

You Said, But I Say – Part 5

“And it was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce'; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” – Matthew 5:31-32

“He said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.’” – Matthew 19:8-9

We come to dwell once again upon the subject of divorce as a continuation of the last article. It is quite amazing how many commentators circumvent this passage, and how many church leaders admit having no clear understanding of what the Bible teaches regarding the rightness and wrongness of divorce. I am personally thankful for God's great pastors and teachers of the centuries past and present. They remind me of the 'old paths' (Jer. 6:16); they faithfully held the plumb-line of God's Word before His people. Charles Spurgeon once commented, “False doctrine makers and their disciples are the curse of the age in which we live. I implore you, my friends, to abide in the good old paths. What you know to be true, that hold fast. Your father's God and your mother's God forsake not; as for the truths which God has taught you by His own Spirit, grapple them to you as with hooks of steel, for, if you go in the way of error, you cannot expect divine protection.” A most necessary duty, especially when it comes to these hard sayings of Jesus.

Divorce had become as easy as performing a little paperwork to legalize lust and avoid open adultery. Sound familiar? As a brief summary, God gave one exception or concession on the issue of divorce – that of unfaithfulness on the part of one party to a marriage. God never condoned, commanded or advocated divorce, but said one time, for all time, “I hate divorce” (Mal. 2:16). In Matthew 19, the Pharisees ask the question, “Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?” (Mat. 19:3). Jesus answered their question by a delineation of God's original standard for marriage (re: Gen. 2:24) – one male (man, Heb. “iysh”), one female (woman, Heb. “ishshah”), bonded together in a life-long, physical, spiritual, social and indissoluble union.

It is with a proper interpretation of God's Law that Jesus confronts the Pharisees. Jesus in essence was saying to them, “You consider yourselves to be great teachers and keepers of the law, but by allowing no-fault divorce you have caused a great blight of adultery to contaminate God's people. By lowering God's standards to meet your own, you have led many people into sin and judgement.” Jesus gives them the proper interpretation, “Everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Mat. 5:32). “Whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery” (Mat. 19:9). In other words, every time a man without proper cause turned his wife loose to remarry, he forced her into adultery, which made him guilty also. Additionally, the man who married the former wife and the woman who married the former husband were likewise guilty of adultery. The important point being that divorce leads to adultery.

To clarify further, Jesus likewise includes the woman in Mark 10: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery” (v. 10-11). With this inclusion of the wife, Jesus completes the picture. If a man or woman has no right to divorce, then that same man or woman has no right to remarry. To do so creates a chain of adulterous relationships for all parties involved. The Scottish minister John Brown comments upon this subject: “According to this law, adultery is the only sufficient reason of divorce. He who for any other cause puts away his wife, is to be held an adulterer if he marry another woman; and she, by marrying him, commits adultery; while, at the same time, he becomes the guilty occasion of adultery, if the woman, who is still his wife, marries another man; for in this case she commits adultery as he also who marries her.” In addition, thousands could testify of the damaging, destructive effects to children, relatives and society in general, not to mention the confusion, resentment, hatred, bitterness, despair, conflict, animosity and other hardships that result from adulterous relationships.

A concluding note should be mentioned here. No article like this could ever deal exhaustively with such a complex and controversial subject. Adultery is a terrible sin, but not the unforgivable sin. And lest someone think that

they have sinned beyond the love of God I can only say this: recognize the enormity of your sin and confess it before God who is all merciful and quick to pardon. Jesus' words in John 8 come to mind here: "And the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the midst, they said to Him, 'Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?' And they were saying this, testing Him, in order that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down, and with His finger wrote on the ground. But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, 'He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.' And again He stooped down, and wrote on the ground. And when they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the midst. And straightening up, Jesus said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?' And she said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you; go your way. From now on sin no more'" (v. 3-11). Yes, God is merciful and quick to pardon the one who recognizes his or her sin, confesses it and turns from it (repentance) with a willingness and desire to never do it again. "Go, and sin no more."

I close with what I believe is certainly the most beautiful of comments by Charles Spurgeon ever made regarding the marriage relationship. It is my hope that it will serve to strengthen the emphasis of this commentary on the subject:

"Sometimes we have seen a model marriage, founded on pure love, and cemented in mutual esteem. Therein, the husband acts as a tender head; and the wife, as a true spouse, realizes the model marriage-relation, and sets forth what our oneness with the Lord ought to be. She delights in her husband, in his person, his character, his affection; to her, he is not only the chief and foremost of mankind, but in her eyes he is all-in-all; her heart's love belongs to him, and to him only. He lavishes love on her, and, in return, she lavishes love on him. Their object in life is common. There are points where their affections so intimately unite that none could tell which is first and which is second. To watch their children growing up in health and strength, to see them holding posts of usefulness and honor, is their mutual concern; in this and other matters, they are fully one. Happy woman and happy man! If heaven be found on earth, they have it! At last, the two are so blended, so engrafted on one stem, that their old age presents a lovely attachment, a common sympathy, by which its infirmities are alleviated, and its burdens are transformed into fresh bonds of love. So happy a union of will, sentiment, thought, and heart exists between them, that the two streams of their life have washed away the dividing bank, and run on as one broad current of united existence till their common joy falls into the ocean of eternal felicity."

— excerpt from C.H. Spurgeon's Autobiography, Vol. 2, 1854-1860, from the chapter "Early Wedded Life".