

Courtship & Marriage article 18

Dear Young People,

In my last letter I spoke of some of the practical aspects of this matter of divorce and remarriage. I want to caution you, when you consider the sad stories people have about their reasons for divorcing each other and their reasons for remarrying, it is very easy and a strong temptation for us to let our emotions decide what is right and what is wrong. We quite naturally are sad because of the bitter life some people must lead, because of spouses that are wicked, cruel, irresponsible, or all of these.

But our emotions are not the final and decisive court of judgment. The question is: What does God say? Obedience to him, regardless of how we feel, brings peace and joy; disobedience brings sorrow and unhappiness in this life and, if we do not repent, in the life to come. We have to know what God says.

You may argue that the circumstances of life are sometimes very cruel and that faithfulness requires great suffering: as one old farmer put it to me some 45 years ago: "Rev., the closest thing to heaven here on earth is a happy marriage. But an unhappy marriage is the closest thing to hell." His words may have been something of an exaggeration, but there was truth in them nonetheless.

Jesus has never, so far as I know, promised an easy life in the world for anyone. To be His disciple is not a rose-covered path, full off singing, through green meadows, along laughing brooks, in which flowers bloom and birds sing all the day. He has not promised us wealth and freedom from sickness, a life without problems and sufferings. Quite the opposite. He told an overly-eager would-be disciple who flung himself at Jesus' feet and swore that he would follow Jesus wherever He went: "Even the birds have nests and the foxes have holes, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay His head." And when our Lord told his followers what it meant to be a disciple and what were the qualifications of discipleship, His solemn words struck like a dagger into our hearts: "Deny yourself; take up your cross, and follow me." Self-denial, cross-bearing – these are the qualifications of discipleship – also for those who are unhappily married.

I once had to work with a young girl who had dated a young fellow from the church. The young fellow was a wild and unruly young man and the girl became pregnant by him. He was then converted, wanted to marry the girl and establish a Christian home. But the girl was an unbeliever who had not even been baptized. She did want to learn her husband's faith, however, and so I spent many long hours teaching her, showing her the principles of the truth, of worship, of a godly life. She learned fast, but it began to dawn on her that the life of a Christian requires much self-denial. And so she did not want to join the church. Her reason for not joining was always: "The cost is too high." She added, "I would have to give up parties and dancing, movies and drinking, all the things that are fun. That is a high price, indeed." She was, of course, right. Jesus warns us as well to count the cost. And I told her that the price which she considered too high was indeed the price that had to be paid.

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The Scriptures are clear that God does not want divorce, much less remarriage after divorce. Malachi the prophet spoke God's Word to Judah: "For the Lord, the God of Israel, saith that He hateth putting away (divorce)" (Mal. 2:16). How can anyone approve of that which the Lord hates?

You say that the Lord approved of divorce (Deut 24)? But Jesus claims that Moses allowed this because of the hardness of the hearts of the Israelites (Matt. 19:8). I do not know of a single person who approves divorce because he admits he has a hard heart.

Jesus goes back to the creation ordinance and spells it out in unforgettable words. In marriage husband and wife become one flesh. It is impossible to cut up something that is one flesh without destroying it. Hence Jesus issues the command: "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matt. 19:6). That is a command of Jesus. When people nevertheless put asunder what God has joined together, they sin directly and with full force against God.

This truth is established in other parts of Scripture. "Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery" (Matt. 5:32). And this is said to contradict the Pharisees who appealed to Deut 24 to get rid of their wives, condoning this brash and foolish act by appealing to Moses.

What Jesus says in Matthew 5:32 is made even stronger by what Mark records for us as the words of Jesus: "Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery" (Mark 10:11, 12).

Nor is there any getting around Luke 16:18, though pages of arguments are produced in an effort to do just that. "Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery." There are no qualifications, no ifs, ands, or buts, no dodging the verse with a multitude of words. There it stands - Stark, forceful, emphatic, beyond argumentation.

Marriage is a life-long commitment and only death can break that powerful one-flesh bond. This Paul tells us in Romans 7:2: "For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband." She is bound to her husband as long as he lives. That binding is done by God. Only God can sever it, which He does by means of death.

And death breaks that binding, because marriage belongs to this life, not to the life of heaven. "For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven" (Matt. 22:30).

The conclusion is, therefore, that a divorce does not break the marriage bond. As Malachi puts it, divorce is a "putting away," It is what some call "a separation of bed and board." That is, the two divorced live separately and no longer share the same house. But it is not a dissolution of the marriage bond: it is not a cutting into two pieces that which is "one flesh." It is not a dissolution of what God hath joined together.

But we have yet to take a look at Matthew 19. The verse reads: "And I say unto you, whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery (Matt. 19:9). There are a few things about this verse that we ought to notice.

1. With this verse, Jesus repudiates the teaching of Moses in Deut. 24 as not longer applicable in the New Testament.

2. The phrase “except it be for fornication” modifies “Whosoever shall put away his wife,” and not “and shall marry another.” We must not and cannot read the text this way: “Whosoever shall put away his wife. Except it for fornication shall marry another.” That doesn’t make sense. Nor may we read it: “Whosoever shall put away his wife except it be for fornication and shall marry another” – as if “except it be for fornication” modifies both what goes before it and what goes after it. Very clearly, the phrase “except it be for fornication” modifies “Whosoever shall put away his wife.”
3. Hence, the Lord teaches that one may put away his wife if his wife is guilty of fornication. A man does not have to do this; Jesus does not command that a man do this. But a man may find it necessary to do this because it is impossible to maintain a covenant home if the wife is a fornicator.
4. Notice the text constantly uses the words “putteth away” and not “divorces” or “cuts the marriage bond.” I think this is important because there are those who say they have history on their side in their defense of divorce and remarriage; that is, many in the history of the church since the Reformation have approved of divorce and remarriage. But, while there is truth to this, it is equally true that many since the Reformation did not approve. For everyone who can be quoted as favoring the remarriage of a divorced person, it is possible to quote another who disagreed. And, from this verse as well as other passages of Scripture, it is evident that the translators of the Bible who prepared the KJV, did not believe that divorce broke the marriage bond. It was only a “putting away.” Some argue long and hard on the basis of the Greek; but such argumentation is wrong. The Greek will not bear the meaning supporters of remarriage give it.
5. The disciples understood the Lord to forbid remarriage, for they comment on this teaching of the Lord: “If the case of a man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry” (Matt. 19:10). Obviously, the disciples are saying that if they may put away their wives for fornication, but may never marry again, it is better to remain unmarried. If one may marry after putting away his wife for fornication, there is no problem with putting her away: the path is cleared to find another wife. So the words of the disciples sustain the interpretation that I have given it.
6. And because Jesus took the statement of the disciples seriously, the Lord adds a section about eunuchs. By a eunuch is meant here, one who does not marry and so abstains from sexual intercourse. Jesus says, there are such people: there are eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake” (Matt. 19:12). We have several of such people in our churches. Their wives or their husbands have forsaken them and committed fornication. They have remained eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, and have found a place in the church in doing the work of the kingdom. Many have, for example, become Christian school teachers.

Divorce is wrong if by it is meant a breaking of the marriage bond, which opens the way for remarriage, and is right only when it is a “putting away” for fornication. We must understand this and maintain it with vigor and consistency. We are called as God’s covenant people to represent the cause of God’s covenant in the world. How shall we do that when we corrupt and debase the one institution that more than another other is a figure of the covenant, namely holy matrimony?

Some argue that, while they agree that remarriage after divorce is wrong even though the divorce has been on the grounds of fornication, the issue is not important. It is, so it is said, “a non-salvific issue.” One can hold either position and still be saved. And it is perfectly pleasing in the sight of God to have fellowship with those who hold to a position that condones divorce and remarriage, if the divorce was on Biblical grounds.

Now, I am not interested in answering any questions about who is saved and who is not saved. We simply do not know this, nor is it our business to engage in such a practice. This is not our calling. But I am very much interested in obeying the word of Scripture. And I am, especially for myself, very concerned to live according to the command of Christ. Christ forbids remarriage under any circumstances. Is it not wrong then to say that disobedience to Christ's command is not an important issue?

The Christian Reformed Church, in the early days of my ministry, allowed for those divorced and remarried to be members of the church, if they confessed their sin. That decision opened the door a crack, and soon the pressure of the problem pushed the door open all the way. Now there are churches where former husbands and wives, with new husbands and wives, sit together at the table of the Lord. It is like an ecclesiastical wife-swapping and is abominable in the eyes of God.

There is a saying among Arabs that if you let a camel get his nose under the edge of the tent, he will soon be in the tent with you. If we let the nose of the camel of remarriage inside the tent, we are soon going to let the whole camel in.

We live in a world of almost total moral chaos. We are told that almost 60% of marriages in the world end in divorce and remarriage. I talked recently with a mother who was converted to the Reformed faith, and she told me that her father had recently divorced his fifth wife. The devil is making a fierce and unrelenting attack on the institution of marriage. The result is that even homosexual marriages are now permitted in some of the States here in America. And many speak of a society where marriage is no longer considered important. The result is that homes are ruined, children are scattered and harmed in ways beyond cure, society disintegrates, because the home is still the fundamental institution of society, and moral anarchy fills the land. I just read an article that divorce and remarriage is more common among clergy than among those in the pew. How important it is that the church protect the sanctity of marriage. What a disaster when it does not do this! Those called by God to defend this holy and sacred institution are, by their conduct, undermining it. I shudder to think of what will happen to them in the judgment day when they must give an account to Christ of their ministry.

Let it never be forgotten, young people, that to approve of remarriage is to approve of adultery, and to say that the 7th commandment can be disobeyed without paying an awful price is to say something contrary to what God says.

This brings to an end our discussion of courtship and marriage. I hope to start on another subject with the next letter. So, if any of you have any questions about what I have written, or about this matter of divorce, please send them to me, and I will deal with them before we go on.

Many blessings to you all.

Our love for you in Christ continues.

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