

EAST
Singapore
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CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

Lesson 18

What the Old Testament Teaches About Divorce

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Christians must be taught the sanctity of marriage and the absolute folly of divorce. The philosophy of the world states that if one does not make a go of the first marriage, he or she can keep on trying through other marriages. This is simply a destruction of marriage and the family unit. Many people enter marriage with the idea that it is terminable.
- B. Ideally, divorce should never be considered as a possible solution for marital problems among Christians. By God's grace, every attempt must be made to heal the rift, for nothing is impossible with God. NOTE: When a man has a wounded leg, the last thing a surgeon thinks of doing is cutting off the leg. His main concern 'is to heal the wound. So a Christian must never consider divorce as a way of solving his or her problems. Divorce only complicates the situation and multiplies the problem.

II. VIEWPOINTS ON DIVORCE HELD BY CHRISTIANS

- A. Introduction: When we come to the subject of divorce, we realize that Christian scholars, preachers and laymen often hold different interpretations of what the Bible teaches on divorce. All true Christians hold that divorce in general is wrong and everything possible should be done to avoid it. However, when it comes to the specifics of divorce, there is disagreement.
- B. Divorce for Adultery and Desertion: This is probably the most common view among Protestants and it teaches that divorce and remarriage are permitted by the innocent party when there has been adultery or desertion by the guilty party. Desertion may include non-adulterous infidelity when one partner no longer meets the sexual obligations of the spouse.
- C. The Westminster Confession of Faith states:

Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage: yet, nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church, or civil magistrates, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage; wherein, a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the person concerned in it not left to their own wills, and discretion, in their own case (XXIV-VI).

- D. Divorce for Adultery. Adultery is the only grounds for divorce with the innocent party free to remarry.
- E. Divorce for Sexual Immorality. The word *porneia* is broadened to mean addiction to sex, oral sex and sexual activity short of full adultery by intercourse.

- F. Divorce But No Remarriage: This permits divorce (complete freedom from one's mate) but does not permit remarriage.
- G. Desertion by an Unsaved Partner: Desertion by the unbelieving partner in a mixed marriage of a believer and unbeliever is a basis for divorce and remarriage.
- H. Separation But No Divorce: This view holds that a couple may separate but not get a divorce. There is no possibility of remarriage.

II. THE IDEAL MARRIAGE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT (Gen. 2:18-25)

- A. The Ideal. In Genesis 2:23-25, through the first marriage of Adam and Eve, we learn that a husband and wife become one flesh, so there is a blending of lives, a joining of hearts and a combining of pursuits and goals. This is not just a union of two bodies but a union of two lives - body, soul and spirit. God's ideal is one man for one woman for one lifetime. Marriage is to be lasting and permanent. NOTE: God's ideal for marriage is no divorce. A divorce or dissolving of a marriage is nothing less than a radical break of the divine institution and is sin before a holy God. The marriage bond is originally and ideally indissoluble.
- B. The Shattering of the Ideal (Gen. 3): Sin entered into this world and disrupted the ideal. Sin always represents a failure to achieve the ideal. Sin makes it difficult to achieve God's ideal whether it be in marriage or other relationships. However, in spite of the problems imposed by sin, God never surrenders the ideal. A man or woman who fails in marriage, can be the recipient of God's redemptive activity and through God can begin to meet the ideal for marriage. NOTE: The entrance of sin may cause God under certain conditions to allow for the marriage tie to be dissolved with divine sanction and authorization. Because of sin, God has made an allowance for divorce.

III. THE PROVISION FOR DIVORCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

- A. Definition of Divorce: A divorce is an official, legal severance of the marriage union designed to free the marriage partners and terminate their marriage with the right and intent of remarriage.
- B. The Old Testament Permitted Divorce (Deut. 24:1-4)
 1. This passage declares that divorce was practiced in the Old Testament and this is confirmed by other passages (Lev. 21:7,14.; 22:13; Num. 30:9-10; Deut. 22: 19, 29 cf. Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:1; Ezk. 44:22). This does not mean that God approved of divorce for God says He hates divorce (Mal. 2:16) because it is a break with His ideal of marriage. Divorce in the Old Testament was tolerated and permitted because of the sin-hardened hearts of the people (Matt. 19:7-8). NOTE: In the Mosaic economy, divorce was discouraged but it was permitted and those involved in it did not incur civil or ecclesiastical penalty as such.
 2. This passage declares that a man who divorced his wife was to give her a certificate of divorce. This apparently was a legal document that took some time to prepare, for this was God's way to give the husband time to cool off and not be guilty of some hasty action. Furthermore, this certificate was a document that gave a woman her freedom to remarry and would protect her against social ostracism and harlotry.
 3. The basis for divorcing a woman in the Old Testament was "indecency" or

“uncleanness” or “an unseemly thing.” Literally in the Hebrew this means “nakedness of a thing.” No Biblical commentator knows for sure what “indecency” means so at best it is speculation. NOTE: However, among the Rabbis there were two schools of thought on the meaning of “indecency” or “unseemly thing.” One group felt it meant sexual immorality, namely adultery and the other “indecent behavior.”

One was the teaching of the great rabbi, Hillel. Moses, in Deuteronomy 24, had said that a man could divorce his wife if he found any indecency in her. Hillel interpreted that to mean anything which displeased the husband. If the wife made bad coffee, he could divorce her. If she did not keep the house clean, if she got angry or argumentative, or whatever, she could be divorced. This was the easy school of divorce of that day. Opposed to that was the school of Shammai, another great Hebrew rabbi, who taught that divorce was to be strictly limited, that only under certain rigidly defined conditions could divorce ever be granted. So the nation was split between these two schools of thought. (Ray Stedman, Caution—God At Work!)

NOTE: It is questionable that the School of Shammai was correct, for it is difficult to prove that “indecency” means adultery. According to the Mosaic Law adulterers were stoned to death (Deut. 22:22) but the woman in Deut. 24:1-4 was not stoned, but she was free to remarry. On the other hand the more liberal interpretation of the School of Hillel does not appear to be well supported. The word “indecency” means more than improper behavior and seems to imply something shameful. It probably means “impropriety of behavior” in defect or omission.

While falling short of illicit sexual intercourse it may well be that the indecency consisted in some kind of shameful conduct connected with sex life. Or it may have been some other kind of impropriety worthy of censure on the part of the husband.

It is, consequently, necessary to strike a balance between the rigid interpretation of the school of Shammai and the loose one of the school of Hillel. We must suppose something shameful and offensive that gives to the husband some legitimate ground for displeasure and complaint. (John Murray, Divorce)

4. It is very clear that a woman with her certificate of divorce was free to remarry if she so desired (24:3). NOTE: It cannot be dogmatically stated that divorce and remarriage is unforgiveable because the Law allowed for it. The Law, which was holy, just and good permitted for divorce and remarriage. Note: This verse proves that divorce dissolves a marriage and that is not merely separation.
5. If the woman marries another man and he in turn divorces her or dies, she is not free to go back and marry her first husband again. This act defiles her and is an abomination to the Lord. NOTE: It should be noted that a divorced woman is not

prevented from returning to her former husband if she did not marry a second husband. Nor does this verse prevent a woman from marrying a third husband in the event that the second husband divorces her or dies.

6. Note: It should also be noted that once a second marriage is contracted, a radical break from the first marriage is a necessity and a whole new relationship ensues.

It should indeed be noted that it is only with reference to the prohibited return to the first husband that the defilement concerned is mentioned. The remarriage on the part of the divorced woman is not expressly stated to be defilement irrespective of return to the first husband. For these considerations we are required to exercise great caution before stigmatizing the remarriage as adulterous. One thing is certain, that the second marriage was not placed in the category of adultery nor the woman regarded as an adulteress in terms of the Pentateuchal legislation. The woman and her second husband were not put to death as the Pentateuch required in the case of adultery.

While not stigmatized as adultery in terms of the Mosaic economy, nevertheless, it is not at all so certain that the remarriage is not regarded as involving defilement. It may very well be that the evil attaching to divorce and the abnormal situation in which the woman is placed as the divorcee of her first husband are regarded as casting their shadow over the second marriage even though the second marriage is not placed in the category of adultery and civil or ecclesiastical penalty is not appended. (Murray, Divorce)