

To Seek and To Save the Lost

Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

Luke 16:18

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Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

Scripture

Luke 16 primarily deals with the topic of possessions. However, in the middle of chapter 16 Jesus made a statement about divorce and remarriage as an illustration of the ongoing applicability of the moral law of God. I mentioned last time that I would like to take the opportunity to address the topic of marriage, divorce, and remarriage today.

Let's read about marriage, divorce, and remarriage in Luke 16:18:

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

Introduction

Jesus' teaching in Luke 16:18 says that adultery is committed when a divorced person remarries or when one marries a divorced person. If that were all that the Bible said about divorce and remarriage, and adultery, for that matter, then we would have a specific principle regarding these matters.

However, the Bible says so much more about divorce and remarriage. So, we need to look at the other places in Scripture where the topic is addressed to develop a full-orbed understanding of the biblical teaching regarding divorce and remarriage.

I would like to deviate from my usual practice of textual exposition. As you know, I normally preach an expository message on a verse or verses of Scripture. Today, however, I would like to do more of a topical exposition. That is, I would like to examine briefly the topic of marriage, divorce, and remarriage

as it is given to us throughout the entire Bible.

My reason for doing this is because I would like to state as clearly as possible what I understand the Bible to teach on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Our culture increasingly opposes biblical teaching on the topic, and it is important that we are clear about what the Bible teaches on the topic.

As I thought about how to approach the topic of marriage, divorce, and remarriage, I decided to use our own Session's position paper on marriage, divorce, and remarriage that was approved on January 17, 2008. At that time our Session thought that it was important to state our church's position regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Lesson

So, today, I would like to set before you some biblical principles and practical implications of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Biblical Principles Regarding Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage
2. Practical Implications Flowing from the Biblical Principles Regarding Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

I. Biblical Principles Regarding Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

First, let's look at biblical principles regarding marriage, divorce and remarriage.

Our Session approved nine biblical principles, which I would like to set before you today.

First, marriage is a divine institution between a man and a woman.

There are two key biblical texts to support this principle. The first is Genesis 2:18-24:

¹⁸Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." ²⁰ . . . But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. ²¹ So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³ Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." ²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

And the second text to support marriage as a divine institution between a man and a woman is Matthew 19:4-6:

⁴ He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? ⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

The clear biblical teaching is that marriage is between one man and one woman, in accordance with the Word of God.

Second, Christians must enter into and conduct their marriages according to the rules for marriage set down in Scripture, and explained in the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 24, and in agreement with our Book of Church Order, Chapter 59.

There are numerous passages in Scripture that give guidance for Christians in their marriages, such as Ephesians 5:22-33 and Colossians 3:18-19.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (in Chapter 24) and

our church's *Book of Church Order* (in Chapter 59) set down further clarifying rules for marriage, based on the Word of God. Some of these rules are restated in our document regarding the biblical principles for marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Third, marriage is intended by God to be permanent.

Two Scripture passages support this principle. The first is Malachi 2:16, "For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, 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."

And the second text to support the permanence of marriage is Matthew 19:6, "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

Fourth, when one of the partners dies the remaining partner may remarry.

The apostle Paul said to the Romans in Romans 7:2, "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." And she is then free to remarry.

Fifth, there are two possible biblical grounds for divorce.

We generally refer to these as "adultery" and "desertion of a Christian by a non-Christian." Let me explain further.

Regarding adultery, Jesus said in Matthew 5:27-32:

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. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

³¹ "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 im-

morality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

In addition, Jesus said in Matthew 19:9, “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

In Matthew 5:27-32 we see the use of two different words, the meaning of which has often been misunderstood or confounded. Jesus uses a different word for “adultery” (*moicheia*) than he does for “sexual immorality” (*porneia*). English translations of the Bible translate *porneia* variously: “fornication” (*KJV*), “unchastity” (*NASV*), “marital unfaithfulness” (*NIV*), “sexual immorality” (*ESV, NKJV*).

The following is helpful in understanding how a married man might be considered to have committed fornication, which today usually means sexual intercourse between two consenting adults who are not married to each other. Louw and Nida state the following:

From the standpoint of the NT, adultery was normally defined in terms of the married status of the woman involved in any such act. In other words, sexual intercourse of a married man with an unmarried woman would usually be regarded as *porneia* “fornication,” but sexual intercourse of either an unmarried or a married man with someone else’s wife was regarded as adultery, both on the part of the man as well as the woman.¹

In commenting on the biblical use of *porneia*, Kittel, Friedrich, and Bromiley write, in part:

Hosea 1–3 portrays the unfaithfulness of Israel to God as a form of adultery. Isaiah 1:21 uses the same image. Jeremiah,

¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 771.

rejecting sacral prostitution, also depicts Israel and Judah as unfaithful women who play the harlot with many lovers (3:2). Ezekiel develops the image in extended allegories (16; 23) Later Judaism shows how the use of *porneia* broadens out to include not only fornication or adultery but incest, sodomy, unlawful marriage, and sexual intercourse in general.²

It is not permissible, nor biblically possible, to restrict the meaning of *porneia* by tying it solely to the act of adultery, although it certainly includes it.

Thus, we conclude that there are two possible biblical grounds for divorce. First, the only possible biblical ground for dissolving a marriage of two Christians (or non-Christians, for that matter) is the “exception clause” of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 (“except for sexual immorality”).

This means either:

- i. Unchastity discovered in the engaged person during the betrothal period or at the time of the marriage, in which case the deceived spouse may put his wife or her husband away, that is, declare the betrothal or unconsummated marriage to be null and void, or
- ii. Sexual immorality committed after the marriage has taken place in which case the husband (or wife) may seek a divorce. Under the rubric of “sexual immorality” are included actions such as adultery, male or female homosexual sex, incest, rape, sodomy, prostitution, bestiality, physical or sexual abuse (threatened or acted upon), pedophilia, desertion of the marriage bed, and use of pornography.

In the first case (i), the principle of permanent marriage is uncompromised. In modern times betrothal is not considered

² Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1985), 919.

contractually or covenantally binding, thus, there has been no true marriage and no true divorce occurs.

In the second case (ii), divorce and a remarriage would be permitted, but even in this case the highest course would be to save the marriage.

We are committed to doing everything possible to save marriages. While we understand that there is a body of opinion that would restrict the meaning of *porneia* to the first interpretation (i), we also believe that the second interpretation (ii) deals with the underlying issue of unfaithfulness and covenant breaking.

Notwithstanding the right to divorce that accrues from the sin of a spouse as delineated above, it should be the desire of all Christians to extend forgiveness and to allow reconciliation where true repentance has been expressed and demonstrated.

The principle set forth in the Old Testament (that of unfaithfulness and covenant breaking) is key in our dealing with specific instances pastorally. For example, while a pedophile may not have had sexual intercourse with his or her victim, he or she has committed other actions that demonstrate unfaithfulness to his or her spouse and a severing of the one-flesh relationship.

Similarly, one who continues in the use of pornography is setting his or her affections on someone other than his or her spouse, is breaking the marriage covenant, and is thus demonstrating marital unfaithfulness.

Further, the one who commits crimes that force society to place him or her in custody has proven unfaithful to his or her spouse by doing that which results in the abandonment of the marriage bed. Thus, we may add to this principle of unfaithfulness and covenant breaking, willful desertion of the marriage bed, which includes those who voluntarily abandon their spouse, as well as those whose actions cause them to be incar-

cerated.

The second biblical ground for divorce, which is “desertion of a Christian by a non-Christian,” will be explained in principle nine below.

Sixth, in no case does Scripture permit divorce (and remarriage) between Christians on any grounds other than those outlined above.

The Bible gives no other grounds for divorce and, therefore, remarriage other than “adultery” and “desertion of a Christian by a non-Christian.”

Seventh, in the case of one Christian partner leaving the other Christian partner for any cause other than porneia, he or she is to remain unmarried or else be reconciled to the abandoned partner.

Paul teaches this to the Corinthian Church in 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 (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.”

Eighth, if a Christian is married to an unbeliever and the unbeliever is willing to continue living peaceably with the Christian, the Christian is not to seek a separation or divorce.

Paul taught this principle to the Corinthian Church in 1 Corinthians 7:12-14:

¹²To 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. ¹³If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

And ninth, if a Christian is married to an unbeliever and the

unbeliever chooses to leave the Christian, the Christian is free to permit the separation and/or resulting divorce.

Since this is a biblical divorce, and the Christian is free to remarry. Paul said to the Corinthian Church in 1 Corinthians 7:15, “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.”

I would like to note two points regarding this principle. First, we concur with the findings of the *Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage*, whose recommendations were adopted by the 20th General Assembly of the PCA (1992), that reads, in part:

In Paul’s day, the separation spoken of in 1 Corinthians 7:10-15 was itself an act of divorce. In our day such separation is not regarded as such. Therefore, the believing spouse whose unbelieving spouse separates from him or her is left in an anomaly, i.e., divorced and free to remarry in the eyes of God (and His Word), but not divorced in the eyes of the State. To resolve this anomaly the Committee holds that the believing spouse may initiate legal action to make her biblical divorce legal in the eyes of the State.³

And second, we concur with all of the recommendations of the *Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage*, adopted by the 20th General Assembly of the PCA (1992). In particular we note the following (labeled f, g, h, and i in the report):

- f. That when believers divorce for other than Biblical grounds, they should remain unmarried or else be reconciled (1 Corinthians 7:11).
- g. That when an unbeliever separates from the marriage relationship with a believer, the believer is free from that marriage and free to remarry but only in the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:15, 39).

³ See PCA Position Papers, 292.

- h. That under extreme circumstances, a Session following the *Book of Church Order* may properly judge . . . that such desertion (separation) has occurred, even though the deserting spouse is still physically present in the home (“desertion” being viewed in the sense understood in the Committee report, Chapter 2, Section II.E.4.).
- i. That the believer in the aforementioned cases (f, g) is free to make the Biblical divorce a legal divorce in the eyes of the State.⁴

Well, so much for the biblical principles regarding marriage, divorce and remarriage.

II. Practical Implications Flowing from the Biblical Principles Regarding Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

And second, let’s look at some practical implications flowing from the biblical principles regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

For the sake of time, I will simply state some practical implications without explanation.

First, Christian marriages are by definition to be between two professing Christians only.

Second, if a Christian has been married and divorced before becoming a Christian, this past history is not to be considered a barrier to a second marriage to a Christian.

Third, if a Christian has been married as a Christian and then divorced, this past history is not in itself to be considered a barrier to him or her becoming a member of the church in good standing.

Fourth, if a Christian has been married as a Christian and then (as the “innocent party”) divorced on the grounds of sexual immorality / marital unfaithfulness, according to the second interpretation of the “exception clause” (Matthew 5:32 and 19:9),

⁴ See PCA Position Papers, 293.

he or she may be remarried and, if a man, would not be barred from serving as a church officer.

Fifth, if a Christian has been married as a Christian and then divorced on any grounds other than sexual immorality / marital unfaithfulness, he or she may not be remarried but is to remain unmarried or else be reconciled to the other partner.

Sixth, if a Christian has been married as a Christian, divorced and then remarried, this past history is not in itself to be considered a barrier to him or her (or his or her new spouse) becoming a member of the church in good standing.

Seventh, divorce between Christians on any grounds other than sexual immorality / marital unfaithfulness, and/or remarriage by such divorced Christians, while not barring them from membership in the church, are sufficient to bar them from serving as church officers until there has been adequate time to show their genuine repentance and change from the life patterns that led to the breaking of their original marriage vows.

At this point they may be considered to be above reproach (1 Timothy 3:2), since no sin is beyond the cleansing and sanctifying work of Christ's atoning sacrifice. Notice what Paul said to the Corinthian Church in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11:

⁹ Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Eighth, divorce and remarriage on non-biblical grounds, while sinful acts, are not necessarily more sinful than other sinful acts, and those caught up in them are to be treated with grace, care, and compassion.

And ninth, a man who has been married as a Christian and who has been divorced on non-biblical grounds and who has remarried or has remained unmarried should be evaluated very carefully before he is ordained to a church office.

While 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 is a reality, it must be demonstrated that guilt has been acknowledged, repentance for sin expressed, and that there are genuine fruits of repentance, with a new stable life established. In addition, while it is also true that all men are sinners and that no sin is beyond the cleansing and sanctifying work of Christ's atoning sacrifice, nevertheless, the question of being "above reproach" and being one who is "well thought of by outsiders" must also be considered, as Paul said to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:1-7:

¹The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ²Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? ⁶He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

Those, very briefly, are some of the practical implications flowing from the biblical principles regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Conclusion

Therefore, having looked briefly at some biblical principles and practical implications of marriage, divorce, and re-

marriage, let us uphold and preserve the Scriptural teaching of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Perhaps you have questions that flow out of this presentation. I shall be glad to answer them. I invite you to read our own Session's position paper on marriage, divorce, and remarriage that was approved on January 17, 2008. You will find copies available at the Information Center.

I also encourage you to read the report of the *Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage*, whose recommendations were adopted by the 20th General Assembly of the PCA (1992). You will find that report at the website of the PCA Historical Society (see <http://pcahistory.org/pca/2-188.pdf>).

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Father, in our culture today there is tremendous confusion and misunderstanding regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Help us as your people to uphold and preserve the Scriptural teaching of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Grant us wisdom as we care for and support those who are struggling with marriages. Grant us love as we interact with those who are divorced. And grant us grace as we minister to and with those who are remarried.

And for this I pray in your name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!