

BIBLICAL MARRIAGE, DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE:

Insights Into God's Faithful Heart

The scope of this study has been limited to the covenantal aspect of marriage and the framework of rights and obligations that constitute marriage in the sight of God, earthly authorities, and society in general. From this perspective the nuances and definitions of the 'husband/wife' roles will not be examined, but instead the focus will be on the heart and attitudes needed by both parties to initiate and sustain the marriage covenant.

Marriage is of Divine Origin

In setting the stage for the human story, the Scriptures provide us with a brief overview of the creation process. Initially 'God created the heavens and earth' without form, empty, and covered in darkness (**Gen 1:1-2**). Then within this material framework the Spirit of God brought forth light, order, and life. Finally, in the concluding phase God created humankind 'male and female' and 'in his own image' and said, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it' (**Gen 1:28**). Beyond possessing the same procreative power of all living things, God made humankind in his image and with a capacity to rule over the rest of creation.

In the next chapter we find a more detailed narrative of how exactly God made us 'male and female' and within that story learn even more of what it means to be created in the image of our Creator.

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." ... So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said,

"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man."

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. (**Gen 2:18, 21-25**)

Differently than the animals, God created the human male first and then the female. This two-step process gives insight into God's nature, since: 1) Humankind was 'made in his image,' and; 2) It was 'not good for man to be alone.' Therefore, the human desire and need for companionship, fellowship and commitment are part of the divine image – part of our human nature.

Woman was created as man's *life partner*. This Hebrew word 'helper,' used to describe woman's role, is also used of God in the lives of his people and therefore carries no negative connotation as a value statement (cf. **Exod 18:4**; **Psa 33:20**). To illustrate the kind of union that God desires for marriage, God used part of Adam's flesh to form Eve – she literally was 'bone of his bone' and 'flesh of his flesh.' This material reality for Adam and Eve was meant to symbolize the standard of union for all marriage – the two will become one! In order to do this, a man (and wife) must lessen the ties to their families of origin and form a new family unit.

Paul quoted **Gen 2:24** when discussing the roles of husband and wife “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church’ (**Eph 5:31-32**). According to Paul, God’s institution of human marriage foreshadowed his eternal plan for the union of Christ and his church, and the specific details of the story of Adam and Eve would also seem to bear this out:

- Adam went into a deep sleep to receive his wife; Jesus literally died for the church;
- Adam sacrificed a part of his flesh; Jesus gave his body and shed his blood for the church;
- Adam & Eve became ‘one’ through the marriage covenant; and through one faith, one baptism, and one Spirit, disciples become part of Christ’s one body (i.e., the church), by means of the ‘new covenant.’

Therefore, in the first two chapters of Scripture, God revealed the essence of his plan for humankind’s eternal salvation – a covenantal union based in self-sacrificial love and mutual fulfillment.

Throughout human history, marriage remains a universal practice within society – a positive notion of life-long commitment between a man and a woman. When characterized by love and commitment, it provides an effective setting for raising healthy, well-adjusted children. Traditions and ceremonies may vary widely through time and across physical distances, but all societies share the concepts of faithfulness and commitment. Of course, from time to time, there may exist ‘sub-cultures’ within a society supporting practices contrary to marriage, but these are often reactionary to bad practice or simply an assertion of a new generation’s freedom of choice. Throughout human history, none of these ideological movements have ever developed into a new, sustainable form of society. Interestingly, in recent times, some cultures that have moved away from Christian marriage ideals, have often developed new laws and terms that protect the rights of two people living together (i.e., ‘sambo’ status in Sweden, which although lacking the ideological call to love and fidelity, seeks to guarantee the rights of those involved in regards to property disputes, material obligations, and the exercise of rights in caring for any children).

The Demand for Fidelity According to the Law

With the coming of the Mosaic Law, the institution of marriage was strongly affirmed through detailed regulations – especially in the area of marital fidelity (i.e., the limitation of sexual relations to be practiced only within the confines of the marriage covenant). Although the affirmation of male leadership was consistent with the already-established cultural norms within the surrounding societies, it may also be that from the divine perspective this was yet another foreshadowing of the leadership role that Christ would take in establishing his covenantal relationship with the church. Consequently, the Law contained the following directives:

- Regarding whom a man could marry:
 - Any Israelite woman (implied by **Deut 7:3**);
 - Captive women who had been ceremonially cleansed and initiated into the Israelite community (**Deut 21:10-14**).
- Regarding whom a man could not marry:
 - No close relatives, including sisters, half-sisters, nieces, etc. [implied by the imperative to not have sexual relations with such] (**Lev 18:6-17**);
 - Neither his wife’s sister or mother (**Lev 18:18, 20:10**);
 - A woman that he had previously divorced, who in turn had remarried another man (details in following section);
 - Canaanite women on the terms of a treaty (**Deut 7:3-4**).

- A newly married man should be freed from military duty for one year so that he can spend that time with his new wife (**Deut 24:5**).
- Under certain conditions a man was obligated to marry:
 - The man who had sexual relations with an unpledged virgin, although still conditional on her father's approval (**Exod 22:16-17**);
 - The man whose brother died without leaving a son, should marry his brother's widow and the first born son would carry on the name of his deceased brother (**Deut 25:5-10**).
- Polygamy was permitted (**Deut 21:15ff**) although special warning was given to future kings to not take *many* wives as a protection for their hearts (**Deut 17:17**).
- The priests were given additional restrictions, stating that a priest must marry a virgin from his own people, and could not marry a widow, divorcee, or a former prostitute, because he was to be holy (i.e., 'set apart') to God and his children undefiled (**Lev 21:7-8, 13-15**).

The Law demanded 'commitment and fidelity' between a husband and wife, and thereby prohibited all forms of adulterous relations (**Lev 18:6-20**). The Ten Commandments also demonstrated the centrality of fidelity since the seventh commandment required marital faithfulness in deed, while the tenth commandment required marital faithfulness in attitude:

1. You shall not commit adultery (**Exod 20:14**);
2. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor (**Exod 20:17**).

The Law also demonstrated the seriousness of fidelity in marriage by the prescribed social response for anyone caught in adultery (i.e., breaking their marriage vows) – for both man and woman, the penalty was death (**Deut 22:23-29**)! In fact, if a man was even suspicious that his wife was unfaithful (whether true or not), the woman needed to submit herself to a ceremonial test of fidelity involving the priest and the drinking of 'water that brings a curse' (**Num 5:11-31**).

The Possibility of Divorce and Remarriage According to the Law

After firmly establishing the principles of fidelity in marriage, the Law also included instructions about divorce. Considering the strength and severity of the Law in regards to the consequences of infidelity, this allowance for divorce might seem somewhat petty and even contradictory. *Why would God seemingly make it so easy for a man to divorce his wife?* Interestingly, even in the time of Jesus this very question seemed to nag the consciences of the teachers of the law and Jesus' simple answer to this will be discussed later.

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, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, 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, 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**)

A man was allowed to divorce his wife if he found something 'indecent' about her – a Hebrew word that is most often translated 'nakedness' and when combined with the verb 'to uncover' is used to describe *unlawful sexual relations* (i.e., **Lev 18** – 14 times). Although some would argue that 'something indecent' could not have been adultery (since the Law clearly demanded death for that trespass – **Lev 20:10, Deut 22:22**), the strength of this word seems to indicate something like it. The Law also outlined certain circumstances where a man was *never allowed* to divorce

his wife: 1) after having wrongly accused his wife of ‘not being a virgin’ (**Deut 22:13-19**); 2) when he had been required by the law to marry an ‘unpledged’ woman that he had already violated (**Deut 22:28-29**).

The new legal status as a ‘divorced’ woman then allowed her to marry another man, and he *legally* became her husband from that point forward. The actuality of divorce helps to illustrate the ‘legal’ nature of the marriage covenant: The marriage covenant could be broken, and the resultant status of those involved included the freedom of each to marry again. The only restriction applied to this was that once a man had divorced a woman, he could under no circumstances remarry her if she had married another and that marriage had either ended by divorce or death. Therefore, it would appear that they could be remarried if she had remained unmarried. *Note that divorce is given the same power to end a marriage covenant that death has – with certainty and finality.*

God’s Heart Behind the Law

Although the NT writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* correctly assessed the administration of the Law, i.e., that it ‘*was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment*’ (**Heb 2:2**), we also find within the Law some insights into the heart of God beyond the straightforward demand for justice:

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.” (**Exod 34:5-7**)

Although God was the ‘Lawgiver and Judge’ (**Jas 4:12**), *legalism* neither defines him nor his purposes. God’s intention in the Law was greater than simply ‘justice for justice’s sake,’ but within the Law, God demonstrated his love for Israel, his desire for a covenant relationship, and the demand for Israel’s reciprocal faithfulness.

Consider God’s response to Cain’s cold-blooded murder of Abel in **Gen 4** – he punished and disciplined Cain, rather than implemented what *justice* clearly demanded: ‘*life for life*’ (**Deut 19:21**). For God, there is an even higher principle than ‘legal’ justice – which is the provision of mercy, since ‘*Mercy triumphs over judgment*’ (**Jas 2:13**)! In anticipation of Israel’s failings, the Law also taught:

‘When all these blessing and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your souls according to everything I command you today, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. (**Deut 30:1-3**)

God deeply desired the relationship with his people to continue, and the Law prophesied that there could be restoration in their relationship even after a massive moral failure, on the condition that there was genuine repentance – *a return to God and renewed obedience to his commands*.

Despite the fact that the Law specifically called for the *death penalty* for certain trespasses (i.e., idolatry, murder, child rebellion, adult contempt for leadership, adultery) and specifically emphasized that ‘no pity be shown’ in the cases of *idolatry* and *murder* (**Deut 13:8; 19:13**), only twice in the Old Testament narrative do we actually see the death penalty being carried out in relation to situations involving adultery or immorality:

- Phineas killing an Israelite in the midst of having sex with a Midianite woman (**Num 25:1-15**);
- The response of the tribes of Israel (excluding Benjamin) against the men of Gibeah when hearing of the rape of a Levite's concubine and her subsequent death (**Judges 20**).
- Notably, neither of these instances could be called a 'simple' case of adultery, since the first instance involved people of unknown marital status and implicated *participation in idol worship*; and the second instance also amounted to *murder* (albeit most likely *not* premeditated) – the Law clearly stating that there was to be 'no pity' in the case of these secondary implications.

On the other hand, the *Book of Proverbs* provides warnings of destruction to the man enticed by the adulterous woman as well as the prediction of her own ruin, without reminding or threatening either that they should expect a death sentence by the Law for their sins (**Prov 5-7**). In addition to this, the adultery of David and Bathsheba demonstrated that the prescribed penalty for adultery was not always administered. When confronted about his sin, David repented, his sin was forgiven, and his life was spared – all with God's direct involvement through the prophet Nathan (**2 Sam 12**). Although David was undeniably guilty and would suffer other consequences for his sin in the lives of his children, surely 'mercy triumph[ed] over judgment' in David's case (**Jas 2:13**).

As the Apostle Paul clarified in his letters to the *Romans* and *Galatians*, God's primary purpose for the Law was never the eradication of sin or the perfecting of humankind since that was something that 'the Law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature' (**Rom 8:3**). Instead it was God's intention that 'through the Law we become conscious of sin' (**Rom 3:20**), so that 'where sin increased, grace increased all the more' (**Rom 5:20**). 'The Law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith' (**Gal 3:24**). For us to be able to understand God's grace and mercy (as well as to desire to seek it), it is first necessary for us to understand God's justice and righteous judgment. Ironically, the legalists of Jesus' day (and of ours) tried to justify themselves by the Law, whereas God's purpose was the exact opposite: through the Law they should have become conscious of their sin, their inability to remedy it, and their need for something greater that only God could provide – *his grace*.

The only recorded example we have of a man divorcing his wife with 'noble motive' is found at the beginning of Matthew's gospel. When recounting the engagement period of Mary and Joseph (both still living under the Law), we see Joseph deciding to divorce Mary: 'This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly' (**Matt 1:18-19**). Although we can infer that Joseph was fully convinced that Mary had been unfaithful to him, he chose divorce as a *non-scandalous* and merciful approach. Would this have allowed the true father of the child to step up and marry her, and thereby allow life to continue on a normal track for all involved? *Could it be that divorce was a God-given way for a man to deal mercifully with his wife's unfaithfulness rather than invoke the death penalty as mandated by the Law?*

Insight from God's Covenant Relationship with Israel

Although the idea of a 'marriage' between God and the nation of Israel is not mentioned in the books of Moses or recorded in the time of the Judges, the analogy became very real in the message of the prophets to the Divided Kingdoms. When confronting the people about their unfaithfulness, God repeatedly used the illustration of a marriage covenant with himself in the

role of *husband*, and both Israel and Judah in the role of *his wives*. Near the end of the Northern Kingdom's existence (c. 784 B.C.), God asked the prophet Hosea to go and marry an 'adulterous' wife, and then to use the personal story of his 'unfaithful wife' as a prophetic illustration for the people of Israel (**Hos 1-3**). Although Hosea's message was full of judgment and warning, it was also an affirmation of the love that God had for Israel and the hope of reconciliation that he was willing to hold out to them. The Law of Moses could have easily been used by Hosea to justify the notion of having his wife put to death for adultery. Instead we see Hosea seeking her out, buying her back from prostitution, and inviting her back home to live with him. 'The LORD said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, through she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes."' (**Hos 3:1**) Hosea's dealings with his wife demonstrate the graciousness of God at great personal cost, and show God's desire for reconciliation with his people as being greater than his desire for immediate justice. Unfortunately, Israel (Northern Kingdom) remained unfaithful and was all but destroyed by the Assyrians.

Almost a hundred and fifty years later, just before Judah was carried off into captivity, God again sent a strong message of judgment, as well as future hope, through the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel (c. 630-570 B.C.). God continued to use the imagery of *marriage* and *adultery*, and graphically described Jerusalem as an adulterous wife who had prostituted herself to the neighboring nations and broken her covenant with him causing him terrible grief and pain (**Ezek 16:1-59; 23:1-49**). Jeremiah takes this analogy even further by describing the '*sending away of Israel*' as *divorce*, because God, as the faithful husband, exercised his legal right in view of her repeated unfaithfulness and refusal to repent:

During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery. Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense," declares the Lord. (**Jer 3:6-10**)

Although Jeremiah doesn't repeat the image of divorce in regards to Judah's unfaithfulness (after having applied it to Israel), the prophet Isaiah does make the connection and asks rhetorically, 'Where is your mother's certificate of divorce with which I sent her away? ... because of your transgressions your mother was sent away' (**Isa 50:1**).

And finally, this profound analogy of marriage, adultery, and divorce is completed with the possibility of *remarriage*. Despite their unfaithfulness to him, the love and longing in God's heart still remained for his people. Through Jeremiah and Ezekiel, God spoke of the future establishment of another covenant:

Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you. Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed when you receive your sisters, both those who are older than you and those who are younger. I will give them to you as daughters, but not on the basis of my covenant with you. So I will establish my covenant with you, and you will know that I am the LORD. Then, when I make atonement for you for all you have done, you will remember and be ashamed and never again open your mouth because of your humiliation, declares the Sovereign LORD. (**Ezek 16:60-63**)

'The days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will make a new covenant with

the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,' declares the Lord. 'This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,' declares the LORD. 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, "Know the LORD," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the Lord. 'For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.' (**Jer 31:31-34**)

God promised to establish an 'everlasting' covenant with his people – a 'new covenant.' This covenant would be established 'when I [the LORD] make atonement for all you have done,' and the covenant would be characterized by complete forgiveness – 'For I [the LORD] will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.'

Without doubt, the shame and tragedy of this analogy is hard for us to grasp and accept. The fact that God would eventually resort to divorce in dealing with his covenant people may seem to shatter our idealistic thinking about his 'unconditional' love and limitless forgiveness. But then we must face the cost of our sin and the terrible price that God paid to redeem us. Consider these words of Jeremiah: "If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him and marries another man, should he return to her again? Would not the land be completely defiled? But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers – would you now return to me?" declares the LORD' (**Jer 3:1**). This echo of **Deut 24:3-4** reminds us of the restriction placed on the husband who divorces his wife – if she has remarried, he must not remarry her since it would be detestable. This same verse might seem to upset the usefulness of the aforesaid analogy if not for the shocking fact that 'defilement' lies at the very heart of the gospel, 'God has made him who had no sin to be sin [i.e., a sin offering] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (**2 Cor 5:21**), and 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds we have been healed' (**1 Pet 2:24**). God did the 'unthinkable' to save us – he took our sins upon himself and thereby paid the price for our redemption.

Therefore, as we examine the Bible's teaching on '*Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*,' let us keep in mind the heart and intentions of God so clearly demonstrated in the Old Testament – so that their import are not lost among the circumstantial details, emotional entanglements, sentimentality, and the demands for justice from our own consciences. Throughout the history of Israel's covenant relationship with God, he was constantly approaching them in the attitude of love – wanting only what was best for them at every turn. Far from legalistically waiting for their first transgression to end the covenant and cut them off completely, God repeatedly approached his people with patience and love, and made them offers of renewal and encouragement, if they would only turn back to him. Every one of God's acts of discipline and punishment were meant for Israel's betterment, and although vengeance belongs to him, God continued to show them that he was 'the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin' (**Exod 34:6**). Although the questions of earthly marriage, divorce, and remarriage may seem to be predominantly legal ones, beneath the frailty of these temporal examples lies an amazing opportunity to understand more deeply the very heart of God – his essence, as expressed in covenantal commitment (faithfulness) and self-sacrificing 'agape' love. Although God gave us the Law, we need to remember that he is not legalistic as we use the term, but gracious and forgiving. At the same time, for those who refuse to repent and accept his mercy, judgment and punishment are all that remain.

Divorce Can Become An Act of ‘Unfaithfulness’

In order to complete this Old Testament survey regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage, we need to read from the last prophetic message written to the Jews before the coming of the Messiah into the world.

Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another?

Judah has been unfaithful. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves, by marrying women who worship a foreign god. As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the LORD remove him off from the tents of Jacob – even though he brings an offering to the LORD Almighty.

Another thing you do: You flood the LORD’s altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favor on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, “Why?” It is because the LORD is the witness between you and the wife of your youth, you have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth.

“The man who hates and divorces his wife,” says the LORD, the God of Israel, “does violence to the one he should protect,” says the LORD Almighty.

So guard yourself in your spirit, and do be unfaithful. (**Mal 2:10-16**)

Interestingly, this current version of the NIV (2010) translates **Mal 2:16** quite differently from most earlier versions: i.e., “I hate divorce,” says the LORD God of Israel, “and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,” says the LORD Almighty’ (NIV, 1984). No one can deny the intensity of either version, but the earlier translation quoted separate from its context has sometimes been used to incite an emotive reaction without really considering the legitimate and even righteous circumstances that might stand behind some divorce proceedings. Therefore, God’s statement, ‘I hate divorce,’ which in context was a judgment against this misuse of divorce by the men of Judah, was never meant to imply that all divorce is somehow ‘unjustified’ or ‘wrong.’

Different from the analogies of the marriage relationship used by the earlier prophets, where God is portrayed as the husband and Israel as the adulterous wife, Malachi addresses a current practice of unfaithfulness among the men of Judah and connects it to their overall unfaithfulness to God as his covenant people. Malachi defines the ‘being unfaithful with one another’ as the unrighteous action done by some of the men of Judah. To the perpetrator, Malachi says, ‘the LORD is the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have been unfaithful to with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.’ Of course, in a broader sense, this ‘being unfaithful to one another’ even extended beyond an individual’s marriage covenant as a broader affront against all those in Israel who remained faithful to the covenant God established with Israel – both past and present. Malachi parallels this *individual* unfaithfulness with the *nation’s* unfaithfulness to God, and thereby declares that ‘Judah has been unfaithful ... by marrying women who worship a foreign god.’ Therefore, the full scenario portrayed by these pronouncements indicates that men of Judah were divorcing their Jewish wives (marriages *sanctified* by the Law of Moses and producing godly offspring) so that they could then marry foreign women (unions openly *condemned* by the Law of Moses)—they were acting *unfaithfully*.

From earlier in this study, we can see that even a ‘morally justified’ divorce was grievous before God because of the underlying *unfaithfulness*; but this new variation on ‘divorce’ was at

least as disturbing (if not even more so, since it was a distortion of God's purpose for divorce): *innocent Jewish wives were being divorced* simply because their husbands wanted to marry somebody else – and those other women were followers of foreign gods – a double offense! As we have already seen from God's own example with his covenant people, there can definitely come a time where the proper response to ongoing adultery and unfaithfulness is divorce – a sad and tragic acknowledgement.

Jesus Came to Fulfill the Law and the Prophets

In his ministry as a 'Rabbi' (i.e., Jewish religious teacher), Jesus amazed his listeners through his insight into the Law of Moses and his ability to go beyond the letter of the law to reveal God's heart and motives. One of the greatest examples of such insight and wisdom is a section found in *The Sermon on the Mount* beginning with, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them...' (**Matt 5:17-48**). Jesus *fulfilled* the Law and the Prophets not simply by accomplishing the prophetic statements made about him and his coming, but through a life of flawless obedience and a perfect demonstration of love for his heavenly father and people (cf. **Matt 22:37-39**).

Jesus then continued by reminding his listeners of six different examples of familiar statements from the Law or the current practices of their tradition, and revealed the divine understanding and intention with the phrase, 'But I tell you...' In this manner, Jesus addressed the very same kind of religious self-righteousness that fills our world today and attempted to infiltrate our thinking. In his first two examples, Jesus provided a provocative response to those who want to justify themselves and say, "I'm a good person – I haven't killed anyone or been unfaithful to my spouse" – interestingly, an assessment that is often heard from people with a cursory knowledge of the Scripture and vague awareness of the Ten Commandments. In direct contradiction to such thinking, Jesus taught that from God's perspective '*unrighteous anger* is just like murder in the heart' (**Matt 5:21-26**) and '*lustful thinking* is adultery in the heart' (**Matt 5:27-30**) – a judgment much stronger than any traditional reading of these commands. Jesus went much deeper than outward compliance and exposed a person's very thoughts and motives.

In his third example, Jesus addressed one of the texts directly connected to the theme of this study in **Matt 5:31-32**: 'It has been said, "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce." But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, *makes her the victim of adultery* [or *causes her to become an adulteress* – NIV, 1984], and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.' In this passage Jesus didn't elaborate on the wrongdoing of the husband who divorced *unjustly* (one variant of which he will address later in **Matt 19:3ff**), but instead showed the fruit that this *unjustified* divorce bore in the life of his innocent spouse – severe moral consequences that were sufficiently offensive before God such that Jesus described the resultant actions as 'adultery.'

Divorce, like marriage, is a legal process that is not dependent on any particular motive or attitude for its validity. Although one would ideally marry for love and companionship, any man and woman who exchange marriage vows (according to the local law and custom) for other reasons such as material security, financial gain, power, lust, prestige, or emotional satisfaction, are still *legally* married; and the promises made, binding. The best that any legal system and community can do is to accept the promises given at their face value, and then hope that right motives and a clear conscience lay behind them. This same principle makes the legality of divorce and the morality of divorce two independent aspects of the same action. A divorce that is *unjustly* initiated and completed still changes the legal status of those involved from 'married' to 'unmarried,' despite the underlying reasons or motivation – and in most legal systems, even

when only one of the partners wants the divorce to take place, it will still be completed after a set waiting period.

So how can the innocent victim of a divorce be guilty of adultery? Since the faithful wife is innocent of ‘breaking her vows’ throughout the period of her marriage and is not the one seeking the divorce, the execution of the divorce in this case solely represents the will of her husband and not hers.

- In the Greek language *verbal voice* is a grammatical construct to express the source and direction of a verb’s action, and thereby can also describe the element of will behind the action. In the *active* voice the subject *performs, produces, or experiences the action*, in the *passive* voice the subject *is acted upon or receives the action* expressed by the verb without volition (possibly even unawares), and in the *middle* voice the subject both *performs and is affected by the action*. Although the usages of these forms are often simple and straightforward, they can also be used to add nuance and meaning in different contexts. Sometimes the passive and middle voices represent the active voice’s meaning and are called *deponent verbs*.
- In the case of the verb ‘*to commit adultery*’ the passive and middle voices can be used to mean ‘*to be seduced*’ and in the particular case of a woman also to mean ‘*to commit adultery*.’ This use of the passive probably developed as a way of placing more responsibility on the man (i.e., a societal judgment) although both are clearly willing partners to the action, or the sexual act would be defined by another term (i.e., rape).

In **Matt 5:32**, Jesus stated that the husband’s act of divorcing his wife ‘makes her commit adultery’ (NIV, 1984) – the word ‘victim’ being added by the translators in the NIV (2010). The action of divorce placed this woman in a situation where she ‘could no longer fulfill’ her original marital vows (i.e., *remain faithful*) through no choice of her own. As with all of Jesus’ examples of wrongful divorce, the weight of his argument is established through the next natural step: *remarriage*. In the moment of entering into a ‘new’ legal marriage covenant (or at the least in the moment of consummation of that covenant), this woman would become guilty of breaking her original vows of fidelity for *the first time*. Since adultery in its purest moral sense is the ‘breaking of one’s vows,’ she does in this moment ‘commit adultery’ and so Jesus explains the terrible moral consequence of an unjust divorce for the innocent party.

As for the man marrying this unjustly ‘divorced’ woman, we also see the implications from verbal voices in the final clause of **v. 32** ‘and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery’:

- Although the verb ‘marries’ is in the active voice, the verb ‘commits adultery’ is in the passive voice. To translate this as ‘*anyone who marries the divorced woman is seduced*,’ hardly makes sense, but to understand this to be a true passive in which something is attributed to the man outside of his own volition would be the more logical reading. Whether aware of the woman’s previous marriage or not, this man is complicit with her ‘vow-breaking’ and thereby becomes a partner in her *act of unfaithfulness*.
- Therefore, the faithful wife who is ‘unjustly’ divorced only becomes *unfaithful* to her previous vows of fidelity when she marries again and consummates that new marriage (and her new husband, by default, shares in that moment since any act of adultery requires a partner).

Thus the scandal of divorce being done as an ‘unfaithful action’ against one’s wife (so strongly addressed by Malachi four hundred years earlier) is still happening in the time of Jesus. Rather than focus on whom the husband choose to marry next (as did Malachi), Jesus pointed out the

moral dilemma faced by a ‘faithful woman’ who was *unjustly* divorced. Against her will, her husband had placed her in a situation where she would become unfaithful to her original vows in the exercise of her freedom to remarry: ‘he caus[ed] her to become an adulteress’ and her next husband ‘to commit adultery.’

It is also worth noting, that the remaining three examples from this section of the Sermon on the Mount contain principles that are both helpful and challenging in this discussion about marriage, divorce, and remarriage – especially in formulating advice and practical measures:

- Let our ‘Yes’ be Yes, and ‘No’ be ‘No’ (**Matt 5:33-37**);
- Justice should never be invoked with a heart to *seek revenge* (**Matt 5:38-42**);
- We should love everyone – *including our enemies* and thus imitate the heart of our heavenly Father (**Matt 5:43-48**).

As we consider the spiritual challenges of honoring marriage and doing everything possible to avoid divorce, these principles will prove helpful in keeping God’s heart at the center of the discussion.

Jesus’ Teaching on Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

As we look through the gospels to see what Jesus taught about marriage, it is noteworthy that all of his recorded summary statements on the subject were in the context of ‘divorce and remarriage’ and he never addressed other specific scenarios like divorce without remarriage and remarriage for widows or widowers. Outside of the two verses already discussed from the *Sermon on the Mount* and a single verse from Luke (to be discussed next), we can only refer to a passage in Matthew and its parallel passage recorded in Mark for direct teaching.

Some Pharisees came to him 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 flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one 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. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”

Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have made eunuchs by others — and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.” (**Matt 19:3-12**; cf. **Mark 10:2-12**)

Although the recorded ‘talking points’ of the dialogue in both gospels are pretty much the same, we must remember that most such narrative reporting are summaries of the actual events with editorial emphases made by the gospel writers. Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts differ slightly on how the dialogue developed (i.e., which party first introduced certain details), the use of a number of supplementary phrases, and include somewhat differing final comments. In review:

- The Pharisees tested Jesus by asking him ‘if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife’ with Matthew adding ‘for any and every reason’ – it may be that they were hoping to get Jesus

into trouble with his answer, not unlike the way that John the Baptist had gotten himself into trouble with Herod over this question, even being imprisoned and later executed (**Matt 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29**);

- The Pharisees and Jesus agreed that Moses had given the instruction that permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away;
- But in addition to this Jesus made the following statements: 1) Moses permitted the practice of divorce because they were ‘hard-hearted’ (i.e., resistant to God’s will); 2) God’s intention from the beginning was shown by making ‘them male and female’ (**Gen 1:27**) and instituting the marriage covenant where the ‘two become one’ (**Gen 2:24**); 3) ‘Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate’ – unfaithfulness, adultery, and divorce were the exact opposite of God’s ideal for marriage, and Jesus succinctly sums up God’s expectation for marital union.

Therefore, it was humankind’s resistance to God’s will for marriage (i.e., the faithfulness of one man and one woman to each other till death) that necessitated ‘divorce,’ and the same could be said about Israel’s resistance to God’s will in their covenant relationship with him – if it wasn’t for humankind’s unfaithfulness, divorce would not have been a possibility.

While the Pharisees are recorded as having specifically asked about the *lawfulness* of ‘divorce’ with no mention of ‘remarriage,’ Jesus repeatedly addressed the scenario of ‘divorce and remarriage’ in his concluding comments. As discussed earlier in **Malachi 2:10-16**, ‘*divorcing to remarry*’ is an act of *unfaithfulness* practiced by the Jews and this seems to be the same context of Jesus’ teaching and ministry as well. Under Roman rule, the Jews found themselves in a situation where polygamy (i.e., having multiple spouses) was no longer legal even though it would appear that the practice had been relatively rare, anyway. And so, without biblical details outlining the full historical process, we see that over time Jewish society developed a practice whereby a married Jewish man could ‘legally’ take a new woman as his wife through the two-step process of divorce and remarriage. Self-righteously, the Jewish man could argue that he had acted within the confines of the law if he did not sleep with his new wife until the divorce was final and his new marriage accomplished, but Jesus stated that such a procedure was still ‘adultery’ because of the motives behind his action. So whether the ‘act of unfaithfulness’ *preceded* the divorce or *followed* the divorce, Jesus looked deeper than the action and identified the ‘unfaithfulness’ as ‘adultery’ (in his heart and before God), despite the apparent ‘legality’ of the second practice. (Note that Jesus is now dealing with the instigator of an *unjust* divorce, and not the victim).

In Mark’s account of the narrative’s conclusion, Jesus did not include the phrase ‘except for sexual immorality’ and also added ‘against her’; and so the text reads, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her’ (**Mark 10:11**). Considering what has been discussed so far regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage, the absoluteness of this statement can only hold true under the conditions of one possible context: the *unfaithful act* of ‘divorcing to remarry someone else.’ Both the verbal voice (discussed earlier) and the verbal mood are important here since the mood of the verb shows whether the action or state denoted is conceived as a fact (*indicative*), a command (*imperative*), uncertain but probable (*subjunctive*), or a possibility (*optative*).

In both *Matthew* and *Mark*, the verbs ‘to divorce’ and ‘to marry’ are in the active voice and subjunctive mood – the subject is acting voluntarily, whereas the verb ‘to commit adultery’ is in the passive voice and indicative – the action attributes a property to the subject as a matter of fact. In this construction, since the man or woman doing the ‘divorcing’ and ‘remarrying’ have

already been shown to have ‘willfully’ made these decisions, Jesus is emphasizing that ‘committing adultery’ is implicated whether they intend this to be the case or not. Their conscious actions of ‘divorcing and remarrying’ have resulted in the fact of ‘committing adultery’ being attributed to them—in full contradiction of their legalistic justification and misuse of the Law.

Mark’s account also included the corollary statement regarding a woman who ‘divorces to remarry’: ‘And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery’ (**Mark 10:12**). Again, ‘commits adultery’ is the passive voice and indicative mood – the action attributes a property to the subject as a matter of fact. (This additional statement is just one of the many evidences showing the different audiences to whom these gospels were addressed: for Matthew’s Jewish audience, this further application was not necessary because the husbands were still the sole initiators of divorce in their society). As with the man in the preceding verse, the absoluteness of this statement can only be true under the conditions of one possible context: the *unfaithful act* of ‘divorcing to remarry someone else.’ In summary, although God through the Law allowed *unfaithfulness* to legitimize ‘divorce,’ the Jews of Jesus’ day were now trying to use *divorce* to legitimize ‘unfaithfulness’ – a complete misreading of the Law and a gross misunderstanding of the heart of God.

The extent of Jesus’ teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage in the *Gospel of Luke* is limited to a single verse, and Luke provides us with no significant context for this teaching, except a similar statement as in **Matt 5:17ff**, about the longevity of the Law and specific challenges to the Pharisees about their worldliness and materialism. ‘Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery’ (**Luke 16:18**).

At first glance this single verse seems to combine the conclusion of **Mark 10:11**, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her;’ and the final thought of **Matt 5:32**, ‘... anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.’ But upon further consideration, the second part of **Luke 16:18** may actually be addressing yet another perspective on the situation: the person who marries the instigator of an ‘unjust’ divorce: in this case, the man who marries a woman who sought divorce in order to remarry.

As was already noted in **Mark 10:11-12**, the absoluteness of Luke’s statement can only be true under one possible context: ‘divorcing for the purpose of marrying another,’ and the unfaithfulness of the heart that precedes the action; or the unfaithfulness of sexual union with another that follows such a action (even when that union takes place in the context of a second legitimate marriage). At the same time, unlike the verb forms in the first two gospels, the verb to ‘commit adultery’ in Luke’s gospel uses the active voice and indicative mood. Therefore, there is no subtlety in Luke’s version and the situation is clearly defined in the first part of the verse as follows: to decide ‘to divorce to remarry’ is absolutely equivalent to the decision ‘to commit adultery.’ In the second part of the verse, this same active voice and indicative mood are a little harder to understand since that doesn’t represent the **Matt 5:32** scenario. On the other hand, if the context for this second part was such that ‘the woman had divorced her previous husband in order to marry this next man,’ the statement agrees with the others and makes perfect sense indicating the evil intent on the part of her potential new husband: ‘... the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery’ because he is a conscious partner in this woman’s unfaithfulness.

From this brief survey, we can affirm a very important detail in understanding Jesus’ teaching about divorce in the gospels: the context for his statements seems to consistently be that of ‘wrongful’ divorce. Ironically, the efforts to legally justify divorce when there had been ‘no

unfaithfulness' was in itself a form of adultery, and this became even clearer as one examined what was really happening in the moment of remarriage (i.e., the resultant breaking of previous vows).

The concluding narrative detail in Matthew's account (not mentioned in Mark) shows the challenge that Jesus' disciples felt in response to his teaching and their understanding of the seriousness of the marriage covenant before God. 'The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry"' (**Matt 19:10**). The disciples' response suggests that the practice of divorce was so widespread and accepted, that Jesus' teaching challenged the norms and attitudes of their society and culture. 'Divorce' had become the easy solution to anyone wanting a new marriage partner, which can only mean it had become a standard exit strategy for anyone unhappy with the current state of their marriage. *Would people still want to enter into the marriage covenant if they knew that 'adultery' was the only ethical reason to justify divorce?* In responding to his disciples, Jesus showed no sentimentality or weakening in his convictions on God's standard for fidelity in marriage. In fact, Jesus took their suggestion of celibacy at face value and answered, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have made eunuchs by others — and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it" (**Matt 19:10-12**).

The marriage vow of fidelity is so much more than simply saying 'Yes, I do' to one person — hopefully a person for whom is felt strong affection and genuine attraction. The marriage vow of fidelity also includes a resounding 'No, I will not' to all other future possibilities, no matter what those possibilities seem to offer or how they make the covenanter feel. *Next to committing to follow Christ, 'getting married' is absolutely the second most important and life-changing decision a person could ever make!*

Jesus' Personal Response to Situations of Remarriage and Adultery

In completing this survey of Jesus' teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage, it seems prudent to consider his personal response to the Samaritan woman in **John 4**, and then his response to the woman caught in adultery in **John 8**. Although Jesus made no definitive doctrinal pronouncements, we can consider his responses to the facts of the situations as instructive and indicative of what he believed.

In this first incident, Jesus confronted the woman at the well and prophetically told her 'You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true' (**John 4:17-18**). Although we don't know the details of how these five previous marriages had ended or the circumstances of her current relationship, the probability that each marriage ended due to the death of her husband (i.e., she was widowed five times) is highly unlikely, and at least some of these marriages (if not all) must have ended by divorce. Although this is an argument from silence, it is important to note that Jesus in no way questions the validity of the five marriages and gives no hint of a 'mystical' view that somehow only the first marriage could be considered 'legitimate.' Jesus' comment that 'what God has joined together, let man not separate' (**Matt 19:6**) implies that although the marriage covenant is joined with God's authority, it can still be broken by the exercise of human will.

From the second incident in John's gospel, we see that according to Jesus, adultery can be *forgiven*. Jesus told the woman, after everyone else had left, 'neither do I condemn you ... go now and leave your life of sin' (**John 8:11**). By missing the nuances of Jesus teaching and the

context of ‘breaking the previous vows’ in the act of remarriage, some have thought that remarriage after an ‘unjust’ divorce results in an ‘ongoing’ state of adultery which can not be forgiven (cf. **Heb 10:26-27**). Ironically, such a conclusion misses the point that after the first moment of consummation in the next marriage, the previous vows are broken, thereby legitimizing the divorce in retrospect – if one wants to be technical about it, there has now been ‘unfaithfulness’ which does qualify as legitimate grounds for divorce. Although adultery is forgivable, that does not mean that its results are always rectifiable – as we will see from Paul’s teaching in **1 Cor 7**, under certain circumstances, reconciliation through marriage between separated or divorced believers is a genuine possibility and in full accordance with God’s will.

Paul’s Teaching – The Freedom to Marry and the Obligations of Marriage

The only recorded apostolic teaching about *marriage, divorce and remarriage* is actually prefaced by a commendation to *celibacy* – interestingly, taking up the discussion just where Jesus had ended it in **Matt 19:12**.

“Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to have sexual relations. But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but yields it to his wife. Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. I say this as a concession, not as a command. I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.

Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” (**1 Cor 7:1-9**)

Although we do not have the exact wording of the questions that the Corinthians had written to Paul (**1 Cor 7:1**), we do see from Paul’s answers and discussion that there was a tension between the freedom to marry, the challenge for some (if they could accept it) to not marry, and the added weight of obligation within marriage on the life of a Christian man or woman. As much as Paul wished that everyone could be celibate like him (**1 Cor 7:8**), he understood that not everyone had that gift (or capacity). For Paul, the advantage of celibacy was very simple to understand, as he explained a little later in the chapter:

‘I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs – how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife – and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord’s affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world – how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord’ (**1 Cor 7:32-35**).

At the same time, Paul understood that celibacy was not for everyone: ‘If they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion’ (**1 Cor 7:9**), which reminds us of what Jesus had said earlier, ‘... the one who can accept this, should accept this’ (**Matt 19:12**).

The fact that Paul discussed celibacy should help us again see just how seriously God views the marriage commitment – the decision to marry should never be made lightly. The aspect of

marriage, which is probably the hardest for our sinful hearts to fully embrace, is the fact that the husband and wife now ‘belong to each other’ (1 Cor 7:4) and have given up their ‘individual’ rights as exemplified by Paul through his discussion of each partner fulfilling their ‘marital duty’ (1 Cor 7:3-5). As in the first century, this scenario challenges the sentiments of our modern era where the call for self-sacrificial ‘agape’ love stands in complete opposition to the constant affirmation of society that every individual should seek and defend their own rights above all else. Since, through the marriage covenant a new entity has been formed (i.e., *the two become one*), it becomes the obligation of both partners together to protect those shared rights. Not only should sexual relations *only* be had with one’s marriage partner, but Paul reminded the Corinthians that sexual relations *should* be had with one’s marriage partner.

Paul’s Teaching – Commands for Believers Married to Believers

‘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’ (1 Cor 7:10-11). The most natural reading of Paul’s affirmation ‘not I, but the Lord’ recognises that Jesus had also addressed husbands and wives who were both living under the Law of Moses (i.e., they were both Jews). Therefore, when compared to the inverted emphasis found in the next section ‘I, not the Lord’ (1 Cor 7:12), we see Paul now authoritatively addressing a new circumstance: mixed marriages between ‘believers’ and ‘unbelievers.’ (To try to read these phrases as Paul giving (or not giving) an opinion, negates both the word ‘command’ and the fact of his apostolic authority – itself derived directly from Christ’s commission and empowering – 2 Cor 12:12; 13:10).

As already discussed, Jesus made it clear that the only divinely sanctioned reason to initiate divorce is ‘adultery’ – an exception so implicit in his teaching that it did not need repetition here. This passage also shows the very human struggle between idealism and reality by stating that a command might have already been broken – even by a Christian: ‘a wife must not separate from husband, but if she does...’ (1 Cor 7:10-11). Despite the statement that a wife should not leave her husband, the reality in the Corinthian church must have been such that at least one wife had already done so. When one considers the overall deficit of spirituality within the Corinthian church (1 Cor 3:1-4) and the low standard for Christian conduct and church discipline (1 Cor 5:1-13), it really isn’t surprising that within the congregation ‘divorce’ had actually taken place without any direct action being taken in response (note that since her resulting status is ‘unmarried’ (1 Cor 7:11), it is clear that the phrase ‘separate’ means ‘divorce’ and not simply ‘not living together’). Considering that all of Jesus’ practical directives recorded in the gospels centered around the situation of ‘divorcing to remarry,’ it may even be that this woman was justifying herself by saying she ‘had *not* remarried’; although that still ignores the clear instruction that divorce, for any reason other than adultery, was itself *adulterous*.

Remember that Paul also addressed two believers in this text, so the further admonition based on this *compromised* circumstance of her disobedience now becomes ‘... she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband’ (7:11). Why the apostle allowed this woman the option of ‘*remaining unmarried*’ is probably best explained by the legal nature of marriage and the complications that would ensue from trying to enforce such a mandate. On the other hand, the second option Paul suggested is definitely the one that resonates with God’s heart for the marriage covenant: she should ‘be reconciled to her husband.’ Despite the obvious act of disobedience done by the woman in this text, some seeking separation for reasons other than adultery have tried to use her example as a precedent to separate from their husbands for whatever reason, *as long as* they do not remarry – a very strange interpretation indeed since the

previous verses (7:1-9) were strongly affirming the obligations of married disciples to each other. Sadly, such actions reveal the same self-seeking motives that Jesus was facing in the misuse of divorce in his ministry – some people are still ignoring the heart of God and bending God’s word to suit their own purposes.

And finally, Paul simply said that ‘a husband must not divorce his wife.’ Although it is possible that Paul’s outline of the first situation may be implied in this second imperative to husbands (i.e., if they have already divorced, they should remain unmarried or reconcile), it may also reflect that this teaching involving a *wife divorcing her believing husband* was ‘specific’ to an actual situation in the church as reported to Paul (1 Cor 1:11, 16:17) – or even possibly part of the questions being put to him as mentioned earlier (1 Cor 7:1).

Paul’s Teaching – Commands for Believers Married to Unbelievers

Although the *Acts* narrative records whole households coming to faith together (Acts 16:15, 31-34, 18:8), situations in which only one spouse chose to respond to the gospel also must be considered as having to have taken place. We know from Paul’s teaching elsewhere that Christians are *not* to marry non-Christians (1 Cor 7:39; 2 Cor 6:14-7:1), but considering the spirituality and discipline issues already mentioned, such ‘mixed’ marriages may have already happened within the Corinthian congregation as well. Again, the non-ideal state of the Corinthian church must be considered when reading these passages, and also the promise that when Paul came for the third time he would ‘*not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others*’ (2 Cor 13:1-3). Apparently not all of the disciplinary issues in the Corinthian congregation could be effectively dealt with by a letter from a distance, as had been the case of the immoral brother described in 1 Cor 5:1-13. For Christians with the unbelieving spouses Paul gives the following directives:

To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Cor 7:12-16)

In this passage Paul addressed the scenarios of *a man married to an unbeliever* and *a woman married to unbeliever* – the directives being identical in both cases. According to Greek and Roman law the wife also had the power to initiate a divorce making the parallel teaching appropriate and necessary.

The case of the unbeliever leaving is straightforward – ‘the believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances’ (7:15) and thereby free to divorce – a very different directive from those given to a ‘believing couple.’ On the other hand, if the unbeliever ‘*is willing to live with*’ the believer, then Paul commands that the believer *must not* divorce the unbelieving spouse. Although there may have been other reasons, the context seems to associate the ‘unbeliever leaving’ with the newfound faith of the believer and the changes of priorities and behavior that might have come along with it. Although we would like to think that a person’s conversion would improve all their relationships, there is a very real possibility that the unbelieving wife or husband (for reasons of her or his own) may not have appreciated this spiritual transformation in their spouse.

As for the idea of the unbeliever being *sanctified* through marriage to the believing spouse, this was clearly not meant in the sense of ‘guaranteeing their salvation’ (cf. **7:16** – ‘How do you know you will save your [currently unbelieving] spouse?’). Instead, we can see that by agreeing to stay *married with* (i.e., ‘live with’) the believer who has now committed themselves to God’s precepts for righteous living, the unbeliever is coming into direct contact with God’s covenantal view of marriage and godly teaching that truly ‘sets one apart’ from the world. **1 Pet 3:1-6** holds out the hope that a wife’s godly example might influence her husband to come to faith: “Wives, in the same way be submissive to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives....” In this case, this sanctification might lead to the other’s salvation.

As for the children being ‘holy’ (root word of the previously used ‘sanctified’), this statement would only make sense if the *unbelieving* spouse agreed to ‘live with’ the *believing* spouse, who is divinely commissioned to bring up their children ‘in the training and instruction of the Lord’ (**Eph 6:4**). ‘God has called us to live in peace,’ and this will only happen if the unbelieving spouse agrees to allow the believing spouse the freedom and opportunity to live out their Christian convictions.

Therefore, in this passage Paul authoritatively added an additional exception clause to the teaching of Jesus: ‘if an unbelieving spouse is unwilling to live with the believer and leaves’ (mostly likely because of the spiritual changes in the believer but not limited to them), the believer *is not bound and is free* [to divorce and/or remarry].

Paul’s Teaching – Do Not Seek To Change Your Circumstances Quickly

After giving permission to any Christian to divorce (and thereby remarry) if ‘the unbeliever leaves,’ Paul then continued ‘Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule that I lay down in all the churches’ (**1 Cor 7:17**). Paul then talked about the each one’s circumstances when they are called, of being circumcised or uncircumcised, or being slave or free, and concluded: ‘Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to’ (**1 Cor 7:24**). Understanding the invisible working of God in our lives, we should not be hasty to change our life situations (thinking we know what is best) since, by doing so, we may also miss an important opportunity that God has provided within those circumstances. *Who knows but that God can use the circumstance of one’s marriage to become the very connection that leads the unbelieving spouse to faith in Christ?*

A few verses later, in the context of giving some strong advice (and not a command) to the unmarried not to seek marriage because of the present crisis (which may have been something specific or just a broader reflection on the ‘end times’ and the second coming of Christ), Paul wrote ‘... I think it is good for you to remain as you are. Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife’ (**1 Cor 7:27**). In this context, Paul has detached the moment for making a change from the time of ‘being called,’ to simply the circumstance of living in troubled times as a disciple of Christ. Paul affirmed that the disciples are free to choose, while at the same time wanting them to carefully consider the challenges. Of note in this dialogue, following the possible challenges of believers being married to unbelievers, Paul placed a restriction on the freedom of Christian widows, ‘she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord’ (**1 Cor 7:39**) – a statement of the obvious for God’s covenant people.

Summary and Conclusion

From the beginning of the human story, God wanted humankind to experience and learn the divine perspective on love, commitment, and faithfulness. After creating Adam and Eve in his own image, God then instituted ‘marriage’ where the ‘two become one’ in a lifelong relationship – a foreshadowing of the eternal covenant to be established between Christ and his church.

The Law of Moses served to further clarify both the privileges and obligations of marriage with special attention being given to fidelity and faithfulness – *adultery* (sexual relations outside of marriage) was to be considered a transgression deserving capital punishment (i.e., death).

- Although the Law did not prescribe a penalty for ‘covetousness’ that had not manifested itself further in some definitive action (i.e., theft, adultery), the Law still condemned it as sin in the heart.
- Remarriage was allowed with the exclusion that a priest could not marry a divorcee or widow, and that a man could not remarry a woman that he had previously divorced.
- The fact that death released a person from their marriage vows proved to be an operative principle demonstrated in the marriage of a sonless widow to her former husband’s brother, and the implication that any man other than priests was free to marry a divorced woman (unless he had previously been married to her).
- A man was allowed to divorce his wife for *indecency*, although the nature of that ‘indecency’ was not clearly defined and the Hebrew word seemed to imply some sort of sexual transgression.

The Old Testament narrative seemed to demonstrate that the death penalty was rarely implemented for adultery, and in most recorded instances, a demonstration of mercy was exercised – sometimes even acknowledging God’s direct involvement. Also, near the end of the thousand year period of the Old Testament’s writing, God condemned the misuse of divorce by certain men of Israel who were acting ‘unfaithfully’ to their wives by divorcing them with the intention of then marrying foreign women.

Most significant to this on-going education about the nature of covenantal relationships was the description of God’s dealings with the nation of Israel as a marriage covenant, and the nuances explored in the prophetic writings about that relationship in the areas of faithfulness, adultery, forgiveness, reconciliation, divorce, and remarriage. Through this lens of a man and woman bound by a marriage covenant, the God of Israel consistently showed himself to be gracious, good-willed, and long suffering. Although the Law prescribed the death sentence for a single act of marital unfaithfulness, God continued to invite his people back to reconciliation and restoration through centuries of recurring episodes of *spiritual adultery*. Finally, after the judgment against the Northern Kingdom was fulfilled through Assyrian conquest, and the Southern Kingdom refused God’s call to repent, the prophets began to speak of an imminent end to the ‘old covenant’ and the establishment of a glorious ‘new’ one. Even in the tragic context of this spiritual ‘divorce’ (God annulling the covenant due to their unfaithfulness), the God of Israel continued to hold out the hope of future blessings to his people through the means of a new covenant.

In the teaching of Jesus, we find a deeper look at the heart of God and condemnation of current Jewish practice in the area of divorce. Jesus affirmed that divorce on the grounds of sexual immorality was allowable (in fact, the only allowable grounds), while at the same time made it clear that ‘divorcing to remarry’ was an act of adultery (i.e., unfaithfulness) that consequently put the innocent party in the position of breaking their vows (i.e., becoming unfaithful) as well. While Jesus taught that God joins a man and woman together in marriage, he

also conceded that the marriage covenant could be broken and dissolved by human decision. Jesus also maintained a high view of choosing to remain ‘unmarried’ for the sake of serving God while acknowledging that such a life choice was not necessarily for everyone.

In the teaching of Paul, we see an affirmation of the teaching of Jesus that Christians should not divorce each other – without making any reference to the exception clause of Matthew’s gospel for sexual immorality. Unfortunately, some Corinthian disciples (at least one woman) had already disobeyed this directive, and Paul instructed them to remain ‘unmarried’ or to reconcile. Also, as Jesus before him, Paul commended celibacy for those that could accept it. For Christians married to non-Christians, Paul made it clear that if the non-Christian was not willing to live with them, the believing husband or wife was not bound and thus were free (to divorce) – otherwise, they were to remain as they had been. Paul encouraged new converts not to change their circumstances too quickly, so that they could seek God’s will in their present situations. Who knows but that their non-Christian spouses might respond to the gospel? Therefore, Paul added a second exception clause to the teaching of Jesus – *if an unbelieving spouse did not want to remain with the Christian, the Christian should allow the spouse to leave, and the Christian would not be bound*. Paul also affirmed that widows could remarry in the Lord, while at the same time encouraged them to remain unmarried, if possible.

From a practical perspective, considering the widespread practice of divorce for any reason in most modern societies, it seems good to list some simple points so that local church leaderships can give direction and deal with existing marriage situations where there are already weaknesses, struggles, and in some cases, sin:

1. Marriage is of divine origin, and the Scriptures remain the only true source to define its principles and proper practice.
2. Marriage requires self-sacrificing ‘agape’ love to function and also the surrender of individual rights to create genuine ‘oneness.’
3. Marriage is not the best situation for everyone (although any believer is free to marry another believer), and the church culture should never convey a negative value judgment between being ‘married’ and ‘unmarried.’
4. Divorce, like marriage, is a legal process that is not dependent on any particular motive or attitude for its validity. Although one would ideally marry for love and companionship, any man and woman who exchange marriage vows (according to the local law and custom) for other reasons are still *legally* married; and the promises made, binding. This same principle makes the legality of divorce and the morality of divorce two independent aspects of the same action. A divorce that is *unjustly* initiated and completed still changes the legal status of those involved from ‘married’ to ‘unmarried,’ despite the underlying reasons or motivation.
5. Divorce on the grounds of ‘sexual immorality’ (adultery) is permissible and at some point even becomes the only suitable response for the sake of the offender and their repentance before God as evidenced by God’s own example in covenantal relationship with his people.
6. The Bible’s portrayal of God’s commitment to a covenant relationship in the face of unfaithfulness (i.e., his willingness to forgive and his desire to reconcile) is a challenging and instructive example for all who marry. At the same time, it must be understood that this perfect endurance of God can only be encouraged and never demanded of the innocent partner – the individual differences in vulnerabilities and circumstances vary greatly from situation to situation.

7. Divorce on the grounds of *desertion* by the unbelieving spouse is also permissible. At the same time, the quality of the unbeliever's 'willingness to live together' implies both freedom and opportunity for the believing spouse to live out their faith to a reasonable degree since Paul based this exception on the principle that 'God has called us to peace' (**1 Cor 7:15**). Obviously, a willingness of the unbeliever to cohabit with the believer while strongly opposing the believer's practice of their faith or seeking to destroy their faith does not fulfil this principle – to say nothing of thwarting any possibility of sanctifying either the unbelieving spouse or the children.
8. Biblically, divorcing for any reason other than the two previously mentioned exceptions is *adultery* – the deliberate breaking of one's marriage vows. Mature leadership, loving pastoral care, and biblical church discipline are imperative for the health of the local congregation in this area, and 'unjust' divorce should be treated as *adultery* on the part of the initiator, and the *plan and intent* to unjustly divorce should be treated the same as the *plan and intent* to commit adultery.
9. As in Corinth, if somehow two members of the congregation have divorced for the wrong reasons without proper church discipline, they should remain as they are or be reconciled to each other.
10. Sometimes a believer wanting to obtain an 'unjust' divorce chooses to leave the congregation before any disciplinary action might be taken. Under such circumstances, their restoration to the church must include the confession of this action as 'adultery.' If the faithful spouse has remained in the congregation and has not married again, the ideal ending would be their reconciliation, but as in the case of the spouse who literally commits the act of adultery, this course of action can only be encouraged and never demanded of the innocent partner.
11. Divorce, like adultery, is forgivable. As with all other sins, this fact of God's grace can sometimes tempt a person to 'go on sinning so that grace might increase' (**Rom 6:1**). Ultimately we cannot prevent another person from misusing God's grace, but we can encourage each other to 'live a life worthy of the Lord and ... please him in everything' (**Col 1:10**).
12. Finally, the condition of our hearts is important before God! To desire an 'unjust' divorce is 'unfaithfulness in the heart' in just the same way that looking at a woman lustfully is *adultery in the heart* (**Matt 5:28**). As the Jews of Jesus day developed a strategy to justify their unfaithfulness through *divorce and remarriage*, some Christians have acted unfaithfully by provoking their spouses to divorce them and thereby getting the outcome that they wanted and maintaining an appearance of innocence. To withhold love and respect, deprive one's partner of sexual intimacy, and 'seek one's own good' are all sinful acts of disobedience contrary to God's instructions for marriage. Again, strong discipleship and biblical instruction are the best defences against these sins of the heart, and the whole congregation should be devoted to preserving the sanctity of every marriage within their fellowship.

In conclusion, marriage provides an amazing opportunity to better understand the heart and mind of God, not only through the companionship and completion which marriage provides, but also through the genuine challenges of loving 'selflessly' and 'becoming one' with another person. Since the creation of the world God's intention has been to bless humankind through covenants of love, and through lifelong commitment in marriage, a man and a woman can

become channels of rich blessings and healing virtues to each other, their children, and the society around them.