

Sneak Peak at Context for Adults: Sexuality, Social Identity and Kinship Relations in the Bible

I had to choose a chapter that could largely stand on its own, so I went with “Lesson 39 – If Moses Allowed Divorce, Why Did Jesus Call Remarriage After Divorce Adultery?” The other lessons required a good working knowledge of group social dynamics, which I spend the first ten lessons teaching in depth, but this one only really required a knowledge of the first-century controversy in question – that of “any cause” or “every cause” divorce. Hopefully, we will have this book on the market in about a month. Just polishing it up!



Without context, the Bible can be used to do terrible harm to people. In this case, we are going to need to talk about three sections of Scripture that have been misused because of translational problems as well as a lack of knowledge

concerning the “any cause” divorces of the first century. First, let’s look at the three sections of Scripture in question:

*Deut 24:1-2 “When a man hath taken a wife and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then **let him write her a bill of divorcement**, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house.*

*And when she is departed out of his house, **she may go and be another man's wife.***

*Matt 5:31-32 "It hath been said, Whosoever shall **put away** his wife, let him give her a writing of **divorcement**: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall **put away** his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is **divorced** committeth adultery."*

***Matt 19:3-9** "The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife **for every cause**? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. They say unto him, **Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away**? He saith unto them, Moses because of the **hardness of your hearts** suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery."*

As we learn from the Babylonian Talmud, in Gittin 90a, during the first century BCE the House of Hillel Pharisees enacted a ruling stating that a man could divorce his wife for any cause. Although the intent of Deuteronomy 24 was clearly to allow divorce in the case of adultery, aka "uncleanness," Hillel expanded that ruling to allow a man to send his wife out for the smallest of offenses – even if she merely burned his meal. As you can imagine, based upon what we have learned so far, this left a wife in a terrible predicament. Even if her husband paid the ketubah money owed with a divorce, it

would only last so long and women in those days could rarely find respectable work. So what question was Jesus *really* being asked?

“Do we (men) have the right to divorce our wives for any reason whatsoever? Do you agree with Hillel’s ruling?”

The answer was undoubtedly not what many of them wanted to hear. Tragically, divorce had become rampant in the time of Jesus – not a mutual divorce as we see in modern times, but a one-sided affair where a woman had absolutely no say. Men had gotten used to having absolute power over their women, and they were using the Bible as their justification. The Bible certainly permitted divorce based on a breach of the marriage covenant, but not over trivialities.

How did Jesus reply?

“God created marriage to be eternal, and when you send your unemployable wives out into the world shamed and without support over insignificant issues, God is not going to see your actions as justified. She is going to be forced to remarry to survive, but as far as God is concerned, you didn’t divorce her legally, and so her adultery is your crime as she is still your wife and your responsibility; this was not her choice. And the guy she marries? He is going to be involved in adultery too – because your callous, selfish decision made a terrible mess.”

What Jesus is addressing here was just one aspect of the systemic societal evil in the first century. Was divorce allowed under the Law? – Yes, absolutely. Was remarriage after divorce allowed? – According to Deut 24, yes. Was “any cause” divorce acceptable? – Absolutely not. There is nothing righteous about treating your wife like she is not your family, throwing her out of the house without her having any say in the matter when she is not an adulteress. The Matthew texts make it clear that a marriage cannot have a one-sided

dissolution. It isn't over until both sides say it is over or until one side destroys that bond through sexual sin. One partner walking away does not unilaterally sever the covenant bond without their spouse's permission. Modern divorce is, in some ways, more like the Biblical model – despite the fact that we still divorce far too easily. One person can't just decide that the marriage is over – it has to be a mutual decision (or at the very least, it can be contested), ratified in the courts, in order for the petitioner to remarry. First-century men, however, were casting their wives aside and taking on new brides – whether their wives approved or not. This was considered adultery – as their wives rights in the matter were being taken into account, by God.

There is a reason why sexual relations in the Bible are so often referred to as “humbling” a woman – that humbling is not necessarily evil or bad, but to have one's way with a woman and then abandon her leaves her feeling violated and demeaned. Marital sexual relations, on the other hand, should leave a woman feeling valued and loved. There is a humility that exists between a man and a woman after sex, a humility that can either result in healthy intimacy or destructive shame. God's intention was for sexual intimacy to bind a man and a woman together honorably for life, not to give them cause for regrets, embarrassment, and feelings of abandonment and betrayal.

Women were created to be extremely emotionally vulnerable to rejection, and any study into honor/shame dynamics will verify that a woman's reputation is far more easily damaged than a man's, and is not easily recovered even if she is later found to be innocent. To be thrown out of her home by her husband merely because she is no longer attractive, or because he is tired of her, or becomes interested in someone younger, strikes at the heart of a woman's basic sense of self-worth. It is the epitome of what it means to be *unloving* to one's neighbor. Even knowing that her husband could legally abandon

her, seemingly with the blessing of God, would have been a cause for much stress in the life of any married woman.

I want you to notice what Jesus didn't say, "Any of you who have married a divorced woman now need to divorce her, or you are sinning." He said nothing of the sort, or even hinted at it. New marriages produce children, and God is in no way honored when yet another home is broken apart. Frequently, Jesus addressed the real core problem without presenting a solution because there was no longer any good solution except – "don't do this anymore." Jesus was telling them that "any cause" divorce was not justified in the eyes of God and that they needed to start honoring the marriages they were in now. "Any cause" divorce was unjust, cruel and arbitrary – making each man a potential tyrant in his own home, and his wife little more than an expendable slave subject to the whim of her master.

Homework: In *Ten Commandments and the Covenants of Promise*, I taught a character lesson about being true to one's marriage covenant partner. As we discussed, Hillel said that divorce should be permitted even if your wife burns a meal, but Shammai recognized that a covenant between people cannot exist if there is no expectation of forgiveness. When a woman marries a man, she needs to know that as she gets older, he will remain true to her. She needs to know that doing her best will always be enough. The same goes for wives with their husbands; we must be loyal to each other unless there is an actual betrayal. My husband and I have been married for twenty-six years, and neither one of us is getting any better looking! I want you to imagine a world where your spouse had the legal authority to hand you a sheet of paper in front of witnesses and walk out the door (or rather, push you out the door) in a society without child support, where a woman had no honorable professional opportunities and whose family might not want the shame of taking her back in. How would that reflect upon your understanding of the nature of God's

covenants? Would you trust Him that forever means forever, or would you think that He is capable of abandoning His own covenant people? Would "Great is Thy Faithfulness" ever have been written if we thought He wasn't long-suffering?