



Ruled by a Gracious God: Marriage, Divorce, and Guarding the Gospel (Deuteronomy 24:1-4)

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INTRODUCTION

I've officiated a fair number of weddings over the years. While planning the ceremony beforehand, I've never heard the couple say, "You know, pastor, we only expect this marriage to last a few years at most, so let's not make a big deal about the whole "To death do us part" thing, ok? We're deliberately not investing a lot of money in the reception for the same reason. We're trying to downplay the celebratory elements. And while you're at it, could you recommend a good divorce lawyer? We thought it would be wise to go in prepared for the inevitable."

No couple talks like that. Why not? Because no one gets into marriage hoping for a divorce or preparing for a divorce! Yet roughly half of first-time marriages in the US end in divorce. The rates are even higher for second marriages (67%) and third marriages (73%). And guess who has the highest rate of divorce among all religious groups? Evangelical protestants. That's the category our church is in, brothers and sisters.

In our culture, nearly every one of us knows someone who is divorced, has talked with someone considering a divorce, has contemplated getting a divorce, or has a friend growing up with parents who are divorced. Whether you're married or single, we need to understand what God has to say about marriage and divorce.

If you're 12 years old and just graduated from King'sKids, it will shape how you think about what your friends are experiencing, how you respond to conflict in your own family, and the kind of man or woman you may choose to date and marry in the future. If you're 72 years old and just celebrated your golden anniversary, it will strengthen your gratitude for what God has worked in your own marriage and equip you to counsel other people with Scripture, not just your own experience.

The same principle applies if you're a single adult. Love does more than send thoughts and prayers to married people in your circle of influence. Love speaks the truth of God's word with humility and courage. Exhorting and encouraging them to guard the gospel by guarding their marriage. And if you're presently in a difficult marriage, you really need to understand what the Bible teaches about marriage and divorce. The temptation to



make life-changing decisions based on what feels less painful, what makes sense in our own mind, or what sympathetic friends affirm is enormous.

Bottom line: don't wait for marriage or divorce to come your way before you learn to think biblically about marriage and divorce. Prepare now. Study God's Word and submit your life to his authority now. Why? Because nothing less than our witness to the truth of the gospel is at stake in the institution of marriage. It's not a human relationship of convenience. It's a divine institution reflecting the relationship between Christ and the blood-bought people. It's not a signpost that you like her, and she likes you. It's a signpost to the saving power of God who keeps covenant and practices steadfast love.

In Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Moses focuses on the issues of divorce and remarriage. But we cannot rightly understand this passage unless we interpret it in the context of the whole Bible in which it is written. So we'll start in Deuteronomy 24, but then spend considerable time in two other books – the Gospel of Matthew and 1 Corinthians – before returning to Deuteronomy and ending in Jeremiah.

My aim, because I believe it's the Lord's aim in Deuteronomy 24, is to equip you to think biblically about divorce and remarriage so you might know what is good, seek what is good, and help others do the same. I've organized what Scripture teaches – both here and elsewhere – into four foundational principles. Truths rooted not in the authority or wisdom of man, but in the authority and wisdom of God.

1) DIVORCE IS FORBIDDEN IN MOST SITUATIONS

In chapter 24, Moses introduces us to a man who doesn't want to be married anymore. Verse 1, his wife finds "No favor in his eyes." Why? Because he sees "Something indecent" or repulsive in her. Moses doesn't tell us exactly what it is. It's the same Hebrew word he used back in Deuteronomy 23 to refer to human excrement. It's a general description that captures anything that is repugnant in the eyes of the beholder.

Bottom line, the guy wants out of the marriage and his reason is something other than infidelity. Otherwise, the procedures Moses just laid out in chapter 22 would come into play. In modern parlance, irreconcilable differences would certainly fit the bill.

Notice Moses isn't endorsing divorce. He's assuming Israelite men are going to divorce their wives, write a certificate, and send them out of their house, creating a domestic and spiritual mess in the process. The regulations he establishes are simply designed to



contain the fallout and provide basic protections for vulnerable parties, especially women. Jesus makes as much crystal clear in Matthew 19:3-8.

“And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, ‘Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?’ He answered, ‘Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What God has joined together, let not man separate.’ They said to him, ‘Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?’ He said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.’”

What had the Pharisees done? They came to the law looking for permission to do what they wanted to do – divorce their wife for any cause – rather than coming to the law eager to understand God’s will. What is God’s will for marriage? Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24 and affirms marriage is a life-long covenant. It is indeed “Till death do us part!” What Genesis 2 establishes, the prophets affirm. Malichi 2:16, “For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.”

But what if they’re not fun to be with anymore? What if every conversation turns into a fight? What if what she wants in bed is different from what I want in bed? What if my spouse becomes repugnant or repulsive in my eyes? “Do not be faithless,” says the Lord. Why not? Because the covenant of marriage isn’t about satisfying your felt needs. It’s a public testimony to the faithfulness of God. Ephesians 5:32, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”

The public integrity of the gospel is bound up with the public integrity of your marriage. What you do in your marriage determines whether you speak the truth or a lie about the way Jesus loves us. And that’s why Scripture, building off the purpose of marriage in Genesis 2, forbids divorce in most situations. It’s not an unfortunate necessity. It’s not less than ideal but understandable. It’s wrong because it’s an act of covenant unfaithfulness.

It's why Jesus says in Matthew 19:9 that if you divorce your wife or husband and marry someone else, you are committing adultery. Even if they’ve done terrible things to you, you’re being unfaithful. You’re breaking a covenant. The Apostle Paul couldn’t be clearer



in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11. “To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.” There are, however, two exceptions to the rule. Two situations where divorce is permitted as an expression of God’s justice.

2) DIVORCE IS PERMITTED IN TWO SITUATIONS

Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 19:9. “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” Exception number 1 is a situation where sexual immorality has occurred. All sin is serious, brothers and sisters. But sexual sin is especially serious. And one of the most grievous consequences of sexual sin is the way it shatters covenant relationships like marriage. Where sexual immorality has taken place – in all the various forms it may occur – Jesus permits divorce, though he doesn’t require it.

That’s an important distinction because there are many situations where the most God-glorifying response to sexual infidelity in marriage may very well be forgiveness and reconciliation. There are married men and women in this church who have been exceedingly gracious for Jesus’ sake to a spouse who has fallen into sexual sin. Oh, that more churches would be filled with powerful testimonies to forgiveness and reconciliation in marriage that make much of Jesus!

That said, we must not create a moral hierarchy of responses to sexual sin in marriage where the most God-glorifying response is always to welcome the sinner back home. You can forgive someone even when sexual sin has permanently shattered your ability to trust them and remain married to them. Sometimes the most loving thing a spouse can do is allow their husband or wife to experience the covenant-breaking consequences of sexual immorality. Especially when godly sorrow and repentance are absent, or a spouse has no intention of remaining sexually faithful. That’s exception number 1.

Here's exception number 2 – when a Christian is married to a non-Christian and the unbelieving partner chooses to abandon the marriage. Listen to 1 Corinthians 7:12-14. “If a brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.”



By “Holy” Paul isn’t talking about salvation by proxy. He’s talking about godly influence. He’s talking about the God-glorifying effect of showing your unsaved spouse and children what Jesus is like through your example! There are men and women in our midst who are married to unbelievers and have persevered in very difficult marriages for decades. You have our greatest respect, brothers and sisters. We are committed to supporting and praying for you as you bear witness to Christ through your sacrificial love! You do not exist in a second-class marriage. You are making much of Jesus through your marriage.

But there are times an unbelieving husband or wife does not “Consent” to live with their Christian spouse. They choose to separate by either physically leaving the marriage or by forcing their Christian spouse to physically leave the marriage through their actions. One thinks here of the grievous consequences of domestic violence, a spouse who wants an open marriage where sexual dalliances are tolerated, or a situation where a non-Christian says, “For the kid’s sake or for financial reasons, I don’t want a divorce. We can just be roommates and live in the same house as if we’re not married.” In those sorts of situations, when an unbelieving spouse separates, what does Scripture require?

1 Corinthians 7:15, “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.” Divorce is permissible and, in many cases, becomes a significant, albeit painful, expression of God’s justice for the abandoned believer. Divorce is forbidden in most situations. And divorce is permitted in two situations.

With those principles in view, let’s pick back up with Deuteronomy 24. In verse 1, the woman’s first husband divorces her for manifestly unbiblical reasons. There’s no sexual immorality in play and she’s not an unbeliever seeking to abandon her husband. He simply finds something about her to be repulsive.

So what happens next? Verse 2, “If she goes and become another man’s wife, and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled...”

It feels like we just walked onto the set of the Jerry Springer show or something, doesn’t it? Such is the havoc sin creates, brothers and sisters. So what’s the problem with the



woman's first husband deciding he wants to remarry her? Here's where principle #3 comes into play.

3) REMARRIAGE REQUIRES A BIBLICAL DIVORCE

The remarriage issue is not a hypothetical question. In our own nation, roughly 40% of new marriages include a partner who is remarrying. If your spouse dies before you do, Scripture is clear. Remarriage is not only allowed but, in some cases, explicitly encouraged! 1 Corinthians 7:39, "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord."

The phrase, "Only in the Lord," in 1 Corinthians 7:39 is critical. Whether it's your first marriage or a remarriage, a believer may not marry an unbeliever. So what about remarriage after divorce? Paul seems to anticipate exactly this sort of situation in 1 Corinthians 7:27-28. "Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned..."

What would it look like for someone bound to a wife to "Seek to be free"? It would mean getting a divorce. So when Paul asks in the very next clause, "Are you free from a wife?" he's not referring merely to those who never got married. He's talking about everyone, divorcees included, who have no present, covenantal obligations to a current or former spouse.

How could someone have covenantal obligations to a former spouse? If you divorced them for unbiblical reasons then you are responsible – 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 – to "Remain unmarried or else be reconciled." I'm not talking about some sort of unbiblical distinction where those who are no longer legally married are still "Married in God's sight." You won't find that anywhere in Scripture. I'm talking about the fact that if you get divorced for unbiblical reasons, then the Lord requires you to either remain unmarried or pursue reconciliation with your former spouse.

But if you are "Free" from a spouse – whether because you never got married, your first spouse died, or your previous marriage ended in divorce for biblical reasons – then a Christian is allowed to remarry whomever they wish. Provided we're talking about a fellow believer. If, however, you choose to remarry after being divorced for unbiblical reasons, then you are committing adultery. Matthew 19:9, "And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."



But how, you ask, can you be guilty of adultery after getting a divorce, even if it was for unbiblical reasons? Doesn't a divorce, no matter the reasons, dissolve a marriage with its covenantal responsibilities? How can you be unfaithful to a covenant (or commit adultery) if there is no remaining covenant? It's a good question. Jay Adam wisely clarifies how someone could commit the sin of adultery by getting remarried after unbiblical divorce.

"Normally, adultery takes place while the marriage contract is still in effect. In the situation to which Jesus refers (Deuteronomy 24) that contract has been broken for sinful reasons. Therefore, while it is truly broken (and no right, privileges or obligations of marriage are permitted or required at this point), nevertheless the divorced parties have no right in God's eyes to be in a divorced state. They are obligated to be reconciled in remarriage so that they can renew the contract and continue to pursue their vows...As Paul says, they must remain unmarried not only in order to be in a position to be reconciled...but, as we now see, also in order to not commit adultery. Adultery, then, is sexual sin with someone other than the one with whom one ought to be having sexual relations."

Jesus makes this exact point in Matt 5:31-32. "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'" What's he talking about? The same unbiblical interpretation of Deuteronomy 24 that concludes divorce for any reason is fine as long as you make it official! "But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

How could a man who divorces his wife for unbiblical reasons "Make her commit adultery"? In the Ancient Near East, if a divorced woman had no family to return to or children to care for her, she was often forced to remarry to avoid grinding poverty. And when she inevitably did, she became a participant in adultery. Why? Because she's having sexual relations with someone other than the one with whom she ought to be having sexual relations, namely, her first husband.

But Jesus is very clear. It's not her fault. It's her former husband's fault. He forced her into an adulterous relationship by divorcing her for unbiblical reasons! And it's her second husband's fault because instead of working to restore her first marriage (which never should have ended), he took her for himself and committed adultery with her. The woman's remarriage to her second husband was unbiblical – tantamount to adultery – because the divorce that precipitated it is unbiblical.



Jesus' words in Matthew 5 explain why Moses forbids the particular kind of remarriage in Deuteronomy 24:4. "Her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled..." How was she defiled? When she committed adultery with her second husband by having sexual relations with him after she was divorced for unbiblical reasons.

So why can't her first husband just take her back again? Wouldn't that be a "Win" in one sense? He never should have divorced you, but now he wants you back! Absolutely not, the Lord says. You cannot flippantly send a woman away and bring her back like a Netflix subscription. We're not talking about trading a commodity – which is how women were often treated at the time by men who wanted their dowry. We're talking about a covenant relationship, a relationship you knowingly shattered, defiling her in the process. And now you want to bring her back as if nothing happened?

Remarriage in this instance is wrong because it makes a mockery of the permanence of marriage. The first husband is taking a casual approach to what God says is sacred. He's treating a holy covenant as if it's of little account. I want you in January, not in February, but let's bring you back in March. "That's abominable," God says. Why? Because it takes what I designed to shout of my faithfulness, my steadfast love and turns it into a consumer enterprise where immediate gratification, not long-term loyalty, is the name of the game.

You already sinned enough by divorcing her in the first place for unbiblical reasons. Don't compound the problem by treating her on the back end like a marital football for you and your buddies to pass around at will. Marriage is a serious thing. If you send her away, you can't have her back.

Granted, a case law like the one found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 doesn't apply in the exact same way to us as it did to the nation of Israel because we're not under the law in a covenantal sense. We're under the law of Christ. But all Jesus teaches on divorce in the Gospel of Matthew and all Paul reinforces in 1 Corinthians 7 emphasizes the timeless principle in Deuteronomy 24. **Don't divorce your spouse for unbiblical reasons or use the institution of marriage for selfish gain instead of making much of Yahweh.** If you do (verse 4), you will "Bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance."

If the same situation arose today, how should it play out? The first husband should be brought under church discipline for pursuing an unbiblical divorce. If he refuses to



repent, he should be treated as an unbeliever in keeping with Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18, which means the situation then falls under the exception clause in 1 Corinthians 7 and the wife is no longer bound. She can leave him and get remarried without fear of committing adultery.

If her second husband ran the same play, he should be treated no differently than the first husband, at which point the woman would be free to remarry her first husband if she wished to do so – provided he had repented of his sin and been restored to the church as a believer. If not, then she's disobeying the biblical requirement to only be married "In the Lord," to not be unequally yoked to an unbeliever.

What's the main point? Remarriage after divorce requires a biblical divorce. Otherwise, a Christian must either remain unmarried or be reconciled in remarriage to their former spouse.

4) HOPE IN THE GOSPEL AS WE GUARD OUR WITNESS TO THE GOSPEL

Why is being careful to embrace God's design for divorce and remarriage so important? Because the gospel is ultimately at stake. As I said at the beginning, as our marriages go so our witness to the gospel goes. Remaining faithful to our spouse in marriage is one of the most important ways we show the world what it means for Jesus to remain faithful to his people.

In the book of Jeremiah, the prophet uses the image of adultery in marriage to describe what Israel has done spiritually in her relationship with the Lord. She's been unfaithful to him. She's played the whore, going after all manner of false gods. In response, the Lord sends her away.

It's a sharp contrast to the divorce in Deuteronomy 24 where the man's reasons for divorcing his wife are entirely unbiblical. And yet both situations have something in common. A husband divorces his wife and cannot be remarried to her because she's been defiled. She's given herself, body and soul, to another lover.

It's a picture of the irreversible breach sin creates in our relationship with God. Though unlike the woman in Deuteronomy 24, no one makes you and me commit spiritual adultery. No one makes us faithless. It's our inheritance in Adam. We reject God's authority of our own accord every time we sin. And Jeremiah tells us that where spiritual



adultery has occurred, we cannot return to the Lord. Our moral defilement and shame are real.

Jeremiah 3:1 uses the language of Deuteronomy 24 to describe the problem. “If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man’s wife, will he return to her? Would not that land be greatly polluted?” What’s his point? If it’s wrong for the Israelites in Deuteronomy 24 to ignore the defilement of adultery how much more is it wrong for a holy God? “You have played the whore with many lovers; and would you return to me? declares the LORD.” I will not compromise my holiness. I will not pollute my dwelling place.

Friends, what was impossible under the law, indeed what the law explicitly forbid on account of our sin, God has accomplished for us through Jesus! He came to earth to obey God on our behalf as the True Israel. Where we were faithless, he remained faithful. Faithful in life. Faithful in death. And through his life and death he has made a way for us to be forgiven and restored. His resurrection shouts as much!

Whether you are single or married, young or old, we all need to be reconciled, spiritually remarried, to the Lover of our souls. His name is Jesus. And if you’re willing to repent of your adultery, he stands ready and eager, with open arms of mercy, to bring you home. It’s the law in Deuteronomy 24 – there can be no remarriage after adultery – that makes the promise in Jeremiah 3:22-23 a monument to the wonder of God’s grace. “Return, O faithless sons; I will heal your faithlessness. “Behold, we come to you, for you are the LORD our God. Truly the hills are a delusion, the orgies on the mountains. Truly in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel.”

As you guard our witness to the gospel by guarding the covenant of marriage, do not hope in your faithfulness friend. Hope in the Lord. Hope in the Lord as you persevere in a difficult marriage for Jesus’ sake. Hope in the Lord as you counsel a friend or family member in a difficult marriage for Jesus’ sake. Hope in the Lord as you prepare for marriage or navigate the joys of a healthy marriage for Jesus’ sake. Hope in Jesus’ power to redeem, to restore, and to keep you faithful to the end.

CONCLUSION

The gospel to which marriage bears witness is the gospel that gives us hope for marriage. And it’s the same gospel that reminds us our marriage relationships are not ultimate. When the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. When the Bridegroom



returns, Christian, you will be part of his spotless bride, whether you had the spouse you wanted in this life or not.

So we pursue marriage, and work on our marriage, and help one another remain faithful to our spouses. But don't load human marriage with the weight of your eternal joy – whether you're already married or aspire to be married. And don't believe the lie that if you're not happily married in this life, you're missing out.

Friend, your greatest joy, the only eternal joy, will never be found in the spouse next to you. It will forever be found in knowing and loving Jesus. You were not, from the standpoint of eternity, made for them. You were made for him. So don't ask your spouse to do for you what only Jesus can do. Come what may, hold fast to him.

Here are a few practical ways we can do that as a church, whether you're single or married. First, regularly pray for married couples in our midst and those preparing for marriage. Second, ask married couples pointed questions about the health of their relationship. Where are you growing? Where are you struggling? Where do you see a need for God's help?

Third, if you're not yet married but aspire to marriage, prepare now to be a faithful spouse by practicing faithfulness in every area of life. Loyalty in relationships doesn't show up at the altar. It's learned (or lost) in all sorts of other realms of life. Learn to be a faithful friend or sibling. If you're on a sports team, be a faithful teammate. If you're working a job, be a faithful employee. Learn to make commitments and stick to them, even if a seemingly better option surfaces at the last minute.

Finally, if someone tells you they are considering divorce and claims to be a Christian, exhort them to submit their thoughts and desires to the authority of God's Word. Don't stop with, "That's hard. I'll be praying for you," because you're afraid of losing the relationship. Speak the truth in love and trust the Lord with the results. If they're disobeying the Lord, tell them. Point them to the power of the gospel. Don't be afraid to tell them things you think they probably already know or have heard before.

And because the situations we wind up in on account of sin can get really complicated, don't hesitate to ask for help. Talk to your Community Group Leader. Talk to one of our pastors. And make sure your motive isn't to win them to your side, but to get real help to understand and apply God's Word. It doesn't matter ultimately what you think or I think. What matters is what God has said.



May we be that kind of church family, brothers and sisters. For the glory of the Bridegroom and the beauty of the bride, guard the gospel by guarding marriage. Let's ask for the Spirit's help.