

Theology at Home Podcast Script
Episode 7: What Did Jesus Really Think About Divorce?

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In the months that followed the revelation that my husband was a sex offender, I was told by my church that I could not get a divorce. His family also said I could not get a divorce, and I felt trapped in a marriage that I knew was not safe for my children. I knew I could never live with my husband but did not feel like I could get a divorce.

Hi, I'm Denise Pass with Seeing Deep Ministries, and welcome to Theology at Home, a space where we study theology and apply it to our lives so we can live it out in our homes, churches, and the surrounding culture.

Sometimes, without realizing it, theology has been handed down to us like a set of rules set in concrete, immovable, and we never think to examine these to see if what we are believing is biblical. Then, when devastating circumstances happen, you aren't prepared and don't know how to navigate traumatic events.

In 2007, the most devastatingly painful reality was revealed—that my husband was an on-going and long-term sex offender. The moment I knew, the kids and I left home. In the months that followed this revelation, I was told by my church that I could not get a divorce. His family said I could not get a divorce, and I felt trapped in a marriage that I knew was not safe for my children. I knew I could never live with my husband but did not feel like I could get a divorce. Because his offenses involved children, he was removed from the home and denied access to our children. Conviction for criminal offenses brought severe consequences where even if reunification was desired, it was a practical impossibility. Though he originally filed for divorce, he refused to agree to a divorce. What are the options in this and other similar cases?

Prior to the criminal court proceedings, I had asked my husband if he would willingly check himself into a place that helps men recover from sexual sin, and he said he would not do it. That was a fleece to the LORD I had made when people were suggesting to me that I lock my children's doors at night and stay in the marriage. I could not do that. I knew I could not live with my husband again. I would never knowingly take a risk with my children. If he was not willing to check himself into a place that could help him, I could not see any way for our marriage to continue. I felt like the worst sinner when my church told me I was in sin to get a divorce.

At one point, nine months after the revelation of his sexual sin, after I had come to the conclusion that I would stay married on paper the rest of my life but never live with him again, God spoke clearly to me when I asked Him to reveal whether a divorce was allowed. I saw a vision of my husband in handcuffs lying on the ground, but the handcuffs were open, and my husband was still lying there on the ground. When I asked the LORD what it meant, He told me that my husband was choosing to stay bound to his sin of his own free will.

I realized then that the decision whether or not to divorce was between me and God. I needed to know what His Word said. Wrong theology would have kept my children and me in danger. As I met with the elders of the church I attended, the LORD moved on my Spirit to share Matthew 5:32 where it says, "But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, *except for sexual immorality*, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." As I studied that verse, I realized God has a compassionate heart for the innocent victims of sexual sin, including those seemingly bound by the legalism surrounding marriage. Many times, well-meaning advisors have not lived the reality of our situation and have lacked the impetus to examine scripture free of cultural bias. And so my children and I left that church. The pastor would eventually apologize a few months later and tell me that I was not in sin to get a divorce, but recovering from spiritual

abuse on top of everything else was traumatizing. We can place burdens on people unknowingly when we step in and tell people how to handle traumatic situations without really knowing the shoes they are walking in and without having done solid exegesis—interpretation of Scriptures pertaining to their situation.

In my case, the church told me it was not adultery that my husband committed because it was with a minor. This is outrageous, and I might add ungodly counsel. I have forgiven them, but the immense pain they caused when I felt like the worst sinner in the world while going through betrayal and these shocking revelations, and I really just needed solid biblical counsel not condemnation.

So, friends, I share this backstory to hopefully help some of you in similar situations and also so you will know that my initial disposition was and is to not divorce, but God is so gracious that He does make a way out in some circumstances.

Ok, so let's dive in and take a closer look at key verses in the Bible on divorce that are often wielded as a club and let's disarm our current day Pharisees of faulty theology as we seek to examine God's Word and take from it what it is actually saying rather than what people will try to force the biblical text to say.

Accurate scriptural interpretation comes down to understanding context to determine meaning, and it also comes down to exposing one's heart motive. We should not approach these verses already knowing what WE want them to say. That would be eisegesis, twisting God's Word.

We discussed last week that the real divorce rate is 26% among evangelicals, but the question that has plagued many people with failed marriages is whether divorce is actually allowed for Christians under any circumstance. Also, some of the Bible verses seem to indicate that if you have been divorced, you cannot get remarried. But is that what the biblical text is really saying? That's the topic for today's episode of Theology at Home.

The Scripture for this episode is **Matthew 5:31–32, Christ said, “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”**

This is similar to Matthew 19:9, “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, *except for sexual immorality*, and marries another, commits adultery.”

So what was this certificate of divorce? It was a means of grace for women who were treated as property and had been disregarded/discarded in the Old Testament for seemingly any reason. It was protection God had for women so they could, in fact, remarry if they were dismissed by their husband for no fault of their own. Christ referred to this Law and severely judged this behavior in men as “hard-hearted”. The certificate of divorce was never intended to be a means to castigate or discriminate against these innocent women who are precious in God's sight and of no less value than men. These practices were condemned on the part of the husband and characterized as hard-hearted.

An exegetical paraphrase of these two difficult verses according to Spiros Zōdhiates, a Greek American Scholar and editor of the Key Word Greek and Hebrew Study Bible, would be “And it was said whosoever dismisses his wife, let him give her a bill of divorcement (see Deuteronomy 24:1–4). But I say unto you that whosoever dismisses his wife, except for reason of fornication (while she is his wife), [makes her appear to be an adulteress], and whoever marries one who is unjust or justifiably dismissed, is considered as committing adultery.”

The woman is not bound to the marriage because of her husband's unfaithfulness or breaking of the vow. However, in the culture, she was considered unfaithful unless she was given a bill of divorcement testifying of her innocence. But if *she* had been unfaithful, she would be an adulteress and be subject to immediate stoning.

Christ expresses his concern about the dismissed Greek word *apolelumenēn*, wife, or husband, in Mark 10:12, who is innocent and ought to be cleared of the stigma of being considered as an adulteress. Quoting from the Old Testament provision (Deuteronomy 24:1–4), Jesus says the wife should be cleared by giving a bill of divorcement. If the dismissed spouse was guilty, the punishment was death by stoning (see Deuteronomy 22:21), so there was no reason to give such a bill of divorcement in that case.

Divorce papers today are not the same as a bill of divorcement. Only the truly innocent (with regards to the context here “sexual sin”), according to the Word of God, has the moral, scriptural right to remarry. Spiros Zodhiates states that “It is the wife who had been dismissed inequitably, who was not an adulteress, but who, because she was dismissed without a bill of divorcement, was stigmatized as adulteress. Naturally, if anyone married such a woman, he would appear to be an adulteress also. However, this should not be considered as true adultery, but only the unjust consequence of the first husband's action in allowing his innocent wife to be considered as an adulteress without a bill of divorcement. The word *apolelumenēn* has the meaning of “unjustifiably dismissed “wife who was not given a bill of divorcement by her husband to clear her of any guilt. The only exception is Luke 16:18 where the *apolelumenēn* does not refer to the innocent wife dismissed by her guilty husband, but the guilty wife, who without cause separates herself from her husband.”

It is important to note here that the predominant spouse seeking a divorce was the man in the Old Testament, primarily because women were typically subjugated under a patriarchal system of cultural laws.

Biblical scholar David Instone-Brewer notes in his book *Church Doctrine and the Bible: Theology in Ancient Context* that there are four typical reasons why Christian divorcees today cannot remarry:

1. Jesus said that people who remarried were committing adultery (Matt 19:9).
2. Paul said a divorcee should not remarry (1 Cor 7:11).
3. Married people are “one flesh,” which sounds permanent (Matt 19:5).
4. Paul said that marriage can only end with death, not divorce (1 Cor 7:39; Rom 7:2).

Instone-Brewer says that although a list like this sounds convincing, each of these reasons is based on misunderstandings and improper context. Let's examine each passage.

“First, Jesus' teaching, in Matt. 19, concerned the newly invented ‘any cause’ type of divorce. He said this was nonbiblical and invalid, so that any remarriage after this ‘any cause divorce’ was adultery because the first marriage hadn't actually ended. But this doesn't mean that Jesus regarded all divorces as similarly invalid, and he lays out one exception here regarding sexual infidelity.

Second, the divorcee whom Paul told not to remarry, in 1 Corinthians 7, was one who had divorced without any biblical grounds. She was told to seek reconciliation, and if her ex-husband refused or this were not possible, then she should not remarry. In the same chapter, Paul told other deserted believers that they were “not bound” (1 Corinthians 7:15) to their former spouse. First-century readers would have recognized his unusual use of “bound” (which was normally only used concerning slaves), though Jews often used this concept with regard to a divorce certificate. They would have realized that Paul was saying that this person was free to remarry— and

therefore that he allowed remarriage for those finding themselves in the practical state of abandonment even though a certificate of divorce may not have been issued.

Third, the phrase “one flesh” of Matt. 19 does sound permanent—and it is supposed to. It emphasizes that sexual union involves the whole person, and that’s why it should be reserved for marriage. Paul uses the same concept when persuading people to desist from becoming “one flesh” with prostitutes (1 Corinthians 6:16). He is using this phrase to show that a sexual union should be permanent, but sin can prevent it from being so as outlined in the previous verses.

The fact that Scripture is not explicitly encouraging remarriage is fitting because marriage is a vow before God and divorce/remarriage should not be taken lightly. The dissolving of a marriage is a sober occasion, but that does not mean God does not provide grace in dire situations.

David Instone-Brewer also stated that:

“Jesus used the Bible in a responsible way, without ignoring the context, arguing from silence, or applying particulars as generalizations. In a debate about divorce, he quoted, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Matthew 19:5, citing Genesis 2:24). The verse he cited from Genesis is about humans in general and not only about Adam and Eve, so he wasn’t generalizing from a particular. Furthermore, its original purpose was to teach what marriage was like, so he wasn’t applying it contrary to this. He emphasized the central point of the text: that couples should become one and remain united. Jesus also didn’t misuse this general text by making it apply to every individual couple in particular. Some marriages do become broken when one partner breaks their vows, and Jesus allowed for divorce in such cases. He used this text to argue that divorce shouldn’t happen, but he didn’t use it to show that divorce cannot happen when one partner does repeatedly break their vows.”

Common sense tells us that we should not take a wooden, one-size-fits-all approach to applying the biblical text to our lives. We should, instead, pray and seek to apply the biblical text faithfully to our context once we understand the original context spoken to a specific people at a specific time and place.

Hopefully, no one enters marriage thinking they want to get a divorce. But we get lost in this culture. Sin can cause us to forget the treasure we have in the person we married. Some may care more about offenses than the person they are married to. There are just causes for divorce as Jesus outlined, but clearly there are also some that are not causes.

People will often quote Malachi 2:16 to people seeking a divorce, telling them that God hates divorce, and then they treat people already in the most painful situation in their lives as if they committed the unforgivable sin. But all sin can be repented of by the grace of God.

And let’s look at what this verse is actually condemning. In a broader context, reading from **Malachi 2:13–16**,

“Another thing you do: You flood the Lord’s altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favor on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. ¹⁴ You ask, “Why?” It is because the Lord is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. ¹⁵ Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth. ¹⁶ “The man who hates and divorces his

wife,” says the Lord, the God of Israel, “does violence to the one he should protect,” says the Lord Almighty. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful.”

God hates the unfaithfulness that leads to divorce. God hates what divorce does to His people. It hurts and traumatizes His people.

GotQuestions.org says *An alternate translation of Malachi 2:16 would read something to the effect of, ‘If he hates and divorces his wife...’ instead of ‘I hate divorce.’ While this is a different statement from God Himself saying, “I hate divorce,” it would not change the point of the passage that divorce does violence to the wife the husband has sworn to protect.

Let’s look at two other Scriptures:

1 Corinthians 7:10-11 through an exegetical breakdown by Greek scholar Spiros Zodhiates in his book, “What About Divorce?”:

“To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife [who has unjust cause] must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.”

So what is an unjust cause? In this Scripture, it is referring to a woman who does NOT have a just cause. Which begs the question, what are the just causes?

Biblical scholar Wayne Grudem held a position in his 2018 book Christian Ethics that there were only two biblically sanctioned grounds for divorce (adultery and desertion by unbeliever, based on Matt. 19:9; 1 Cor. 7:15).

1 Corinthians 7:15 says, “But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.”

Grudem says that even in cases of abuse, he had said in 2018 that the church should provide protection, church discipline, and possible separation, but not divorce. He could not see abuse as being included within the “desertion” clause. However, as I described in my own personal case, abuse can lead to an effective desertion situation because under today’s laws, there may be no practical, legal, or safe path for reunification because of social services action, restraining orders, sex offender registries and stipulations, and the like.

But in 2018-2019, Grudem had an increasing conviction of a need to re-examine *divorce for self-protection from abuse* due to his awareness of several horrible real-life situations and thinking, “This cannot be the kind of life that God intends for his children when there is an alternative available.”

Examples such as arguments leading to repeated rape in a marriage, a battered spouse not getting help from a pastor, and repeated threats or actual instances of physical harm or murder. These are extreme and qualifying circumstances that would not have been tolerated even in the Old Testament except for the “hardness of their hearts”.

Grudem found a breakthrough in 1 Corinthians 7:15 in the phrase, “in such cases.”

The phrase “in such cases” (ἐν τοῖς τοιοῦτοις) in 1 Cor. 7:15 had never been investigated before.

“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.” (ESV)

Grudem wondered if it means in only this case: desertion by unbeliever, or in any cases that have similarly destroyed a marriage or left a spouse in a state of abandonment?

His research uncovered several examples of this phrase in extra-biblical literature that show that the Greek phrase ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις meaning "in such cases"; often includes more kinds of situations than the original example.

I am including a link to his paper on this, which shows his research.

Instone-Brewer argues that Jesus did not oppose all divorce but only the “any matter” or no-fault divorce promulgated for men by the Hillelite (not Shammaite) branch of the Pharisees.

Jesus and Paul assumed the universally accepted grounds for divorce in early Judaism reflected in the marriage contracts of the day: not only adultery but also failure to comply with the three marital obligations specified in **Exodus 21:10-11** (food, clothing, and conjugal rights). The latter three were grouped in rabbinic sources as material neglect (withholding food and clothing) and emotional neglect (withholding sexual relations, perhaps widened already in the first century to acts of cruelty and public humiliation). According to Instone-Brewer, Jesus and Paul held that both a person who divorces on valid grounds and a person who is divorced on invalid grounds are free to remarry.

Biblical scholar Robert A. J. Gagnon, Ph.D. sees Instone-Brewer’s view as the best scriptural case, not only to date but also for the foreseeable future, for broadening the grounds for divorce and remarriage-after-divorce beyond the grounds of adultery, extreme physical abuse, and desertion that are normally accepted in evangelical churches. But he does fears that it can also cause people to rush to divorce. However, withholding food, clothing and emotional neglect are forms of abandonment.

Once again, it comes down to the heart. God does hate divorce, and the breaking of a covenant is not a light matter. Divorce is exceptionally painful and hurts the children and the parents in immeasurable ways. Trauma from divorce is difficult to recover from, and it makes it difficult to live out God’s purposes for us when we’re entangled in so many mixed painful emotions.

Divorce had been a part of my DNA growing up as my parents were divorced multiple times, but I had determined it would not be a part of my story and saved myself for marriage, and when I got married, I viewed that marriage covenant before God seriously. But life sends us surprises and suffering we do not anticipate, and other people make decisions that we cannot control. The Bible speaks a lot about divorce and has answers to all our questions, but we need to understand first what the Scriptures were saying in the time they were spoken into. Understanding God’s heart about divorce is not about rules void of compassion. His commands are full of love and have our best interests in mind. And sometimes the scenarios we find ourselves up against in this life are not cut and dry.

Growing up, there was a stigma that we were that family who had divorces. I envied friends who had stable homes. My mom and I moved to a shady part of town, and I still remember my mom crying when I used our last quarter to play a video game across the street at a Pic Quik convenience store. Life was hard. I had to skip school on Fridays because of knife fights and was constantly threatened to be beaten up. A maintenance man and family member both tried to sexually abuse me. I wondered if I would have gone through any of those things if my parents hadn't gotten a divorce. But you know all the trauma that happens on this side of heaven, we know God didn’t intend any of it to happen. Sin has broken us, but Jesus is the only One who can restore us.

Some beliefs I had about divorce were handed down to me. I think that's the thing with theology. We have things handed down to us that we don't ever examine for ourselves to see what scripture is really saying. And that's what I'm seeking to do in this episode. As someone who witnessed multiple divorces from my parents while growing up, I see the devastating consequences, and I see that scripture does meet us in those places.

God is able to heal us from our brokenness or our sorrow. I remember the day in church when I chose to believe that God could heal me and my kids. It is still a hard-fought battle with many layers of healing that have been completed and many more still to go. So if you're listening and perhaps thinking you don't know my situation, I don't have to know your situation. God speaks to every situation, and His grace is enough.

Perhaps you are listening today and have felt shame and guilt for being that person who carries what I will refer to as the scarlet letter "D." Divorce was never supposed to be part of your story. Or maybe you are listening today and know you caused the divorce. God's plan is to redeem your brokenness.

Divorce bears ugly fruit. It should never be a casual decision because we are mad at someone. Offenses build fences and drive wedges, but wounds can be healed if two people are willing to repent and work at restoring their marriage.

Sometimes divorce is the option that we must take. But we don't take it lightly. As we approach God's Word, it is not to try and make it fit our scenario, but to see what God's Word is actually saying.

Jesus permits divorce and remarriage for sexual immorality. Paul permits divorce and remarriage for believers abandoned by unbelieving spouses. The Lord doesn't require divorce but desires repentance and reconciliation.

In all his utterances on this subject, Jesus blames only the one who disrupts a marriage, and not the one whose marriage is disrupted. 1 Corinthians 7:15 is exactly the same as Matthew 5:32, 19:9, and the passages in Mark. The innocent party in a destructive marriage is not bound as Paul states, nor does Jesus declare that party bound.

These verses show us the seriousness of marriage. In our modern culture, we can try to gloss over God's righteous standards, but a covenant is a covenant.

Grace is not to be abused, but it is to be applied. God makes a way out when there is unfaithfulness and abuse or abandonment.

We need to seek to understand the heart of God in His Word, not approach the Word of God for loopholes. We really wouldn't want it any other way than God's because He wants what is best for us.

Closing

Well, next week, we are continuing our focus on relationships and are going to tune up how we relate to one another with the topic, "Are You Toxic?" We have looked at marriage relationships, but how are our relationships with others at home, in the neighborhood, and at church?

I'd love to hear about topics that interest you as you seek to know God and His Word more in the coming year. Those gray areas don't have to be gray anymore. God reveals His Word to His people. Until next time, Go with God and saturate your mind in His Word so your thoughts can become more like His thoughts daily! Visit the

web page theologyathome.com or my website denisepass.com for more information, videos, and articles to help you grasp God's intention in His Word and to know Him more.