

Divorce & Remarriage pt.2:

“Except for Adultery”

Righteousness & Relationships Part 8

Matthew 5:31-32 5-23-10

Summary: We must not be over-strict or over-lenient on divorce lest we push people into sin. Old Testament context: Divorce not God’s desire for marriage, but permitted to protect the innocent party. Cultural context: Divorce required for adultery. Matthean context: Joseph planned a righteous divorce of his WIFE. Sermon on the Mount context: divorce is an example of continuity – not change. “Except for *pornia*” means except for adultery (adultery is worse than divorce). What is permitted is not God’s “second best.” He only permits good things. And He restores what is ruined.

Introduction	1
Old Testament Context	2
Divorce and Remarriage were Permitted.....	2
Because of Hardness of Heart	3
But it wasn’t that way from the beginning	4
The Cultural Context	4
The Context of Matthew	5
A Righteous Divorce.....	5
Joseph is called righteous while planning divorce.....	7
The Context of the Sermon on the Mount	8
Divorce is an example of what has not changed.....	8
Except for <i>pornia</i>	9
Betrothal View	9
The Levitical Prohibitions View	10
The “Except for Adultery” view.....	10
Why Divorce for Adultery?	10
Conclusion: God’s Best?	11

Matthew 5:31-32 "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

Matthew 19:3-12 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?" 4 "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' 5 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'? 6 So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." 7 "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" 8 Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." 10 The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry." 11 Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. 12 For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."

Introduction

We are studying through the Sermon on the Mount and have arrived at the section where Jesus touches on divorce. This is a very difficult topic in Scripture. There are so many different passages that mention divorce, and trying to harmonize them all, and to extract from them principles that will enable us to discern God's will in situations that are not addressed in Scripture is an extremely difficult and complex study. But as difficult as this issue is, it is crucial that we get it right because there are grave dangers if we err on either side – either by being too lenient or by being too strict. Sometimes people have the attitude, “I don't know for sure, but I'm going to err on the side of love and leniency.” But love and leniency are not the same thing. There is nothing loving in permitting something Scripture forbids. If God says, “I will punish anyone who does this” and you go ahead and tell someone he can do it, that is not loving. If you tell someone – “It's OK, I think you can go ahead and remarry” and it turns out that is adultery in God's eyes – you are guilty of influencing that person to sin. So we definitely do not want to err on the side of leniency.

And so some people see that and say, “I am going to err on the side of holiness and a high view of marriage and strictness when it comes to divorce and remarriage.” But holiness and strictness are not the same thing either. If God permits something, and we forbid it, we are not erring on the side of holiness. You cannot be holier than God. If you are more strict than God on something then that promotes sin, not holiness. And that is especially true when it comes to marriage. Paul makes the argument in 1 Corinthians 7 that those who try to remain single when they are supposed to be married end up falling into sexual sin.

So if it turns out there is some category of divorced people who actually do have the biblical right to remarry, and we tell them they do not have that right and must remain single, and as a result they fall into sexual sin – we are guilty of pushing them into that sin. That is the sort of thing false teachers do.

1 Timothy 4:1-3 The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. ...3 They forbid people to marry

It is a serious sin to forbid something God has not forbidden.

So can you see how important it is that we get this right? We really do not want to err on the side of being too lenient, nor do we want to err on the side of being too strict. Both errors push people into sin. So it is crucial that we strive to discover God's will with as much precision as possible in this area.

Last time I devoted the entire session to Jesus' main point – that generally speaking, divorce is wrong. And I went on and on about why it is wrong and what is so evil about it. And I talked about why God does not allow it even in the case of really, really hard, painful marriages. If you missed that session, I would strongly urge you to go back and read or listen to it because everything else in this study will most likely be misapplied if you do not have the foundation of that first message. We are going to be talking about exceptions to the rule, and you cannot understand exceptions to the rule if you do not understand the rule.

But now that we have established the general rule it is important that we study the exceptions.

Matthew 5:32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress...

There is endless debate over what Jesus meant by **except for marital unfaithfulness**. When you are trying to figure out what someone meant by what they said, you need to understand the context in which they said it.

Old Testament Context

Divorce and Remarriage were Permitted

Matthew 19:8 Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives..."

The passage the Pharisees are citing in Matthew 19 is Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 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, 2 and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, 3 and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, 4 then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled.

Jesus calls that permission. Evidently when Moses describes that specific situation in verse 1 he is describing something that is allowed. It was permitted for man to divorce in those circumstances.

Because of Hardness of Heart

But why? If God hates divorce and His intention was for marriage to be life-long, why did He permit divorce? Jesus tells us why.

Matthew 19:8 Jesus replied, "**Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."**

Accommodation for Disobedience?

Many interpreters have taken it to mean God did not originally permit divorce, but then mankind became so hard hearted that He adjusted His Law to accommodate man's sin. People would not obey His law about divorce, and so God softened it.

Does that interpretation strike you as a little odd? Is that how God operates? Does God typically accommodate His law to fit our rebellion? "Here is My law, but if your heart is hard, you don't have to do it"? Thou shalt not steal, but if your heart is hard, then you can go ahead and steal? Normally you are not supposed to murder, but if your heart is hard, feel free to kill all you want? Since when does God give permission to disregard His standards just because you have a hard heart?

Protection from hard heartedness

I do not think that was what Jesus meant. It seems to me the permission is not for the hard-hearted person, but for the victim of the hard-hearted person. Most interpreters agree that God gave the law in Deuteronomy 24 to protect women. A man would get tired of his wife and just throw her out. But he would not give her a certificate of divorce. That way she couldn't get remarried, and if he decided he wanted her back at some point he could just take her back. Then when he got tired of her again, he would say, "OK, I'm sick of you now – get lost."

We all know the heart of God toward widows and orphans and people who are helpless. So He permitted divorce – not for the sake of the hard-hearted man, but for the sake of the abandoned woman. God permitted divorce because of hard-heartedness – not to allow people to be hard-hearted, but to protect the victims of hard-heartedness.

And sometimes the victim was the husband. The permission in Deuteronomy 24 specifies that he divorces his wife because of some indecency in her. That word "indecency" refers to something shameful and disgusting.¹ It could include things like public exposure, various kinds of sexual sins, homosexuality, etc.

¹ The literal phrase is that **he divorces her because he finds in her a matter of nakedness**. That particular word for nakedness is used fifty-four times, and it is always in the context of something shameful (when it speaks of people - twice it is used of land – to refer to land that is exposed and unprotected. In verses where nakedness is referred to and there is no shame implied (like Job 1:21 **Naked I came from my mother's womb...**"), a different word is used. This word is always connected with shameful, disgusting things, such as incest or public exposure. The one other place in Scripture where the exact same phrase is found is Deuteronomy 23:14, where it describes human waste lying around in the camp that someone might step in.

What about adultery? Adultery is never mentioned as a ground for divorce in the Old Testament for a very obvious reason – the penalty for adultery in the Law of God was death. In God’s Law adultery always ended a marriage because the guilty party was to be put to death.

Now in the book of Hosea it seems that God actually allowed for the innocent party to forgive the adulterous spouse. That entire book is about how God was a husband to Israel, and Israel kept going after other lovers (false gods) and God kept bringing her back and restoring her. And to illustrate that God required His prophet Hosea to marry an unfaithful woman. She kept leaving and going after other men, and he kept bringing her back and restoring her and loving her.

That illustrates the heart of God. God is not a “one strike and you’re out” type God. Where there is repentance there can be forgiveness and restoration. However even in the case of Hosea, when he took her back he required that she be faithful to him.

Hosea 3:1-3 The Lord said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods ... So I bought her for fifteen shekels ... 3 Then I told her, "You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will live with you."

So even with Hosea it was not a situation where he was willing to stay with her while she was sleeping with other men in an ongoing, unrepentant way.

It is hard to say if that was just a one-time exception for the purposes of what God was teaching through the prophet Hosea, or if that was actually an option all the time. But either way, the norm was for the adulterer to be put to death, so that adultery ended a marriage.

God is incredibly patient and forgiving, but even for God there is a limit to how long He will wait for repentance. And where there is nothing but hardness of heart, there comes a time when God lets a person go.

Jeremiah 3:8 I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries.

Future generations of Israel would be restored, but for that particular generation, it was over. They cried out for mercy, and they wanted to come back – but God would not take them back because they were refusing to repent of their sin. He even cites the law in Deuteronomy 24 as the reason why He would not take them back.

Deuteronomy 24:1 "If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him and marries another man, should he return to her again? Would not the land be completely defiled? But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers-- would you now return to me?"

God gave that generation over to their enemies, they were destroyed and carried off into exile, and we never hear from that generation of Israel again.

But it wasn’t that way from the beginning

So, what is the Old Testament context? God permitted divorce to protect the innocent spouse from the hard-hearted spouse. But Jesus quickly points out, **but it wasn’t that way from the beginning**. We should gather our understanding of the general rule not from the exceptions but from the ideal in the Garden of Eden, where it was one man and one woman together for life. That is the way marriage is supposed to be. So if there is a divorce it is always because someone is rebelling against God.

The Cultural Context

By Jesus' time Israel was under the control of Rome, and the Romans did not allow the Jews to carry out the death penalty for adultery. They could not put the person to death, so what they did instead was require that the innocent spouse divorce the guilty spouse. That was the law in Israel at the time of Jesus. If there was adultery, or if it was discovered that there had been premarital unchastity, the man was required to divorce his wife, and he could never marry her again, and the man she sinned with was forbidden to ever marry her. And not only was that law in the Mishna for the Jews, but it was also the law for the Greeks and the Romans. In all three cultures, if your wife committed adultery and you failed to divorce her you would be charged with a crime. The name of the crime was *lenocinium* (pimping).

And that may sound harsh to you, but keep in mind – for Israel that was a considerable softening of the law. God's Law had required the death penalty. So to soften it to merely require divorce was to make it much, more mild than it had been.

Now, there was a lot of debate in Jesus' day about grounds for divorce – just as there is now. You may have heard of the debate between two famous rabbis - Hillel and Shammai. The debate was over what Deuteronomy 24 meant by “indecency.” The liberal view was that it meant whatever you want it to mean. If your wife burns your breakfast then she has become indecent in your eyes and you can divorce. The conservative, hard-line view was that indecency referred only to adultery. And there were various other views. But all sides of the debate agreed on one thing – where there is adultery there must be divorce. That was just assumed. It was the law of the land, and even the most conservative hard-liners agreed that it was essential that you divorce your spouse in the case of adultery.

The Context of Matthew

So now you understand a little bit about the mentality of the people Jesus is talking to in the Sermon on the Mount. We need to know that to be able to discern how Jesus' words would have been understood. Now one more bit of context we need to cover – the context of the book of Matthew. The readers of Matthew have already read about a divorce situation in this book just four chapters earlier. And so we need to understand that event as well. This is the first mention of divorce in the New Testament, and it is presented in an amazingly positive light.

A Righteous Divorce

Matthew 1:18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph

The Meaning of Betrothal

Now it is very important that we understand what that means. That is not engagement. **Pledged to be married** does not mean engaged. They did have engagement back then – just like we do. And their engagement period was just like ours – it could last any amount of time, it was not legally binding, and to get out of it all that was required was for either the man or the woman to say, “I changed my mind.”

But if they did not change their mind and decided to go ahead and get married, they would do exactly what we do. They would come together before witnesses, exchange vows, give a coin (which later became a ring), and at that moment they became husband and wife – just like we do. Once they made those vows before witnesses and gave the coin – they were legally married – just like today. The difference between our culture and their culture was in their culture, after they became husband and wife, the first year of their marriage was spent apart. (It was not always exactly a year. It was generally nine to twelve months, except if the woman was a widow – then it was three months.) During those months the man would go back to his father's house and prepare a place for them to live. And when the father decided it was time, he would send the groom to go get his bride. At that point they had a wedding celebration and a feast, after which the man would take his wife to their new home and only then did they consummate physically for the first time.

That first year of marriage while they were apart was called the betrothal period. The Greek word is $\mu\eta\sigma\tau\epsilon\acute{\upsilon}\omega$ (*mnasteuo*). The NIV translates it “pledged to be married.” The ESV uses the word “betrothed.” Both of those are good translations. The CSB and NAS say “engaged,” and that is not a

good translation. This is not engagement. They were legally married. If they wanted to split up during that time it required a divorce. And if the man died during that period the woman was called a widow.

Does God agree that betrothal = marriage?

So in the eyes of the culture they were legally married. What about in the eyes of God? What does God think about the betrothal period? The answer to that question is right there in verse 19.

Matthew 1:19 Because Joseph her husband² was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Matthew calls Joseph **her husband**. And that is consistent every place in the Bible where the betrothal period is mentioned.

Genesis 19:14 So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters.

They were in the betrothal period, and yet they are called sons-in-law. Deuteronomy 22 is a chapter that prescribes penalties for sexual sins. And in that chapter the penalty for adultery is much more severe than that for fornication (sex prior to marriage).³ And in verses 23-24 of that chapter it tells us what to do if the sin takes place during that betrothal period. What is the penalty then? Do you get the fornication penalty or the adultery penalty? Or something in-between? Answer: If a person sleeps with a betrothed woman both the man and the woman get the adultery penalty. It is not fornication – it is adultery.

Deuteronomy 22:24 you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death ... the man because he violated another man's wife.

Again, the betrothed woman is called a **wife**.

Definition of marriage

So did God recognize the betrothal period as marriage? Yes, and here is why: In God's eyes, what is it that makes a couple married? The joining of two people in marriage occurs at the point when the couple makes formal vows that are recognized by the state as legally binding.

Every culture has its own laws about what constitutes a marriage. If you do not meet those requirements, then you are not married in the eyes of God. If two teenagers in the back seat of a car say, "You know what, we're married. I love you; you love me, we're committed for life – here's a ring of the top of a pop can – we're married" – that is not a valid marriage. And a girl who falls for that should not be surprised if on the drive home afterward the guy says, "You know what – we're divorced. Don't call me anymore – I'm done with you."

Sometimes young people say, "What does it really matter if you have a piece of paper? What matters is love." No, the piece of paper matters *big time*. In Proverbs 2:17 and Malachi 2:14 it refers to the marriage *covenant*. It is not just an agreement between a man and a woman – it is a formal, legally binding contract.

So at what moment do two people become married in the eyes of God? It is at the moment they make the formal, legally binding contractual life-commitment to one another, and are recognized by the law of the land as being married. And that is exactly what took place at betrothal. They made their vows before witnesses, those vows were legally binding, and they were considered married by the state.

So betrothal fits the definition of marriage, God calls the betrothed man a husband, He calls the betrothed woman a wife, He calls the betrothed man the son-in-law of the woman's father, He calls sexual

² Some have tried to say that the word translated **husband** can also mean fiancé. But first of all that argument is circular, because the only evidence for it is the fact that couples were called husbands and wives during the betrothal period. Secondly, since the people in that culture thought of a couple as being husband and wife during the first year of marriage, there is no question that the word Matthew used would have been understood to mean husband. So if Matthew had wanted to say something different, he chose the wrong word (which, of course, is impossible).

³ Adultery is more serious, because it is a double sin. Not only does it involve the same sexual immorality as fornication, but it also adds a betrayal of a spouse and a desecration of a marriage on top of it.

sin during betrothal adultery rather than fornication, and divorce is required to end it. That is as married as you can get.

Betrothal of the Church

And I am glad – I am glad God considers betrothal marriage. That is great news for us because in the biblical analogies that speak about our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, the time we are living in right now corresponds to the betrothal period. In Matthew 25 Jesus said the Church is awaiting the return of the bridegroom for the wedding feast. The period where the wife waits for the bridegroom to come is the betrothal period.⁴

John 14:1 I am going [to My Father’s house] to prepare a place for you. 3 And ... I will come back and take you to be with me

We are betrothed. But the Church is not just engaged to the Lord Jesus Christ – we are joined to Him as His wife.

Joseph is called righteous while planning divorce

So, back to our verse.

Matthew 1:18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married (betrothed) to Joseph

They were husband and wife, but they were still in that first year of marriage so they had not slept together yet.

18 ...but before they came together, she was found to be with child...

They have not slept together yet and suddenly Mary is pregnant.

19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.⁵

Now after this Joseph learns that Mary was not unfaithful and so he calls off the divorce. However, before that happened, while he was still planning the divorce he was called righteous. And that brings up an interesting question. If God hates divorce, how is it that Joseph could be called righteous while planning one?

There are a few possibilities. One is that he is called righteous for being nice about it – the fact that he was going to do it quietly. It is true that the fact that he was being so nice about it is the reason why he is called righteous, but that only makes sense if the thing he is being nice about is not a sin. God would not call him righteous for planning to sin in a nice way. Would I be called righteous by God if I were planning on robbing your house but leaving a mint on your pillow? Sinning in a courteous way is not righteousness.

A second view is that Joseph is called “righteous” not in an ethical sense, but simply in the sense of being law-abiding. The law of the land required that he divorce her, and he was just following the law. It is true that Joseph was following the law, but I do not think that is what Matthew has in mind with this

⁴ We see the same language used in connection with Israel. Ez. 16:8 **I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine.**

⁵ This is a wonderful picture of the sovereign control of God over human customs in history. Why on earth do you think it happened that in ancient Israel there was a custom that married people didn’t sleep together for the first year? Since they were bound together for life anyway, what is the point of that? I can’t think of any sociological reason. But I think it’s fascinating that in His providence God arraigned for that to be the strict custom, in order to set the stage for the virgin birth. If they had been sleeping together, obviously there could be no virgin birth. But this way, Mary could conceive as a virgin, but also have a husband at the time so she didn’t have to go through that as a single mother. It also works beautifully to illustrate our married but still separated condition with our Husband in heaven in this age.

word **righteous**. The word **righteous** appears fourteen times in Matthew and it never means law-abiding. In Matthew that word always refers to proper ethical conduct before God.

And besides that, if this divorce would have been sinful it would not matter what the human law was. If the law of the land requires you to sin the righteous thing to do is to ignore that law and obey God rather than men.

So how is it that Joseph can be called righteous while he was planning to divorce his wife? There is only one explanation: It was a righteous divorce. If Mary had indeed committed adultery, it would have been a righteous thing for Joseph to divorce her.

The Context of the Sermon on the Mount

At this point someone might be thinking, “OK. Maybe Joseph was not wrong to plan to divorce, but wasn’t that technically still in the Old Testament period? Perhaps there is a stricter standard in the New Testament. Maybe Jesus is casting aside the Old Testament standard and setting up a new, higher standard.” Maybe He is saying, “Moses permitted divorce, but now I am canceling that permission. Joseph was righteous in what he was doing, but if someone did the same thing today it would be sin.” Is that possible? What does Scripture say about God’s standards for divorce in the Old Testament compared to His standards for divorce in the New Testament? That is where the context of the Sermon on the Mount comes in.

Divorce is an example of what has not changed

Jesus is in the midst of a section in this sermon that began back in verse 17. He is giving examples of how the Old Testament Law is still in place.

Matthew 5:17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

Jesus is not overturning or changing the Law – He is teaching them the correct way to interpret it. This is later on in Jesus’ ministry and it is in a different place – down south in Perea. In verse 16 Jesus is speaking about how His presence marks a whole new era – the old era ended with John the Baptist. And that brings up the question – if this is a new era, does that mean the Law is over with? Or is it still in place? And Jesus answers that question in the very next verse.

17 It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law.

The Law is still completely in force. Jesus is not setting it aside. And then in the next verse Jesus goes on to give an example of that. And of all the examples Jesus could have chosen to illustrate how the Law of God stays the same in this new era, look what He picks:

18 "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

So at two different times in two different contexts Jesus offers His teaching about divorce as an example of how the Old Testament Law is still in place. It is not new, it is not different, it is not a change in ethics – it is an example of how there is no change in ethics.

The moral, ethical aspect of the Law is binding on us in the same way it was binding on the people in the Old Testament.

The parts that are no longer binding in the same way are the ceremonial and civil aspects of the law. We do not offer sacrifices today because of how Jesus fulfilled the ceremonial law. And when it comes to

civil regulations – tax law, business regulations, penalties for various crimes, law court procedures, inheritance regulations, etc – those are civil codes for the operation of the nation, and for those kinds of things we are subject to the taxes and business regulations of the United States and the State of Colorado. There are some divorce laws in the Old Testament that I think fall into that category. For example Deuteronomy 24 – you cannot remarry your former spouse if there has been an intervening marriage. Or Deuteronomy 22:19 - if you have falsely accused your wife of infidelity you can never divorce no matter what. Or Deuteronomy 22:29 – if a man rapes a woman he must marry her and can never divorce her no matter what. The best I can tell those are civil codes, not moral law. I do not see those as being binding on us today.

However what is binding are the basic moral principles that we learn about the will of God with regard to marriage and divorce. The original design – one man and one woman together for life. The protection of the innocent party, the fact that God hates divorce, and the fact that God hates adultery.

Except for *pornia*

So with all that background, now we are ready to tackle this exception clause in Matthew 5:32.

Matthew 5:32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

What did Jesus mean by that phrase **except for marital unfaithfulness**? That exception only appears in Matthew. In the other Gospels it just says “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery.” So some people have said, “If Jesus can say that in an absolute way in the other gospels without mentioning an exception, then the exception must not be a real exception.” And so a number of different views have emerged.

Betrothal View

One is that Jesus was speaking only about betrothal. The word translated marital **unfaithfulness** in the NIV is the Greek word *pornia*, which is often translated *fornication*. Those who hold this view have said, “If Jesus meant adultery, why not use the normal word for the adultery? Why not say, “Except for adultery” rather than “except for *pornia*”? If *pornia* refers to fornication, then that is sex before marriage. So what Jesus was saying was, “If a man divorces his wife he commits adultery (except if it is in the betrothal period – like with Joseph and Mary. In that case divorce is OK since it is really just engagement).”

But as we have seen, even if Jesus were referring to betrothal, that is still marriage - not engagement. And if it were just engagement, Jesus’ statement would be very strange. He would be saying, “It’s OK to break off an engagement if your fiancé is promiscuous, but if she is not promiscuous and you break off the engagement and marry another woman you have committed adultery.” If betrothal is mere engagement and not marriage, why would Jesus say that a man commits adultery by breaking it off and marrying another?

Secondly, to say it must refer to betrothal because Jesus uses the word for fornication rather than the word for adultery does not make sense because sexual infidelity during betrothal was called adultery, not fornication.

And thirdly, it is simply not true that *pornia* has to refer to fornication rather than adultery. *Pornia* was actually a very common way to refer to adultery if the adultery were committed by a woman. There was more than one way to refer to adultery – just like we might say, unfaithfulness, cheating, adultery, etc. When a man committed adultery they usually called it *mochia*, and when the woman did it they usually called it *pornia*. So it is perfectly natural for Jesus to use the word *pornia* to refer to a woman committing adultery. That was a standard way of speaking.

And it would even make more sense if Jesus wanted to include other forms of sexual immorality such as was included in Deuteronomy 24, because *pornea* was a broad term that could mean adultery but could also include other forms of sexual sin. So there is no reason to assume that the original readers would automatically think of betrothal just because Jesus used the word *pornea*. And even if it did refer to betrothal it would still mean that divorce is permitted in the case of adultery within marriage.

The Levitical Prohibitions View

Another view is that *pornea* refers to the various Levitical prohibitions, such as incest. So Jesus is saying “No divorce – unless you are married to a close relative in an incestuous marriage, go ahead and divorce. That was the view I held for about ten years. People who hold that view point to 1 Corinthians 5, where the man was with his mother in law and it is called *pornea*.”

The problem with that view is it would not require divorce. A Jew could not be legally married to a close relative. So if they are sleeping together someone just needs to move out, but it does not require divorce.

And beyond that, Jesus’ hearers would not automatically assume *pornea* referred to incest. Unless some other meaning is specified, the most natural meaning of *pornea* in the context of a married woman is adultery.

The “Except for Adultery” view

There are various other views, but we do not have time to go through them all. I have studied all the various views I could find and my conclusion is that what Jesus meant was simply this – it is wrong for a man to divorce except in the case of when his wife has committed adultery. In that case he is not wrong to divorce her.

So what about the fact that the exception is not mentioned the other gospels? As we found last week there are numerous examples of one gospel mentioning an exception while another one does not. One gospel said they brought no bread, another says they brought no bread except one loaf, etc. When one gospel gives more detail and another gospel gives a briefer account you do not explain away the more detailed statement to match the shorter one – you take the shorter one as the basic principle and use the more detailed one to give additional understanding.

Given the Old Testament context and the legal situation of the day and the fact that all sides of the debate agreed that divorce was OK in the case of adultery, it is no real surprise that the gospels that have a shorter account would not mention the exception, because everyone would take that for granted. There is no need for the Gospel writers to mention it – except in Matthew, where he had included the story about Joseph and Mary. He does not want anyone to think Jesus is condemning Joseph, so he mentions the exception for adultery.

Why Divorce for Adultery?

Some people have wondered where forgiveness fits into this view. Why doesn’t God just tell the innocent spouse to just live with it and forgive? We have to do that with every other sin, why not with adultery?

The answer is sexual sin is uniquely evil in marriage. Marital love must be exclusive. The Church does not have two husbands. We do not worship two gods. If someone insists on giving himself to some other god, the Lord Jesus Christ will not accept him. God has never been willing to share His people with another god. And so involving a third party in a marriage is especially detestable to God. If your spouse is going to continually drag some third party into your marriage physically, it is detestable to God for you to be involved in that. To continue to participate in a three-way situation like that perverts the picture of Christ and the Church.

This is another reason why divorce became necessary when man became hard-hearted against God. Man became so sinful that they created marital situations that were actually worse than divorce. God hates divorce, but there are some marriages that are so sexually perverted that He hates those marriages

even more than He hates divorce. And so where there is ongoing, unrepentant, hard-hearted adultery, divorce can actually be better than staying married.

Conclusion: God's Best?

The fact that God uses the word **righteous** to describe Joseph when he was planning to divorce Mary is very significant in our understanding of how we think about God's permissions. Sometimes you hear people speak about divorce and say, "There are certain contexts in which God allows divorce, but it is never God's best." It is permitted, but it is not God's best – as if God permitted things that are not really good. He does not.

God is not like us. There are times my kids will ask if they can do something and I will say, "Um... OK" and they will say, "It sounds like you don't really want me to do it. Would you rather I not do it?" When they ask that it is because they think I am giving permission, but I am not crazy about the idea, so that if they go ahead and do it I might be a little bit unhappy with them – even though I gave permission.

Human parents sometimes give permission in a situation like that because they are torn and do not really know what is best. But that is never the case with God. God never gives permission to do something that He would rather you not do. God's will is not divided into "God's best" and "God's kind-of OK." At any given moment it is either God's desire for you to do something or it is not. If God gives you permission to do something then that thing is not only OK – it is flat-out righteous. Matthew 1:19 does not say, "Joseph had in mind to divorce her quietly because he was an OK man." It says **righteous man**. There is nothing there about second best or third best or last best – if God permits something then that is God's best and it is a righteous thing to do.

Sometimes I wonder if this "God's best" thing is not just a way of imposing our legalistic ideas on people. The Bible allows for something, but we do not like the idea, so we say, "You can do it, but it's not God's best." If you are the type who says that sort of thing to people, I guess all I have to say to you is it is not God's best for you to say that to people. It is not God's best for you to make people feel guilty for doing something God told them they could do.

In many church circles divorce has become a kind of unforgivable sin. There is a stigma that is so often attached to divorce so that even in the case of a righteous divorce – or a sinful divorce where there has been repentance – still there is a stigma. And maybe some of you felt that last week. I preached strongly against sinful divorce, and I know that was a hard sermon for many of you. Even though you are not committing any sin right now in that regard, you felt guilty and condemned in that sermon because of your past.

You need to understand – there is no guilt in a righteous divorce. And there is no guilt in a forgiven sinful divorce. That is what "forgiven" means. You say, "I think I had biblical grounds, but my conscience isn't clear because I was not the spouse I should have been. I bear plenty of blame too." If you know of sins you committed, repent of them. And once you have repented, the guilt is gone.

The enemy will try to come and tell you that your life is ruined now. Your dreams for what you thought your life was going to be are dashed, and now you will just exist on the junk heap of divorced humanity the rest of your life. When Satan whispers that in your ear he is lying. You see, the God we serve does not just delight in forgiving; He also delights in restoring. He makes beautiful things out of that which seems to be destroyed beyond repair. If your usefulness to Him were over then you would not still be breathing. If you are still alive then you still have work to do here, and you are just as much a child of God as anyone.

Psalm 71:20 Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again; from the depths of the earth you will again bring me up.

Hosea 6:1-3 "Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. 2 After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. 3 ... As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth."

The Lord will restore you and revive you like spring rain that turns everything green and healthy.

Joel 2:25 I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten

The amazing thing about that is the fact that the locusts were sent by God. They were God's punishment for their sin. And God promises He will repay you for the losses you have incurred from the consequences of your own sin!

And if you think, "Well, maybe God will forgive me, but my effectiveness and usefulness in ministry and serving Him is forever ruined" – read what God said to Jeremiah when he sinned.

Jeremiah 15:19 If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me

The whole purpose of the spiritual restoration is restoration of service and usefulness in ministry. And Jeremiah did repent and had a long, fruitful ministry after chapter 15.⁶

Your life is not ruined. The only way a human soul can be ruined is if it gets to the point of being completely unwilling to repent. But as long as there is any willingness at all in your heart, if you seek Him He will enable repentance and bring restoration. It may not be in the timing you expect or come in the form you would have liked, but if not then both the form and the timing will prove to be far better than what you were hoping for.

Benediction: 1 Peter 5:10,11 And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. 11 To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

⁶ Lest the reader think, "OK, if God restores so wonderfully, I'll just get the divorce, take my lumps in chastisement, repent, and then receive wonderful restoration" – remember that 1) No sin is EVER worth it, and 2) there is no guarantee God will grant you repentance if you knowingly plan on rebelling against Him like that.