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Divorce and Oaths (Part 1)



The Life and Teachings of Christ - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses the topic of divorce and oaths, explaining how the Bible emphasizes the importance of faithfulness and the keeping of vows, especially in the context of marriage. He notes that while divorce is not encouraged in the Bible, there are instances where it is allowed, such as in cases of adultery. He stresses the complexity of the issue and the need for individuals to carefully consider the commitments they make and the consequences of breaking them.

Transcript

Let's turn now to Matthew chapter 5 again. I'd like to read and discuss today verses 31 through 37. Jesus said, Furthermore, it has been said, whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.

But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery. Again, you have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not swear falsely, but you shall perform your oath to the Lord. But I say to you, do not swear at all, neither by heaven, for it is God's throne, nor by the earth, for it is His footstool, nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black, but let your yes be yes, and your no, no, for whatever is more than these is from the evil one. Now, we could easily occupy the entire session simply talking about the first two verses that we read, which is about divorce, because there are so many opinions, really, on the subject of divorce, and it's a very hard issue, partly because what we have here in these two verses is almost the entirety of the teaching of Jesus on the subject. There is one other place where he talked about divorce, and that's over in Matthew 19, but there he said almost the same thing, almost word for word.

There's a little different spin on it there, and we'll take a look at that in a moment, but for the most part, Jesus said very little about it. Now, you don't have to say much about it if you're going to make absolute statements. For example, if he simply said, no divorce,

period, he wouldn't have to say anything more.

That would be quite obvious. The problem comes with his saying, except for the cause of fornication, or sexual immorality, which then raises questions, well, okay, divorce apparently is permissible for some cause. Jesus suggested immorality is a valid cause for divorce, but what does he mean by immorality? What kind of immorality? And if there is immorality, and if a divorce takes place, then what about the question of remarriage? Certainly what he goes on to say in verse 32 sounds as if remarriage is out of the question.

And so there's different people who take this different ways. If he was going to say this much about it, one could almost wish that he'd said more to deal with specific cases, because it's not at all clear from just taking what Jesus said, and then adding to that what the apostles had to say on it, as well as what the Old Testament said, and trying to get a clear picture of which principles prevail in different situations. Now, some people find it easy and just say, well, no divorce and remarriage, and that's an easy way to work it out, as long as you never have to counsel anyone who's been divorced and wants to remarry, or you never find yourself divorced, wishing to remarry.

Then, you know, you have the luxury of taking the strictest possible stand. Now, of course, you can take the strictest possible stand, even if you do counsel people who are divorced and want to remarry, or even if you find yourself divorced someday, wishing to remarry. But the question is, is that the stand that Jesus was trying to take? Is that what Jesus was trying to say? Because it would be a shame to consign yourself or somebody else to the remainder of their life being single, if in fact they were the victim of a divorce, if they were a faithful wife or a faithful husband and were abandoned by their spouse, and if, in fact, it was such a case as Jesus would have allowed remarriage, it would be a shame for you to take a stand stricter than that which he would have taken.

Not that it would hurt you if you were doing it on yourself, but if it was your task to counsel others, and you took a stricter stand than Jesus would have intended to, then, of course, you impose on others burdens that perhaps he wouldn't have. That's where this gets sticky. The easiest thing is to never counsel anyone on the subject and never be divorced yourself, and then you'll never have to worry about it.

But in our day and age, that luxury is afforded to fewer and fewer people. That is the luxury of being never divorced and of never having to talk to anyone or give counsel to anyone who is divorced. Therefore, it is a prickly problem.

In fact, in my opinion, the divorce question is the single hardest issue to give biblical counsel about. Not because the Bible gives no counsel about it. The Bible does give counsel about it.

The trouble is that one could seem to get mixed messages from what the Bible says in

one place or what it says in another. For example, this passage seemed to say that there is only one possible grounds for divorce, and that is for the cause of sexual immorality. Now, to complicate that matter, there is a parallel to this in Mark, where he leaves out the expression, except for the cause of sexual immorality, where he just makes the same statement, but without the exception clause.

Which, if you read it in the other version, therefore, it would seem that he does not allow divorce for any cause. But then Matthew, in both places that Jesus speaks about it, here and in Matthew 19, includes such a clause. So then, there is debate going on now.

Did Jesus include that clause and Mark simply left it out? Or did he not include it and Matthew added it to clarify what he thought Jesus meant? And you will find different teachers take different stands on this. I will just tell you where I stand right from the beginning. I do not think that any gospel writer fabricated words and put them into the mouth of Jesus.

I believe that if Matthew said that Jesus included that clause, then Jesus did. And if Mark left it out, that is for whatever reasons, that is his business. We know that many things were left out of the Gospels.

I mean, not everything Jesus said was included, and some of the things that he said were shortened. But I do not think that any of the gospel writers added things that would change the meaning of what Jesus said. And that is what Matthew would be accused of doing if, in fact, Jesus never made this exception clause.

As some people suggest. Well, we need to take a look at that and the next issue in it. Verses 33 through 37 has to do with oaths.

Now, I am using the New King James Version, which has put, this particular edition has put, subtitles over the different paragraphs. I do not know how many of you have versions that do that. But the New King James editors have, over verses 31 and 32, have put the subtitle, Marriage is Sacred and Binding.

And over the next verses, 33 through 37, Jesus forbids oaths. Now, that would seem to be good titles for that. But I understand the issue to be totally different in both cases.

It is true that marriage is sacred and binding. But I am not sure that that is what Jesus is trying to get across here. I think he does in chapter 19.

He approaches it from a different angle, I think, in chapter 19, where he was approached by the Pharisees at the very beginning of that chapter. Perhaps this is the time we should look at it. And he was asked, in verse 3, 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? That is Matthew 19, verse 3. And Jesus said, 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.

A quote from Genesis 2, verse 24. So then, Jesus says, 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? And Jesus 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. 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. His disciples said to him, If such is the case of man with his wife, it is better not to marry. We won't go on, although he continues to discuss something similar.

Here, where Jesus teaches against divorce in Matthew 19, it is clearly with a stress on the sanctity and permanence of marriage. He says, Well, didn't you read how God made things in the first place? He made a man and a woman, he joined them together, made them one flesh. That's an act of God.

Marriage is an act of God. Now, it may be that individuals make their own choices, but once they have made their choice, and once they have made a vow before God and consummated their vows, they are in the sight of God joined. And therefore it is not the prerogative of any man, a judge, a government, or anyone else, to say that that marriage is broken.

Man makes a covenant before God with a woman when he marries her and God has joined them together. And Jesus said, Do not let man put it apart. So very clear where Jesus is teaching against divorce in Matthew 19, he is saying it is because of the sanctity of marriage.

But the context of Matthew 5, I take to be a little different and a different spin on this. Because as I pointed out in our last session, I believe that in the six examples Jesus gives here of instances where the Jews, his disciples, had heard certain things taught by the rabbis, but where Jesus wished to modify or to add to what they had already heard, I believe two of the examples he gives stress the need for justice, two stress the need for mercy, and two stress the need for faithfulness. These are the three things that Jesus said elsewhere.

In Matthew 23, 23 Jesus said those are the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faithfulness. I am persuaded, as I pointed out in our last session, that the first two examples, you shall not kill and you shall not commit adultery, and the things he said afterwards were chosen to illustrate the fact that God is concerned about justice. And when he gives commands like don't kill and don't commit adultery, it is because

those actions are an injustice.

And he wants you to be a just person. If you are to be a loving person, you must necessarily be just in your dealings with people. And Jesus goes on in those places to point out that there is even lesser ways you could offend God with injustice even lesser than actual murder and adultery.

Your very attitude, your very mind games that you play, the way you talk to your neighbor, the way you do business with your neighbor. If you don't conduct yourself toward your neighbor in accord with the principles of justice, then you are not loving your neighbor and you are in violation of the same principle that you would be in violation of if you committed adultery or murder. Because those are bad because they are also injustices.

Now, on the two examples we've just read of, divorce and the taking of oaths, I believe here we have Jesus sharing a concern for faithfulness. Faithfulness, as we have studied on another occasion when we were studying character, is simply the quality of integrity. It's the quality of being a person who is honest and committed to staying honest.

Now, to say one is honest or is a faithful person, it means that they will not say anything that they believe to be false. Furthermore, it goes beyond that. It also says that if they commit themselves to something, they will not break that commitment because that is to go against their word.

There are two ways to be unfaithful. One is to lie, to be an unfaithful witness, to testify that something is true and then when you know it's not true. The other is to testify that you will do a certain thing and then not to do it.

In both cases you've told a lie. One was deliberately, but in the second case where you make a commitment, at the time you make a commitment it may be that you intend to keep it, but because of some consideration you find it difficult to keep. Nearly impossible maybe, or maybe even impossible in some cases.

If that's the case, then obviously you're not entirely at fault except you shouldn't have made such a commitment if you didn't know you could carry it out. But where you make a commitment that is simply hard to carry out, a faithful person will certainly carry it out. We have seen on other occasions what the psalm says about this in Psalm 15, about the righteous person who will dwell in the presence of the Lord.

It says in Psalm 15, Lord, who may abide in your tabernacle, who may dwell in your holy hill? He who walks uprightly and works righteousness, who speaks the truth in his heart. He who does not backbite with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor does take up a reproach against his friend. In whose eyes a vile person is despised, but he honors those who fear the Lord.

He swears to his own hurt and does not change. Now, that line, he swears to his own hurt but doesn't change, simply means that he makes an oath, he makes a commitment, and then it turns out to be to his own hurt. No one swears deliberately to his own hurt.

No one makes oaths to do something that he thinks he... Well, I mean, I'm not saying no one ever does, but it's uncommon. Most oaths are not taken with a mind to say, well, I'm going to take this oath even though it's going to smart, it's going to hurt me. Most people take oaths which they feel they can fulfill without... with a minimum of pain and sacrifice.

And, for instance, marriage vows are that kind. Every couple that makes vows of faithfulness to each other for life, till death do us part, intends to keep those vows. Well, I shouldn't say every couple does, but I think the majority do.

But they don't expect it to be too painful. If you expected a marriage to be painful, you wouldn't enter into it. You normally don't marry someone that you know going into it that this is going to be hell on earth being married to this person.

You usually choose somebody that you think is going to be fun to be with, enjoyable, easy to love, and someone who will reciprocate your love. But, as you know, many marriages don't turn out that way, even though that's exactly what people expect them to be. When they get married, it turns out otherwise.

A person who swears to his own hurt is one who makes a commitment and later finds out it hurts. It hurts to keep it. It hurts to keep it more than he thought.

It's more costly than he figured. Now, the righteous man who will dwell in the holy hill of God swears to his own hurt, but doesn't retract it, doesn't change. Now, anyone who is of poor character and low-level integrity and an unfaithful person can make a vow and then break it as soon as it becomes hard to keep it.

But the righteous person, the faithful person, is the one who keeps his vows even when it's painful to keep them. He doesn't change. He doesn't back away.

He doesn't say, I'm sorry, I didn't know how difficult this was going to be. And every divorce is the product of somebody failing in this characteristic. There has never, to my mind, as near as I can think, there's never been a divorce that's ever occurred without somebody violating this principle.

Because every marriage begins with an oath before God or at least before men. And by the way, an oath before man is binding also as we'll find out when Jesus goes on here about swearing by your head and swearing by heaven and earth and so forth. An oath is made.

And whether it's made consciously to God or whether it's made simply to a judge or

justice of the peace or something, it is still made before God. It's still an oath that God sees, hears, and expects people to keep. And they have sworn.

Now, divorces take place because people have sworn to their own hurt. They swear that they're going to stay faithful to each other. They take an oath, but they find out later that it's not as happy a life as they thought it would be.

Or maybe it was happy and it's gotten sour. Or maybe they still, you know, it's not so bad, but their wife is not as attractive to them as someone else is or something, you know. And for some reason or another, staying faithful to that oath has become a chore, has become difficult, a burden.

And divorce occurs when people who have sworn to their own hurt change. Now, the righteous person swears to his own hurt and doesn't change. But if you swear and change, that is, if you say, I will do something, and then you change your mind and don't do it, you are unfaithful.

That is unfaithfulness and is unloving, obviously. And the reason for that is because when you make a commitment of that sort or any other kind of commitment, but this is a major one, a marriage commitment, when you say, okay, I will forsake all others and cleave only to you, and she says, I will forsake all others and cleave to you, then both parties put out of their mind any other options. Now, what happens only too often is that, and many times it's the man who's at fault here, of course, I guess many times it's the women too, but it can be both, but it seems fairly typical for it to be a man that his wife ceases to be thrilling to him after he sees what she's like when she goes to bed in curlers and wakes up without makeup on or whatever it is.

You know, that makes her different after marriage than before. And he's still maybe working in the office and there's cuties, you know, running around half-dressed, you know, who are secretaries and things like that and flirtatious, batting their eyes at him. And he begins to say, well, you know, I'm, you know, I really, I was hasty marrying this woman that I married, you know.

And he begins to think he'd be a lot happier with somebody else. And the more he thinks he'll be happier with someone else and the more he nurtures that thought, the more unhappy he is with the one he's with. And the more he begins to feel like he's made an oath to his hurt, to his own hurt.

Now, if he's a wicked, unfaithful man, he divorces his wife and maybe takes off with someone else. But he breaks his oath to his wife. In the meantime, his wife has let other options go by.

If she'd known he wasn't going to be faithful, she wouldn't have made a vow to him in the first place. But in her being faithful to him, there may have been better men than

him that she would have had the option of, but she'd put them out of her consideration. Because she's been faithful to her oath.

So the one who is unfaithful, who has made a promise to be faithful, is greatly wronging the person who's trusted them. And that's why it's very offensive to God for people to do that because it's extremely unloving. I think I may have told you a time when I was running some discipleship schools in Santa Cruz, they were only summer-long programs, three-month programs.

And since they were not year-round, it was not possible to afford to maintain facilities year-round for a school that was only in the summertime. So I lived largely with other people during the year, and then when summer would come around, I would rent some facility large enough to accommodate the students. We usually had about 25 students per summer.

And I would rent a different place every year, whatever was available. And one year, I realized I was going to need, well, a friend of mine was going to Hawaii and he wanted to rent out his house for the summer. And I looked at it, it was a nice large house, I knew he was going to need a lot of room, and so I rented it.

But it was not large enough for everyone. I told him I'd rent it. It wasn't yet summertime when all this transpired, but I told him I would rent his house for the summer.

And then I realized that we were going to need a second house as well to accommodate all the people that were coming. So I started looking for a second house as well. I figured I'd rent his and another one.

What we found was two houses right next to each other with a courtyard between them that was actually a situation a little bit like this one here. Ideal for the whole school. His house was way across town.

I thought to have half the student body half across town and when they could all be accommodated here would make sense. But I couldn't afford to rent both of those houses that were next to each other and his too. Now I did secure the houses that were next to each other because I knew I wanted those in any case.

I went back to my friend and said, I found something better for our purposes. Would you mind if I didn't rent your house? And he got real upset with me. He said, Brother, I counted on you.

You said you're going to rent it and I've had quite a few people come by who were willing to rent it from me and I said, No, it's already rented. You've inconvenienced me by saying you'd rent it so I expect you to keep your word. I said, Well, okay.

I mean, I could have just said, Well, you know, up yours. But I mean, that's not the way

Christians are supposed to behave. So I said, Okay.

He was right. He was right. I mean, I would have been in the wrong.

He was right. I had made a commitment to him and he was counting on me and if I bailed on him, it would have been a wrong done to him because if no one else came along to rent his house in the meantime, he would have missed opportunities to rent it to someone who would have taken it. So anyway, I said, Okay, I'll take it.

I'll rent it from you. Although I had no idea how we'd pay for it. I knew we wouldn't have the finances for it so I just thought, Well, I'll do the right thing and God will provide.

That's what living by faith means to do what's right and leave the consequences with God. But I said, I said, But if anyone else comes along who'd like to rent your house, could you let him know it's available? He said he'd do that and sure enough, someone else came along and did rent his house so I was out of there but I was willing to do what appeared to be impossible to pay for all the houses even though we were only going to use two. I wasn't even going to use this.

I'd just pay him for it and not use it but the Lord got me out of that but I had sworn to my own hurt and fortunately, I was, God got me out of it but I would have had to keep that commitment and the only way I could avoid it is by being unfaithful and I would rather be financially hurt than be unfaithful. It's important to God that you do the loving thing and you cannot do the loving thing if you're unfaithful because again, whenever you make a commitment, people count on that. That's what commitments are about.

People won't count on you at all if you don't commit yourself to anything but if you commit yourself, people say, Okay, that's covered. Now I can take care of this other business and then when you bail on it, then they've got to go back to square one and try to find someone to do the thing you were supposed to do or they've put themselves out because you promised to do something and you don't do it. We've had this in previous years and I don't want to put any trips on anyone who may end up leaving before the year's over but I'll just let you know that when students leave here before the year's over, especially if quite a few do, I don't expect that to happen this year but we've had some years where we just had flaky people and quite a few people leave before the year's over, it really puts a pinch not only on the school but on the other students who stay because we've got a certain budget we're counting on.

The room and board, we wouldn't have had the school if we'd known we were going to have so few when it was over but we count on them, they say they're coming for the year and if they leave, then the money they would've paid for room and board was going to help enhance the meals and stuff for the rest of the students and everybody suffers for it. Now what you have to realize is when you make commitments, you can be like everybody else or you can be like God. God is faithful and that's the point here.

The point of the sermon on the mount is to say that God wants people not just to avoid murder and adultery, he wants people to be like him. He wants people to have character like his. He is just, he is also faithful and if he is not faithful, then we can't count on anything he's ever said.

If God swears to his own hurt and changes, then how can any of us hope to be saved because when God swore that he'd save you, maybe you've turned out to be more of a problem than he cares to live with. Maybe he says, I think I'll cancel that promise I made to you. Obviously our salvation is based on God's faithfulness and God wants us to be like him in that respect, in terms of character.

Now that is what underlies the concern here about oaths and marriage. Marriage is an oath. It is one of the most normal oaths that people take, even Christians do.

There were other oaths in the Jewish society and that's what Jesus is referring to in verses 33 through 37. We'll talk about that separately. But in both of these cases, Jesus is talking about being a faithful person who does what they say they'll do.

And when he says whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery, he is not abrogating the law that he has said earlier. It has been said whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. Jesus quotes Moses here and also in Matthew 19, which we saw a moment ago, also the same thing that Moses taught is brought up.

If you'll look at Matthew 19 again, when Jesus indicated that what God has joined together man should not separate, verse 7, Matthew 19, 7, they said to him, why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce and to put her away? And 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. Notice the verb.

They say Moses commanded to give a certificate of divorce. Jesus said, no, Moses permitted you to. That's a little different than commanding you to.

You're not commanded to divorce your wife, but because of the hardness of heart you were permitted to. But that has never been what God would prefer for anyone to do. God would prefer for marriages to adhere, to stick together because he joins them together and it is a wrong for man to put them apart.

Now I've heard some preachers say, I think quite wrongly, that what God has joined together no man can put asunder. I disagree with that. If that was the case, Jesus wouldn't have to command that no man should put asunder.

He says, do not let any man put asunder what God has joined together. Obviously that is saying that God has joined something together. And though men are capable of dividing what God joined, they should not do so.

It is wrong to do so, but it doesn't say it's impossible to do so. It can be done. And wherever a divorce takes place, there is somebody guilty of something.

There's never been a divorce that's happened where somebody didn't sin. But I would disagree with those who say that both parties are equally guilty in divorce. I've heard this frequently from people teaching about divorce who obviously don't have much first-hand experience with it.

They say, well, there's no innocent parties in divorce. Everyone's equally guilty. There's no innocent parties.

Both are guilty of divorce. Not really. In fact, not at all.

It can be that both parties are guilty, but I don't think it usually is. Usually one party wants the divorce and the other party doesn't. And the party that doesn't want the divorce and doesn't seek a divorce cannot be held responsible for it.

Now, when they say there's always two guilty parties, what they mean is that no spouse is perfect. And therefore, let's take my own case. I've been divorced.

I was not a perfect husband, and I'm not a perfect husband now. And I seriously doubt that I'll ever be a perfect husband. But I am not guilty of the divorce that I was made subject to because I did not approve of it.

I do not approve of divorce now. Never did. Never will.

But I didn't have much to say about it. The courts granted my wife a divorce without grounds. She had no grounds.

In California, they have this nebulous category called irreconcilable differences, which just means someone doesn't want to work on the relationship anymore. And so they granted her a divorce. She took off with someone else, later married someone else.

Now, for someone to say, well, there's two guilty parties there. Well, that's only saying the same thing as saying that every human being in the world is imperfect, and therefore there's five billion guilty parties. But the fact of the matter is that being imperfect is not grounds for divorce.

And while I was not the perfect husband, she was not the perfect wife, neither of those factors necessitated a divorce to take place. The party who decides for the divorce, or at least decides to break up the marriage, that person is guilty. The person who is seeking to be faithful and seeking to keep the marriage intact and keep their vows even to their own hurt.

By the way, in my case, I know intimately how that can be because my wife was committing adultery for the last year and a half of our marriage and not secretive about

it. And I wasn't. And I knew it.

And she knew it. And, you know, keeping my vows to her was hard. I really believed, and I still believe, that I had grounds for divorce, but I didn't take it because I felt like that wouldn't honor the Lord.

I had made a vow and even though I had technically, I believe, according to the Sermon on the Mount, I had technically grounds for divorce, I felt that God didn't want me to be technical. He wanted me to keep my vows as best I could and do the loving thing and forgive and so forth. So that's what I kept doing until she divorced me.

But the point I'm making is you cannot say that both parties in divorce are equally guilty. They can be. If a husband and wife both sit down and say, listen, you tired of me? Yeah, I'm tired of you too.

Why don't we get a divorce? Okay, let's do it. Okay, then both are equally guilty then and no doubt that happens sometimes. I've known of a few cases like that, congenial divorces.

But in that case, it's not that there's no crook or no criminal, it's they're both criminals because they're both saying, I made a vow but I don't want to keep it. How about you? No, you don't want to keep yours either? Okay, let's both be liars and get a divorce. Let's both make ourselves liars because anyone who gets a divorce from another party or anyone who breaks up a marriage they've entered into makes themselves a liar because they swore before God and witnesses that they would never do such a thing as that for their entire life.

And therefore, all divorce constitutes unfaithfulness. Now, in saying that, I want to clarify something because Jesus indicated that sexual immorality on the part of one party is grounds for divorce. He says, he frames it to the men because his disciples were men that he was speaking to, he says, if a man divorces his wife except for the cause of sexual immorality, which suggests that if he divorces her because of her sexual immorality, what he has to say doesn't apply.

But if he divorces her for any other reason than sexual immorality, then he causes her to commit adultery and her marriage partner of the next marriage to commit adultery. That implies that there are grounds for divorce, but why would there be grounds for divorce? If a man has made a vow and made a covenant with a woman, why should her sexual immorality have anything to do with his keeping it or not? Well, because sexual immorality is a life-joining act. Sex is a life-joining act.

Paul said that if a man is joined to a prostitute, he becomes one flesh with her. Even according to the way that it's stated in Genesis 2.24, the two become one flesh, Paul quoted that verse in 1 Corinthians 6 and said that this applies even if a man goes to a

prostitute. Now, obviously, there's something spiritual, something sacred, and something life-joining about the sexual activity between a husband and wife.

It is that which seals the covenant. And when a husband or wife, I believe, goes outside of that covenant and has sexual relations with somebody other than their spouse, that person has done something that is tantamount to divorce. If the faithful party later goes out and divorces them on those grounds, that person can't be blamed.

That is, the innocent party can't be blamed because they sought a divorce. The other party is the one who created a divorce. The marriage was violated.

The covenant was violated by the party who commits sexual immorality. Just as it was consummated by the sex act, a sex act outside of the marriage can break the covenant. This is clearly taught in the Old Testament with reference to God himself.

God said that Israel was his wife. And he told her on many occasions, Jeremiah, I think, chapter 2 is one of those places, but there are many other places, Hosea, the book of Hosea, the first three chapters, and many other places. In Deuteronomy, Moses warned of this, that if Israel would go out and worship other gods, that would be like a wife committing adultery against her husband, and that he would divorce her for that eventually.

And that's because they broke covenant with him. Now, if a wife breaks covenant with her husband by going out and sleeping with another man and he divorces her, he is not breaking the covenant, he's not committing adultery, he's not the cause of that situation, she is, she broke it. Likewise, if the reverse is the case.

The point is, even God himself saw himself capable of seeking a divorce and obtaining a divorce from Israel on the grounds of what was the equivalent of adultery. Now, this raises some interesting questions when we bring God into the picture. Because what Jesus seems to say, Jesus in his teaching does not seem to allow for divorce, or at least for remarriage.

And yet, we have to ask ourselves, how does this fit with God's character? He himself allowed divorce and remarriage in the Old Testament. He didn't like it. He didn't like divorce.

He allowed men to divorce their wives because of their hardness of hearts, but he didn't allow them to murder because of the hardness of their hearts. He didn't allow them to get away with even Sabbath-breaking because of the hardness of their hearts, or, you know, disobedience to their parents. And yet, he allowed them divorce because of the hardness of their hearts.

And this suggests something. It suggests to me, at least, that divorce does not stand above all other sins as the most heinous, even if a person does it sinfully. Now, I do not

believe in divorce.

I believe if a person is divorced on the grounds of sexual immorality, I can't fault them for that, but I wouldn't even counsel them to divorce on those grounds. I don't counsel anyone to divorce on any grounds. Divorce always is more complicated than staying in the marriage.

Well, I don't know if I should say always. If a man's, you know, a murderer or something, it's hard to say that the woman... Well, let's just... I don't want to speak in over-generalizations, but my conviction is that I have never met a case yet where divorce was a solution to the problem. It was a relief, in some cases, to the man or to the woman, but it created problems of its own.

Divorce creates new problems that weren't there before the divorce. And I do not... I'm against divorce, but I want to make this clear. Divorce is not treated in the Bible with the same... as the same magnitude of a sin, even when it's a wrongfully acquired divorce, as many other sins, and yet in the Church, in many cases, divorce is practically the unforgivable sin.

There are churches that will never forgive a divorced party, especially if they're remarried. And there are others who, though they will forgive them in the sense of allowing the membership in the Church, they will never allow them to be in the ministry. I may have told you about my friend who was in... Well, I don't want to tell you which denomination, but it's a denomination that does not allow divorced and remarried people to be in the ministry.

They just don't... They won't ordain people with that in their background. Even if the divorce and remarriage took place before they were saved and they've been converted since then, they still won't. Which to me, it seems bizarre.

I mean, it's like... It's like holding something in their past against them enough not to let them in the ministry, but not enough to keep them out of the Church. They'll let them come to Church and pay their tithes, but they're not a full Christian, you know, available for every role in the Church. But my friend who actually was in this situation, he lost his marriage.

His wife left him and married someone else. He was in this particular denomination, and he's a preacher. And he was allowed to be a preacher in the denomination until he remarried.

But when he remarried, of course, he couldn't preach in that denomination anymore. And he told me, he said it's an amazing thing. He said, if I had murdered my wife and repented and married someone else, I could be a preacher in this denomination.

Because murder is not treated as an unforgivable sin. And since my wife would then be

dead, they would not forbid me to remarry. But if I'm a faithful husband, never cheat on my wife, keep my vows to her, and then she runs off on me, and I remarry, then I'm stigmatized for the rest of my life.

That is the way churches have handled this divorce question in some cases. To me, it's not consistent with biblical revelation at all. The fact is, divorce is an act of unfaithfulness.

It's a wrong thing to do. It's an unloving thing, and Jesus never smiles upon it. But it doesn't mean that when somebody has done it, even wrongly, that there's no forgiveness and no restoration for them.

One of the hardest things about knowing what to do with divorced people is that if they're divorced and not yet remarried, the question is, do you make them hold out for the return of their spouse? I mean, let's put it this way. If you got married, your spouse committed adultery, let's say, and you divorced them, and you and your former spouse were now both still single, and you now felt that, or maybe you even divorced your spouse without grounds. Let's say they didn't commit adultery.

Let's just say your spouse displeased you, and you divorced them. And since then you've repented, and you and your spouse are both still single. It would seem that repentance from that would mean that you seek to restore that marriage.

Because their repentance does involve a desire for restitution. You can't just say, well, I'm going to backslide for a few weeks, divorce my wife, and then repent, and be a single man again, or a single woman again. No, if you repent, that means that you consider that what you did is wrong, and any restitution you can make to make it right again will be what you're committed to doing.

So if a person has divorced their spouse wrongfully, I don't think that there's any proof of genuine repentance until they have at least offered to come back, offered to rejoin with their spouse. Now, what if their spouse has remarried? Or what if they have remarried? Or both? This gets very sticky. Some people say, well, if your spouse is remarried and you're not, then you just have to wait until they're widowed or something, and then try to get it back together, or just stay single.

Others have said, even if you're remarried, you should divorce your second spouse, because it's an adulterous relationship in the eyes of God, and you should wait for your next spouse, your former spouse, to come back, even if they're married at the time, you've got to wait for them to come to a place where they want to divorce their second mate, or they are widowed. I mean, there's some real complicated, weird stuff, in my opinion, weird stuff, that's taught in the name of biblical Christianity on this subject. And one of the things that is confusing is that Jesus said so little on it, and yet there's so many different situations.

Now, what Jesus did say, let's look at what he did say, that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality, okay, let's stop there for a moment. If a man divorces his wife, he initiates it, and it's for any reason other than her own prior unfaithfulness. Now, to show how complicated this deal is, some people don't even think that her unfaithfulness is an issue here.

Some think that sexual immorality here just means she turned out not to be a virgin when he married her. That he married her thinking she was a virgin, and then when he married her, he found out she wasn't a virgin, and because of her prior fornication, he can now annul the marriage or get out of it because he was misled by her into thinking she was a virgin. In other words, they would say even immorality after marriage is not taken into consideration here.

There's no grounds for divorce after marriage. They say what Jesus means by sexual immorality is prior to the marriage. That's just another complication that people have to sort out.

But as I understand it, Jesus is saying if a man has a wife and she has not committed adultery, she has not been unfaithful, then his act of divorcing her is an act of unfaithfulness on his part. On the other hand, if she has already been unfaithful, she has smashed the covenant by her behavior, then he's at liberty to either forgive her or get out of it. I mean, he can divorce her or leave the situation without being guilty himself of breaking the covenant.

She's the one who broke it. It's broken. It's gone unless they want to reestablish it.

And that's how I understand this. Now, the effects of divorcing a wife without proper grounds is what gets really difficult here. He says a man who does this causes her to commit adultery and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.

Now, compare that with the very similar but slightly different wording of Matthew 19. In Matthew 19 verse 9, I say to you, whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality so far that's word for word the same as Matthew 5. But then he says, and marries another he commits adultery. And whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.

Now, both statements end with the statement that the one who marries her that is divorced commits adultery. But the principal difference between Matthew 5 and 19 in this case is that in Matthew 5 he says the man who does this causes her to commit adultery. In Matthew 19 he says if this man divorces her without grounds and remarries he commits adultery.

And in both cases the man who marries her commits adultery. So, you've got a lot of people involved in this deal and they're all adulterers if things aren't done in the biblical

if biblical principle is not observed. Now, in my opinion the except for the cause of sexual immorality is a condition that affects the entire teaching.

In other words, he could say whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery causes her to commit adultery and anyone who marries her commits adultery except if the divorce in the first place was on the grounds of immorality in which case he's not committing adultery by divorcing her and he's not causing her to commit adultery by divorcing her because she's already done it and of course there is the possibility of her even afterwards receiving forgiveness and being perhaps in a legitimate marriage later. Do you know there is? Look at what the law says back in Deuteronomy 24. This is the law that Jesus is alluding to or quoting actually.

He says, You've heard that it was said if a man divorces his wife let him give her a writing of divorce. Look at what it actually says. In Deuteronomy 24 the opening verses.

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. Notice it doesn't say he has to but it says and he writes her a certificate of divorce puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house. 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 to be 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 has given you as an inheritance. Now this is a strange law because it basically indicates if a man divorces his wife and she marries someone else and he divorces her or dies then she can't go back and be with her first husband even if he wants her back. The reasons for this have been speculated about and I don't have time to get into it in detail now but one thing I'd like to show it does not say that she cannot remarry.

It doesn't say that if he divorces her that she can't remarry although it does perhaps say that she has been defiled perhaps by remarrying it's not clear on that matter. But then it's not clear at all either on what uncleanness means. Divorce on the grounds of uncleanness it says in verse 1. He has found some uncleanness in her.

He divorces her. Now he permits this. He doesn't command it.

He nowhere says that the man is within his rights in doing this. He just says if a man does this and she goes and marries someone else he doesn't say she's within her rights in doing that either.