

Jesus on Adultery and Divorce • Luke 16:16-18

Marriage was disappearing. Immorality was rampant in much of the Roman Empire. Divorce came easily and was frequent. Women were often treated more like property than like persons. But none of this should come as much of a surprise because they were pagan. They believed in the pagan pantheon of Greek and Roman deities. They didn't believe in the one true God and they didn't have the Bible to teach and guide them. It should be no surprise that they lived as they did. In some ways it was simply the logical end of the beliefs that they practiced.

What is a surprise is that it wasn't much better within the Jewish community and they believed in God and had the Bible as their teacher and guide. Under Jewish custom it was very difficult for a woman to divorce a man, but it was very easy for a man to divorce a woman. A wife could divorce her husband if he contracted leprosy, rejected the Jewish religion or raped a virgin. But other than that divorce was virtually unavailable to women. By contrast, a man could divorce his wife if she spoiled a dish of food, talked to a strange man, spoke disrespectfully about her in-laws or raised her voice so it could be heard in the next house. In the farthest extreme, Rabbi Akiba taught that a man could divorce his wife if he found another woman who was better looking. In other words, divorce could be for any reason at any time. As a result, many women simply refused to get married because it was virtually inevitable that the marriage would soon end in divorce.

Some people might argue that there are similarities to today. An ad from the TV section of the Sunday Minneapolis Star Tribune reads:

DIVORCE from \$69
1000s of Satisfied Customers
SAME DAY SERVICE
In business 12 years

In 1900 there were 55,751 divorces in the United States. In 1997 there were 1,163,000 di-

vorces in the United States. True, there was a huge increase because the population was larger. But, the number of divorces per 1000 population increased six times from the beginning to the end of the century.

Actually, the rate of divorce has declined since its historic high in 1980 although that may be because many people have given up on marriage. They simply live together and may split up without ever entering a marriage covenant.

Some say that divorce used to be too rare. Too many people spent their entire adult lives in marriages they should not have been in. At the other extreme are those who say that divorce has become far too common and that we are increasingly practicing serial polygamy in America.

Frankly, a lot has changed in the last twenty-five years. It used to be uncomfortable to talk about divorce in church because so many church people disapproved of the topic. Now it is uncomfortable to talk about divorce because so many people are divorcees.

Let's try to step beyond the practices of ancient cultures and modern times. Let's try to get around all of our opinions and experiences. Let's see what Jesus had to say about marriage, adultery and divorce in Luke 16:16-18:

"The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law.

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

Jesus is here referring to the Old Testament laws. He said that up until the time of John the Baptist and Jesus himself, Old Testament law dominated religious discussion and life. Then along came Jesus

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with very good news. He taught that God loves us and wants us; that God wants to forgive our sins; that God is on our side and we don't need to be afraid of him. All we need to do is accept him and we can be the recipients of God's wonderful grace and goodness.

That message was so powerful that people by the thousands flocked to Jesus and to his kingdom and his message. It was such a stampede that they were like a crowd breaking down doors in order to get to Jesus and absorb his teaching. But some people assumed that all God's rules disappeared. They were so enthusiastic about God's grace that they were convinced they could do absolutely anything. They thought, "Since God loves and forgives, anything goes. Sin like crazy and don't worry about it. God will forgive you. There are no more rules."

But Jesus insisted that it's not like that. God's moral laws don't change. In Jesus' words, "*It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law.*" In other words, God's moral laws are the same as they have always been.

If you write a capital E and omit the bottom horizontal line, you change the letter from E to F and change the meaning of the word and the sentence. Jesus says that heaven and earth will disappear before the tiniest little stroke of a pen can or will be taken out of God's moral law.

Jesus gave an example of one of God's laws that doesn't change. He said, "*Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*" He was specifically talking about people who make up reasons for divorce, end their marriages and marry someone else. This may be legal by the laws of earth but it is adultery by the laws of God.

Jesus is saying that marriage is permanent. A man can't morally just divorce his wife and marry someone else. To do so is wrong, it is sin, whether local law permits it or not. For a man to leave the permanent relationship of marriage and marry someone else is to commit adultery. And adultery is sin.

Adultery is sexual activity outside of marriage. It is one of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:14, "*You shall not commit adultery.*"

Adultery is primarily a sin against God. That's not the way most people think of it. Most people

think of it as a sin against a spouse. Most people think of it as a sexual sin. Actually, lots of people don't think of adultery as sin at all. They see it as something they do for some reason they have chosen.

Shock radio celebrity Howard Stern says, "It's okay for a man to commit adultery if his wife is ugly." While such a statement should be patently offensive to anyone who hears it, such an attitude is outrageously sinful against God.

God says that adultery is in the same league with murder, stealing, lying and idolatry. It is a serious affront to God that deeply offends and hurts him. Adultery represents everything that is the opposite of what God stands for. It represents breaking promises; lying; stealing what rightfully belongs to someone else; invading an intimate covenant relationship; undermining marriage and family which is the basis of God's design for human relationships and society. No one can commit adultery without offending and alienating God himself. Jesus says that anyone who divorces and marries someone else commits adultery.

If this is what God says it is no wonder he is quoted in the last book of the Old Testament in Malachi 2:16 as saying, "*I hate divorce.*" God hates it when marriages he has blessed split up. God hates it when people end relationships he wanted to stick together. God hates it when families are divided. God hates it when hearts are broken. God hates it when good dreams are shattered. God hates it when innocent people are victimized by others who destroy or abandon a marriage. God hates divorce.

Please don't misunderstand. God doesn't hate divorcees. In fact, God himself is a divorcee. He says in the Old Testament in Jeremiah 3:8 that he divorced Israel for adultery. So when God says he hates divorce he is speaking out of his own experience. God himself was the innocent victim of the sin of adultery. God understands the pain. He has been there. He has personally gone through his own traumatic divorce. He was deeply hurt. God hates divorce. But, God never hates people who are divorced. He hates what divorce does to people.

I suppose you could compare it to cancer or car accidents or alcoholism. God must hate what all of these do to people as well, but he loves the people who are the victims of diseases and accidents and poor personal choices.

This is a very important distinction. If you are divorced, please don't ever think that God hates you. Don't ever think he abandons you or is not on your side. The truth is that whoever you are, whether you are an innocent victim of someone else's behavior or you are the person who has hurt someone else, God loves you. It is the divorce which God hates.

Having said all this, let me state that Jesus clearly taught that adultery may result in divorce. It's not recorded in Luke's biography of Jesus but you can read Jesus' words in Matthew 19:3-9:

Some Pharisees came to Jesus to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. So Jesus is back to saying, I'm talking about the moral law of God from the very beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

Here Jesus gives further explanation of what he said in Luke 16. In Luke 16 he taught the basic principle of God's law that marriage is permanent. But some people must have asked him, "What if my husband or wife commits adultery? Do I have to stay married even then?" Jesus then restated the basic principle but he added an exception: *"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."*

Jesus came from heaven to earth to give all of us the very best life possible, both for now and forever.

So, Jesus taught that a person whose spouse is unfaithful may divorce that person and remarry. It is Jesus' one exception. It kind of makes sense when you understand that under the Old Testament code a person who committed adultery was stoned to death and the surviving spouse was widowed and therefore was free to remarry. Jesus taught that the stoning is discontinued but the innocent spouse has the right to divorce. It is a right that might not be exercised. The person may forgive and stay married.

Later in the New Testament St. Paul added another exception to the list in I Corinthians 7. By this time there were many individuals who were becoming Christians but were married to spouses who didn't believe. Some of them said, "If you don't renounce your Christian faith, I'm leaving." St. Paul taught about what to do in this very difficult situation. He said to let the other person leave. As painful as it is, let the unbeliever leave. In such a case, the Christian may be divorced and remarry. Here's what he said in I Corinthians 7:15: *"... if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace."*

All of this tells us that God greatly cares about our relationships. When a Christian is married to a non-Christian God wants the Christian to love the other person with the hope that the other person can be won over and become a Christian. But, if that doesn't work and the

partner leaves, God wants us to go on in peace.

Let me summarize these teachings of Jesus and the New Testament in a short list. First, marriage is permanent. Next, divorce is unusual. And third, sexual unfaithfulness and desertion are the biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage.

These teachings of Jesus are powerful and important for all Christians. But they also raise many unanswered questions about specific personal situations. Obviously, the Bible does not fully address every one of our individual circumstances. But, what we must do is judge our situations in the light of the Bible's teachings—and not the other way around!

There are some for whom the teachings of Jesus are troublesome because they have not lived and loved the way Jesus taught. They regret that but they cannot change the past. If that's you, what should you do? The answer is the same as it would be for any other sin, mistake or choice inconsistent with God's love and law. First, admit that what you have done is wrong. Then, ask for God's forgiveness and fully claim God's grace. If possible, ask for forgiveness from those you have wronged. Then, go on with life in the joy of God's wonderful grace.

Let's go back for a moment to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 19. What we didn't look at before was the response of the disciples to Jesus' teaching. Matthew 19:10 says, "*The disciples said to him, 'If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.'*" They thought the standard was too high and the expectations of Jesus were too tough. They figured it was better not to marry than not have an easy out with divorce.

My guess is that there are a lot of people today who have the same response to what Jesus taught. But we need to understand that the central purpose of Jesus is declared in John 10:10 when he said, "*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*" Jesus came from heaven to earth to give

all of us the very best life possible, both for now and forever. That is the central core. Out of love and commitment to our very best Jesus not only tells us how to live but also helps us do it. His whole purpose in coming from heaven to earth is to show us and help us live God's very best for our lives.

Let's go with Jesus. Let's live his way—life to the full!

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