

Divorce and Remarriage— the Heart or Letter of the Law?

In the mid 1960's two ministerial- student friends of mine each warned me that I *must* make up my mind about divorce and remarriage, especially since I also planned to enter the ministry. The only problem was that they held opposite views. It wasn't until about 40 years later (2005) that I finally came to a conclusion regarding this difficult question.

It came through my dialogue with jail and prison inmates and sensing some of their inner motives in their post-marital and pre-re-marital struggles. Through these dialogues I began to sense something far deeper than debating the technicalities of divorce and remarriage, that behind God's law is His desire to bring us to Himself.

The purpose of the law

When Jesus was asked if it was “*lawful* for a man to divorce his wife,” He answered that Moses wrote it “because of the hardness of your hearts,” but “from the beginning it was not so.” God's intent was that a man “be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” (Mt. 19:8, Mk. 10:5-7)

In effect Jesus upgraded God's Old Testament law to correspond with what He was teaching—that the Kingdom of God is far more than observing outward laws; it's about inward reality, the law written on our hearts, as David had seen (Ps. 40:8, Jer. 31:33, Heb. 10:16). This kind of obedience begins with “the poor in spirit,” and goes on to include the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the spiritually hungry, etc. (Mt. 5:3f) And that a man can be a murderer or an adulterer without ever committing the act (Mt. 5:21-23, 1 Jn. 3:15).

Revealing a deeper understanding of spiritual reality, Jesus taught that divorce was yielding to carnal hard-heartedness. He would soon offer Himself as the fulfillment of every aspect of God's law so that it would become a heart-reality through relationship with Him and with one another (Heb. 10:8-18).

God used Paul to further clarify the purpose of God's law. The law, which is “holy and just and good,” was given not as a set of rules to live up to *but to reveal the horrible condition of our hearts*, that every one of us “may become *guilty* before God.” And driven

by “godly sorrow” and “*the fear of the Lord*,” we would come to Jesus in repentance and faith. (Pr. 8:13, Rom. 3:19-20; 2 Cor. 7:10)

But far from throwing out the law, Paul added more “laws” to the teaching of Christ in order to more clearly reveal God's will for the various situations we'd find ourselves in. *They were no more intended to be lived by mere outward conformity than the laws of Moses were.*

In fact it was not Old Testament law that finally revealed my heart and drove me in desperation to faith in Christ, but the far more difficult demands *of the heart* in the New Testament that caused me to cry out, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24)

Illustrations of the law

The law is like scaffolding around a building under construction (ourselves). When the building is finished, the scaffolding is taken down. Or the law may be compared to a template or pattern for an artist to use to guide him in painting a design. When the painting is finished, the template is not needed.

Still another illustration is a temporary fence to protect children from danger until they mature. The law acts like handcuffs or jail, *temporarily* restraining “the lawless” *outwardly*, but *not inwardly*, until the *heart* changes and the believer learns to yield his members to the “law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus.” This “walk according to the Spirit” lifts him above “the law of sin and death” as an airplane overcomes the law of gravity through a different or “higher” set of laws (1 Tim. 1:9, Rom. 6:12f; 8:2f).

The Bible pictures the law as a tutor or “schoolmaster” training child-heirs to become responsible enough to manage their inheritance. After the tutor has trained these heirs, he is no longer needed, because as responsible heirs *they will go much farther, deeper, and with Spirit-led motivation and wisdom than the law could ever put into writing.* (Gal. 3:23-25; 5:18)

My favorite illustration of the law is an MRI because, first it exposes areas of sin and weakness I didn't know were there, increasing my desire for God. And second, with these shocking revelations I learn more and more that I'm no different than the people I'd criticized. The end result is more brokenness and intimacy with God. But that's not all, for I begin to feel connected in a profound way with everybody because I can finally *feel* their humanity, their weakness; I *understand* a little of where they're

coming from. (Rom. 3: 9-20; 14:7, Gal. 6:1, Eph. 4)

The law is not the real

So the law is not the real thing, but a *guide* to it. But we have a strong tendency to take what we can *see* (the law) and make it the real because we can't see the real. Real is eternal and infinitely more powerful than the visible, because it is that which *makes* the visible, for it is God Himself. (Heb. 11:3, Acts 17:28, Gal. 5:18, Col. 1:16-17) And His realm—the Kingdom of God—is a “mystery” and cannot be understood unless the Spirit *reveals* it to us, and that only little by little (Mt. 13:11-17, Rom. 1:17, Jn. 1:6, 1 Cor. 2:9-14, 2 Cor. 3:18, Is. 28:9-10).

Often spiritual reality is paradoxical, with two opposite ways of expressing it, but both equally true. It may contradict what appears to the mind because it supersedes or replaces sense investigation the way laws of inertia and aerodynamics defy the law of gravity.

Which is why Paul said, “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. . . . I will not be brought under the power of any” (1 Cor. 6:12). Paul did not use this understanding to violate the law, but to *be led by the Spirit* in applying the ultimate meaning of the law. The result was that he *exceeded* its demands, denying himself and laying down his life for others, even as Jesus did and taught in His “Sermon on the Mount” (Mt. 5-7, see Rom. 14, 1 Cor. 8:1f; 9:14-15).

And for this reason reality may *seem* to contradict God's holy law, because the law is not the real but the “scaffolding.” An example is how the New Testament replaced the Sabbath Day with a *spiritual* Sabbath of *Rest* in Christ—the reality behind the pattern (Col. 2:16-23, Rom. 14:5-7, Heb. 3-4).

Taking one day a week to rest and worship is good and valuable to restore ones energy and spiritual vision. But it falls far short of the Sabbath rest God brought His New Testament Church into, where God conquered whole nations through saints who learned to *rest* in the mighty power and “finished work” of Christ through His Spirit.

This is why Jesus replaced the laws of Moses with heart motivation, because the outward commandments, as holy as they are, *had failed to produce heart-reality.* In fact *they did the opposite:* they hardened hearts instead of exposing, softening, and empowering them (Mt. 23; Gal. 3:10; 4:25).

Paul went to great lengths to explain how

dangerous it is to manipulate the law or even freedom from the law for our own purposes, *destroying the relationship for which the law was intended* (Rom. 14, 1 Cor. 8, Gal. 5, Eph. 2:14-22). Hebrews was written as a strong warning against missing the whole point of the law—faith that leads us out of dead works to *rest*, to Life in the Spirit, “in His Son,” so we may freely enjoy relationship with Him and one another (Rom. 8, Gal. 2-6, Heb. 4:14-16; 6:1; 10:22-25; 12:14-15; 13:1f; 1 Jn. 5:11).

Divorce and remarriage

To more clearly prove my point, I'm going to take the strictest view of the divorce and remarriage question (which I lean toward after studying the various views, including the controversy over the Greek and Hebrew words for “putting away”). This old-fashioned “holiness” view is “no divorce” unless the *unbelieving* partner made this decision on his own, according to 1 Cor. 7:10-16 (Mt. 5:32; 19:1-9, Mk. 10:11-12, Lu. 16:18, Rom. 7:3).

The only exception is in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, where Jesus permitted divorce when the other partner committed “fornication,” and that word in its Jewish context is also a subject of debate. And I'm inclined to agree with those who believe it applied only to divorce from an engagement (betrothal), as applied to Jewish law, since that exception is mentioned nowhere else in the New Testament, and Matthew's Gospel was written specifically to the Jews.

Why would the most important precept in Jesus' teaching—forgiveness—be denied a married spouse for cheating? To me it would seem to be a far more serious blemish in what He taught about divorce, when forgiveness that leads to healing and restoration can many times lead to a stronger marriage than ever. And this kind of forgiveness might even be assumed in the case of a believer married to an unbeliever living in wicked Corinth (1 Cor. 7:14).

Those who feel this interpretation casts a dark shadow over the many godly people divorced and remarried may miss a deeply profound and powerful advantage in taking this position. Why search for theological loopholes to make His law *easier* when God has gone to an incredible amount of trouble through both Old and New Testament laws and precepts to make it *impossible* to keep His law by living “after the flesh,” *so we will*

“walk after the Spirit”? C.H. Mackintosh wrote, “The more clearly anyone can prove me to be a sinner, the more clearly he establishes my title to the love of God and the work of Christ” (*Notes on Leviticus*, p. 234).

David, in his best-known psalm of repentance for his adultery and murder, said, “Behold, You desire truth in the *inward* parts, and in the *hidden* part You will make me to know *wisdom*.” It was because he felt God’s anger toward his sin that he came in brokenness, in “fear and trembling,” to Him Whose “*delight* is in the fear of the Lord.”

Mercy and grace are meaningless without knowing that God is also a *consuming fire*. And the same “fear of the Lord” which “is to hate evil” is also “the beginning of *wisdom*.” For “the secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him. And He will show them His covenant,” a promise available for the marriage covenant. (Ps. 25:14; Ps. 32; 34:11-14, 18; Ps. 38; 51:6, 17, Pr. 8:13; 9:10, Is. 11:3; 57:15; 66:2, Heb. 12:29).

What a goldmine of wisdom David would have missed if he’d taken his sin lightly. If the New Testament really does teach against divorce, it actually lays the foundation for a *better and more natural way for grace to work without the legalistic stigma against those entrapped by its demand*.

In other words, the strict law against divorce *empowers* grace, allowing it (Him) to *really* transform us so that through the godly sorrow and brokenness in our failure and weakness, His marriage-covenant law becomes engraved on our hearts, enabling us to lay down our lives for our mates no matter what they put us through! (Eph. 5:22-33). How? Because we *know we’ve failed just as badly and God didn’t give up on us!*

For He has something infinitely more valuable by a much higher standard than yielding to our weakness, as Moses did through permitting divorce. It’s what Paul reveals through Romans 6-8 and Galatians 2-5, that keeping even the “no divorce law” *outwardly only* falls drastically short of the brokenness and love the (New Testament) “law” was *really* meant to produce. “For I *through the law died to the law that I might live to God*” (Gal. 2:19).

This is how God puts His law into our hearts, creating in us the *heart* and the *desire* to endure a difficult marriage and the *wisdom* to navigate through the various complications of a previous divorce and considerations of remarriage (2 Cor. 3:3, Heb. 8:10).

But of course this also opens the door to “sin that grace may abound,” and misuse this incredible liberty to *destroy* what God intended in the marriage relationship “from the beginning” (Mt. 19:8). It is with this horror in mind that I sometimes stop printing this article, choosing rather to allow people to suffer under guilt than to give them a quick-fix shortcut to “cheap grace,” and undo the priceless value of the most sacred covenant in Scripture—the marriage bond. Yet God took this risk through Paul’s teaching in Romans and Galatians, which reveals that living in a state of self-righteousness and spiritual pride can be just as bad.

So from this background of law versus grace emerged a vision of what might transpire before the “Judgment Seat of Christ” regarding this matter. (Rom. 6:1; 14:10, 2 Cor. 5:10).

The following scenario does not deal with the question of one’s salvation, but of eternal reward, which includes our heavenly responsibilities, nearness to God’s throne, and our intimacy with Him, the ultimate marriage (1 Cor. 3:11f; 6:2-3, Rev. 2:26; 20:4; 22:12).

Judgment Day

I saw in my mind two kinds of people in two categories who will stand before God one day to give account of the *stewardship* and *responsibility* they exercised toward their mates.

The approved:

1. Those who follow the scriptural ideal, New Testament “law.” The first is what I trust will be my type, as God continues to give grace to my wife and me. Both of us came from families where divorce was almost the unpardonable sin.

There are still many families like us even among youth, and I trust our hearts will not become lifted up because of the miraculous grace God gives to keep us together. I hope one day to hear these words from Him: “Well done. You stood faithful to the teaching and training you received and found my grace came through.” Wow! We made it!

2. Those who fall short of what I think is the biblical ideal. Some did not have the training, spiritually or emotionally, to prepare them to survive a difficult marriage. They failed, but picked themselves up, married again, and kept going. Whether wrong or not for a hundred reasons, their hearts have been *humbled and*

broken by their trials and errors.

In the end they have what God was after all along—a genuine fear of God, faith in His Word, and deep love for others. Not only do I expect God to welcome them, but in many cases I may see them closer to His throne and with greater reward because of how they overcame through deeper affliction with far less advantage than I had.

The disapproved:

1. Those who followed the scriptural ideal. “Lord,” they may say, “I’ve kept your word to the hilt. My wife and I stuck it out for the duration while we watched many in the church divorce and even remarry! You said, ‘Many are called, but few are chosen.’ I feel sorry for them, but they knew better. I tried to warn them, but they wouldn’t listen. No doubt it was the great ‘falling away’ Paul mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:3.”

Then I hear God answer: “Yes, you endured, but you became hardened toward those who failed. If you had *really* felt sorry for them, you would have *covered* them with intercession and prayer, as I commanded through my servant John (1 Jn. 5:16). And if your warnings had been tempered with wisdom and tears, they might have listened. I’m sorry, but you will not be comfortable close to my Throne, for many of those you criticized for failure have—through their failure—been reduced to such dependence on Me, they now display my grace and glory in ways you are not prepared to understand.”

2. Those who fall short of the biblical ideal. These will come expecting to receive the same mercy shown their counterparts in the first category, but they might be surprised to hear these words: “True, you had a difficult first marriage. But you had enough knowledge and strength to overcome every problem if only you had taken my Word seriously. You would have found an abundance of grace far exceeding your expectations to bring you into the kind of relationship with Me I created you for.

“Instead you looked for loopholes for an easier life. You focused on and magnified the exception about your mate’s unfaithfulness when all along I wanted to use your forgiveness and patience to restore her [him] to Me and to you. What a marriage you could have enjoyed on a level of intimacy parallel to that of my

Bride (Eph. 5:22-33, Rev. 21:2, 9).

“Furthermore, even before your previous marriage was a lost cause, you got your eyes on someone else and entertained a *spirit of adultery*. That was the intent of my law—to deal with your wandering heart, to make your eye single so your whole being would be full of light (Mt. 5:22). Then you would have been a candidate for my grace and wisdom to replace your lust with self-sacrificing love” (1 Cor. 13:7, Eph. 5:25).

Mercy triumphs over judgment (Jas. 2:13)

Each of us will be judged according to what we did with what we knew and had available to us “Each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is.” (1 Cor. 3:13; also Lu. 12:47-48, Jn. 9:41; 15:22,24, Rom. 1:18-20; 2:12-16)

My intent is not to provide anyone an “opportunity for the flesh” (Gal. 5:13), but to allow those struggling with guilt over what is too late to change to come to rest in the mercy of God and face with new hope the often tragic consequences when children and families are torn apart and thrown into confusion and bitterness.

But I also want us to search our motives *lest we take carelessly what God takes so seriously that He sees it as a picture of His relationship with us*, His Church, His Bride. For some reading this will use my view as confirmation for a divorce and/or remarriage when they could otherwise endure and experience this amazing grace as they “press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Php. 3:14).

But if otherwise, God sees deep into our hearts and will judge each one, not by outward but *inward* conformity to His will for each of us. And what may be approved for one may be disapproved for another. I’m glad I’m not the final Judge, for outside of grace, the heart of even the “greatest saint” is “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; *who can know it?*” (Jer. 17:9)

But with this understanding my case for divorce and remarriage has been laid to rest, leaving me free to love my friends unconditionally. To the extent that God’s holy law has been written in my heart, to the extent I tremble at His Word, to that extent I can expect wisdom in relating to each of them,

“speaking the truth in love,” or “without a word” by a grace-sustained example (Eph. 4:15, Jas. 2:13, 1 Pet. 3:1).

Now *you* must work out your own salvation “with *fear* and *trembling*” (Php. 2:12).

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