

Church Live Re-Visited: Session Seven - Part 1

by Ron Bailey

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding the Bible's inspiration and authority, as well as the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding the process of inspiration.

Duration: 32:35

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5-6, Matthew 19:8, Acts 15:22, Romans 14:1, 1 Corinthians 7:6-39, Ephesians 4:2, James 1:19

Topics: "Marriage And Divorce", "Biblical Interpretation"

Description

This sermon delves into the complex topic of marriage, divorce, and singleness, exploring different interpretations and historical contexts that influence our understanding of these issues. The speaker emphasizes the need for humility, respect for differing opinions, and sensitivity in addressing these matters, especially in a world where relationships are often strained. The importance of considering cultural backgrounds, biblical inspiration, and the nuances of interpretation is highlighted to navigate the challenges of understanding marriage and divorce biblically.

Transcript

We'll just pray and then we'll make a start. Father, we thank you for the time again given to us to gather around your word. And we look to you, we trust you to be our teacher, to lead us into truth, to keep us from error and presumption, and to help us, Lord, to examine the things that are of significance, Lord, in what you're wanting to say to us tonight.

We pray, Lord, you'll help us to understand and that you'll give us a real sense of your presence in our midst. Amen. Well, the subject tonight, as I said on Sunday, it's actually going to be marriage and divorce and singleness.

But I'm going to do it in a particular order, so I want to tell you what my strategy is. I know that this is a difficult topic and in some ways it's kind of a dangerous topic. I remember quite a long time ago going to an elders' conference where there were lots and lots of brothers and we were going to discuss the whole question of divorce and remarriage.

And Mr Northwood was with us and I remember him saying there are two things, I think it was more than two, he said there are two things that traditionally Christians find great difficulty in coming to a kind of consensus and agreement with. And he said one is the question of pacifism or taking up of arms in times of conflict and the other is the question of divorce and remarriage. I think another one that Christians have

struggled with down the centuries has actually been what to do when someone sins, particularly if the someone who sins is a person who has been significant, a teacher, an elder, a pastor, a bishop, whatever it is.

So I want to make it clear tonight what I'm not going to do. I'm not going to try to give you the definitive fellowship line on marriage, divorce and singleness. I'm not even trying to give you the definitive early Christian fellowship, that's our own kind of line on these things.

I want to examine these things and share with you conclusions that I've come to and see how we get on and hopefully in the little breaks we have in between the little sessions, if you have questions, let me remind you, they are not recorded so you can ask those questions very freely, there's no such thing as a dumb question, you can ask anything you like, but they will not be recorded so you needn't worry about that. Okay, well I think one of the things that will be a help to us, and it will be a kind of broader help I think, is if we have a look at one of the reasons why Christians, godly Christians, people who are loyal to the Lord and who want to follow the Lord, come to different conclusions about certain things. It has to do with interpretation.

When you're thinking about Bible teaching, there are two things that we need to kind of divide. One is inspiration, that's to say the way we got our Bible, the way God inspired men and women, taught by the Holy Spirit, I believe recording the exact words that God had put in their hearts to record, not in dictation but preserving it so that what they wrote was what God said, absolutely, with every word, every letter, every part of a letter. I'm not going to go into how that took place, but that's my understanding.

My understanding is also that the Bible is without error. I do not believe there are any factual errors in the Bible. But that's not the same as interpretation, because all the people who have different convictions about marriage, divorce and singleness, many of them would have those same convictions about inspiration.

They would say, yes, I believe God has inspired every part of the Bible, every word of it, I believe it's reliable, I believe it's without error. They would say the same thing. But it's when you come to the questions of interpretation, and there are some aspects of interpretation that I think it will be useful just for us to mention as we go through these things.

And it's good, I think, to try to respect Christians when they have different opinions. I don't think there are many Christians who are engaged in a conspiracy to corrupt the church. I don't think that's the case.

So it's good to respect them and to listen to them, but ultimately to come to a place where, as Paul said when he wrote to the Romans, you're convinced in your own mind that you hold to the thing that you feel sure about, but even at that stage not to be afraid for people to ask you questions. Let me turn to 1 Corinthians. Well, let's turn to Matthew chapter 19 first of all.

Matthew chapter 19. The Lord Jesus in Matthew's gospel refers to issues of marriage and divorce and the implications of it on two occasions. And this one I'm looking at is now chapter 19 and verse 7 and 8. Okay, this is what it says.

They said to him, Why then did Moses command to give a writing of divorcement? And to put her away? Jesus said to them, Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, allowed you to put away your wives. But from the beginning it was not so. Now this is really quite an important statement here because the

Lord is saying that sometimes there is a difference between what God permits and what God commends.

These are not necessarily the same thing. God will only ever command what is perfect. Only ever will he command what is perfect.

But God at times, and we need to kind of check the times, will permit things that are imperfect, things which have been tailored to particular circumstances. In this particular point here, he's talking about the hardness of men's hearts. I don't think he just means men as opposed to women, although I think in some of these things men can be harder than women.

And I don't think he's just talking about issues of divorce and remarriage. I think he's just simply making a statement that during the period of the law in particular, because of the hardness of men's hearts, God instituted certain laws which weren't his perfect will. It isn't the way that God would have chosen to do it.

But given the materials of the hardness of men's hearts, he applied and accommodated his laws to things and he permitted them. Let me show you another little example of something like this. In 1 Corinthians chapter 7 and verse 6. 1 Corinthians chapter 7 and verse 6. I'm just kind of jumping in at the middle just so you can see the point I'm making.

And he says this in verse 6. He says, I speak this, and I think he means what he's going to say next. He says, I speak this by permission and not by commandment. Now does he mean by that that he doesn't have the same sense of inspiration? That really this isn't the word of God in the same way that other things are the word of God? Or does he mean something else? I think he means that there are some things that God has declared categorically.

He said this must be so, this must be so. There are some other things where God accommodating his will to conditions which include the hardness of men's hearts. There are some things that he has permitted.

So there is a difference sometimes in the scripture between what is commanded and what is permitted. And we will need to look at some of those issues when they come up. Okay.

Now the next thing we can ask is this question. Are the commands of Paul less important than the commands of Jesus? If you look at 1 Corinthians chapter 7 and verse 10, Paul says this. You won't be able to follow my reasoning at this point because I'm just trying to introduce the way we're going to try and interpret these things.

In verse 10 it says, And to the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord. Now what's happening here then? Is Paul saying, well there is a difference between the commands that I give and the commands that the Lord gives? I don't believe he's saying that either. I think he's making a point here.

He's actually referring to something that the Lord said specifically when he was upon the earth. And that leads me to kind of touch on something which is a bit of an axe for me to grind. Many, many modern translations of the Bible now come with the words of Jesus in red.

In fact, in many modern versions it's difficult to get a Bible that doesn't have the words of Jesus in red. I sometimes say I prefer Bibles that have the words of the Holy Spirit in black. And I'm actually making a point when I say that because the people who put the words of Jesus in red are implying that there is something more important about the words of Jesus because Jesus said them.

That is a mistake. That is not the way to understand the Scripture. What's happened in the Scripture is it's not the words of Jesus that are the key thing.

What's important is the process whereby God the Holy Spirit has inspired gospel writers like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to give a report of what was said in a way that exactly conveys what the Spirit of God wanted John or Mark or Matthew or Luke to convey to those people. So sometimes you don't have the exact words of Jesus. For example, if you look at if you look in Matthew chapter 19 and verse 9 you'll see one place where Matthew is reporting what has been said.

And Matthew's gospel has the Jews in mind in particular. If you've read the gospels and thought about them you'll notice that there's different styles in the gospels. And Matthew's gospel constantly refers back to the Old Testament.

There's a way in which Matthew's gospel almost all the time is actually saying this was done because it was written like this. It was done so that this would be fulfilled. What Matthew is doing is he's taking key sections of the Old Testament and he's showing the Jewish people whose book the Old Testament was how God had fulfilled the promises in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

In chapter 19 then and verse 9 he says this And I say to you, whoever shall put away his wife except it be for now I'm going to put a more modern term in here sexual immorality verse 9 and shall marry another commits adultery and whoever marries her who is put away commits adultery. So you've got a reference there to what's sometimes called the exception clause. Matthew seems to be adding something that Mark doesn't add and it's this thing that's being called the exception clause.

It's wrong says Matthew in his record to put away someone, to divorce someone other than for sexual immorality. Now that little phrase doesn't occur in Mark. So has Mark missed it? Or has Matthew added it? Is this Matthew adding it looking as an editor and trying to help people understand it or is this Mark simplifying things Mark's always in a hurry to get to things is he just kind of cutting the corners what's happening here? And I don't believe it's either of those things.

I believe that it's the Spirit of God specifically inspiring Matthew to record something which captured all the truth of what Jesus was saying in a way which could be particularly applicable to the Jewish people. And we'll see some of the implications of that in a minute. So it's important I think when we're looking at these things that we don't set one scripture writer against another and say well this person has a greater revelation.

Sometimes even in our own circles that's been done. You'll get people who prefer Paul or John and don't really think quite so much of James and don't think Peter really got his act together very well. I think that is a real mistake.

That is the same kind of inspiration with every single one of the Bible writers. Exactly the same kind of inspiration. And it's not that they are recording necessarily the exact words as a tape recorder would have done.

What they are doing is they're recording it as a reporter would have done but they are being superintended by the Spirit of God. So they're capturing exactly what God wanted us to hear through them. So the inspiration, the miracle of inspiration is taking place in the individual.

The miracle of the inspiration isn't some mechanical process whereby the words of Jesus have been kind of recorded like a tape recorder and then captured. I hope that will help you maybe when you think of other parts of the Bible because there are times when there are apparent discrepancies, apparent differences in the Bible and for some people this is a bit of a stumbling block. But if you understand the way in which God has recorded, inspired the Bible and not tried to say exactly the same thing through Mark as he was saying through Matthew, it ought to help a little bit in that way.

Okay, now there's another thing that we can have right at the end of 1 Corinthians chapter 7. It's interesting how many of these kind of ideas come into 1 Corinthians 7 and some people think that 1 Corinthians 7 is kind of a take it or leave it place because Paul doesn't seem to be quite so sure as he normally is because he's saying, well Jesus said this, I'm saying this and this is my counsel I'm giving to you. And he says this kind of thing here in 1 Corinthians chapter 7 verse 39 he says, the wife is bound by the law as long as her husband lives but if her husband dies she is at liberty to be married to whom she will, only in the law but she is happier if she abides after my judgment and I think also that I have the spirit of God.

And if you read that in one way you might think, well isn't he very sure then? Does he only think that he's got the spirit of God?

In fact this word think has been translated too weakly here it's a stronger word than I think it's not just a kind of a passing possibility it's a conviction it's a clear conviction I've got somewhere if you look at Acts chapter 15 and verse 22 I'll show you somewhere where the same word is used Acts chapter 15 and verse 22 in my Bible it says it pleased the apostles and elders with the whole church to send men of their own company to Antioch and in fact that word that's translated pleased is the word that's translated think in 1 Corinthians chapter 7 and the last verse this is a conviction this is not just a passing possibility and in fact a little bit later on in verse 25 it seemed good to us being assembled with one accord to send chosen men to you it seemed good is again the same

Greek word that's translated think so what's happened in most of our Bibles is it's been translated in a way which leaves you with a little bit of doubt really the doubt isn't there it's much more certain than that OK, that's just to say a little bit about the nature of how people interpret the Bible and this has to do with the historical background now some years ago 1984 there was a book written by Gordon Wenham and William Heath called Jesus and Divorce and in some of our circles this book kind of went the rounds and was very highly regarded and they reprinted it in 1997 these two on the back it says this William Heath and Gordon Wenham explore the different schools of interpretation this is a very thorough book it's worth reading and present a fresh consideration of the various

statements of Jesus and Paul drawing on linguistic and contemporary cultural evidence then it says this they closely criticized the view that allows remarriage after divorce on the grounds of immorality which is widely held by evangelicals today then it says this instead the authors turn to the early church which permitted divorce but not remarriage in other words the people who did this particular book when they were trying to interpret the gospels and things like 1 Corinthians chapter 7 they said we've got to read this in the context that is as close as we can to the people that this letter was written to because they would have understood it and there are certain from about AD 1000 through to about AD 300 100 to 300 there's a group of writers and we've got quite a few of their writers

and these are called the anti-Nicene fathers and what this book does is it interprets 1 Corinthians 7 and things that Jesus said very much in the context of those early church fathers it says we think they were closest to the events they were closest to the mindset the way that people thought they were closest to the apostles we think it's more likely that they interpreted it properly so they say this is why we've done it this way there is a bit of a PS with this book that I discovered today and it really kind of quite surprised me this is written by Gordon Wenham and William Heff and was reprinted in 1997 and in the year 2010 2002 William Heff the second half of that partnership wrote this paper called Jesus on Divorce How My Mind Has Changed this man he's a professor of New Testament

and Greek at Taylor University he's served as a professor since 1986 he's a very highly resourced man he's got contacts he's got understanding he's got knowledge of ancient languages he's got all and in five years he changed his opinion on some aspects of what he said in that book now this is another book a more recent one and this one says this on the back this is even before you get into it back covers are really very useful if you're reading Christian books theological books usually people don't read the back but I once went to a lecture on how to read a book and it was very helpful and one of the aspects was to read on the back because it begins to give you a mindset it says here on the back of this one looking closely at the biblical text on divorce and remarriage in the light of the

first century Jewish and Greco-Roman world this book shows that the original audience of the New Testament heard those teachings differently now what this man has done is he has gone in the opposite direction these folks were basing their understanding not basing it but they were trying to interpret it in the context of something that was pretty much a hundred years after first Corinthians this man is actually going from a hundred years before Corinthians and backwards into the Old Testament and into the whole culture of the Jews and the Romans and he says we need to interpret what we are trying to do is we are trying to understand what the original receivers of the letter would have understood from Paul do you understand that? that's what we are trying to do and these two men say the

best way you can do that is to think like the early church fathers thought these people say the best way you can do that is actually to think like the Romano-Greco world thought and the Jews thought as well and the consequence of these two things is they come to different conclusions about what's being said so this is one of the reasons why we have these struggles I'm going to say a little bit before we have our first little break just about world history I'm not going to tell you a lot of world history but to me it's intriguing I've said this often when we've had conversations with people because I often get involved in conversations about divorce and remarriage I ought to have told you this let me tell you a story this will go back maybe 25 years ago I was preaching in a church and I'd

been asked to do a series over the weekend and I was I think there were about 5 sessions and we did singles marriages widows children everything we did the whole of the weekend and one of the things we were to do was singles and after one of the meetings one of the elders asked me if I would talk to a young woman in their church and I spent a couple of hours talking to this woman and at this point I believed in what you might have called the most extreme view of divorce and remarriage I believed and taught that the first sexual act between a man and a woman created a lasting bond that could only be severed by death whether it was voluntary or involuntary no matter what the implications were that was what I taught and I had my kind of Bible verses to teach it then I had this conversation

with this young woman she was in her early twenties she was bright she was pretty she was lively she had lived with her husband for twelve months when she was converted and she changed her way of looking at

things so completely that her husband left her and divorced her he said you're not the woman I married you won't go to parties you won't go to clubs you won't get drunk you're not the woman I married I'm leaving so he left so I'm now talking to this young woman she's about 22 23 I want to be discreet about what I'm saying now her instincts as a woman have been awoken during twelve months of married life I'm now faced what do I say to this woman do I now say according to my understanding of the Bible you are joined to the man till the death of one of the partners and there's no prospect

at all of you ever being joined to another man in this same kind of relationship I discovered that at that point when I asked myself and this is this is why pastoral care always affects theology and it always affects your understanding it's really very easy to come to Bible conclusions in your study actually it's no difficulty at all it's actually when people get involved that things get much more complicated and I looked at this young woman and I thought now can I say to this young woman you cannot contemplate the prospect of another relationship with a man for the rest of your life because that's what the Bible teaches and I thought I asked this question sometimes of myself I thought am I willing to die for this belief of mine I'm not sure I was willing to die for this belief of mine

what I was sure of is I wasn't willing for her to die for this belief of mine and I wasn't willing for this woman to put her life on hold for the next 50 years because of a conviction that I held about the Bible if there was the slightest possibility that I was not right in the thing that I believed I was not willing to lay that heavy burden on this young woman and it just put the brakes on and stopped me for a long long time for many many years I would say that this view convinces me and this view convinces me I can see the points they're making I can see the line I can follow their arguments but for a long long time I was just in a state where I thought well actually I don't know I don't know I can see weaknesses here I can see strengths here I don't know actually now I do know I may

not know next week when I come back to the next bit but I think I know at the moment but I just want to make this point that there are times when we need to be sensitive about what we're saying because the decisions that we make don't just affect us of course they affect all kinds of people but we're living in a world where marriage relationships are just absolutely mangled and if you say well yes it's terrible it's never been like this actually it has been like this it was like this when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians chapter 7 we've been through a few hundred years which have been different which have been a bit more stable the Victorians although they were hypocritical they had some moral convictions so there were definite standards about what you should do and what you shouldn't do and now

we are kind of in the aftermath of that and we think the whole world is kind of falling to pieces but actually the world we are living in is now much more like the world that the Bible was written to ok so what I was going to say is this I'm not going to go into it deeply I'm just going to say this is that to me it's interesting that there is no definition of marriage in the Bible and of course you need a definition of marriage before you can create a definition of divorce are you following me? you can't define divorce until you've defined marriage but there is no definition of marriage in the Bible and the question then is well why is there no definition of marriage in the Bible? well let me tease you a little bit why is there not the definition of a camel in the Bible? why is there not

a definition of a donkey in the Bible? well because everyone knows what a camel looks like and everyone knows what a donkey looks like and everyone in ancient history they knew what a marriage looked like.

There were certain details that they did differently, but there were certain aspects of the marriage which were common to every society. And one of the main things was, and I'll go into this at some length at another point, one of the main things was that marriage is a contract. It creates a relationship that is not there naturally.

It creates a relationship with conditions. It creates a relationship with obligations. And if the obligations are not kept, then it breaks the contract that was made.

That was the understanding of marriage right the way through all the ancient civilizations. That was actually the understanding of marriage right through the Jewish period, that marriage created a contract, and that the contract had certain obligations written into it, implied or sometimes actually written. And that if these failed, if one of the persons failed, then the contract was broken.

And actually, whoever broke the contract and caused the contract to be broken was then fined in a particular way. In the Jewish pattern of life, it was like this. When a Jewish man and a woman got married, there were two exchanges of money.

There was a bride price that went towards the family of the woman. There was also a dowry that came with the woman to the family that she was joining in getting married, let's say her husband. And if either of these two failed in their marriage contract, when the two split up, the person who was guilty lost a portion of the investment.

In other words, some of the money would have to come back from the family if the woman became adulterous. The man would have to give part of the dowry back to the woman if he became adulterous. So it was a contract, a contract that can be broken.

And when it was broken, there were certain kind of implications to it. So we need, when we're looking at these things in marriage, we need to sort of try and keep in our minds all these different contexts which all affect our interpretation. And this is why we need to be calm.

We need to be measured. We need to be humble about the conclusions that we come to and respect people who come to different conclusions. Now I'm going to have a pause, so this will turn off.

So if you've got any questions.

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