CORE Seminars –Marriage

Week 12

***Divorce***

There’s no question that when it comes to divorce, we’ve come to a topic that is at the same time both difficult and unfortunate. It’s unfortunate, because where divorce has occurred, sin has occurred. And it’s occurred in such a way that a covenant union has been broken. A relationship is torn apart in divorce, and there’s no way that’s not tragic and painful. It’s difficult, because though the Bible’s teaching on divorce is clear in its broadest outline, when we descend into the particulars of any given case, the application of Biblical principles is not always obvious and rarely is it easy.

What we need to understand is that God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16), but not from a safe and smug, self-righteous distance. No, God hates divorce the same way a divorced person hates divorce, not as a disinterested third-party, but as one who knows the pain of divorce personally. For the fact is, God himself is a divorcee. In Jeremiah 3, we read,

NIV **Jeremiah 3:6** 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. 7 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. 8 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.

God knows what it means to be betrayed and forsaken. And God knows the pain of divorce. So as we consider in this class what He has to say, we want to remember that He does not speak to us on this matter from a distance. Rather he speaks to us through Christ as a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, including the grief of love betrayed and love forsaken. And it’s precisely into that context that His Word comes to us as a Word of truth and hope.

4 Questions that structure our conversation:

***1) What is divorce?***

Divorce is the dissolution of a marriage / ending a marriage covenant

* Marriage exists when there has been a sexual union in the context of a covenantal oath. Ephesians 5:22-33 lays out the covenantal context, and speaks of a one-flesh union. Divorce breaks or dissolves that union.
* Of course, many things can violate the marriage covenant (such as sin). And whenever the covenant is violated, the marriage is violated in some degree. But not every violation calls into question the fundamental one-flesh status of the covenant. For example, what if your spouse had poor boundaries with his or her controlling mother. Unlike the controlling mother, other things do however strike at the very heart of the covenant and its obligations. Matt 5, 19 and 1 Cor 7 define a few things we would consider as breaking the marital covenant, which we’ll look at in just a moment.
* Divorce, in the Bible, therefore, is the public and formal acknowledgement that the union has been broken, and the covenant is dissolved.

***2) What does God think of divorce?***

God hates divorce

It is the breaking of a covenant: the ultimate lie about God's character (faithfulness) and the way He relates to His people. Malachi 2:11-16 gives us three reasons why God hates divorce,

 11 Judah has broken faith. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god. 12 As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the LORD cut him off from the tents of Jacob —even though he brings offerings to the LORD Almighty. 13 Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. 14 You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. 15 Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. 16 "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. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.

Reason 1: God hates divorce because it impairs parents' opportunity to raise godly offspring. Notice vs. 15. Remember a central purpose of marriage is to produce godly offspring.

Reason 2: God is a covenant-keeping God who hates divorce because it is a breaking of a covenant. When a covenant is made, God’s desire is for it to be kept and for us to persevere in it; not to break it. Notice in vs. 14 the phrase - “you have broken faith with her.” Why the term “faith?” Because the covenant is formed by God, and so a breaking of it is not just a wrong against the spouse, but an offense against God who formed to covenant. In Malachi 2, the covenant is broken between God and Israel.

The gospel of Matthew gives us another reason - Reason 3: God hates divorce because it destroys the picture of covenant faithfulness. In Matthew 19:4-6 we read,

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

Jesus warns that what God has put together, no man should judge himself allowed to separate. It is as if Jesus where to say, “If God put this together, how dare you (a mere human) consider separating it?” In Genesis 2:24, the phrase “be united to his wife” (NIV) can also be translated “hold fast” (ESV). The picture is of holding on and not letting go. When Jesus says they are no longer two, but one, he saying they are no longer two individuals, but one unit/one flesh. So, you can translate this concept of “one flesh” to mean oneness, unity, being on the same page, having the same mindset, etc.

Jesus is saying, How dare you destroy this picture of covenant unity? How dare you ruin this picture of oneness that God has built into marriage? So he says in v. 6 – “Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

***3) What are the biblical grounds for divorce?***

Biblical grounds are never meant to be a proof text to self-justify leaving a marriage. “Ah! Here it is! Now I can divorce him.”

Rather, they lay out the covenantal nature of marriage and provide framework for reconciliation. As God demonstrates in the book of Hosea (3:1), even in the face of adultery, divorce is never required, but only allowed. The option is always there to forgive. And in fact, the Bible seems to allow no reason for withholding forgiveness in the face of repentance. Nevertheless, in a fallen world, repentance is often absent. In that case, there are two basic categories for biblical grounds for divorce:

# (1) Matthew 5:31-32, 19:8-9 (see also 19:3-8)[[1]](#endnote-1): “…except for sexual immorality…”

5:31-32 – 31"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'32But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.[[2]](#endnote-2)

19:8-9 – 8”Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. 9I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

* Greek word translated “sexual immorality” is *porneias* and refers to sexual intercourse between a married person and someone apart from their spouse. *Porneias* can refer more broadly to sexual immorality (not just adultery), or what we might call sexual infidelity.
* Infidelity strikes at the heart of the covenant – for a marriage is a covenant surrounding a sexual relationship, a covenant that is pictured by and protects an exclusive intimacy. [[3]](#endnote-3)
* So what constitutes infidelity? Certainly adultery does. But what about the use of pornography? What about the growing trend of on-line virtual affairs? Here we see that even a clear principle can be difficult to apply. This is why divorce, if it’s to be considered, should be considered with counsel and direction from the elders of your church and other wise parties. This is not a matter of checking a box, but ultimately a matter of public judgment by the church.
* But when such a judgment is made, the innocent party, in such a case, may (not must), **without sin**, divorce his/her spouse.
* If a godly reconciliation is possible, it should be pursued.
* Does the wronged partner have to stay with or reconcile to the guilty party to forgive? No. There is a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness can be and often must be extended unilaterally. But reconciliation requires both parties to be involved, willing to take responsibility for their own actions, and repentant of their own sins.

# (2) 1 Corinthians 7:12-15: “…if an unbeliever departs, let him depart…”

12To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)[[4]](#endnote-4): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. 14For 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. 15But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.

* The issue that Paul raises is covenantal desertion where the departing spouse is a non-believer.
* If the non-Christian is willing to live within the Christian understanding of marriage, he is sanctified. The unbelieving spouse is not saved; but the believer is used in the marriage as a means of grace and Christian influence on the unbelieving spouse. The hope is that one day the unbeliever might be saved because God used the believer in this marriage.
* But if unbelieving husband decides to desert his spouse, the Christian is not bound. Not bound means they are no longer obligated to stay in the covenant; they are free to remarry, stay single, or reconcile;
* After thinking through this issue, along with study and prayer, the elders believe that certain forms of abuse, including **physical and/or sexual abuse of spouse or children is within the category of desertion** (because stopping the abuse requires physical separation, and is therefore a breaking of the covenant, etc.). Why? Because we consider this sin such an egregious evil that it rises to the level of breaching the covenant.
* Now, does one fight, or one blow constitute physical abuse? How long does abuse have to go on before professed repentance and contrition is proved not genuine? Once again we quickly see that even when the principle of desertion is clear, but its application can be extremely difficult, and requires patient and humble counsel and direction.

***4) How Do You Divorce-Proof Your Marriage? (12 suggestions)***

**Remember the golden two questions in marriage.** Vertical: How do we let our marriage look like the gospel? Horizontal: How do we have unity/oneness in marriage?

**(1) Marriage doesn’t work without repentance.** If you hold on to your sin, and refuse to let it go, your marriage is in a dangerous place. Christianity does not work if you are unwilling or slow to deal with your sin. A lack of repentance not only effects your life, and your relationship with God, but it also hurts the marriage. Why? Marriage is a partnership, and whenever one spouse doesn’t fight their sin, it affects both parties.

**(2) Don’t skip the basics of your faith.** Go to church. Read Scripture. Pray. Meet with other Christians. Build relationships where other people who really get to know you. All of these are fundamental building blocks for your faith; and consequently, also for your marriage. A real, vibrant faith in Jesus is only going to help your marriage. If you are convinced of God’s love for you, it should show up in your marriage (1 John 4:9-17). Make your personal walk with the Lord a priority. Notice these first two points: Repentance and faith—the two key elements for the Christian life.

**(3) Don’t Give the Devil a Foothold.** Satan will look for ways to undermine your marriage. For some of you, it will be through less sex; for others, it will be tension over finances or parenting; for others, your pursuit of comfort or your pre-occupation with your work will become idolatrous and more important than your spouse; and the list can go on and on. Satan loves to build tension, stress, and division into a marriage. Remember the goal is unity in marriage. There is a spiritual battle going on, and Satan is out to ruin the unity in your marriage. And that makes sense because Christian marriages when done well brightly reflect the gospel; and we know Satan wants to dampen (stamp out?) any witness for the truth.

**(4) Do the hard work of investing in the marital relationship.** In what is a crazy busy life, there are thousands of things that can occupy our time. And especially after children enter into the picture, you might find it hard to invest in each other for the good of the marriage. You might find yourself so busy with many good things that you find yourself taking your spouse for granted. Yet, if you don’t invest in your relationship right now, what you’ll find is one day the kids will leave, and you’ll be at a loss how to deal with one another and how to love each other. So don’t wait, build into your marriage right now. Build in to your spouse spiritually, emotionally, sexually, relationally. That means spouses pursuing each other for conversations. Sit across the table from one another, and do the hard work of investing in each other. Talk honestly about hopes, dreams, disappoints, and struggles, but also enjoy laughing and having fun together.

**(5)**The most basic element of successful communication in marriage: **Listen with the goal of understanding your spouse**. Remember: We’re often caught with arguing our own way, getting what we want, fighting for own desires (James 4:1), and not loving our spouse by really listening to understand what *they want*.

**(6) Learn how to handle conflict well.** One difference between good and bad marriages is that not that good marriage don’t have conflict (they do!), but good marriages know how to handle conflict. In fallen world, sin will cause us to fight, but as Christians, we can learn to handle conflict wisely and lovingly as a *Christian* husband and wife. And as Christians, should even our conflicts (and how we handle them) look different than the world?

**(7) Be honest about your sin.** The secret sins in marriage—adultery and porn being just two examples—are what often ruin a marriage. The nature of sin is that it likes to hide in the darkness (Eph 5), and that is never good for a marriage. God’s intent for your marriage is that you are known by your spouse. Naked and not ashamed; vulnerability—that’s God’s intention for your marriage (Gen 2:25). So any kind of hiding goes against God’s design. Be honest with your spouse about your sin.

**(8) Be teachable and humble towards your spouse.** One of the strongest indicators of a possible divorce is if a husband is not able to be influenced by his wife. When the answer is ‘no,’ the likelihood of divorce significantly increases. So, men, listen to your wives. They are in marriage with you as God’s means of sanctification. But wives, just as I say this to the men, so also I say it to you: be humble and teachable. Pride hurts a marriage; and godless pride is never helpful.

**(9) Build your marriage around a good church.** If God’s intention is that his manifold wisdom would be displayed through the church (Eph 3:10), then why wouldn’t we want to be a part of that? Most families are much quicker to orient their lives around a community with good schools or around a good job, but often make the choice of a church secondary to these other things. But choosing a job, but having no certainty about church, you are putting your spiritual life, and the spiritual life of your spouse, captive to work choices. Your job takes greater priority and it limits your choices of churches. But if growth in Christ matters more than anything else, why not do it the other way? Make your first choice for your marriage a good church; and then choose everything else (jobs, schools, home, etc.).

**(10) Don’t isolate your life or your marriage.** If you go to a good church, the worst thing you could do is only go for the good teaching or the programs. You need to let others “in.” Build honest and loving relationships with other Christians. Do that individually. It is good for both of you to have someone from the church who is the same gender meeting and talking with you about life. You can’t do Christianity on your own. You need others to get through this life. God never meant for us to try to survive by ourselves; he meant for us to be dependent on others. This is more than just occasional accountability—this is learning how to do life together. Do this also for your marriage. Find others with whom you can open up and share your joys, hopes and struggles. Let another couple “in” so they know your relationship. These kinds of relationships you need to build when life is going well because they end up being your spiritual safety net when life is going poorly.

**(11) Roles matter.**

**(12) Show grace to each other.** Grace is unmerited favour. Life has a lot of hard things; and because of our sinful nature, it is all-to-easy to focus your energy on your spouse’s faults, or like Genesis 3, find ways to blame your spouse. Just as God has show grace to each of us through the cross, so also the love, mercy, kindness, grace, forgiveness of God should overflow into our relationship with our spouse. Show grace to your spouse. Let your marriage be characterized by grace, love, forgiveness and acceptance.

#### Conclusion

Pastorally, and as a church, how should we respond to divorce? Just as God did: with truth and compassion. On the one hand, we need to be clear on the Bible’s teaching. And we need to do so long before that teaching is needed. This is why we have this class. This is why we try to put young married couples in young married small groups. We want to prevent divorce by building strong marriages from the start. That is why I run a yearly marriage workshop. That is why the pastors devote so much of their time to marriage and pre-marital counselling. It’s why we hope you, as married people, are reading the books we recommend, and are involving others in your marriage, to build you up and hold you accountable. We want to be a church that proclaims the truth about our covenant-keeping God, with our words, and with our marriages.

On the other hand, we want to respond with compassion. Divorce is the result of sin, and all of us have some acquaintance with that topic—if not personally, we all have relatives or friends who have gotten divorced. Divorce is not the unforgivable sin, even if in this life it has some on-going consequences. Instead, we want to hold out the hope of the gospel to those whose lives have been broken by divorce. Both the hope of forgiveness for those whom reuniting with an ex-spouse is no longer desired. And the possibility of reconciliation to those who are separated and even some who are divorced. WE should never forget that the God of Jeremiah 3 is also the God of Hosea 3.

**Hosea 3:1** The LORD said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though 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."

You and I know what it is to be reconciled to God, though we deserved a certificate of divorce from him. We want to be people who hold out that same hope to those who have known the pain of divorce, the hope of reconciliation with God and the hope of reconciliation with their spouse, through and because of the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who died to reconcile that which was torn asunder by sin. In all cases, the hope of forgiveness from God and for your spouse/ex-spouse.

1. **End Notes**

In Matthew 19:3-8, It is also important to notice that the Pharisees said that Moses “commanded” divorce and Jesus said that he only “permitted it” because of their hard heart. In this passage Jesus eliminated the Mosaic penalty for adultery and he legitimated divorce for adultery. At the same time, he eliminated the Mosaic sufferance respecting divorce and we find an increase moral and legal judgement. This is similar to other passages in the Sermon on the Mount (expands adultery to anyone who looks at a woman lustfully). This is an excellent picture of Jesus authority and example of how we should look at the NT to interpret the old. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In Matthew 5:32, it is important to note that the act of divorce does not make her an adulteress, but it makes her vulnerable by creating a temptation or circumstance or by her remarrying. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The covenantal aspect of adultery seems to be more of a concern to God than the sexual. This is seen by the discrepancy in punishment between the situations in Deut 22:23-24 and 22:28-29. The sexual sin in both cases is the same; the magnitude of the crime is determined by the presence or absence of a marriage covenant that is being violated. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ##  Not I, But the Lord: v.12 doesn’t mean that part of the passage is uninspired (see v. 40). In fact it’s just the opposite. Paul is placing his words on a par with Jesus’ words, giving them the same authority on a topic that Jesus did not speak.

 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)