

A New Covenant:  
Biblical Singleness, Marriage, Divorce, and Sexual Purity  
Presentation 5: Why God Hates Divorce

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We have come to the most dangerous place in our series: “A New Covenant: Biblical Singleness, Marriage, Divorce, and Sexual Purity.” In this fifth presentation, we enter upon a study of the Bible’s teaching and the practice of the Seventh-day Adventist Church with reference to divorce.

We begin with Malachi 2:13-16, margin reading (note: Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures from the English Standard Version):

You cover the Lord’s altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. But you say, ‘Why does he not?’ Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. For the Lord, the God of Israel, says that he hates divorce, and him who covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.

God is unsparing when it comes to divorce. Why aren’t your prayers being answered as you wish? He asks. You have a problem, Israel, with marital unfaithfulness.

This text pictures the husband as the unfaithful partner and the wife as the faithful. She is your companion, more, the wife of your covenant, God points out. No one forced you to marry; it was your free choice. You united with her. Then, you were unfaithful to her. You broke the covenant you entered into with her and with Me (God).

God made two one flesh; there was three-way consent—husband, wife, God. He gave His Spirit. He gave all that was needed for this new family unit to witness for His kingdom. Unfaithfulness to the marriage vow is here described as treachery. God calls the husband to discern what spirit he is of. God says that He hates “putting away,” that is, He “hates divorce.”

To be unfaithful to one's spouse in the Bible is classed alongside to kill (Exodus 20:13, 14). On that intense note, let's describe where we are going today. In particular, we will deal with definitions of marriage, divorce, adultery, sexual immorality, see how different choices relate to each other, discuss biblical grounds for divorce, and offer several reasons not to divorce.

### **What is Divorce?**

We need definitions. First, what is marriage?

Marriage is part of the design by the Creator of men and women so that when they choose to enter covenant with God and each other, their union stands as a revelation to themselves and to others of what the kingdom of God is like. When a man and a woman enter into biblical marriage, they enter into the creation of something new in the one world where sin has wrought continuous and unsparing devastation. Two come together and voluntarily commit themselves to other-serving each other in particular. Christian marriage is a beachhead in a revolted world. God is invading, sending light into darkness.

Christian marriage, like Jesus in certain respects, is incarnational. Two become one flesh. The Bible, speaking of Jesus, says that "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14). Hebrews chapter one calls Jesus the ultimate revelation of God to man, and He is. Marriage is also incarnational. Jesus came down into this dark world and walked in it in human flesh. Husband with wife also step down from the wedding platform and walk in it in human flesh. Biblical marriage is evidence of the kingdom realized—an invasion. In a marriage, not only God, but betrothed, join together and something new and beautiful in the world is created. Dare we say it: Man and God cooperate together in creation; an adventure begins.

We may now consider divorce. Whereas biblical marriage is an act of creation, divorce is an act of destruction; it is a separation of what God had joined together. It uncreates, retreats, withdraws, gives up, concedes. It is the abandonment of other-serving for self-serving. This is not the whole picture; there are occasions where one may have biblical grounds for divorce. However, having grounds for and engaging in divorce are two different things.

The main words for divorce used in the Tanakh (Old Testament), have to do with releasing or departing, but we will limit our study mostly to the New Testament. There, we have two words. One is *apoluo*. The root *luo* means to “loose” or “destroy.” The prefix *apo* means “from, away from, to separate.” In Matthew 1:19 Joseph is ready to “put away,” (*apoluo*) Mary privately. Barabbas is released (*apoluo*) instead of Jesus (Matthew 27:26). This word is also at the center of most New Testament passages concerning divorce (Matthew 5:31, 32; 19:3, 7, 8, 9; Mark 10:2, 4, 11, 12; Luke 16:18).

The other word is *apostasion*, a word closely related to our English word, “apostasy.” *Stasy* comes from “stasis” or “to stand,” and again, *apo* is the preposition meaning “from, away from, separation.” The word *apostasion* means to “stand away from,” or “something that separates” (Matthew 5:31; 19:7; Mark 10:4). We will study the Matthew passages in a few minutes.

### **Handout**

Now, to our handout. What we have here is more or less a simple “X” figure. We start with the slash that runs from the bottom left side. This position represents “Biblical Marriage.” Following that slash to the top right side, you see the words “Adultery / *Porneia*.” Each end of

the line is polar opposite to the other end (biblical marriage versus adultery / *porneia*). This line represents voluntary choices made involving two.

Then there is the opposite line, or the backslash. We start with the upper left end of the line and there you see “Biblical Singleness.” At the opposite end, the lower right corner, you see “Adultery in the heart.” The line between these two points represents voluntary choices made by one person.

Notice the dashed vertical line in the center, dividing the whole graphic into two fields. The left represents choices made in the realm of converted behavior; the right half of the graphic represents choices made that reflect unconverted behavior. Furthermore, the left half represents other-serving behavior, the right, self-serving.

Because God does not force Himself or His truth upon us, we are free at any time to choose to move from one position on this graphic to another. All are somewhere on this chart.

Every Christian should always be on the left side of the line—the side labeled “converted behavior.” When we are on this side, we are witnessing to fallen and unfallen beings for God. Remember, Revelation 12:11 points out that the satanic accuser is overcome by not only the blood of the Lamb Jesus, but by the word of our testimony, our witness. Jesus working in our lives means the manifestation of overcoming behavior in our lives. The vindication of God’s character happens when our lives are consonant with a biblical faith in Christ. If we live at present in what has been called “the sealing time” (Revelation 7:1-3; 14:1-5; 22:11, 12), and if the object of this time is that we become settled into Jesus and His truth so that we cannot be moved, then, at present, we should, with increasing strength, be becoming confirmed in other-

serving, in converted behavior, in living by every word, every command, every directive and help that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3).

In contrast, those who by their actions are demonstrating unconverted behavior, who are backsliding into self-service, are slipping over onto the right side of this line. On this side, one is choosing self-destructive behavior, and sending a satanic message and witness into this world. Everything on this side of the line means scarring, cheapening, degenerating. So long as one's free choice remains, he may be able to find his way back to God's side, but at extraordinary cost to himself, his wife, his children, his friends, his church, and his God. The witness on the right side of this line destroys any church's Christian and evangelistic credibility in the community; on the left side, enhances it.

### **Grounds for Divorce**

Are there any legitimate moral grounds for divorce? There are. All have free will, and some will waver in their commitment to other-serving. They may choose to depart from their commitment to God and to their spouse. Each person remains a free agent. God does not take away our free will; we will have free will for eternity. In this life, we learn to keep our free will on God's side. The marriage commitment can be an enormously helpful aid in training oneself in that lesson. Nevertheless, there are situations in which one may legitimately choose to divorce another.

### **Adultery**

The first reason we will consider, is adultery. What is adultery? Adultery is when someone chooses to violate a marriage covenant. Remember, the marriage covenant is entered



into by husband, wife, and God. At the point of marriage, all three are faithful participants and members in the covenant. They enter into covenant with God; they do not marry Him per se. Their agreement to be faithful to each other is entered into before Him and with Him and the union is blessed by Him.





One spouse may choose to be unfaithful to his marriage covenant, and to withdraw from the covenant. If he engages in sexual union with a partner not his spouse, he *de facto* violates his covenant, and is unfaithful both to his spouse and to God. Likewise, adultery is committed when one who is not bound in covenant with another voluntarily engages in sexual union with one who is.

### Porneia

Now, let's talk about *porneia* and fornication. A dictionary entry on fornication states that The origin of the word derives from Latin. The word *fornix* means 'an archway' or 'vault' and it became a common euphemism for a brothel as prostitutes could be solicited in the vaults beneath Rome. More directly, *fornicatio* means 'done in the archway'; thus it originally referred to prostitution. The first recorded use of the noun in its modern meaning was in 1303 AD, with the verb fornicate first recorded around 250 years later.



The common meaning of fornication today is the sexual union of two persons with each other who are not married to each other. However, the actual term used in the Bible is *porneia*. Older versions translate this as "fornication," but newer usually give the translation "sexual immorality." "Fornication" sounds quite specific, "sexual immorality," rather generic. In fact, *Porneia* is a very general word, covering a variety of immoral behaviors. It also means "sexual perversions." Examples of *porneia* include

-  sexual union between two persons not married to each other
-  incest

-  child sexual abuse
-  homosexual practices
-  sexual violence
-  other sexual perversions

### Other Reasons

The Seventh-day Adventist Church recognizes a small number of additional reasons for divorce as being legitimate:

-  abandonment by an unbelieving spouse
-  physical violence

A divorce obtained in order to bring personal safety from a physically abusive spouse does not confer grounds for remarriage. There may be other circumstances which could confer grounds for divorce but which are not particularly “unfaithfulness to the marriage vow.” A divorce resulting from such factors does not give either one the scriptural right to remarry, unless in the meantime, the other party has remarried, committed adultery or fornication, or died. The *Church Manual* adds,

Should a member who has thus divorced remarry without these biblical grounds, he/she shall be removed from church membership; and the one whom he/she marries, if a member, shall also be removed from church membership (p. 206).

So, again, be very careful who you marry.

### **A Brief Study of Divorce in Matthew**

Let’s study. We begin at Matthew 5:31, 32:

It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Jesus here goes out of His way to quote from Deuteronomy 24:1. A divorce is effected when the husband writes a legal document of divorce. You might notice in 24:1 that the grounds for divorce are a bit vague, namely, “he has found some indecency in her.”

The *Etz Hayim*, a Torah with commentary published by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, referring to this verse says,

Failing to please him refers to any conduct the husband finds intolerable. A husband could divorce his wife for any reason, however subjective (*Etz Hayim*, commentary on Deuteronomy 24:1, pp. 1127, 1128).

A look at divorce trends among observant Jews shows that they are high, but not so high as among Americans in general. This may be explained by high Jewish commitment to family. In any case, Jesus intentionally quotes from Torah where the grounds for divorce are broad, and imposes a much stronger requirement. The only biblical ground for divorce (besides adultery), He says, is *porneia* (“sexual immorality”).

In Matthew 19:3-9 Jesus is approached by the Pharisees. The object, of course, is to get Jesus “on the record” in disagreement with Moses. Jesus confirms what He had said in Matthew five, but here offers His reasoning: Since God instituted marriage man has no business divorcing lightly. Divorce was permitted because of the hardness of hearts, but from the beginning it was not so. Think about it. Can you recall even one divorce in the Book of Genesis? And so, some 4,000 years later, Jesus raises the bar far above that offered in Deuteronomy. Only sexual immorality is permitted as a sufficient ground.

In Matthew five, He proceeds to say that if a woman is divorced on illegitimate grounds, the husband causes her to commit adultery. In Matthew 19:9 He says that “Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

When a woman has been divorced without biblical grounds, and, in what she may regard as virtual necessity, she remarries without biblical grounds, the husband who divorced her has set up a situation where her remarriage in God's eyes is actually not a biblical marriage. It is adultery. Likewise, the one who marries a divorced person, who does not have biblical grounds for being divorced, also commits adultery. Remember, adultery is a violation of the covenant between husband and wife and God. If there were no biblical grounds for divorce, then that same covenant was still current. (We will address this further in the next presentation.)

### **Reasons Not to Divorce**

We have invested some energy today in better understanding what divorce is and why God hates it. But we would be mistaken if we did not spend a portion of our worship on reasons *not* to divorce. There are many, including the following:

- ◆ Because you profess to be a Christian and you have entered into a covenant with your spouse and with God to be faithful. At the top of your list of persons whom you are other-serving, above your spouse and in the number one position, is God. The high standards of the church that Jesus raised up, and even God's own good name are at stake in what you do.
- ◆ The emotional wreckage from a divorce, when all is done, may be so destructive to you personally that your religious experience may fail and you may not be prepared for Jesus' Second Coming.
- ◆ You entered into covenant for a life-long union—not until it became less interesting to you. One who divorces sends the message that Marriage is neither Sacred nor Holy. He teaches by example that commitments can be broken. Christians are here to witness to faithfulness not unfaithfulness.
- ◆ The time that you have already invested in the relationship is a good reason to rethink divorce. You have spent years growing accustomed to your partner's way of life, likes, dislikes, habits, and temperament. Any new relationship and possible marriage will take as

much time and effort. Are things really so bad that you're willing to throw all of this away for another relationship that may or may not turn out the same? A replacement marriage is even more likely to end in divorce. Most people unconsciously seem to seek out someone similar to their first spouse. Years invested in that person can never be recovered. You may say it will work if I have a different spouse, but the real question is, will there be a different you? If there really is, then you will already be fighting to save your *present* marriage.

◆ How can you begin to calculate the emotional destruction that divorce causes to children? Anger and resentments are born that poison body, mind and spirit, and which are likely to affect individuals for the rest of their lives. But children with married parents are less prone to engage in risky behavior such as premarital sex, substance abuse, delinquency and suicide. Parents also provide an invaluable example for how children can experience a healthy future marriage. Children of non-divorced parents suffer less abuse and neglect, have better health, enjoy higher economic security, and do better in school.

◆ Divorce is extremely costly in material terms. Legal fees, child support, alimony/palimony and different living arrangements empty bank accounts quickly. But married couples tend to make more informed and less risky investment decisions. With another person in the relationship, there is more accountability, and spending decisions are made more responsibly.

◆ For women, marriage is the safest relationship, compared to couples living in sin, where rates of physical aggression are three times higher.

◆ United States divorce rates for first, second, and third marriages are 50% percent failure of first marriages, 67% failure of second, and 74% failure of third marriages (According to Jennifer Baker of the Forest Institute of Professional Psychology in Springfield, Missouri, source: <http://www.divorcerate.org/> accessed 2010-03-21 02:54Z.)

### **Conclusion**

Why does God hate divorce? Because it is so indescribably destructive. It is the antithesis of His ways. It is the opposite of how He treats us, and it is the opposite of how He would have us treat us. Are there situations in which one may find himself with biblical grounds for divorce from his spouse? Yes. Has God had many occasions in which He could have abandoned us for

our unfaithfulness to Him? Doubtless. And yet, He stretched out His arms on that cold cross to embrace us, and pled for us before our Father. If we would be like Jesus, we should find a hundred ways to avoid engaging in divorce. People on your left hand and on your right are looking for hope; they want to see the gospel incarnated in human flesh. Couples, this is your opportunity. Those who are married, be role models and fight for your marriage!

Our next sermon will complete the topic of divorce with a look at exactly what is going on when one divorces and remarries with and without biblical grounds, and, if the church and the state disagree about marriage or about morality, what then? We will also consider closely exactly how our brother and sister believers in Jesus have chosen to address these issues, and how this local church must also address them. None of us can change the past. But what we can do, is, in the power of God's Holy Spirit, stand with Him on His side of the line that He has drawn and affirm the moral boundaries that He has marked out. We can stand on God's side of the question of biblical singleness, marriage, divorce, and sexual purity.

**Biographical note:** Larry Kirkpatrick has served in the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church since 1994. He is a pastor of the American West, having led churches in Nevada, Utah, California, and Idaho. His writings include the books *Real Grace for Real People*, and *Cleanse and Close*. Larry and wife Pamela presently serve in the Upper Columbia Conference, ministering to the [Bonners Ferry](#) and Clark Fork churches in the incomparable beauty of Northern Idaho.