

**Monday**

Read Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and Malachi 2:13-16

Here are two clear texts on divorce from Jesus' Bible (the Old Testament). The Deuteronomy text is usually considered the clearest text on the permissibility of divorce in ancient Israel. Something odd about the text is that it presumes that divorce is already a practice. It doesn't establish the practice of divorce but rather regulates it. What do you make of these regulations? Does it favor the rights of men or the rights of women or does it treat both equally?

The Malachi passage is a very clear word that God despises divorce. Your translation might not have "I hate divorce..." for v. 16 like I mentioned in the sermon (that word choice comes from the NRSV translation) but the passage is very forceful in its condemnation of divorce. Is this passage directed at men, women, or both? Based on your reading of this passage in Malachi, why does God despise divorce?

**Tuesday**

Read Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:1-9

We need to figure out what Jesus means when he says, "<sup>32</sup> But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, *makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*" Why should this be of concern? Well, we must assume, as the people of Jesus' time did, that women who were divorced would almost always get married again. They had little choice in order to survive. So, if we read this in a particular way, and many read it this way (past and present), Jesus seems to be saying that whoever marries a divorced woman is a sinner and she is a sinner, too. Ouch.

Let's draw this out so we can see its ramifications. A couple is married. The woman is perfectly faithful and a wonderful wife in every way. The husband is a total jerk and decides to divorce his wife so that he can pursue someone else. Now she is, perhaps quite literally, cast out on the street. Is Jesus saying that she can't remarry because her evil husband divorced her for no good reason? Frankly and in brief, the historic doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church seems to say so – that this victim of her husband's sin will be committing sin and leading her new husband

into sin if she remarries. That is not the understanding of our Reformed tradition (or, at least, the part of it I inhabit).

Jesus is not unfairly putting the burden of divorce on the woman or calling the wife a sinner on account of her husband's, or former husband's, sin. In fact, as this text is directed at husbands, Jesus is pushing the husband, who is the perpetrator of such an invalid divorce to realize that he is the cause of his former wife's "adultery", not her, by virtue of forcing her into a remarriage situation when she was wrongly divorced. The sin is his, not hers. Jesus and the New Testament tend, in its teachings on these matters, to be frustratingly incomprehensible and focused on the duties of men. Jesus is sharply curtailing divorce to instances of deliberate sexual infidelity as the only time, if absolutely necessary, that a man can divorce a woman. This is a stricter definition than Deuteronomy 24. What is not clear and what Christians have debated since biblical times is the situation with divorce and remarriage as it pertains to women. Our historic Reformed faith is helpful in this regard. The Westminster Confession states, "In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce: and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead." It then goes on to endorse remarriage.

Think in terms of your gender: What are these passages saying to you as a man or woman and what should your witness be concerning divorce and remarriage?

**Wednesday**

Read Luke 8:43-48 (a story about a woman who potentially made Jesus ritually unclean by touching him. How does he respond? How does he treat her?)

Here are the four quick points I made towards the end of the sermon (I guess we'll see on Sunday whether the Spirit moves me to expand upon these).

1. Women suffer inordinately because of divorce, historically and contemporarily, and they don't need the added feelings of guilt that a poor reading of scripture can add.
2. Read improperly, this text can seem to be blaming and punishing victims of the sin of others and that is not the Gospel. Good

reading leads to good understanding which helps build a rich, lasting faith.

3. The New Testament, especially in contrast to Rome, treats women as people, not property. Two thousand years of skewed traditions can mire or forget that fact.
4. The New Testament treats women as people because Jesus is a champion of women. Read the Gospels and you will find Jesus coming alongside women, helping women, and lifting up women in a society that treated them little better than cattle.

You may have grown up being taught by the Church that women are second-class citizens. I think it is a tragic misreading and misinterpretation of the witness of scripture and the ministry of Jesus Christ. What were you taught about the role of women in the Church? What do you believe now? Why?

#### **Thursday**

Read Matthew 5:1-12

if you are or were the victim of a divorce, I want you to hear the special blessing of Jesus rushing into your life and overflowing it with blessing: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

When those evil voices of blame, self-doubt, and self-recrimination enter into your consciousness, push them out with those words of Jesus.

But perhaps you are at some fault for your divorce – man or woman. What is the hope for you in these teachings of Jesus on divorce? They are hard teachings and can seem devoid of mercy. So one might ask, “Can God’s blessing rest on remarriage – especially when I bare some or all of the blame?” The answer to that question will be the same as your answer to this question, “Is there forgiveness of sins in the gospel?” My answer, based on Jesus and scripture, is yes. What is yours? There can be blessing of remarriage because there is forgiveness of sins for the sincerely repentant person in the gospel of Jesus Christ that this church, and the Church Universal, proclaims. Repentance, not equivocation, not

blame, not denying sin, but repentance is necessary to have God in your marriage – current or future.

Pray for marriages and those who are married or divorced.

#### **Friday**

Each week in 2022, we are praying for the most dangerous places to be a follower of Jesus. Please spend today in prayer for Kazakhstan and the Christians in Kazakhstan. You can get more info, and this info comes from, here: <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/>

What is life like for Christians in Kazakhstan?

Persecution in Kazakhstan hasn’t changed much over the years. Legislation dating back to September 2011 restricts the ability to worship freely. Kazakhstan’s government has steadily increased its control over religious expression in the country, which means increased surveillance, raids on church meetings, and arrests. Kazakh Christians from a Muslim background bear the worst persecution at the hands of the state and from family, friends and community.

Areas for prayer:

- Pray for Christians—and particularly for church leaders—in Kazakhstan who endure government suspicion and interference in their lives and faith.
- Pray for converts from Islam, that they would be protected from oppression and discrimination from their family, friends and community.
- Pray God would work through the hearts of the leaders of Kazakhstan. The country has been a single-party government for decades, and control is tight.