

When Divorce is Scriptural and Marriage is Unscriptural

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The Old Testament prophecy of Malachi reveals an age deadened to sin. The people of Israel had been drugged to an unconsciousness of sin. They were in a spiritual stupor with no conviction, which is the lowest state of sin. They mouthed surprise that God would find fault with their lifestyle. They were peevish and petulant children who affected ignorance of God's standards.

The sins of which Israel was guilty sound as familiar as the morning newspaper. You and I and our contemporary society need to hear again God's words of reproof, spoken through His man, Malachi the prophet.

Judah has dealt treacherously, and an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem, for Judah has profaned the LORD's holy institution which He loves: he has married the daughter of a foreign god. (Malachi 2:11)

Malachi was very specific: "Judah has dealt treacherously, and an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem." Now we know whom Malachi was talking about: *Judah* means the tribe of Judah, *Israel* includes all the twelve tribes, and *Jerusalem* was the capital.

"An abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem." God was talking about how they profaned the covenant of the fathers by dealing treacherously with one another. They were profaning the holiness of the Lord. God is holy, and God loves holiness. God doesn't love sin; He hates sin.

Now God would spell it out to them. He told them specifically what He was talking about – "He [the men of Judah and Israel] has married the daughter of a foreign god." The men saw the beautiful foreign girls who lived around them when they returned from their captivity in Babylon. So they were leaving their wives and marrying these foreign girls who served pagan deities. This brought idolatry into the nation.

We see this same thing all the way through the Word of God. I believe this is the situation in Genesis: 6:1-7 where we are told that the sons of God were marrying the daughters of men. I certainly do not hold the view of some expositors that the "sons of God" were angels who were cohabiting with human women and producing some sort of monstrous offspring. Our Lord expressly said that angels do not marry (see Matthew 22:30). Rather, the situation in Genesis marks the beginning of the breaking down of the godly line of Seth as they intermarried with the ungodly line of Cain.

We see this happening again when the children of Israel were nearing the promised land. The king of Moab hired Balaam to curse Israel because the king and his people, the Moabites, feared them. When God would not permit Balaam to curse them, he gave the king of Moab some very bad advice—bad for Israel. Balaam said to let the daughters of Moab marry the sons of Israel. They did intermarry, and this brought the idolatry of Moab into Israel.

Again, after the kingdom of Israel was divided, the idolatry of Phoenicia was introduced into the Northern Kingdom by the marriage of Ahab with Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, who was first an idolatrous priest, then king of Tyre and Sidon.

In Malachi's Day

Now this was happening again in Malachi's day. We learn from Nehemiah that there were all kinds of pagan people living around the remnant that had returned from Babylon. A young

Israelite would see some good-looking foreign girl and decide that he would like to have her for a wife. So he would get rid of his own Israelite wife and marry this pagan girl.

It is the same old story that is being reenacted in our day. I have been sounding a warning against mixed marriages (believers with unbelievers) here in southern California for more than fifty years, but the divorce rate continues to climb. Nobody is paying any attention to me, but I'll keep on saying that a believer ought not to get married to an unbeliever. Any girl or any boy who flies in the face of God's very definite and specific instructions in this connection is just flirting with trouble. Believe me, problems will be coming their way. It cannot be otherwise.

May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob the man who does this, being awake and aware, yet who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts! (Malachi 2:12)

"The LORD cut off ... the man who does this, being awake and aware." It doesn't make any difference who he is, he will suffer the same judgment. "Yet who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts!" Neither will he escape if he goes through the temple ritual but continues to live in sin.

My friend, a true child of God will not continue to live in sin. That is the reason the prodigal son down in the pigpen finally came to himself and said, "I will arise and go to my father." He was a son and not a pig. He had the nature of his father and could not continue to live as a pig.

I received a startling letter from a church officer here in southern California who asked for help because he "couldn't give up the awful sin of adultery." If he is a child of God, he will get out of the pigpen. Only pigs love the pigpen and are satisfied to stay there. A son will get out of it.

And this is the second thing you do: you cover the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping and crying; so He does not regard the offering anymore, nor receive it with goodwill from your hands. (Malachi 2:13)

The wives of these men who were divorcing them and marrying foreign girls came to the altar weeping. They shed their tears upon the altar, and God said, "I heard them. Then later you came along and very piously placed your offering upon the same altar on which were the tears of your wives! I want you to know that I paid no attention to your offering."

The church officer who wrote that startling letter may be the treasurer of the church or the head deacon, but I can assure him that God is paying no attention to his so-called good works. In fact, it would be better for him to keep out of sight and not go to church rather than bring reproach on the name of Christ. God makes it very clear that He pays no attention to his offering anymore nor receives it with goodwill from his hands. God knows our hypocrisy and will not accept our service.

Now the men in Malachi's day, with feigned innocence and pretended ignorance, ask why:

Yet you say, "For what reason?" Because the Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant. (Malachi 2:14)

"Yet you say, 'For what reason?'" God has offended them by suggesting that He wouldn't accept their offering. The thought is that they were saying, "Why wouldn't He accept it? I brought a

very nice fat lamb to offer.” Malachi spells out the answer for them in neon lights so they cannot misunderstand him: “Because the LORD has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously.” You see, the Israelite had married a Hebrew girl when he was a young man. But when he grew older and moved among the pagan and heathen about him, he decided that he wanted to marry one of the pagan girls whom he had learned to know.

“Yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant.” His Hebrew wife was the one with whom he stood before the priest, and he covenanted to be faithful and true to her.

From the Beginning

But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. (Malachi 2:15)

“But did He not make them one?” goes back to the Genesis creation of and institution of marriage by God Himself. Adam was a half and Eve was a half, and together they made one. This is evident when a child is born – he is part of both parents. The two are certainly one in the child.

“Having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring.” You see, she is to be like he is – spiritually as well as physically – for the sake of the family. A home where there is divorce or where there is polygamy is not a fit place in which to raise children.

My friend, if you are a young lady, you ought not to marry that young man unless he believes as you do because, actually, you are supposed to go his way. And you will find the going rough if you are a child of God and he is not.

If you are a young person, let me say this to you. If you think that you can win your sweetheart to Christ, make sure that you do it *before* your marriage, since that is when you have the greatest influence. I tell you, a young fellow or girl in love will do almost anything to please the other. But after marriage they will not be so anxious to please. If you don’t win your sweetheart to Christ before marriage, you are in trouble, and I mean *deep* trouble.

“Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth.” Malachi is warning them to watch what they are doing. God had specifically forbidden His people to intermarry with the unbelievers.

“For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one’s garment with violence,” says the LORD of hosts. “Therefore take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.” (Malachi 2:16)

In the Old Testament, when a man married a girl he took his outer garment and put it over her. This lovely custom was to signify that he was going to protect her.

This is what Boaz did for Ruth. Ruth was a widow and, according to the Mosaic Law, she had to claim Boaz as her kinsman redeemer before he could act. He could not ask her to marry him; she had to claim him. So her mother-in-law, Naomi, acting like a regular matchmaker, sent Ruth down to the threshing floor. It was harvest time, and all the families were camped around the threshing floor. At night, to protect the grain, the men slept around it with their heads toward the heap of grain and their feet stuck out like spokes of a wheel. Ruth followed Naomi’s

instructions and lay at the feet of Boaz. During the night he realized that someone was there and asked who it was. She replied, “I am Ruth, your maidservant. Spread the corner of your garment over your maidservant [in other words, take your maidservant under your wing] for you are a close relative.” She was asking him to marry her. In marriage a man offers a woman his protection and his love and she offers her devotion and her life to him. This is a beautiful picture of Christ’s relationship with believers.

In Malachi’s day the men of Israel were dealing treacherously with their wives. They had covered them with their garments in marriage, but now they were covering their garment with violence. In other words, they had divorced their wives.

Notice that God says He *hates* divorce – “He hates divorce, for it covers one’s garment with violence.”

God’s Ideal

God’s ideal for man from the very beginning was that there should be no divorce. We know that, for Jesus said that Moses allowed divorce because of the hardness of men’s hearts, but that from the beginning it was not so. Then how was it at the beginning?

So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him.
(Genesis 2:20)

To begin with, we learn that among all the creation of God that was beneath man, none could take the place of what God would create for Adam – that is, a wife. God had created all other creatures by twos. God let Adam give names to all the animals so that he would discover for himself that each animal had a mate but that he was alone and needed someone who was like he was yet different from him. He needed one who was a helper, someone to be fitted to him. He was just a half, and he needed the other half so that together they could be one. That was the thing God had in mind. God created Adam first and allowed him time to realize that he needed someone else.

And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. (Genesis 2:21)

Why did God do that? Why didn’t He take her from the ground as He had done with Adam? Because she was to be like Adam and yet different from him. She must come from man because man is not really a whole person. She was made from his side. This is not some foolish story. God wants to impress upon man that woman is part of man, that he is only half a man without a woman.

The Scriptures know nothing about this idea of either women’s lib or the other extreme, the inferiority of women. God put woman on a high plane. It is obvious to us already that the people in the days of Malachi had lost that vision. That is why God was admonishing them, “When you sin against the wife of your youth, you are sinning against Me.” God protects the status of women.

And Adam said: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” (Genesis 2:23)

What is woman? Adam was *ish*, and woman is *isha*. She is the other side or other half of the male. We call them male and female. She is “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” She is called woman because she was taken out of man.

And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.
(Genesis 2:25)

This was before sin had entered into the world. Neither one looked with lust upon the other because at that time they were innocent. They looked upon each other with tenderness and with love. There was a mutual respect. Each of them could truly say, “You are the one for me.” The creation of Eve made Adam a man, all man. The presence of Adam made Eve a woman, all woman.

I really get provoked when I hear people talk as if sex is something that is bad. Of course, the sex act outside of marriage is wrong. But after all, who was it that thought of sex? God is the One who thought of it and made it. He is the One who designed man and woman. He had in mind a marvelous arrangement when He created the sexes.

Why Divorce Was Permitted

Then sin entered into the world, and it marred everything, including the relationship in marriage. When we get to the time of Moses and the Law, we find that divorce was permitted. This does not mean that it was God’s intention when He instituted marriage, but He permitted it, as Jesus said, because of the hardness of man’s heart. The Mosaic Law said this:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house.... (Deuteronomy 24:1)

“Uncleanness” in the bride may imply that she had deceived her husband by not being what she claimed to be. When, for instance, her husband found that she was not a virgin, then he could write her a bill of divorcement.

By the time of the New Testament, the interpretation of *uncleanness* had become so broad that if a wife even burned the biscuits, that would be grounds for divorce. At the time that Jesus was asked the question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?” the rabbis were teaching that a wife could be divorced upon the slightest whim, which was certainly contrary to the intent of the Mosaic Law.

There were other specifics in this Mosaic Law:

When she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man’s wife, if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, then her former husband who divorced her must not take

her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance. (Deuteronomy 24:2-4)

That would be progressive prostitution, and it would lead to the sort of thing we are seeing in our contemporary society, people being married and divorced seven or eight times! To do that is absolutely to ridicule the marriage vow.

Jesus on Divorce

The problem that was prevalent in Israel at the time of Malachi is prevalent in our contemporary culture today. We have certainly changed our viewpoint on divorce in recent years in this country. I suppose that divorce is one of the most controversial subjects that any Bible teacher has to deal with today because there is confusion as to what the Bible really says on that problem, and there is a great difference and wide diversity of interpretation. You cannot say that there are *no* grounds for divorce, although that was the unanimous decision of the church over a century ago – in spite of what the Word of God had to say.

The Lord Jesus made two things very clear on this subject of divorce.

1. Moses had permitted divorce because of the hardness of heart of the people.
2. There is one clear-cut basis for divorce, and that is fornication, unfaithfulness to the marriage vow on the part of either the man or the woman.

Notice this record in Matthew's Gospel:

The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?" And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?" (Matthew 19:3-5)

As I mentioned before, Jesus goes back to the beginning, to the time of creation, when God instituted marriage.

"So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so." (Matthew 19:6-8)

Then He sets down the one reason for which divorce is allowed:

"And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery." (Matthew 19:9)

It is quite interesting how the disciples followed up that statement with this conclusion:

His disciples said to Him, “If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” (Matthew 19:10)

In other words, “If it is really that strict, if there is one and only one reason for divorce, then it would be better not to get married at all.”

Then our Lord explained the liberty that we have:

But He said to them, “All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given: For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother’s womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it.” (Matthew 19:11, 12)

It is not necessary for everyone to get married. There are some men and some women who do not need to marry. By no means is it a sin to be single. Some folk simply do not need to get married – they are eunuchs from birth. Others are made eunuchs by man, such as Daniel in the court of Nebuchadnezzar. It was forced upon them and served the purpose of making captives more docile toward the king, and it also enabled them to devote more time to their studies. Then there are eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. That is, there are individuals who have kept themselves eunuchs in order to serve the cause of Christ and the cause of the church. It is wonderful if a man or a woman feels able to do that. I have known several preachers who have never married. I thought I would do the same in my ministry and decided that I would be an old bachelor all my life. But I soon learned that bachelorhood wasn’t for me. This is an area in which God has given us great liberty. But the important thing is this: Christ said that if you do choose to get married, it is a commitment. The only ground for divorce is fornication by your mate.

Paul on Marriage

In the days of the early church this matter of fornication arose in the Corinthian church. People of different religious backgrounds were in the church, and there were couples who had married when they were pagans, but later one of the spouses became a Christian. What should have been their relationship after one of them was converted? Paul addressed this new situation:

Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife. (1 Corinthians 7:10, 11)

If a couple had been married when they were pagans and now one is converted to Christianity, the Christian is not to walk out on the marriage. If the believer departs, he is to remain unmarried or else be reconciled again.

But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a

woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. (1 Corinthians 7:12-15)

Although Jesus said that fornication is the only cause for divorce, the pagan member of a marriage may want to walk out on the marriage. After the partner becomes a believer, the unsaved party may say, "I don't like this arrangement. Things are different now from when I married you. I'm going to leave." In such a case Paul says to let the unbeliever go. Whether the unbeliever goes out and gets married again or not, in this situation I assume it would mean that the believing husband or wife would be free to marry again.

When Paul said, "A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases," what is the bondage? It is the marriage vows.

When he said, "God has called us to peace," I believe Paul was saying that God does not ask any man or woman to live in a *hell* at home. Never. If they find that they cannot get along together, that they fight like cats and dogs, I think they ought to separate. On several occasions I have advised couples to separate – but neither of them is to remarry. Their problem is not divorce, it is marriage. They should not have married in the first place. God has called us to peace, therefore the home is not to be a boxing ring nor a place for karate. It is a place for *love*.

There is Forgiveness

A home of love is God's ideal for man. From the beginning God did not intend for divorce to be part of the equation, but because of man's sin, He permitted it. You may say, "Well, divorce is sinful." Sure it is, and so is murder. But a murderer can be saved. In fact, one was dying on a cross next to Jesus, and he was saved. When Jesus Christ died on the cross, He died for all sins. The thief on the cross was both a thief and a murderer, and his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His shed blood saved him. A thief can be saved, and a divorced person can be saved, too. So let's not put divorce in a special category all by itself. If an unsaved person has been a thief and then repents and gets saved by coming to Jesus Christ, he is forgiven for his thievery. We would permit such a man to get married. We would do the same for a murderer. Then let us be fair about divorce. There are people who get divorced before they are saved. When they come to the Lord Jesus Christ, they are forgiven for that sin. I think such a person is free to marry again, and I feel that this is implied in the Scriptures.