

Divorce: The Corruption Of A Covenant

by Steve Zeisler

During their time of preparation for marriage, people are at the height of hope and anticipation. One of the privileges of being in the ministry is to be able to participate in that preparation. But that privilege carries with it responsibility, because a pastor has to delve into at least two important issues with a couple who plan to be married.

The first issue concerns the spiritual unity of the couple. Do they both share a commitment to Jesus Christ? A Christian who chooses to marry someone with whom he or she cannot become spiritually one, someone who cannot willingly serve as Christ's instrument in the marriage, is a disobedient Christian. However, the attraction of romantic love makes some couples want to deny the validity of that question.

The second issue concerns whether either of them is still bound to a previous marriage. Are they both free before the Lord to be married, or do they have a prior marriage commitment to which the Lord holds them responsible? That too is a difficult question, one that people in love find hard to face.

I mention these concerns because the passage in the book of Malachi which we are going to study this morning raises these issues. The prophet addresses these difficult questions in chapter 2, beginning with verse 10:

"Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers? Judah has dealt treacherously, and an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord which He loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. As for the man who does this, may the Lord cut off from the tents of Jacob everyone who awakes and answers, or who presents an offering to the Lord of hosts. And this is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts It with favor from your hand. Yet you say, 'For what reason?' Because the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then, to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce," says the Lord, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the Lord of hosts. "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously."

Before we go any further, I would like to say a word to those of you who have been gritting your teeth ever since you read the title of the message this morning; you realized we were going to be talking about divorce, and you may perhaps be sick and tired of hearing about divorce. For some who were recently divorced, or others who are in a hurtful marital situation right now, this is a most painful subject. Because of the emotional floodtide that threatens to overwhelm them, some people who are sitting in this room cannot dispassionately consider what the Bible teaches about divorce. I want you to know that I appreciate that fact. It may well be that it will be hard for you to benefit much from what I will have to say.

To encourage you, let me tell you where we will come out at the end of this message. This passage is not about judgment, primarily, nor is it about God's anger concerning past failures. The thrust, the lesson of the passage is in the last phrase of verse 16: "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously." Here is an appeal to examine your situation right now and to resolve from this point on to obey Jesus Christ in this area of your life. Whatever your condition is at this moment, starting now the appeal of Scripture is, "Take heed to your spirit." If indeed you are "dealing treacherously," stop it. That, hopefully, will be the lesson we will take home with us this morning.

Historically, the two issues raised by Malachi, Judah's "marrying the daughter of a foreign god" (dealt with in verses 10 through 12), and secondly, divorce, and God's ringing declaration, "I hate divorce" (in verses 13 through 16), were intrinsically tied together. It seems likely that the Israelite men to whom Malachi was ministering were divorcing their Israelite wives and running off with younger and more attractive Canaanite women-- an ancient version of what today is called the "mid-- life crisis." In both cases the prophet is telling Israelite men and women that if they marry someone who is not committed to their Lord, or if they divorce their mates, they are violating a covenant.

In Scripture, the concept of a covenant is critical. A covenant is a solemn agreement between two parties. Covenants are more important than the laws of physics. The covenants God made concerning what he would do in relation to human beings-- about his commitment to his people, about the kind of God he is, about his unfailing determination to make people what they ought to be-- are more important than the laws of gravity, electromagnetism, or any of the physical laws which God has built into the universe. Solemn, wholehearted agreements-- covenants-- between individuals are sacred in the eyes of God. That is where Malachi centers his argument: covenants were being violated; great and awesome promises were being trampled upon. That was the problem to which the prophet addressed himself.

The people of God are responsible to give God the right to choose their marriage partners. In both the Old and the New Testament alike, God is on record as saying that it is wrong for his followers to intimately join themselves in marriage with those who are not his followers. It is wrong for us to give our future resources, our deepest emotions, the position of greatest human influence, to somebody who is at odds with us spiritually, somebody with whom we can never serve the Lord, somebody who will never understand our prayers, who will be drawing us away from the Lord. If Jesus Christ is our Lord, if Yahweh is our Lord, then we have to give him the right to choose whom we should marry. God is very serious about this.

Consider the questions raised by Malachi in verse 10 to underline the authority of the Lordship of Yahweh, the Lordship of our Lord. First, "Do we not all have one father?" To the Jews, this would immediately bring to mind Abraham, the father of their nation. The Jews drew their identity from their physical relationship to Abraham, whereas we Gentiles have been adopted by grace into the family of God. According to Scripture, if we have the same faith that Abraham had, then we too are counted as Abraham's children. Our identity, the name with which we name ourselves, ought to be based upon the gracious actions of God. Our identity is wrapped up in what God has done for us, as it also was for the Jews. That fact ought to underline his Lordship, his authority, in our lives.

The second question is, "Has not one God created us?" God created us, he owns us, therefore he has certain rights over us. When we think of God in this light we are reminded that we owe him our total obedience. Here the prophet is saying that God is our Sovereign because he created us.

Thirdly, "Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother?" Here Malachi is sounding another note to underline the authority of our Lord. We are part of a community-- the family of God-- that includes people from all over the earth. The wonderful brother-- sister relationships which we have in the body of Christ ought to remind us that Jesus is Lord. Given this relationship, it is distressing to see how one man or one woman's failure, especially failure in this area of choosing marriage partners, seems to have a rippling effect. Children, friends, young Christians and new believers struggle to make sense of it all. We are brothers and sisters, bound together by our common faith, and as such we have a responsibility to the members of our family. The fact that we are part of this family ought to remind us that the Head of our family, Jesus Christ, is in charge of our lives.

The most important statement of verse 10 is Malachi's reminder to the Israelites of "the covenant of our fathers." On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took the cup and said. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." This arrangement, this new covenant, this solemn promise of God was sealed with the blood of Christ. We Christians are his by covenant. We are his by the eternal agreement we have entered into, therefore, God has the right to command us. The question of whom we marry should first and foremost be the question, "Since I am his servant, whom does the Lord want me to marry?" We have no right to charge off_especially in an area as important as this_and do what we want, disregarding the things which God considers important.

Verse 12 sounds a note of judgment (the mention of the consequences of disobedience in these verses): "As for the man who does this, may the Lord cut off from the tents of Jacob everyone who awakes and answers, or who presents an offering to the Lord of hosts." Here Malachi is saying that those who have a cavalier disregard for God's will and go ahead and marry whom they ought not marry are living their lives as though the Lord was blind and powerless. They are wrong to think they can go about the ordinary business of the day (to "awake and answer") trotting into the temple at regular intervals to bring an offering, as if their behavior didn't make any difference. They rebel in an area as important as this and still go about life among the people of God and expect the Lord to ignore it. That is what got to Malachi, and that is why he cries, "May there be a separation from, an abandonment of those people who treat God so lightly, those people who disobey God and then carry on as if their actions did not matter, as if God should not be concerned." Such behavior was what bothered the prophet; that was what got under his skin.

This leads to the prophet's second concern. Beginning with verse 13 he takes up the subject of divorce, the abandoning of the marriage commitment:

"And this is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. Yet you say, 'For what reason?' "

Evidently people were crying out to God, either in anger or in self-righteousness, importuning him to be more responsive to them. They wondered why he did not treat them better. How dare he not be more responsive to them, to their interests and their needs? they asked. But Malachi reminds them that this was happening because God was a witness to the vows they took when they married, vows which they were now contemptuously disregarding. Why shouldn't God be concerned about that? Shouldn't God react to that? Should they be surprised that God took seriously their marriage covenant?

The force of this passage is not directed at those who have genuinely and deeply repented of their rebellion. It is not directed at people whose divorces are irretrievable, people who have repented of those days and those actions. Nor is this passage directed at those who were the victims of their mates' determination to flee or to destroy their marriage. It is not directed at those who have gone before the Lord and who have been open and willing to learn to be the kind of spouse they ought to be. Nor is the passage directed at the "bad guy," the one who destroyed his or her own marriage but who has come to an awareness of that and has asked the forgiveness of God and is willing to do whatever the Lord requires to put things right. Even those should not bear the weight of the prophet's analysis here.

Malachi is talking about people who do whatever they feel like doing with their marriage and yet expect God to overlook their behavior. They foolishly expect that the Lord who loves them, the Lord whom they called to witness their marriage, the Lord who is concerned about the next generation to not care that they have abandoned and turned their backs on their sacred covenant. Those are the people who ought to feel the weight of this prophetic word. In the Sermon on the Mount, 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 your way. First be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your offering." Our intimacy with the Lord will be greatly affected if we are hurting other people, if we are selfishly trampling on other people's feelings, if we are at odds with those who have a right to our love. We cannot expect God to take no notice of that. We are responsible to make right whatever relationships we can make right as we approach the Lord to be close to him. Peter made the same point concerning marriage: "Grant your wife honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life so that your prayers may not be hindered." Our prayer life is going to be affected by the way we treat people, especially our marriage partners.

The heart of Malachi's argument in this section, where he is talking about divorce, again centers around the subject of a covenant, as it did in verses 10--12. The main problem with divorce, as he illustrates it and expounds on it, is that another solemn agreement that has been entered into has been broken. When people marry they participate in an extremely significant, lifelong commitment, one that God himself is concerned with and one that affects other people. In marriage, a couple enters into a covenant, which is the same word used by God of his relationship with us. To trample on a covenant-- especially a covenant which the Lord has been called to witness-- is an extremely serious thing. But we sometimes regard our feelings as more important

than facts. We are even willing to adjust what we think are the facts in order to get them in line with our feelings; to act on our feelings rather than allow the truth to dictate our actions, although that truth contradicts what we feel inside. We feel that marriage is made up of nothing but the trauma, the conflicts, the hurt feelings and the frustrations that exist in any two-- person tension. But here we are reminded that there is a transcendence about marriage; marriage is witnessed in heaven and before the world. When a couple marry, they enter into something bigger than both of them, in effect. They have a certain responsibility, even though their feelings may seek to propel them toward irresponsibility.

The Hebrew in verse 15 is difficult to translate. The key word there is the word, "one." I think what it is saying is, "God made one." Thus this word is a reference to what happened when God took Adam and Eve and made them "one" flesh, "one" new person (Gen. 2). People enter into a covenant in marriage; a unity, a new life has begun, made up of two people in the process of becoming one. "God made one." That union affects the world in which we live; it even affects generations yet unborn. "God made one," looking for godly offspring, intending that demonstration of oneness would pass spiritual life to the next generation. He is concerned about blessing the rest of the world; he is considering the next generation. We are married by covenant. There is so much more to marriage than how we happen to feel at any given moment. There is more to marriage (even a difficult one) than the fights, the tension, the silence, the game-- playing. Marriage is set in a much bigger context than that. We are married by covenant.

In verse 14 Malachi uses two terms that support his basic appeal for faithfulness to the marriage covenant. First, speaking of the wife who is being divorced, the wife who is being left behind (and women should insert the word "husband" here, the husband who is being left behind, as that is increasingly the case), "She is the wife of your youth," the prophet says. She is the one with whom you fell in love years ago. Although many years have elapsed, although time and circumstances may have obscured your view of her-- it may be very difficult for you to see beyond the memories of all kinds of problems, to look back to the time when you were young-- yet she is the woman you married back then; she is the one you fell in love with; she is the same person.

Ron Ritchie told me of a conversation he had had with a friend of his recently. This friend, who had been divorced from his wife and had remarried, had just returned from another state, where he had travelled to see his children, who were living with his former wife and her husband. He reported to Ron that three awakenings of understanding had occurred to him on that trip. First, he had a new awareness of the tremendous pain he felt in knowing that his children were separated from him by many miles knowing that they were growing up away from him, knowing that another man was raising them. He felt the pain of this more deeply than ever before. Secondly, he became deeply aware of the mercy of God, because all four of the adults involved in this story are Christians now; all four of them are serious about their Lord; all four of them have received forgiveness from God for what had happened, and a new hope had taken root in their lives.

But the third thing that this man learned on his trip was the thing that interested me most. He and his former wife had had an opportunity to have a long conversation together lasting several hours. They talked about the old days, the things they had learned, etc., and this man thought to himself, "I remembered then why I had married her." Their divorce had been bitter; there had been angry words and both of them had grown very far apart. He had forgotten everything but the hard times that had been most recent, but on this trip and in that conversation he finally remembered what it was that attracted him to his former wife in the first place. He remembered why he had married her. He remembered the wife of his youth, the woman behind all the history of painful memories. It struck him that he had forgotten all those things about her. It seems to me that that is Malachi's point here. The woman you married back then is the same person, although it may be very difficult for you to see beyond all that has happened since then.

The second term which Malachi uses to describe the wife of your youth is that she is "your companion." This Hebrew word speaks of an almost mystical, life-sharing experience. It refers to people who are bound up together as deep and earnest friends. If the feminist movement in our day has done some good it is in this area. Christians have been helped to rediscover and call to mind again the biblical picture that husbands and wives are to be companions, friends and sharers of life together. They are not to be bound up with responsibilities that keep them from one another. There is to be a sharing of all areas of life. They are to do things together, to listen to each other, to take each other's point of view seriously, to find ways to do together what they might

otherwise have done separately. Husbands and wives are to be companions, treating each other as equals. Such is the great concept raised by the prophet here: "She is your companion and your wife by covenant."

In trying to think of something to illustrate this concept of companionship, the best I could come up with, if you'll pardon me, was to refer you to how TV commercials sell beer. You know the picture-- the two attractive, wealthy young couples, sitting around the fire, the snow falling outside, while they are holding their beer in a make-- believe portrayal of magnificent companionship and life-- sharing unity. Other commercials show them sitting on a beach together, the beautiful sunset in the background, etc., etc. These commercials just drip with this kind of loving, life-sharing sentiment. It goes without saying that the advertising industry is not stupid. They know how deeply people long for that kind of companionship. Never in history did beer create such companionship between people. But it is this image, which is so cleverly portrayed in those television advertisements, that Malachi places before us to seek after. In marriage, a mystical joining together in companionship, in life-- sharing, occurs. The wife of your youth is to be your companion. That is what God had in mind when he gave you to one another.

In summary, Malachi is here attempting to get the Israelites to face what they were doing in their marriages. The main point he is making is, What you do when you choose to marry someone, what you do when you choose to stay married to someone betrays the kind of attitude you have toward your God. If we aggressively create a situation that results in divorce, then we are disregarding our Lord; we are treating him with contempt. If we choose to marry somebody who is not his choice for us we are treating him with contempt. It is to this basis that Malachi returns again and again. Your actions in this area, your actions as a member of God's family display to yourself and to the world how serious you are about the Lordship of Jesus Christ in your life.

There is not a great deal of condemnation in this passage. The prophet does not build into his argument a list of the consequences, a description of all manners of misery which will befall people who sin in this area. That is not how he constructs his thinking. Where he leaves us is with what we should hold before ourselves as we leave this passage of Scripture: If all these things are true, if it matters this much to God, if you are his servant and he is your Lord, if all these things are true, "Take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously." Examine yourself. Examine the thoughts you have allowed to creep into your mind. Face the resentment that you refuse to let go of. Start admitting the areas where bitterness has been given a toehold in your life. Look squarely at the temptation to love another, the fantasy you have about being with some other person rather than the one to whom you are married. Examine yourself to see if Jesus Christ is in fact your Lord. Examine yourself to discern if what is happening inside you illustrates more and more your desire to do what matters to him; or whether it illustrates the fact that you are increasingly willing to disregard him, to treat him with contempt. "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously. "

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