

Looking at divorce through Jesus-tinted spectacles

By Dr Christopher Peppler

Some researchers contend that Christians divorce at roughly the same rate as non-Christians, but this is misleading. Apparently, 60% of nominal Christians experience divorce but this applies to only 38% of committed Christians. Now, rather than debate the difference between nominal and committed Christians, let's rather take the point that 38% constitutes a problem and 60% is disastrous for families, church and society. So, in either scenario divorce is an important issue for all Christians.

So many scholars and pastors have written books and articles on this subject that it would both presumptuous and tedious for me to attempt to evaluate the many different views. Rather, I want to set out my own understanding of the biblical position on divorce from an essentially Christocentric perspective.

The Christocentric Lens

I predicate my understanding of the subject on a firm belief that the Bible is the inspired and authoritative written Word of God. However, this contention does not go far enough because most committed Christians believe this yet differ in how we are to understand the inspired record. So, my second contention is that any subject revealed in scripture should be understood from a Christocentric perspective. By this I mean that what Jesus Christ said and did should be both the starting point and primary guide to understanding.

[<http://www.truthistheword.com/the-christocentric-principle/>]

My approach to the subject of divorce is first to attempt to understand what Jesus taught on this, then to consider the Old Testament background to His teaching, and finally to note any relevant teaching in the New Testament epistles. I will therefore start with my understanding of Matthew 5 31-32 in the context of verses 17 to 30, move on to Matthew 19:3-12 and the verses from Mark 10:2-12 and Luke 16:18. I will comment briefly on the Old Testament references of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and Malachi 2:13-16. Finally, I will consider Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16.

Matthew 5:17-32

Matt 5:31-32 reads, "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery".

On the face of it, this appears to prohibit divorce except when the spouse has committed adultery. However, the context of this statement is adultery and not divorce per se.

Jesus' statement here is part of what we usually refer to as the Sermon on the Mount, an extended teaching that starts at Matthew 5:1 and ends at 7:29. More specifically this pronouncement on divorce is part of Jesus' treatment of the Ten Commandments. He introduces this section of His sermon with the words, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them" (5:17). Jesus concludes this introduction with; "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). This is not a gospel of works, but a statement of the pre-crucifixion criteria of righteousness for all law-keeping Jews, and this would have included His disciples at that time.

Jesus then disclosed the true import of the sixth commandment, 'You shall not murder' (Exodus 20:13) by revealing that physical murder issues from a murderous heart (5:21-22). However, in revealing this He was also striking at the hypocrisy of the religious Jews of His day who made a show of obeying the outward applications of The Law without dealing with their own hearts and attitudes. Jesus then gave two examples of how His hearers were to deal with their wrong thinking.

Jesus then dealt with the 7th commandment, 'You shall not commit adultery' (Exodus 20:14) in a similar fashion by pointing out that the thought life cannot be divorced from the physical manifestations that may follow (5:27-30)..

There is no 11th Commandment, which reads 'You shall not divorce'. Verses 27 to 32 are therefore an expansion of His discourse on adultery and not a new subject. This context is important because the divine intent here is not to define or qualify divorce, but to convict religious Jews of their violation of the 7th Commandment. In essence Jesus was saying something like, "you claim to be righteous because you outwardly obey the 7th Commandment, yet you have adulterous thoughts and by divorcing your wives, as you often do, you are actually committing and causing a form of adultery." This will become even clearer when I look at Matthew 19.

The core teaching of this section of the Sermon on the Mount is that only a heart so pure that anger and lust never even arise in the mind can meet the standard that God the Father has set in His Law. Jesus was effectively demonstrating that the religious Jews of His day were falling short of earning righteousness through observance of the Law. Legalistic Christians today equally miss the point that Jesus was making. Paul however understood perfectly for he wrote; 'Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin' (Romans 3:20).

Matthew 5:32 also contains what has come to be known as an 'exception clause' for divorce. Many teach that divorce is acceptable if the spouse has committed adultery. However, a simpler reading of this verse, in the context of the larger passage, is "you can't cause your wife to become an adulteress if she already is one". As I hope to point out, divorce is never OK with God, not even when marital unfaithfulness has taken place. But first I need to take you through Matthew 19:3-12.

Matthew 19:3-12

The Matthew 19 passage begins in verse 3 with clearly establishing the context of the teachings; 'Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" Divorce was a hotly debated issue among the religious teachers of Jesus' day. Rabbi Shammai interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1 as meaning that divorce was only permitted if the wife committed sexual sin. Rabbi Hillel taught that a man could divorce his wife for any reason, no matter how trivial. The Pharisees wanted to ensure that they were interpreting the Law of Moses correctly because they thought that their righteousness depended on meticulous compliance to the correct interpretation. From what Jesus later said to we can gather that they were not concerned about the moral rightness of divorce and nor were they concerned with protecting the wife in the event of a divorce. They simply wanted to put Jesus on the spot and ensure that he offended at least half of the religious Jewish community.

Jesus started His response to them by first defining marriage as the creation-based divinely ordained bonding of a man and a woman. He then concluded, "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." (19:6). In other words, "If you knew what marriage actually is you would realise that nobody may mess with it."

The Pharisees forced the issue by referring Jesus to what Moses had said concerning divorce. They did not focus on the contested part of Moses' teaching; 'If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her ...' Instead they tried to trap Jesus by asking, "Why then did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Well, Moses was not 'commanding' anything, he was simply setting out a prohibition against a man re-marrying a woman he had previously divorced. Jesus responded by making three points; divorce was never part of God's perfect creation plan, Moses allowed it only because of the hardness of heart of Jewish men, and the issue they should be concerned about was not certificates of divorce but disobedience to the 7th Commandment. This last point harmonises with what Jesus had already taught as part of His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:31-32). This dealt with the Pharisees but it raised some questions in the disciples' minds.

Jesus' followers made a statement that probed neither the righteousness of divorce nor Moses' teaching. Instead, they said; "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry." (19:10). What a strange declaration; "If I have to stick with one woman

for the rest of my life I would rather not get married at all!" This was totally off the point and displayed the disciples' usual lack of comprehension. Jesus responded to it graciously but His answer really does not have anything to do with either divorce or adultery. The Message paraphrase of the Bible renders Jesus' response as; "Not everyone is mature enough to live a married life. It requires a certain aptitude and grace. Marriage isn't for everyone. Some, from birth seemingly, never give marriage a thought. Others never get asked — or accepted. And some decide not to get married for kingdom reasons. But if you're capable of growing into the largeness of marriage, do it."

In Jesus' first teaching on adultery and divorce, He referred back to Moses' statement recorded in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, the passage later cited by the Pharisees who were trying to trap Him. However, I have already given my understanding of what Moses was actually teaching in this passage. So, now let's deal briefly with the other Old Testament text often used to 'prove' that any form of divorce is prohibited by God.

Malachi 2:13-16

The NIV translates the first part of verse 16 as "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel..." and so many scholars claim that this constitutes an absolute divine censure of divorce for any reason. However, the passage does not end there, but continues with the enigmatic and seemingly disconnected words, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment". The ESV translates this verse differently and it is worth reading the whole passage to grasp the context:

"You cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favour from your hand. But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. "For the man who hates and divorces, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless."

So, Malachi 2:13-16 does not constitute an absolute ban on divorce, and how could it when Moses later ruled against just one particular practice concerning divorce. What is clear though, irrespective of which translation you favour, is that God is definitely not in favour of divorce.

To complete the survey of the biblical revelation concerning divorce there remains only to look at what Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16

1 Corinthians 7:10-16

It appears that the Corinthian Christians believed that Jesus would come again during their lifetime, and possibly in the very near future. In the light of this, they had written to Paul posing a number of questions. So, Paul started his response to them with the words 'Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband' (7:1-2). He goes on to say that it would be best not to get married at all (presumably in light of the urgent task of evangelising). However, sexual sin is a bigger problem and so unmarried people should rather marry than have sex outside of marriage. He then instructs married couples that they should not separate or divorce. The exception, he says, is that if an unbelieving spouse wants to divorce then the believer should peaceably permit this. However, a believer may not initiate divorce from an unbelieving spouse.

Forgiveness and restoration

So far it is clear, at least to me, that God does not approve of divorce. However, divorce is not the 11th Commandment and does not constitute an unpardonable sin. It appears from Moses' reference to a certificate of divorce that although God finds it very displeasing, He does provide for it in order to protect His people, and particularly the women. Jesus made it clear that this concession was only because of the hardness of heart and not because He or His Father approved of it.

The law against adultery is part of the Ten Commandments, but even so is not an unpardonable sin. This is obvious from the way that Jesus dealt with the woman caught in adultery. Jesus asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." (John 8:10-11). From this, and other passages that deal with repentance and forgiveness, we cannot argue that adultery constitutes a sin that God will not forgive, or that He will not fully restore a repentant adulterer. Jesus does teach that sexual union between either one or both parties in a post-divorce re-marriage constitutes an initial act of adultery, but there is no indication in His teaching that re-marriage creates a condition of ongoing adultery.

1 John 1:9 has, 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness'. This is a well-established biblical principle and must apply to every class of sin except for attributing the supernatural works of Jesus to the devil (Mark 3:29).

Conclusion

God 'hates' divorce and allows it only to protect the people, particularly wives, who are wronged and harmed by it. Jesus attributes the provision of a 'certificate of divorce' to sinful hardness of heart, and He uses divorce as an indirect example of adultery in order to uncover the pious deceit of the Pharisees. Jesus did not teach that God bans divorce; for how could He when He himself (through Moses) had ruled otherwise? Divorce, like adultery, is forgivable and as a result, God will not withhold restoration from the truly repentant.

May a divorced person remarry? My answer is 'yes', provided the parties concerned realise that they have broken covenant and that God is not at all pleased with this. Additionally, they need to repent and seek to correct the attitudes and circumstances that lead to the divorce. Their pastor should be involved in preparing them properly for the new marriage covenant and pray with them for forgiveness and restoration.

When is it acceptable to initiate divorce? In my opinion, physical or severe emotional abuse or rape are reasons to initiate a divorce. This would certainly also be the case if children were being harmed or in real danger of harm. Unrepentant and repeated adultery would also give grounds for divorce. But, in all these cases I would strongly suggest counselling or professional intervention before a divorce is finalised. Severing a marriage covenant is greatly displeasing to God and very harmful to all involved, and so divorce should always be a last resort.

Divorce is usually painful, destructive, and a negative influence on children, family and friends. People who have experienced divorce, other than the callously self-seeking, should be treated more with compassion than with legalistic censure.