

“Divorces . . . and Marries Another” (Luke 16:16–18)

July 28, 2019

Brian Watson

Do any of you have one of those page-a-day calendars? You know the kind: each day, there’s a page with today’s date and some kind of fact, an inspirational quote, or a different picture. Each day, you tear off a new page and see something new. I once saw one of these calendars that had a different Bible verse for each day of the year. Each day, you tear off another page and read another Bible verse. On one day, July 3 to be exact, this calendar had the following Scripture passage, quoted from the King James Version: “If you therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine.” That sounds good. If you worship God, you’ll have everything! But there’s a problem. That verse isn’t quoting God. It’s Luke 4:7, where Satan is tempting Jesus to worship him in the wilderness. Satan lies to Jesus and says, “If you worship me, I’ll give you everything.” Context matters.

While that may be an obvious example of ripping a verse out of context, the fact is that many people do that, though often in more subtle ways. Various people do that with controversial issues. For example, take the issue of immigration and our nation’s southern border. Some people will quote a passage from Leviticus, where God tells the Israelites to love the sojourners and to treat them as natives (Lev. 19:33–34). I guess they mean that we should accept every immigrant who comes to our country. Others may appeal to Nehemiah, in which the wall around Jerusalem is rebuilt, or Ezra, in which the Israelite men were told to “Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives” (Ezra 10:11).¹ Their point is that there is nothing wrong with walls and drawing boundaries. People once did this with the issue of slavery: they quoted verses from the Bible against slavery and to support slavery.

The fact that people have used the Bible to support opposing views raises some important questions. Is the Bible really so confused that it teaches contradictory messages? Then it can’t possibly be the word of God. Or perhaps the problem isn’t with the Bible, but with its interpreters. Perhaps the Bible is consistent, but we tend to interpret it wrongly.

At this church, we believe firmly that the Bible is God’s word, and that because God is true and doesn’t lie, and because he doesn’t change, the overall message of the Bible is consistent. However, the Bible is a collection of books written over many centuries. It’s a long

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

book. And it takes a lot of time, effort, and study to understand its message. Taking one verse out of context can actually lead to a misunderstanding of God's word. If we take one verse out of context, we may walk away thinking we're understanding God's will for us when we're actually siding with the devil. That's why I take time to explain the Bible, and to explain context. I want to make sure that we understand what God is actually saying to us.

Lately, we've been studying the Gospel of Luke to understand Jesus, the Son of God. And today, we come to a short passage that is a bit hard to understand. If we read one of these verses out of context, we might walk away with a very wrong view of one controversial issue. So, I'm going to give us a whole-Bible context for that one issue.

Today, we're in Luke 16. Two weeks ago, I preached on the first fifteen verses of the chapter, which seem to belong together. In those verses, Jesus teaches that we should use the resources that God gives to us wisely. Specifically, he teaches that we should use our money for God's purposes. Luke tells us that when the Pharisees, a group of Jewish religious leaders, heard this teaching from Jesus, they ridiculed him because they were secretly "lovers of money" (Luke 16:14). They didn't want to be told that they had to be generous, that all the wealth they had was from God. And Jesus said that God knows their hearts and that what is exalted among men is an abomination to God (Luke 16:15).

Later in this chapter, Jesus will teach a famous parable about an unnamed rich man and a poor man named Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). The rich man ignored the plight of Lazarus. When both men die, they end up in different places: Lazarus is with God in heaven and the rich man suffers condemnation in what we could call hell. Here is an example of a man who didn't use his wealth to honor God, because he trusted in his money and not in God. And Jesus suggests that this wealthy man didn't understand the Old Testament, what he calls "Moses and the prophets." If this man knew the Hebrew Bible and believed its message, he would have lived differently.

Between those two passages are the following verses. At first, it's hard to understand why they're here. But I think if we read them in context, we see that Jesus is teaching that God's word is consistent, and that if we take the whole of God's word together, we should see that what Jesus teaches is consistent with the Old Testament. The Jews of his day should have realized that he was the Christ, the anointed King that the Old Testament promised would come.

Without further ado, let's read Luke 16:16–18:

¹⁶“The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. ¹⁷ But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.

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

Let’s break down those three verses. In verse 16, Jesus seems to contrast the period prior to his ministry with what happens in his ministry. The Law and the Prophets are two portions of the Old Testament. The third part of the Old Testament, according to the original arrangement of the books, was known as “the Writings.” Jesus is saying the era of the Old Testament extended to John the Baptist, the one who announced that the Christ was coming. John the Baptist told people to prepare for the coming of the King by turning away from their sins and turning back to God. Since then, Jesus says, the good news, or, “the gospel,” of the kingdom of God is preached. The ESV says “and everyone forces his way into it.” I think the alternate translation, which you can see in the footnote, is right: “everyone is forcefully urged into it.” Obviously, not everyone wants to be part of the God’s kingdom, at least not on God’s terms. But Jesus did tell his disciples to go throughout the world and passionately urge people to turn to the King.

So, it seems that Jesus is contrasting the Old Testament era with the New Testament era. There are some differences, to be sure. The Old Testament prepares the way for Jesus. It looks forward to him, it anticipates his coming, it foreshadows his ministry in many ways. Yet Jesus knows that people might misunderstand what he’s saying. They may think that the old era is entirely different than the new one, as if God has changed his mind. So, in verse 17, he says that it would be easier for all of creation to pass away than for the tiniest part of the Old Testament to become “void,” to be changed or to be thrown away. No, everything in the Old Testament was intentional. Everything had its purpose. The Law, another way of referring to the Old Testament, is all about Jesus in some way or another, and Jesus came to fulfill the Law (Matt. 5:17–18). He obeyed the Law perfectly, and all the Law points to what he came to accomplish.

Now, in verse 18, Jesus very suddenly pivots to talk about marriage and divorce. And this is where we really need to pay attention to context. If we read only this one verse, we may think that everyone who has divorced and remarried has sinned and is still living in sin. But, as we’ll see, that’s not true. I think what Jesus is doing is giving us a test case for the consistency of the Bible’s teaching. What the Bible says about marriage and divorce is very consistent, just as what the Bible teaches about money, wealth, and charity is very consistent.

So, let's take a tour of the Bible's teaching on marriage. In the very beginning of the Bible, we see that God made men and women to be united in marriage. The first chapter of the Bible says that God made men and women in his image and likeness (see Gen. 1:26–28). Both men and women are meant to reflect God's glory, to represent him on earth, to serve him by ruling over the world according to his terms, to love him and obey him as perfect children would love and obey a perfect father. There is a suggestion even in the first chapter of the Bible that men and women complement each other. In Genesis 1, we see other complementary pairs: heavens and earth, light and darkness, water and sky, land and sea. In the same way, men and women are meant to go together, to complement each other, to correspond to each other.

In Genesis 2, we see that God created the first man, Adam, and then created a woman, Eve, to complement him. When Adam sees Eve, he says, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23). Then, we're told this: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Adam and Eve were made for each other, and they were married in the garden of Eden. Think about this: before there is any form of human government, there is marriage. Before there is technology, there is marriage. And don't miss the most obvious point: God created marriage. God invented this institution. This is not the product of tradition, or some primitive society. It comes from God. And that's important to know because there are people who don't believe marriage is good or necessary. Recently, there was an article in *The Atlantic* arguing that marriage isn't necessarily good.² The article notes that today in America, about half of people over the age of 18 are married. In 1960, 72 percent of Americans of that age were married. When people do marry, it is often later. Of course, many couples choose not to marry at all. But we should see that marriage is God's plan, and that it is the basic building block of society. That's why two of the Ten Commandments deal with marriage and family. The fifth commandment instructs us to honor parents, and the seventh commandment prohibits adultery (Exod. 20: 12, 14).

I'm not going to speak about singleness today, but I feel like I need to interject a footnote here. The Bible doesn't teach that everyone must be married. The New Testament honors the importance of those who remain single. Single Christians can be even more devoted to God in some ways. But, still, marriage is a good gift. God's plan for sex and having children is

² Mandy Len Catron, "What You Lose When You Gain a Spouse: What If Marriage Is Not the Social Good That So Many Believe and Want It to Be?" *The Atlantic*, July 2, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2019/07/case-against-marriage/591973>.

intimately connected with marriage: People shouldn't have sex and have children outside of marriage. Of course, any sin can be forgiven by God, but still, God's plan is that sex should occur within marriage, that raising children should involve man and woman, father and mother, husband and wife.

Marriage is so important that there are other laws in the Old Testament about marriage. To understand the Jewish perspective on divorce and remarriage, however, we should look at just two of those laws. The first one is a bit surprising, but it factored into Jewish understanding of marriage and divorce. Let's look at Exodus 21:7–11:

⁷ When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. ⁸ If she does not please her master, who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has broken faith with her. ⁹ If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. ¹⁰ If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. ¹¹ And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money.

This passage is strange to modern ears, because it talks about slavery and the possibility of a man marrying multiple wives. I can't get into the issue of slavery today, except to say that the Bible regulated the institution of slavery; the Bible doesn't command slavery. Slavery was not part of God's initial plan for humanity. Also, the slavery of the Old Testament was very different from the slavery in America. In Israel, people who were in debt could sell themselves as slaves, slaves were supposed to be treated well, and they could be freed. Obviously, that wasn't the case in America. And polygamy was also not part of God's plan: we already saw that one man and one woman were meant to be united in marriage.

So, with that qualification, look at what the passage says about marriage. It says that a female servant, if she is regarded as a wife, is required to have food, clothing, and "marital rights," which were regarded as "conjugal rights." If a man would not give his female slave these things, she was not bound to him as a wife. She could be set free, with the understanding that she could marry another man.

While the passage is about a female slave, we shouldn't write it off. If a female slave who was a wife of a man was to be given food, clothing, and affection, how much more should a free woman or a free man be given these things! Judaism understood that the failure to provide material support and appropriate affection was grounds for divorce.

The other law regarding marriage and divorce is Deuteronomy 24:1–4:

¹ “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, ² and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife, ³ 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, ⁴ then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

This law imagines a scenario in which a man has found something “indecent” in a woman. The Hebrew literally says that a man has found “the nakedness of a thing” in the woman, which is a way of referring to sexual immorality. The law doesn’t command that a man divorce his wife if she has committed adultery, but it says that in the case where a woman has committed some sexual sin and a man divorces her, he should do it in the following way. If she marries another man, and if that man divorces her or dies, she shouldn’t go back to her first husband. I suppose the reason is that she has made a mockery of marriage by committing adultery and having serial husbands, and that is why she is called “defiled.” The important thing to see here is that the Bible acknowledges that there is another ground for divorce: sexual immorality, namely adultery.

By the time of Jesus, many centuries later, there were two different interpretations of this passage. One rabbi, named Shammai, interpreted the passage in the way that I just did. This law only allows divorce in the case of sexual immorality, when someone has violated their marriage vows. Another rabbi, Hillel, read the law to mean that a man could divorce his wife for “any cause.” I think that’s the wrong reading of the passage, but it became the most popular way of reading it.³ Josephus, a Jewish historian writing at the end of the first century AD, refers to this when he writes, “He that desires to be divorced from his wife for any cause whatsoever (and many such causes happen among men), let him in writing give assurance that he will never use her as his wife any more.”⁴

³ For this sermon, I’m drawing heavily on information presented by David Instone-Brewer in *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church: Biblical Solutions for Pastoral Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

⁴ Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* 4.253, ed. and trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 120.

Jesus was asked about these different interpretations of the Deuteronomy 24. We see this in Matthew 19. I'll read verses 1–9:

¹ Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. ² And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

³ And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” ⁴ He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? ⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” ⁷ They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” ⁸ 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. ⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

When the Pharisees come to Jesus, they are asking him to weigh in on the “any cause” reading of Deuteronomy 24. They are saying, more or less, “Who is right? Is Hillel right that we can divorce for any reason whatsoever? Or is Shammai right in saying that Deuteronomy 24 is only about sexual immorality?” Jesus goes back to Genesis, saying that God’s definition of marriage is found there. Notice how Jesus says that “he who created” man and woman, “said” Genesis 2:24. This is another way of seeing that Jesus regarded the Old Testament not as man’s word about God, but God’s word written through man.

Jesus says that man and woman are supposed to be united, and that their union should not be separated. However, he acknowledges that we are sinful, that we have hard hearts. Therefore, he says that divorce is legitimate in the case of sexual immorality. In other words, he says that Shammai was correct.

Now, Jesus is only looking at Deuteronomy 24 here. If he were asked specifically about Exodus 21, he probably would have said that a husband who fails to provide for his wife has failed his marriage vows, and that is another ground for divorce. The apostle Paul, writing in 1 Corinthians 7 (see in particular verses 10–16), says that if a Christian is married to a non-Christian, and that non-Christian abandons the Christian, then divorce is allowable. The person who was abandoned may be divorced and there is no reason to believe that person cannot remarry.

So, the Bible clearly states that divorce is allowed in the case of sexual immorality and at least one form of abandonment. The Bible doesn't command people to get divorced in those cases, but there is a recognition that if one spouse cheats on the other, it is very hard to move forward. The one who is wronged should forgive, and, if possible, should try to reconcile with the unfaithful spouse. But perhaps the unfaithful spouse doesn't want to be reconciled. Similarly, in today's society, with our no-fault divorce laws, it is easy for one person to want out of the marriage. If one spouse wants to abandon the other, there's nothing that the spouse who wants to stay in the marriage can do to change the other's heart. In these cases, God has allowed divorce. And when a person has divorced, the marriage is terminated, and the person is free to remarry.

The trickier issues of interpretation deal with such things as abuse. Can a wife who is being abused by her husband divorce him? Obviously, this is legal in America. But is this right in the eyes of God? I think there's a great case to be made that an abusive husband violates his marriage vows, and if he is unrepentant, the wife can legitimately divorce him. Married people shouldn't be quick to divorce. We should pray for reconciliation. We should forgive when people seek forgiveness. But we cannot change another person's heart. And I don't think God intends to trap people in miserable situations that are not of their own making.

If we read the Bible carefully, we see that there is a consistent message about marriage and divorce. If we read only Luke 16:18, we would be led to think that divorce is always wrong, and that remarriage is never allowed. And that is why we must read the Bible as one whole story, and we must not read passages in isolation. God didn't only give us the Gospel of Luke. He gave us the other 65 books of the Bible, too.

Christians are not members of the old covenant, the one that God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. Therefore, Christians are not bound by the terms of that covenant. We are not bound by the Law. The law was given to a particular nation in a particular historical time frame. It was given to Israel, which was supposed to be a theocracy, not a democracy. Therefore, we can't simply translate the Old Testament Law to modern governments, which is why cherry-picking a few verses from the Old Testament and applying them to America is wrong. The Law was given to Israel before the coming of Jesus. Therefore, Christians are not bound to follow all the ceremonial laws regarding sacrifices and proper worship. All those laws foreshadow the only true sacrifice for sin, Jesus, who is not only the Lamb of God, but the true High Priest and the true temple.

However, we should look to the Old Testament for ethical principles. And when we see the principles that undergird the Law, we find that these ethical principles are applied consistently in the New Testament. Making sense of the Law takes work. It takes a thorough knowledge of the Bible. It takes wisdom and knowledge. It takes the hard work of thinking carefully. Most people don't have that kind of knowledge or wisdom, and a lot of us are very lazy intellectually. We don't like to think long and hard about complex issues. That's why people often adopt fundamentalistic attitudes, whether they're Christians or atheists. There are religious fundamentalists and atheistic fundamentalists. There are right-wing and left-wing fundamentalists, conservative and liberal fundamentalists. What is common to both is a lack of thought and instead of carefully applying principles, they both want a list of right and wrong things. But that's not what God has given us. He wants us to read the Bible, to think, to pray, and to come together to reason.

When we do these things, we see that divorce and remarriage are not always wrong. Divorce is always the result of sin, but it is not always sinful. And part of the reason why we know this is because God himself was a divorcee. In the Old Testament, God is said to be the husband of Israel (Isa. 54:5). Many theologians believe that God "married" Israel at Mount Sinai, where made a covenant with them, after redeeming them out of slavery in Egypt. But Israel cheated on God by worshiping other gods.

In Jeremiah 3, both the divided kingdoms of Israel (the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judea) were said to have committed adultery against God. This is Jeremiah 3:6–10:

⁶The LORD said to me in the days of King Josiah: "Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and there played the whore?" ⁷And I thought, 'After she has done all this she will return to me,' but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it. ⁸She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce. Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore. ⁹Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree. ¹⁰Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the LORD."

God wrote Israel a "decree of divorce." God divorced Israel because she was unfaithful. God did not sin in divorcing Israel. This metaphorical divorce was the result of Israel's sin. Much of the

material I've presented in today's sermon is presented by David Instone-Brewer, who has written two books on the subject of divorce and remarriage in the Bible. He writes this:

Thus the Old Testament prophets describe God as a divorcee, and when you put together all the references, you find a clear and unanimous picture. God had married Israel at Mount Sinai in the wilderness, then brought his bride across the threshold of the Jordan into Palestine. There he gave her food (milk and honey) and wool for clothes, and of course he loved her and was faithful to her. In Palestine, however, Israel was introduced to many other gods and started to worship them, offering them sacrifices of food and ornaments. The prophets described this worship of other gods and spiritual adultery.⁵

That was what happened with Israel, but it's really our story, too. God made us to have a special relationship with him, marked by faithfulness. And we have gone and worshiped other gods. We've made created things more important to us than the Creator. We've spent our love, time, energy, and money on many other things and not on God. We've cheated on him. And God has every right to divorce us forever, to consign us to condemnation and hell.

But God is amazing. He seeks after unfaithful people. He promised Israel that he would one day remarry faithless people (Isa. 54:6–8; 62:4–5). He did that by sending his Son, Jesus, into the world. Jesus is the only one who never cheated on God. He is the only one who was perfectly faithful, never failing to love, obey, and worship God the Father. And yet Jesus was cut off from the land of the living. He was treated like the worst of criminals, suffering under torture and dying on the cross. He also bore God's holy, righteous wrath against sin. He did this so that all who trust in Jesus would be forgiven of sin, adopted into God's family, and brought into the church, the bride of Christ.

Marriage is important because it was designed to reflect the true marriage of God and his people. The apostle Paul says that marriage "refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32; see Eph. 5:22–33 for context). For that reason, we shouldn't take marriage lightly. But marriage between humans isn't ultimate. The true marriage, the one that will last forever, is between Jesus and Christians. If you aren't part of that marriage, I urge you to confess your sins to God and put your trust in Jesus. I would love to talk with you more about what that would look like in your life. If you are a Christian, then do marriage on God's terms. Wives, respect and submit to your husbands. Husbands, love and care for your wives, the way that Jesus loves his church. If you have failed in marriage, know that Jesus stands ready to forgive you. That doesn't mean we have

⁵ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*, 38.

a license to sin, but it does mean that there is hope for sinners who have failed at marriage. It's better to fail at human marriage and be part of the true, eternal marriage, than to have a happy marriage now and be divorced from God forever.