

Malachi 2:13-16
Divorce: Pursuing the Faithless as Christ Pursues Us
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Introduction:

This will be the last sermon on this third section in the book of Malachi. Actually, this sermon will not so much be on the book of Malachi directly, but it will be on the topic of divorce. We have been considering the topic of divorce as laid forth in the context of the book of Malachi over the past 3 weeks. This week we will be looking at the issue of divorce from a bird's eye view. We will be considering what the Scriptures on the whole have to say about divorce.

What we have seen in Malachi 2:13-16 is that God had rejected Israel's sacrifices and prayers because of their faithlessness to their wives. The Israelites were divorcing their wives and God was judging them for it. The reason why God hates divorce is because he hates faithlessness. In Malachi 2:16 God says, "I hate divorce." And if the NASB is correct in its rendering of Malachi 2:16 we see that God not only hates divorce, but also the divorcer:

*"For I hate divorce," says the LORD, the God of Israel, "**and him who covers his garment with wrong,**" says the LORD of hosts."*

Obviously, God takes divorce very seriously. I was looking on line this past week and in May of 2008 Gallup reported that 70% of our American culture deems divorce to be morally and culturally acceptable.¹ What I find to be even more interesting in this study is that more people found divorce to be more culturally and morally acceptable than gambling. Only 68% of Americans consider gambling to be culturally and morally acceptable. Thus, to the average American it is more acceptable to leave your wife because you have "fallen out of love" with her than it is to buy a lottery ticket every now and then, play bingo every now and then, or throw some dice every now and then. I am not necessarily condoning gambling (although I find God taking a *much stricter* stance against divorce than gambling in the Scriptures), but I am demonstrating that we live in a culture which has accepted divorce as a "way of life" wholesale. We swim in a culture which has not only been racked by the damaging consequences of divorce, but we live in a culture which has normalized divorce, welcoming it as a part of the very fabric of our society. It has even been asserted that there are just as many divorces in the church as there are in secular culture. Thus, God's message of warning through Malachi to "*guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth,*" is just as relevant for us today in our setting than it was in Malachi's day.

This morning we are going to consider what the rest of God's word says about divorce. We are going to answer the question, "Is divorce ever permissible for a Christian, and if so, under what circumstances?" I do want to preface this entire sermon by stating the fact that divorce is a highly sensitive emotionally-charged issue. I ask that you give me the courtesy of understanding that I only have 45 minutes (or so) to deal with a topic

¹ See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/107380/Cultural-Tolerance-Divorce-Grows-70.aspx>, 2009.

that can oftentimes involve highly complex situations. If you have any questions in light of what I say this morning please do not hesitate to talk to me after the service.

Biblical Grounds for Divorce

Matthew 19:1-9

Before jumping into any of the texts let me first state my case: Scripture teaches that there is technically only one ground for taking the initiative to divorce your spouse. Turn with me to Matthew 19:1-9.

*1 When Jesus had finished this instruction, He departed from Galilee and went to the region of Judea across the Jordan. 2 Large crowds followed Him, and He healed them there. 3 Some Pharisees approached Him to test Him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife on any grounds?" 4 "Haven't you read," He replied, "that He who created them in the beginning made them male and female , 5 and He also said: For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, man must not separate." 7 "Why then," they asked Him, "did Moses command [us] to give divorce papers and to send her away?" 8 He told them, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because of the hardness of your hearts. But it was not like that from the beginning. 9 **And I tell you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.**"*

What we see in this passage is that Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees who are hoping to trap Jesus by throwing a hotly debated question at him. Divorce was as hotly debated in the first century as it is now, and the Pharisees were trying to put Jesus in a position where he had to pick sides. There were two primary schools of thought in the first century among the Pharisees regarding divorce, the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai. The difference between the school of Hillel and the School of Shammai revolved around their unique interpretations of Deuteronomy 24:1. Moses says,

"If a man marries a woman, but she becomes displeasing to him because he finds something improper about her, he may write her a divorce certificate, hand it to her, and send her away from his house."

The debate between these two schools within the camp of the Pharisees more specifically revolved around the word translated "improper." The word translated "improper" in the Hebrew, *ervah*, is extremely vague and carries with it the idea of "nakedness" or "improper sexual behavior."² The school of Hillel interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1 in a very liberal sense and suggested that *ervah* meant "anything indecent" in any and every sense of the word. Thus, they suggested that Moses taught

²Brown, Francis ; Driver, Samuel Rolles ; Briggs, Charles Augustus: *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor, WA : Logos Research Systems, 2000, S. 788

that you could lawfully divorce your wife if anything about her was unbecoming to you in any way. In fact, those who followed this school of teaching believed that you could lawfully divorce your wife for something as small as burnt food. In other words, if your wife overcooked the macaroni and cheese, send her away with a bill of divorce! The school of Shammai, on the other hand, conservatively (correctly) suggested that *ervah* referred specifically to sexual unfaithfulness.

Notice their question to him, *“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife on any grounds?”* They were asking him if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any ol’ reason at all (notice the phrase, *“on any grounds”*). I think that the Pharisees who were talking to him at this point were from the school of Hillel. They thought they knew their stuff well enough to prove Jesus wrong in his more conservative view of divorce.

Jesus responds by calling their attention to God’s primary intention for marriage in Genesis 2:24. *“Haven’t you read,” He replied, “that He who created them in the beginning made them male and female , 5 and He also said: For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, man must not separate.”* In other words, Jesus answered their question with a resounding, *“NO!”* Surely, a man cannot divorce his wife just because he finds something unbecoming in her in any way. God has miraculously brought this man and woman together so that they are considered *“one flesh,”* and thus it had better take something much more serious than burnt food, or mismatched compatibility, or the loss of a feeling of love, or an inability to civilly disagree, or disagreements about money to rip them apart. What Jesus is saying at this point is that divorce is not an option for the Christian, period. Marriage is God’s gig, while divorce is Satan’s gig. To divorce (and especially for such superficial reasons) is destroy God’s creative, powerful, and *“good”* work.

After Jesus directs the Pharisees attention to God’s original intention for marriage, the Pharisees, thinking they have adequately anticipated his answer, ask another trapping question. They are trying to stump him here. They must have known Jesus’ stance on this issue of divorce and they must have thought that they had an adequate arsenal to prove Jesus’ logic to be skewed. So they challenge his first answer by saying, *“Why then,” they asked Him, “did Moses command [us] to give divorce papers and to send her away?”* In other words, they said, *“Well, if God intended marriage to be so permanent then why did Moses, God’s right hand man in the Old Testament, “command” us to divorce our wives?”* Craig Blomberg helpfully says, *“The Pharisees counterquestion raises the obvious objection: Why did God permit divorce in Old Testament times if he categorically opposed it?”*³

Notice Jesus’ retort back to them. He corrects them in his answer. He says, *“Moses **permitted** you to divorce your wives because of the hardness of your hearts. But it was not like that from the beginning.”* Notice first that Jesus corrects their twisting of Scripture. Moses did not *“command”* the Israelites to divorce their wives. No, he *“permitted”* them to. And the only reason he *permitted* them to divorce their wives was because of their hardness of heart. This is true, is it not? The only reason any marriage ends, ***without exception***, is because of sin. Divorce was never part of God’s original plan;

³ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*. The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 291.

rather, it was introduced when men (and women, of course) became contaminated by sin. Divorce is only in the picture when sin is in the picture.

Jesus then goes on to reveal to the Pharisees the proper grounds for divorce. “*And I tell you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.*” Here we see that Jesus clearly sides with the school of Shammai (at least on a surface level). He states that the **only** lawful and biblical grounds for divorce is sexual immorality. The word translated as “sexual immorality,” *porneia*, does not specifically refer only to adultery; rather, it refers to “fornication, sexual immorality, sexual sin of a general kind, that includes many different behaviors.”⁴ D.A. Carson suggests that the word *porneia* is the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew word *ervah* from Deuteronomy 24:1.⁵

Thus we see that the only grounds for divorce laid forth by Jesus is sexual immorality.

1 Corinthians 7:12-16

Although I don’t want to spend much time in 1 Corinthians 7, I do want to call your attention to it. Many look to 1 Corinthians 7 as passage which lays forth for the Christian another grounds for divorce. However, I do not think that is an accurate way of thinking about 1 Corinthians 7. In 1 Corinthians 7 we find no permission for a Christian to initiate a divorce. In Matthew 19:9 we see Jesus giving his followers the permission to initiate a divorce on the grounds of sexual immorality. In 1 Corinthians 7 we find Paul setting forth a situation in which a believer, if he/she is married to an unbeliever, is not “bound” or “enslaved” to fight tooth and nail to keep the marriage together if the unbelieving spouse wants a divorce. Observe the text;

12 If any brother has an unbelieving wife, and she is willing to live with him, he must not leave her. 13 Also, if any woman has an unbelieving husband, and he is willing to live with her, she must not leave her husband. 14 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the Christian husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. 15 But if the unbeliever leaves, let him leave. A brother or a sister is not bound in such cases. God has called you to peace. 16 For you, wife, how do you know whether you will save your husband? Or you, husband, how do you know whether you will save your wife?

In this instance Paul suggests that the believing spouse who is being divorced by his/her unbelieving husband is “not bound,”—“not bound,” in essence, to keep the marriage together. He says, “*But if the unbeliever leaves, let him leave. A brother or a sister is not bound in such cases. God has called you to peace.*” So you see, this is not so much a grounds for divorce. In fact, Paul makes it quite clear earlier in the text that the believing spouse is *not* to leave the unbelieving spouse (see vs. 12-13).

⁴Swanson, James: *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Greek (New Testament)*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. DBLG 4518

⁵ See <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/resources/a/Divorce-and-Remarriage>, 2008.

Thus we see that Paul makes two admonitions to the Corinthian believers in this passage: (1) the believing spouse is not permitted to divorce the unbelieving spouse (for the sake of the salvation of both the kids and the unbelieving spouse), and (2) the believing spouse is not “bound” to fight tooth and nail to keep the marriage together if the unbelieving spouse wants a divorce (for “God has called you to peace).

So really the only grounds for divorce laid forth in the entire Bible is “sexual immorality.” God does hate divorce, and we know from Jesus’ words in Matthew 19 that divorce only exists because of sin, and yet we see that Jesus lays forth one occasion where divorce is lawful.

Are we Asking the Right Question?

In light of all of this talk, however, I do believe that we need to learn something about divorce from Jesus’ response to the Pharisees in Matthew 19. Notice the great difference between Jesus’ and the Pharisees’ approach to the issue of divorce. The Pharisees, like most modern day Christians, fell into the warning of the old axiom, “The good is the enemy of the best.” The issue here is an issue of settling. The Pharisees concern is; “What can I get away with?” while Jesus’ emphasis is; “What is most pleasing to God?” For the Pharisees there was no concern for what brings God most glory, no concern for what brings about most Christlikeness. Their greatest concern was; “What are my rights; what is permissible for me; what are my options if I should want out of this martial relationship.” Their concerns were self-centered as opposed to Christ-centered or Gospel-centered.

Notice the complete difference between Jesus and the Pharisees: The Pharisees’ discussion centered and focused on the lawful grounds of divorce, while Jesus’ discussion focused on the permanency of marriage. In other words, the Pharisees emphasized how one can lawfully get themselves out of the bind of marriage, while Jesus emphasized the responsibility that one has to keep their marriage together in light of God’s intention for marriage.

As stated earlier, 70% of all Americans now believe divorce to be both culturally and morally acceptable, and I have seen many Christians fall into the thinking of Pharisees. Their emphasis is on how they can lawfully get out of their binding marriages if they should so choose, as opposed to how they are going to exhibit the love of Christ in the context of marriage. Ultimately, Jesus’ emphasis was not on the grounds for divorce. Notice how he brought up the only grounds for divorce.

"Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because of the hardness of your hearts. But it was not like that from the beginning. I tell you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."

Notice that Jesus didn’t set forth the grounds for divorce in a straight forward manner; rather he set forth the grounds for divorce in light of the fact that divorce should never happen. He seems to be suggesting that even divorce on the grounds of sexual immorality, although permissible, should not even be considered an option for the believer. Although he permitted it, he did not condone it.

Following Our Greatest Example

As Christians our focus ought not be on how we can lawfully get out of the union that God has miraculously brought together; rather, our focus ought to be on doing whatever we can to treat each other as God has treated us in Christ, exhibiting to the world the love of God bestowed upon us through Christ in the Gospel. Turn with me to Ephesians 5:22-33.

22 Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord, 23 for the husband is head of the wife as also Christ is head of the church. He is the Savior of the body. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so wives should [submit] to their husbands in everything. 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as also Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her, 26 to make her holy, cleansing her in the washing of water by the word. 27 He did this to present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and blameless. 28 In the same way, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hates his own flesh, but provides and cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, 30 since we are members of His body. 31 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. 32 This mystery is profound, but I am talking about Christ and the church. 33 To sum up, each one of you is to love his wife as himself, and the wife is to respect her husband.

What we see in this passage is one of the primary purposes for marriage. Marriage is purposed to provide for the world a picture of Christ's relationship with the church. We see here in *vss. 22-24* that the wife is to submit to her husband as the church submits to Christ. This does not mean that the husband is to Lord authority over the wife. No! Actually, what we see in *vss. 25-33* is that while the wife is to submit to the husband in a way that resembles the church's submission to Christ, the husband is to be exemplifying the love of Christ by "*loving your wives, just as also Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her.*" Thus, the husband is to faithfully, tenderly, and lovingly lead his wife for her good, just as Jesus did for the church.

This ultimately is to be the focus in marriage; "How can I most faithfully provide a picture of Christ's love for the church in the midst of my spouse's failures, imperfections, and sins." Ephesians 5 teaches us that Jesus is to be our example in the covenant of marriage. And what sort of an example did Christ set for us to follow? Turn with me to John 13:34:

³⁴ *"I give you a new commandment: love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another.*

Here we see that Jesus says, "*I give you a new commandment: love one another.*" The interesting thing about this commandment, "*love one another,*" is that it really isn't a new commandment. In fact, you can find this exact commandment in Leviticus 19:18; "*love your neighbor as yourself.*" At this point Jesus sounds like he is trying to take credit for making up a new commandment that is actually quite old. This is sort of like a man walking around saying, "Listen to this new song I just made up" and then he proceeds to

sing “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so...” You would respond by saying, “Whatever man, that isn’t a new song. You can’t take credit for that.” But Jesus then goes on in the verse and makes an addition which completely changes the face of the commandment. He says, “*Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another.*”

So really the principle of the commandment has not changed. Love is the commandment; however the thing that makes Jesus’ commandment so new is that it comes forth with a new depth. After all, how did Christ “love you?” This question is answered in Romans 5:8

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The new commandment is that we are to love each other as Christ has love us. This is a completely new commandment, because never in the history of the world has there ever been one who has ever poured out such infinite love and grace than when Jesus poured himself out on our behalf on Calvary. Jesus died for you while you were still a sinner, while you were his enemy (Romans 5:10), while you were, by nature, an abomination to him (Ephesians 2:3). He died for you when everything about you was completely repulsive to him. This is the new commandment: “Look at Calvary! Now go and do likewise.” We see this same principle laid forth in Colossians 3:13.

Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so also you must [forgive].

This is our *new* commandment. Jesus has set a *new* standard for us. We are no long to simply love or forgive; we are to love and forgive as Jesus has loved and forgiven us. These principles of love and forgiveness, my friends, apply to our marriages. You are to faithfully love and forgive your spouse no matter how badly your spouse may hurt you emotionally, no matter how faithless he/she has been. Is this not the picture that we have in the Gospel: the faithfulness of God in spite of our faithlessness to him, the love of God poured out on our behalf in spite of our hatred of him and his character, the mercy of God in spite of our mercilessness to others, and ultimately to Christ by hanging him upon a tree?

Now I do not want to sound insensitive to those who have been through the heart wrenching and gut wrenching trauma of faithlessness in the context of marriage. I have never been a victim of faithlessness, and I know that I cannot even begin to imagine the pain, the heartache, and emotional trauma involved. I do not want to downplay the gravity of faithlessness in any way whatsoever; however, we must remember that the grace given to you in Christ far outweighs the grace that any person would have to bestow on his/her wife no matter how unfaithful the guilty partner has been. The grace and love that has been given you in Christ cannot be matched. Your spouse can never sin against you in greater way than you have sinned against Christ.

Paul Washer one time said that the greatest evidence that although we are justified we are not yet completely made like Christ is that we have to be commanded to give mercy. He said, “We who have received bucket full upon bucket full, ocean full upon ocean full of infinite mercy in Christ now have the audacity to reluctantly hand it out with an eye dropper.”

The Gospel is the ultimate standard of righteous living. You are to be faithfully committed to your spouse, loving him/her with an **unconditional** love (a love that does not demand that one meets conditions before it acts) as Christ has loved you.

If you are thankful for the exceptional clause laid forth by Christ, you need to take another look at your soul. Your focus should be not on your right to “get out” as soon as things get sticky, your focus should be on Christ and His glorious Gospel. Your eyes should be fixed on Jesus; imitating him by pouring out the love, forgiveness, and longsuffering that he has poured out on your behalf.

The greatest way to pick out a mature Christian, one who really understands the Gospel, from an immature Christian, one who has a truncated view of the Gospel, is by observing how they respond when they have been wronged. This is the ultimate test.

Conclusion:

I want to conclude by reading a portion of a song written by Derek Webb called “The Church.” As I read this consider what this means in your relationships, and especially in your marital relationships. Consider how you can imitate Christ in the way you respond to your spouses’ sins and failures.

The Church
Derek Webb

I have come with one purpose
To capture for myself a bride
By my life she is lovely
By my death she's justified
I have always been her husband
Though many lovers she has known
So with water i will wash her
And by my word alone
So when you hear the sound of the water
You will know you're not alone

I have long pursued her
As a harlot and a whore
But she will feast upon me
She will drink and thirst no more