

A New Covenant:  
Biblical Singleness, Marriage, Divorce, and Sexual Purity  
Presentation 6: Covenant and Divorce

A sermon by Larry Kirkpatrick  
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Sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among the saints. Let there be no filthiness or or foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God (Ephesians 5:3-5) (Unless otherwise mentioned, all Scriptures are presented from the English Standard Version.).

Sexual immorality should be so rare in the church that there is no reason even to mention it. It should be—entirely—absent. The church should be faithful to prevent it. When it occurs, it should be faithful to affirm God’s moral boundaries by honestly addressing situations of immoral behavior. If we permit the high standards of the church, and even more, the holiness of God’s name, to be damaged by our failure to be faithful, we will be guilty of sending souls to hell.

Today is the sixth presentation in our series, A New Covenant: Biblical Singleness, Marriage, Divorce, and Sexual Purity, and the last presentation on the topic of divorce. We are very near the end of this series.

We are going to get clarity about our marriages. Every adult here today will be able to understand from a Bible standpoint where they stand with God in terms of marriage and divorce. We will also understand precisely how our brother and sister believers world round have chosen to address these issues, and what is the duty of this congregation.

### **Not to Dig at Old Bones**

When we accepted God’s call and came to serve in pastoral ministry for this congregation at your request, I said that I was not coming here to dig up old bones. That is still true. So, why the interest in figuring out exactly how heaven sees our marriages? Many of us are unsure where we stand with God. We feel a vague separation; deep down we suspect that we are under His condemnation. How can we testify to His power to save, His mercy, His grace, if we are not sure

whether we are under that mercy and grace? We have a handout for you. Let's shine a light on our own situation, and if repentance is in order, to lay hold and make a fresh start.

The bottom-line purpose here is to affirm the moral boundaries that God has marked out, and, so much as is possible, to begin to make long-term repairs of the reputation and witness of this church in this community. We need to clear our slate with God so that His name is no longer reproached, and so that we may with renewed hope and vigor and power labor for the salvation of souls.

### **Diagramming Marriages**

We are passing to you a handout worksheet. We have devised a simple method to biblically diagram marriage and divorce sequences. You'll see the key to the symbols in the upper right. Let's work at diagram 1.

#### **Diagram 1 A: The Reclaimed Marriage**

The first example is perhaps the most hopeful. A man and a woman are married. From time to time we all do something that grates upon or irritates our spouse. This is more than that. In this example, there comes an occasion where the husband or the wife engages in an event of unfaithfulness. This is a precipitating event. This is represented by the diamond shape in the diagram. The top half of the diamond help us understand the event, and the bottom half tells us how it was resolved.

Let us say that there is an event of marital unfaithfulness. The marriage covenant is violated. So we can write a "V" into the top part of the diamond. When the covenant is violated, there is a faithful party and an unfaithful party. In the lines to the left and to the right of the

diamond you can mark that in. Let us say here that the husband was unfaithful. Place a “U” on the left line, and the wife was faithful, so write an “F” (for “faithful”) over the right side.

But in this case, the husband demonstrates to his wife’s satisfaction full and sincere repentance. So write “FSR” on the left underneath the “U” for “unfaithful.”

The faithful spouse is the one who determines to the best of her understanding whether the unfaithful spouse is demonstrating full and sincere repentance. What might full and sincere repentance look like? The following are suggested.

- ◆ Complete discontinuation of unfaithful behavior (i.e., sustained changed behavior)
- ◆ Complete discontinuation of attempts to justify one’s behavior
- ◆ Full acknowledgement that one has sinned against God and against one’s spouse
- ◆ Clear expression of one’s repentance and desire to continue in the marriage as a faithful partner

The wife chooses, in this case, to continue the marriage in spite of the husband’s unfaithfulness. So we can write in a “C” in the bottom half of the diamond for covered/forgiven. The marriage continues.

#### Diagram 1 B: Divorce With Biblical Grounds

Now go to the last part of diagram one and another scenario. Suppose that, as before, we have a husband and wife who are married, and the husband chooses unconverted behavior and engages in a choice of unfaithfulness. So we write in the same letters as before: “V” in the top of the diamond, “U” on the left, and “F” on the right side.

But unfortunately, in this case, the husband, so far as the wife can tell, does not come to full and sincere repentance over his role in the event of unfaithfulness. She has biblical grounds for divorce, and in this case, she chooses to divorce him. So you can write a “D” in the bottom half of the diamond.

At this point, you see that the couple is no longer a couple. Now look at the lines. A solid-line represents a continuing relationship with divine legitimacy, a dotted-line represents an improper relationship, or a status of not having grounds to remarry.

#### Diagram 2 A: Divorce and Remarriage With Biblical Grounds

Everything about the top part is the same as in our previous scenario, but here we extend that. In this case, the wife has grounds to remarry if she so desires. The man was unfaithful. He violated the marriage covenant. He does not have grounds to remarry—not until his former spouse remarries, or dies, or engages in *porneia*, or commits adultery with another person violating that person's marriage covenant. So his line becomes a dotted-line for now.

Now, let us say that sometime after the devastation of divorce comes a degree of healing. The woman meets a man who is biblically eligible to marry. They are then married. After she remarries, her former husband may, if he finds a woman who is biblically eligible to marry, remarry.

#### Diagram 2 B: The Unfaithful Removed From Membership

But sometimes it does not work out that way. Let us consider what happens when someone without biblical grounds remarries. Let us say that in this case, as before, the husband is unfaithful and the wife is faithful, and there is a divorce. He does not have biblical grounds to remarry. She does. But she chooses not to remarry. So long as she has neither remarried a biblically eligible person nor died, her former husband cannot remarry.

But in this scenario he does remarry without biblical grounds. This new relationship of his, before God, will be an immoral relationship. It is actually not a marriage; it is a case of sexual immorality. It is adultery. The woman he marries commits adultery with him.

Now wait, you say. The marriage was dissolved. Not so fast. The marriage was indeed dissolved but the covenant remains. The man was unfaithful. He violated the marriage covenant. The former spouse is still living; he may not remarry until she does. Any union he engages in without biblical grounds will be a further case of immorality on his part. Why is this? Here is how our brothers and sister round the world have stated this.

A spouse who has violated the marriage vow and who is divorced does not have the moral right to marry another while the spouse who has been faithful to the marriage vow still lives and remains unmarried and chaste (*Church Manual*, p. 206).

Remember that the marriage covenant is life-long in duration (see Romans 7:1-3). The unfaithful spouse violates the covenant but the faithful spouse, and God, who is always faithful, continue to live. Thus, one may violate the covenant, but just as God and the faithful spouse remain, the covenant remains. Unfaithfulness to the marriage vow does not dissolve the covenant; the covenant remains in effect until the faithful spouse dies or remarries. Thus, one who violates the covenant is still under obligation to God to remain biblically single until the former spouse dies or remarries.

But in our scenario, the unfaithful spouse remarries without biblical grounds. Thus, he is committing adultery still. The person who is his new spouse is also an adulterer. They are living in sin. Our brothers and sisters have spoken plainly to this situation:

The person who does so [remarries without biblical grounds] shall be removed from church membership. The person whom he/she marries, if a member, shall also be removed from church membership (*Church Manual*, p. 206).

### Diagram 3: State Recognized Marriage Versus Covenant Christian Understanding

Check our box closely here at diagram 3 A. You see two persons who are going to marry each other. But look closely. They are both squares, which on our chart, represent men. In the United State, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont, and New Hampshire, at present, recognize homosexual unions as marriage. Other countries which—at present—recognize same-sex unions, are Belgium, Canada, Netherlands, Norway, South Africa, Spain, and Sweden. More are on the way. Biblically, such unions are *porneia*, literally “sexual immorality” or “sexual perversion.”

We can see that in certain places the state recognizes sexual perversion as marriage. However, the covenant Christian understanding says that biblical marriage always involves one biblically eligible to marry male and one biblically eligible to marry female. We do not recognize same-sex unions as being biblical marriage. The dotted-lines in the right side of the diagram show that such a relationship is immoral.

By the way, we are not suggesting that the state should define marriage. God began the whole thing; He has defined it already. If an unbeliever wishes to engage in sexual immorality with another unbeliever, or even to call that union marriage, this is their own concern. I am a Christian disciple. My God has defined marriage for me. His moral boundaries are the moral boundaries I seek out and affirm in my life. I refuse to call such a relationship a marriage. This does not mean I hate homosexuals, or that I seek to treat them disrespectfully. I am living by a different moral system than they are, or than what the state may offer. God’s Word is a higher authority than the state, the Constitution, or civil law. There may be consequences for me if I live

in a way that does not mesh with the state, the Constitution, or the civil law, but as a disciple of Christ this is a given.

In any case, same-sex unions are not at the center of our topic. We mention this only to make a point: The state's understanding of marriage and the church's understanding of marriage are not always the same. With this in mind, we hasten to diagram four.

#### Diagram 4: Divorce With Biblical Grounds Versus the State System

You'll see that diagram 4 A is the same as diagram 1 B. Two are married, the husband chooses to engage in an unfaithfulness event; he violates his marriage vow. He is unfaithful, the wife is faithful. She does not see him as changing course. There is insufficient evidence of full and sincere repentance. She divorces him. In God's eyes, she has remained faithful and has biblical grounds to remarry. He is unfaithful, and does not, at present, have biblical grounds to remarry.

But now a look at the state system for dealing with marriage and divorce. Same scenario. But here the divorce is usually accomplished for reason of "irreconcilable differences." Write "IR" into the top half of the diamond. There is no judgment by the state regarding which spouse is unfaithful and which faithful. Write question marks on the lines to the left and right of the diamond. There is simply the dissolving of the marriage union as far as the state is concerned. Accordingly, as far as the state is concerned, at the conclusion of the divorce, each ex-spouse is at liberty to remarry or not.

Let's be clear. In God's eyes, the covenant remains. The vows are binding unless a spouse having biblical grounds chooses to divorce and to remarry. As Christian disciples we choose to accept that moral reality is as God defines it to be and not as man defines it. The state may say

that a man may marry a man, but the church understands that a man may not marry a man, and that, in God's eyes, such a union is sexual perversion. Just as we choose to see matters God's way rather than the state's way when it comes to so-called same-sex marriages, we must be consistent and also choose to see marriage and divorce the way that God sees them.

The consequences of this are that

- ◆ The initiation of a divorce is not when the legal papers are filed with the state, but when one spouse engages in an event of unfaithfulness toward the other spouse
- ◆ A divorce even when recognized by the state may or may not have biblical grounds
- ◆ A finalized state divorce does not necessarily in God's eyes grant one the right biblically to remarry
- ◆ The state may issue a marriage license for a sexual union that is immoral

What About Those Who Have Remarried Without Biblical Grounds?

But many of us have remarried, and some of us did not have biblical grounds. What then?

A little lady named Ellen G. White helps:

I advise that these unfortunate ones be left to God and their own consciences, and that the church shall not treat them as sinners until they have evidence that they are such in the sight of the holy God. He reads hearts as an open book. He will not judge as man judgeth (Ellen G. White, *Testimonies on Sexual Behavior, Adultery, and Divorce*, p. 216).

### **Are We Hitting This Point Too Hard?**

Someone might say, Don't you think, pastor that you are laying it on just a bit thick? I have spoken with many missionaries, and in some places on this globe the locals think nothing of stealing, or they have other moral cultural blind-spots. Naturally, we think that all who have cultural blind-spots must be those outside of our own culture, and that citizens of the United State in 2010 could not possibly have any cultural blind-spots. We are at the front edge of culture and human development.

Don't you believe it. We have our cultural moral blind-spots as others do. When I see half of marriage commitments made in this country failing, I am persuaded that failure of faithfulness in marriage may be our greatest cultural blind-spot. If we rightly apply the experience of the Laodicean church to ourselves as the end-time church, we understand that we have a problem with blindness to our own defects. But if we permit Him to, God will anoint our eyes that we may see (Revelation 3:17, 18).

### **Solutions**

We have spent much energy today understanding how marriages come apart. Let us return to the question of prevention. Remember, Jesus restored the creation view of marriage—a lifelong commitment. It is the Eden plan. In Eden there was no provision for divorce. Had they not sinned, Adam and Eve would never have died. We have no indication from the Bible that their marriage would ever have ended. Sabbath comes to us from a perfect world, and we—Seventh-day Adventists—are called to restore the breach in God's law concerning it. So does marriage, and so does God's call to us extend to the restoration of the Eden view of marriage.

Be that as it may, we cannot change the past. But if we are in the middle of a situation where—in God's eyes—we have not yet ended a marriage, what then? Check this: Divorce is not required even when there are biblical grounds; the faithful partner may choose to forgive and restore a repentant previously unfaithful partner. If he demonstrates full and sincere repentance, he can be taken back. If his heart is changed, renewed by grace, if he is truly a new person inside, then his behavior in the marriage will have a different character than it had before.

Hosea takes a wife who is unfaithful (Hosea 1:2; 2:2; 3:1). And yet, he wins her back at last. His story is paralleled to the unfaithfulness of Israel and God's hard dealings with her unfaithfulness. Nevertheless, there is a hopeful line throughout. Hear some samples.

Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us, he has struck us down, and he will bind us up (Hosea 6:1).

God is a Healer not only of disease but of hearts and of relationships. If a heart is pliable, He will heal it. Often we are not in a position to be healed until after we have made our own catastrophic decisions. Often He chooses not to intervene, in order that the consequences of our folly may educate us and bring us to Him at last on our bloodied knees.

Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you (Hosea 10:12).

Fallow ground is ground which has once been tilled, but now it lies waste and has gotten hard. It needs to be broken up and made soft again. If one will truly repent, God is ready to wash and nourish the ground.

I will allure her and bring her back into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. . . And in that day, declares the Lord, you will call me 'My Husband' [*ishi*], and no longer will you call me 'My Baal' (Hosea 2:14, 16).

*Ishi* means husband or man, *baali* means not only one's husband but one's master. In Hosea's case, Gomer was bought back out of slavery. But he does not want the marriage to be based on that past part of the relationship. Bought back, He will win Gomer over and leave those days behind.

I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily; he shall take root like trees of Lebanon (Hosea 14:4, 5).

We saw in the previous message that one of the primary words used for divorce refers to it as an apostasy. God stands ready to heal our apostasy. That means that He stands ready also to heal our marriages. Where is our heart? If an unfaithful spouse not only says he is sorry, but truly changes his ways, we should seek the restoration of the marriage. But nothing short of full and sincere repentance will do. The change must be absolutely persuasive.

Which brings us to this question: Is divorce really the answer to a troubled relationship—or is other-serving? If both spouses started off converted, cannot both spouses return to being converted? Before we are converted, we are primarily inclined to serve ourselves. After, we are primarily inclined to serve others. Which perspective will work best in a marriage? If you are converted you have Christ, and with Christ all things are possible (Philippians 4:13). Even a marriage. Is anything too hard for the Lord? Only the human heart. And yet, He is ready to heal.

### **Conclusion**

Little is more painful than a marriage gone bad. But a marriage between two converted people really cannot go bad unless someone's heart goes bad. God is ready to heal. If we are ready to receive His help, He will give it. If one will fully and sincerely repent, there is hope.

Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him, let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins (James 5:19, 20).

Next time we meet, part seven, Sexual Purity, and in June we tie-off with an opportunity to sign a covenant of congregational renewal.

**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.