Section: Doctrine of Man

**TEACHING NOTES for Lesson 26 (March 29, 2023)**

**“The Permanence of Marriage” Question 29**

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**Q29. What is marriage?**

Marriage is a covenant relationship whereby God joins together one man and one woman into a one-flesh union designed to be faithful and last until the couple is separated by death.

Tonight we focus in an a very important part of the catechism answer for Q29. The last part says, that the covenant relationship whereby God joins two together called Marriage, “last until the couple is separated by death”!

We have looked at the origin of marriage, the author of Marriage, the definition of marriage, the purpose of marriage, the fuel for thriving marriage, and the God given roles for marriage and so tonight we look at the terms of marriage. Under what terms does God give for a marriage to end?

I will tell you up front what we believe the bible clearly teaches and then we will spend time looking at scripture carefully to see it in context with the aim of humbly submitting ourselves to its teaching on this important area of life. Four important points …

The Bible teaches that:

1. Because Marriage is a Creation Ordinance, God’s design and terms for marriage are to remain unchanged as God designed it until the end of this creation.
2. The one-flesh union created in marriage is permanent until the death of one of the spouses.
3. Initiating or longing for a divorce is never lawful.
4. Remarrying after divorce is an act of adultery if a former spouse is living.

**First, we must understand that…**

**Marriage is a Creation Ordinance**

There are several creation ordinances that all of mankind is commissioned by God to do for all of this creation. **Marriage** is one of them. We see this 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.

Understanding God’s intention and unique purpose for his Creation Ordinances are a critical foundation for our study of the bible’s teaching on the permanence of marriage.

Two important things we need to understand about creation ordinances are:

1. **An ordinance that is creational is perpetual.** (….meaning creation ordinances are to be carried out from the beginning of the creation until the end of the creation. That is their term)
2. **Creation ordinances are commanded to be rightly *honored* by all men and women.**

The Apostle Paul shows us the importance of the creation design in his teaching in a number of places as he often appeals to the *creation order* when He asserts the distinct roles that men and women have in the church and home. He roots the foundation of God’s design for these things in the creation account by solidifying his point about how marriage should be by looking to the account of God’s design in creation. Paul’s point is that this is the way they are to still to be understood and carried out today.

One place we see Paul do this is when he refers to the headship of the husband by solidifying this principle in the fact that, Adam was formed first, then Eve -1 Timothy 2:13.

Many can be guilty of reading the bible in parts and wondering or claiming that it no longer applies today. While there are things that God ordained to happen only for a time, the clarity we must understand is that when the topic at hand is a “Creation Ordinance” it is still for today and it will be for the rest of this creation.

Another example of the perpetual reality that marriage serves its purpose for this creation is that Jesus is clear to say that marriage is not for the next life.

**When we die, Human marriage doesn’t exist or continue in the new creation!**

Jesus says in **Matthew 22:30**For in the resurrection they neither marry *nor* are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

This shows that after death, human marriage is no longer needed.

Human marriage is God’s design and purpose for this life only.

**Creation ordinances are commanded to be rightly *honored* by all men and women—*creation ordinances* are over all of mankind.**

This means that the mandates God gave to all mankind at Creation are not just for Christians or any other select group of people God created but instead they are for all people.

All mankind must honor the mandates of the creator. He gets to tell us how this creation will work. **WHY?** Because it is His creation. Because it all belongs to Him and exist for His glory.

Now, let’s go back to the definition and installation of human marriage as it is given 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.

This ordination and definition of marriage is what Jesus and the Apostles thousands of years later still hold up as the fundamental unwavering mandate for how marriage is to be. **WHY?** because it is God’s creation ordinance for marriage and it is for all people for all of this creation!!

We will see this over and over again as we study scripture tonight how Jesus and the apostles will reference back to the creation mandate as the fundamental source for how we are to understand and apply God’s word when it comes to marriage and how a marriage ends..

because God is the one who creates and ordains/decrees marriage it does not change on the whim of culture or the desires, longings or circumstances of any given person.

**God’s law is that Marriage is only ended by Death**

Consider with me Paul’s point about the Law of God in …

**Romans 7:1** Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law

—***that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives?***

Now, notice with me what Paul picks in the next verses to prove that ***the law is only binding on a person as long as he lives***. The permanence of marriage!

Listen as he continues..

**Romans 7:2-3** For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. 3 Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

The clear and unwavering law of marriage—God’s law and design for marriage—is that it only ends by death.

Now turn with me to…

**1 Corinthians 7:10-11** To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband 11 (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

When Paul says, *“I give this charge (not I, but the Lord)”* this means he is restating teaching/instruction that was given explicitly previously by Jesus himself.

Paul reveals to us clearly that it is against God’s law to initiate or longing for a divorce. And that marrying other after a divorce is not allowed. Paul’s words here are the inspired and *perfect interpretation* of the Lord’s prior teaching on these things!

**When someone ask you what you think about divorce and remarriage, if you belong to Christ, then do what Paul does here. Say “*Not I, but the Lord commands….”***

**Now, notice the first instruction of what one should do if they are separated from their spouse is one of two things, first he says, “remain unmarried.”**

**1 Corinthians 7:11** … she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband…

**WHEN would this apply?**

It would be the case if reconciliation to the spouse is not possible, such as they have already married another. **WHY does God, through Paul, command them to remain unmarried?**

Because you have entered into a marriage covenant and by God’s design that one-flesh union is until death do you part. Not separation do you part of divorce do you part. ONLY Death!

If your spouse has not died, which in God’s law and economy is the only thing that ends the one flesh union that he binds together then you are to honor the covenant even if the other person sinfully refuses to!

Church you must see that this is not a waste, it is not meaningless and it is not a dungeon you are trapped in. It is a God given testimony opportunity to make much of Christ unending covenant with his bride. You can still model that commitment and covenant of Christ and His bride by keeping your covenant vow. In this you display the faithfulness of Christ even when we are unfaithful to him. And if people say that sounds crazy then you get to point to just how amazing and out of this world’s norms the Gospel of Jesus is!!

***The other option for the separated person is to pray for and pursue reconciliation with the estranged spouse if they have not entered into another one flesh union.***

**1 Corinthians 7:11b** she should remain unmarried or **else be reconciled to her husband**

If neither of them have entered into a one flesh union with another and they are both still living, then it honors the Lord to humbly pray for and pursue the restoration of the marriage as it tells the proper testimony of Christ unending covenant with His bride the church.

Later in this chapter Paul says the following..

**1 Corinthians 7:39** *A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives*. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.

Once again, notice the “Permanence of marriage until death” pillars are taught.

Here in verse 39 again we see that death is the God ordained way to end a marriage, *“if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.”*

The one-flesh union created in marriage is permanent until the death of one of the spouses.

Notice quickly an important related point this passage gives us; *“if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes,* ***only in the Lord****.”*

This informs us that it is God’s desire that *believers only marry believers*.

**2 Corinthians 6:14** says clearly, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers….”

To all who are unmarried, see that this is a clear, non-negotiable command from the Lord.

It is God’s design that a believing person *eligible for marriage* only seek and marry a believer—that is Paul’s meaning of, “**only in the Lord**.”

Now, we will come back to 1 Cor 7 later as there is more work to be done in that chapter, but since Paul said His teaching was the Lord’s teaching, let’s turn now to consider what Jesus said about marriage and the permanence of marriage in his own teaching. Turn with me to the Gospels..

Of the four Gospel books, there are three where Jesus speaks to marriage relations directly in Matthew, Mark, and Luke but not John.

So, let’s look at Christ teaching first in Luke:

In Luke chapter 16, Jesus makes the swift and direct statement about marriage, divorce, and remarriage in verse 18:

**Luke 16:18** “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

That’s it, there is nothing before or after about marriage that is mentioned. That is all that God inspired Luke to write about regarding Jesus teaching marriage.

Also note that Jesus says, “he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.” This tells us that even the person who may not have had their own divorce in the past is still also committing adultery in this situation. **Why?** Because …

**“The one-flesh union created in marriage is permanent until the death of one of the spouses.”**

He commits adultery because in God’s eyes they are still married, even though they sinfully executed a divorce!

So, the not-divorced person marrying a divorced person commits adultery because the person they are marrying is still in a one-flesh marriage union. That is what Jesus is teaching there and it could not be more very clear.

*Next, Look with we at Christ teaching in* ***gospel of Mark.***

As we consider Mark’s inspired account of Jesus teaching realize up front that it is the same account that Matthew gives in his gospel and yet Mark is writing to a different audience and so it includes different God ordained details. We’ll come back why this is critical for a right understanding in a moment!

*Remember the 4 main things* The Bible teaches regarding divorce and remarriage…

1. Because Marriage is a Creation Ordinance, God’s design and terms for marriage are to remain unchanged as God designed it until the end of this creation.
2. The one-flesh union created in marriage is permanent until the death of one of the spouses.
3. Initiating or longing for a divorce is never lawful.
4. Remarrying after divorce is an act of adultery if a former spouse is living.

*We will see all of these in this passage..*

**Mark 10:2-4** *And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” 3 He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” 4 They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.”*

*So the* context for this important interaction is this:

The Pharisees approach Jesus to test Him/trap Him (as they often did).

They asked him: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

He answered them, “What did Moses command you?”

It was not unusual that Jesus would ask the Pharisees what they thought the existing law was on the matter. Jesus does this intentionally to unveil that they don’t rightly understand or accept what God’s law is or requires.

Jesus does this to put on display how mankind often twists God’s ordinances to make them better suit us because of our sin. The Pharisees prove just that, look at their response,

**Mark 10:4** *They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.”*

What the Pharisee’s are referencing here is the instruction of Moses that is found in

**Deuteronomy 24:1-4** that says, 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, 2 and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, 3 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, 4 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.

This Mosaic legislation, simply includes an acknowledgment that divorce was occurring in Israelite society. This is simply a reflection of the **hard hearts** that existed at the time as Jesus will refer to it in a moment. Moses acknowledgment of the practice to issue a certificate of divorce as a way of separating from a spouse (as is often done in our society today) in no way provided God’s sanction for or approval of divorce. The Mosaic Law neither commanded divorce nor established divorce as a right.

The Pharisee’s and many others since have wrongly looked at this verse out of context and not in line with Sola Scriptura.

A careful reading of Moses words in v4 prove the point that there is no legitimate divorce making the wife free to remarry because he sates, “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”

If she was permissibly divorced and free to remarry then why is she defiled by having been married again and therefore an abomination before the Lord?

She is defiled and it’s an abomination because she did not keep her vow and married another while her spouse was still living!!

Back to Mark’s account, the Pharisee’s came to TRY to prove Jesus was a false teacher, but He flips this on them, proving they don’t understand God’s will for marriage and divorce by their answer to His question. Look what Jesus says in reply to this answer.

**Mark 10:5-9** *And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. 6 But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ 7 Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, 8 and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. 9 What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”*

Jesus could not have been more clear in his answer to their question **“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”**

What Moses did was not to permit a change in God’s creation ordinance of marriage but acknowledged the sinful way people were pursuing divorce and based on that testimony gave a clear command about what should not happen in that given situation. **Mark 10:5** *And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment.*

Then Jesus straightens them out and refers to the creation ordinance by saying “*But from the beginning of creation”. He goes on to quote God’s definition of God’s miraculous work to make two one. Then he CLEARLY says in v9.. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”* **Mark 10:9**

In other words, this is a holy action of God that is intended to be ended by God in death and not in any way by man in sin!!

What GOD has joined together, let not man separate!

What GOD has joined together, let NOT man separate!

Can I quickly mention that the murdering of your spouse or yourself in suicide, while it is death is not death caused by God but by man. This would be gross and vile sin to commit and in no way should be seen as an answer to an unwanted marriage. The death God ordains to end a marriage needs to be a death that God causes/ordains and not sinful man.

***Again, What GOD has joined together, let NOT man separate!***

Jesus was asked directly: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

And Jesus answers directly that God’s will and design of marriage has never changed, (and it won’t in this creation since it’s a Creation Ordinance) therefore, a married couple “are no longer two but one flesh. **9**What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” Asked and answered.

Then Mark’s account continues as the disciples asked Jesus about this later in the house whereby Jesus reiterates God’s position on the sin of divorce!!

**Mark 10:10-12** *And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11 And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, 12 and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”*

In this we see that, remarrying after divorce is an act of adultery.

Notice closely what Jesus, and our 4th pillar says:

If a person divorces their spouse and marries another person, they **commit** adultery.

**Notice he says, they Commit adultery.** The word is not an ongoing act of repeated sin.

The ***act*** of **getting married** (if a former spouse is living) is adultery.

Listen carefully, this does NOT mean the whole marriage is adultery every day there forth. NO, the whole marriage should *not* be thought of as an ongoing act of sin.

And that is why our point is written how it is; ***Remarrying after divorce is an act of adultery if a former spouse is living.***  Not an engagement of unending adultery!!

If you are in this situation, you have remarried after a divorce and your former spouse is living (or was living at that time), then make sure you understand how Jesus and we say this. **Entering into that new marriage was a one-time act of adultery.** So Jesus is not saying, nor are we your elders saying ***that the new marriage as an ongoing repeated sin.***

If this is you, then you should confess that while your marriage ceremony might have been beautiful and while your marriage might be amazing, it was still the sin of adultery according to Christ to have gotten married while a spouse was still living and therefore it is not something to be repeated or emulated. NO instead it is by God’s grace that you *are* forgiven of it in Christ and God’s will that you live faithfully in the marriage you are now to glorify God until death do you part!!

We have a number of beloved couples in our church to whom this is their testimony. They did not rightly understand God’s law when they were married but now hold a God honoring view and repentance of it. May this be the case for all to whom it applies.

*Now as we prepare to look at Matthew’s gospel account of this same set of interactions, it’s important we recognize the context because it helps us understand why the two accounts differ slightly.*

Understand that the Gospel of Mark was written to **a gentile audience**, *a non-Jewish audience*.

That means Mark’s audience wasn’t naturally or historically part of the Old Covenant God made with the Jews and therefore they would not have been very familiar at all of the Jewish traditions or laws.

All the gentiles that received this Gospel letter from Mark have the testimony that God ordained for them to receive. **They would likewise come to the conclusion, and rightfully so, that there is no permission to initiate or long for a divorce, or to remarry after divorce if a former spouse is living since they would be committing adultly if they did.**

So, then as we turn to **Matthew’s Gospel,** it is important to understand that it is written to a Jewish audience. Matthew’s audience was absolutely steeped in their knowledge and application of the Jewish traditions and laws. We’ll come back to this because it is very important especially regarding the difference of what Matthew’s gospel includes that Mark’s does not!! Turn to **Matthew 19:3-12**

Since we walked though this same dialog in Mark already we won’t repeat ourselves fully. But know that this passage is what God inspired Matthew to share with his audience of *the same exchange* that Mark’s Gospel had in chapter 10. Pick it up with me in…

The content from Mark we just looked at is covered in v 3-8, so then looking to verse 9 (for the sake of time), we come to the more difficult portion for people to correctly understand. Jesus says:

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

Jesus words, “except for sexual immorality” are words we haven’t seen yet.

We find this kind of statement also mentioned by Jesus earlier in Matthew’s Gospel chapter 5:31-32 in his sermon on the mount.

“It was also said, Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32 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. **– Matthew 5:31-32**

Now, based on a very simple or surface reading it *might appear* here that Jesus **gives** a permission to divorce or remarry after a divorce based on the unique case of your spouse committing sexual immorality against you. There are many who believe that is what he is saying here. Many of whom I very much respect but who I very much disagree with on this point.

It is your elders conviction and that of many other solid theologians and pastors that Sola Scriptura and context are so very essential for a right understanding of what Jesus is saying here and that it is in no way contradictory to what all of scripture teaches on this matter.

We firmly believe, that there is no exception that is different that Jesus gives here if you understand what he is saying in relationship to his particular audience!!

Surely what we read Jesus saying in Matthew 5 and 19 needs some careful attention because it ***seems contradictory*** to what we read is God’s unwavering position on divorce in all the rest of Holy Scripture.

So, lets dive deeper than just our surface read of this to see what Jesus is saying here. The Greek word many modern translations use there for “divorces” in “whoever divorces his wife” is **more commonly** a general word for **separation** or ***putting away***.

I bring this up so that you understand that you read the word “divorce” (which has a very narrow and specific meaning in our minds), but the word wasn’t and isn’t **actually** that narrow.

You see the word more technically (accurately) translated in older translations, such as:

KJV “Whosoever *shall put away* his wife” YLT “whoever *may put away* his wife”

Many times throughout Scripture the Greek word is used, and it means something definitively different than marital divorce.

In fact, the various forms of this Greek word are used **more than 60 times in the NT**, and **it is only** translated “divorce” in newer translations *in the marriage passage discussions*. It’s commonly translated elsewhere as “dismiss or put away”

The reason for this clarity is not to say the word can’t mean divorce, but it is to say that if your reading causes you to be in conflict to teaching in Scripture, you must do a deeper work than a surface reading of the modern English translation.

This point is important because, I believe the translators deciding to translate it “divorce” in our Matthew passages does readers a disservice in that it does not communicate well that **other types of separation are in play here**.

For example,

-Possibly a separation of betrothed persons (formally committed, but not yet a one-flesh union)

-and/or it means the putting off/putting away a spouse by the cause of capital punishment for something the law required.

You’ll see why this is important as we continue, so let’s move on…

**Our looming question is very specifically, what does this “except for sexual immorality” in Matthew’s Gospel mean?**

This is where rightly realize Jesus audience and Matthews audience is recording what the other gospels did not and that understanding the audience is critical.

See, the Jews had an Old Covenant history and understanding that the gentiles did not have. And because of that, Matthew’s Gospel contains so much writing that would have been easily understandable for the Jewish readers, but not necessarily the gentile readers without further calcification.

There is a reason these words are in Matthew’s Gospel twice the way it is and not Mark’s Gospel….and that is because the Jews knew the promises made during the Old Convent for the Messiah to come through a certain people. It automatically has **huge** implications and meaning to the Jewish audience… implications and meaning it doesn’t have to us gentiles, until we are taught why and then understand its reason for being in Matthew’s Gospel like it is.

This is also the case with these “except for sexual immorality” statements. Let me explain.

We must understand that when Jesus has this exchange about marriage and divorce, the Old Covenant was still authoritatively over them as God’s law. Jesus who never sinned, very much upheld the Old Covenant law until he fulfilled it and established The New Covenant with his shed blood.

That means all of the Jews were bound by the OC Law and they knew it’s laws well.

We see these layers emphasized in Matthew’s Gospel (since it’s the Gospel written first to the Jews).

Why this matters is because, in the Old Covenant, if a spouse or betrothed person was sexually immoral, God provided a means to end the marriage in the only way a marriage is actually ended and that’s by death!! **The marriage would be brought to an end by the punishment of death for any persons guilty of sexual sins**. This was clear to the Jews in the Old Covenant—God was clear in what was to be done to sexually immoral people, Leviticus 20 speaks to it, and so does:

**Deuteronomy 22:22** “If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.

So, consider these facts carefully…

**Primarily, who was in the Old Covenant?** *Israelites. Jews.*

**What did the Old Covenant set forth for those caught in sexual immorality? What was the consequence for that sin?** *Death.*

**Now, what have we seen in Scripture is the only God ordained, *actual way* for the one-flesh marriage union to end?** *Death.*

So then, when the Jewish audience reads in Matthew’s Gospel “whoever [puts away] his wife, **except for sexual immorality**, and marries another, commits adultery,” or the like in chapter 5, what would they think of?

**They would realize that Jesus is reminding the Jews that sexual immorality meant death in the covenant they were in which is why it is the only what a person can put away a spouse without committing adultery is to exercise the Old Covenant law to have them killed according to God’s law.**

Now our, New Covenant, 21st Century, gentile minds, don’t automatically think about what the Old Covenant set forth as the punishment for those caught in sexual immorality.

But with these things in mind, the right hermeneutics, we can understand how the **first audience** would have heard these “except for sexual immorality” statements.

Church: Jesus words, here do not contract the rest of scripture by providing some new and unique exception clause but it reinforces and holds up Christ’s and the rest of Scripture’s teaching that only death ends the one-flesh marriage union.

This is why Matthew includes this portion of clarity in this testimony and Mark doesn’t!!

Jesus words “except for sexual immorality” is *not* a God given permission to *divorce*.

Jesus has a famous teaching also found in Matthew 5, v27-28 that also helps us where he clarifies..

27 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. - **Matthew 5:27-28**

If Jesus was truly giving an exception for those whose spouse committed adultery and therefore they are permitted to divorce and remarry.

Then according to Jesus teaching here in Matt 5:27-28, everyone would essentially qualify to divorce and remarry. And clearly this is not God’s way according to the rest of scripture.

To further help us read this rightly, look at the passage again and see that the disciples correctly took Jesus’ words in Matthew 19 to mean the one-flesh union created in marriage is permanent until the death of one of the spouses.

In response is says in **Matthew 19:10** The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.”  The disciples are saying, “if a person is not permitted by God to end the one-flesh union via divorce than it’s better to not even marry!” At a minimum, they understood the fullness of the commitment one is making to pow until death do you part. For many, it is better to not marry. But this is the focus on our next lesson.

Let’s look at one more passage, back to 1 Corinthians 7.

We read verses 10 and 11 previously, so jump down to verse 12:

**1 Corinthians 7:12-13**

Paul transitions a bit to address a specific situation within his train of thought:

**12**To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) [[Remember, Paul is an Apostle inspired by the Holy Spirit so what He says here means Jesus had not **specifically** given this situational instruction in His ministry prior, but it’s God Inspiring Paul now to authoritatively write these things.

Here it is: To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. 13 If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. -**1 Corinthians 7:12-13**

Pause, here Paul is lifting up and giving this situational instruction on the heels of the permanence teaching he just finished in the prior verses. Paul teaches that initiating or longing for a divorce is not lawful.

This instruction address the following situation:

**what if an unbelieving spouse is not willing to live with his or her believing spouse? What if the unbeliever separates himself/herself from the marriage?** Paul answers here in v15

But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. **1 Corinthians 7:15**

Paul says. “Let it be so”! This means that a Christian cannot and should not force the hand of an unbelieving spouse who is insistent on leaving/separating/divorcing. In this, Paul is comforting believers to know that you are called to a ministry of peace, and that means you do what you can to lovingly work for and fight for the marriage, **but you are not sovereign over the unbelieving spouse, so you cannot control them**. The implications of this are you are not in sin, if you are abandoned or divorced by an unbeliever causing it.

(You may have sin in other regards to repent of, but a separation forced on you by an unbelieving spouse is not your sin.) To be clear, the believer is not insisting on a divorce or longing for it, the unbeliever is insisting on it.

Realize, this situation is not permitted for when both spouses are believers, because two legitimate Christ followers have Christ love and forgiveness to apply to the hardships of their marriage as well as the authority of the word and the help of the church. It is only when one is an unbeliever and lacking all those things that this call to peacemaking can be employed.

Additionally Paul says, the believer “is not enslaved” (in the text there) is speaking to the kind of effort one must take (or doesn’t have to take) to keep the believing spouse with you. If you were enslaved, it would become your everything, it would own you day and night, it would be your full-time effort to force yourself on them. But since the believer “is not enslaved,” Paul can give the instruction that it would be permissible to agree to (with a clear conscience) a separation/divorce forced by the unbeliever.

The third pillar saying, **“Initiating or longing for a divorce is never lawful”** is very specific. See that? A person is never honoring God by initiating or longing for a divorce. But God through Paul, does say, you can have a clear conscience if an unbelieving spouse forces a divorce on you that you don’t long for. You’re not sovereign over that person and are called to peacemaking.

*But don’t take this farther than Paul does here*. The rest of what we have seen is still true, namely, the **one-flesh union** created in marriage is permanent until the death of one of the spouses. And remarrying after divorce is an act of adultery if a former spouse is living.

Just because you may submit to a divorce forced on you—you are not enslaved to forcing them to stay— that does not mean it trumps God’s Creation Ordinance reality for marriage.

The one-flesh union created in marriage is still permanent until the death of one of the spouses. That doesn’t change. And therefore, what a person does after a divorce, no matter the reason for the divorce, doesn’t change.

According to scripture, remarrying after divorce is an act of adultery if a former spouse is living.

While, in human considerations, the marriage is ended in divorce, in God’s consideration, which is the ultimate, the one-flesh union created in marriage is still intact, until the death of one of the spouses, and it must be honored as such.

*Simply stated: This means a new marriage is not permitted by God, even in the cause of being forcibly divorced by an unbeliever*.

Practically, it means that you live in such a way that honors the standing one-flesh union in every way **on your end**, until you or that spouse dies. That means pursuing sexual interactions of any kind, dating others, or longing for new relations with anyone, would be a dishonoring in mind, deed, or heart of God’s call on you to honor the one-flesh union He created.

While, because of sin in this world, you cannot have the marriage with your spouse you had hoped for (at least so far as you can tell at this time), **you can** give a beautiful testimony of the Lordship of Christ in your life and have the opportunity to speak the gospel using this situation.

Remember what Paul made clear in Ephesians 5…

**Ephesians 5:31-32** Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

God through Paul teaches that *human marriage is designed by God to display the unbreakable union that Jesus has with the redeemed ones*.

So how does this relate to someone who has been divorced or may be left by an unbelieving spouse in the future? This person must “hold fast” to their commitment they made so that in doing so it points to the gospel reality that Jesus will never leave His redeemed ones!

First, in doing this a person can show that Jesus is their highest treasure…not the temporary.

An unmarried person gets to live out the reality that it is not one’s spouse that fulfills them or should be their cause of ultimate joy. No, it’s Christ Jesus who is these things for us and by living unmarried there is a unique opportunity to live that out and share that in the struggle.

Second, when someone asks about the situation (for example why you are not seeking another spouse after a divorce) there is now an incredible opportunity to share the gospel. ‘Perhaps something like, “*It is sad that, due to sin, my marriage did not turn out as I had hoped, but I have all I need in Jesus. So, I can honor God’s design for me to be faithful to the marriage covenant I did make and the one-flesh union that God created between us. In fact, the Bible tells us that our human marriage, and the until death commitment to it, is a parable of how Christ will not forsake those He is united with. So, by me staying faithful to the marriage covenant I made, I get to put this on display. Even if my spouse was unfaithful or continues to be unfaithful to the marriage covenant we made, including even getting married to someone else, in my continuing to honor the marriage covenant I made, I show Jesus’s commitment to His people (true believers) even when we sin after being united to Him. See, Jesus doesn’t stay faithful to true believers based on our performance. Our sin cannot and does not separate us from Jesus, likewise, our marriages, no matter how riddled with sin and difficulty they are, should reflect Christ’s forgiveness and faithfulness.*”

**We must not ever lose sight of the fact that marriage is *ultimately* not about me, not about my temporary desires or fleshly needs, but about Jesus and His gospel**

Unmarried divorced brothers and sisters among us or listening to this audio later: Don’t miss this powerful opportunity. Use it as a means to glorify God and proclaim the gospel! And be sure of this: **living life without a spouse is not second rate.**

If you are thinking to yourself, “*well you’re married, and your marriage seems to be going fine, so it’s easy for you to hold this position and say these things*,” then first you need to realize that it’s not about the messenger—your pastors’ situations don’t and can’t dictate what we teach—and second, building on that, most importantly, God’s word is the authority and Jesus did do life without a spouse, and confidently, we do not call that second rate.

**Marriage cannot be our hope or treasure, Christ must be.**

As we conclude our passage walkthrough, we hope you saw in Scripture the four pillars we stated at the beginning.

I to take a few more minutes to try to quickly answer some other common questions.

The first is..

**Q: Does Scripture advocate that an abused husband or wife should take the abuse since they cannot get divorced?**

A: This is a very important question and clarity. The answer is NO, this teaching **does NOT mean a spouse should accept or tolerate any kind of abuse**. Period.

**We will not** tolerate or stand by when abuse is happening.

Abuse of another human being is terrible and completely unacceptable. To say you must put up with it is not to fight properly against sin and wicked actions but to endorse them!

Now, how a person handles an abusive situation needs to be biblically informed. So, let’s do that briefly.

First, let me say that you need to realize that someone would have to go beyond Scripture to conclude that it is okay to divorce due to abuse. You must see that. In none of the passages in Scripture that we looked at or otherwise, is *divorce as we know it* permitted for abuse. God ends the one flesh union with death and death only. This is clear.

That said, **what does a person do?** If abuse happens, Scripture would put that squarely in the category of ***sin that needs to be exposed, held accountable* and repented of**.

*Exposing it is the step an abused spouse should take*. For believers this often happens by including church leaders and peers for accountability, support, and to create a safe haven for the abused spouse.

So, what this looks like, say for example, is if a spouse is physically abused, the clear counsel we are giving is **get out of the physical situation (leave the area), get help, get accountable space, and proceed seeking biblical results**. Divorce is not the solution but getting to a safe haven (some kind of accountable space), bringing in proper accountability, and praying for repentance is.

In many cases, abuse will justly require law enforcement to be called and if a spouse is found guilty of abuse they may be put in jail.

Understand that Christian grace and forgiveness doesn’t mean we encourage or give room for people to practice sin. We still hold them accountable. Someone married to an abuser might end up in a season or lifetime of physical separation to protect oneself and hold accountable the person practicing sin, but it is not grounds to break the covenant of marriage through divorce.

**This leads us to a second related question:**

**Q: If a spouse is put in jail, especially for a long time, is divorce and remarriage permissible in Scripture for the non-jailed spouse?**

A: No. Just like in the unbelieving spouse divorcing a spouse situation, the requirement from God would be to honor the one-flesh reality, honor the marriage covenant, and remain faithful in all available ways to the incarcerated spouse—this is telling the world the same gospel good news about Jesus’ faithfulness to His redeemed even in their sin.

Think for a moment of this example, **if your adult child commits a heinous crime and goes to jail for 30 years, *does this consequence change the fact that he/she is your child?******No.***

Same with a spouse—even more with your spouse as you are one-flesh with them. You are still married to them! Incarnation changes the day-to-day function of the relationship immensely, but it doesn’t mean you move on. Only death ends the one-flesh relationship.

Ok, next, this is a big one, fairly common:

**Q: What if I was divorced before I knew correctly what Scripture says about it or before I was saved even, and I am not yet in a new marriage, can I have a new opportunity to get married?**

A: Since the one-flesh union exists despite one’s knowledge of how it works, or the person’s spiritual state, there are no exceptions to God’s unchanging design for these things.

In the same way, no person looks at a marriage between unsaved people or even a marriage of one saved person and one not and declares them to not actually have a real marriage.

Remember, marriage is not a Christian only institution, it’s a Creation Ordinance given to all mankind. Any marriage between one man and one woman is a real marriage in which God has joined them together into a one-flesh union that is permanent until the death of one of the spouses.

Additionally, not knowing every detail of God’s design or law does not give someone rights to not honor it. That’s the case in this topic or any other topic. Again, there is real opportunity to live for God’s glory over our own temporary desires and proclaim the gospel in these situations.

Now, another common question:

**Q: If I married someone previously divorced even though it’s my first marriage (or if I am divorced and already in a subsequent marriage) how should I think, feel, and act now that I know God’s design for marriage?**

A: You need to honor, in the here and now, the most recent marriage that you have committed to. A marriage in these cases is not second rate or invalid. Subsequent marriages are REAL marriages. A new one-flesh union has been created and it needs to be honored until death. Do not sin again by having another divorce.

Your new marriage is real and should be honored until death. *We have many married couples in our church where one or both sides have been married before. This doesn’t make these current marriages second rate or looked down on. They are to be upheld and fought for just like anyone else, and we are happy to walk with you and grow with you in your marriage if this is your history.*

Additionally, it is important that you agree with the Scripture we saw in these lessons, and rightfully say that the act of getting married (in the two situations in question) was a sin (it was an “act” of adultery), confess it as such, and then, in an act of repentance honor that real marriage you are in….living each day in faithfulness to your new spouse, until death do you part, for God’s glory. As a redeemed believer, you are forgiven in Christ of the act of sin in getting married and you are sanctified day by day by our gracious God in your marriage.

If anyone divorced and not remarried (or anyone interested in a divorce person) is hearing this and thinks, well, I really want to get married so I’ll just commit the sin, confess it as sin, and then have my spouse. Do not do this. It spits in the face of God. This would call for accountability and church discipline. Let me tell you that intentional, preconceived sin is a VERY serious thing that we must warn you not to do. Jesus doesn’t delight in us seeking our will over His. He says, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." (**John 14:15**) Do you love and live for Jesus as Savior and Lord of your life? Then it should be your joy to keep His commandments. Do not commit presumptuous, preconceived sin.

**The Marriage Covenant**

As we wrap up, let me remind you

Consider the formal traditional marriage vows with me for a moment to see with me that God’s intention for marriage has been in front of us the entire time even if you are unfamiliar with God’s word on these matters.

For those of you who are married or planning to be married, I encourage you to listen to these clarities with fresh ears so that you are rightly understanding what you have or are committing to so that you can all the better live out the covenant you made in your marriage to your spouse.

***I take you***

I take you and you take me. I give myself to you and you give yourself to me.

***To be my wedded wife/husband***

(To be wedded) meaning to be bound by God as one. That’s oneness!!! (hands together)

It is to be formed into a one flesh union that like nothing else is.

***To have and to hold***

Meaning, You are mine and I am yours. The scriptures in 1 Corinthians say:

The husband’s body belongs to the wife and wife’s body belongs to the husband.

You do not belong to yourself anymore. You are now one with another.

You have given yourself to this person. You have signed over the rights to them to become one.

***From this day forward***

This is Covenant language.

The beginning of the term of the marriage covenant. It is legal and binding language.

***For better, for worse; For richer, for poorer; In sickness and in health***

This is further terms: meanings if our relationship gets way better or if it gets way worse.

If our lives get way better or if they get way worse..

If we become rich or utterly poor. If we are healthy or utterly sick and incapacitated.

What these statements are saying is that there are no circumstances that can or will divide our wedded union. There are no clauses in our covenant that give us an out. We are all in. Your spouse can become a terrible person and completely not live up to your expectations but you are still their spouse and no change in circumstances changes this or gives you an out. Again, you must see this with God’s eyes for what marriage is and not how man has chosen to view it.

We literally could say, whether faithful or not, whether present or not, whether convicted as a criminal to a life in jail or not, we are still bound by this one flesh union.

**To love and to cherish**

Meaning, I will love you and cherish you as my own life and body no matter what.

Meaning, my commitment to love and to cherish you is not a matter of feelings or circumstance but is a matter of a covenant commitment that I am making here and now.

**Till death do us part**

This is the closing term. This is the only term that ends the covenant according to God’s word.

Why is this the only one, because it is the one God is in charge of.

He is the one who binds us and He is the one who separates us or ends the covenant of the one flesh union with death. There is no marriage after death, as I quoted earlier. Marriage is only for this life.

And the Covenant you make is only for the terms of the life of the man and or the woman.

If one dies the covenant is fulfilled and they are no longer in a one-flesh union.

While some may want to romanticize the that they are still married after their spouse has died.

They are not. The union is finished. The covenant fulfilled.

What is amazing to me is that these are the vows people say and yet so few really understand or embrace what they really mean or what they have entered into by their covenantal vow.

While it takes two participating people to have a relationship… it only takes one to stay faithful to the covenant you made before God and to the other person. Meaning you cannot control your spouse, but you can honor God and the marriage covenant regardless of what the person you married has done or is doing.

I pray this is a true blessing for you to grow in your oneness simply by a better understanding of oneness and of the vows you made. If you have lacked in fulfilling your covenant then honor God and love your spouse well by confessing this and repenting of your short sidedness and look forward in the ways you can better honor God in these things. You will be blessed for this.

We want you to know there is pastoral sensitivity to the effects of divorce. Please know that your pastors and group leaders are here to walk with you, love you, and help you with current marriage struggles or past hurts stemming from divorce. We do this according to what God’s expressed will is, as found in His word (Scripture).

God is good, this topic can be hard in our fallen context, but we are committed to walking with you through it. Please feel free to reach out to your leaders with any additional questions you may have. As part of our answer to those questions we may have a resource or two for you to use in working it.

Marriage is a covenant relationship whereby God joins together one man and one woman into a one-flesh union designed to be faithful and last until the couple is separated by death.