

## Marriage-Divorce-Remarriage: A Review #2

### Paul's Teaching

Much that is included in this series is an elaboration or revision of material from previous essays. To better understand this lesson, it is important to read FR 307. In it I asked if the Corinthian disciples would have been safe in following Paul's instructions concerning marriage. His teachings differed from those of Jesus and were much less restrictive.

Away from the Jewish setting of Jesus' teachings, Paul offered apostolic instruction to the disciples of Greek culture in Corinth (1 Cor. 7). Yet he did not refer to Jesus' teachings or to the Law that Jesus was explaining in his Sermon on the Mount. Some today will not baptize a person or accept him in their fellowship without first passing judgment on his marriage status. Paul did not follow that procedure! He had not indoctrinated the converts in Corinth about marriage relationships, else they would have already known his teachings and their letter would have been unnecessary. He encouraged, "*Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called*" (v. 20).

*"Dear Paul; In the new relationship into which you have led us women, we readily repudiate the local religion served by prostitute priestesses in the temple of Venus. We recognize the degrading nature of such sexual experiences for both women and men, but how are we to look upon marriage and conjugality now? May we continue in these sexual relationships while belonging to Christ?"*

Some such questions were asked the apostle by the Corinthians. If we had the exact questions, we might better understand his answers. I propose the above questions in view of Paul's preface to his answers, that preface being in I Corinthians 6. Commonly, a gap is left between the sixth and seventh chapters, but let us consider the possibility that Paul is laying some ground work in the sixth chapter for his answers in the seventh.

But let us repeat this observation before we proceed. Why were they inquiring of Paul? They did not have copies of the Gospels to tell of Jesus' teachings on the subject, and those who had preached to them had not taught them, else they would not be needing answers from Paul. In view of this, it may be startling to learn that Paul never quoted Jesus' statements from the Gospels in giving his answers!

In Chapter 6:9, Paul lists sexual sins with idolatry, no doubt, because they were very much a part of the religion in their community with their temple supported by a thousand prostitute priestesses. Although some Corinthians might have argued that God made both our passionate sexual nature and also the means of satisfying it, hence "*all things are lawful,*" Paul countered that "*The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.*" They had become members of Christ who must not make themselves members of a prostitute, lest they become one with her and the temple that sponsored her. They had become one with Christ. Never could the Christian female be a priestess of their temple nor could the male become joined with the prostitute and what her temple represented for they themselves had become temples -- temples in which the Spirit of God lived. To become one with a prostitute would be a sin against one's own body which had become a temple of God.

Could sexual expression have any place in these new temples? Yes, for God intended that each should have a conjugal partner. One spouse was not to refuse the other on the grounds that he or she was now joined to Christ making it inappropriate to become joined to another person. The unmarried, having no rightful sexual fulfillment, tend to be aflame with passion. God recognizes this, and he does not deny any person the right of a spouse. So, Paul says that the unmarried may marry. *“To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.”* Agreed, sexual fulfillment is not the loftiest motivation for marriage, but Paul was dealing with the point raised by their questions rather than the broader scope of marriage.

Who are these unmarried ones? There are three kinds of unmarried persons: (1) those who have never been married, (2) widows, and (3) divorced persons (Compare the use of *agamos*, unmarried/single, in 7:8-11). Now, wait a minute, Paul! You don't mean that divorced people may marry; you must mean "they should marry, except for the divorced!" Paul makes no exceptions. Let the unmarried marry.

Paul continues, *“To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband) – and that the husband should not divorce his wife”* (v. 10-11). Whether Paul learned the Lord's will from Mark 10:11 or by revelation is uncertain. It is an ambivalent statement: “she should not separate – but if she does.”

Do not verses 10-11 deny what I have just written about verses 8-9? No. We must go back to the context and the questions that were asked. This convert to Christ feels that, since she is joined to Christ as one with him, even as a sexual partner in a symbolic sense, she cannot be joined conjugally with her husband also. She feels strongly that she should refuse him sexually or even separate from him. Paul discourages that but, if she should separate on that ground, she must not use it as a pious excuse to rid herself of her husband in order to take another. To prove her sincerity of purpose she must remain single or be reconciled to her husband.

Paul's instructions here are not concerning failed marriages, abused partners, desertions, or the tragic mistakes of young people in which cases the unity of marriage is already destroyed except for the legal divorcing. The destroying of the union of two whom God joined together is the sin, not the remarriage.

Paul assured them of the sanctity of their marriages even though they might be joined to unbelievers. Sexual relations with a spouse were not immoral or idolatrous even though the spouse might be a pagan. If the unbelieving partner, in retaliation to the companion's acceptance of Christ, chose to separate from the believer, the brother or sister was not bound. That would put such a disciple back into the unmarried state covered in verses 8--9 where he or she would be free to marry again.

In this teaching, Paul does not call upon anyone to divorce a mate. They were to remain in the state in which they were called. They did not have to try to change their circumcised- uncircumcised, slave-free, or married-unmarried state in order to be joined with Christ as a temple of the Spirit. *“So, brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God.”* None were "living in adultery." To our surprise, Paul does not even mention adultery in his teaching about marriage and divorce in this context.

In verses 27-28 Paul further advises: "*Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you should marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she has not sinned*" (NASV). Paul, you really can't be saying that, can you?

We miss the impact of that passage because of pre-set ideas and vague translations. The word that Paul uses is not *free*, but the Greek *luo* which Vine defines as *to loose, unbind, release*. In order for a man to be loosed, unbound, or released from a wife, he must necessarily have been bound to one previously and then loosed by divorce or her death.

This passage is expressed clearly in the NEB: "*Are you bound in marriage? Do not seek a dissolution. Has your marriage been dissolved? Do not seek a wife. If, however, you do marry, there is nothing wrong with it; and if a virgin marries, she has done no wrong.*" The virgin cannot be the "loosed" person to whom Paul refers. Marriages are dissolved by death and divorce. Paul makes no distinction here in granting the privilege of marriage.

Jesus' explanations concerning marriage and divorce were an elaboration of the meanings of a legal code, the Law of Moses. Paul does not mention that legal code. Paul's teachings were to Gentile disciples who had accepted the grace of God in Christ. Even though he does not seek to bind the Law upon them, his teachings would foster the same principles upholding the sanctity of marriage that the Law was intended to promote.

God hates divorce. God also hates lying, slander, fornication, murder, and all other sins. He surely hates any sin that brings about divorce even as he hates malice that causes murder and lust that causes fornication. God's willingness to forgive the penitent of the sins which developed into divorce give no more approval or license to divorce than his willingness to forgive lust gives approval or license for fornication, or his willingness to forgive malice gives approval or license to murder.

Although any failed marriage brings trauma and distress, I do not believe that it carries a lifelong irreversible sentence of celibacy, loneliness, guilt, and despair. Paul did not teach that. Sincerely pious men may bind heavy burdens of guilt and despair which they are reluctant to lift with their little finger, but Jesus has promised, "*My yoke is easy, and my burden is light!*" To the penitent, God's grace offers forgiveness, new beginnings, and opportunity for new-found happiness. Otherwise, none of us would have any hope!

□

(Cecil Hook: March 2006)

*"I believe; help my unbelief!"* (Mark 9:24).

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**FR 311**

*This was originally meant for #2. It is based on FR 22.*

In the Sermon on the Mount beginning in Matthew 5, Jesus was explaining and illustrating to the Jews under the Law the principles of the various laws which they were evading by their traditional teachings. He was not relaxing or altering an iota or a dot of any commandment. Neither was he formulating new laws for all time. He was addressing the Jews in his audience who were bound by the Law of Moses rather than addressing you and me. Since we are continuing our thoughts concerning divorce and remarriage, we will look only at Jesus' statements relating to that subject.

In verse 27, Jesus stated, "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*" In my great wisdom (!), I have often passed along the observation that the Ten Commandments did not forbid lust -- but only the sexual act -- and that Jesus added the stricture of lust. That was dumb!

One commits adultery by adulterating. To adulterate is to corrupt, debase, or make impure. An adulterer is one who adulterates a marriage. So this command involves a married person. Jesus' statement here has commonly been applied to youthful (and older!) persons who have normal sexual attraction toward females, but that is not what Jesus was talking about. The words *woman* and *wife* are the same word (*gune*) in the Greek, being translated at the discretion of the translators. A Commandment also warned, "*You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.*" The words *covet* and *lust* are also the same word (*epithumeo*) in the Greek. So, Jesus was saying "whoever looks upon a wife -- his neighbor's wife -- to covet/lust." Jesus is only repeating the Law in saying that one should not covet his neighbor's wife. Now, let us go a bit further.

Looking into Matthew 5: 31-32; 19:9; Mark 10:10; and Luke 16:18, we will notice the familiar words, "*And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity (fornication in some versions), and marries another, commits adultery.*" We see Jesus' picture develop more clearly, all in the context of the Ten Commandments. A married man becomes enamored with another man's wife, divorces his wife, and marries her. When the conjunction "and" connects two actions, often in common usage the first action is taken in order to take the second. Consider these illustrations: "He chased the thief and retrieved his wallet."; "Whoever argues his case and wins will be happy." In countless expressions like these, the "and" is understood to mean "in order to." In harmony with Jesus' explanation concerning these laws, we can understand him as meaning, "Whoever divorces his wife (except for unchastity/fornication) *in order to* marry another, commits adultery." He was not commenting on all failed marriages but the case of a man purposely divorcing his wife in order to marry another man's wife whom he has coveted/lusted after.

### **Limited Application**

Since Jesus was speaking of their familiar Law, is it not reasonable to conclude that he was limiting the "except for unchastity/fornication" to the circumstance as it applied under that very law? When Jesus mentioned unchastity as "grounds for divorce," he was not introducing a new element. In Deuteronomy 22:12-21, the Law declared that if a man took a wife and then did not find in her "the tokens of virginity," after due procedure, she should be put out and stoned to death. Even though this is referring to premarital fornication (she had not adulterated marriage), the context indicates that it was promiscuity or prostitution. This provision related to premarital sin. We are doubly presumptuous in applying it to adulteration of an existing marriage and then applying it to

us who were never under the law. We contradict both the Law and Jesus when we declare that unchastity is the only grounds making divorce and remarriage permissible. Unchastity was not grounds for divorce but for stoning to death! This must be limited to the context. Consider further.

In Chapter 24:1-4, it is stated that when a man takes a wife and is disappointed with her because he has found some indecency / unseemly thing in her, he may give her divorce papers so she may remarry. This indecency is not fornication, for the penalty of stoning is not prescribed. In fact, she is given protection by a bill of divorce. Jesus explained (Matt. 19:3-9) that even though God did not have such in mind from the beginning, because of hardness of heart, he made provision for the legal divorce and her remarriage. If the man were to drive her out without divorce, she would not be free to remarry. That would be extremely hard-hearted and cruel, for in those times a woman found life very difficult without a supportive husband. That merciful provision allowed her to resume a normal life. So, proof of promiscuity as a justification for divorce and remarriage was not a requirement in all cases. Did Jesus override the law with his statements? Ezra demanded the divorcing of all the many foreign women that Jews had married (Ezra 10), however, he did not warn either the men or women involved against remarriage. Let us not put Jesus in the position of making a new, all-inclusive law about it which would, in effect, annul the former one. He was only restating and explaining the laws which came through Moses that the Jews had been obscuring by their accumulation of traditional teachings.

Many times in my early years I heard the sincerest of teachers explain that the Sermon on the Mount was the constitution of Jesus' new law. That seemed to fit well with the prevalent concept that Jesus replaced the Law of Moses with his own law. We concluded that any pronouncement of Jesus became his unchanging law for all people for all time, not being limited to his hearers or to special circumstances. Even though we were definitely convinced that the Law of Moses and Ten Commandments were not binding on us, we explained that the Ten Commandments, except for the Sabbath Commandment, were "brought over" in the new law. A part of a written code, engraved on stone, was made a part of Jesus' law! That was our conclusion, in spite of such statements as, "*But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.*" (Rom. 7:6). We explained inconsistently that Jesus both destroyed the law and reinstated part of it after changing or adding to its meaning.

In my contending here that Jesus' pronouncements about divorce and remarriage were not laws for us, you may be protesting in thought that my argumentation is too weak. That could be the case, or it could only seem that my approach is novel because you have had the traditional concepts reinforced by all your teachers. Have you interpreted all of Jesus' statements as universal laws for all time? Just two examples from his same sermon: "*Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you*" and, "*But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret...*" (Matt. 5:39; 6:6). Did Jesus list exceptions or limitations? No, but we do not give to all beggars and borrowers and we pray in public. That's not our hangup!

You may wish to remind me that Paul indicated the new covenant relevance and validity of the Ten Commandments in Romans 12:8-10 where he wrote, "*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. The*

*commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."* If you say that Paul was binding these commandments, you may have more than you bargained for there. To those Jewish disciples in Rome who were familiar with the Law, Paul lists only five commandments as examples, and then adds "*and any other commandment!*" The Jews counted 613 commandments. Paul's statement would include them all! Are you ready to bind the entire Law on us?

This is a very meaningful text. It brings us to the core of our discussion. The *law of Christ* is not a legal code like the one graven on stone or written on parchment. His was to be written on the heart. The term law can have shades of meaning. It can mean a legal code or a principle of action. Our principle of action is love, not keeping a legal code. Jews tried to keep laws for justification, but that was futile, for none can be justified by law. Disciples, because they have been justified by Christ, respond through "*faith working by love*" (Gal. 5:6) rather than to commands of the Law or any code of law. That principle of action is what Paul was emphasizing in the passage above and in many others also. When we let love guide our decisions, we fulfill the purposes that God was seeking to promote by the Ten Commandments, the entire Law of Moses, and the prophets. This is what Micah told Israel, "*What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*" (Micah 6:8). Those who are seeking to do the loving thing do not need a list of arbitrary laws to follow.

Traffic laws are definite so that infractions are easily detected. But what do they mean to you if you are rushing your critically wounded child to the hospital? Are you compelled to come to a complete stop at stop signs, wait for green lights if the intersection is clear enough for you to cross, and remain within the speed limit when the roadway is clear of endangering traffic? Strict observance of traffic laws is commendable under ordinary circumstances, but not when it shows lack of love and concern for your dying child. Keeping the letter of the law would be simplistic, but fulfilling the principle of the laws would demand discernment.

## **Arbitrary Laws**

Efforts to follow arbitrary laws concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage do not lead to the higher expressions of love, nor do they find definitive answers to all of the legalistic questions we raised in our previous lesson. Couples can be held together in miserably failed marriages because of belief in arbitrary law when the principle of action has long-since vanished. Demands of law cannot create or sustain love in a marriage. Law may perpetuate the legality of a marriage, but is a marriage that is devoid of the loving principle fulfilling even any supposed legal purposes of marriage?

Most of the apostolic teaching on this subject is written to non-Jewish disciples in Corinth who had not been under the Law (1 Cor. 6:9-20; 7:1-40). To them Paul makes no mention of Jesus' statements about marriage in the Gospels. Neither do any other writers of new covenant scriptures. Please consider my comments in my previous essay. Paul's tone is not of rigid authority, but of gracious concession, advice, charge, instruction, and consideration.

If a disciple were to divorce a cruelly abusive husband, remarry, and have children in a happy family situation, would she have to destroy that marriage in order to please God?

Arbitrary law might demand such, but Christ's principle of action of determining every action by discerning the most loving course would not.

If there were an arbitrary law forbidding remarriage, then we could make dogmatic judgments involving no loving principle. They would be harsh and stern serving no purpose other than to keep a law with the mentality of a slave. It would fulfill no intended purpose of the law. Though Jesus explained that man was not made for law but law was made for man, it would reverse that by indicating that man was made for law.

Where law defines white and black, judgment comes easily. But when we seek to satisfy the principle of action, consideration must be made to determine the most merciful and loving course for all who are involved. Maturity is demanded for such responsible decisions.

"If we leave it on that basis, everybody will feel free to divorce his spouse and marry another!" someone may respond. I'm sorry you are eager to do that. "Oh, I am not talking about myself. I love my wife and do not want to be rid of her in order to marry another," you reply. You won't be jumping through the loophole, but everybody else will? Do I not detect a wee bit of self-righteous judgmentalism there? How do you know everyone else is so devoid of principle? Those who are without principle do not let law stop them. And if you do not love your wife but live with her because you think a law demands it, you are not doing her any big favor!

## **Pulpit Lessons**

Why do we not hear more lessons from the pulpit explaining God's will about divorce and remarriage? I cannot speak for others, but I can speak from unpleasant experience. After most every effort of mine from the pulpit to lay rigid rules considered to be God's arbitrary law, some sincere person or persons would come or call in tears of deep concern because I had destroyed their confidence. Or they would silently fade away from our congregation. Then I would have to question my own dogmatism wondering if it was productive of any good.

Being a career minister, people sometimes looked to me for answers. When they would detail their problematic situations, for some I would have to tell them that I was not sure of God's will in their case, so I would not try to decide for them. I would refer them to scriptural references and ask them to study and decide for themselves. Now wasn't that great! I, as a "teacher in Israel," professionally trained, could not ascertain the answer so I laid it on them to find the correct one!

Maybe others have not faced that problem. But I had a deep feeling that my answers, or lack of them, failed to reflect the mercy and grace of God. Yet I was so steeped in legalism that I kept searching for legal solutions. We can believe that God designed marriage for loving social companionship in which sexual fulfillment could be enjoyed and children could be brought into a loving relationship for full nurturing until their maturity. Any and all regulations had the goal of facilitating that even though we all recognize that law cannot produce it. Love is the only principle by which God's design can be created and sustained. It is sad, then, that sometimes that very principle of action is lacking, neglected, or reversed so that irreparable damage is done to the relationship. That effect of sin cannot always be corrected so a happy marriage can continue. Only by the grace of God can damaged lives be renewed. All our judgments about failed

marriages must be made with these things in mind. Our corrective efforts must be positive in upholding the purpose of marriage rather than being punitive, adding to the grief and feelings of guilt.

The damage a fire brings to a house is the same regardless of who or what is to blame for it. Can the house be repaired and refurbished after a fire? That depends upon the extent of the damage. With some it is impossible. So it is with damaged marriages. When marriage is destroyed, we can trust that God's principle of action allows the penitent to build again over the ashes of failure. []

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