

Regulation and Authority in the Family

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Bible Text: Deuteronomy 21:10-17
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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 shave her head and trim her nails. She shall put off the clothes of her captivity, remain in your house, and mourn her father and her mother a full month; after that you may go in to her and be her husband, 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.

If a man has two wives, one loved and the other unloved, and they have borne him children, both the loved and the unloved, and if the firstborn son is of her who is unloved, then it shall be, on the day he bequeaths his possessions to his sons, that he must not bestow firstborn status on the son of the loved wife in preference to the son of the unloved, the true firstborn. But he shall acknowledge the son of the unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his.¹

Lord, we thank you for your Word. We thank you that it is sufficient for everything that we need. Lord, I pray for Scott Brown as he comes to preach that you would speak through him that he would boldly proclaim your words. I pray that you would teach us from your Word today in Jesus' name. Amen.

Change of Voice:

You have an outline before you. You can follow where we are going here this morning. This is a very unusual text that we are dealing with this morning. It is a very challenging text. It is also a passage of Scripture that is terribly maligned and very easily misunderstood if one does not take time to labor in it. And, in many ways, I come this morning before you as in fear and trembling, with weakness of every kind in my soul to bring this message to you. But I want to commend it to you. I want to present it as a very

¹ Deuteronomy 21:10-17.

beautiful thing, something that is very helpful, something that needs careful inspection and in good labor and clear thinking about it and also a heart ready for wisdom, a heart ready for submission to the Word of God.

So I pray that God would help us to understand this text, that he would come and bring a spirit of wisdom upon us, a spirit of humility and the ability to understand the will of the Lord as it is revealed here. If you don't believe this text is the will of the Lord, then you have a wrong view of Scripture.

And so just by way of introduction I would like to cover a number of things. What you will see me do here this morning is try to build a number of ways of understanding this text before we move into it. So we are going to take a little bit of time to try to move through a number of the really critical considerations that really need to happen as we go into such a difficult text as this.

And the first is what category of Scripture is this? It is not history. It is not narrative. It is not poetry. It is not prophecy. It is didactic Scripture. It is teaching. It takes a critical command and gives them to the people of God. And so... and it is giving counsel in some difficult situations. And it ... as is true with all didactic texts, texts that give specific commands and instructions, they all... every time you are in a didactic text, you should think of the other didactic texts on the same matter, because they need to be compared and cross referenced with one another. So the first thing is we are in a didactic text of Scripture.

Number two, what is the message of this passage of Scripture? I really think there are many messages here that cross up a whole range of topics of real life, life in war, life in the home, life in the heart.

And so but what is happening here just as broadest level is that God is coming and giving commands that regulate abuses in war time and they provide for the spiritual rescue of women from paganism. Do you see that in the text? They provide of a rescue of women from paganism. They legislate for sin that will inevitably destroy marriage in certain situations, marriages of women with men who are rescued in war. So there is this legislation, really, of how to handle some of the difficult issues that are here.

It is interesting that the Pharisees quote this text to try to accuse Jesus and they also quote Deuteronomy 24 and the whole text about the certificate of divorce and try to trap him. And Jesus explains this text. And that is very helpful.

Moses is giving laws to regulate the abuses of men in war time. In war time conventions are thrown off and men ought... they lose their bearings of morality and love and they act like beasts in wartime and God is so kind to come to his people and give them laws and ways to regulate their passions in times of war. In times of war if you have ever read the history of any war, you know that morals are left on the streets of the homeland and they are abandoned in the battlefield and in the cities where war is conducted and they travel

far away from home and their moral compass is smashed and they have nothing to guide them, but this would guide them here.

And so this passage is for the safety and the blessing of women who are captured in war. It calls for a right treatment of women and there is a process here of assimilation of women in to God. The law provides a process for a woman could become, where a pagan woman could become part of the people of God and she has lived in paganism. Now she is in a household of faith. And she has opportunity to become a new woman, but it may crash. And it may not complete. And her treatment is carefully regulated and God cares about the treatment of women. He issues very specific commands all over Scripture about the treatment of women. There are no better. There is no better place for a woman than in the arms of Christian law and when women are abused and treated poorly it is not Christianity that is being applied. And so there are explicitly commands here for the care of women.

You must bring her into your home. You must not sell her. You must not treat her a slave. She cannot be abused. She cannot be treated as an object. Christian men do not do that to women. And then there is the marriage relationship that is actually regulated in at least in very...

Ok.

And so the marriage relationship is strictly regulated. Marriage activities are strictly for the marriage covenant. The marriage intimacy is exclusively relegated to marriage. And so not even in war is this suspended. And so this... but here this text is not about. This text is not about how to go find a wife. Ok? This text is how you treat women who are captured in war.

And God's desire finally, finally... I think we see this so clearly and this is, perhaps, one of the most amazing parts of this passage that I think is easily missed and it is the heart of God for sinners that he desires the conversion of captives, that he would take someone captive and bring them to a place where they could be converted and cared for all the days of their lives. This text has in it tremendous passion for sinners, tremendous information about how God loves to take a captive and set them free and them in a household of love.

So that is the message that is here and we will unpack this sort of line by line later. But there is a third consideration. Who is the target audience here? Moses is speaking to men. Do you see that? These are directions for males, for men who are in war. And these are men who are tempted to do the wrong thing. What men do has enormous leverage in a culture. How men conduct themselves in war, at home, at work, wherever they happen to be, has enormous implications for the welfare of women.

What we find here is the implication that men can have wrong motives. They can do the wrong thing because they are selfish, that they may abuse their authority in their families. This text regulates the abuse of authority in a family and this is the heart of

many marriage problems. Men do the wrong things because they think that they can do whatever they want in their marriages and on... and this text rails against men out from under the authority of God in their marriages. And so Deuteronomy 21:10-14 challenges men to do good and to be good in an environment of tremendous temptation where society has legitimized bad behavior.

So there are all these cultural, you know, culturally accepted ways of acting that are challenged here in this passage of Scripture. We live, you know, just take a step back and think about this for a minute. We live in a world of socially acceptable bad behavior, where men do the wrong things. And the situation that is going on here, is the situation of war and taking captives and marrying those captives. But the sinful heart of man is tempted to do the wrong thing.

So the target audience is a man.

And then, fourthly, how do we interpret this? Now, the reason I wanted to take some time here and take a long, you know, run down the runway here before we take off and really get into this text is there are a number of hermeneutical principles that really need to be understood to interpret the text properly and I would like to talk about that for a little while and I don't really have time to get through all of the hermeneutical questions or principles that are here, but I would like for at least to surface a few of them. And there are...

Let me just start with a very broad principle. There are a number of ways to read your Bible, ok? One way to read your Bible is to inflect toward the worst instead of assuming the best of the text. To assume the worst, to make it sound terrible, when, perhaps, the actual meaning isn't terrible at all. And so there is a way of reading the Word of God that is resident in the flesh, in our flesh that causes us to look at a text, to look at a word in its worst light, to make it mean the worst it possibly could be and to assume that, perhaps, that this is not for me, that this is the Old Testament God who says things that don't work anymore. And this is one such text that has this potential of our approach to it.

Now you can read this text and if you think the worst of the text, then you can say, oh, this is saying that a man should just go find some cute woman and drag her home and me Tarzan, you Jane. Is that what this text is saying? Is that consistent with the heart of God?

You could say, "Well, if you don't like her, if there is just something you don't like about her, then kick her out of the door. Shave her head and, you know, throw new clothes on her and then get rid of her. You use her and then you lose her."

People could use this text that way. And it doesn't assume... what does it assume about the text? It assumes that God is bad. It assumes that the Word of God is not authoritative. It assumes that all the law is not summed up in love.

Do you know that every single word in this text, it is summed up in the word love? And so if we interpret it by taking its worst interpretation, its worst possible understanding, we have sinned. We have been wicked before God. We have taken something that was intended for love and we have turned it into something that is evil.

Do you see this tendency in your own heart? Have you ever... Did you see this tendency when you read it?

My supposition is that many of us when we read this we were offended and we thought bad of God and his Word.

Do you believe that every word of God is pure?

And so we can approach the Scriptures in a wrong way. And often this happens to us for a number of reasons. It may be that our brains are wired wrong. We have lived so long in relativism and ungodly philosophy that we don't think right and our brains are wired wrong. As we have said many times, you know, our brains have been pickled, you know, in the juice of the world for so long. Many of us have been educated in pagan institutions. We spent thousands of hours listening to pagans tell us about what the world is all about. That is true of me.

It may be that we have not prepared ourselves properly to interpret Scripture. It may be that we do not know the Scriptures so that when we read something we don't see the whole counsel of God on the matter spinning out before us. We only think about this one thing. Oh, I don't desire her. I get rid of her.

We don't think of what God has already said in dozens of places about how women are to be treated and say that this means something that is contrary to dozens of other things in Scripture.

It may mean that we are not equipped to see how one's, how a statement in one place cross references to a statement in another place. But there is another way. There is another way to approach the Word of God. You can assume the worst of it, or you can assume the best of it. You can assume that every word of God is pure. And then labor with a humble heart to discern the will of the Lord, to seek him, to seek what he has said about these matters and find all of Scripture interpreting Scripture.

I want to give you four principles that are contained in this kind of approach and the first is assume the best. Be like David who said in Psalm 119:14:

“I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, As much as in all riches.”²

That is an assumption. Oh, that it is from God and that it is riches.

Or Psalm 119:16.

² Psalm 119:14.

“I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word.”³

The heart that assumes the best says that. It says like in Psalm 119:18.

“Open my eyes, that I may see Wondrous things from Your law.”⁴

It is reflected in 119:24.

“Your testimonies also are my delight And my counselors.”⁵

Do you see? You can approach a word of Scripture or a text with the disposition of delight or a disposition of rejection of it. Or you can say:

“Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes, And I shall keep it to the end.”⁶

You could say like David:

“I will delight myself in Your commandments, Which I love.”⁷

You can say:

“My hands also I will lift up to Your commandments, Which I love, And I will meditate on Your statutes.”⁸

“Your statutes have been my songs In the house of my pilgrimage.”⁹

This is an attitude towards Scripture that doesn't judge Scripture. It responds in humility and joy and says:

“God, be merciful to me a sinner!”¹⁰

Help me to understand your ways.

The second principle is to approach it with humility and thankfulness.

Psalm 119:59 says:

“I thought about my ways, And turned my feet to Your testimonies.”¹¹

³ Psalm 119:16.

⁴ Psalm 119:18.

⁵ Psalm 119:24.

⁶ Psalm 119:33.

⁷ Psalm 119:47.

⁸ Psalm 119:48.

⁹ Psalm 119:54.

¹⁰ Luke 18:13.

Psalm 119:68 says:

“You are good, and do good; Teach me Your statutes.”¹²

So that is an approach of humility and thankfulness. And then, thirdly, interpret Scripture with Scripture. This is perhaps one of the most important things that I think that I have to say about this text here is to ... is that we as a people to be very careful to interpret Scripture with Scripture. And, of course, this is one of the simple, you know, hermeneutical principles that should guide all of our biblical interpretation.

If something seems difficult, you know, if something seems incomprehensible like several things in this text, then what else does Scripture say? What else? Does every Scripture say everything that needs to be said about the subject? The answer is no and that is why Scripture should always interpret Scripture.

And so that is how we need to approach Deuteronomy chapter 21. And if we don't, we will be lost in this text and we will end up saying that God is not quite right in the head and that this is not for us.

And so when we read this text and any other text of Scripture, we should assume at the same time simultaneously what else God had said. So when we read this we should assume the rest of God's laws regarding immorality or equal yoking or the preservation of love in marriage or in particular this text, all the other matters that have to do with a husband's role in his family and assume, you know, as we read this we ought to assume that whatever he says here has to include what he has also said about nourishing and cherishing and washing of the water with the Word from a husband to his wife, of living with her in an understanding way.

What we read here should be categorized according to a number of other considerations, not just one single consideration. And that is how we interpret Scripture. We look at it and see it in its light.

And then fourth, the fourth principle is that clear passages clarify and explain and trump the unclear. If you read something in Scripture and you really are not sure what it means... and there are many things like that, because God has not given us a simple book. God has given us something that is deep. It is very profound. Isn't the Bible absolutely astonishing in this fact? That the smallest child can be so blessed and helped and transformed by it and yet the greatest scholar has to bang his head against the wall to understand it. This is an amazing, miraculous aspect of holy Scripture. That God can use it to speak to the humblest, feeblest of mind on the one hand and yet challenge the greatest minds that ever lived all in one book, all in one category of Scripture. It is absolutely amazing.

¹¹ Psalm 119:59.

¹² Psalm 119:68.

And so Scripture is wonderful and so because of that, we have to find way through this. And one way we must always consider is that the clear passages explain or, perhaps in our own minds, trump the unclear, that there are no contradictions in Scripture. The only contradiction is the contradiction in our own brain, just the cross ups in the synapses of our brains. Our brains are fallen and we are crossed up at every point and so we have to go to God with humility and say, “Oh, Lord, what are you saying that we might find ourselves like the Gadarene demoniac who found himself clothed and in his right mind because he had finally submitted to the wisdom of God?”

So the clear passages trump the unclear and so if this passage seems to teach something new, then it is it subject to the other passages of Scripture about divorce, treatment of women and other things like that.

So those are some of the sort of the ... we are going down the runway. Now we are going to take off and go into this passage. But we begin with verse 10. And now we will just try to do some kind of exposition of this passage.

There is the situation. The situation that is presented is that God has delivered women in a time of war and he speaks of behavior in times of war. He says:

“When you go out to war...”¹³

The people of God were commanded to go out to war. They were doing what they were supposed to do, to wage war against the Canaanite nations. And then the circumstance that is identified here is that:

“... the LORD your God delivers them into your hand, and you take them captive.”¹⁴

So a war has been won. Captives are taken and there are temptations in the midst of that scenario and these temptations have to do with women and captives and marriage. And those are the temptations and difficulties that are all there.

Notice that something from heaven has come and that is God has delivered. God delivered these women into their hands. They were... God is sovereign over all things. He does cause all things to work together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose. And here in this text God has done something. He has delivered captive women into the hands of men who have a knowledge of the covenant of God. They may not, as we know, they may not walk according to that covenant, but women have been delivered into the hands of men who now the covenant of God. Now that is really an amazing thing.

But he has brought something to their doorstep that needs to be managed properly and it was an act of God.

¹³ Deuteronomy 21:10.

¹⁴ Ibid.

You know, I think there is so much that I want to say about this. You know, a man can receive nothing unless it is given to him from heaven. What do you have that you did not receive? And there are things that come upon us that are difficult, that strain our spirituality, that strain our abilities in so many ways. Isn't that true?

When was a time in your life when you were not strained by the circumstance that God brought to you? He brought it to you for his own purposes. And a woman is rescued. She was entrapped by the violent culture. She was in a pagan nation. She had been learning the ways of the Gentiles and all of the groping in the dark, all of other confusion, all of the problems of having this heavens as brass and the ground hard, all of those problems were hers because she was a pagan. And to live as a pagan means that you are lost and you are being harmed by the devil and he hurt you every day. And this was this woman, this kind of women who was rescued here.

And so she is entrapped by defiling culture. And God delivers a woman into a man's hands. And now just for clarification, this was not a Canaanite woman. We are already told that they were not allowed to take wives among the Canaanites. So he was not... this man in this story is not taking a wife from the Canaanites because we have already learned in Deuteronomy chapter seven that that is not lawful. And so they have gone out to fight and they brought the women and the little ones and the livestock back and now it is for them to manage according to the will of God. And that is very challenging.

So then ... so not only is the situation very clear that God delivers a woman, secondly, a man is attracted, at least that is what it seems to say in verse 11.

“...and you see among the captives a beautiful woman, and desire her and would take her for your wife.”¹⁵

Now this... I mean, this seems very strange, doesn't it? You read this verse and it is how do you incorporate this in your thinking about appearance, about beauty and all of these things like that? And it really begs so many questions. Is this just ... is this a selfish man? Is this a man who just cares only about beauty? He is entrapped by his eyes, the idle of beauty eclipses all other questions and it is my... it is all... is that what this means?

It could mean that. But this is a woman whom a man found attractive. How many of you found your wives attractive? Well, you did. You found them attractive. It was part of it. Was it all of it? I hope not. But my experience is that there is attraction in marriage.

And that is what is happening here and there is some level of desire and attraction and so what does this mean? Is this teaching young men to go find an attractive woman? No. That is not what this is teaching at all. But it is just acknowledging a reality of life. And that should be taken into account according to all the other things that we know about marriage an equal yoking and all kinds of things like that. It can't be just taken alone.

Like it would be wrong to say, “Hey, just go find a beautiful woman.”

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 21:11.

That is not what this passage is teaching at all.

And we know she was not a pagan woman because that is forbidden in Deuteronomy chapter seven. But it assumes that this woman has ... there is an agreement, there is an agreeability about this whole situation. He desires her and she desire to come, as well. And so a man is attracted.

Number three, a woman is transformed. Verses 12 through 13.

“...and she shall shave her head and trim her nails. She shall put off the clothes of her captivity, remain in your house, and mourn her father and her mother a full month.”¹⁶

Now probably her mother is still alive, but her father probably was killed in war. Of course, we don't really know with certainty all of what happened to her family. But she does four things and we need to take a look at these four things and notice a couple of things. First of all, these are things that she does to herself. These are her own actions. She is doing these things by her own hands. And every commentator I read on this text says this is about conversion. This is about change of loyalty. This is about change of status. This is about coming out of paganism and into the people of God. And there is this transition period where this woman who was rescued in a war against pagans actually becomes a follower of God. And so there are in this change of status and in this conversion she is not a captive anymore. She is not a pagan anymore. She is no a Hebrew wife. And there are four things that Moses says that men need to do in this kind of situation.

First, bring her home. He would bring her home and here is just another notation among many in Scripture where men take care of women, where men provide care and protection and safe haven for a woman and then take responsibility for the care and the protection of women. This is the gigantic calling of manhood is to deal with women rightly.

And does this mean that it is ok for a man to live with a woman before he marries her? No. That is not what this text is teaching. Ok? It flies in the face of every other command in this matter. So, no. This is not teaching that you can live with someone before you get married, even though it appears that is exactly what is happening. She is coming into the home and so it is not legitimizing living together, getting to know one another and then deciding, you know, whether you want to get married. That is not what it is here, but that God preserves the sanctity of womanhood through careful behavior and provision of women with a roof over the head. And in that home she has the freedom and the dignity as any other Israelite might have.

One of the commentators on this text says, “The treatment here is describes the goodness of Israel's God for a people who have no rights.”

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 21:12-13.

And so it really it casts a vision of the difference that there is between pagan manhood and godly manhood. The second thing that she is to do is to shave her head and to trim her nails.

Now that sounds strange, doesn't it? And this would take her out of the status of a slave and make her part of the family of God and she is switching identity. She is switching her look. She is switching her heart. There are a number of things that are happening here. There is a dramatic change even in the way she dresses. There is a pagan way to dress and there is a godly way to dress. The Bible makes that very clear.

And then all of what we wear, all of our appearance should bring glory to God. It should breathe the gospel. It should breath purity and goodness. And this woman now is going to look differently from the top of her head to the tip of her nails.

And then she puts off her old clothes. This is the third thing. And among the people of God you can't just have your hair and your clothes any way you want, but it is regulated by God. God has given very clear statements regarding the use of clothing, the purpose of clothing and how one ought to dress and that is a person... that is a long study, but this woman here is putting off her old clothes and she is not dressed like a pagan any longer.

And then, fourthly she enters into a one month period where she is mourning for her father and her mother and this period is a time of transition. And it is interesting, you know, when we were having our Bible study on Tuesday about this somebody mentioned, you know, here is a man. He is now seeing this woman at her worst. Her head is shaved and she is mourning. She is not looking all that well is what this brother said. I forgot who said it, but that here a man's consciousness is being calibrated. He may have been attracted by her beauty, but she is not beautiful now. And so, you know, God is doing something to rearrange the affections for this woman, that she would not just be valued for her beauty, but that there is something more, that it would be wrong to continue with such a silly and shallow and ungodly way of valuing a wife simply for her beauty and therefore to dishonor her and not to love her.

So there is this whole process that is... I believe it is about conversion. I believe it is about cutting away the old and putting on the new. It is moving out of paganism and into the care of God into the house of God.

This story is like the story of Hosea. God rescues Israel from a captive people and she goes into harlotry. This is like the passage of Scripture that Jason read at the beginning of our worship service in Ephesians chapter two that you were dead in your trespasses, that you had no hope. You were without God in the world, that you conducted yourself in the flesh as children of wrath, but he made you alive. God was rich in mercy. You were dead in your trespasses and sins, but he wanted to show the exceeding greatness of the riches of his glory and he created you for good works that you would perform in the future, that this is about the rescue of a pagan woman.

And so she is transitioning away from the old life to the new and every area of life is affected.

And so in this whole mix is the rescue of a pagan, the reformation of a life, the placing of a woman in a place of care where she is not treated as a thing, where she has loving headship. It is respectful headship. And she is not treated like a slave. And, of course, we know many marital problems come from the failure of a man to treat his wife in this way. This may sound... this text may have sounded like so ancient Israel to you, but it is also about a man who just wants to do his own thing and doesn't nourish and cherish his wife who is not under the authority of God, who thinks he is the big man in the house and he is not. Christ is the head. And so he abuses his wife and dishonors her with a wrong view of headship.

And God here comes and he destroys a wrong view of headship in the home, that you just can't do anything you want with your wife.

And then we come to the last point in this didactic text and that is a ... the disappointing contingency is anticipated in verse 14.

“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.”¹⁷

Now, of course, there are many things that require pausing upon and we will try to do that. But it says here that if you have no delight in her... Now what does that mean? Does that mean if you just... if you don't like the girl, you can get rid of her? Is that what Scripture teaches? Is that what the love of a husband is about? Is that what the love of a brother to a sister is about? Absolutely not.

So it can't mean what you think it means when you just read that word. There has to be more to the story. It has to be nuanced by the other passages of Scripture.

Let me suggest that what it means is that if for some good and biblical reason if there is a good reason that will hold up on judgment day, if there is a good reason that is consistent with the laws about divorce, then that is what that means, that that word collects up. It has to collect up a number of things. It can't mean that if you don't just like everything about her you can get rid of her. It can't mean that. That flies against... that conclusion, interpreting it that way flies in the face of everything that is said about marriage and love and relationship.

Whatever happened to patience? Whatever happened to the principle of Scripture that is summed up in the word, “Till death do us part?” Is that consistent with that? No. It is not at all.

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 21:14.

So we can't go in the wrong direction and say, "Oh, this just means, you know, you can just set her aside."

So this is meant to deter rash decisions. And what does it mean to humble her? It can mean a number of things. It can mean the humility of making... of her being a captive. It could be the humility of her shaving of her head. That was a humiliating thing. It could mean the humility of setting her free. And it could have to do with the intimacy factor, but I am not confident that is the primary meaning.

And so we have to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture and highlight the fact that setting Scripture in a systematic way instead of just making one verse stand alone, ripping it, you know, bleeding and screaming out of its context as some legitimate way, you know, to... to interpret Scripture.

One ... one of my early mentors and disciplers when I was a young believer was known for saying, you know, the Bible says there is no God. Where does it say that? Well, the Bible says the fool in his heart says there is no God.

Well, you could take something out of context and not see it in its immediate and then broader context as far out as the whole communication of the heart of God on a matter. And that is what we have to do with the text [?].

So if you read "delight" and you end up thinking like the Pharisees thought that it meant you could get rid of your wife for any reason, you are wrong. You have misinterpreted this text. You have been as evil as the Pharisees in your treatment of Scripture. Jesus confronts them and shows them what this means when we get to the gospels.

And so the clear texts define the unclear ones.

So this text does not teach, Moses is not saying that a man can take a woman into his house and if it doesn't go well, he can get rid of her. He can divorce her. This is the wrong conclusion.

Now I would like to give you five texts of Scripture that this should be reads alongside. Now there are more, but I am just going to give you five.

First, please turn to Malachi chapter two. The first of the five texts is Malachi 2:16.

While you are getting there, I will frame the context a little bit here. God is confronting his people through his prophet Malachi and he is speaking up dealing treacherously with one another and profaning the covenant of your fathers. That is what he is saying. He is talking profaning the covenant of love that Moses established in the wilderness, this very covenant of love. And they are profaning it and they are dealing treacherously with their wives.

And in verse 16 he says, "I hate divorce."

So whenever you read that word “delight” you need to go read Malachi chapter two where God says, “I hate divorce.” That should qualify and explain at least one aspect of it.

Let’s go to Matthew 19, a second text that we should consult in order to try to properly interpret this passage.

Matthew 19 beginning in verse three. We learned that the Pharisees had actually done exactly what we want to do with this text. They misinterpreted it. And they mangled the meaning of Moses’ words and the Pharisees were promoting divorce for almost anything. And they literally were promoting the idea that if your wife didn’t cook the food the way that you wanted, then that was grounds for divorce. There were some Pharisees saying that. And that is the background for this whole scenario. It was no fault divorce, you know, in the first century.

And so in verse three the Pharisees come with a question. I hope you are looking at this text. In verse:

“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?’”¹⁸

Does that sound like this whole matter of delight in Deuteronomy chapter 21? It certainly does. What are the reasons a man can divorce his wife?

And then Jesus answers in verse four.

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’?”¹⁹

Jesus is now quoting Genesis chapter two.

So he is taking this misinterpretation, this mangling of a meaning and he takes them back to Genesis and he says the two shall become one flesh.

"So then, they are no longer two but one flesh.”²⁰

And then Jesus drops the hammer in the last phrase here.

“Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.”²¹

¹⁸ Matthew 19:3.

¹⁹ Matthew 19:4-5.

²⁰ Matthew 19:6.

²¹ Ibid.

So when you read Deuteronomy 21 you have to hear Jesus say, "Let no man separate." That is the heart of God in the matter. Deuteronomy 21 cannot mean that there is a casual attitude toward a woman in marriage. It cannot mean that. And then the Pharisees ask another question. They are not satisfied and they seek another example.

And here in verse seven they actually quote Deuteronomy chapter 24 in the text about the certificate of divorce which we will spend significant time about when we get there.

Verse seven:

They said to Him, 'Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?'"²²

And then Jesus replies that divorce always involves sin.

So when you read this whole matter of if he doesn't delight in her, you have to know that there is sin in here somewhere. Divorce always involves sin. It always involves hardness of heart. There never was a divorce where this was not true. And so he says...

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."

His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry."²³

And so he was explaining to them how sin can overcome a marriage, how hardness of heart can destroy a marriage. And the disciples were afraid of it. And they saw how fearful it was when hardness of heart would come. They have seen, I am sure. They saw it in their own... those who were married saw it in their own marriages.

The third text that we should consult in understanding Deuteronomy 21 is Matthew chapter five verses 31 and 32.

Now here Jesus is quoting Moses in Deuteronomy 24 saying that immorality is the only reason divorce is permitted.

Furthermore 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

²² Matthew 19:7.

²³ Matthew 19:8-10.

for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery;
and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.²⁴

So you have to read Deuteronomy 21 in conjunction with Matthew chapter five.

The fourth text is Deuteronomy chapter 24. Let's read that. Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

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, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.²⁵

A number of things that we learn about this. One is that this is another sin that defiles the land in some way. Divorce is so terribly harmful.

And so Moses is speaking here of hardness of heart.

And then finally the fifth text, 1 Corinthians chapter seven verses 12 through 15.

This shows a situation where a believer is married to an unbeliever. It is not going well and it shows when an unbelieving spouse will not live with the believer. So 1 Corinthians 7:10, first of all, speaks of the sacredness of marriage and really commands the believing spouse not to depart, which should also qualify this whole idea in Deuteronomy chapter 21.

“Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband.”²⁶

It just can't be any plainer. A wife is not to depart from her husband. And then in verse 11:

“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.”²⁷

²⁴ Matthew 5:31-32.

²⁵ Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 7:10.

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 7:11.

And then in verses 12 through 16 he speaks about a man with a wife who does not believe and he says:

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. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. 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. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?²⁸

What we learn from these five different texts is that God hates divorce, that God hates the dissolution of a marriage and he issues very careful words to speak of it and he commands men to protect women and to provide for them.

I would just like to suggest to you as the front running possibility in this is that the divorce in Deuteronomy 21 is a situation where a wife does not believe. She is not assimilated. She does not want to stay. He lets her go. There may be some other nuances that could be brought to bear to qualify this and maybe make it more faithful to the text. But it is most likely from all else that Scripture says it is most likely that this more like the parable of the soils where the seed fell on stony ground and it came up, but then it withered away. It could be that kind of situation where the woman could not be assimilated into the family and so he sets her free. She is not able to stay within the covenant life that God has established for home. And so the husband doesn't force her to stay. He allows her to go and he sets her free. He does not treat her like a slave. He does not sell her, but he lets her go.

Ok. So what does this mean for today?

Number one, let's understand that we have before us holy Scripture and it ought to be read with humility. It ought to be read with confidence and joy and a godly inquisitiveness that assumes the best, that always assumes the best. Our dark hearts will tweak us in the other direction and we will think that God is not wise and we are wiser than he. But let's be very careful with this temptation that we all have when we read holy Scripture and if we are despising anything in Scripture, know this, that God is touching you in the realm of either your ignorance or your idolatry or your worldliness. It is one of those things.

So let's read Scripture with humility and godly joy, with a proper confident inquisitiveness that befits the nature of the Word of God.

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 7:12-16.

Jesus said that not one jot or tittle will pass away from this book until all is accomplished. And he said those, the great ones in this world will teach this law and those who are least in the kingdom of heaven won't. We just need to understand that God has spoken very, very distinctly about these things.

Number two... Let me go back. Let me go back to this first point before I go. What does that mean? I mean, what it means is that God has placed before you something perfect and something very beautiful, something that you and I need, something that would correct us, something that would take us off our own throne and put him on the throne and there is no happier place in the universe than when Jesus Christ is Lord. There is no other place. And so let's approach it with humility and joy.

So the second point. Men, let me speak to men. This passage is directed to men who have a wrong authority, whose authority is not regulated by God, who are not treating their wives in an understanding way, men who... we men who do not love our wives like Christ loved the Church. Yet we should so. We should.

Men, much is riding upon your interpretation of this passage and whether you think it is for you. I think it is for me and you.

And you young men who are going to be husbands some day, please see the precious and sweet way God desires that the daughters of Zion be treated, that he would rescue them, he would wash them, he would give them a new name and new clothing and that he would put them into your hearts to care for them and you better be very careful with her.

Number three. Sin is always present and ready to destroy your marriage. Sin is always present with divorce and the only hope for a marriage is that a couple run from sin.

Let me tell you. Let me just say something very distinctly here. In every one of your marriages are the seeds of divorce. Every single one. None of you are protected from it because it is the seed of hardness of heart. Please repent, run. If there is hardness, run to the cross, but fall down on your face. You will see the seeds of hardness grow and they will kill your marriage, ok?

Wives, is there any hardness? Do you have any hardness towards you husband? God knows how many reasons you could have it. The imperfections of my life as a husband would be enough to destroy my marriage if my wife would allow hardness of heart to destroy it.

So wives, guard your hearts. Don't let this moment go. Don't think that this is not for you, wives. Your hardness will destroy your marriage.

Just this week I received the news of one of my... who was one of my dear friends whose marriage is now destroyed because this lived in their house. And now all seems to be lost, but it started little. It started with nourishing hardness and it grew and it grew and it completely overtook them. And now they are destroyed. And I pray that somehow these

things could be reversed, but so much is lost in the process. So be warned, daughters of Zion. Be warned, men. Be warned.

If a household is not governed by the doctrine of God, then it will fall by the doctrines of demons that it has entertained and God so desires to come and rescue sinners and bring them into a wonderful place that is both regulated and governed and blessed by the law of liberty, the perfect law of liberty that gives life to all of those who embrace it.

And our only hope is that we come into his house and we are shaved and we are washed and we put on new garments and he is our God and we are the sheep of his pasture. And, brothers and sisters, this text makes that so clear that Christ is our only hope in our homes.

And here we have a passage of Scripture that has regulated the authority of men in homes, that casts a vision for the cleansing of sin, the rescuing of a woman out of paganism, bringing her into a place of care and comfort and the great dangers that lie at the doorstep of every home in this church, the seeds of hardness of heart.

And so I pray that God would help us to love his Word more, that we would see the glory of the cross, the salvation of sinners that God has accomplished through his Son.

Let's pray.

Oh Lord, we are amazed at the distinctive, careful words that you deliver to us in this passage. We love them, because they all breathe love. And now let it be so with us, Lord, that we would have a world of love in our homes. Amen.