

## **Barratt Ministries Challenge**

### **Issue No. 28**

#### **Ye have heard ... Divorce**

#### **Sermon on the Mount Series, Matthew 5:31**

*by Maurice Barratt*

“It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: but I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.”  
(Matthew 5:31-32)

Christian opinion is sharply divided over divorce. Some believe it shouldn't be allowed, and accuse those who think otherwise of compromise; while those who believe it is permissible in some cases often view the others as legalistic.

In our series we have so far had two examples from Jesus about murder and adultery. This section about divorce is not a new paragraph, and it's actually not a separate example; it is still part of the example about adultery. So it is not preceded by “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time”. It's all in the context of adultery.

For the first time Jesus does not quote from the Ten Commandments. The Old Testament passage Jesus refers to is Deuteronomy 24:1-2. “When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.”

There are some points we should immediately note here:

The bill of divorce was always for a woman, never for a man. In God's law a man could divorce a woman, but a woman could not divorce a man.

The bill of divorce was not for the man's benefit. It was to protect the woman and other men; it proved that the woman had been put away, and was therefore free to marry without committing adultery, and that another man was legally free to marry her without committing adultery.

Divorce is only allowed here for a specific reason: “some uncleanness”; that is, something unholy, or defiling.

These laws may sound strange to us today. But in order to understand about divorce, we need to remember the origins of marriage. Eve was created out of Adam. From the moment of Eve's creation, Adam was incomplete until he was reunited with his wife. Therefore a man takes a woman as his wife to make himself complete. The woman is now part of the man; the wife is part of the husband. We may understand this more easily if we remember that marriage is an image of Christ and the Church. Marriage is a carnal image of a spiritual reality. As the Church is to Christ, so the

wife is to the husband. We as the Church are part of Christ, and he is our head, our Lord. This is why the prerogative is always with the man in marriage or divorce. And this is also why divorce is a serious matter to God — because if marriage is an image of Christ and the Church, then divorce is an image of a rift, a split, a division in that unity and relationship between Christ and his Church.

There are various different circumstances in the Old Testament which affected divorce regulations. For example, in the case of a man who married a wife and accused her of not being a virgin, if the accusation was found to be true, the woman had to be stoned to death for “playing the whore”; but if it was found to be not true, the man had to be punished and pay money to the woman’s father, he had to keep the woman as his wife, and he was not allowed to ever divorce her (Deuteronomy 22:13-21). Again, if a man took an unbetrothed virgin by force and lay with her, he had to pay money to her father, marry the woman, and was never allowed to divorce her: “he may not put her away all his days” (Deuteronomy 22:28-29). So the rules changed depending on the circumstances.

### **What Jesus says**

“But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.”

Jesus seems to contradict the Old Testament law. But we have seen that he never contradicts the law, only fulfils it. He shows us what the spirit of the law is, what its real meaning is, what perfection is. The letter of the law, as with any legality, allows a lower standard than perfection, because perfection is to do with the heart and the spirit, desires and motives, and the law can only be concerned with outward actions. So Jesus is not bringing in a new standard, only exposing what was really the true standard all along. When the Pharisees questioned Jesus about his comments and asked, “Why then did Moses command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?”, Jesus replied, “Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so” (Matthew 18:8).

Jesus was saying that the law was in fact making allowances for fallen, carnal humanity. Then he takes us back to the beginning, to perfection, when God made Eve from Adam and the two became one flesh. Perfection is that perfect unity, with no division. Any division is less than perfection; divorce is simply the end result, the extreme of disunity, just as murder is the extreme of anger in the heart and adultery is the extreme of a lustful look and a wrong desire in the heart.

Jesus says that the man who divorces his wife, except for fornication, makes her commit adultery, and makes any other man who marries her commit adultery. This statement brings us back to the context of adultery, and we can see that in fact in this paragraph Jesus is exposing three examples of adultery, examples which were not sinful according to the letter of the law, but are sinful according to the spirit of the law, the reality behind the law:

The man who looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her in his heart.

The man who divorces his wife, except for fornication, makes her commit adultery if she marries again.

The man who divorces his wife, except for fornication, causes any man who marries her in the future to commit adultery.

Each of these examples is designed to expose those who hide behind the law. The religious Jews (like religious Christians) felt righteous as long as they kept within the letter of the law. What Jesus is doing is exposing the fact that we all fall short of perfection, we are all guilty of division and disunity and imperfect relationships in our hearts. We cannot hide behind the law; that is merely self-righteousness and hypocrisy.

### **What Paul Says**

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul speaks about divorce, amplifying Jesus' comments. This is an unusual passage, because as well as giving commands as from the Lord, Paul also offers his own human advice and counsel. He begins by saying that it is good for a single person to remain single, and a married person to remain married. "Unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: but and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). At the same time as commanding wives not to leave their husbands, Paul recognises that it does happen, and gives another command for if it should happen. Then, straight after he gives the Lord's commands, he offers his own advice, that a Christian with an unbelieving spouse should not leave their partner; but if the partner does leave, the Christian "is not under bondage in such cases" (verse 15). This mixture of God's commands and human advice, of strict commands followed by instructions for what to do if the command is broken, all tells us that we are dealing with a matter of perfection, the ideal perfect unity of marriage, but that God, Jesus and Paul all recognize that there are mitigating circumstances, different cases, and that fallen humanity, even redeemed fallen humanity, cannot always measure up. Here is the strictness of perfection alongside the leniency of Christian grace; God's understanding of human weakness, Moses' permissive law allowing for the hardness of human hearts, Paul's advice on how to best cope with less than perfect situations; and Jesus' ruthless exposing of self-righteousness, only so that we may come to him and allow him to live in us and be our righteousness.

### **What God Says**

In a well-known scripture (Malachi 2:16) God says that "he hateth putting away". What is not so well-known is that although God hates divorce, as he hates any imperfection and disunity, he not only recognises that it happens, he actually divorced his own people. "... for all the causes whereby backsliding Israel committed adultery I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce ..." (Jeremiah 3:8). And in Isaiah he says, "Where is the bill of your mother's divorcement, whom I have put away?" (Isaiah 50:1). This is the same God who created man and woman and ordained that they come together as one flesh. Marriage in the beginning is a moral issue, not a legal one. Legal issues vary from culture to culture, depending on reason and tradition. But morality is to do with the heart and the outward actions that result from the heart's motives. Morality is about what you actually do, not about how you justify your actions, or what laws you use to get around them. Marriage always has been to do with the heart, never with law. But we like to use the law to avoid and get round the real issues of the heart, to protect our own self-righteousness. We keep the law but break

the morals. Thus a man and woman could pride themselves on the fact that they are married and not divorced, yet they could be divorced in spirit, because their relationship has withered and died. Perhaps they no longer sleep with each other, or they no longer talk to each other. Maybe these are extremes — or maybe not — but all of us know what imperfect relationships are. Perfect unity escapes us. We commit the sin of divorce in spirit most days.

Moreover, we may pride ourselves on our married life, and yet be causing divorce in the body of Christ. If we are committing spiritual adultery (that's when we pledge allegiance to God and say we love him, and yet prove by our actions that we love the world and its values - see James 4:4) then we are causing divorce between God and ourselves. Adultery is the reason for which divorce is permitted, and spiritual adultery is the reason God divorced Israel.

In the last issue we saw that if physical adultery is serious, spiritual adultery is more serious still; so it is with divorce. But let us remember the context of Jesus' words. He is trying to expose our hearts. Let's not think ourselves to be exempt from divorce and take a self-righteous, religious attitude towards it. It's a sin of the heart, and Jesus needs to expose those inward sins so we may see ourselves as we are and not become religious hypocrites. Once we see ourselves as we are, we can begin to change. How terrible if we take the words of Jesus, the very words which are supposed to expose us all and show us our hearts, and instead use them to judge other people!

## **Experiences From Life**

*by Joanna Barratt*

### **"Am I Really Prepared For This?"**

The pastor preached an anointed sermon on prayer, and my songs complimented his theme. Maurice didn't mind at all stepping down from the pulpit because the pastor had told him that God had laid this particular sermon on his heart. But the next time we were invited to preach in his church we were amazed to find that the pastor was no longer there. He was in prison ... he had been sexually abusing the children in his Sunday School! His wife tried to hold her head up; after all, it was her husband who was at fault. But what should she do - she had children of her own?

After harrowing experiences in her childhood, a close relation of mine married a young Christian man without hesitation because she felt confident he would look after her. But she found out before very long that she had leapt from the frying pan into the fire, as his alcoholic problem was revealed and he began to beat her. His threats became increasingly menacing. On one occasion he held a gun to her head, but after another experience, this time of having a machete put to her throat, she told God that if she lived through that night it would be the last one she spent under the same roof as her husband.

Another man was the leader of the worship group in his church for years with apparent fervour and commitment, and was looked upon by all as a model Christian. His wife was devastated when he left

her to live with someone else - his boyfriend?? All of the above marriages ended in divorce, and I could quote many more accounts of disastrous Christian marriages.

### **Unequal Parties**

I understand that marriage appears to hold the answer to many of our carnal needs, i.e. sex, companionship, fulfilment, home life - but marriage was actually instituted as a contract between two unequal parties. The man promised to love, comfort and cherish his wife and the woman promised to obey and serve her husband. In a society like ours where we have liberation and equal rights for women, what we should really be asking before we leap into such a serious commitment as wedlock is ... why does a liberated woman need to be married? I personally believe that our western culture and mentality get in the way of successful marriages. Unless we understand what marriage entails and have a proper attitude towards the principles laid down in the bible, then our marriages are doomed to failure from the very start.

### **Christ And The Church**

Paul says that the husband and wife are an allegory of Christ and the Church. When Jesus asked for disciples he told them plainly what they were to expect and said that anyone who put their hands to the plough and looked back was not fit for the Kingdom of God. He didn't feed them romantic notions of living "happily ever after" like we often do to gain converts. He told them the cost, and lived a lifestyle that would emphasise before their very eyes what they could expect when they made this incredibly important decision. As Christians I feel that we are not often equipped to make marriages work as they should. There are plenty of instructions for potential husbands and wives in the bible, but these are rarely taken into consideration before the wedding vows are made. Do we really know what our roles are? When our emotions are hurt, principles firmly established in our minds and hearts will protect us from making irreparable blunders. Ephesians 5:22 says that wives should submit themselves unto their own husbands as unto the Lord because he is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church. Titus 2:4 tells us that wives should be sober, discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, love their husbands and children; and be obedient to their own husbands "that the word of God be not blasphemed". And there are many more such instructions if we would care to search them out. On the other hand the husbands are told in Ephesians 5:25 to love their wives as Christ not only loved the church, but gave himself for it, so that through his sanctification and cleansing he could present to himself a glorious church, without spot, wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish. In this same manner men are told to love their wives as they love their own bodies, and we know for a fact that everyone in truth loves themselves because we nourish, cherish and pamper ourselves. He who loves his wife loves himself.

### **Adam and Eve**

When God presented Adam with Eve, Adam loved her so much that in order to keep his relationship with her he preferred to leave his Father (God) and partake of her sin by eating the forbidden fruit -

"And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression" (1 Tim. 2:14). Scripture makes it clear that Adam knew perfectly well what he was doing when he took the fruit from Eve and ate it after her. "For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh." The love relationship between Adam and Eve must be the most perfect one we can find in the bible. Moses and Paul offered God this supreme sacrifice of being cut off from Him for the sake of other souls, but Adam actually did it as a prophecy of the second Adam - Jesus who did the same for us. I believe there are always two sides to every troubled marriage, but I must confess I feel the major responsibility falls upon the man. He is the one who does the choosing, and it is his job to present the woman as a glorious bride, as Christ presented his church. Jesus said that, because the hearts of men were so hard, Moses allowed them to give a bill of divorcement to their wives. How did the men of Jesus' generation treat their brides? Did they love them with an unselfish love as Christ loved his church? Did they feel they couldn't survive without their wives and were prepared to be cut off from everyone else in the way Adam had forsaken all for Eve?

### **Caught In The Act**

I wonder what Jesus perceived when the woman caught in the act of adultery was brought to him. She herself was well aware that the penalty for this particular sin, if discovered, was death by stoning. So what had driven her to indulge herself by finding comfort in the arms of a man other than her husband? Did Jesus see her as a woman who was neglected, ignored, beaten, abused? I am certain of one thing, God sees the hearts and He deals very harshly with the rebellious and hard-hearted. But towards this obviously sinful woman, Jesus had compassion, and he openly said that he did not condemn her. We all know his attitude towards the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees, but he didn't regard this woman, who had been caught red-handed, in this same manner. The men who were standing around waiting to cast stones at her were the ones who felt the condemnation, not her, and they all slunk away in shame and embarrassment. Richard Wurmbbrand, a man who has been severely persecuted for his faith in God said, "Never judge anyone until you have walked a mile in their shoes!" If this woman had found fulfilment and happiness in her marriage I am sure she would not have been in this situation. Every one of us is seeking the love that can only come from people who are very special to us, i.e. mother or father, husband or wife, friend. I only found what I was looking for when I was married and had my first child. I felt like a complete person with a family of my own, someone to love me and someone for me to love. My search was over and I somehow felt immune to the temptations which had so easily pulled me before. I do not advocate divorce, but neither do I advocate hypocrisy. I believe a marriage should be worked at and enriched by both parties, despite all the setbacks and failures. When one party ceases to try anymore then all we end up with is a piece of paper which forces us to live under sufferance in a relationship which fails to fulfil all our original hopes and dreams. Surely this was neither God's nor our intention.