

On Marriage and Divorce (Part 2)

Leviticus 20:10-17; Matthew 19:1-12 & WCF 24.4-24.6
Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 28 February 2021, 16:30
(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Here is the last of two sermons on the topic of Marriage and Divorce.

We have four points in this sermon...

- No Close Blood-Relative
- Reasons for Divorce
- Divorce and the Counsel of Godly Brothers & Sisters
- What about Marrying Someone Else after a Divorce?

No Close Blood-Relative

The Westminster Confession's Article 24.4 summarises this Bible truth, i.e., *that Marriage ought not to take place between persons who are within the degrees of close relationship by blood or by marriage forbidden by the Word.*²

In other words, the Bible prohibits two kinds of marriages, i.e.,

- marriage between close blood-relatives (the so-called *incestuous marriage* – also called *marriage of consanguinity*), and...
- marriage of *affinity*.

What exactly is the second one – marriage of affinity? Well, it's a marriage that starts from a *relationship* of affinity – a relationship created by marriage. For example, if a man marries a woman, he gains a relationship of affinity with her family members. And what God's Word forbids is the scenario in which a man is not just happy to have his own wife, but, *while this man is still married to his wife*, he also wants her sister or her mother or even his daughter-in-law as his wife.

The Bible forbids that!

However, the Bible does not forbid marrying a *deceased* spouse's sibling. Indeed, the Bible even commands the so-called levirate marriages – where a man marries the wife of his deceased brother.³

Well, so far regarding the marriage of affinity.

What about the incestuous marriage (marriage of consanguinity) – yes, the marriage between close blood relatives? Why does the Bible forbid that?

You see, some people have asked, "But whom did the children of Adam & Eve then marry?"

¹ In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my two main sources whose guidance I appreciate: 1) Van Dixhoorn, Chad. 2014. *Confessing the Faith: a reader's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust. 484p.

2) Sproul, R.C. 2007. *The truth we confess*. (In: Sproul, R.C. ed. *Truths we confess: a layman's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – in three volumes*. Vol. 3: *The State, the Family, the Church, and Last Things* (Chapters 23-33 of the Confession) Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. 281p.).

Many words & phrases I have written, I have gladly borrowed with great thankfulness from this source.

² For the appropriate Bible passages, cf. among other, Lev 18 and Lev 20:10-24

³ Cf. Deut 25:5-10

Well, the Bible tells us that Adam & Eve had daughters (Gen 5:4).⁴ And the Bible mentions no one else of their generation.

So, the presumption is that Adam & Eve's sons married their own sisters. Thus, in the beginning, marriages were necessarily incestuous.

Now, someone might ask, "How does this rhyme with the high moral standards and good theology of the Bible?"

Well, a great Reformed theologian gives this answer: "...the prohibition against intermarriage was not established in creation, but only later in history." What's more, "We also know that biological problems from intermarriage do not ordinarily arise in the first generation. Only after repeated generations do we begin to see birth defects and other problems resulting from the intermarriage of blood relatives." And so, "Initially, the populating of the earth required blood relationships, but God refused to allow that to continue once there were spouses available who were not immediately related by blood."⁵

My brother & sister, I'm so glad that if there's one law of God which our government still upholds, it is this one – the one of not marrying a blood-relative.

You see, at the time when our son, Johan, wanted to get married to Xiaocun (pronounced "Shout-soon") and they went to the government's **Births, Deaths and Marriage** office (BDM), the officer who went with them through the application form, read also this question out to them: "Are you blood relatives?" Well, there were smiles & laughter when this officer looked up from reading this question, and saw that there was no way in which they could be blood relatives – he from Western European stock and she a beautiful young Chinese lady!

Well, it is incestuous marriage, and marriage of affinity, that God's Word strongly prohibits – not only in Leviticus 18 and 20, but also in other parts of Scripture where...

- Amos says (in Amos 2:7), "...*And a man and his father resort to the same girl in order to profane My holy name.*"⁶
- John the Baptist rebukes Herod for living with his brother's wife!⁷
- The Apostle Paul (in 1 Cor 5:1) rebukes the church of Corinth because they did not lift a finger to discipline a man who had his father's wife!⁸

Well, so far regarding point 1: "No Close Blood-Relative and No Marriage of Affinity." Here is point 2...

Reasons for Divorce

Based upon the Bible, WCF 24.5 has strong words against sexual unfaithfulness during *engagement*, and also against sexual unfaithfulness during *marriage*.

⁴ Gen 5:4 *Then the days of Adam after he became the father of Seth were eight hundred years, and he had other sons and daughters* (NASB).

⁵ Sproul (ibid:37)

⁶ [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Am 2:7). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

⁷ Mark 6:17-18, *For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married.* ¹⁸ *For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."*

⁸ 1 Cor 5:1 *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife.*

Firstly, this is how it has summarised what the Bible says about unfaithfulness during *engagement*:

“Adultery or fornication committed after engagement (i.e., after the two got engaged), if detected before marriage, gives valid reason to the innocent party to break the engagement.”

Young people, engagement among God’s Old-Testament people was much more legally binding than engagement today. That is why the Hebrew word for *getting engaged*⁹ has in many English translations been rendered with the word *betrothing*, which means *to formally pledge your troth* (truthfulness/faithfulness) to your fiancé/fiancée. You see, in Bible times, the engaged couple were by law considered husband & wife even though they did not live together until after the wedding. What’s more: if it became known that either he or she was unfaithful to one another, then, by God’s Old-Testament law, both of them could receive the death penalty.¹⁰ That’s why Mary’s fiancé, Joseph, was greatly disturbed when he found out that she was expecting a baby! And he was only able to make peace with her situation when an angel of the Lord revealed to him that Mary had conceived her baby through the overshadowing power of God’s Holy Spirit.¹¹

Well, although engagement in Bible times was more legally binding than ours, a Christian engaged couple today should in no lesser way be faithful to one another.

And so, if sexual unfaithfulness (*adultery* or *fornication* – as the Westminster Confession calls it) occurs during the period of engagement, then, even today, such unfaithfulness is grounds enough for breaking the engagement.

So far regarding unfaithfulness during *engagement*!

⁹ The word *’ērash* (אָרַשׁ), *betroth*.

¹⁰ Cf. Dt 22:20-27 *But if the thing is true, that evidence of virginity was not found in the young woman,*

²¹ *then they shall bring out the young woman to the door of her father’s house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death with stones, because she has done an outrageous thing in Israel by whoring in her father’s house. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.*

²² *“If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.*

²³ *“If there is a betrothed virgin, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her, ²⁴ then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry for help though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbor’s wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.*

²⁵ *“But if in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. ²⁶ But you shall do nothing to the young woman; she has committed no offense punishable by death. For this case is like that of a man attacking and murdering his neighbor, ²⁷ because he met her in the open country, and though the betrothed young woman cried for help there was no one to rescue her.*

¹¹ Cf. Mt 1:18-21 *This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

²⁰ *But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”*

What about unfaithfulness during *marriage*?

Well, based upon the Bible, WCF 24.5 says:

In the case of adultery after marriage (i.e., after the two got married), it is lawful for the innocent party to seek a divorce, and after the divorce to remarry just as if the offending party were dead.

Well, some churches (like e.g., the Roman Catholic Church) believe that there are no valid reasons for a divorce – never ever!¹²

But our Lord Jesus gives a different answer. You see, in our New-Testament passage, we hear how some Pharisees came to Jesus and asked him about this very matter.¹³

Of course, in short, our Lord 's answer was that, originally, God did not intend for divorce to happen. Originally (from the beginning), marriage was intended to be a lifelong contract without dissolution/termination!

But then Christ gave an “except” clause – except for sexual immorality!¹⁴

So, Christ allows for divorce only on one ground, i.e., sexual immorality.

But then the Apostle Paul, in the Holy Spirit, added another ground for divorce, i.e., desertion by an unbelieving spouse. Yes, in 1 Cor 7:15, Paul says, “***But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances...***”¹⁵

That’s when a spouse deserts his/her life’s partner.

¹² Cf. Sproul (ibid:38), and also e.g., <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z7w2fg8/revision/3> “The Roman Catholic Church does not recognise divorce. A marriage can only end when one partner dies or if there are grounds for an annulment. A couple may be granted a civil divorce and be divorced in the eyes of the state, but their marriage will continue 'in the eyes of God'.”

¹³ Mt 19:1-12, ***When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.***

³ ***Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”***

⁴ ***“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’⁵ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”***

⁷ ***“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”***

⁸ ***Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”***

¹⁰ ***The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”***

¹¹ ***Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”*** (NIV84).

¹⁴ In Greek, *mē epi porneiai* (μη ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ), *except for sexual immorality (fornication)*.

For *mē* (μη) meaning “except,” cf. “...in conditional clauses after ἐάν Mt 5:20; 6:15; 10:13; 12:29; 18:3, 16, 35; 26:42; Mk 3:27; 7:3f; 10:30; 12:19; Lk 13:3, 5; J 3:2f, 5, 27 al. After ὅς ἄν (=ἐάν) Mt 10:14; 11:6; 19:9; Mk 6:11; 10:15; 11:23; Lk 8:18; 18:17...” (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., pp. 644–646). Chicago: University of Chicago Press). (Underscoring of Mt 19:9, mine).

¹⁵ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. (1984). (1 Co 7:15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Now, some people have included physical abuse within the scope of desertion. They argue that the abuser has in effect deserted the spouse. But this is not so clear – and therefore interpretable by the church courts (elders and session).¹⁶

I remember long ago, when I was an elder in one of the RCNZ churches, there was a man who, over a very long period, failed to look after his wife & family financially – too picky when it came to what kind of job he wanted (he frowned upon manual labour, and kept on waiting for something that would bring in quick and easy money; and he lied to his wife about certain financial matters). Well, after several years of this behaviour – and without him repenting – that church’s Session decided to take that husband to the last step of discipline. And the reason that Session gave was that, over many years, he had broken the very trust relationship which is so foundational to any marriage!

I never heard what happened to that marriage afterwards.

Nevertheless, what we have just seen is that the Bible gives two grounds for divorce: adultery and desertion.

Yet, the following words need to be said as well: Even if there are just grounds for a divorce – be it adultery or desertion – it does not mean that he or she *must* end their marriage. It simply means that he or she *may* seek a divorce!¹⁷

But, sadly, the truth is that couples can often get themselves into a “dead-end street” in which their values & wills clash with each other. And, if they don’t get counselling (and listen to such counselling), then they can heap up a variety of reasons to justify their sinful behaviour – and to seek a divorce!

But what the WCF 24.5 teaches is that divorce cannot just happen at the whim of a human being. No, it can only happen on the two grounds just mentioned – adultery or desertion. Well, on that “note,” we have come to point 3 of the sermon...

Divorce and the Counsel of Godly Brothers & Sisters

My brother & sister (Young people), let’s pray that none of our marriages will ever end up in divorce!

But if it ever comes to the stage that any brother or sister is contemplating seeking a divorce on the grounds mentioned, let such person (and all of us) then remember that there is great wisdom in the counsel of brothers & sisters in the Lord!

You see, based upon the case law mentioned in Dt 24:1-4, the WCF’s article 24.6 says, “*a public and orderly procedure is to be observed, and the persons concerned are not to be left to their own wills and discretion in their own case.*”

And the value of this Old-Testament law suggests that, since marriage is such an intimate thing, and the breakdown of marriage such a destructive thing, the husband and wife

¹⁶ Cf. Sproul (ibid:39).

¹⁷ Well-said words of Sproul (ibid:40). Also cf. Van Dixhoorn (ibid:330) who says, “Illicit sexual activity does not necessitate a divorce; it does not even make divorce recommended; but it certainly justifies it.” Also cf. Mt 5:31-32, “***It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery***” (NIV 1984).

Also, cf. Mt 19:9, “***I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery***” (NIV 1984).

Also cf. Rm 7:2-3, “***For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage.³ So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man***” (NIV 1984).

should not be left to make the decision themselves. They ought to seek wise counsel from the church and the state – and then they ought to pay attention to it!¹⁸

After all, is it not so that marriage starts at a wedding ceremony which is very much *public* – and at which *vows* are *publicly* made!?

So, that being the case, is it then not true that there should be an orderly attempt made by that couple and their elders and godly brothers & sisters in order to try and mend that marriage!?

And is it not fair to say that, only if such remedial action fails, then should we consider there to be sufficient cause to dissolve the strong bond of marriage?

Perhaps someone might ask, “But, pastor, is it not possible that, at least, part of the elders and church community could be wrong in their advice to the person(s) seeking a divorce?”

Well, one has to admit – there is always such a possibility. To give an example, I know of at least two cases in which a man had committed adultery, then pleaded for forgiveness, but his wife refused to receive him back as her husband. Yet, then sadly that woman was severely criticised by the rest of the community!

And, in this regard, I love the words of RC Sproul, from which I quote:

“If a man commits adultery and then pleads for forgiveness from his wife, it is her duty to forgive him. She has no other option. But that doesn’t mean that she must stay married to him. She must forgive him and receive him as a brother in Christ, but she does not have to receive him as husband in Christ. His behaviour radically undermined the trust that is foundational to an intimate marital relationship. If she cannot continue in such a damaged relationship, God gives her the freedom to dissolve it.” Sproul continues saying, “I have seen the Christian community criticise the innocent party in such circumstances for going ahead with the divorce. But the person has that right, and it is wrong to condemn that Christian for exercising his or her right.”¹⁹

So far, regarding point 3

Here is the last point...

What about Marrying Someone Else after a Divorce?

My brother & sister, we once had it in our extended family that a brother-in-law’s wife died. Then, about two years later, friends introduced him to another woman – but a woman who was divorced by about ten years!

The first reaction of our brother-in-law was that he would not marry her, because she was a divorced woman – and Christ said that *anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery!* Well, as the weeks went by, this brother-in-law started feeling quite attracted to this woman. And so, he asked me, “But what exactly did Christ mean when he said that anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery?”

And so, I studied the Scriptures and the commentaries. And here is what I found...

Indeed (in Mt 5:32), our Lord did say those words, but He said it in a specific context.

Here is what He said, “***But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress*** (literally: causes her to undergo adultery),²⁰ ***and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery***” (NIV).

¹⁸ My adaptation of the well-said words of Van Dixhoorn (ibid:331)

¹⁹ Sproul (ibid:41).

²⁰ Note: the Greek is using the passive voice of the verb – it uses ποιεί αὐτήν μοιχευθῆναι (lit. “...he [her husband] causes her to suffer adultery”). μοιχευθῆναι is an aorist passive infinitive of μοιχεύω, i.e. in the passive it means “to undergo adultery.” Thus, her husband *does* wrong; she *suffers* wrong.

Now, did Christ really mean that *every* woman who gets put away by her husband will be guilty of adultery if another man marries her – and that that other man will also be guilty of adultery if he married her?

My brother & sister, our Lord was against the easy divorce habits by which some people quickly jump from one relationship to another.²¹

You see, if a man divorces his wife, then she as well as other men should be careful.

Why?

Well, because she and her husband should first be given the chance to get back together again. If this couple is not allowed that chance, then, who knows (as one commentator says), it might well be that, before the two could be reunited, “*she, in her deserted state, could give in to the temptation of becoming married to someone else. So, the erring husband should be given the chance to correct his error, that is, the chance to go back to his wife.*”²²

My brother & sister, it is clear: our Lord hates adultery and He hates divorce. But, together with some Reformed commentators, I believe that in Mt 5:32, our Lord was not talking about a divorced woman whose divorce took place on one of the two biblical grounds (adultery or desertion); and it is a divorce that has been well and truly established.²³

And that is why the WCF’s article 24.5 says that *in the case of adultery after marriage it is lawful for the innocent party to seek a divorce and after divorce to remarry just as if the offending party were dead.*

And that was exactly the case with the woman our brother-in-law then married – she had been divorced, sad as it was, but she had been divorced because of desertion by her husband; and she was divorced for at least ten years already with no contact between her and her previous husband. What’s more, in that divorce of so long ago, she was the innocent party. And so, she was free to remarry as if the offending party were dead!

We want to conclude...

²¹ Cf. Kuyvenhoven, A. 1988. *Comfort & Joy: a study of the Heidelberg Catechism*. Grand Rapids, MI : Faith Alive. p.243 for, “In Mark 10:20-11 and Luke 16:18 Christ taught that a husband or wife who divorces his or her partner and marries another one commits adultery. One who marries a divorced person also commits adultery, he says. In this saying Jesus speaks against the easy divorce that was often an excuse for getting another partner, and calls it adultery. But in Matthew 19:9, while the same saying calls such divorce adultery, it adds an exception – “except for marital unfaithfulness.” Although Jesus did not intend to give a justification for divorce, he acknowledged that sometimes his condemnation does not apply because of grave sins in the situation.

A similar statement would be “All killing, except in the case of provocation, is murder.” Such a statement does not approve killing just because provocation has occurred. It does say that a further assessment of the whole situation is required before the murder charge applies. And in the same way, apparently, all divorce cannot be called adultery.

Scripture also considers divorce a possibility in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16. Thus, while the church cannot leave any doubt concerning God’s will for marriage, it must also take into account actions and circumstances that happen in a sinful world and that are opposed to God’s will for marriage.”

²² My adaptation of W. Hendriksen’s comments on Mt 5:32, for which cf. Hendriksen, W. 2004. *New Testament Commentary: exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Book House. p.306.), “...*she, in her deserted state, should yield to the temptation of becoming married to someone else. (Thus,) the erring husband should be given an opportunity to correct his error, that is, to go back to his wife.*”

²³ For such commentators, cf. footnotes 17 and 18

My brother & sister, marriage is the closest relationship that will ever exist between two human beings here on earth! And how beautiful – and what a blessing – it can be if he and she live humbly with one another, and on God’s terms and for His glory!
And as we seek counsel (whether that counsel is premarital or martial or, sadly, towards a divorce), we ought to seek God most earnestly!
I mean, let every young person who is not yet married – and every married person – understand that adultery and desertion are some of the sorest trials ever to be suffered by human beings. And the only counsel, wisdom and comfort is to be found in the One who is always faithful – the One who has instigated marriage!

AMEN (2,701 words excluding footnotes)