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Colossians 3:18-19

21st Message

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# DIVORCE: WHEN MAN PUTS ASUNDER

SERIES: *THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH*  
*LIVING RESURRECTION IN RELATIONSHIPS #5*

These past two weeks we have looked at Paul's instructions to wives and husbands in the household of faith:

**Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. (Col 3:18-19 NIV)**

Sadly in so many marriages there comes a time when the wife no longer submits to her husband and respects him, when the husband no longer loves his wife and is instead harsh with her.

Everything in a marriage ceremony bespeaks permanence. The minister asks,

“Will you have this woman to be your wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honor her, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep yourself only unto her, *so long as you both shall live?*”

The couple exchange their vows:

“I take you to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, *till death us do part*, according to God's holy ordinance.”

After the exchange of rings the minister pronounces them married and gives a solemn warning,

“Those whom God has joined together, let no one put asunder.”

The man and woman pledge their troth to one another with the best of intentions, confident that their love will endure. But half of all marriages now end in divorce. Despite the solemn warnings, man *does* put asunder. Until forty years ago it was necessary to prove grounds for divorce: adultery, abandonment or cruelty. But no-fault divorces are now the norm, citing only “irreconcilable differences” or “irretrievable breakdown.”

When I moved to the US in 1985 I encountered many changes. Some of these I anticipated, but others I did not. One of the biggest surprises concerned divorce. In Europe I had lived in a world largely untouched by divorce. But I moved to a world deeply affected by divorce. I was shocked at how deeply divorce had impacted even the church. When we started the intern program here at PBCC twenty years ago, five of the initial group of twelve were divorced. Sue and I are very fortunate that both sets of parents celebrated fifty years of marriage, and her parents are closing in on sixty. I am very aware that divorce has touched nearly everyone here: you are divorced, your parents divorced, or you've watched close family and friends go through a divorce. Sadly the divorce rate among Christians is no better than among non-Christians. Even worse, many Christian leaders are now divorced; this is especially tragic when their ministry was a contributing factor to the relational breakdown with their spouses. Divorce may have lost its stigma but it has not lost its sting; divorces are deeply painful and leave wounds that last for decades. Children,

especially, suffer great collateral damage because of the actions of their parents.

How should we as Christians think about divorce? Like headship and submission, this is another controversial topic on which Christians are deeply divided. Christian leaders who are firmly committed to the authority of Scripture reach very different conclusions about divorce and about the related issue of remarriage after divorce. Is divorce ever permissible? Is remarriage after divorce ever permissible? PBCC has no official policy on these two big questions. The elders have no statement. What I give you is my own view on the matter.

Before I begin, let me remind you of the basis on which we approach this topic. We take our guidance not from secular society, but from the Scriptures. And we read the Scriptures as people of the risen Christ, filled with the Spirit. This series is entitled “Living Resurrection in Relationships.” We have been raised with Christ (Col 3:1). We have put off the old self and put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of our Creator (3:9-10). We are to let the message of Christ dwell in us richly (3:16). So our thinking about divorce must be informed by the gospel message of Christ and by the empowering of the Spirit.

Divorce and remarriage is not a new issue. It was a hot topic 2000 years ago. Both Matthew and Mark record an incident when Jesus was questioned about the matter. For several reasons I think Matthew's account of this incident is the best place to start a discussion about divorce.

**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?” (Matt 19:3)**

This was not an innocent question: the Pharisees were testing Jesus, trying to catch him out. They were trying to embroil him in a current dispute. What were valid grounds for divorce? The rabbis of Jesus' day had divided into two camps on this question, based on their reading of a single verse from the Torah, Israel's Law:

**If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house... (Deut 24:1)**

The dispute concerned the difficult phrase translated “something indecent.” Rabbi Shammai and his followers interpreted this to mean adultery. But Rabbi Hillel and his followers took a much more liberal line; focusing on the word “something” they said that divorce was permissible for any cause—similar to no-fault divorces now, except that only the husband could divorce for any cause. Both sides assumed that remarriage was permissible after divorce. Which side would Jesus take? The liberal Hillelite line that divorce was permissible for any cause, or the stricter Shammaite line that divorce was permissible for adultery?

**“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (19:4-6)**

As usual, Jesus wove a masterful line between both camps. Instead of directly answering their question, he went back to the original purpose of marriage, quoting two verses from the creation accounts in Genesis 1–2. In the beginning God created man as male and female (Gen 1:27). God designed humanity to be differentiated into male and female. But his purpose was not to leave them apart but to bring the two together. Therefore a man leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife and the two become one (Gen 2:24). From these two verses Jesus drew the conclusion which has become such a well-known saying: “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (KJV). This has been incorporated into wedding ceremonies via the *Book of Common Prayer*: “Those whom God has joined together, let no man put asunder.”

In this reply Jesus affirmed several important features of marriage. It is not mere societal convention, but part of God’s original creation purpose, hard-wired into how we are made as humans. It is between one man and one woman: polygamy, serial polygamy, and homosexual marriage had no place in the beginning. It is intended to be permanent: the man leaves and cleaves. Divorce is not envisioned as an option; there was no prenuptial agreement between Adam and Eve. This is where we must start any discussion of marriage and its dissolution. The conjoining of one man and one woman in marriage is good. Any dissolution of such a union is a fracture of the created order.

The Pharisees came back at Jesus with a second question,

**“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” (19:7)**

If marriage was intended to be permanent, why did Moses command divorce? But did Moses command divorce? This also was a matter of current debate: was divorce *required* in the case of adultery? In essence, what Moses actually commanded in Deut 24:1 was that *if* you were going to divorce your wife then you had to do three things: write a certificate of divorce, give it to her, and send her away. He didn’t say you have to divorce your wife. Hence Jesus’ reply:

**Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.” (19:8-9)**

Moses did not command divorce. It was only a temporary permission because of hardness of heart. Ouch! It was not this way in the beginning: when God brought the first man and woman together divorce was not an option. Divorce is due to hardness of heart.

Only now did Jesus finally answer the question:

**“I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” (19:9)**

Jesus came down on the side of Shammai: divorce and remarriage were permissible for adultery. But in answering the question he followed a process which I find indispensable for thinking through this matter. Jesus laid down a redemptive-historical paradigm, a biblical-theological approach. He started with creation, with the good beginning, affirming marriage as the lifelong union of one man and one

woman. This has to be our starting point. It is not God’s intention that marriages be breakable. Every broken marriage is a fracture in God’s creation purposes. Jesus then moved to Torah, the Law which God gave specifically to Israel to guide them in living as a new humanity in covenant with God. Torah was a good gift, but it was limited in its ability. It was God’s law written on tablets of stone. Next Jesus went behind Torah to expose its limitation: the human heart which remained unchanged by Torah.

Jesus did a similar thing in the Sermon on the Mount, where he also came down on Shammai’s side:

**“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 sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” (Matt 5:31-32)**

This statement occurs within a set of five sayings where Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said...but I say to you”: about murder (21-26), adultery (27-32), oaths (33-37), retaliation (38-42), and attitude to enemies (43-47). Each time he cited Torah, but then went behind Torah to get to the heart of the matter: what is going on in the heart is the real issue. He concluded the section, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48). Concerning adultery, Jesus said,

**“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matt 5:27-28)**

Ouch again! Again Jesus exposed a problem in the human heart. Torah couldn’t deal with this problem. Written on tablets of stone, Torah was unable to change the Israelites’ hearts. The Old Testament uses a colorful set of images to describe Israel’s inner problem: stiff necks, hard foreheads, uncircumcised or hard hearts, closed ears. There was something deeply wrong that Torah could not fix. But hope was on the way: listen again to our Scripture reading:

**“The days are coming,” declares the LORD,**

**“when I will make a new covenant  
with the people of Israel  
and with the people of Judah.**

**It will not be like the covenant  
I made with their ancestors  
when I took them by the hand  
to lead them out of Egypt,  
because they broke my covenant,  
though I was a husband to them,”**

**declares the LORD.**

**“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel  
after that time,” declares the LORD.**

**“I will put my law in their minds  
and write it on their hearts.**

**I will be their God,**

**and they will be my people.**

**No longer will they teach their neighbor,  
or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’  
because they will all know me,  
from the least of them to the greatest,”**

**declares the LORD.**

**“For I will forgive their wickedness  
and will remember their sins no more.” (Jer 31:31-34)**

Israel had broken covenant with the Lord, her husband, and so he had handed her a certificate of divorce and sent her away (Jer 3:8). He had fulfilled the terms of Deut 24:1. But that was not the end. There was hope. The Lord promised to make a new covenant, in which his law would be written not on tablets of stone but on the hearts of his people. This new covenant has been inaugurated through Jesus Christ. As those who have been raised with Christ and are filled with his Spirit, we are beneficiaries of this new covenant. And so we have to think about divorce from within this new covenant. We are not living under Torah, so we don't take our guide from Torah or even from Jesus' interpretation of it.

Standards are even tougher. We have been raised with Christ. We are living resurrection in relationships. God has dealt with the problem of hard-heartedness. What do the New Testament epistles have to say about divorce within the new covenant? They don't say very much; they don't give us a handbook on the matter. Paul does address the matter briefly in his first letter to the Corinthian church:

**To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. (1 Cor 7:10-11)**

Context suggests that Paul is here addressing marriage between two believers. In such a marriage, the wife should not separate from her husband, and the husband should not divorce his wife. The use of different verbs reflects the socioeconomic reality of the day: the wife would leave her husband's house, and the husband would put his wife out of the house. This was evidently happening within the Corinthian church, just one of many problems which beset that church. Paul gives not an opinion, but a command in the name of the Lord: this should not happen among believers. And if it does happen there should be reconciliation. Broken Christian marriages should be put back together again. No Christian relationship is so broken that it cannot be reconciled. No differences are irreconcilable; no breakdown is irretrievable.

Next he addresses the case of mixed marriages, between a believer and an unbeliever:

**To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him...**

**But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. (1 Cor 7:12-15)**

Since elsewhere Paul makes it clear that a believer should marry only another believer, we can assume that here the case is of two who married as unbelievers and one has subsequently come to faith. The believer has no grounds for leaving the unbelieving spouse. I have known believers who have lived in such marriages for decades. God has given grace sufficient to the circumstances. Some of the unbelieving spouses have come to faith, including some of you here today. In other cases the unbelieving spouse has not come to faith, but still God has given the believing spouse great love for the other. But if the unbeliever leaves then the believer is not bound, presumably meaning that if the unbeliever initiates divorce proceedings the divorced believer is free to remarry. This, of course, assumes that there has been no hard-heartedness on the part of the believing spouse to provoke the divorce.

This is about all the specific guidance which the New Testament epistles give on the issue of divorce. There are some other verses to which Christians appeal, but I don't think they are really helpful. Despite the relative paucity of specific guidance I believe that we can think our way responsibly through this matter.

I'm going to stick my neck out and say there are no Christian grounds for divorce. When two Christians are walking in the Spirit there should be no divorce, because there should be no hard-heartedness. Every divorce among Christians is a failure. But divorce *does* happen among Christians; believers *do* put asunder. What do we do about it?

Among Christians who support divorce, three circumstances are usually cited as valid grounds: adultery, desertion and abuse. Jesus' approval of Moses's permission for divorce in the case of adultery is cited as proof that adultery is valid grounds for divorce among Christians. I beg to differ. Jesus said that this was a temporary permission due to hardness of heart. The question to ask is, "What is the Spirit-filled response to adultery?" This must be repentance and forgiveness: repentance by the guilty party and forgiveness by the offended party. Both are costly. Both require soft-heartedness. Both require being filled with the Spirit. And the church community must do everything to promote such reconciliation; it must provide an environment conducive to repentance and forgiveness. Repentance will be hard for the adulterer. He or she has to admit to gross moral, spiritual and emotional failure. The church community has to provide a space in which such can be confessed. Forgiveness will be equally hard for the offended party. He or she has to be filled with a deep compassionate love for the sinner. The church must be a place where marriages stretched to breaking point can be restored to wholeness. If the adulterer is not willing to repent, and the offended party is not willing to forgive, then they are not walking in the Spirit, they are not living resurrection life. In which case there is a deeper problem than the fractured relationship between the two parties.

Desertion is valid grounds for divorce only in the case of a mixed marriage between a believer and an unbeliever, where the deserting party is the unbeliever and the believer has done nothing to precipitate the divorce. In such cases there is nothing the believer can do; he or she is divorced involuntarily.

The New Testament says nothing about the case of abuse. Here I think we should not be afraid to use wisdom and common sense. I believe that if church leaders are walking in the Spirit, living resurrection life, then God will give them wisdom to handle such circumstances.

But still divorces happen among Christians. I dare say that most divorces among Christians do not fit these categories; they happen for invalid reasons, for "irreconcilable differences" and "irretrievable breakdown." How should the church treat such divorces? And there still remains the really big question, the elephant in the room: are Christians free to remarry after a divorce?

Hard-liners say that since it is God who joins a couple together then a divorce can't end a marriage, and the couple remains married in the sight of God. Only death can end a marriage. Since the couple remains married in the sight of God there can be no remarriage. This is the view of many conservative evangelicals. But Jesus didn't say, "What God has joined together, man *cannot* put asunder," but "*let not* man put asunder." Man should not put marriage asunder, but he can and he does. Man should not sin, but he can and he does.

Human divorce, as much as it may offend God, does indeed end a marriage. Promises are broken and the vows lie in tatters.

The Catholic church views marriage as a sacrament which cannot be broken by man. The only possibility for remarriage is to annul the first marriage, to declare that it was never valid in the first place. Only the official magisterium of the church can pronounce a marriage invalid. A major factor in the English Reformation was Henry VIII's quest for an annulment for his marriage. But annulment makes a mockery of marriage. Furthermore, the Protestant world does not view marriage as a sacrament, and does not accord church leadership the power to annul a marriage.

Much of the evangelical church has taken the position that people who have been divorced cannot serve in ministry. Churches will not hire pastors or appoint elders who have been divorced. Mission agencies will not accept applications from divorced people. Parachurch organizations steer clear of divorcees. A few weeks ago I was talking with someone here who expressed surprise that we have on our elder board a man who has been divorced. For us that's a non-issue, but the person who made the comment comes from a church background where divorce renders a man forever disqualified from such service. This attitude has been widespread, though it is now changing not so much out of biblical conviction but out of pragmatic necessity: there are many fine people who have been divorced whom these organizations want to hire or appoint to their boards. Such policies have treated divorced people as modern-day lepers. They have made divorce an unforgivable sin from which there can be no full recovery. This seems to me to be a denial of forgiveness.

So how should we respond to divorce? Again let me be blunt: divorce should not happen. It should not happen among non-Christians, because lifelong union between one man and one woman is God's creation purpose. But it does: man *does* put asunder. In some ways this is unsurprising, because humanity is beset by hardness of heart. Divorce especially should not happen among Christians, because we are supposed to be living Spirit-filled lives delivered from hardness of heart. But divorce happens among Christians: Christians *do* put asunder what God has joined together.

We start by calling divorce what it is: a breakdown of God's creation purposes for marriage, and a breakdown of God's redemptive purposes for his people whom he has raised from death to new life in Christ and filled with his Spirit. Divorce is wrong, and somewhere there is sin. But divorce is not the real problem. Behind divorce lie broken marriage vows. And behind the broken vows lies hard-heartedness. The obvious approach is to try to find whom to blame. But this can be very tricky. The one who seems to be at fault on the surface may not be the primary contributor to the marital breakdown. I think a better approach is to try to discern the responsive heart and the resistant heart. The responsive heart should be encouraged to act in a Spirit-filled manner. The resistant heart should be urged and rebuked if necessary, with a view to becoming responsive.

Still divorce happens. What do we do then? Divorce is wrong, but having said it is wrong we can cling to the final statement in God's promise of the new covenant: "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jer 31:34). Where there is sin there is also the possibility of forgiveness of sin. As they hymn says,

The vilest offender who truly believes,  
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord!...  
O come to the Father through Jesus the Son,  
And give him the glory, great things he has done.

Or are we to exclude divorced people from that promise? We have to include divorce among the list of sins for which there is forgiveness. God's grace is bountiful. Letting the message of Christ dwell in us richly means that we cling to the gospel message of forgiveness of sins. If the Spirit has softened a person's heart, if the divorce has been dealt with, then I am not going to stand in the way of a divorced person remarrying.

This turns the matter of divorce and remarriage into a pastoral issue, not a matter for the rule books. It is up to the wisdom and experience of those exercising pastoral care and oversight to discern the responsive and the resistant hearts. This will not satisfy those who want rules written in a book or a personnel manual, or organizations that want a check-list. They might say that such reliance on pastoral wisdom opens the opportunity for abuse, that this forgiving grace offered in the gospel can be abused. Yes it can. But that's part of the scandal of the gospel, the scandal of forgiveness. You don't remove that scandal by drawing up rules. Instead, we can leave certain matters to the Lord, because he's the one who sees deeply into the heart. He knows the heart that is soft and tender towards him, and he knows the heart that is hard and resistant toward him. It is the state of the heart that is the real issue.

As individuals and as a church we must do everything we can to promote healthy marriages. We must provide a safe environment for people struggling in their marriages to receive supportive care, where shame can be brought out into the open and dealt with. We must embrace the gospel of repentance and forgiveness, extending it even to those who have been through a divorce for whatever reason, even the most impermissible of reasons. And we must be a place where we all, raised in Christ, and empowered by his Spirit, live resurrection life in our relationships, with our hearts made tender and supple by God's grace, not hard by our self-centeredness.

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