



DISCOVERY SERIES



God's. Protection Of Women

When Abuse Is Worse Than Divorce

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GOD'S PROTECTION OF WOMEN

When Abuse Is Worse Than Divorce

Marriage is meant to protect a lifetime of love. The permanence of a husband-wife relationship rests on a covenant of mutual commitment that is designed to survive normal and even serious marital conflict.

Sometimes, however, verbal and physical abuse do to a marriage what murder or rape does to a life. What then? What if efforts to save a marriage result in the compounded loss of peace and trust in the home?

In the following pages, Herb Vander Lugt, longtime church pastor and RBC senior research editor, opens the Bible to show that Moses, Jesus, and Paul all recognized that some marital conditions are worse than divorce.

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A FAMILY NEEDING HELP

It was nearly 11:30 p.m. when I answered our doorbell. I opened the door and saw a young mother with a battered face standing there with two frightened little boys.

I recognized the woman. She and her husband had been attending the church I pastored. They had both impressed me as being warm and friendly. I had seen no outward sign of trouble. That night, however, she told me a story of family secrets. She admitted that her husband occasionally beat her, and that he sometimes terrified her and the children by holding a knife to her throat.

In the days that followed, I learned that this woman's husband tried to prevent her from leaving him by appealing to the Bible. He insisted that because

he had not been sexually unfaithful, she had no biblical right to divorce him.

When this man saw that his wife was serious about getting help for herself and their children, he moved away without leaving a forwarding address. She eventually obtained a divorce and took on the difficult full-time job of rebuilding her life and caring for her children.

Over the years, I've seen other families in similar circumstances. I've heard stories of women who have been urged by well-meaning counselors and friends to forgive their abusive husbands and to concentrate on being a more loving and submissive spouse.

I've also seen the despair and loss of faith that have occurred when women have had to choose either to endure their abuse or to lose their church family.

In more than 50 years of pastoral experience, I have done everything I could to help couples work through normal, even serious, marital conflict. I have seen the damage that occurs to children when their parents take a casual attitude toward divorce. But I have also seen the consequences of attempts to save abusive marriages at the expense of women and children who are just as vulnerable as widows or orphans.

In this study, therefore, I want to show you how I came to the conclusion that sexual unfaithfulness and abandonment are *not* the only biblical grounds to be considered when it comes to saving or ending a marriage. We will look not only at the ideal of marital permanence but also at the biblical evidence that Moses, Jesus, and Paul all recognized a range of marital conditions that are worse than divorce.

THE LONG HISTORY OF MARITAL ABUSE

In every age, there have been men who were protective and kind to their wives and children, just as there were husbands who were abusive. In ancient cultures, however, men had far more rights than women or children. Victors in battle often killed the men of an enemy tribe, raped some of the women, and took others as concubines and slaves. Men generally viewed women as property, insisting on absolute sexual fidelity on the part of a wife, while making no such demand of themselves.

Although exceptions existed, usually in royal households or families of wealth, the legal rights of women were slow to emerge. Even in the United States, women did not have the right to vote until 1920.

Interestingly, an exception occurred in the Puritan community of colonial America. Puritan concern for civic and familial godliness caused them to take the word of a woman seriously in cases of slander, sexual infractions, and divorce. In the spirit of the Reformation, Puritans didn't see marriage as an indissoluble sacrament but as a civil contract that could be terminated if either party did not fulfill fundamental duties of marriage. Although cruelty was not a recognized ground for divorce in the Puritan era, there were those who thought cruelty to a wife was a type of desertion. Such legal protection of women did not survive the decline of Puritanism. Instead, it was replaced by courts that gave men the benefit of the doubt.

Over time, however, the influence of technology and the demands of a

wartime economy once again changed the way men and women related to one another. Many women began working outside the home. Their daughters, in turn, began to see educational and professional opportunities that their grandmothers never knew.

Along the way, many women have had to overcome more than gender bias in society. They've also had to live down a misunderstanding of the biblical phrase, "help meet" (Gen. 2:18,20 KJV). In response to this oversight, biblical scholar Dr. Walter C. Kaiser describes the richness of meaning found in the ancient Hebrew language:

The Hebrew word *helper* (in Gen. 2:18,20 as a designation of the woman) is used only 16 more times in the Old Testament. In those cases it is always a designation

of God as the One who saves, upholds, and sustains His people (as in Ps. 46:1). There is no sense in which this word connotes a position of inferiority or subordinate status. The word *suitable* for literally means “in front of,” signifying one who stands face to face with another, qualitatively the same, his essential equal, and therefore his “correspondent”

(*Hard Sayings Of The Bible*, pp.666-67, IVP, Downers Grove, 1996).

Another misinterpretation involves a common misreading of the curse God pronounced on a fallen world (Gen. 3:16). After our first parents sinned, God said to Eve, “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”

In the past, many of us misunderstood the intent of the words, “And he shall

rule over you.” We saw male domination as a divine order to be accepted rather than as a part of the curse that was to be resisted.

The God of Genesis told our first parents that because of their sin the human experience from that point on would involve pain, sorrow, and discord. Women would have increased pain in childbirth. Men would have to work hard to get a harvest from the earth. While trying to provide for and protect their families, men would also have to fight the inclination to dominate their wives.

We expect farmers to resist weeds. And we pay doctors to lessen a woman’s pain in childbirth. By the same logic, we need to fight against the belief that it is a man’s right to rule and dominate his wife.

PROTECTION OF WOMEN UNDER THE LAW OF MOSES

The apostle Paul reminds us that all Scripture is inspired by God and full of wisdom for living in a fallen world (2 Tim. 3:16). With this reminder, let's review some often-overlooked provisions in the law of Moses. While Jewish rabbis have seen significance in these passages, the church has often focused on the marital ideal rather than those conditions which, according to Moses, required protection for even the most weak and vulnerable women in Israel.

As Genesis reveals God's original intent for marriage, Exodus and Deuteronomy show principles of marital justice in a fallen world where women were often regarded as property.

PROTECTION FOR A DAUGHTER SOLD INTO SLAVERY

In the days of Moses, financially burdened men could pay their debts by selling their daughters to fellow Israelites. While such a practice is unthinkable today, buying and selling wives was common in the ancient Middle East. Moses, however, imposed limitations on this practice to soften the cruelty. For the protection of women who after being sold by their fathers were no longer wanted by their husbands, Moses wrote:

If a man sells his daughter to be a female slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master, who has betrothed her to himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt deceitfully with

her. And if he has betrothed her to his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters. If he takes another wife, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, and her marriage rights. And if he does not do these three for her, then she shall go out free, without paying money (Ex. 21:7-11).

Because this text lists three foundations of marital duty, Jewish scholars have seen it as a model of the marriage covenant.

Rabbis have also seen in Exodus 21:7-11 a principle of interpretation that reasons from the lesser to the greater. In other words, if legal protection is provided for a slave wife, how much more would it apply to a free wife in Israel.

With that background, let's take a closer look. Whoever purchased and married a slave woman

had to provide her with "food" (the Hebrew word here signifies high-quality food), "clothing," and "marriage rights" (probably a reference to regular marital relations so that she could have children). If the husband violated his responsibility to make such provisions, he was to let his wife "go out free."

Writing in the December 1997 issue of the *Journal Of The Evangelical Theological Society*, Joe M. Sprinkle, then associate professor of Old Testament at Toccoa Falls College, wrote:

The expression "she is to go free" [NIV] can mean no less than formal divorce. The point being made is that if this woman, sold as a slave-wife, is no longer to be a wife she cannot be kept as a slave on the pretext that she is the man's wife. Instead, she is to be given her freedom. The

purpose of this law, then, was humanitarian: to assure that a woman sold for the purpose of marriage would not be taken advantage of by being reduced instead to ordinary slavery. Thus under these conditions, and for the sake of the woman involved, God commanded the Israelite unwilling to give the woman full wifely privileges to divorce her without return of the original bride price.

Ideally, of course, it would have been better for the man to fulfill his marital obligations and not divorce his wife. This law by no means condones the man's abandoning of his marital duties. But biblical laws are not utopian. In the real world, people often refuse to do the right thing. What this law does is to indicate that where

due to human sinfulness and stubbornness a man refuses to maintain his marriage, divorce can be prescribed as the lesser of evils (p.534).

At a time when we need to renew our commitment to strong families and marriages, some will think it dangerous to call attention to Mosaic laws that open the door to divorce. Keep in mind, however, that such laws strengthen the values of marriage by making it clear that God did not give a man license to ignore his marital commitments.

PROTECTION FOR WOMEN PRISONERS OF WAR

In addition to providing protection for a daughter who was sold, Mosaic law provided marriage, divorce, and remarriage protection even for foreign women captured by Israelite soldiers as prisoners of war.

When you go out to war against your enemies, and the Lord your God delivers them into your hand, and you take them captive, and you see among the captives a beautiful woman, and desire her and would take her for your wife, then you shall bring her home to your house and she shall be your wife. And it shall be, if you have no delight in her, then you shall set her free, but you certainly shall not sell her for money; you shall not treat her brutally, because you have humbled her (Dt. 21:10-14).

This is another practice that is difficult for us to imagine. But it introduces a merciful touch to the unpleasant reality of war in ancient times. God was reaching down into a fallen, violent culture. It was a world in which the victors of war often killed any

enemy capable of wielding a sword and did whatever they pleased with the women and children. In its setting, therefore, this legislation was humanitarian in nature.

According to Moses, even a woman who was taken as a wife from the spoils of war was to be given the protection of law. If her husband became dissatisfied with her, he had to treat her as he would a wife from his own people. He was not allowed to subject her to brutal treatment. Instead, the law required him to give her a certificate of divorce.

PROTECTION FOR UNLOVED WIVES

Moses wrote another law that would have caused a man to think twice before divorcing his wife.

When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found

some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's wife, if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord (Dt. 24:1-4).

It is noteworthy that this law apparently did not require the husband to prove that he had valid grounds for a divorce. Neither did it subject either the man or the woman to community discipline. The only restriction was that the

man who so divorced his wife forfeited the right to remarry her if she married someone else in the interim.

But what is implied in the phrase “she has been defiled”? (v.4). Since Moses did not condemn the woman's second marriage, we can be sure that it was not a statement about her moral condition after her divorce. Instead, the point of the law was to assure that she would never again be an eligible wife for her first husband. The New English Bible reflects this idea when it states that the first husband “is not free to take her back to be his wife again after she has become for him unclean.”

This restriction seems to formalize what the man himself had implied when he originally found “some uncleanness in her” (v.1). Since the term *uncleanness* is left undefined, it has been the subject of rabbinic

debate over the centuries. We can probably safely conclude, however, that the husband is not making a public accusation of adultery. The law of Moses required death for adulterers, not a provision of divorce (Dt. 22:22).

Whatever the reason was for the husband's dissatisfaction, it's important to keep in mind that Moses' toleration of divorce was not an indication that God was approving a man's right to divorce for any reason. Jesus clearly declared that God made this allowance because of the hardness of men's hearts (Mt. 19:8).

A question might be asked as to why this law placed such a strong prohibition on the potential remarriage of this couple if the wife was subsequently remarried, divorced, or even widowed. One possibility is that such a restriction would discourage a casual

attitude toward divorce and remarriage. The law may also have had the intent of protecting the husband's new wife from being relegated to a secondary place should the man decide he wanted to return to his "first love."

Of course, this concession does not mean that God abandoned His ideal for marriage as expressed in Genesis 2:24 and repeated by Jesus:

Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning "made them male and female," and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate (Mt. 19:4-6).

God's ideal and intent for marriage has never changed.

What has changed, however, are the conditions that occur when hard-hearted people break and are broken by the timeless principles of God. The same law that offers penalties for murder, theft, perjury, and adultery also provides consequences when the purpose and covenant of marriage are broken by contempt and abuse.

But if God allows and even provides for divorce under such circumstances, what are we to make of Malachi's quote of a God who "says that He hates divorce"? (Mal. 2:16). Let's take a look at the context.

PROTECTION FOR WRONGLY DIVORCED WOMEN

In the days after Israel's exile to Babylon, some of the men of Judah began divorcing their wives and marrying worshipers of other gods. This social condition

so compromised the spiritual health of Israel that the priests and prophets of God expressed alarm (Ezra 9:1-2, 10-12; Neh. 13:23-27). Ezra, the priest of God, was so outraged that he demanded that the men of Israel divorce their "pagan wives" (Ezra 10).

At about the same time, the prophet Malachi also expressed anger at the way Jewish men were divorcing their wives and marrying the daughters of pagan neighbors. So Malachi declared, "The Lord God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence" (Mal. 2:16).

Here the prophet of God shows God's heart for women who are wrongfully divorced by their husbands. From this text, however, many have concluded that God condemns all divorce and regards it as an inherently immoral action.

Listen again to Professor Sprinkle as he comments on Malachi's statement that God hates divorce.

However one renders v.16, what is condemned in context is not necessarily every divorce under every condition—as if the text is opposed to the actions of Ezra and Nehemiah 13—but specifically the divorce of innocent Jewish wives simply because their husbands prefer foreign wives to their Jewish ones. There are thus two points of condemnation: (1) They are marrying pagan wives who will undermine Israel's religion and their covenant with God, and (2) they are too cavalier in repudiating without cause the marriage covenant with their original Jewish wives. We cannot conclude from this verse, however, that God

opposes divorce in any and every circumstance. The context is a limited one. God is opposed to these particular divorces, not any and every divorce regardless of circumstance.

Otherwise, one makes this text contradict the passages already considered above where divorce is prescribed.

Some divorces are wrong. Some are necessary. All are to be mourned. No one knows this better than those who have been there. Such persons don't need our condemnation. They need others to join them in grieving lost love and broken dreams.

Some will ask, "But why are we looking at Old Testament law?" Well, when the apostle Paul said that all Scripture is inspired by God and is full of wisdom for living in a fallen world (2 Tim. 3:16), he had Moses,

the Psalms, the Proverbs, the Prophets, and the New Testament writings in view. So if we ignore the Old Testament, we will be like someone who picks up a 250-page novel and starts reading at page 200.

If we don't keep the Old Testament in view, we will miss the way Jesus personifies and fulfills the spirit and intent of Moses. Only when we consider the whole counsel of God can we see that the Mosaic laws of divorce are the other side of the coin of foundational values of home and family.

While recognizing that marital permanence is God's ideal, Moses also recognized that there are hard-hearted conditions worse than divorce.

The next step is to see how the timeless principles of Moses complement the wisdom and teaching of Christ.

NEW TESTAMENT PROTECTION OF WOMEN

God's love and protection for both men and women is seen clearly in the life and teachings of Christ. As One who came to fulfill the heart and spirit of the law, Jesus showed a respect and consideration for women that was not common to His community. On one occasion, He showed compassion to a woman caught in adultery (Jn. 8:3-11). On another, He showed care and respect for a woman who had been married multiple times (Jn. 4:7-30).

Ironically, however, many women in our own day have been confronted with a Jesus who seems to be on the side of the husbands who are abusing them.

Consider, for instance, the following woman. To

identify with her plight, imagine that she is your own daughter:

She doesn't know where to turn. And she blames herself for ending up in an abusive marriage.

You know your daughter isn't perfect. But what you haven't seen is how often she's cried, and how hard she's tried to make her marriage work. For the last 12 years, she's prayed that God would give her the patience and grace to stay with the man she promised to love for the rest of her life.

Sometimes, however, she wishes she had never been born. Her husband tells her he doesn't love her and that he's sorry he ever married her. He calls her names and deprives her of affection. Yet, whenever he's in the mood, he expects her to meet his sexual demands. When she talks about getting help, he threatens to tell her friends that she's mentally ill or that

she's having an affair. She doesn't doubt that he would lie to protect himself. He leaves bruises and deep wounds others cannot see.

When your daughter has confided in church leaders, they have advised her to be more submissive and not to criticize him or provoke his anger. They usually ask if he's been sexually unfaithful, but she doesn't think he has. Some have asked if she thinks he's really a believer. She tells them that he says he is. When she asked one elder why those questions were important, he told her that without sexual unfaithfulness or the abandonment of an unbelieving spouse, she didn't have biblical grounds to leave her husband. The same church leaders told her that separation was not an option because it was often the first step to a divorce. Almost as often,

they have reminded her that Jesus teaches us to forgive.

This may not be your daughter. But she's somebody's child. And now she needs help.

It's just as true, though, that her predicament opens a Pandora's box of questions. If we use the Old Testament to open the door to divorce, how many additional marriages will be lost? How can we know that a woman who is claiming abuse is not merely looking for an excuse out of an unhappy marriage? Doesn't Jesus help us hold troubled homes together by raising the standard of marital permanence? Let's take a closer look.

PROTECTION FROM DIVORCE FOR ANY REASON

In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, He repeatedly showed how religious men had misused the laws of God to create a cover

for their sin. One of His examples related to the prevailing rabbinic view of a text we have already considered. An influential group of rabbis was teaching that on the basis of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, a righteous man could divorce his wife for any and all reasons. So Jesus observed:

*It has been said,
"Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce."
But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery
(Mt. 5:31-32).*

It's not difficult to understand that Jesus is taking issue with the rabbis' "divorce for any reason" teaching. But what did He mean when He said that a man who wrongly divorces

his wife “causes her to commit adultery”? Was Jesus disagreeing with Moses, who allowed such men to divorce their wives? And was He also saying that Moses was allowing a kind of divorce that turned wrongly divorced women into adulteresses?

We can begin to answer these questions by looking closely at the context. Jesus was explaining that God’s kingdom was characterized by righteousness—right relationships with God and with others—that begins in the heart. He challenged religious teachers who were focusing on the letter of the law while ignoring its intent. When Jesus said that the one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery (5:28) and that if a man’s eye causes him to sin he should gouge it out (v.29), He was focusing on the root of harmful behavior.

By such statements,

Jesus was offering insight rather than legislation. No reasonable human court or church council could require surgical removal of an eye as a punishment for lust, or excommunication from the church for adultery of the heart.

Jesus was therefore helping His listeners focus on deeper issues of the soul and to see the damage self-righteous husbands were doing to their wives when they divorced them for something less than sexual unfaithfulness.

Professor Dallas Willard describes the damage that husbands in the first century did when they forced their wives into the stigma of being divorced. He writes:

In the Jewish society of Jesus’ day, as for most times and places in human history, the consequences of divorce were devastating for the woman. Except for

some highly unlikely circumstances, her life was, simply, ruined. No harm was done to the man, by contrast, except from time to time a small financial loss and perhaps bitter relationships with the ex-wife's family members.

For the woman, however, there were only three realistic possibilities in Jesus' day. She might find a place in the home of a generous relative, but usually on grudging terms and as little more than a servant. She might find a man who would marry her, but always as "damaged goods" and sustained in a degraded relationship. Or she might, finally, make a place in the community as a prostitute. Society simply would not then, as ours does today, support a divorced woman to any degree

or allow her to support herself in a decent fashion (*The Divine Conspiracy*, p.171, HarperCollins, 1997).

In this light, consider again Jesus' words, "But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery" (Mt. 5:32).

It seems unlikely that Jesus was intentionally adding to the burden of wrongly divorced women, or that He believed the men who married them were guilty of adultery. Neither is it biblically consistent to think that He was taking issue with Moses for allowing divorce and remarriage. If we instead stay with the context, it is possible to see that our Lord was confronting the self-righteousness of hard-

hearted men. He was focused on those who were “adulterizing” their wives by causing them and those who married them to live in a state that falls short of God’s original intent.

PROTECTION FROM HARDNESS OF HEART

In Matthew 19, we find a specific example of the rabbinic view of divorce we’ve been considering. Beginning with verse 3, Matthew described religious leaders who tested Jesus to see if they could put Him in a position of disagreement with Moses.

The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?” And He answered and said to them, “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made

them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.” They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?” He said to them, “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery (Mt. 19:3-9).

Here we see that the Pharisees were trying to pit Jesus against Moses. A few

verses later we read that His disciples, who shared the attitudes of the Pharisees on marriage, also needed to be reminded of God's original intent (Mt.19:10-12; Mk. 10:10-12). So Jesus presented two sides of the coin. He emphasized the ideal of marital permanence without disagreeing with the wisdom of Moses in allowing divorce.

Commenting on the allowance made for hardness of heart, Dr. Willard notes:

No doubt what was foremost in His [Jesus'] mind was the fact that the woman could quite well wind up dead, or brutally abused, if the man could not "dump" her. It is still so today, of course. Such is "our hardness of heart." Better, then, that a divorce occur than life be made unbearable. Jesus does nothing to retract this principle. . . . No

one regards a divorce as something to be chosen for its own sake

But of course a brutal marriage is not a good thing either, and we must resist any attempt to classify divorce as a special, irredeemable form of wickedness.

It is not. It is sometimes the right thing to do, everything considered (ibid., pp.169-70).

When Jesus called His listeners back to God's original intent for marriage, therefore, He was not taking issue with Moses. The two were taking different roles. Jesus was speaking as a teacher of righteousness, exposing the hypocrisy of men who had not only lost sight of God's ideal but also of their own hearts.

In first-century Israel, rabbinic practice had ignored Moses' provision for women. Contemporary Jewish law made no provision for

unloved and abused women to divorce their husbands. Only women with wealth or status could take this step by working through Roman authorities. We have already seen, however, that while Moses did not allow a woman to write a certificate of divorce, he gave the elders of Israel a legal basis to free a woman from the neglect, contempt, and abuse of a cruel husband.

So why in Matthew 19 did our Lord allow for divorce only on grounds of sexual unfaithfulness? Why didn't He mention the grounds listed by Moses before Him or by Paul after Him? (1 Cor. 7). Again, the answer is in the context. Jesus was not responding to women in distress. He was speaking to self-righteous men who were trying to use Moses to justify their right to divorce for any reason.

This was not the only time Jesus carefully chose

words that met the needs of His listeners. Look at what happened a few verses later.

Immediately after His conversation with the Pharisees, we read in Matthew 19:16 that a self-righteous, wealthy ruler came to Jesus and asked, "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?"

From our point of view, the question seems like a perfect opportunity for our Lord to explain that salvation is found not by personal merit but by faith in God's Messiah. Yet, because Jesus understood the man's self-righteous heart, He didn't tell him all He could have said about eternal life. Instead, Jesus told the man to keep the law of God. When the man said that he had done that, Jesus told him to sell everything he had and to follow Him.

Because we understand the context of our Lord's

conversation with the rich young ruler, and because He didn't take the occasion to teach salvation by grace through faith, we don't use Jesus' response as the definitive teaching about salvation.

A similar context and intent must be kept in view when we read in this same chapter: "The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?'" (Mt. 19:3). Jesus' answer was given to self-righteous Pharisees, not to a woman requesting protection from an abusive husband.

But what about the statement of Jesus in Luke 16:18 where He seems to declare that every remarriage after a divorce is an act of adultery?

Here again, in the presence of Pharisees, Jesus was offering insight rather than legislation. He exposed

as idolatry their love of money. He angered them not only by saying, "You cannot serve both God and money" (Lk. 16:13 NIV), but also by adding, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts" (v.15). Then Jesus continued:

The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it. And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fail. Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery (vv.16-18).

Because Jesus here affirmed the whole law, we can safely assume He was not taking issue with the Mosaic allowances for

divorce and remarriage that we have already considered.

So what was Jesus saying? He was confronting the hearts of the Pharisees who not only broke the first commandment by their love of money but also the seventh commandment by the casual way they were divorcing their wives. They were adulterizing themselves, their wives, and their wives' future husbands by divorcing for any and every reason.

In principle, love of money is idolatry, and unjustified divorce and remarriage is adultery. But these insights were spoken to confront self-righteous hearts. Luke 16:18, like Matthew 5 and 19, are not meant to be God's only or final word on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. As we are about to see, the apostle Paul discussed additional issues.

PROTECTION ON GROUNDS JESUS DIDN'T MENTION

In another often-overlooked passage, the apostle Paul gives us a New Testament example that is consistent with both Moses and Jesus on marriage and divorce.

In his first letter to the Corinthians he wrote:

Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife (1 Cor. 7:10-11).

Note what Paul wrote here. On the basis of the authority of Christ, he instructed husbands and wives not to divorce each other. But then he went on to say that if a woman did leave her husband (for unspecified reasons) and obtained a divorce (through

Roman law), she should remain unmarried or be reconciled to her former mate.

Paul's counsel to the church raises questions. Why, when linking his instructions to the Lord (v.10), did he make no mention of the "except for fornication" clause? And why did he warn against remarriage when, by doing so, he seemed to ignore the divorce-and-remarriage provisions of Moses?

Because of the attention given to these laws by the first-century rabbinic community, we can be sure Paul was acquainted with Mosaic divorce law. And the very fact that Paul based his command on the authority of Jesus makes it obvious that he knew and accepted what Jesus had said. These facts suggest that he was writing about something other than the grounds for divorce recognized

by both Moses and Jesus.

To understand the intent of Paul's comments about marriage, divorce, and remarriage, we need to look at the context of his words. He began chapter 7 by saying, "Now concerning the things of which you wrote." This comment indicates that he was writing to answer questions raised by followers of Christ in Corinth.

What Paul wrote next shows that the Corinthians were asking questions about marriage and the role of sexual intimacy within marriage (vv.2-3). In a Corinthian culture marked by sexual indulgence, some apparently were advocating sexual abstinence, even within marriage, as being the most complete way of expressing their devotion to Christ.

Paul's response was both idealistic and practical. He said he wished all people

could give undistracted devotion to Christ. But he was also realistic enough to know that it requires special grace to live in an unmarried state (1 Cor. 7:7-9). He therefore recommended marriage, and marital intimacy, for those who could not give single-minded devotion to Christ without being overwhelmed by sexual temptation.

It is in this immediate context that Paul urged wives not to divorce their husbands, and then added that if they did leave they were to remain unmarried or be reconciled (vv.10-11).

Paul then went on to address additional situations that Jesus had not mentioned. With sensitivity to the Spirit of Christ, he wrote, "But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. . . . But if the

unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace" (1 Cor. 7:12,15).

By saying, "a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases," Paul relieved the conscience of those living with unbelieving partners who no longer wanted the marriage. By adding, "God has called us to peace," the apostle clearly recognized the intent of the marriage covenant.

So, in response to questions from the Corinthians, Paul discussed additional issues of marriage and divorce that our Lord had not addressed. In the process, he joined Moses and Jesus in becoming part of the whole counsel of God for understanding the ideal of marriage and the conditions under which a relationship may be lost.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, abusive male domination of women is just as much a part of the curse as weeds in the garden and increased pain in childbirth.

Many, however, in trying to return to the ideal of marital love and permanence have not seen the wisdom God Himself showed in circumstances of marital abuse.

Mosaic case law shows that it is better to end a marriage than to force a hard-hearted man to live with a wife he no longer loves or wants. To protect the woman from being subjected to ongoing contempt, or from being returned to her family or society as an unwanted *married* woman, Moses permitted a formal certificate of divorce that declared the marriage ended. With this

allowance of divorce came the legal freedom to remarry.

I believe that a failure to recognize this Old Testament background has led many students of the Bible to ignore the wisdom of Moses and to misunderstand the teaching of Christ on the subject of divorce and remarriage.

Yes, divorce reflects a serious and costly departure from God's original design. But the solution to the problem is not found in misrepresenting the heart of the law or in ignoring the plight of unloved or abused wives. Neither can we rightly maintain that sexual unfaithfulness and the desertion of an unbelieving mate are the *only* grounds for a divorce.

Just as Jesus did not give the whole picture about salvation to the man who wondered "what good thing" he could do to be sure of eternal life (Mt. 19:16-26),

neither did He give the whole picture to men who misunderstood the intent and spirit of divorce law (vv.3-12).

Jesus came into a first-century Jewish community that often reflected little regard for the rights of women. Therefore, He gave such men only one basis on which they could divorce their wives.

Jesus, however, was not saying that Moses made a mistake in allowing divorce for hardness of heart. Neither was He addressing wives whose husbands refused to honor their covenantal commitments. Moses had already spoken to those conditions.

I know that in our day, many have bought into the easy-divorce philosophy. As a pastor, I have been deeply concerned over husbands and wives who divorced their spouses to marry others with whom they had “fallen in love.” I have seen

them manufacture a host of rationalizations to justify what they did. In many cases, it was evident that they had become disappointed and bored with their marriage. With no better reason than their own self-centeredness, they showed willful distrust in God and an utter disregard for the lasting hurt inflicted on their spouses, children, relatives, and circle of friends.

But I have also encountered equally sad situations in which endangered women and children were urged to stay in abusive marriages, because there was no evidence that the husband had been guilty of sexual unfaithfulness.

For far too long, well-intentioned pastors and church elders have labored under the assumption that there are only two biblical grounds for divorce and

remarriage: sexual unfaithfulness or desertion by an unbelieving spouse.

Patterns of progressive revelation show us that Jesus was building on Moses, and that Paul, in turn, wrote about additional practical issues that Jesus didn't address in His words to the Pharisees.

Some years ago a pastor asked me, "Have you taken the strictest position possible in what you have written on the subject of divorce and remarriage?" I said, "No, but I have tried to present the biblical position." He responded, "Then I'm not interested. The only way we are going to stop the divorce epidemic in our churches is by taking an absolute no-remarriage position and putting all divorcees on the shelf, as far as service in the church is concerned."

I do see the "divorce epidemic" as a grave evil. And I remain committed to

working hard to salvage as many marriages as possible. But I believe it is neither biblical nor Christlike to ignore the plight of those who are faced with the ongoing contempt and abuse of a covenant-breaking mate.

While we have in this study focused on God's concern for abused wives, it is also true that He is concerned when the wife becomes hard-hearted and abusive. I know a heartbroken pastor whose wife divorced him because she was dissatisfied with his salary and had fallen in love with her wealthy employer. I know another man whose wife of 20 years divorced him because she said she preferred the freedom of being unmarried. In his case, she left him no choice but to cooperate with the divorce process.

Over the years, I have also seen many victims of

divorce (both men and women) treated as second-class church members after enduring an unwanted breakup of their marriage.

Many church leaders continue to regard all divorce and remarriage as actions that disqualify divorced people from any leadership positions in the church.

I understand that churches often make such decisions out of a desire to remain faithful to the Scriptures. Many pastors and elders have felt torn by a desire to show mercy and compassion while also feeling bound by what they believe to be the clear statements of the Word of God. Such leaders have honestly believed that there are only two biblical grounds for divorce: sexual unfaithfulness or desertion by an unbelieving spouse.

Yet, as we have seen,

such restrictions have been formed without enough consideration for the biblical context in which Jesus spoke and Paul wrote. Words meant for self-righteous religionists who were willfully divorcing their wives for any and all reasons have been wrongly applied to persons living under the terrible weight of hard-hearted contempt and abuse.

Once again, I believe that well-intentioned people have failed to take into consideration the contexts in which Jesus talked about the sin of adultery. They have also failed to learn from Moses that even a hard-hearted divorce dissolves a marriage in God's eyes.

Many church people continue to maintain that any person remarried after a divorce lives in a state of perpetual adultery. I believe such persons need to look

again at what Moses said on behalf of God in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. In this passage, a divorce so completely dissolves a marriage that the only restriction imposed on a man who divorces his wife is that he is forbidden from ever marrying her again if she has been remarried, divorced, or even widowed in the meantime.

Please believe me when I tell you that I in no way am trying to weaken our resolve to build permanent healthy marriages. I have been deeply moved by the self-giving love of both men and women whose spouse became handicapped through illness or accident. In one instance, the wife, before the age of 30, developed both multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis, which rapidly debilitated her. That husband and father made arrangements at his job

that allowed him to get his children ready for school and to be home at noon to meet the needs of his wife. He remained a pleasant, gracious person and never gave the impression that life had cheated him.

Working to rescue a troubled marriage is worth the effort. For pastors and counselors, the ideal, whenever possible, is to help couples overcome normal and even serious marital conflict. We must not easily relinquish the goal of a restored, healthy, lifelong marriage for every couple.

Neither, however, should we attempt to misuse the moral authority of the church to deny membership or fellowship to those who are mourning the loss of their marriage to an abusive, covenant-breaking spouse.

But what if a woman falsely claims emotional or physical abuse as an excuse

to get out of her marriage? That's certainly a possibility, but it's not going to be the norm. Most women have many reasons for not wanting a divorce. They are far more likely to cover up their shame than to make up stories. They have too much to lose when it comes to their family, church, children, and financial security. Many still cherish dreams of a better day. They need to be believed, unless they show they can't be trusted.

But what if you're still not sure you could ever give encouragement to a woman who is thinking about leaving her marriage for anything other than sexual unfaithfulness or the abandonment of an unbelieving spouse? What if you find yourself thinking that it's more faithful to listen to the Word of God than to your heart?

If that's what you're

thinking, it's good that you want to obey God above all else. That's why this booklet was written. The Word of God teaches us to listen not only to the letter of the law but also to its intent.

As we conclude, let's take one more look at our Lord's example. In Luke 13:10-16, we read that Jesus went into a synagogue on the Sabbath and healed a woman who had been crippled for 18 years. When the ruler of the synagogue saw what Jesus had done, he objected that the visiting rabbi had violated the no-work law of the Sabbath. Jesus, however, showed that it was the leader of the synagogue who misunderstood the heart and spirit of Sabbath law (Lk. 13:15).

In a similar incident, Jesus asked, "Which of you, having a donkey or an ox that has fallen into a pit, will

not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day?” (Lk. 14:5).

In Mark 2:27 Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” By saying this, our Lord showed that He is more concerned about people than He is about the letter of Sabbath law. He was angry with those who put more value on keeping the law than on showing love toward those the law was made to protect.

When someone we love is struggling with severe marital abuse, it’s not difficult to see the connection between her situation and that of the crippled woman who was healed by Jesus on the Sabbath day.

In a similar way, we can say that marriage was made for men and women, not that men and women were made for marriage. The God of the Old and New

Testaments has shown us in so many ways that in hard-hearted circumstances, He is more concerned about people than He is about the letter of marriage law.

Thankfully, our God does not apply the strict letter of the law to any of us! Because Christ died in our place, God offers mercy rather than condemnation to all who come to Him in repentance and brokenness.

Abusive husbands, therefore, can find the forgiveness of God—even if they have lost their marriage. Such mercy is also available to those who have put more value on the law of marriage than on the people the law of marriage was made to protect.

May our Lord help us to know when to work hard for reconciliation and when to be willing to grieve with those who are experiencing the pain of lost dreams and broken promises.



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