

Marriage-Divorce-Remarriage: No. 6

Specific Laws and Principles

Do you agree that each of the Ten Commandments is about as specific, absolute, and unbending as any law could possibly be? “Do not kill.” “Honor your father and mother.” Who could argue with those laws? These universal laws apply to everyone equally. Right?

So, it is sinful to kill a cockroach, a tree, a chicken, or another human. Well, no, it only refers to human beings, we deduce, though it does not say that. It is a universally specific law against killing a human, we deduce also though no penalty is specified.

The very code of law delivered through Moses allowed for killing of humans by accident, in self-defense, in warfare, and stoning offenders to death. We can all agree that the law demanded the honoring of one’s father and mother, but that law did not define how they were to be honored. It makes no checklist of all the things that would dishonor a parent. Must a daughter honor her mother who deserted her as a child? Must a daughter honor her father who was sexually abusing her? And what was the penalty for dishonoring one’s parents?

Similar conditions, exceptions, and clarifications apply to most all other laws which may seem to be universal, specific, and unbending as statutes. Just laws are based upon principles though those principles may not be defined in the laws themselves. The general principle may be the purpose of the law but the statute may not enumerate and expand on specifications, limitations, exceptions, or penalties in application. The legal statute must not over-ride other principles – like the weightier principles of love, mercy, and justice (see Matt. 23:23f). When we interpret a teaching or command to be contrary to love, mercy, or justice -- the highest of principles -- wisdom will demand that we re-study our conclusion. Yet, there is no legal code that specifies the most loving, merciful, and just course for each situation that arises in our lives. Our judgment is involved. God fearing disciples will be looking for mercy while less sincere ones may look for loopholes. As we apply our judgment we must ask for wisdom and remember that Jesus promised that his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

How does this apply to this study concerning marriage? In every way! The Jews had the statutes of Moses for fifteen hundred years and were still divided in their understanding of those laws relating to marriage. Shammah and Hillel represented diverse schools of thought prevalent in Jesus’ time. If they, with prophetic guidance through the centuries, had not learned to interpret their legal code, how could we be expected to do it?

Let us consider this statement of Jesus with the same logic and lack of emotion as we have applied to the two illustrations above. “*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). Is this an iron-clad, unbending statute to be applied universally in all situations? Does it deal with all limitations, exceptions, and conditions that arise within marriage any more than “You shall not kill” was a universal prohibition? Does it encompass all of the weightier principles of love, mercy, and justice? What of all the adulterating causes that I have enumerated in the two previous

lessons which neither the Law of Moses nor Jesus in his explanations touched on? We must discern the higher principles rather than seeking to enforce a general statement of law.

As with the law against killing, the Law of Moses itself made an exception allowing divorce and remarriage (Deut. 24:1-4). And Jesus nullified the universality of his statement above by allowing “*except on the ground of unchastity*” (Matt. 5:32) without clarifying all the definitions of unchastity that would adulterate a marriage. Jesus was not dealing with the whole scope of marriage but was explaining points of their law to the Jews. And, as we have already covered, we were never under the Law of Moses that he was explaining.

How does this relate to Paul’s instructions to those in a covenant of grace instead of law?

Some make Paul’s statement that “*a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives*” an affirmation of an unbending, universal statute (Rom. 7:1f). Note, however, that he was speaking to those Jews who knew the law, using their law to illustrate a point. He was not teaching about marriage but about the duration of the Law of Moses. And we have already noted that the law itself allowed for her divorce and remarriage.

With this background, it would be good to read Paul’s chapter (1 Cor. 7) again in its entirety. Note that he does not lay down dogmatic rules, universal statutes, or unbending regulations. “*I say this by way of concession, not of command.*” “*I wish.*” “*I say.*” “*I give my opinion.*” “*In my judgment.*” These many personal expressions indicate that Paul is appealing to our judgment of what is just, merciful, and right rather than judging by specific statutes of universal law.

You may be pointing to verse 10, “*To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband*” as a rigid law Paul was imposing, but Paul invalidates such a concept as he injects “*but if she does... .*” His exception indicated lack of rigidity. Besides, putting this in the context of the questions Paul was dealing with, it is evident that he is warning a woman against using the piety of devotion to Christ as an excuse to separate from her husband so she could marry another. Because she became devoted to Christ did not give her license to leave her husband, but if she did leave him, she had to prove her sincerity by refraining from marriage to someone else.

Again, Paul seems to lay down an absolute rule in verse 39: “*A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives.*” But he had already established that a wife might rightly separate from her husband in verses 10 through 16. So Paul is affirming the principles of marriage instead of enforcing tenets of a rigid law.

For centuries Paul has been trying to get us to comprehend, “*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.*” (Rom. 13:9-10). It is only confusing and entangling to try to define all aspects of those commandments. Simply follow the most loving course! That means that we must judge what the most loving course is since all details are not specified. Horrors! That leaves it up to us to judge what the weightier matters are! We cannot follow such a

licentious course! We will be casting all standards aside! Everybody will just do what is right in their own eyes! We need specific laws to define everything!

It is regrettable that I was schooled and nurtured in that spirit of bondage to law and it is even more regrettable that I taught it most of my career! You probably were tutored in the same dependence upon legality as I was. I surely understand why you would shrink back from what I am writing here. Paul definitely did not bind us to law – but to the principles which law fosters. Principles can only be applied through our discernment, and we may not always reach the same conclusions in exercising our judgment. Each must give account to God rather than to fellow-disciples, elders, congregations, or systems of religion with their written or unwritten creeds (Read Romans 14 again).

If you pray for wisdom, you may find much of your answer in Paul's concessions and advice which point to the higher principles of action. He offered advice instead of law to the person whose spouse was not a believer (v. 12-16). He did not call for change of marital status in the process of conversion (v. 17-24). He offered his opinion about the advisability of marriage in view of the impending distress which was developing as the "*parousia*" drew near (v. 25-31). He offered advice about the distractions of marriage – advice with which you and I may disagree and are free to do so! – (v. 32-40).

Still skeptical, you are pointing to verse 39, where Paul lays down an absolute rule that a widow is restricted in marriage to a spouse "only in the Lord." But does Paul tell us what he means by "only in the Lord"? Assuming that he means a fellow-disciple, does that mean one serving in one's own fragmented division of believers only? Can party lines be crossed? Does being a nominal member of a group suffice? How dedicated must one be? What if she marries a pagan, does God demand an annulment? If so, is she free to marry again because God did not recognize the marriage to a pagan? If she sinned in marrying a pagan and he was later converted as Paul suggested might happen (v. 16), would that automatically remedy her sin?

Looking at Paul's sensible advice as an absolute law puts one back in the confused tangle of trying to determine all the legal implications. Paul did not entangle them in law again. All can agree that it is better for spouses to be in harmony religiously. Isn't that what Paul was advising? That wisdom would apply to all marriages, not just those of widows.

In concluding this series (until I learn more!), let us review the premise of my discussion. Jesus' explanations about marriage and other matters were not new laws over-riding the Law of Moses. He was explaining their true meaning to Jews, some of whom would be keeping them until AD 70. We have never been under that Law. Paul was answering questions about marriage from disciples in Greece. They had not been indoctrinated in regulations about marriage by Paul or others, else they would already have known the answers to their questions. Paul did not instruct them to read the Gospels for themselves for those documents, if written at the time, had not circulated to Corinth. In answering their questions, Paul did not review Jesus' teachings with them. His answers differed from Jesus' teachings about law and were much less restrictive. Would the Corinthian disciples have erred in following Paul's advice and instructions? No. Paul did not bind a yoke of law but pointed to the higher principles of justice, mercy, and love in making their decisions and he offered advice of expediency instead of dogmatic laws. He taught that penitent sinners of various ugly descriptions could be washed and cleansed so as to no longer bear the guilt of those sins. He sentenced no one to a life of celibacy. In these

lessons we have seen more clearly the difference in serving God under the Covenant of Law and the Covenant of Grace.

Yes, God hates divorce but he himself sorrowfully put away Israel (Mal. 2:16; Jer. 3:8). I suspect that most all who have gone through the trauma of divorce hate it. It is no picnic. Failures in life bring pain and sorrow but not hopelessness to the person who seeks a better life offered through the grace of God.

*“Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a **yoke** upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we shall be saved through the **grace** of the Lord Jesus, just as they will”* (Acts 15:10-11).

*“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my **yoke** upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my **yoke** is easy, and my burden is light”* (Matt. 11:28-29). []

It is my intention to make these six lessons into a home-made booklet of about 25 pages. You may know people to whom you will want to give the material. Much in these essays has been revisions and adaptations from ten FR documents which you may access at my web site by going to the topical INDEX and to the topic of Marriage and also Polygamy. They will include some additional points.

(Cecil Hook; May 2006)

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