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West Valley Presbyterian Church  
What About Divorce?  
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One of the most difficult and heartbreaking moments in my tenure as a pastor was the time I worked with a woman I will call Laura. Laura was in her 50's at the time but looked as if she were 75 years old. She was stooped, haggard and her clothes were rumpled hanging off of her very slight frame. Her face was lined with the contours of pain; she looked out at me from dark, anxious eyes that often filled with tears that would quickly subside. She came to me to talk. To talk about her husband who was an evangelist. I knew her husband. He was at the church I was pastoring and he was someone who knew scripture inside and out, and would always stand up and quote it at the church in Bible Studies and in small groups. He had all the answers. The problem is that he was abusive at home. The horrors of his abuse I don't want to relate here, but it was severe enough on both a physical and emotional level that three other pastors before me had tried to help Laura get out of the marriage. By the time I met her, she was a broken woman, as were her now grown children that he had terribly abused as well. "I can't divorce him," she would tell me over and over again. "The Bible says I have to

stay with him.” She would point out to me that Scripture that says that God hates divorce. Then she would point out that he hadn’t committed adultery (the thing that Jesus said in the scripture was the only grounds for divorce). He was just terribly violent. “I have to obey the Bible” she would say in her thick German accent. “I have to support my husbands ministry.”

What does the scripture really say about divorce? What is going on here in this passage that we read this morning? This is a sermon that has a lot of information in it, so please track with me. I think though that once you understand some of the background you will find that it makes more sense to you, and that those of you who have been through the pain of divorce, and you have guilt piled up on top of this, you will be helped. Before I begin I need to give credit to others – I did not have time this past week to go back and study the Code of Hammurabi or the Talmud so I am indebted to others work on this...namely John Ortberg who did a great talk on divorce...and he himself gave credit to the Biblical scholar David Instone-Brewer who did the research.

So in order to understand the Biblical perspective on divorce we have to go way back to the Hammurabi Code before the Old Testament was even written. In that world, women were very oppressed, and the

husband, following the code of Hammurabi could divorce their wife at any time. A husband could divorce his wife if she put too much make-up on, or if she got too fat. He could divorce her if she burned the dinner, or if she watched too many chick flicks. If you were a divorced woman, the man who divorced you could come back at any time and be your husband again. If you had managed to eek out a living on your own, he could come back, claim the estate, the kids the whole gamut. And it was very hard to get married back then after you were divorced, because no one is going to want to come near you if they know your former husband is lurking in the wings can emerge at any time.

That is why in the Old Testament, God who is always the champion of the oppressed, the downtrodden, the underdog, makes a law around this. It is a law of compassion and justice. Now, as we said last week, and from Genesis it is clear that God's intent for marriage is that it be a permanent commitment from a husband and wife. But, if it did break up, the law of Moses said:

**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, he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house. (Deuteronomy 24:1)**

Now, the "certificate" was a way of protecting the woman, because it meant

the first husband could never come back and reclaim her. The certificate always had a phrase on it: You are free to remarry any Jewish man, or any Jewish woman that you wish.

Deuteronomy here mentions divorce on the grounds of “indecent.” In the Hebrew, it read “for the cause of sexual immorality.”

This raises the question, “What about other cases. Was there provision for divorce because of abuse or abandonment?” Those cases were covered as well, in a roundabout way.

In Exodus 21, we find another classic text on divorce. The law here covers the question, “What happens if a man takes a second wife?” and it’s designed to protect the interests of the first wife. Polygamy was not prohibited in the ancient world...

**If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her (the first wife’s) food, her clothing or her conjugal love. If he does not provide her with those three things, she is free to go without payments of money. (Exodus 21: 10-11)**

Once again, the law is seeking to protect the woman. When he (the husband) married his first wife, he made a vow to provide support (food and clothing) and love. So, if he breaks that vow, then the first wife is free to leave, free to get a divorce, free to get a certificate, free to remarry.”

Over time the rabbis looked at these two passages that became the classic text in the Scriptures governing divorce. They said: Here is the principle that is involved: Based on these texts, marriage involves a vow, and the vow includes three primary promises: fidelity—to be faithful . . . no sexual unfaithfulness (Deuteronomy 24); to provide—food, clothing (Exodus 21); and to provide sexual intimacy and affection. **Marriage is a vow: to be faithful, to provide and to love.**

When these vows are broken, the victim of the broken vows has a

right to get divorced. Male or female . . . . That would include the right to be remarried.

**There was no such thing in Judaism as a divorce that did not include the right to remarry. That was the idea behind the “certificate.” of divorce.**

Of course, rabbis debated the specifics of all of this, because that’s what rabbis spent their time doing.

How much did the husband need to provide in terms of food, and clothing?

What about sexual intimacy – how much was required?

So there were lots of little laws made that were more specific, but they all were around the very real provision that divorce sometimes needed to happen under certain circumstances.

Now...

Did rabbis believe that Biblical grounds for divorce could include things like abandonment or abuse?

Of course they did.

**Abandonment would simply be the extreme form of breaking the vow to provide. Abuse would be the extreme form of breaking the vow to love. In Israel, those would be grounds for divorce.**

That did not mean that anyone thought divorce was a great idea. It was simply a way to prevent further injustice and suffering when vows were broken.

So that was the framework for marriage and divorce in ancient Israel.

Now in Jesus’ day, what developed in the ancient world of the Old Testament has direct bearing on the scriptures that we read concerning divorce in the New Testament.

So more information now folks... Two of the most famous rabbis who lived a few decades before

Jesus and dominated rabbinic teaching were named Hillel and Shammai.

Schools were founded around these two ways of thinking to interpret the Law.

Hillel looked at the law in **Deuteronomy 24:1**, where Moses says a man can divorce his wife for “**a cause of sexual immorality.**”

Hillel reflected on this text and said:

Moses could have said that a man could divorce his wife “for sexual immorality,” but he includes these words...  
“*for the cause of...* sexual immorality.”

Why does he include that phrase?

The rabbis believed that no word was random or redundant in scripture.

So the school of Hillel somehow reasoned that

that the words “for the cause of...” must refer to other causes as well that would allow for divorce.. besides sexual immorality.

The school of **Hillel concluded that it must mean “any cause.” In other words, Hillel said that Deuteronomy 24 meant that a man could divorce his wife for two reasons: sexual immorality or any cause at all.**

They decided that this “any cause” divorce would be available to only one gender. In other words it boiled down to men being able to divorce their wife for any cause.... any fault you could conceive of.

Again, Hillel rabbis would list different faults they believed a husband could divorce his wife for under this “any cause” provision. **They listed things like:**

- **If she walked around with her hair unbound, her husband could divorce her, because that was considered improper.**
- **If she argued in a voice loud enough to be heard in the next house, he could divorce her.**

Hillel is saying:

Now there’s a new divorce option available. It’s never before been available in the history of Israel ...

the “any cause” divorce ... available to any husband.

Soon, as you might imagine, it became the most popular form of divorce in Israel.

So that’s where we are, coming into Jesus’ day with the divorce issue from

the perspective of the school of Hillel.

The other important school of thought from the rabbi, Shammai, disagreed with Hillel. **Shammai was the school of thought that Jesus was all about.** This perspective on divorce said that...

**Deuteronomy 24:1 refers only to divorce being allowed for sexual immorality. Shammai would also have agreed that divorce could also happen, on the basis of Exodus 21, when the vow for provision was broken, or when the vow for love was broken.**

But when it comes to Deuteronomy 24,  
**In essence, the school of Shammai said:  
An “any cause” divorce is wrong.**

In Jesus’ day, this caused a big debate between the rabbis who followed Hillel and the rabbis who followed Shammai.

Everybody wanted to know exactly where every rabbi stood on this subject. It was a big deal which school of thought you ascribed to.

This brings us then to the scripture we read today. Matthew 19:3 says,  
**Some Pharisees came to Jesus to test Him or trap Him. They asked Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” (Matthew 19:3)**

Do you understand now what they are asking? They are asking about “any cause” divorce. Jesus, are you of the school of Hillel? Or of Shammai? Do you believe in “any cause” divorce?

Not...“Rabbi, is divorce always against the law?” That was never debated in that day. Divorce was in

Moses’ law. No rabbi would have ever asked, “Is it lawful for us to follow Moses’ law?” It was in the law.

What they’re asking is:

Jesus, how do you interpret Deuteronomy 21? Do you agree with Hillel or Shammai?

They are trying to trap him the scripture says. How are they trying to trap him?

Well, it's a loaded question, not only because it will cause a big debate between the two schools of thought on this, but because Herod himself had divorced his first wife – gotten an any cause divorce - in order to marry his brother's wife. Those of you who know scripture will know that when John the Baptist confronted Herod on this John was beheaded.

It's a scary loaded question they are asking Jesus

So Jesus goes back to the very beginning of Torah. In Genesis, it says:

**A man shall leave his father and mother. The two shall become one flesh.**  
(Genesis 2:24)

By the way, in the Hebrew it just says, "they shall become one flesh." What Jesus is doing when he adds "two" is subtly saying that polygamy is not really God's plan either. "The **two** shall become one."

God's purpose for Marriage is that a husband and a wife make a permanent, intimate commitment.

**The Pharisees say:**

**Why then did Moses command that the man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?**

(Matthew 19:7)

Jesus replied:

**Moses permitted you to divorce, because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. (Matthew 19:8)**

In other words divorce was not what God intended to have happen, but human sin enters in and vows are broken.

Jesus goes on to say that if



you do get divorced and get remarried—which would have been the expectation in that culture— that’s adultery.

And because the only grounds Jesus mentions here is sexual immorality, some people have thought that the New Testament position is that the only Biblical grounds for divorce—or for divorce and remarriage—is adultery. This has led to anguish and heartbreak and confusion like the woman I worked with that I mentioned at the beginning ....

In essence some people will take this scripture and say “You mean that if my husband beats me, beats our children, is addicted to drugs and alcohol, steals money, tries to kill me, I have to stay married to him, but if he strays one time sexually, then I can get a divorce?”

People have thought this.

Here, Jesus is not talking about the whole Jewish framework of marriage and divorce that was a part of his world as a rabbi. The law made divorce possible as I have shown you. Jesus is not discussing all of this - what happens when the vows of Exodus 21 — provision and love and faithfulness—are broken. Rather, this is the Hillel-Shammai debate, and any reader would have recognized it by implication back then.

So if we said to someone today, “Do you think drinking should be legal for a 16 year old,” by implication you and I would understand that the question is about alcohol, not about drinking a diet coke. The same thing is true in this text.

Basically if you were to sum it up...the question posed to Jesus is What is your interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1? And Jesus says to them, “I’m a Shammai guy. I’m against ‘any cause divorce.’”

He would have shared the understanding that Biblically, when the vows of marriage are broken (Deuteronomy 24:1 and Exodus) for faithfulness, love

and provision, and where there is hard-heartedness, then divorce may well be the only option.

All of this that I have told you needs to be taken in the context of what I said last week about honoring your marriage vows, and working hard at marriage because it isn't easy. And I said last week that I think our culture has made divorce way too simple to do. We give up too easily. It was that way in the Roman world too. Basically you could walk out on a spouse, and you were divorced. That was Roman law; there was so much infidelity and so many sexual affairs going on that Caesar got concerned by the lack of legal sons being born into Roman households and he actually established a law in 18 BC making it compulsory for Roman citizens to get married. If you got divorced, within eighteen months, you had to be remarried again.

St. Paul writes against this flagrant abuse of the marriage vows, and he says don't live the way the Romans live! Don't go that low. Live up to God's standards. Even if you've married an unbeliever and you've become a Christian in the meantime, seek to honor your promises to that person.

But, he says,

**But if you're married to an unbeliever, and the unbeliever leaves, (Again, in the Roman world, that is a divorce.) let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances. (1 Corinthians**

7:15)

In other words, if your spouse abandons you, then the marriage is over, and you are free to remarry - in the Lord, Paul adds a little later . . . in other words “to a believer.”

Paul would not understand himself to be amending Jesus; he’s not tacking on additional grounds for divorce; he is not adding abandonment as another grounds for divorce in addition to adultery. He would have understood that he and Jesus were in agreement with the framework that they grew up and were teaching out of . . . that the teaching of the Old Testament was **that marriage was a vow to be faithful, a vow to provide and a vow to love.**

Everybody has been or will be touched by divorce in some way or another. Some of you here have had your heart broken by it. Some of you have been beat up by it and are wondering, “Is there any life after divorce?” I want to tell you there is.

This message is timely as we start up our 13 week divorce care program this Tuesday. One of the messages in this program is that God understands the pain of divorce. In Scripture God is the divorcee. God describes himself as a jealous lover, and the pain of being in love with a people who are continually unfaithful to him breaks his heart. I made a vow to you to love you, provide for you, and care for you, God says, and you wandered far from me.

One of the most amazing and heart wrenching statements in all of Scripture is in Jeremiah. This is God speaking:  
**I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries.**  
(Jeremiah 3:8)

The best divorce recovery or care program ever created was the cross of Jesus Christ. By that cross, reconciliation is possible, forgiveness, and restoration with God and with one another.

If you feel far from God today because of the pain of divorce, God understands that pain.  
He was rejected too.  
But his mercy is endless, and his forgiving love without limit.  
Today know that we are all on the wrong side of this divorce with God.  
We've all wandered; we've all been unfaithful – we have all had hard hearts and we have all broken our vows to him...  
But our God ruthlessly pursues us with unending amazing grace...the cross being the crowning expression of that love...  
So I would ask that as we go to prayer now...you would

Let the healing love of Jesus, the forgiveness of his sacrifice on the cross, the genuine longing that he has for you, to be in a close relationship, fill you now as we pray together...

You gave us the best Divorce Care program ever...at the cross. Thank you for this....