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HOW TO AVOID DIVORCE

(Part 1)

Malachi 2:13-16

By

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September 7, 2003

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Malachi Lesson 5

How to Avoid Divorce (Part 1) Malachi 2:13-16

Over the past 30 years America has experienced an epidemic of divorce. Probably every person here has a family member or close friend who has gone through divorce. Many of you grew up in Christian homes where your parents split up. In fact, many of you have been divorced. It used to be that evangelical Christians, while not exempt, at least had a better track record than the general public. But that no longer seems to be the case.

Even some well-known pastors and Christian leaders have gone through divorces. A 1981 survey showed that ministers ranked third among the professions in the number of divorces granted each year, behind medical doctors and police (*Leadership* [Fall, 1981], p. 119). I have seen many pastors go through divorce.

I have no desire to heap guilt or condemnation on those who have already been traumatized by divorce. If you sinned in your marriage (inevitably *both* sides sin in divorce situations), I trust that you have confessed your sin to the Lord and sought the forgiveness of those you sinned against. We cannot undo the past. But we can learn from our mistakes and grow as we walk in daily repentance. So I don't want to add to anyone's pain. But I do want to call us back to God's standard of lifelong marriage and give some biblical principles that can help all of us avoid divorce.

This problem affected both the priests and the people in Malachi's day. In our text, the prophet unfolds God's perspective on marriage and divorce and gives us some principles for cultivating our marriage relationships so that we can not merely avoid divorce, but also have satisfying marriages that glorify God.

It is significant that our text addresses men. In fact, most biblical texts on marriage and family are addressed to men, not to the women. The Bible allows no refuge for passive men who do not take an active role in their marriages and in rearing children. Since our text addresses the men, so will I. It says:

To avoid divorce, develop God's perspective on marriage and cultivate your relationship with your wife.

Due to time constraints, we must save the second half of that statement for next week. This week, we will focus on *God's* perspective, which we must develop and maintain in our marriages.

To avoid divorce, develop God's perspective on marriage.

Divorce, like all sins, always starts in the mind. Today, our society is far more permissive towards divorce than it was 50 years ago, and this has flooded into the church. When Adlai Stevenson ran against Dwight Eisenhower for president in 1956, it was a big deal that Stevenson had been divorced. But when Ronald Reagan ran against Jimmy Carter in 1980, Reagan's divorce was hardly mentioned. It was Reagan who as governor of California signed the nation's first no-fault divorce law in 1969. Now all 50 states have such laws. It is now easier to get out of a marriage than it is to get out of a car-lease contract! So we need God's perspective.

1. To avoid divorce, view marriage problems as God views them.

If you get married, you will have marriage problems. If you say, "I'm married, but I don't have any problems," you *really* have problems, because you're out of touch with reality! Any time two sinners with different backgrounds and ways of thinking, come together in a relationship as close as marriage, you've got problems! There are ungodly and godly ways of dealing with those problems. Our text reveals two ways that God views our marriage problems:

A. Marriage problems stand between the believer and God.

These guys were trading in their older Jewish wives for newer Canaanite models. Then they stopped by the temple to do their religious thing. For some strange reason, their crops were failing. So they were covering the altar of the Lord with tears, weeping, and groaning, because the Lord did not regard their offerings (2:13). But they didn't make the connection! They ask, "Why doesn't God notice all the nice offerings that we bring to Him?"

This sounds incredible, but I find that guys still do the same thing. They go to church and look very spiritual. If someone asks how they're doing with the Lord, they say, "Just great, thanks!" But

at home, things aren't so great. They're at odds with their wives. They aren't leading their families in the things of God. If you press them, they will blame their wives for the tensions in the home. Meanwhile, things aren't going so well at work. But they don't make the connection. They cry out, "Lord, why aren't You blessing my career?" He says, "I'll give you a hint: How is your relationship with your wife?"

Jesus said, "If you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering" (Matt. 5:23-24). Peter applies this principle to marriage when he says [1 Pet. 3:7, *New Living Translation*], "You husbands must give honor to your wives. Treat her with understanding as you live together. She may be weaker than you are, but she is your equal partner in God's gift of new life. If you don't treat her as you should, your prayers will not be heard."

So if your prayers are not being answered, both Peter and Malachi say, "How are you doing with your wife?" If you say, "Things are fine between me and God, but my wife is a problem," God says, "Everything is *not* fine between you and Me! Get things right with your wife!"

B. Marriage problems stem from the hardness and deceitfulness of the human heart.

Twice the Lord warns these men, "Take heed then to your spirit and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth" (2:15, 16). Divorce (and the marriage problems that lead to it) is a problem of the spirit, or heart. When the Pharisees (who also took a loose view of divorce) asked Jesus why Moses allowed divorce, He replied, "Because of the hardness of your heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way" (Matt. 19:8). Divorce is an indicator that at least one person, and almost always two, has a hard heart.

There is no contradiction between Moses' permission of divorce (Deut. 24:1-4) and God's hatred of it (Mal. 2:16). I understand the Bible to *allow* (not mandate) divorce in cases of unrepentant sexual immorality (Matt. 5:32; 19:9; Deut. 24:1; Jer. 3:6-10); and

when an unbeliever deserts a believer (1 Cor. 7:10-16). But God still hates it. Divorce does not glorify Him. People always get hurt, especially the children. Even in cases of sexual infidelity, I believe that God is most glorified when there is genuine repentance and forgiveness, not when there is divorce.

We all need to pay attention to God's repeated warning here, "Take heed to your spirit." Just as calluses form naturally on my skin at points of friction, so they form on my spirit at points of friction. If there is friction in my marriage, I am in danger of becoming insensitive towards my wife and towards my own sin. If I am blaming my wife or blaming God for things that are not going well in my life, I am exhibiting signs of a hard heart or spirit. If you want an exercise in self-examination, I commend to you Stuart Scott's booklet, *From Pride to Humility* (excerpted from his book, *The Exemplary Husband* [Focus Publishing]). He shows many specific ways that our pride blinds us to reality.

Our hearts are not only prone to hardness, but also to deceitfulness. "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). We all tend to gloss over or excuse our own sin, and then blame others. These men, who were callously dumping their wives, were saying, "How should I know why God isn't regarding my offerings?" Their sin was deceiving them from perceiving reality.

Proverbs 19:3 says [*New Living Translation*], "People ruin their lives by their own foolishness and then are angry at the Lord." These men were abandoning their wives for younger, more attractive models, but were upset with God because their crops were failing! They were probably bitter at their wives, blaming them for being nags or for having a bad attitude. As marriage problems mount, it's tempting to walk away from the problems and start over with a "clean slate." Along comes someone new and exciting, who is so understanding of the ordeal that you've gone through with your insensitive mate. So you trade in the older model with all the problems for a newer model that doesn't seem to rattle quite so much. What a relief! What a sense of "peace"! But this is *not* God's way! Take heed to your spirit!

So we need to develop God's perspective on marriage problems. They stand between us and God and they stem from the

hardness and deceitfulness of our hearts. But we also need God's perspective in another area:

2. To avoid divorce, view the marriage covenant as God views it.

Our self-centered, pleasure-oriented society has done away with the idea of a lifelong covenant as the basis of marriage, but we need to recover this truth (2:14):

A. Marriage is a covenant.

A covenant is a formal legal agreement or contract entered into in the presence of witnesses, which has certain binding obligations. Marriage, in God's design, is based on a covenant, not on feelings of romantic love. The excuse, which I've often heard, "I don't love her [or him] anymore" is not valid. God's reply is, "Learn to love each other as I commanded you."

In biblical times, most marriages were arranged by the parents, not by those getting married. That did not mean that the couple had nothing to say about it. But it does mean that two people who may not have feelings of romantic love can develop those feelings in the context of a lifelong marriage covenant. The Bible does not say, "Marry your lover." It does say, "Love the one you're married to" (Eph. 5:25). Romantic love is built and sustained on the foundation of the commitment of the covenant. That commitment is the glue that holds the marriage together during the inevitable times of stress.

B. Marriage is a serious covenant.

God is the witness of the marriage covenant (2:14). Because God takes that covenant seriously and views it as lifelong, it must be entered into prayerfully and with much godly counsel. If we harbor the thought, "If it doesn't work out, we will get a divorce," we do *not* have God's perspective!

He says, "I hate divorce" (2:16). He adds that divorce covers a man's garment with violence or wrong. This phrase stems from a Hebrew custom. When we get engaged, we usually give an engagement ring, but the Hebrews had a different custom. A man would take his robe or outer garment and drape it around his prospective bride as a symbol of the protection and care that he was

offering to her as her husband (Ruth 3:9; Ezek. 16:8; Deut. 22:30). Thus “garment” is used as a figure of speech for marriage. To cover his garment with violence means that a man is treating cruelly the woman whom he pledged to protect. God calls it treachery and says that He hates it.

The danger in our day of easy, quick, and common divorce is that we will shrug off or even call good what God hates. In a “Dear Abby” column (9/30/02), a woman wrote,

I am a 39-year-old married woman who has lost all hope. My convictions and emotions are in severe conflict. I’m a deeply devout person, which made the divorce from my first husband extremely traumatic. When I remarried, I made a religious commitment that I would make my second marriage work, and under no circumstances would I ever leave my new husband.

Because of that commitment, I feel I must honor my pledge—even though there is no love, no intimacy and no marriage anymore. My husband has refused me children and provides me nothing but cold, unwanted solitude in our home.

She goes on to say how severely depressed and trapped she feels, since she has no way out. She concludes, “Abby, all I want is to get out of this marriage so I can start over—but my oath is holding me hostage. Please help.”

Abby tells her to speak to her spiritual advisor to relieve her of her “well-intentioned but unrealistic oath.” Abby says, “Ask yourself if a loving God would want you to remain in a loveless marriage that is a marriage in name only.”

Abby subsequently (11/12/02) printed letters from two ordained ministers (one male, one female) assuring this woman that God is love and does not want anyone to live in such a situation. She must forgive herself and love herself. In fact, by staying with her husband, she was doing him a grave disservice, because she is unable to love him. Abby thanks both ministers, agreeing that “we cannot love another person until we first learn to love ourselves.”

I read of a Congressional hearing on the high divorce rate where an “expert” (*i.e.*, psychologist) stated that our high divorce rate actually shows how highly Americans value family life, because

it shows that we are unwilling to accept anything less than the best (cited by Jerry Regier, *Pastoral Renewal* [6/88], p. 13). Go figure!

We could laugh at these examples of convoluted, worldly wisdom, except that they've infiltrated the church. I've read of well-known Christians who have left their mates with the excuse that God wants them to be happy after all the years of misery they've endured in their sour marriages. A conservative Christian wrote,

I hope my wife will never divorce me, because I love her with all my heart. But if one day she feels I am minimizing her or making her feel inferior or in any way standing in the light that she needs to become a person God meant her to be, I hope she'll be free to throw me out even if she's one hundred. There is something more important than our staying married, and it has to do with integrity, personhood, and purpose (cited by Francis Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* [Crossway], pp. 132-133).

Another Christian writer argues that "there can be as much sin involved in trying to perpetuate a dead or meaningless relationship as in accepting the brokenness, offering it to God, and going on from there." Os Guinness wryly comments, "Disobeying Christ out of faithfulness to Christ! The irony is exquisite!" (*ibid.* p. 133).

So we must view marriage as a serious covenant before God, because He hates divorce. Also,

C. Marriage is a purposeful covenant.

Our text reveals three of God's purposes for marriage:

- 1) Marriage is intended to provide companionship between a husband and wife.

"She is your companion..." (2:14). I will deal with this more next week, but for now note that when God created Adam, he was in a perfect environment, in perfect fellowship with God. What more could he want? But God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18), and He created Eve for Adam.

When I was single, I would sometimes hear some super-spiritual advice to the effect that I just needed to be content with being single. If I couldn't find contentment, something must be wrong with my relationship with God. But I used to go back to

Genesis 2 and base my argument in prayer on God's word, "It is not good for the man to be alone." While some are gifted to be single (1 Cor. 7:7), there is nothing unspiritual about desiring a lifelong companion. God created us with that desire!

- 2) Marriage is intended to be a picture of the believer's relationship with God.

Verse 16 is the only time in Malachi that God is called "the God of Israel." The reason that designation appears here in the context of God saying that He hates divorce, is that divorce smudges the picture of God's covenant love for His wife, Israel (see Isa. 54:5-8). In New Testament terms, the church is the bride of Christ, and husbands are exhorted to love their wives just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her (Eph. 5:25-33). Christian marriage should reflect the eternal covenant love of Jesus Christ for His chosen bride, the church. The world should be able to look at a Christian husband's faithful love for his wife and get a glimpse of how God loves those who are in a covenant relationship with Him. Divorce shatters our witness to a world that desperately needs to know of God's great love.

- 3) Marriage is intended to reproduce godly offspring.

Commentators acknowledge that verse 15 is the most difficult verse in Malachi to translate. There are several suggested variations. Rather than confuse you with all of the views, I'll just give you the view that I consider the best. The text should read, "Did He [God] not make [them] one [referring to God's making Adam and Eve one flesh in marriage] although He had the remnant of the Spirit?" In other words, God had enough creative power to make many wives for Adam if He had thought that best. But He only created one wife and made the two into one flesh in marriage. The text continues, "Why one? He sought a godly offspring."

So in arguing against divorce (and polygamy), Malachi says, "God didn't make multiple wives for Adam, although He could have done so. He gave Adam one wife, in part, because it is more difficult to raise godly offspring in a multiple marriage situation." God's design for the family always has been one man and one woman who covenant together for life, because that is the best situation for rearing children who follow the Lord.

I admire and respect single parents who work hard to provide for their children. The normal day for many single mothers is enough to make most of us want to go take a nap! As a church, we should help single moms by providing male role models for boys and girls who do not have a father in the home. Yet at the same time I must say that God's best is for children to be raised in a home where the father and mother provide the security of a committed covenant relationship, demonstrating the love of Christ toward one another.

Conclusion

In 1990, Robertson McQuilkin, the president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary, surprised many in the Christian world when he resigned his position in order to care for his wife, Muriel, who had Alzheimer's disease. He was in his early sixties and could have served much longer. His wife could no longer communicate in sentences, and even her phrases were often nonsensical. She needed around the clock care. Since she would only grow worse, trusted, lifelong, godly friends urged McQuilkin to put her in an institution and continue his ministry. He wrote of his struggle, but then said,

When the time came, the decision was firm. It took no great calculation. It was a matter of integrity. Had I not promised, 42 years before, "in sickness and in health ... till death do us part"?

This was no grim duty to which I was stoically resigned, however. It was only fair. She had, after all, cared for me for almost four decades with marvelous devotion; now it was my turn. And such a partner she was! If I took care of her for 40 years, I would never be out of her debt.

McQuilkin was startled by the public response to his resignation. He heard of husbands and wives renewing their marriage vows, of pastors telling the story to their congregations. It was a mystery to him why it attracted such attention, until an oncologist friend, who lives constantly with dying people, told him, "Almost all women stand by their men; very few men stand by their women." Robertson concludes,

It is all more than keeping promises and being fair, however. As I watch her brave descent into oblivion, Muriel is the joy of my life. Daily I discern new manifestations of the kind of person she is, the wife I always loved. I also see fresh manifestations of God’s love—the God I long to love more fully (*Christianity Today* [10/8/90], p. 40).

If the word “divorce” pops into your mind, think about divorcing our godless culture. To avoid divorce in your marriage, develop God’s covenant perspective!

Discussion Questions

1. How can we uphold God’s standard of lifelong covenant marriage and yet minister sensitively to divorced people?
2. Are there ever situations where two Christians are simply too incompatible to stay together in marriage? Explain.
3. How far can we push Christian marriage standards (*i.e.*, tougher divorce laws) in a pagan culture?
4. What does a husband do when his wife is really a difficult person to get along with? How does confrontation fit with love?

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