

Panthers:

Have you or anyone in your immediate family been divorced? *Divorce* means “to go separate ways.” A couple cannot divorce unless they have first been married. God designed marriage for the man to *leave* his family, *cleave* to his wife, and *weave* his life with hers (Gen. 2:24). Consequently, God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16). In spite of the Bible’s clarity on the issue, the divorce rate is higher among the churched than the un-churched. In His third of *six examples of inside-out righteousness*, Jesus taught His disciples to *be divorce free*. In each example, Jesus followed a three-fold pattern: (1) He addressed an Old Testament command saying, “You have heard that it was said;” (2) He alluded to the Pharisees’ legalistic interpretation; and (3) He clarified the intent, or spirit, of the law, prefacing His fulfillment with, “But I tell you.”

The Old Testament command: “*It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce’*” (Matt. 5:31). Jesus referenced Moses’ Law that said “*If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house*” (Deut. 24:1). How one defined “indecent” was the hinge point in the interpretation and application of this verse.

The Legalistic Interpretation: “*A husband who gives his wife a certificate of divorce has no obligation to her.*” Two thousand years ago, two rabbinical schools differed in their interpretation of “indecent.” One held a conservative interpretation, the other one liberal. The conservative interpretation from the School of Shammai defined “indecent” as “adultery.” The liberal interpretation from the School of Hillel defined “indecent” as *anything* displeasing such as “spoiling a dish,” adding an exception for divorce when “finding another fairer than she.” Although that sounds flippant, it represents the climate of our culture today. Whether conservative or liberal, the legalistic interpretation of the law removes the man’s obligation to his former wife when he issues her a certificate of divorce.

Outside-in righteousness says that what we do warrants a corresponding response from God. Get a legal divorce, and remove any obligation. That’s religion, not relationship. It follows the letter of the law, but misses the spirit of the law. Jesus fulfilled the law by clarifying its intent.

The Spirit of the Law (Heart): “*But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery*” (Matt. 5:32). The exception of adultery is not a one-time act to be used as a loophole to exit one’s marriage. Rather, it is a continual, unrepentant act; one that is also superseded by forgiveness. Jesus said that Moses permitted divorce only because men’s hearts were hard, noting that divorce was outside God’s original design (Matt. 19:8). In essence, Jesus said, “*Be committed*” which means “to stay together.”

Inside-out righteousness flows from the heart—a heart that is fully surrendered to Christ. This is how His righteousness is applied to us. Commitment is the spirit of the law because God is committed—He maintains His love (Exod. 34:7). He will never leave or forsake us (Heb. 13:5). Christ is the ultimate picture of that commitment. On the way to the cross He said to the Father, “Not my will, but yours” (Lk. 22:42). In a world where there is so much desire for change in relationships, we can take heart that Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8).

If you have been divorced, you have not committed the unforgivable sin. In Christ, God will forgive you and restore you. If you are considering marriage, realize that you are about to make a covenant—not merely an agreement—with three parties: you, your fiancé, and Christ. If you are considering leaving your spouse for another person, turn back to keep your commitment made before God. Most churches will not marry a couple where one party has left his spouse for the other because Jesus was so clear on this issue (Matt. 19:3-12). That relationship is rooted in sin and dishonors God.

We will remain committed to our spouses only through Christ in us. Our commitment to Him is reflected in our commitment to each other. After all, God is searching throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to Him (2 Chron. 16:9).

Committed,
Mitch