
Demand #40

WHAT GOD HAS JOINED
TOGETHER LET NO MAN
SEPARATE, FOR MARRIAGE
MIRRORS GOD'S
COVENANT WITH US

Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh"? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate. — MATT. 19:4-6

Your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name. — ISA. 54:5

Jesus demands that husbands and wives be faithful to their marriages. He does not assume this is easy. But he teaches that it is a great thing because marriage is the work of God himself whereby he creates a new reality of "one flesh" that surpasses human comprehension and portrays to the world in human form the covenant union between God and his people. Marriage is sacred beyond what most people imagine, because it is a unique creation of God, a dramatic portrayal of God's relation to his people, and a display of God's glory. Against all the diminished attitudes about marriage in our day, Jesus' message is that marriage is a great work of God and a sacred covenant breakable only by death.

MARRIAGE: THE MIRROR OF GOD'S COVENANT WITH HIS PEOPLE

Jesus knew his Jewish Scriptures and saw them as coming to fulfillment in himself and his work (Matt. 5:17-18). This includes his awareness of what God had said about his relationship with his people when he portrayed it as marriage. For example, God said, “Your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name” (Isa. 54:5). And “In that day, declares the LORD, you will call me ‘My Husband.’ . . . And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD” (Hos. 2:16, 19-20). And “When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine” (Ezek. 16:8). And “Surely, as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel, declares the LORD” (Jer. 3:20).

With these Scriptures as the backdrop, it is inevitable that Jesus would see God’s creation of marriage in the beginning as a means of portraying his relationship with his people. So Jesus read in Genesis 2:24, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” When God said this—and Jesus explicitly says that *God* said this, not just Moses, the writer of Genesis (Matt. 19:4-5)—he had in view (as he has all things in view) that he would call his people his wife and himself her husband. Therefore, the union between a man and a woman is uniquely God’s creation with a view to portraying the relationship between himself and his people.

GOD CREATES THE UNION OF EACH MARRIAGE FOR HIS GLORY

Jesus is explicit about marriage as God’s creation. He does not leave us to figure this out from the Scriptures, and he does not limit the cre-

ation to the first marriage between Adam and Eve. He says, “What therefore *God* has joined together, let not man separate” (Matt. 19:6). God, not man, is the decisive creator of the marriage union. And the point is that *each* marriage is “joined” this way by God, because he tells us not to “separate,” and the only marriage we can decisively separate is the one we are in. So this marriage—this particular marriage, not just the concept of marriage or the general ordinance of marriage or the first marriage—is God’s work. God has acted in the union of this husband and this wife. These two are one flesh by God’s work, not just by their choice.

And as a God-created union of “one flesh” this man and this woman are in a covenant analogous with God’s covenant with Israel. Their marriage portrays God’s relationship with his people. Through marriage God fills the earth with (mostly unwitting) witnesses to the relationship between him and his covenant people. This is one of the main reasons that divorce and remarriage are so serious. They tell a lie about God’s relationship to his people. God never divorced his wife and married another. There were separations and much pain, but he always took her back. The prophet Hosea is a testimony to God’s radical love for his wayward spouse. God never abandons his wife. And when he has to put her away for her adulterous idolatry, he goes after her in due time. This is what marriage is meant to portray: God’s invincible and gracious commitment to his covenant people—his wife.

In this way marriage is meant to glorify God. In Jeremiah 13:11 God says, “As the loincloth clings to the waist of a man, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, declares the LORD, that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a *glory*.” God freely chose and married Israel so that they would display his glory. Therefore, marriage is the work of God’s creation, the portrayal of his covenant love, and the display of his glory.

BUT WHAT ABOUT MOSES’ PERMISSION OF DIVORCE?

This gives some sense of why Jesus’ demand for marital faithfulness astonishes the Pharisees. They can hardly believe he would raise the

bar so high. They had come to him with a question: “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” (Matt. 19:3). Jesus answers them not by reference to the Mosaic law but by reference to the Mosaic creation account. In other words, he intends to root the meaning of marriage in its original design, not in the way marriage is managed by the law in view of sin.

Jesus says, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matt. 19:4-6). So the answer to their question is: God made marriage to last, so don’t treat it as breakable.

Now the Pharisees think they have Jesus trapped. He seems to have just taken a position contrary to the Law of Moses. So they ask, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” (Matt. 19:7). In other words, they hear correctly in Jesus’ answer the implication that one should never break the marriage covenant. But that is not the way they understand Moses. So they ask, why did Moses make a provision for divorce if, you say, the covenant is not to be broken?

Jesus responds, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so” (Matt. 19:8). So Jesus takes his stand with Moses in the creation account and says that just as in the beginning the marriage covenant was not meant to be breakable, so now in the kingdom that he was bringing on earth, this original intention is to be rediscovered and reasserted. In other words, Jesus is raising the standard of his disciples above what Moses allowed. He puts it like this: “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery” (Matt. 19:9).

THE DEVASTATION OF DIVORCE

We are now at a point where we need to tackle the question, did Jesus make provision for his disciples to divorce and remarry? Are

there situations in which he would sanction this? There is no consensus on the answer to this question today among his followers. I want to say clearly from the beginning that I am aware that men more godly than I have taken different views than the one I will give here. I do not claim to have seen or said the last word on this issue, nor am I, I pray, above correction should I prove to be wrong. What follows is an attempt to show why I believe Jesus considered the marriage covenant breakable only by death and therefore forbade remarriage while a spouse is living.

I realize that simply saying this will feel devastating to some, adding more misery to the injury of what they did not want to happen. Divorce is painful. It is often more emotionally wrenching than the death of a spouse. It is often long years in coming and long years in the settlement and in the adjustment. The upheaval of life is immeasurable. The sense of failure and guilt and fear can torture the soul. Like the psalmist, night after night a spouse falls asleep with tears (Ps. 6:6). Work performance is hindered. People draw near or withdraw with uncertain feelings. Loneliness can be overwhelming. A sense of a devastated future can be all-consuming. Courtroom controversy compounds the personal misery.

And then there is often the agonizing place of children. Parents hope against hope that the scars will not cripple them or ruin their own marriages someday. Tensions over custody and financial support deepen the wounds. And then the awkward and artificial visitation rights can lengthen the tragedy over decades.

Because of these and many other factors, people with sensitive hearts weep with those who weep. They try not to increase the pain. And sometimes this care is confused with compromise. People think that loving care is incompatible with confrontation—that the tenderness of Jesus and the toughness of his demands cannot both be love. But surely this is not right.

THE CHALLENGE TO LOVE BIBLICALLY

Jesus was an extraordinarily caring person. His teaching on divorce and remarriage was also firm: “What . . . God has joined together, let

not man separate.” In fact, firm and loving confrontation with the demands of Christ *is* a form of caring, because a sinful decision is just as harmful to a person as the emotional pain. This is true individually, and it is true for the church and society. Compassionate compromises on the sanctity of marriage that weaken the solidity of the covenant of marriage look loving in the short run but wreak havoc over decades. Preserving the solid framework of the marriage covenant with high standards feels tough in the short run but produces ten thousand blessings the future generations take for granted.

The great challenge to Jesus’ followers in the face of divorce and remarriage is to love biblically. The great challenge is to mingle the tears of compassion with the tough love of obedience. This alone will honor Christ and preserve the spiritual health and power of the marriage and the church Jesus founded.

In Matthew 19:3-9 and Mark 10:2-12 Jesus rejected the Pharisees’ justification of divorce from Deuteronomy 24 and reasserted the purpose of God in creation that no human being separate what God has joined together. He said that Moses’ handling of divorce was owing to the hardness of the human heart and then implied that he had come to do something about that. His aim was that the standard of his followers would be higher than what the Law allowed.

How high? That’s the question I try to answer in the next chapter.

Demand #41

WHAT GOD HAS JOINED
TOGETHER LET NO MAN
SEPARATE, FOR WHOEVER
DIVORCES AND MARRIES
ANOTHER COMMITS ADULTERY

Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.—MARK 10:11-12

Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.—LUKE 16:18

It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.—MATT. 5:31-32

And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.—MATT. 19:9

Jesus set a higher standard for marital faithfulness than Moses or the Jewish teachers of his day. He did not affirm the permission for divorce found in Deuteronomy 24. He said it was owing to the

hardness of the human heart (Matt. 19:8) and implied that he was here to change that. In this chapter we will try to discern just how high Jesus' standard of marital faithfulness is.

CLUES IN MOSES THAT DIVORCE DID NOT DESTROY GOD'S UNION

I suspect that Jesus saw a higher standard for marriage implied not only in the creation account of Genesis 2:24 but also in the very wording of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which shows that the *one-flesh* relationship established by marriage is not completely nullified by divorce or even by remarriage. Consider what Moses wrote:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance. (Deut. 24:1-4)

The remarkable thing about these four verses is that while divorce is taken for granted, nevertheless the woman who is divorced becomes "defiled" by her remarriage (v. 4). Therefore, it may well be that when the Pharisees asked Jesus if divorce was legitimate, he based his negative answer not only on God's original intention expressed in Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, but also on the implication of Deuteronomy 24:4, that remarriage after divorce, while permitted, nevertheless *defiles* a person. In other words, there were clues in the writings of Moses that the divorce concession was on the basis of the hardness of man's heart and did not make divorce and remarriage the most God-honoring path.

Moses' prohibition of a wife returning to her first husband even after her second husband dies (because it is an "abomination," v. 4) suggests that today no second marriage should be broken in order to restore a first one. I will return to this issue later on. But for now I would say that even a disobedient second or third marriage should not be broken, but confessed as less than ideal and yet sanctified by God's mercy. It is better in God's eyes than more broken covenants.

THE PROHIBITIONS WITHOUT EXCEPTION

Twice in the Gospels Jesus expresses with no exceptions his prohibition of divorce followed by remarriage. In Luke 16:18 he says, "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." Here Jesus seems to call all remarriage after divorce adultery. These are strong words. Evidently the reason a second marriage is called *adultery* is because the first one is considered to still be valid. So Jesus is taking a stand against the Jewish culture at the time in which all divorce was considered to carry with it the right of remarriage.¹

Luke 16:18 carries another implication: The second half of the

¹ It puzzles me that so many commentators take the opposite approach. They observe that since "any Jewish reader would have taken for granted" that divorce opened the door to remarriage, therefore Jesus agrees with this assumption and does not need to say it in Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18. Hence Andreas Köstenberger, for example, writes, "Rather than concluding that Jesus did not allow for any divorce in sexually consummated marriages, it is much more likely that he did not elaborate on points at which he agreed with the commonly held view in his day." *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004), 242. I am inclined to say that Jesus' explicit, unqualified rejection of remarriage in Mark 10 and Luke 16 is a direct repudiation of this cultural assumption as a compromise with the hardness of man's heart. How could he have more clearly addressed and rejected the cultural assumption of the legitimacy of remarriage after divorce? David Instone-Brewer's arguments that (1) the short form of Jesus' saying in Luke 16:18 is a reference to Herod Antipas' marriage of his brother's wife (160-161), and (2) that the omission of any exception clause is explained on the analogy of rabbinic abbreviations (161-167), and (3) that the exception clause, "except for *porneia*," should be "except for indecency," referring to the phrase "some indecency" in Deuteronomy 24:1 and expressing the more conservative Rabbi Shammai's position all seem unlikely to me. David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002). If one objects that Jesus did not endorse or forbid remarriage after the death of a spouse because he shared the commonly accepted view, my response would be: 1) None of Jesus' discussions of remarriage are aimed at answering the question about what is legitimate in the death of a spouse, but only what is legitimate in the divorce of a spouse. 2) In one place where Jesus comes close to the issue of the death of a spouse (in the question of the Sadducees about the wife who was widowed seven times, Matt. 22:23-32), Jesus finds no fault in her remarriage after a spouse's death.

verse (“he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery”) shows that not only the divorcing man is guilty of adultery when he remarries, but also *any* man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. This is all the more remarkable because the woman in view here is presumably the innocent party in the divorce, because when her husband divorces her he commits adultery in marrying another. Apparently this is because he had no right to divorce his wife. That is, she has done nothing to make his divorce legitimate. Nevertheless, any man who marries this abandoned woman, Jesus says, “commits adultery.”

This is a hard saying. The woman who is forsaken by a man who leaves to marry another is called by Jesus to display the holiness of her marriage vows and the nature of the marriage covenant by not marrying another. Since there are no exceptions mentioned in the verse, and since Jesus is evidently rejecting the common cultural conception of divorce as including the right of remarriage, the first readers of Luke’s Gospel would have been hard-put to see any exceptions on the basis that Jesus shared the cultural acceptance of divorce.

The other instance of Jesus’ unqualified rejection of remarriage after divorce is found in Mark 10:11-12. He said, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” These two verses repeat the first half of Luke 16:18 but go further and say that not only the man who divorces, but also a woman who divorces and then remarries is committing adultery. And as in Luke 16:18, there are no exceptions mentioned to this rule.

What we have so far is two seemingly absolute prohibitions of remarriage after divorce in Luke 16:18 and Mark 10:11-12 since Jesus sees marrying a second time as adultery, even if you are the innocent party in the divorce. And we have a strong statement in Matthew 19:6 and Mark 10:9 that God has joined married couples together and therefore no man should separate them.

IS THERE A PERMISSION FOR DIVORCE IN
MATTHEW 5:32?

But what makes the matter more controversial is that in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 there seems to be an exception to the rule of no remarriage after divorce. In Matthew 5:32 Jesus says, “Everyone who divorces his wife, *except on the ground of sexual immorality*, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” Again in Matthew 19:9 he says, “Whoever divorces his wife, *except for sexual immorality*, and marries another, commits adultery.” Both these verses are generally interpreted to say that Jesus allowed divorce and remarriage where there has been “sexual immorality” by one of the partners. Is that what the “exception clauses” mean?

According to the wording of Matthew 5:32 (“. . . *makes* her commit adultery”), Jesus assumes that in most situations in that culture a wife who has been put away by a husband will be drawn into a second marriage. Nevertheless, in spite of these pressures on the divorced woman to remarry, Jesus still forbids this second marriage. His words imply that the remarriage of an innocent wife who has been put away is nevertheless adultery: “Everyone who divorces his wife, *except on the ground of sexual immorality*, makes her [the innocent wife who has not committed sexual immorality] commit adultery.” This would mean that remarriage is wrong not merely when a person is *guilty* in the process of divorce, but also when a person is *innocent*. In other words, Jesus’ opposition to remarriage seems to be based on the unbreakableness of the marriage bond, not on the conditions of the divorce.

So Matthew 5:32 does not teach that remarriage is lawful in some cases. Rather, it reaffirms that to remarry after divorce is to commit adultery, even for those who have been divorced innocently, and that a man who divorces his wife is guilty of the adultery of her second marriage, and that a man who marries a woman who is put away by her husband, even innocently, commits adultery. Hence the final clause of the verse: “And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” Before we tackle what the

exception clause means, let's put the similar text from Matthew 19:9 before us.

THE EXCEPTION CLAUSE IN MATTHEW 19:9

The other place where Jesus seems to express an “exception clause” to the prohibition of divorce and remarriage is Matthew 19:9, “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, *except for sexual immorality*, and marries another, commits adultery.” Does this exception mean that there are situations in which a married person may be free to remarry after divorce? That is what most commentators see and what most followers of Jesus think. In my understanding of Jesus’ demand this is not what it means. It may help if I describe my pilgrimage to another understanding.

All of my adult life I assumed that adultery and desertion were two legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage. This was the air I breathed, and I saw a confirmation of this in the exception clause in Matthew 19:9, even though, as I see it now, the rest of the New Testament pointed in the other direction.² But there came a point when this assumption began to crumble.

I was initially troubled that the absolute form of Jesus’ denunciation of divorce and remarriage in Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18 is not expressed by Matthew, if in fact his exception clause is an opening for divorce and remarriage. I was bothered by the assumption so

² A fuller statement of my understanding of the rest of the New Testament may be found under the topic “Divorce and Remarriage” at the Desiring God website, specifically, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resourcelibrary/articles/bydate/1986/1488/>. A survey of three views is offered in *Remarriage After Divorce in Today's Church*, ed. Mark L. Strauss (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006), in which Gordon Wenham represents the position of no marriage after divorce, William A. Heth (who no longer holds his view represented in his book coauthored with Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, updated ed. [Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1997; orig. ed. 1984] represents the position of two grounds for divorce and remarriage, and Craig S. Keener represents the position that various other grounds are allowed for divorce and remarriage. In addition, see Craig S. Keener, *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991); and Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth: A Biblical Examination of Divorce and Remarriage* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1981), who argues for no divorce after remarriage. David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002) and *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2003) argues for a range of grounds for divorce and remarriage including abuse and neglect. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *God and Marriage* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980) and Andreas Köstenberger with David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004), offer good overviews of the wider biblical vision of marriage and defend a limited divorce and remarriage position.

many writers make, namely, that Matthew is simply making explicit something that would have been implicitly understood by the hearers of Jesus or the readers of Mark 10 and Luke 16 (see footnote 1).

Would they really have assumed that the absolute statements included exceptions? I began to have serious doubts. Therefore, my inclination was to inquire whether or not, in fact, Matthew's exception clause conforms to the absoluteness of Mark and Luke, not the other way around.

The second thing that began to disturb me was the question, why does Matthew use the Greek word *πορνεία* (*porneia*, "sexual immorality") instead of the word *μοιχεία* (*moicheia*) which means adultery? Sexual immorality in marriage would naturally be adultery. But the word Matthew uses to express Jesus' meaning is one that usually means *fornication* or *sexual immorality without reference to marital unfaithfulness*. Almost all commentators seem to make the assumption again that *porneia* refers to adultery in this context. The question nagged at me why Matthew would not use the word for adultery (*moicheia*), if that is in fact what he meant.

Then I noticed something very interesting. The only other place besides Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 where Matthew uses the word *porneia* is in Matthew 15:19 where it is used *alongside moicheia*. Therefore, the primary contextual evidence for Matthew's usage is that he conceives of *porneia* as, in some sense, *different* than adultery. Could this mean, then, that in Matthew's record of Jesus' teaching he is thinking of *porneia* in its more usual sense of fornication or incest or prostitution that does not denote marital unfaithfulness, that is, adultery?³

³ Abel Isaksson agrees with this view of *πορνεία* and sums up his research as follows:

Thus we cannot get away from the fact that the distinction between what was to be regarded as *porneia* and what was to be regarded as *moicheia* was very strictly maintained in pre-Christian Jewish literature and in the N.T. *porneia* may, of course, denote different forms of forbidden sexual relations, but we can find no unequivocal examples of the use of this word to denote a wife's adultery. [Giving Isaksson the benefit of the doubt here in what may be a technical overstatement, he may mean this (which is what I would say): If a wife sells herself into a life of prostitution, the way Israel did in Jeremiah 3:6 and Hosea 2:2, her acts may be called both *porneia* or *moicheia*. But the fact that the same act may be described in these two ways does not make the words interchangeable. *Moicheia* still denotes the covenant-breaking of marital unfaithfulness, while *porneia* denotes illicit sexual immorality that does *not* denote marital unfaithfulness, but may involve married people.] Under these circumstances we can hardly assume that this word means adultery in the

The next clue in my search for an explanation came when I noticed the use of *porneia* in John 8:41 where Jewish leaders indirectly accuse Jesus of being born of *porneia*. In other words, since they don't accept the virgin birth, they assume that his mother Mary had committed *fornication* and that Jesus was the result of this act. On the basis of that clue I went back to study Matthew's record of Jesus' birth in Matthew 1:18-20.

THE RELEVANCE OF THE EXCEPTION CLAUSES FOR JOSEPH'S BETROTHAL TO MARY

In these verses Joseph and Mary are referred to as husband (*ἀνὴρ*) and wife (*γυνή*). Yet they are described as only being *betrothed* to each other. This is probably owing to the fact that the words for husband and wife are simply *man* and *woman* in the Greek, and to the fact that betrothal was a more significant commitment at that time than engagement is today. In Matthew 1:19 Joseph resolves to "divorce" Mary though they were only betrothed and not yet married. The word for divorce (*ἀπολῦσαι*) is the same as the word in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. But most important of all, Matthew says that Joseph was "just" in making the decision to divorce Mary, presumably on account of her assumed *porneia*, fornication. In other words, this "divorce" was permitted according to Matthew.

Only Matthew has told that story of the crisis Joseph faced in whether to marry his betrothed even though she, as far as he knew at first, had committed fornication (*πορνεία*). In handling this crisis he called Joseph "just" in the plan to "divorce" her. That means that Matthew, as a follower of Jesus, would not consider this kind of "divorce" wrong. It would not have prevented Joseph (or Mary) from marrying another.

clauses in Matthew. The logia on divorce are worded as a paragraph of the law, intended to be obeyed by the members of the Church. Under these circumstances it is inconceivable that in a text of this nature the writer would not have maintained a clear distinction between what was unchastity and what was adultery: *moicheia* and not *porneia* was used to describe the wife's adultery. From the philological point of view there are accordingly very strong arguments against this interpretation of the clauses as permitting divorce in the case in which the wife was guilty of adultery. (Abel Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple*, trans. Neil Tomkinson and Jean Gray [Lund, Sweden: Gleerup, 1965], 134-135)

Since only Matthew had told this story and raised this question, he was the only Gospel writer who would feel any need to make clear that Jesus' absolute prohibition of divorce followed by remarriage did *not* include a situation like Joseph and Mary's. That is what I think he does with the exception clauses. He records Jesus saying, "Whoever divorces his wife—not including, of course, the case of fornication [πορνεία] between betrothed couples—and marries another, commits adultery."⁴

A common objection to this interpretation is that both in Matthew 19:3-9 and in Matthew 5:31-32 the issue Jesus is responding to is marriage, not betrothal. The point is pressed that "except for fornication" is irrelevant to the context of marriage. My answer is that this irrelevancy is precisely the point of the exception clause. Whether it sounds irrelevant in the context depends on how you hear it. I don't think it sounds pointless if you hear it the way I just suggested or if Matthew 5:32 goes like this: "But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife—*excluding, of course, the case of fornication* [πορνεία] *during betrothal*—makes her commit adultery." In this way Jesus makes clear that the action his earthly father almost took—to "divorce" Mary because of πορνεία—would not have been unjust. It would have been right. That is the kind of situation the exception clause is meant to exclude.⁵

This interpretation of the exception clause has several advantages:

- It does not force Matthew's Gospel to disagree with the seemingly plain, absolute meaning of Mark and Luke.
- It provides an explanation for why the word *porneia* is used in Matthew's exception clause instead of *moicheia*.

⁴I do not know all the words Jesus may have used to express this prohibition over the time of his ministry. Therefore, I am slow to say that Matthew created this exception clause and put it in Jesus' mouth. It is likely that Jesus taught in Aramaic, and so in one sense Matthew and the other Gospel writers, who were writing in Greek, decided what exact wording to use in our Gospels. My own conviction is that these Gospel writers were inspired by the Holy Spirit and that what they wrote in Greek accurately represented what Jesus taught.

⁵Andreas Köstenberger arrays seven arguments against this view in *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, pp. 241-243. Though I don't find them compelling, I have tried to take them into account in my thinking and conclusions.

- It squares with Matthew's own use of *porneia* (for fornication) in distinction from *moicheia* (for adultery) in Matthew 15:19.

- It fits Matthew's wider context concerning Joseph's contemplated "divorce" from Mary (Matt. 1:19).

What are the implications of this high standard of marriage? To this we turn in the next chapter.

Demand #42

WHAT GOD HAS JOINED
TOGETHER LET NO MAN
SEPARATE—ONE MAN,
ONE WOMAN, BY GRACE,
TILL DEATH

The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.—MATT. 19:10-12

IF SUCH IS THE CASE, BETTER NOT TO MARRY?

Not surprisingly, when Jesus had finished teaching on marriage and divorce in Matthew 19:3-9, his disciples were bewildered by how strict Jesus’ standards were. So they said, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry” (Matt. 19:10). This response confirms that we are on the right track when we hear Jesus setting the bar very high. The disciples assume that this standard is so high it is better not to marry. In other words, if there is no back door to marriage, it is better not to walk through the front door. This response would not make as much sense if Jesus had just prescribed a back door as large as infidelity.

Jesus' response is not to lower the bar so that marriage becomes less risky. Instead, he says, in essence, that the ability to remain single if necessary and the ability to stay in a hard marriage if necessary are both a gift of God. In other words, flourishing in singleness and flourishing in marriage are a work of divine grace. "Not everyone can receive this saying [the saying that marriage is permanent], but only those to whom it is given" (Matt. 19:11). The point is not that some disciples are given the grace and some are not. The point is that this grace (or faithfulness in singleness and marriage) is the mark of a disciple. "Those to whom it is given" are followers of Jesus.¹ God gives the grace for what he demands.

EUNUCHS FOR THE KINGDOM

Then Jesus illustrates that such grace has actually been given to those who for various reasons have not been permitted to marry. "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it" (Matt. 19:12). The point here is that if you do not marry or if you are divorced and must remain single, you are not alone but are in the company of some who have had singleness forced on them and some who have chosen it for the sake of the kingdom. In all cases God gives grace.

The words "Let the one who is able to receive this receive it" are like the words "He who has ears, let him hear" (Matt. 13:9, 43; 11:15). That is, whether you have ears to hear—or whether you have grace to receive this call to radical respect for marriage—is the mark of being a follower of Jesus. "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27).

¹ Compare the parallel wording between Matthew 19:11 and 13:11, the parallels between Matthew 19:12 and 13:9, 43; 11:15, and the parallel between Matthew 19:11 and 19:26.

THE FOLLY OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Marriage is a great work of God. It is a great gift to the world. It is worthy of books and songs and poetry and life and sacrifice, not just a little chapter like this. Jesus would grieve over the cavalier way that marriage is treated in our day. He would be appalled at any thought of two men or two women calling their homosexual union *marriage*. He would not call it marriage. As much pity as he may feel for the sexual brokenness, he would call the practice of homosexuality sin and the attempt to sanctify it with the word *marriage* folly.

He would respond to this folly the same way he responded to the Pharisees' justification of divorce with Moses' teaching. He would go back to the beginning. Only this time he would underline the words *male* and *female*. "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them *male* and *female*, and said, 'Therefore a *man* shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his *wife*, and they shall become one flesh?'" (Matt. 19:4-5). Jesus would root heterosexual marriage in the creation of man as male and female and in the original union of man and woman into one flesh. He would count it a great sadness that the glory of marriage and all that it stands for is so debased as to make it a covering for the sin of homosexuality.

ARE DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE THE UNFORGIVABLE SINS?

But as great as marriage is, divorce followed by remarriage is not the unforgivable sin. Sometimes I am asked whether my understanding of Jesus implies that divorce is the unforgivable sin. The answer is no. Jesus said that his blood will be the basis of forgiveness for all sins (Matt. 26:28). Therefore he is able to say, "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" (Mark 3:28-29).

From these wonderful promises we learn that forgiveness for sins

is available on the basis of the shed blood of Jesus. Forgiveness is available for all sins, without exception. Forgiveness is received freely through trusting Jesus to forgive our sins. This implies that we see sin as sin and hate it as a dishonor to Jesus. The only unforgivable sin is the sin that we refuse to confess and forsake. We commit unforgivable sin when we cleave to a sin so long and so tenaciously that we can no longer confess it as sin and turn from it. What Jesus calls “the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” (in Matthew 12:31-32) and “eternal sin” (in Mark 3:29) is the resistance against the Holy Spirit’s convicting work to the point where he withdraws, leaving the sinner in helpless hardness of heart, unable to repent.

Neither divorce nor remarriage is in itself the unforgivable sin any more than is murder, stealing, lying, coveting, adultery, or homosexual behavior. “All sins will be forgiven the children of man” (Mark 3:28). God is faithful and just to forgive—he will honor the worth of his Son’s sacrifice for all who confess their sin and bank their hope on the saving work of Jesus.

Marital sin is in the same category as lying and killing and stealing. If someone has lied, killed, stolen, or illegitimately left a marriage, the issue is not, can they be forgiven? The issue is, do they admit that what they did was sin? Do they renounce it? And do they do what they can in order to make it right if possible?

What usually causes the conflict is not whether divorce and remarriage are unforgivable sins, but whether they are sins at all—to be confessed (from the past) and to be avoided (in the future). If a person has stolen things in his past, no one would say that we are treating stealing as the unforgivable sin if we insist that this person confess his sin and begin to make amends to those he defrauded. A sin is not unforgivable because it must be confessed as sin, renounced as an option, and its effects made right (as far as possible).

So it is with divorce or remarriage. It should not keep anyone out of fellowship with the followers of Jesus any more than a past life of robbery. But there should be a heartfelt confession of the sin

committed and a renouncing of it and an affirming of what is right, just as with all other sins of the past.

WHAT DOES A FOLLOWER OF JESUS DO WHO HAS DIVORCED AND REMARRIED?

What then would Jesus expect from one of his followers who has sinned and is divorced and remarried? He would expect us to acknowledge that the choice to remarry and the act of entering a second marriage was sin and to confess it as such and seek forgiveness. He would also expect that we not separate from our present spouse. I base this on at least five observations.

First, Jesus seemed to regard multiple marriages as wrong but real. He said to the woman at the well in John 4:18, “You have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband.” She is living with a man now, but there has been no marriage—no covenant-making. The others he calls “husbands,” but the one she is with now is not her husband.

Second, Jesus knew that Deuteronomy 24:4 spoke against going back to a first husband after marrying a second. He did not go out of his way to qualify this provision.

Third, covenant-keeping is crucial to Jesus as we saw in the previous chapter (also see *Demand #23*). Therefore, even though the current covenant is adulterous in the making, it is real and should be kept. Its beginning in sin does not have to mean that it is continuously sinful and without hope of purification.

Fourth, there are illustrations of God taking acts of disobedience and turning the result into God-ordained plans. One example is the fact that it was sin for the people of Israel to ask for a king to be like the nations (1 Sam. 12:19-22). Nevertheless, God turned the sinfully instituted kingship into the origin of the Messiah and the kingship of Jesus. Another example would be the sinful marriage of David to Bathsheba. The adultery with her, the murder of her husband, and the marriage “displeased the LORD” (2 Sam. 11:27). So the Lord took the life of the first child of this union (2 Sam. 12:15,

18). But the second child, Solomon, “the LORD loved” and chose him as ruler over his people (2 Sam. 12:24).

Fifth, through repentance and forgiveness on the basis of the blood of Jesus and through the sanctifying work of the promised Holy Spirit, a marriage that was entered sinfully can be consecrated to God, purified from sin, and become a means of grace. It remains less than ideal, but it is not a curse. It may become a great blessing.

MARRIAGE: GREAT AND PRECIOUS, BUT NOT ULTIMATE OR PERMANENT

There is no doubt that Jesus’ demand for faithfulness in marriage is a radical word to our modern culture. Here is a test for his lordship over our lives. His standards are high. They do not assume that this earth is our final home. He makes it very clear that marriage is an ordinance for this age only. “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Matt. 22:30). Therefore, marriage is a brief blessing. A great one, but not an ultimate one. A precious one, but not a permanent one.

This eternal perspective explains why Jesus can be so radical. Never to have married is not a tragedy. Otherwise Jesus’ life is a tragedy. Tragedy is craving the perfect marriage so much that we make a god out of being married. Jesus’ standards are high because marriage does not and should not meet all our needs. It should not be an idol. It should not and cannot take the place of Jesus himself. Marriage is but for a moment. Jesus is for eternity. How we live in our marriages and our singleness will show if Jesus is our supreme treasure.