

Biblical Ethics – Do Not Commit Adultery

(by Jim Hughes) [267/365 – 2026-09-13]

Divorce

The Bible speaks about a man divorcing his wife by giving her a certificate of divorce (Dt 24.1; Mt 5.31). The Pharisees understood this to mean that for any cause a man could write a certificate and send her away (Mt 19.3). But this is not what Moses taught. A man could only divorce his wife if he found “some indecency” in her (Dt 24.1). The word that is translated ‘indecency’ is the same word that is used elsewhere to describe indecent or dishonourable sexual relations, translated as ‘uncovering nakedness’ (Lev 18.6-17; Lev 20.11, 17, 20, 21). The only legitimate reason that a man could divorce his wife was if he found that she had committed adultery. Jesus corrects the Pharisees’ mistaken understanding and limits the reason for divorce to sexual immorality (Mt 5.32).

Some interpreters conclude that Moses is talking about something other than adultery in Deuteronomy 24.1. They argue that the OT punishment for adultery was death (Lev 20.10). Therefore, divorce wouldn’t be required since the adulterers would be dead. But the punishment for adultery is death only if *both* parties are caught in the act (Lev 20.10; Dt 22.22). And no one is to be put to death without the evidence of two or three witnesses (Dt 17.6). However, there can be circumstances when adultery occurs without witnesses. For example, a woman could be found to be pregnant, yet her husband was away on a business trip. This is one reason why God instituted a test for unfaithfulness (Num 5.11-31). Today, a DNA test would be used. In such a circumstance divorce is permitted.

Jesus does not correct Moses by saying that the only ground for divorce is marital unfaithfulness. Jesus endorses Moses since Moses also said that the only ground for issuing a certificate of divorce was marital unfaithfulness. Jesus endorses this part of God’s law outside of the Ten Commandments to show that the ‘least’ commands (Mt 5.19) as well as the ‘greatest’—the details as well as the summary—apply to all men in all generations.

Some professing Christians think that they can live a life that pleases Jesus through some mystical ‘love.’ Love for Jesus is not shown by waving hands in the air or mouthing spiritual-sounding words. But if we ask how we are to show our love for Jesus, it becomes difficult to define love without reference to specific commands and obedience to them. Love is shown by obeying his commands (Jn 14.15, 21), including those that deal with divorce.

Divorce is permitted only for marital unfaithfulness (Mt 5.32; Mt 19.9). Most interpreters conclude that Paul teaches that divorce is also permitted when an unbeliever deserts a marriage because his partner has become a Christian (1 Cor 7.10-15). In the context of his instructions about marriage, Paul viewed an

unbeliever who deserted a marriage as being ‘dead’ (1 Cor 7.8, 39). Divorce is unnecessary when a former marriage partner is dead; the believer is not bound and is free to remarry. Thus, Paul permits divorce as a means of declaring the former marriage partner ‘dead’. Also, Paul viewed mixed marriages as sinful (Dt 7.3; Ezra 10.2; Neh 13.23-27; 1 Cor 7.39; 2 Cor 6.14-15). So, if an unbeliever leaves the marriage, it is as if he has committed spiritual adultery.

The only legitimate cause for divorce is marital unfaithfulness—and not, for physical or psychological abuse as many Christians argue should be included as legitimate reasons. But the Bible’s teaching is frequently ignored today, as evidenced by the number of divorces among high-profile entertainers and athletes who claim to be Christians and by surveys that show that the attitude of professing Christians toward divorce and the number of actual divorces among professing Christians appears to be higher than justified because of adultery—e.g., based on claimed incompatibility. The excuse used by the Pharisees was that Moses permitted it. Today the Church doesn’t attempt to defend its disobedience by misapplying God’s law; it just ignores God’s law. God says that a person who divorces another covers himself with violence (Mal 2.16); and although (for marital unfaithfulness) he permits divorce because our hearts are hard (Mt 19.8) it is not required, nor is it ideal. The ideal action is for us to forgive as God forgives, and not to tear apart what God has joined together (Mt 19.6).

Marriage is an institution established by God at creation and is a covenantal relationship (Mal 2.14-15) between a man and a woman that represents the covenant between God and his Church or Christ and his bride (Eph 5.25-28). Jesus places his teaching about divorce after his teaching about adultery (Mt 5.27-30). Divorce is the outcome of the lust of a heart that pursues its desires. Divorce is the result of selfishness that permeates our hearts. Divorce breaks the covenant. Marriage is social behaviour; divorce is anti-social behaviour. Marriage brings together in covenant; divorce separates in covenant breaking.

We need to apply lessons we can derive from these considerations—one in a direct sense and the other in a typical sense. First, we must stand firm on what God’s law teaches and speak out against divorce in every illegitimate case where divorce is not an option (e.g., ‘incompatibility’, or ‘growing apart’). In the case of marital abuse, the abused spouse may separate from the other. Taking this stand will be difficult, and men will scoff at us for defending God’s law. Second, we should also consider spiritual adultery and divorce. If we are married to Jesus through belief, we must not commit spiritual adultery or seek to break the marriage covenant through divorce. “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mt 19.6). In Canada, in 2026, the percentage of first marriages that ended in divorce was 38%. So, Christian spouses who make marriage work and live in a peaceful partnership with one another, have an opportunity to let the Gospel shine through their lives.