriage to be a one-flesh union until death parts. That seems to be why Jesus said a second marriage while the first spouse is living is adultery, because He considers the first one to still be valid.

But is this the case in *every* situation? It seems that way from this statement, especially when we consider that the second half of the verse ("...he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery") indicates that not only is the divorcing husband guilty of adultery if he remarries, but also *any* man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. The woman in view here is presumably the innocent party in the divorce, because when her husband divorces her, he commits adultery in marrying another. Apparently, this is because he had no right to divorce his wife; she's done nothing to make this divorce legitimate. Yet Jesus says that any man who marries this abandoned woman commits adultery.

This is a hard saying. The woman who is forsaken by a man who leaves to marry another is called by Jesus to display the holiness of her marriage vows and the nature of the marriage covenant by not marrying another. Since there are no exceptions mentioned in the verse, I believe the first readers of Luke's gospel would have been hard-pressed to find any exceptions to this unqualified statement. It was a sharp break from their cultural norm, as it is ours.

Having said that, most biblical scholars, theologians, etc. do not affirm this interpretation of Jesus' words, and they do so because of the exception statement that is recorded in Matthew 19:9 and 5:32. I can't

dig into those statements today, but I would refer you to two sermons I preached in October 2010, and the elders' position paper on divorce and remarriage (attached to this manuscript), as well as *God, Marriage and Family* by Andreas Koestenberger, for a faithful, Christ-loving scholar who addresses both sides of the issue.

For today, I believe I need to simply stand on this clear, sobering, powerful affirmation of the glory and magnificence of the covenant of marriage. Perhaps one reason why the church seems indistinguishable from the world in regard to divorce and remarriage is because we spend so much time talking about the possible exceptions (you should go into God's Word and study these things yourself), and so few people stand with Jesus and wave the banner boldly and unapologetically that Jesus Christ, Lord of the universe, Savior of the world, lover of the broken sinner, risen and reigning King of kings, infinite in wisdom and knowledge commands His disciples to keep the covenant of marriage until death, and His commands are not burdensome!

Obeying Jesus' Command Today

Surely, a word needs to be spoken here to those listening who have already been through the pain of divorce, and possibly remarriage as well. And I will do that, but first I want to address all those who are married, whether it is a first or second or third marriage, as well as all those who have never been married, but aspire to it. How do we apply, or obey, this command today? Jesus has made a command; He is not abolishing the law, and the gospels (and epistles) are filled with commands to God's people on how to live in a manner that honors Him. This is part of our calling as Jesus' disciples, to teach people to obey everything He has commanded, and now we have considered one of His commands. But how do we do that?

Let's go back to the two points I reviewed at the beginning, and apply them to the law/command Jesus gives here. We embrace that the law was "until John"; that is, it is a pointer to the good news of the life,

death and resurrection of Jesus. We rest in the freedom that obedience to this command or disobedience to it is not the means of attaining a relationship with God, so you need not fear that you will be cast away from God if you divorce. This is immensely practical, because the marital difficulties you're experiencing are likely the result of sin on someone's part (or both parties). Because you know that your standing with God is not based on law-keeping, but on God's grace in Christ, you are free to be honest about your difficulties and get help, because embracing the gospel creates a culture where it's ok to not be ok.

But is that all that disciples of Jesus can say? "Yes, we're talking about one of the ten commandments here, but thankfully the law was only until John, so we're not bound by that anymore, so it's no big deal whether we persevere together or just end this marriage." With the apostle Paul I say, "By no means!" Because we also can see that what the law aimed at all along – love for God and neighbor (and who is a closer neighbor than your spouse?) – is not negligible now that we are under grace, but it is possible now that we are under grace:

"³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the righteous requirement of the law (LOVE HER, until death parts you!) might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

This means that the main "work" of staying married is not staying "in love", but staying in Jesus, like a branch to a vine. Through the Spirit, by faith, you behold the glory of the Lord shining in the face of Jesus Christ, and beholding His glory, you are changed into His image from one degree of glory to another, and that means you are changed into one who loves, even as you have been loved.

When Jesus looked down from the cross, He didn't think, "I am giving myself to you because of how attractive you are to Me. There's such great chemistry between us." No! He was in agony, and He looked

down at us – denying Him, mocking Him, abandoning Him and betraying Him – and in the greatest act of love in the history of the world, He stayed there. He could have called thousands of angels to His side to rescue Him, and He stayed! For you! He loved you, not because you were lovely (Romans 5:6, 8), but to make you lovely.

You dwell in that love, and you say, “As Jesus has so beautifully loved me, I will love you, and thus fulfill the law of Christ in the strength that He supplies. This is, ultimately, why marriage is given by God: to display the covenant-keeping love of Jesus for His bride, the Church. What a witness this kind of love is in the church, and in the world! And that love is displayed brilliantly when two flawed, imperfect people who often fall short of each other’s expectations have been so humbled at the love of Jesus to them when **they** fell short of **His** expectations, that they remain faithful to their vows even when their spouse doesn’t seem very lovable.

A Word to the Divorced and Remarried

For those who are divorced (and remarried), it is especially painful to hear all this. Perhaps you feel your divorce and remarriage was on biblical grounds, and if so, you need not feel guilty this morning. I don’t look down upon you at all, and I root for the second and third marriages in this room as passionately as I root for the first marriages, because it is a covenant that God honors (John 4:18).

But if you hear the word of Christ today and feel convicted of sin, there is no need to leave here in despair, or feeling like an outcast. Sin has made all of us outcasts, yet the unbreakable love of Christ proclaimed in the gospel means *nothing* can separate you from His love...including a divorce. If you’ve come to see that your divorce and/or remarriage was formed on sinful grounds, confess it, and He’s faithful and just to forgive you because of Jesus!

Jesus' teaching on divorce – which maybe you have broken – is so severe because marriage exists to proclaim the mercy of God in the gospel, and His mercy is a severe mercy! Nothing can separate you from that mercy, so rest in His love and delight in you today, and in whatever situation God has called you, abide in Him and bear the fruit of love, to the praise of His glory.

Divorce and Remarriage in the Scripturesⁱ

Introduction

Divorce is painful. It is emotionally more wrenching than the death of a spouse. It is often long years in coming and long years in the settlement and in the adjustment. The upheaval of life is immeasurable. The sense of failure and guilt and fear torture the soul. Loneliness can be overwhelming. A sense of devastated future can be all consuming.

The great challenge to the church in the face of divorce and remarriage is to love Biblically. John wrote, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments" ([1 John 5:2](#)). In other words, the test of true love to people is not only the feeling of compassion in the heart but also conformity to the commandments of God in behavior. The great challenge is to mingle the tears of compassion with the tough love of obedience. This alone will honor Christ and preserve the spiritual health and power of the church.

Why is there a Special Concern with Divorce and Remarriage?

1. People who come to Joy may want to know where we stand on this issue.
2. Inside the church people need clarification about where the leadership of the church stands and what the church position is.
3. Marriage, divorce and remarriage involve the mingling of solemn oaths and sacred physical union unlike any other relationship.
4. Marriage is unique among all relationships in that it is set apart by God to signify to the world the relationship between his Son and his bride, the church ([Eph. 5:21-33](#)). Therefore the breaking of this bond is extraordinary among all human bonds.
5. Divorce has reached epidemic proportions in our culture and in the church.

Is Divorce or Remarriage the Unforgivable Sin?

When divorce begins to be discussed in this way it is common for someone to ask whether divorce is the unforgivable sin. The Scriptures teach plainly that forgiveness for sins is available on the basis of the shed blood of Jesus (Acts 10:43, 1 John 1:9). Forgiveness is available for all sins, without exception. Forgiveness is received freely through trusting Christ. And trusting Christ involves confessing sin as sin and turning away from it to embrace the ways of God with joy.

Neither divorce nor remarriage is in itself the unforgivable sin any more than murder, stealing, lying or coveting. God is faithful and just to forgive—he will honor the worth of his Son's sacrifice for all who confess their sin and bank their hope on the saving work of

Christ. Therefore marital sin is in the same category as lying and killing and stealing. If someone has lied, killed, stolen, or illegitimately divorced, the issue is not, can they be forgiven? The issue is do they admit that what they did was sin? Do they renounce it? And do they do what they can to make it right?

What makes divorce and remarriage seem to be a special matter of concern in the church is that very seldom does someone affirm the rightness of lying, killing, and stealing. But people often affirm the rightness of divorce and remarriage. In other words, what usually causes conflict is not whether divorce and remarriage are unforgivable sins, but whether they are sins at all—to be confessed (from the past) and to be avoided (in the future).

So, is there a Biblically legitimate divorce and remarriage which is not sin and so does not need to be confessed or avoided? If so, what are the circumstances that define it?

Diversity of Viewpoints at Joy and in the Wider Church

Among the leadership at Joy, complete unanimity does not exist on every nuance and detail concerning the question of what divorces and what remarriages are Biblically permissible. This lack of unanimity is a reflection of the evangelical church worldwide, and reflects historic positions that have been taken for centuries.

What follows is our attempt to establish from the Scriptures what kind of divorce and remarriage the church, as a concerned and responsible body, will regard as clearly outside the Biblical limits of what is acceptable, while being mindful of what was stated above: there is NO past divorce or remarriage that in itself is unforgivable. Our prayer is that all divorced and remarried brothers and sisters at Joy will gladly affirm this statement, either because they believe their situation was Biblically legitimate, or because they now see that it was not, and are genuinely repentant as they look back.

Guidelines for Church Life

Marriage is a human relationship ordained and instituted by God ([Malachi 2:14-16](#)). His original design was one man and one woman united by covenant and sexual union for life ([Genesis 2:23-4](#)). The relationship was a mystery in that it set forth symbolically in physical form the relationship between himself and his people ([Eph. 5:21-33](#); [Isaiah 54:5](#); [Hosea 2:14-23](#); Ezekiel 16; [Jeremiah 3:20](#)). Therefore God hates divorce for what it does to people and for what it does to the glory of his own covenant with the church.

Nevertheless, there are Scriptures which suggest that divorce and remarriage may be permitted in certain situations (see below). What follows should be read with the awareness that for some of us they represent a minimum expectation for Christians and a weakening of Biblical standards. Even those of us who affirm them as entirely Biblical can imagine a married couple, previously held back from a divorce by the conviction that it would be contrary to Scripture, now going ahead with it because they can see an "out" in one of the statements below. None of us wants these guidelines to encourage divorce or weaken the commitment God means for us to have to our marriage covenant.

1. A believer and unbeliever should not marry ([1 Cor. 7:39](#); [2 Cor. 6:14-15](#)).
2. Since death breaks the marriage bond ([Rom. 7:2-3](#); [1 Cor. 7:39](#)), remarriage to another believer is permissible without sin for a believing widow or widower.

3. Divorce may be permitted when a spouse deserts the relationship, engages in prolonged, unrepentant, adultery, or is dangerously abusive ([1 Cor. 7:15](#); [Matthew 19:9](#);¹ [1 Cor. 7:11](#)). We are not here dealing with remarriage (see #4 and #5). We simply acknowledge that there are times when the Bible permits separation.

Some of us want to stress that "divorce" in this statement should not imply a decisive and permanent end to the relationship while the spouses are alive and not remarried. Even after long periods of separation and alienation, reconciliation can happen, as when the people of God return to the Lord after periods of waywardness ([Hosea 2:14-23](#)). Others of us want to stress that decisive divorce in certain cases is permitted, and that this leaves the deserted, or abused spouse free to remarry (see #5).

We all want to emphasize that the phrase "may be permitted" holds out the possibility that inquiry may reveal that the deserted partner engaged in a wrong behavior that drove the other away, so that a change is called for at home rather than divorce. We also want to stress that forgiveness and reconciliation between sinning spouses is always preferable to divorce, even where adultery has occurred (See Matt. 18:21-22, Luke 17:3-4).

4. The remarriage of the aggrieved, divorced spouse may be viewed as severing the former marriage so that the unmarried spouse whose behavior did not biblically justify being divorced, may be free to remarry a believer ([Matthew 19:9](#)), if he or she has confessed all known sin in the divorce, and has made significant progress in overcoming any destructive behaviors and attitudes.

Recognizing the differences of conviction in the church, those of us with more limiting standards for remarriage consent not to make our standard normative for the whole body. Others of us, who regard this fourth statement as fully Biblical, respect those among us with a more limiting interpretation and do not require or expect them to act in any way against their consciences in attending, supporting or performing enactments of marriage they regard as contrary to Scripture.

All of us urge every member who contemplates remarriage to struggle in prayer and study with all the relevant Scriptures, with the sole aim of glorifying God through full obedience to his word. Consider fairly the arguments against remarriage and those for it.

Moreover we want to affirm the goodness and beauty of a life of singleness in God's service, both before marriage and after marriage. It is commended in [1 Corinthians 7:7,11,32-35](#), and elevated by the examples of Jesus and Paul and hundreds of great single saints.

5. After serious efforts have been made toward reconciliation the aggrieved partners referred to in guideline #3 may, together with the leadership of the church, come to regard their marriages as irreparably broken. In such cases remarriage may be a

¹ Note: Not all of us would want to use [Matthew 19:9](#) as a support for this statement, since we believe the "exception clause" in this verse ("except for sexual immorality") refers to fornication not adultery, and is meant to exonerate those, like Joseph in [Matthew 1:19](#), who break a betrothal because of unfaithfulness. Others of us believe it refers to adultery in marriage and is meant to exonerate those who divorce and remarry after a spouse has been impenitently unfaithful.

legitimate step, if taken with serious reckoning that this cuts off all possibility of a reconciliation that God may yet be willing to produce.

This guideline is for some of us the hardest concession to make. Remarriage after a divorced spouse marries again (see #4) at least has in its favor that the possibility of reconciliation was decisively cut off before. But while the spouse is still unmarried and alive reconciliation is still Biblically possible. This makes it very hard for some of us to condone a step that decisively cuts asunder what God meant to be permanent and which could yet be permanent ([1 Corinthians 7:10-11](#)).

Others of us believe that [1 Corinthians 7:15](#) ("If the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so, in such a case the brother or sister is not bound.") gives freedom to a Christian to remarry if abandoned. We also believe that denying remarriage puts an unwarranted strain on the chastity of the divorced person who may not believe he or she has the gift of celibacy ([1 Corinthians 7:7](#)).

But we all agree that serious efforts should be made at reconciliation, including the intervention of the church if necessary, before any aggrieved spouse is resigned to singleness or is free to remarry.

6. The aggrieving partners referred to in #3 (who were guilty of abandonment, adultery or abuse) should repent and be reconciled to God and to their spouses ([1 Corinthians 7:11](#); [1 John 1:9](#)). If it is too late because their spouses have remarried, then they should remain single because they left their first marriage without Biblical warrant ([Matthew 19:9](#); [Luke 16:18](#); [1 Corinthians 7:11](#)).

7. If a second marriage ends in death or divorce, the widow or widower in this case is not permitted to return to the first spouse in marriage ([Deut. 24:1-4](#)).

8. With regard to a new believer who has undergone a divorce prior to their conversion, two different views have been widely held. Some hold that the change in standing from unbeliever to believer does not alter the application of the guidelines for divorce and remarriage (See [Matthew 19:4-6](#) which highlights the fact that enduring marriages are part of God's plan for all his human creation, not just his redeemed people.)

Others hold that because the new believer has become a new creation in Christ and that their previous sinful conduct has been washed away by the blood of Christ, the new believer is free to marry for the first time as a Christian.

Because the Scriptures do not clearly address this issue as it pertains to marriage, each individual pastor/elder is free to be led as his Spirit-illuminated conscience sees fit in regards to presiding over such marriages.

Those who are Already Remarried

Those who are already remarried and become convicted that their remarriage was not within biblical grounds should:

1. Acknowledge that the choice to remarry and the act of entering a second marriage was sin, and confess it as such and seek forgiveness, assured that God is faithful and just to forgive all sin (1 John 1:9)
2. Not attempt to return to the first partner after entering a second union (see #7 above)

3. Not separate and live as single people thinking that this would result in less sin because all their sexual relations are acts of adultery. The Bible does treat second marriages as having significant standing in God's eyes (see John 4:18). That is, there were promises made and there has been a union formed. Promises are to be kept, and the union is to be sanctified to God. Staying in a second marriage is God's will for a couple and their ongoing relations should not be looked on as adulterous.

i" What follows has been adapted and edited from Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis MN.