

MARRIAGE & DIVORCE

Understanding the Marital Covenant



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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
is from the *King James Version*.

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“But from the beginning of the creation, God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. “Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.”

— Mark 10:6-9.

PREFACE

Both marriage and divorce stir up deep emotions. Marriage is a time of immense joy and excitement, both for those entering into it as well as for families and friends. Sadly, divorce produces the opposite extremes—even God said, “I hate divorce.”¹

Marriage is a special relationship between a man and woman that should be a lifelong sharing of thoughts, ideas, joy, sadness, intimacy, and all other aspects of our humanity. It is also something that is blessed by God because He intended marriage to be a covenant between the husband and wife established upon vows of love, faithfulness, and trust.

The marital covenant is central to marriage because a husband and wife vow to commit their lives to the relationship until death befalls one of them. This lifelong pledge produces the deepest love, the closest relationship, the greatest commitment, and is a wonderfully nurturing environment for a relationship with God.

Divorce, on the other hand, consumes people with grief, feelings of loss, and anger. The impact is usually widespread and the terrible cost includes broken families, child custody disputes, confused children, loss of friends, disparate alimony and/or child support, loss of possessions, and so forth.

¹ Mal. 2:16.

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Covenant vows are the most binding of all commitments between men and women and they are the very foundation of marriage. All vows are witnessed and attested by God and failure to fulfill a vow is a sin² against Him. When a vow is broken, it is an act of *betrayal*, a word that, in and of itself, evokes some of the most repulsive thoughts and feelings.

Marriage and divorce cannot be fully understood aside from an understanding of covenants and vows, but neither can they be considered without a familiarity in dealing with offenses, betrayals, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. To that end, the reader is highly encouraged to first read the booklet titled, “[OFFENSES—Ordinances of God](#)”, an understanding of which is assumed herein.

² Numbers 30:2; especially Deuteronomy 23:21.

CHAPTER 1

Marital Covenant

God created mankind with the genetic identities of male and female. His stated purpose was that they would fill the earth with their offspring—“Then God blessed them [*Adam and Eve*], “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth ...” (Gen. 1:28). Rather than following the random mating common to animals, God wanted children to be conceived and raised in an environment of love, faithfulness, and trust between their father and mother. As such, He intended the union of a man and woman to be a singular commitment to the exclusion of all others that endures until death annuls the covenant³.

MARK 10:6-9 “But from the beginning of the creation, God ‘made them male and female.’ 7 ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, 8 ‘and **the two shall become one flesh**’; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9 “Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.”

While the Bible does not explicitly mention that marriage is a *covenant*, it is quite clear this is the case in the parallel of the first covenant with ancient Israel when God said, “I am a husband” (Jer. 31:32). It also follows the pattern of the new covenant for Christians who will be the bride of Christ⁴. Regardless of the type, the definition of a covenant remains the same:

DEFINITION: A **Covenant** is a BINDING AGREEMENT wherein the two parties involved vow to fulfill certain obligations. A covenant requires a bond of trust to exist between the participants.

³ Romans 7:2.

⁴ Revelation 19:7-9; Matthew 26:28; et al.

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God's covenant with ancient Israel was based upon a lifetime⁵ commitment of love, faithfulness, and trust. The Israelites were chosen by God as His special people⁶ and God promised them long and healthy physical lives filled with abundance. For their part, the Israelites were to love⁷ God and obey His Law as outlined in the Bible and summarized in the Ten Commandments.

To emphasize their covenant role to God, the first and second commandments demanded loyalty to their Husband and, together, these two forbid what can be generally described as “spiritual immorality.” Sadly, it was ancient Israel's adultery with pagan gods that was the deciding factor when God divorced Israel⁸. Adultery is so offensive to God that these two commandments formed the basis of the seventh commandment that forbids adultery in a marriage between a husband and wife.

DEFINITION: **Adultery** is intentional SEXUAL BETRAYAL of a spouse by a person under a marital covenant and a person outside of that covenant.

Because of their unfaithfulness, the old covenant with ancient Israel was replaced with the new covenant after the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Like the old covenant, it is also a marital covenant. While God's Law is still obligatory, the terms are now raised to a new level of spiritual obedience and God's promises are eternal life and spiritual blessings rather than physical ones.

It is plain that the constitutions of both the old and new covenants are archetypes of the marital covenant for marriages between men and women, even though marriage was originally instituted by God in the beginning with Adam and Eve⁹.

⁵ Deut. 5:29.

⁶ Deut. 4:10.

⁷ Deut. 6:5.

⁸ Jer. 3:8; Hos..

⁹ Gen. 2:20-24.

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DEFINITION: A **marital covenant** is a BINDING AGREEMENT established upon vows before God of love, faithfulness, and trust between one man and one woman until death.

This commitment and binding is fundamentally important to a marital covenant because they mirror the new covenant between Jesus Christ and the children of God. Nothing less than eternal love, faithfulness, and trust are acceptable and, similarly, God expects nothing less between Christian husbands and wives.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:2 For I [*Paul*] am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present *you* as a chaste virgin to Christ.

While the marital covenant is not explicitly called such in Scripture, it is clear that God established it as the basis for marriage between a man and woman. Every marital covenant is a union before God; therefore, the husband and wife are accountable to Him when they fail to keep it.

DEFINITION: **Marriage** is the BINDING of a husband and wife under the vows of a marital covenant before God.

Because of the foundational importance of the marital covenant, no marriage can be considered established by God without vows of a lifetime commitment to love, faithfulness, and trust. A marital covenant is between the husband and wife where God is the Witness and Judge of their vows. Therefore, entering into such a covenant is a serious commitment, but the decision belongs exclusively to the man and woman because they are responsible for the vows they pledge before God.

Covenant Vows

A covenant stands upon the vows of the parties. A vow is one of the most binding of all oaths because it is a commitment made by a person before God, which means a vow is subject to the witness and judgment of God.

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DEFINITION: A **vow** is a SOLEMN OATH or *asseveration* made by a person as part of a covenant agreement. All vows are witnessed by God and fall under the jurisdiction of God by statute¹⁰. Broken vows are, therefore, subject to penalties or sanctions according to the judgment of God. Breaking a vow is termed a *betrayal*—a serious major offense that is a sin against God.

DEFINITION: An **oath** is the formal pledging of a VOW or PROMISE.

A promise differs from a vow in that a person commits to something *outside* of a covenant. In other words, a promise does not require any commitment by the recipient. Breaking a promise—called lying—is still a sin.

DEFINITION: A **promise** is a SOLEMN OATH in which a person makes a commitment to another, but the recipient of the promise is not under any obligation to reciprocate—so no covenant is involved. Breaking a promise is *lying*, which is a sin against God.

While a covenant stands upon the vows of participants, there is an exception when it comes to God. The Bible never mentions God making vows—only promises. God is above all¹¹ so, when He makes an oath, there is no higher authority¹² who can attest to it. When people proclaim an oath, it is a vow attested by GOD; but when He proclaims an oath, it is a PROMISE because He is the highest authority—and God’s promises are certain¹³.

Love

Marriage vows of love, faithfulness, and trust sound simple enough; but what does each of these commitments mean?

¹⁰ Lev. 5:4; Num. 30:2; especially Deut. 23:21-23.

¹¹ Eph. 4:6.

¹² Gen. 22:16; Heb. 6:13.

¹³ Titus 1:2.

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In English, “love” covers so many different thoughts, desires, and feelings that it can hamper our ability to express or understand it. However, this is not true in the Greek language, which uses four different words to express different aspects of love: *agape*, *eros*, *storge*, and *phileo*.

DEFINITION: **Agape** is GODLY LOVE. It is an unconditional, wholehearted desire to serve and obey God the Father and Jesus Christ. This is the highest and purest form of love.

DEFINITION: **Eros** is ROMANTIC LOVE between a man and woman. This involves deep feelings of respect, tenderness, and longing exclusive to a husband and wife. Note: *Eros* was originally much more than sexual desire, but it became perverted even in ancient times. Sexual desire without love is called *lust* in the Bible.

DEFINITION: **Storge** is FAMILIAL LOVE, which is the close bond that exists between parents and children as well as brothers and sisters.

DEFINITION: **Phileo** is LOVE OF OTHERS. It is a discipline of thoughts and emotions to do good for others without expecting anything in return. Interestingly, love between close friends is called *philostorgos* in Romans 12:10.

As intended by God, marriage is a relationship that can produce and nurture *all* types of love; so its place in the marital vows is of utmost importance. Without love, there can be no marriage relationship—whether between a man and woman or people and God.

Faithfulness & Trust

While faithfulness and trust are very similar, both are required in the marital vows because there are critical differences between them:

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DEFINITION: **Trust** is the BELIEF or expectation that someone can or will do something.

DEFINITION: **Faith** is TRUST that we have demonstrated and proven through acts of submission or obedience.

A classic example of the difference in faith and trust is the story of a tightrope walker named Charles Blondin. His greatest stunt was walking a tightrope across the Niagara Falls while pushing a wheelbarrow full of rocks. After successfully making the trip several times, he asked the crowd if they believed he could transport a person in the wheelbarrow and the crowd roared in agreement. However, when he pointed to one loudly cheering man and asked him to get in the wheelbarrow, the man refused. The man trusted that Blondin could safely transport someone across the falls, but he was unwilling to prove that trust by riding in the wheelbarrow himself. In other words, he had no faith.

Faith and trust are also exemplified in the story of Abraham:

HEBREWS 11:17-19 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, 18 of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," 19 concluding [trusting] that God was able to raise *him* up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

Abraham trusted that God could raise Isaac from the dead, but he PROVED it by actually attempting to sacrifice his son. He proved his trust in God and so established his faith. Verse 17 says that "by **faith**...when he was **tested**" because a personal commitment is not required to have trust but it is the very basis of faith. This is why God said afterwards, "now I **know** that you fear God" (Gen. 22:12). Faith is trust that has been proven. This is why James says:

JAMES 2:17-18 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

In a marriage, a husband or wife implicitly trusts that their spouse will keep their vows; but the husband or wife is faithful when he or

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she remains true when faced with any temptation to dishonor or break them.

PRINCIPLE: **Trust** is something spouses RECEIVE from each other, whereas faith is the proof of their trust that they GIVE to each other.

Love, faithfulness, and trust are required for any lasting marriage. Love leads to trust and trust leads to faith. These are the commitments of a lifelong marital covenant AND our covenant relationship with God.

CHAPTER 2

Marriage by an Elder

Traditionally, elders are mediators of a marital covenant by leading and performing the ceremony of vows. They can also be instrumental in helping the couple understand the serious commitment they are making to each other before God.

An elder is a witness of the marital covenant when he is part of the ceremony. As Paul said, “By the mouth of two or three witnesses every [*all; without exception*] word shall be established.” (2 Cor. 13:1). While God and Jesus Christ are certainly witnesses in heaven, human witnesses endorse the covenant on earth.

Finally, a marital covenant does not technically require an elder to be legitimate; but, in addition to being witnesses, elders also have legal authorization to record or register the marriage according to secular statutes. In this regard, a wedding by an elder would include both the marital covenant vows and the secular legal licensing or registration.

Justice of the Peace

In at least today’s world, there are secular frameworks for marriage—one such is a justice of the peace, which is recognized throughout all states as legally binding. In all regards, a justice of the peace is a legally recognized magistrate of the city, county, or state.

In such a ceremony, the couple is granted a certificate or license that legally recognizes the marriage; however, no vows are required. Generally, the justice of the peace simply authenticates and attests to the identity and current non-married status of the individuals and then is a notary for their signature on the license.

While covenant vows are not required of the couple, some choose to include vows prior to the signing of the license. Exchanging vows prior to the ceremony is an important consideration because

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not only is the couple married in the eyes of the secular government by the justice of the peace, but he is also a witness to any marital covenant vows, which are required to establish a valid marriage before God.

Common Law Marriage

Another secular arrangement is *common law*. It differs in a couple of respects from those bound by a marital covenant. By definition:

DEFINITION: **Common law marriage** is a SECULAR LEGAL FRAMEWORK devoid of a marital covenant wherein a couple is considered married according to local statutes. “Common law” does not exist in all states.

This type of union has valid legal status under secular statutes in some states but it does not require a covenant of vows between the couple.

In modern times, “common law” is often the term used **informally** for relationships that have neither a legal nor a covenantal basis. Without vows for a lifetime of love, faithfulness, and trust, the couple is, in no uncertain terms, not under any form of a marital covenant. Worst of all, “common law” marriage typically *requires* the couple to cohabitate for a minimum period of time before it can be applied to their relationship. This “shacking up” is nothing less than fornication.

DEFINITION: **Fornication** is SEXUAL INTERCOURSE between people who are not under a marital covenant.

While some couples spend a lifetime together with unspoken tenets of love, faithfulness, and trust, does that constitute a covenantal marriage? Only God knows. In days gone by, societal mores and relationships between a man and woman were unquestionably more biblically based and people had high regard for vows and commitments. Today, however, it is a rare instance of a “common law” situation that is anything other than fornication.

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Another problem that arises with “common law” marriage unions is that the legal framework is *not common* in the USA—it is completely unrecognized or absent from a number of states. The lack of consistency makes it impossible to hold “common law” as a standard for marriage from a secular legal perspective, much less a biblical one. In fact, a couple under “common law” marriage in one state may find themselves suddenly UNmarried if they change their legal residence to another state.

Importantly, any relationship that lacks a marital covenant based upon vows of a lifelong relationship of love, faithfulness, and trust, such as “common law” marriage, cannot be adjudicated by any biblical statute as a valid marriage. Nonetheless, it is a simple enough matter to rectify through an elder who can mediate a proper marital covenant if the couple so chooses.

CHAPTER 3

Marital Covenant Betrayal

The heart of *every* covenant is the vows. Once made, breaking a vow becomes a very serious sin against God¹⁴:

DEUTERONOMY 23:21 “When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and **it would be sin to you.**”

Betrayal is so hated by God that Paul said “[covenant-breakers] ... are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.” (Rom. 1:31-32). Even those who *condone* someone who breaks a covenant are “deserving of death.”

By definition, breaking a vow is betrayal. So, what constitutes a betrayal of a marital covenant vow? Because the vows are lifetime commitments of love, faithfulness, and trust between a husband and wife, a betrayal is any serious major offense that violates the specifics and intents of the vows.

DEFINITION: A **betrayal** is a **SERIOUS MAJOR OFFENSE** against someone with whom there is a covenant relationship, meaning the vows and bond of trust between them are violated and broken. A betrayal is always a sin.

All will agree that adultery certainly betrays a marital covenant, and this is obvious in the Scriptures¹⁵. But why is adultery a betrayal? While it might seem a ludicrous question, understanding it is an avenue to recognizing other serious major offenses. Betrayal of a marital covenant violates vows of love, faithfulness, and trust because a marriage has the requirements and expectations that the husband and wife are one with each other **AND NO OTHER**. This means that they do not share the love that is unique between a husband and wife with anyone else—they do not share

¹⁴ Also Num. 30:2; Eccl. 5:4-6.

¹⁵ Matt. 19:9; Rom. 7:2-3.

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their bodies with others; they do not share their intimacy with others; they do not share their private thoughts with others, etc.

Betrays—More Than Adultery

What else betrays a marital covenant vow? What about physical or emotional abuse, homosexuality, pornography, alcoholism, or drug addition? Most of them are crimes against civil law and all of them are considered morally wrong even in today's world. Above all, they are serious major offenses against vows of love, faithfulness, and trust. No one would seriously argue that these do not betray a marital covenant.

Another type of betrayal is fraudulent behavior. Marrying for wealth or power, living a secret life, or engaging in criminal activities or behaviors are all fraud. In addition, failure to divulge major psychological issues or hiding serious emotional problems can be fraudulent circumstances if they were not disclosed and resolved before a marriage. Fraud after a marriage unquestionably violates the marital covenant vows, but it is especially unscrupulous when they are committed before the vows are made.

DEFINITION: **Fraud** is INTENTIONAL DECEPTION for the purpose of selfish gain. A fraudulent vow is never valid.

Treachery, on the other hand, is a very insidious form of fraud because it betrays not only the marital covenant vows but also the bond of trust.

DEFINITION: **Treachery** is INTENTIONAL DECEPTION that *betrays a bond of trust* for the purpose of selfish gain.

One example of treachery is a husband or wife who has an affair with a sibling or friend of their spouse. There is an implicit bond of trust between the spouse and the sibling or friend that they will respect and honor the marriage. Another case of treachery would be a husband or wife, whose spouse is an invalid or incapacitated, who persuades the disadvantaged spouse to sign over rights and ownership of all the assets and then divorces him or her. Without a

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bond of trust, the spouse could not have manipulated the situation. Finally, a husband or wife who criticizes, complains about, or falsely accuses their spouse to others, hoping to gain support for his or her side of a story, is not only lying to others but is betraying the bond of trust of the marital covenant vows.

There are also spiritual offenses that betray a marital covenant, such as idolatry, sorcery, necromancy, witchcraft, etc. Because all vows are before God, these sins not only show utter disdain for the marital covenant vows but also show contempt for God.

There are many ways a covenant vow is betrayed. Notice the following scripture¹⁶—committing any of these “works of the flesh” certainly violates a vow of love, faithfulness, and trust.

GALATIANS 5:19-21 Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, 21 envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told *you* in time past, that those who practice such things **will not inherit the kingdom of God.**

These are such major offenses that they will cause someone to lose out on salvation unless there is true repentance—because each one betrays a covenant with God. It is evident that there are many forms of covenant betrayal and all are serious major offenses that violate any covenant based upon love, faithfulness, and trust. Importantly, these are not just physical sins—they are also spiritual sins¹⁷. Betrayals such as these would also violate a marital covenant between a husband and a wife because it is a mirror of the covenant between a true Christian and God and Jesus Christ.

¹⁶ For additional forms of covenant betrayal, refer to Rom. 1:28-32; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 2 Cor. 12:20; Eph. 5:3-6; Col. 3:5-6; 1 Tim. 1:9-10; Rev. 21:8; 22:15.

¹⁷ Rom. 7:14; 8:4.

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Divorce

A marital covenant is formally terminated by a divorce:

DEFINITION: **Divorce** is the intentional DISSOLUTION of a marital covenant.

While it is somewhat counterintuitive, divorce is clearly JUSTIFIED for serious major offenses¹⁸ and at times even prudent, especially when there is physical, emotional, or spiritual spousal abuse, sexual immorality, drug addition, alcoholism, fraud, treachery, etc.

DEFINITION: Divorce is **justified** for any serious major offense that is a BETRAYAL of the marital covenant vows.

It is important to understand that a divorce itself is not the betrayal—it is always the *result* of betrayal. For this reason, divorce can be justified and, at times, prudent. Also, betrayal does not, of necessity, end in divorce if it can be sufficiently reconciled. A divorce simply legally dissolves the marital covenant.

DEFINITION: **Divorce** always involves a BETRAYAL of the marital covenant, but it is not a betrayal in and of itself.

Even though betrayal is always involved in a divorce, the spouse who commits a serious major offense is the guilty one while the other spouse is innocent (although there can be instances where both spouses are guilty of betrayal). Therefore, **it is not a sin if the innocent spouse divorces the husband or wife who was guilty of the betrayal.**

PRINCIPLE: **Guilt** or **innocence** is determined by the perpetrator of the BETRAYAL, **not** who files for DIVORCE.

If a husband forces his wife to accept a divorce so he can marry another woman, he is solely responsible for the betrayal—the wife is innocent. Likewise, a wife who files for divorce because she is

¹⁸ Matt. 19:7-8.

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being abused is innocent—the husband is guilty of betraying the vows to his wife.

It is also important to recognize that a marital covenant between spouses is established before, and attested by, God. Therefore, the ultimate decision to divorce belongs exclusively to the parties of the covenant—the husband and wife—and no one else.

On a final note, reconciliation of a betrayal is a serious matter to God, as is true for all major offenses. Reconciliation requires repentance by the offender and forgiveness by the victim. However, some offenses cannot be reconciled because either the offender or victim refuses to properly deal with the offense. In those cases, the offender must be *willing* to repent to an unforgiving victim or the victim must be *willing* to forgive when the offender repents. It is also vital to understand that a betrayal, because of the serious nature of such an offense, generally prevents *full* reconciliation of the relationship as it existed prior to the betrayal because the bond of trust was destroyed. In many cases—including abuse, sexual immorality, drug addition, alcoholism, criminal behavior, fraud, or treachery—it is not necessarily prudent to seek *full* reconciliation. (For more information about offenses and reconciliation, refer to the booklet titled “[OFFENSES—Ordinances of God.](#)”)

CHAPTER 4

Matthew 19:9—Adultery & Sexual Immorality

There has been confusion about one particular scripture that some mistakenly believe limits divorce to adultery¹⁹:

MATTHEW 19:9 “And I [*Jesus Christ*] say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality [*including adultery*], and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”

There are two terms critical to the exegesis of this verse: adultery and sexual immorality. While adultery was mentioned previously, it is included here:

DEFINITION: **Adultery** is intentional SEXUAL BETRAYAL of a spouse by a person under a marital covenant and a person outside of that covenant.

DEFINITION: **Sexual immorality** (Greek *porneia*) includes adultery, homosexuality, prostitution, pornography, incest, lust, idolatry, etc. These are sins whether they are committed *physically* or *spiritually*.

After a careful reading of this scripture, notice that there are two parts (separated by a semicolon). The first part states that a husband who divorces his wife when she is NOT GUILTY of sexual immorality (sexual immorality is the *exception*) and marries another woman is committing adultery. The stated exception grammatically implies that the man is divorcing his wife *without a cause* because he wants to marry another woman. In other words, the MOTIVE for divorce is his lust for another woman. His subsequent marriage to the other woman would be, most certainly, an adulterous marriage because the husband divorced his wife *without a cause*. That is certainly a betrayal of the marital covenant vow of love, faithfulness, and trust until death.

¹⁹ Compare Matt. 5:27-32; 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18.

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The fact that it was *without a cause* answers the original question posed by the Pharisees to Jesus Christ. Notice:

MATTHEW 19:3 Then the Pharisees came to Him and tempted Him, saying to Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife **for any cause?**”

The Pharisees asked if a husband can divorce “for **any** cause.” The answer is *no*, as Jesus confirmed by stating that a subsequent marriage is adultery unless there is a justifiable cause for divorce, such as sexual immorality. Interestingly, their original question was specifically about divorce; however, Jesus must have known their thoughts because He responded by addressing the legitimacy of a subsequent marriage. Lust for other women was apparently the real motive of the Pharisees.

Now examine the second part of verse 9:

MATTHEW 19:9 “... and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”

One might conclude that a man who marries ANY divorced woman is also committing adultery; however, that would be an absurd conclusion and is not supported in the scripture.

The only situation that makes sense, and the one that is grammatically supported, is if the wife truly was guilty of a betrayal, which was the situation here. In the first part, Jesus mentioned the exception—“except for sexual immorality.” The second half of verse 9 addresses the exception by stating that a man who marries a divorced woman who was GUILTY of sexual immorality commits adultery. Here, Jesus addressed the *exception* from the first half. In the first half of verse 9, the wife had NOT committed sexual immorality.

In summary, Matthew 19:9 addresses two divorce cases: 1) a husband who divorces his wife *without a cause* in order to marry another woman and, 2) a man who marries a divorced woman who committed *sexual immorality*. It does not limit justifiable divorce to adultery because Jesus Christ did **not** state that either divorce even *involved* adultery—the first had no legitimate cause and the

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second was due to sexual immorality. He only stated that the **subsequent marriages** are ADULTERY.

PRINCIPLE: A **subsequent marriage** to someone who divorced *without a cause* or someone who *betrayed* their marital vows is ADULTERY.

Sexual immorality (*porneia*) refers to a range of physical and spiritual sins. It includes, but is not limited to, adultery, homosexuality, prostitution, pornography, incest, lust, idolatry, etc. The fact that the subsequent marriages were adultery in no way infers that either betrayal was adultery. The first divorce was without a cause and the second was not specified other than it involved “sexual immorality.” Therefore, Matthew 19:9 does **not** in any way limit divorce to adultery.

This all leads to a question. Does the phrase “except” imply exclusivity? In other words, does *except* mean that there are no other allowable conditions for divorce aside from the broad range of sins that fall under the category of sexual immorality?

The word *except* comes from two Greek words: *ei me*. Literally, they translate to “if not” and are variously rendered as *except*, *but*, *unless*, *otherwise*, *only*, etc. as determined by the context. Many times *ei me* is used in the sense that the condition is exclusive to all else. An example of exclusivity would be Galatians 1:19 where Paul said, “I saw none of the other apostles **except** James.” In this case, Paul only saw the apostle James and no others.

But there are other scriptures where it is obvious *ei me* cannot be exclusive. For example:

ACTS 21:25 “But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written *and* decided that they should observe no such thing [*physical circumcision*], **except** that they should keep themselves from *things* offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.”

If this was an exclusive condition, then the believing Gentiles only had to refrain from eating meat sacrificed to animals, eating improperly slaughtered animal meat, and sexual immorality to be

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accepted by God. If the Gentiles only had to avoid these particular sins, the logical conclusion would be that they could then worship other gods, take God's name in vain, ignore the Sabbath, murder, steal, lie, and covet. However, no one would seriously assert that this is what was intended in the Greek. Making a claim that Gentiles were not obligated to obey the same laws of God as the Jews (except for physical circumcision) is no less ridiculous than suggesting that Matthew 19:9 only allows for divorce when there is adultery. This is clear when considering the numerous major offenses that God says BETRAY a covenant vow including the broad term of sexual immorality. **Every** covenant is broken when the vows are BETRAYED.

For example, if a husband intentionally shoots his wife and she survives, would anyone seriously claim that the husband is not guilty of murder in his heart just because the result was technically only attempted murder? Would anyone argue that such an act of hate does not betray a marital vow of love, faithfulness, and trust? Above all, would anyone maintain that the husband and wife are still bound by a marital covenant? A husband who harbors that much hatred toward his wife absolutely BETRAYS his marital covenant vow of love, faithfulness, and trust.

Moreover, no one enters into a marital covenant by vowing, "I am allowed to commit every sin *except* for adultery (or sexual immorality)." That would be completely absurd—a vow that would be rejected by God; however, this is essentially what someone is saying when they construe Matthew 19:9 to mean that a marriage can only be betrayed by adultery.

Love is the FULFILLMENT of God's Law²⁰. While no marriage is free from occasional offenses, divorce can be certainly justified for any major offense that betrays the vows and bond of trust in a marriage—it is not limited to adultery or sexual immorality.

²⁰ Romans 13:8, 10.

1 Corinthians 7—God's Ordinances & Paul's Judgments

There are several scriptures in 1 Corinthians 7 pertaining to marriage and divorce that need some explanation. This chapter was Paul's response to a letter from the Corinthians about abstaining from marriage in order to more fully dedicate themselves to God (verse 1). It was also influenced by the case of sexual immorality between a man and his stepmother (chapter 5) and the failure of the *ekklesia* to judge such matters; instead, they were addressing them in civil court (chapter 6). In chapter 7, he clarifies the ordinances of Christ pertaining to common marital situations as well as adding his own personal judgment in certain cases.

Paul begins by emphasizing that marriage is the only acceptable union for physical sexual relations:

1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-9 Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: *It is good for a man not to touch a woman.* 2 Nevertheless, **because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.** 3 Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. 4 The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband *does*. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife *does*. 5 **Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.** 6 But I say this as a concession, not as a commandment. 7 For **I wish that all men were even as I myself. But each one has his own gift from God,** one in this manner and another in that. 8 But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am; 9 but **if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with [sexual] passion.**

Paul emphasizes the importance of the marriage estate in avoiding the temptations of sexual immorality (*porneia*) and, to that end, reminds them of the conjugal duties that are part of any marriage.

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(Note that both the husband and wife are believers as indicated by the fact that they devote themselves from time to time to fasting and prayer—verse 5.) While he wished everyone was able to control their natural sexual desires, he portrays marriage as a natural and acceptable union established by God.

Next, Paul turns his attention to a marriage between believers where they are considering separating:

1 CORINTHIANS 7:10-11 Now to the married I command, *yet* not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from *her* husband. 11 But even if she does depart, **let her remain unmarried or be reconciled** to *her* husband. And a husband is **not to divorce** *his* wife.

While we are not told the reason behind the separation, one possibility is that the motive of the men was to better serve God. If true, it showed disregard for their vows to their wives because they were, at the very least, withholding their conjugal dues. Regardless of the reasons, it was a cause of strife, temptations, or offense.

What is known is that they had *not* divorced, so no covenant betrayal is involved. Instead, they were allowed to separate but not to divorce. This is a charge from the Lord (verse 10) so it is an ordinance commanded by Christ and, even though these verses mention the wife separating, it applies equally to a husband who wants to separate from his wife.

The reason Christ laid this charge is because it is a marriage between believers. Married believers are in covenant with each other, having pronounced vows of love, faithfulness, and trust to each other before God. This includes their conjugal dues that show love and prevent the temptations of Satan.

Believers are also in covenant with God and have a much greater responsibility to reconcile offenses. God only allows divorce because people can be hardhearted²¹ and refuse to reconcile with each other or by committing serious betrayals. Believers are

²¹ Matt. 19:8.

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expected to first avoid offenses and then, when they arise, reconcile with each other in humility and love.

It is important to understand that this is not a case for divorce, which is allowed when the marital covenant is betrayed. Instead, the focus is on the marital commitments between a husband and wife. Honoring the vows of the marriage covenant requires reconciling offenses between each other. In the absence of a betrayal, a husband and wife can separate from each other until they reconcile, but they are **not** to DIVORCE.

PRINCIPLE: Divorce is not a legitimate recourse for every problem or offense that occurs in marriage, even if the issue is highly emotional and distressful.

Separation, however, is only permitted with one condition: “let her *[and him]* remain **unmarried**” (verse 11). This phrase in no way suggests the separation is the result of a betrayal because they are commanded “**not** to divorce.” Instead, a husband and wife who are separated must either reconcile or remain as IF they were unmarried. In other words, while separated they are not to dishonor their marital covenant, which is binding for life. This also means they are not to divorce even if the separation is long-term. Barring a covenant betrayal, married believers must endeavor to reconcile and end the separation (reconcile). Divorce is absolutely out of the question.

Even though Paul discourages separation (by his parenthetical comment in verse 11), in allowing it he recognizes that giving each other time and space is sometimes necessary to help people reconcile. It allows time to think, to meditate, and for an opportunity to draw closer to God so that their decisions are guided with godly wisdom, humility, and love.

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Up to this point, the discussions have been about two married believers. Now, Paul himself makes a judgment (not Christ, i.e., “not the Lord”) in marriage between a believer and an unbeliever²²:

1 CORINTHIANS 7:12-14 But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any **brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her.** 13 And **a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him.** 14 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.

Is willing means to *think well of* each other. So, Paul describes a peaceful cohabitation between the husband and wife wherein one is a believer and the other is not. The fact that one is an unbeliever is not a circumstance in itself that requires or justifies divorce.

PRINCIPLE: The Bible clearly advocates for continuing a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever that is a peaceful cohabitation.

So why is this a judgment of Paul and not an ordinance of Christ? Because it involves an unbeliever who is not under covenant to obey God. It would be difficult to establish a biblical ordinance for people who are ignorant of, or refuse to obey, God’s Law. Such matters must be judged on a case-by-case basis according to godly wisdom and guided the Holy Spirit.

Paul continues the discussion of a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever by addressing one that is *not* peaceful:

1 CORINTHIANS 7:15-16 But **if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases.** But God has called us to peace. 16 For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save *your* husband? Or

²² The terms *believer* and *unbeliever* are used in keeping with scripture (Luke 12:46; Acts 5:14; 1 Cor. 6:6; 14:23; 2 Cor. 6:14; 1 Tim. 4:12) to distinguish between those who are members of the Body of Christ and those who are not.

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how do you know, O husband, whether you will save *your* wife?

In the instance where the unbelieving mate separates, Paul says the believing spouse is “not under bondage” (Gk. *ou dedoulotai*). What does he mean by this? The word literally means *not bound* or *loosed* in the strongest sense of a slave being freed from a master. Because the topic is an unbeliever who separates from his or her spouse, it means that the believing husband or wife is *not bound*, or obligated, to live together if the relationship is not peaceful. This is particularly the case where the unbeliever is hostile toward God, demands complete subservience of the believing spouse, or requires the believer to put the unbelieving spouse before God.

Even though Paul is not specifically addressing a divorce situation caused by a covenant betrayal, it is one in which there is great strife and conflict. Because the unbeliever does not accept the way of life to which the believing spouse has been called, separation is allowed and, perhaps, even recommended. Still, the hope is for reconciliation (“God has called us to *[make]* peace”) and, ultimately, that the unbeliever will become a converted child of God (verse 16). As in the case of married believers, a period of separation can be helpful for the purpose of reconciliation between a married believer and an unbeliever.

However, if the unbeliever refuses to reconcile after a reasonable period of separation and sincere attempts to resolve the issues, it could be that the situation deteriorates to one that is no longer peaceable. This might be the case if the unbeliever interferes with keeping God’s holy days, disallows teaching the children of God’s truth, withholds conjugal duties, creates a financial hardship, prevents access to the children, etc. Circumstances such as these can become betrayals of the marriage covenant. This is certainly the case if the unbelieving spouse inhibits or prevents the believing spouse from obeying God’s commandments. The covenant of baptism with God takes precedence over anyone else in a believer’s life.

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When these things occur, the believer is not condemned by God if they sincerely tried to reconcile or had no part in the betrayal of the marriage covenant. In other words, the believer is not responsible or under God's judgment for keeping His commandments when there is a conflict with a spouse, even if it results in dissolution of the marriage.

The last scripture that bears some discussion concerns the binding and loosing of a man and woman:

1 CORINTHIANS 7:25-28 Now concerning virgins: I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy *has made* trustworthy. 26 I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress—that *it is* good for a man to remain as he is: 27 **Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife.** 28 But even if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Nevertheless such will have trouble in the flesh, but I would spare you.

The word *bound* (Gk. *dedesai*) in verse 27 is different from the one used in verse 15. Here (and Rom. 7:2), the discussion is about a relationship between a man and woman who **desired** to be joined in marriage. In other words, they are bound not against their will but, rather, they were in agreement with each other.

In fact, this Greek word for *bound* can also mean *betrothed* or *pledged* to a marriage. So, Paul is not speaking of a marriage established upon covenant vows because dissolution of a marital covenant requires a divorce, which is not the same as being *loosed* (released). This is clear because he does not condemn either being *bound* or being *loosed*.

Verse 28 firmly establishes that this is about betrothal: “**if** you do marry, you have not sinned.” In other words, Paul was reassuring them that they are not sinning if they get married even though an unmarried person can more fully dedicate themselves to God (“I wish that all men were even as I myself”—verse 7). However, he reminds them that remaining celibate is also not an ability God

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gives to everyone (“each one has his own gift from God”—verse 7). Continuing, Paul said:

1 CORINTHIANS 7:34-38 There is a **difference between a wife and a virgin**. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world—how she may please *her* husband. 35 And this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction. 36 But **if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin [to whom the man is betrothed]**, if she is past the flower of youth, and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; **let them marry**. 37 Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin, does well. 38 So then he who gives *her* in marriage does well, but **he who does not give her in marriage does better**.

Paul differentiates a wife and a virgin in verse 34. A virgin refers to a woman who has never been married—she is not a “full” wife yet, not having committed vows or consummated the marriage. Thus, the phrase “**his** virgin” refers to the woman to whom a man is betrothed (verse 36); that is, they are not yet married.

Paul is discussing is a BETROTHAL between a man and woman. In simple terms, a betrothal is an agreement between a man and woman to marry, but covenant vows have not been established. For this reason, a man and woman can jointly annul a betrothal without the consequences of a broken marital covenant.

Evidently (verse 1), some of the Corinthians wanted to be loosed from their betrothal so they could better serve God; however, they were concerned that it would be wrong not to marry the women to whom they were betrothed. (Betrothal was, in times past, a serious commitment although it was not established with covenant vows.) Paul recognized that an unmarried man or woman is better able to serve God; but, he advised the Corinthian men that if they believed that annulment of their betrothal “is not right,” then they should marry (verse 36). This is in keeping with James 4:17 that states,

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“Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do *it*, to him it is sin.” Failure to do something that one would consider to be good is the same as a sin.

The bottom line is that verse 27 is not concerned with divorce; instead, it addresses the binding and loosing of a premarital betrothal agreement in which no covenant vows have been exchanged.

Marrying Outside the Body of Christ

One subject that has produced entrenched opinions is a believer marrying an unbeliever. Those who are absolutely against it will, at times, condemn believers who marry outside the Body of Christ. The subject of such judgments often become defensive, and even apologetic, of their decision and their spouse. Beyond the fact that entering into any marriage covenant is a choice that belongs solely to the husband and wife (discussed in Chapter 1), it is important to know what the Bible says about the matter.

In general, those who are opposed to a believer marrying an unbeliever use two main arguments. The first, from the OT, can be encapsulated in these scriptures:

DEUTERONOMY 7:1-4 “When the LORD your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you, 2 “and when the LORD your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them *and* utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. 3 **“Nor shall you make marriages with them.** You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. 4 “For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the LORD will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly.

God specifically warns against the ancient Israelites marrying any of the inhabitants of Canaan because they would turn their hearts away from God to serving idols. There are many such warnings

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throughout the OT. In fact, it was such a problem that the LORD eventually divorced the ancient Israelites because of idolatry.

There are, however, several problems with using this to claim that God forbids marriage to an unbeliever. The first is that this did not apply to all pagan peoples. God was concerned with those nations specifically listed in verse 1 because they were acutely wicked and He planned to destroy them for that reason, not just so that the ancient Israelites could have their land. In other words, God singled them out from other nations for destruction and did not want ancient Israel to have any dealings with them. Other nations were treated quite differently:

DEUTERONOMY 20:10-18 “When you go near a city to fight against it, then proclaim an offer of peace to it. 11 “And it shall be that if they accept your offer of peace, and open to you, then all the people *who are* found in it shall be placed under tribute to you, and serve you. 12 “Now if *the city* will not make peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. 13 “And when the LORD your God delivers it into your hands, you shall strike every male in it with the edge of the sword. 14 “But **the women, the little ones, the livestock, and all that is in the city, all its spoil, you shall plunder for yourself;** and you shall eat the enemies’ plunder which the LORD your God gives you. 15 **“Thus you shall do to all the cities which are very far from you, which are not of the cities of these nations. 16 “But of the cities of these peoples which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance, you shall let nothing that breathes remain alive,** 17 “but you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the LORD your God has commanded you, 18 “lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the LORD your God.

Those nations listed in Deuteronomy 7:1 were singled out for destruction; however, God differentiated those nations that were “very far from you” and allowed the ancient Israelites to either make peace with them or to destroy the men and keep the women for servants or wives.

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Sadly, one of the main reasons for marrying outside the Body of Christ is of the difficulty finding a truly converted and suitable mate. There are many obstacles these days, including the scattered locations of brethren and significant doctrinal differences among believers. It is interesting that those who are opposed to anyone marrying an unbeliever fail to consider that Joseph, the youngest son of Jacob, married an Egyptian or that David and Jesus Christ were descended from Ruth, a Moabitess.

The second argument used against marrying an unbeliever is usually along the lines of:

2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-18 Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. **For what fellowship has [justice] with lawlessness?** And what communion has light with darkness? 15 And **what accord has Christ with Belial?** Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? 16 And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people.” 17 Therefore “Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you.” 18 “I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the LORD Almighty.”

Specifically, Paul is talking about those who live justly (God’s “sons and daughters”—verse 18) engaging with those who are utterly lawless. He makes the point by comparing Christ and Satan (Belial). So, to claim that Paul’s statement, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers” applies to marriage is not only out of context, but is completely contrary to ANY marriage covenant with vows of love, faithfulness, and trust—even believers should not be unequally yoked.

The reality is that the Bible never forbids a believer marrying an unbeliever except the obvious unions such as to an atheist (God-hater), Satanist, lawless criminal, etc. To the contrary, Christ and Paul were seemingly more concerned about the temptations of sexual immorality for those who found it difficult to remain chaste (see the discussion on 1 Corinthians 7) as evidenced by the fact

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that they never forbid marrying an unbeliever. Which is better? To risk sinning because of our natural, God-given sexual desires (which also rules out children) or find a suitable mate that is an unbeliever? While marrying outside the Body of Christ requires the believer to consider the possible negative impact the unbeliever could have on their salvation, marrying another believer has its share of issues as well.

Ultimately, the decision to marry an unbeliever is the sole responsibility of the believer. As with any marriage, there should be a solid understanding by both the man and woman of the vows, commitments, beliefs, roles, expectations, plans, goals, etc., prior to marriage. These are vitally important for the marriage covenant.

However, even though the marital covenant is patterned after our covenant with God and Jesus Christ, it is not a covenant with God or Jesus Christ. A marriage covenant is between the husband and wife so it does not require either, or both, to be in the Body of Christ for God to honor it.

With that said, the things that concern an elder who is asked to perform a marriage remain unchanged whether either or both are believers. Counseling a man and woman for marriage is basically the same in all cases, including the importance of recognizing that their covenant vows are BEFORE God. (Recall that a true marriage is established by God because the covenant vows of love, faithfulness, and trust are witnessed and attested by Him.)

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

“Marriage is honorable among all,” said Paul (Hebrews 13:4). God intended marriage to be a lifetime commitment between a husband and wife and He holds vows to the highest standards of love, faithfulness, and trust. The marital covenant reflects the eternal marriage of Jesus Christ and the *ekklesia*. True Christians who desire to enter into an eternal covenant with God are warned to “count the cost” (Luke 14:28)—and so, too, should all who enter into a marital covenant.

The reality, though, is that the human “heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9), and marriage all too often ends in divorce. Breaking one’s vows is a serious major offense (betrayal) and reconciliation is an obligation for all offenses to the extent possible or prudent. Regardless of who committed the betrayal, there is a responsibility on the part of both the offender and victim²³.

Those who go through a divorce have a heavy burden. While the sin of a betrayal is serious, both the offender and victim have a responsibility. God requires them to be *willing* to reconcile even though it is not always possible or prudent to fully restore the previous relationship²⁴. Repentance to the victim is required of the offender and the victim is obligated to forgive when the offender repents, at least to the extent that they are no longer enemies.

Whether offender or victim, reconciliation is also necessary prior to a subsequent marriage because an unreconciled betrayal is a sin that will indeed weigh heavily upon any new relationship.

²³ Matt. 6:14-15; 18:23-35.

²⁴ Refer to the booklet “[*OFFENSES—Ordinances of God.*](#)”

APPENDIX A

Porneia Means More Than Physical Sexual Immorality

Physical *sexual immorality* encompasses sins such as fornication, adultery, homosexuality, prostitution, pornography, incest, lust, etc. However, in both the Hebrew and Greek, it also figuratively means *idolatry* even though they are never translated as such. Not only is this captured in the dictionary meanings, it is clearly established in the allegorical usage of sexual immorality in both the Old Testament and New Testament. Throughout the Bible, sexual immorality refers to ALL WICKEDNESS even though most often no actual sexual acts are involved.

Fundamentally, God's relationship with mankind is founded upon covenants. God's involvement with mankind, beyond the imparting of physical life, always requires a covenant. It is such an essential component that even covenants between people, including marriage, that are established with God as Witness and Judge are upheld to the same standards. It is important to understand the broad scope of sins behind sexual immorality because it is a serious matter indeed when anyone violates, betrays, and breaks a covenant with Him.

OT: Idolatry & Harlotry

A major theme in the Old Testament is God pronouncing the terrible sins of ancient Israel. Emphasis becomes increasingly harsh in the later writings of the major and minor prophets. Notice one of many such warnings wherein their sins against the covenant are described as idolatry and harlotry²⁵:

EZEKIEL 6:3-13 "and say, 'O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Lord GOD! Thus says the Lord GOD to the mountains, to the hills, to the ravines, and to the valleys:

²⁵ Also Ezek. 14:3-6; 16:15-36; 20:27-30; 23:2-21.

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“Indeed I, even I, will bring a sword against you, and I will destroy your **high places [where you worship idols]**. 4 “Then your **altars [of sacrifice to idols]** shall be desolate, your **incense altars [place of prayers to an idol]** shall be broken, and I will cast down your slain *men* before **your idols**. 5 “And I will lay the corpses of the children of Israel before their idols, and I will scatter your bones all around **your altars**. 6 “In all your dwelling places the cities shall be laid waste, and the **high places** shall be desolate, so that your **altars** may be laid waste and made desolate, your **idols** may be broken and made to cease, your **incense altars** may be cut down, and your works may be abolished. 7 “The slain shall fall in your midst, and you shall know that I *am* the LORD. 8 “Yet I will leave a remnant, so that you may have *some* who escape the sword among the nations, when you are scattered through the countries. 9 “Then those of you who escape will remember Me among the nations where they are carried captive, because I was crushed by their **adulterous heart [desiring after idols]** which has departed from Me, and by their **eyes which play the harlot after their idols;** they will loathe themselves for the evils which they committed in all their **abominations [ALL that is evil to God]**. 10 “And they shall know that I *am* the LORD; I have not said in vain that I would bring this calamity upon them.” 11 ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Pound your fists and stamp your feet, and say, ‘Alas, for all the **evil abominations** of the house of Israel! For they shall fall by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. 12 ‘He who is far off shall die by the pestilence, he who is near shall fall by the sword, and he who remains and is besieged shall die by the famine. Thus will I spend My fury upon them. 13 ‘Then you shall know that I *am* the LORD, when their slain are among **their idols** all around **their altars**, on every high hill, on all the mountaintops, under every green tree, and under every thick oak, wherever they offered sweet incense to all **their idols**.

In addition to idolatry, verse 9 paints a picture of the Israelites having an “adulterous heart” and “[adulterous] eyes” as they actively pursue their idolatry. God expressly identifies this as “evils which they committed in all their **abominations**”—which is nothing less than intentional and unrestrained wicked behavior. Clearly,

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idolatry and harlotry (a form of sexual immorality) refer to a broad range of wicked behaviors that are abominable to God. The accusations of spiritual immorality in Ezekiel 6:3-13 is the concluding condemnation of a list of the sins of ancient Israel:

EZEKIEL 5:6-9 'She [*Israel*] has **rebelled against My judgments by doing wickedness** more than the nations, and **against My statutes** more than the countries that are all around her; for they have **refused My judgments, and they have not walked in My statutes.**' 7 "Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: 'Because you have **multiplied disobedience** more than the nations that are all around you, have **not walked in My statutes nor kept My judgments**, nor even done according to the judgments of the nations that are all around you'– 8 "therefore thus says the Lord GOD: 'Indeed I, even I, *am* against you and will execute judgments in your midst in the sight of the nations. 9 'And I will do among you what I have never done, and the like of which I will never do again, **because of all your abominations.**

God denounces Israel for not keeping His laws, statutes, and judgments and called them abominations. Obviously, this covers every sin, which is portrayed as idolatry and framed by harlotry (immoral sexual behavior). This is the case even if the sin has nothing to do with sexual acts. Translated *abominations*, the Hebrew word means anything that is abhorrent and vile to God. (Interestingly enough, the Hebrew word for *abomination* also allows for the additional meaning of idolatry even though it is never translated as such.)

DEFINITION: **Sin** is a VIOLATION of God's Law.

DEFINITION: **Evil** is the RESULT of sin.

DEFINITION: Anyone who **practices doing evil** is WICKED.

Why is all this important? It boils down to covenants with God. IDOLATRY denotes a dedication to a way of life against God whereas HARLOTRY typifies the strongest of human desires and motives. In other words, idolatry indicates the priority of one's life where harlotry describes the lustful pursuit of it.

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DEFINITION: **Idolatry** is a metaphor for anything that is ABOVE GOD in importance or focus.

DEFINITION: **Harlotry** is a metaphor for zealously PRACTICING WICKEDNESS.

In a large sense, idolatry and harlotry are matters of the mind and heart. Notice the accusation by God in Ezekiel:

EZEKIEL 14:3-7 3 “Son of man, these men have **set up their idols in their hearts, and put before them that which causes them to stumble into iniquity.** Should I let Myself be inquired of at all by them? 4 “Therefore speak to them, and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Everyone of the house of Israel who **sets up his idols in his heart, and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity,** and then comes to the prophet, I the LORD will answer him who comes, according to the multitude of his idols, 5 “that I may seize the house of Israel by their heart, because **they are all estranged from Me by their idols.**” ‘ 6 “Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “**Repent, turn away from your idols, and turn your faces away from all your abominations.**” 7 “For anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell in Israel, **who separates himself from Me and sets up his idols in his heart and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity,** then comes to a prophet to inquire of him concerning Me, I the LORD will answer him by Myself.

Idolatry and harlotry are abominations to God and He uses these metaphors as warnings to repent and obey His Law. As Ezekiel 44:7 says, “they **broke My covenant because of all your abominations.**”

Even though sin, evil, and wickedness are specific terms for all that is against God, idolatry and harlotry are metaphors for the same. They are abominations to God and the worst of all accusations because they violate a covenant with Him as is clear with the ancient Israelites.

NT: Porneia—Sexual Immorality

In transitioning to the New Testament, we find the same metaphoric warnings. However, instead of idolatry and harlotry the Bible uses SEXUAL IMMORALITY (Greek, *porneia*). Notice:

REVELATION 13:4 And they worshiped the dragon, who gave *his* authority to the beast. And they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who *is* like the beast? Who has the power to make war against him?”

Instead of idols made of wood, metal, or stone in the Old Testament, the New Testament prophesies worship of the dragon (Satan) and the beast. It continues to describe the relationship of the world with these two evil beings as one with a prostitute:

REVELATION 17:1-6 And one of the seven angels who had the seven vials came and spoke with me, saying to me, “Come here; I will show you the judgment of the great whore who sits upon many waters; 2 With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication [eporneusan, a verb form of *porneia*], and those who dwell on the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication [porneias].” 3 Then he carried me away in *the* spirit to a wilderness; and I saw a woman sitting upon a scarlet beast that had seven heads and ten horns, full of names of blasphemy. 4 And the woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and was adorned with gold and pearls and precious stones; *and* she had a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominations and the filthiness of her fornication [porneias]; 5 And across her forehead a name was written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF THE HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. 6 And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And after seeing her, I wondered with great amazement.

Not only are the leaders of nations described as having immoral sexual relations with the great whore, but the entire world as well (verse 2). There is a fanatical dedication to the great whore and they are said to be “drunk with the wine of her fornication.” In other words, they not only commit their lives to the whore, but they are

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zealous in their lustful pursuit of her evil ways. Being “drunk” indicates that they fully indulge in the sins of the whore.

Sexual immorality is clearly mirrored in the New Testament and upheld as an abomination to God with the same revulsion found in the Old Testament. However, it is much more than just the world willfully and zealously following the whore. They are also IN COVENANT with her! Take note of the mention that she has a golden cup that holds the “wine of her fornication.” This is again mentioned in chapter 18:

REVELATION 18:3 Because **all nations have drunk of the wine** of the fury of her **fornication [porneias]**, and the kings of the earth have **committed fornication [eporneusan]** with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich through the power of her luxury.

An important aspect of the metaphor includes drinking from the whore’s cup containing the wine of her sexual immorality (fornication). Drinking from a cup of wine seals a covenant as is the case with Passover:

1 CORINTHIANS 11:25 In like manner, *He* also *took* the cup after He had supped, saying, “**This is the [wine] cup of the New Covenant** in My blood”

Using a cup of wine (which represents a blood sacrifice) to seal a covenant is not limited to the Passover ceremony. In fact, Paul also makes the observation that being joined in whoredom is a marriage covenant relationship:

1 CORINTHIANS 6:16 WHAT! **Don’t you know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body? For He says, “The two shall be one flesh.”**

The phrase “the two shall be one flesh” is referring to a marriage covenant. When “all nations” drink the wine cup in Revelation 17 and 18, they are sealing their covenant with the great whore.

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Covenant Breakers

Worship of the beast and fornication with the great whore mirror the idolatry and harlotry of the Old Testament. Called *abominations*, idolatry and harlotry are declarations of all that is wickedness, evil, and sin against God. Similarly, the New Testament portrays abominations as SEXUAL IMMORALITY (with the various forms of the Greek *porneia*). Understanding this provides a perspective of the broad meaning, but the New Testament also clearly specifically calls out their abominations just as it was done in the Old Testament:

ROMANS 1:29-30 being filled with all [injustice], [including] sexual immorality [porneia], wickedness [poneria], covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are* whisperers, 30 backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents,

Notice in particular that each of these sins is a state of mind that is “ALL injustice”; that is, the perpetrator is wicked and practicing evil. God will absolutely not establish a covenant with anyone who commits such sins. Not only that, the sins listed above are so egregious to God that every one of them violates or betrays a covenant. This is made plain in the next verse:

ROMANS 1:31 undiscerning, [covenant-breakers], unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful;

Anyone practicing any of these sins is not only lacking in godly understanding and a covenant-breaker, but does not even possess the most basic of human emotions—natural affection for others. Without repentance and overcoming using God’s Holy Spirit, the end result will be eternal death:

ROMANS 1:32 who, knowing the [just] judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.

It is interesting that the list of sins in verses 29-30 begins with SEXUAL IMMORALITY (*porneia*), which is followed by

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WICKEDNESS (*poneria*). One might imagine that the order is reversed; however, the reason for the given order comes back to having a covenant relationship with God. Any covenant with God is similar to a marriage founded upon love, faithfulness, and trust. With that consideration, sexual immorality describes an utter disregard for His covenant whereas wickedness does not necessarily involve a covenant. In other words, the greater abomination is sexual immorality (wickedness) in a covenant than wickedness that is done without a covenant.

Our covenant relationship with God is unique, special, and holy. This is emphasized by an Old Testament word that is difficult to understand in the English language: *cheded* or *hesed*. It is typically translated as *mercy*, but the full meaning cannot be captured in a single word. While it is beyond the scope here, the intention of *hesed* can be somewhat described as COVENANT LOYALTY. God keeps *hesed* and expects the same with those in covenant with Him. We can only begin to understand how God feels when betrayed by someone in a covenant with Him. This is why *sexual immorality* comes before *wickedness*—it is wickedness that occurs WITHIN A COVENANT. For this reason, sexual immorality is used as an overarching metaphor for all unjust behavior by someone in a covenant with God.

Interestingly, verse 31 includes another reference to covenants—*implacable*. It literally means “without libation,” which was something used in a ceremony to dedicate a treaty. So, clearly, anything that violates a covenant is abhorrent to God. Again and again, the Bible views all sin, evil, and injustice from the perspective of a covenant relationship with God and a betrayal is an abomination to Him.

In addition to Romans 1:29-30, other scriptures list many more abominations that betray a covenant. Read the following scriptures and notice in particular the one common denominator in all of them—sexual immorality (*porneia*)—and practicing such things ends in the second death:

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1 CORINTHIANS 6:9-10 Do you not know that **the [unjust] will not inherit the kingdom of God?** Do not be deceived. Neither **fornicators [porneia]**, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, 10 nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:20-21 For I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and *that* I shall be found by you such as you do not wish; lest *there be* contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults; 21 lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and I shall mourn for **many who have sinned** before and have not repented of the uncleanness, **fornication [porneia]**, and lewdness [*sexually promiscuity*] which they have practiced.

GALATIANS 5:19-21 Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, **fornication [porneia]**, uncleanness, lewdness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, 21 envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told *you* in time past, that those who practice such things **will not inherit the kingdom of God.**

EPHESIANS 5:3-6 But **fornication [porneia]** and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; 4 neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. 5 For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, **has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.** 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things **the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.**

COLOSSIANS 3:5-6 Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: **fornication [porneia]**, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these things **the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience,**

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1 TIMOTHY 1:9-10 knowing this: that the law is not made for a [just] person, but for *the* lawless and insubordinate, for *the* ungodly and for sinners, for *the* unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, 10 for **fornicators [porneia]**, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine,

REVELATION 21:8 “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, **sexually immoral [pornois]**, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars **shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.**”

REVELATION 22:15 But **outside [of the Kingdom]** are dogs and sorcerers and **sexually immoral [pornois]** and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie.

There is no question that sexual immorality is a metaphor for all wicked behavior that violates, betrays, and breaks (without repentance) a covenant with God.

God's People are in a Marital Covenant

The covenant between God and the ancient Israelites was not one that solely obligated their obedience to the Law in return for physical blessings. It was a MARITAL relationship covenant²⁶. Here are couple of scriptural examples:

JEREMIAH 31:32 “**not according to the covenant that I made** with their fathers in the day *that* I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though **I was a husband to them**, says the LORD.

ISAIAH 54:5-10 For **your Maker is your husband**, the LORD of hosts *is* His name; and your Redeemer *is* the Holy One of Israel; He is called the God of the whole earth. 6 For the LORD has **called you like a woman** forsaken and grieved in

²⁶ Also Jer. 2:2; 3:6-8, 14; Ezek. 16:8-21, 28-32; Hos. 2:2-7.

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spirit, like **a youthful wife** when you were refused,” Says your God. 7 “For a mere moment I have forsaken you, but with great mercies I will gather you. 8 With a little wrath I hid My face from you for a moment; but with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you,” says the LORD, your Redeemer. 9 “For this *is* like the waters of Noah to Me; for as I have sworn that the waters of Noah would no longer cover the earth, so have I sworn that I would not be angry with you, nor rebuke you. 10 For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but My kindness shall not depart from you, **nor shall My covenant of peace be removed.**,” says the LORD, who has mercy on you.

Clearly the covenant with ancient Israel was a MARITAL COVENANT founded upon their vows of obedience²⁷ and love²⁸ in return for physical blessings²⁹. Under this context, their unfaithfulness was described as that of an idolatrous whore. For this very reason, sexual immorality can only mean general wickedness because physical sexual acts were definitely not the primary accusation as covered previously. Sexual acts outside of a marriage covenant are not the real problem because their sins were motivated by a heart that has turned aside from their vow of love, faithfulness, and trust.

In all regards, God’s relationship with the ancient Israelites was that of a Husband and wife under a marriage covenant. This is also true of the new covenant of salvation unto eternal life³⁰:

HEBREWS 12:24 to **Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant**, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than *that of* Abel.

HEBREWS 13:20-21 Now may the **God** of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, **through the blood of the everlasting covenant, 21 make you complete [perfect**

²⁷ Exod. 19:8; Deut. 27:10.

²⁸ Deut. 11:13, 22.

²⁹ Deut. 11:26-27.

³⁰ Also Heb. 8:6-13; 10:16, 29.

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you in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* glory **forever and ever**. Amen.

Understanding that the covenant of salvation unto eternal life with God is a marital covenant is absolutely crucial. This new covenant requires a personal vow of love, faithfulness, trust, and obedience to God. Because of this, it is obvious that sexual immorality is, just as with the old (marriage) covenant, a metaphor for all wicked behavior that violates, betrays, and breaks (without repentance) the new marital covenant with God. Obviously, that involves much more than physical sexual sins.

There is, however, one subtle difference between the old and new covenants. The old covenant was a full marriage covenant. In simple terms, the ancient Israelites were fully wedded to God. However, those of the new covenant are not yet married to God³¹; instead, they are betrothed:

2 CORINTHIANS 11:2 For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For **I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.**

This is also why the new covenant is a MARITAL covenant and not a full MARRIAGE covenant. The difference being that a marital (“pertaining” to marriage) covenant is not yet finalized with a wedding. Regardless, the terms of the covenant are fixed even though the covenant is still yet to be fulfilled as a full marriage to Christ.

Marital Covenant Between People

Unlike general wickedness that is extant in nations that have no covenant with God, sexual immorality is particularly egregious and encompasses any and all wickedness by anyone in covenant with God. Physical sexual sins have never been the limitation of

³¹ Also Matt. 22:3-13; 25:1-13; Eph. 5:23-27; Rev. 19:7-9.

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covenant betrayal because any covenant with God is spiritual, not physical.

Sexual immorality, as it applies to any covenant that either includes God or where He attests to it (as Witness and Judge), such as a marriage covenant between people, covers all wicked behavior as defined by God's Law. This is because God establishes the foundation of covenants with Himself and those among His people. In the biblical metaphors of God as Husband and His people being a wife, sexual immorality covers all wickedness. Other evidence is the scripture that warns against sexual immorality by the **Body**—the *ekklesia*—which belongs to Christ:

1 CORINTHIANS 6:13, 15-20 Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods, but God will destroy both it and them. Now **the body is not for sexual immorality [porneia] but for the Lord**, and the Lord for the body. ... 15 Do you not know that **your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot?** Certainly not! 16 Or **do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? For "the two." He says, "shall become one flesh."** 17 But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit *with Him*. 18 Flee **sexual immorality [porneia]**. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. 19 Or do you not know that **your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit** *who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?* 20 For you were bought at a price; therefore **glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.**

Again, it is impossible to limit this to just physical sexual behaviors. It is plainly obvious that sexual immorality is not being used here in the strict meaning of sexual sins, but rather all that is injustice and wickedness pertaining to a relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ and any other covenant that is established by God. This is because the framework for all covenants with or between God's people is founded upon the same critical vows of love, faithfulness, and trust. Sins against these vows are always

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betrayals of the heart well before they are manifested as physical acts.

When Sexual Immorality is Not Sex

To highlight the use of sexual immorality as a metaphor for non-sexual sins, notice the following scriptures.

HEBREWS 12:16 lest there *be* any **fornicator [pornos]** or profane person like **Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright.**

Obviously, Esau was not committing a sexual sin when he sold his birthright. Still, he is call a fornicator.

REVELATION 2:20, 22 “Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman **Jezebel**, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and **seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality** and eat things sacrificed to idols. ... 22 “Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and **those who commit adultery with her** into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds.

Jezebel was never accused of committing any explicitly sexual sins. She was condemned for instituting worship of Baal³².

1 CORINTHIANS 10:7-8 And do not become idolaters as *were* some of them. As it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.” 8 Nor let us **commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell;**

The problem here was not that the ancient Israelite men **married** some of the daughters of Moab, it was that they committed idolatry and worshipped the pagan god Baal Peor³³.

There are very few cases where *porneia* is definitely referring to sexual sins. These include John 8:41; 1 Corinthians 5:1; and 7:2, but these are quite rare compared to the majority of the 50 places

³² 1 Kings 18.

³³ Num. 25:2-3.

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where a form of *porneia* is used to mean any wickedness by those in covenant with God.

Summary

Sexual immorality is used in the Bible as a metaphor for all injustice and wickedness because it violates and breaks a covenant. Knowing that every covenant with or before God is a marital covenant explains why sexual immorality covers much more than physical sexual acts. Understanding this, take another look at Matthew 19:9:

MATTHEW 19:9 “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for **sexual immorality** [*porneia*], and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”

Considering that the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ was the Husband of the old covenant with ancient Israel, was His answer focused upon a marriage between a man and a woman or was He considering the old covenant that had been betrayed over and over again? The former would leave the reader to believe that *sexual immorality* was specific to physical sexual sins. The latter was used as a metaphoric warning to the ancient Israelites and obviously covers any wickedness against their covenant with God. It really is a moot question because the marriage covenant between people was founded from the beginning upon the same vows of love, faithfulness, and trust required by God of EVERY COVENANT with Him and those to which He attests—including a covenant of marriage between people. Therefore, with very few exceptions, sexual immorality is a metaphor for any wickedness that occurs against any covenant established by God.

APPENDIX B

Roles of Husbands & Wives³⁴

Many balk at the biblical roles of husbands and wives, but they do so because they fail to understand Scripture or the curse that is upon mankind after the sin of the first man and woman. When Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they both sinned and, consequently, God laid a curse on both³⁵. Even though Eve ate first, it was Adam who was held responsible for bringing sin into the world³⁶. God gave Adam the responsibility as a husband to Eve to care for, and protect, her in the same manner that he was told to tend (care for) and keep (protect) God's garden in Eden.

On the other hand, Eve failed as a helper to Adam in their moment of temptation. Instead, she allowed herself to be used by Satan to entice her husband to sin.

For failing to serve each other in the intended roles of husband and wife, marriage has been under a terrible curse from God. Understanding how to end the curse begins with recognizing that the roles of husbands and wives—as *originally* intended by GOD—are to mirror the relationships between God, Jesus Christ, and the *ekklesia*.

Two core scriptures define these roles. A husband is told:

EPHESIANS 5:25:27 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the *ekklesia* and gave Himself for her, 26 that He might sanctify and cleanse her [the *ekklesia* and a marriage] with the washing of water by the word, 27 that He might present her to Himself a glorious *ekklesia*, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.

³⁴ Refer to the Bible Study [“Roles of Husbands & Wives—Remove the Curse.”](#)

³⁵ Gen. 3:16-19.

³⁶ Rom. 5:12.

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And a wife is told:

EPHESIANS 5:22-24 **Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.** 23 For **the husband is head of the wife**, as also Christ is head of the *ekklesia*; and He is the Savior of the body. 24 Therefore, just as the *ekklesia* is subject to Christ, so **let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.**

God established the roles of a husband and wife in the beginning with Adam and Eve. What was Adam's role? That of head gardener tending (caring for) and keeping (protecting) GOD'S garden; as such, he worked for God. In his role as husband, God made Adam responsible for teaching Eve His commandments (tending to her needs) and protecting her so she can grow in her relationship with God. What was Eve's role? To be a helper to Adam in tending and keeping God's garden. In her role as wife, she was responsible for helping Adam with his shortcomings so that he, too, could grow in his relationship with God.

After they sinned, God told Eve, "Your **desire** shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." (Gen. 3:16) God used very similar wording when He told Cain (after he killed his brother Abel), "[Sin's] **desire** is for you, but you should rule over it" (Gen. 4:7). This kind of desire is *harmful*. In this verse, sin is personified as *desiring* Cain for the purpose of destroying him. Examples of the curse of this harmful desire include a wife who returns again and again to an abusive husband or when a woman gives in to fornication after encountering a lustful man. This is why God told Cain to RULE OVER his sin—literally to *dominate* it (through repentance)—so that he is not destroyed by it.

However, a marriage wherein the husband *dominates* his wife is also an unhealthy one. God *never* intended a husband to DOMINATE and RULE OVER his wife nor a wife to have an UNHEALTHY DESIRE for her husband. **These harmful behaviors are the curse upon marriages.**

WISDOM: The **curse** that has been upon marriage from the beginning is a woman's HARMFUL DESIRE for her

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husband and a husband's CONTROLLING DOMINANCE of a wife.

To end the curse, a husband must VOLUNTARILY CHOOSE to be the loving head and a wife must VOLUNTARILY CHOOSE to submit to him. Understanding that God's roles for husband and wife are choices is essential.

WISDOM: A husband and wife who voluntarily choose to live by God's intended roles in marriage are the least vulnerable to the temptations of Satan and have a deep relationship with each other and God.

In these roles, a husband is to love his wife in the same manner that Jesus loves us and gave His life for us and a wife is to submit to her husband as a helper in the same manner that we all submit to Jesus Christ. BOTH spouses serve the other in roles of AGAPE LOVE according to the roles of Christ and the *ekklesia*. **This is a perfect union.** It does not matter who is more intelligent, stronger, the highest earner, etc.—those are talents and gifts. What truly matters is the **relationship** between a husband and wife.

Finally, God's intended roles in a marriage do *not* constrict either the husband or wife because **a role does not limit or define capabilities.** A marriage should never be a competition with, or a domination of, the other spouse.

WISDOM: Biblical marital roles do not *limit* or *define* the capabilities of men or women; instead, they provide the best **relationship** between husbands and wives to become one with each other and with God and Christ.

APPENDIX C

Dealing With Divorce—An Elder’s Role

Divorce is one of the saddest and most complicated situations an elder will encounter. Because it involves betrayal of the marital covenant, it can invoke a range of unimaginable emotions from vehement anger to utter grief and despair.

For these reasons, an elder should approach a divorce with impartiality, especially if there is a friendship with one or both of the spouses. As much as possible, the involvement of an elder should focus on a role as teacher of Scripture and an elder to the brethren. The main reason for this is that the couple is solely responsible for their marriage—they own any decision to divorce. Even the perception of siding with one of the spouses not only can lead to divisions in the congregation but also can place the elder in a position of having some responsibility for the outcome.

Remaining impartial makes it possible for the elder to help the husband and wife to reconcile (even if it ends in divorce) as well as, and just as important at times, guide the brethren (either as a congregation or individually) during this difficult time. Understanding how to deal with offenses in general, and betrayals in particular, is essential in helping others to address them.³⁷

Finally, when counseling a couple for marriage that involves a prior divorce, it is important to understand the betrayal behind it. In the case of the offender, betrayal absolutely requires repentance both to God and the victim. Even if the victim refuses to forgive, the offender must be at least *willing* to repent to the ex-spouse. Discerning these situations can be difficult because they are a matter of the heart. Still, an elder must look for fruits of true repentance³⁸. Even so, God absolutely will forgive anyone who truly repents of betraying their vow to a previous marriage, thus

³⁷ Refer to the booklet “[*OFFENSES—Ordinances of God.*](#)”

³⁸ Matt. 3:8.

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allowing for a subsequent marriage. Furthermore, the offender needs to be completely open and honest about the betrayal with the potential spouse; otherwise, his or her vow could be fraudulent and invalid.

Regarding the victim of betrayal, it is just as important to ensure that the victim has forgiven the offending spouse. If the offender is unwilling to offer true repentance, the victim, at a minimum, must be *willing* to forgive the offender. Sometimes, the victim is altogether unwilling to forgive the offender. Reconciliation is always required by God to the extent possible; otherwise an unforgiving victim will carry a heavy burden into any new marriage. Like an offender, an innocent victim should be open and honest with a potential spouse about the prior betrayal that led to the divorce before entering into a subsequent marriage. Some sins of betrayal—including abuse, sexual immorality, drug addition, alcoholism, criminal behavior, fraud, or treachery—are mentally and emotionally traumatic, thus the victim must sincerely seek God’s healing from the suffering, pain, and grief.

Thoughts and intents of the heart, when it comes to serious matters, are usually very difficult to discern and only God can truly know them³⁹. It is important for any man or woman who has been through a divorce to understand that God takes vows very seriously, so truthfully communicating about a prior betrayal is vital. Reconciliation, a responsibility of both the offender and victim, is essential especially for any subsequent marriage. For the elder who mediates the marital covenant vows before God, it is just as important to examine the heart of those entering into marriage, especially after divorce, as it is with baptism.

³⁹ Heb. 4:12.

APPENDIX D

Sworn Oaths

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus discussed the swearing of an oath:

MATTHEW 5:33-37 “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘**You shall not swear falsely**, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’ 34 “But I say to you, **do not swear [FALSELY] at all**: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne; 35 “nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 “Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 “But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

Instead of swearing by the name of God, people were swearing by ‘lesser’ things (than God) because they did not want to be held accountable for **not** fulfilling their oaths. People were intentionally lying and deceiving by falsely swearing oaths to things *other than* God to avoid ‘divine’ repercussions. Basically, the scribes and Pharisees thought they had discovered a loophole around Leviticus 19:12, which says:

LEVITICUS 19:12 ‘And **you shall not swear** by My name **falsely**, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I *am* the LORD.

The wording in Matthew 5 suggests that it is only swearing falsely if an oath is sworn **by the name of God** because it does not specifically prohibit falsely swearing by other things. If they swore by something else, then they believed that God could not judge them for breaking an oath. Swearing by other things was also a way to circumvent the Third Commandment because it specifically warns against taking the name of God in vain. So, by swearing to things other than God, they thought they could not be accused of breaking the Third commandment.

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Jesus was addressing the practice of oaths sworn to things other than by the name of God so that they could break their oath. A better wording of these verses might be:

MATTHEW 5:33-34 “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘**You shall not swear falsely [by the name of God]**, but shall perform *[or fulfill]* your oaths to the Lord.’ 34 “But I *[Jesus Christ]* say to you, **do not swear [falsely by the name of God or anything else] at all** ...

If Jesus Christ was against all oaths, then He would have specifically mentioned oaths sworn **by the name of God** in order to directly counter Deuteronomy 6:13:

DEUTERONOMY 6:13 You shall fear the LORD your God and serve Him, and **shall swear by His name**.

Jesus was not forbidding oaths sworn by the name of God but forbidding swearing falsely by other things with the intent to break their oaths. In doing so, He quoted the Old Testament statute against FALSE swearing in Leviticus 19:12 and made it clear that no one shall swear falsely regardless of whom or what they swore by. He was **not** forbidding *all* oaths in Matthew 5:34; therefore, Jesus did NOT change the Law of God but, instead, upheld it.

DEFINITION: Swearing is a SOLEMN OATH THAT INVOKES THE NAME OF someone or something as an *attestation* to the commitment made by one person to another. The recipient of the sworn oath is not under any obligation to reciprocate, so no covenant is involved.

There is additional scriptural evidence that the typical Greek translation of Matthew 5:34 is misunderstood or mistranslated because Jesus Christ later confirmed that swearing oaths is permitted by reinforcing the commandment **not** to swear falsely:

MATTHEW 23:16-22 “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘**Whoever swears by the temple, it [the oath] is nothing [not binding]**’, but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he **is obliged to [fulfill the oath]**.’ 17 “Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? 18 “And, ‘Whoever **swears by the altar, it [the oath] is**

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nothing [not binding]; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he **is obliged to [fulfill the oath]**.' 19 "Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? 20 "Therefore **he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it.** 21 **He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it.** 22 **And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it.**

Incredibly, the scribes and Pharisees had been teaching people that oaths were "**nothing [not binding]**" if they were sworn by the temple or altar. They claimed that oaths were only binding if they were sworn by the temple gold or an offering. In a severe rebuke, Jesus Christ said that swearing by anything pertaining to the temple is still an oath sworn by the name of God.

Rather than forbidding the swearing of oaths, Jesus commanded that it does not matter by *whom* or *what* an oath is sworn, but that **every oath shall be fulfilled**. If Jesus had forbidden all oaths in Matthew 5:34, then why does He not likewise forbid them in Matthew 23? Did He change His mind ... AGAIN? The reality is that these verses are nothing less than an *affirmation* and *declaration* by Jesus Christ that oaths are NOT forbidden because He was addressing FALSE oaths in Matthew 5. He also emphatically said that all oaths are sworn by the name of God regardless of whether or not parts of the temple are invoked!

This, once again, proves that Matthew 5:34 is misunderstood or mistranslated because both the Law of God in the Old Testament and Matthew 23:16-22 support the swearing of oaths. The only alternative is that Jesus not only changed the Law once in Matthew 5:34 but changed it again in Matthew 23:16-22! However, "Jesus Christ *is* the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8). The only possible conclusion is that Matthew 5:34 does not prohibit all oaths but only condemns swearing FALSE oaths.

Refer to the booklet "[Swearing of Oaths—Does Matthew 5:34 Forbid Them?](#)"