



JESUS AND THE LAW

Part 67 of Luke's Gospel: Investigating the Man Who Is God

Pastor Mark Driscoll | 16:14–18 | March 20, 2011

Luke 16:14–18

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INTRODUCTION

All righty, guess what book of the Bible we're in? Luke, yeah. If you don't know that, you're new. We have been in Luke for over a year. Today, we look at Luke 16:14–18, Jesus and the law. And you can find that in your Bible or on your app.

Here's where we find ourselves in the story. Jesus is making his journey toward the great city of Jerusalem, where he is ultimately gonna die on a cross for our sins and rise from death as our savior. Along the way, he is preaching and teaching and having the occasional conflict with various religious types. And he has just concluded, in the section that precedes what we will be studying today, a discourse regarding money. And he concludes his instruction saying, “You cannot worship both God and money.” You can worship God and use money, or you can worship money but not simultaneously worship God and money.

And the result is that the religious leaders laugh at him because, as is often the case with those who are religious hypocrites, they're in it for the money. And so Jesus is going to have a very important discussion with them about salvation.

SUCCESS CANNOT SAVE

And we pick up the story in Luke 16:14–15, where Jesus teaches that success cannot save. He says this, “The Pharisees,” those are the religious leaders, “who were lovers of money,” that's the problem, “heard all these things, and they ridiculed him,” mocked him, made fun of him, as, sadly, some people still do of Jesus to this day. “And he said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.’”

As Jesus is teaching about money, that we should use money but not love money, that we should worship God with money but not worship money as God, they mock him, make fun of him, make sport of him, make light of him because religion can be a highly profitable business and they were lovers of money.

And they did not believe that they were in any danger. They did not believe that God was displeased with them. They, in fact, assumed because they were religiously powerful and successful, and financially powerful and successful, that God's blessing was upon them. This is an error that can also be made today. That is assuming, “Well, they're very popular. They're very rich. Their life is going very well. God must not be displeased with them. This must be the result of his blessing.” Not always true. We wouldn't say that same thing, for example, about a drug dealer. “Lots of people are attracted to them. Business seems good. Their influence is growing. God is obviously blessing them.” We'd say, “No, other factors are at play.” And sometimes religion, bad religion, greedy religion, false religion, can be very popular and very profitable.

And Jesus says, “You've only been justified in the sight of men,” meaning other people look at you and say, “You're a decent person, you're a moral person, spiritual person, helpful person, kind person. To some degree, we esteem you.” Jesus says that kind of justification is no good at all. It's not enough if people think well of you. The question is, what does God think?

And he uses this language of “justified,” or “justify.” This is a very important issue. It was actually at the heart of something called the Protestant Reformation, where there was a debate within Christianity about how someone is justified in the sight of God. And the point is this, that God is holy and God is good and God is just and God is without sin. And we are unholy and we are unjust and we are sinners. We sin by nature. We sin by choice. We sin in our actions. We sin in our words. We sin in our deeds. We sin in our motives. We have sin of commission, where we do what we ought not

do. We have sin of omission, where we fail to do what God created and designed us to do. As a result, the Bible declares all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

And the question is, how can we as sinners be declared righteous, seen as just in the sight of a holy God? God can't just ignore our sin. That would make him unholy and unrighteous. God can't accept, tolerate, or accommodate our sin. Likewise, that would make him unholy, unjust.

And the result is that we find ourselves in a very bad condition, where we learn that our success cannot save us. The most moral among us is not moral enough. The most devoted among us is not devoted enough. The most obedient among us is not obedient enough, because the standard of God is ultimately perfection. That's why Jesus says elsewhere to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect. God is a perfect being, his kingdom is a perfect place, and only those who are perfect are fit for his presence in that place. We're in a terrible predicament. You need to know that, in that natural state, we are destined toward the conscious, eternal torment of hell. We will suffer forever, separated from God. And if that was the only option, that would be just.

And so Jesus, because he loves even these hypocritical, greedy, self-righteous religious leaders—as he loves us in our sin—is telling them the truth despite the fact that they are mocking him. As perhaps some of you hear this, your response may be akin to theirs, “This is silly. This is crazy. This is outdated.” And maybe, at least in your heart, you're laughing at the words of Jesus, as they did. This shows us that we are like them. We're not good people. We're bad people. And at the end of the day, we cannot stand before God and have him declare that we have lived a sinless, perfect, wonderful, faultless, flawless life. None of us will. Theologically, we're all sinners. Practically, this is what people mean, even those who are not Christian, when they say, “No one is perfect.” That's indeed true. That's indeed true. And your success cannot save you. And any comfort, blessing, ease that you have in your life is not indicative of God's approval.

THE LAW CANNOT SAVE

What happens then is some people move toward religion, a sort of hard, moralistic religion. And then Jesus continues by saying that the law cannot save. And the law here is in reference to the Old Testament Scriptures, beginning with the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, which means book in five parts, most of which is penned by Moses. And it has some 613 commands. “Do this. Do not do that.” It's filled with law.

And here's what Jesus has to say, Luke 16:16–17, “‘The Law and the Prophets,’” the Old Testament, “‘were until John,’” his cousin, that is John the Baptizer, “‘since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.’”

Jesus says that from the beginning of human sin, prophets have come and laws have been proclaimed to reveal to us God's standard of holy, righteous, obedient perfection. But the law cannot save.

Now, religion wrongly assumes, believes that the law can save. So religious people will pick up the Bible and say, “Okay, here's the manual. Do this. Don't do that.” And they assume that if they do the good things and don't do the bad things, that they will stand before God, declared holy, righteous, and just in his sight. But the truth is we break God's laws all the time and none of us are, in fact, perfect. And the Bible says elsewhere that to break any of the law is to nullify all of the law. And some of us like to say, “Well, I kept most of it,” or “I kept the heart of it.” Some of us ignore certain pieces or we have various ways of arguing it away, “Well, it's cultural. It's outdated. That was a different time. Things have progressed. My personality is different.” We have ways of excusing ourselves.

And Jesus says, “Not a jot, not a tittle, not the dotting of an *i*, not the crossing of a *t* will be neglected by God the just judge when he investigates the entirety, the totality of our life.” This is to arrest our attention and to concern us. This is because the Bible is good, but we are bad. And the more you read the Bible, the worse you know you are. Right? We hear this often from non-Christians and new Christians. “Pastor, I was reading my Bible. It's not working.” “What do you mean?” “Well, the more I read it, the worse I feel.” “No, I promise you, it's working. It's working quite well.” You don't know how sinful you are until you understand the laws of God. And then we start comparing ourselves not to ourselves, but to the Word of God. And we realize how much sin there is in our heart and mind and life. How many of you, the more you read the Bible, the worse you know you are? Even simple verses like “Love your enemy.” “Uh oh. ‘There's a long list of people that I have not done that to. Well, at least I've not committed adultery. Oh, Jesus says it counts in your heart and he knows your mind? Whoops. Wow, I really am guilty.’”

The law cannot save. The law exists to show us our sin, to show us that we desperately need a savior and that we cannot save ourselves, that morality, good works, religion is, as he says previously, an abomination. It offends God. It does not please him. It repels him. It does not invite him. Those who know they are sinners, those who know that they need help, those who know that they need a savior, they welcome God and they don't mock him as these religious people do. The law cannot save.

What we instead need is a savior. And so he proceeds to talk to us about the good news of the kingdom of God. And the good news is literally “gospel.” So the bad news is we are sinners. The good news is there's a savior. The bad news is that we have not kept the laws of God. The good news is that our savior has kept all of the laws of God, that we are the bad news and Jesus is the good news, that our God became a man, that our God lived without sin, that our God never broke any of the commands of Scripture, that Jesus, our God, in becoming a human being, lived a perfect, sinless, obedient life. He lived the life we were supposed to live, but have failed to. In thought, word, deed, motive, he kept, in complete, total obedience, the entirety of the law of God. Only one person has ever lived without sin, his name is Jesus Christ.

And the good news is that he went to the cross and suffered and died in our place, for our sins, as our substitute and savior, to cancel our debt to God. Furthermore, he gives us his righteousness. He gives us his obedience. He gives us his perfection. Martin Luther rightly calls this “The Great

Exchange.” And that’s the good news. When we stand before God the Father, who is a perfect, holy, and righteous judge, we will not boast about our life. We’ll boast about the life of Jesus. We do not tell him about all the good we have done. We will tell him about how good his Son has been to us. We will not sing our praises. We’ll sing the praises of Christ. When the Father asks, “For what cause might I declare you to be justified and declared righteous in my sight?” we will say we belong to Jesus. He is our savior. He is our righteousness. He is our God. He is our good news.

And religious people know nothing of this. Friends, it’s not about us, it’s about Jesus. It’s not about what we do, it’s about what he’s done. It’s not about the life that we live, it’s about the death that he died. It’s about Jesus. That’s the good news.

EVERYONE IS A HYPOCRITE

And these people are still not getting it, as some of us are prone to do likewise. And so Jesus is going to point out in their life a specific sin that reveals that they’re not as holy as they think they are and that they’re hypocrites. And Jesus does this because he loves them. So if you have been under conviction from the Holy Spirit, Jesus is similarly serving you in this way because he loves you. He’s not trying to destroy you or dismay you. He’s inviting you to get to know who you really are so that you would come to know who he really is and how desperately you need him.

And so Jesus’ next big point is that everyone is a hypocrite. And by everyone, I mean everyone. Right? Because here is what happens, as is the case with these people: they see everyone else’s sin far more clearly than their own. We have this proclivity, right? Any of you married? Right? Have you noticed your spouse? They have sin in their life and they don’t even see it. They’re oblivious to it. And they’re thinking the same thing about you. This is because other people’s sin is far clearer than our own.

We’re hypocrites. How many of you, even if you just judged yourself by your own rules, you’d still be guilty, let alone God’s laws? How many of you have rules and laws and judgments and preferences and legalisms and causes and you’re guilty, but you judge everyone else for not living up to the standard you don’t live up to? This is how we work. We’re all hypocrites. We should never say, “I can’t believe that people are like that.” We should say, “I cannot believe people are like me.” That would be more accurate, right?

And they have hypocrisy because, to this point, we have seen repeatedly in the narrative of Luke’s gospel, over the course of more than a year as we’ve been walking through this book of the Bible, they keep arguing with Jesus. “Oh, did you heal on the Sabbath? You’re not supposed to heal on the Sabbath. We have a lot of rules and you can’t break any of the rules.” Well, there’s one rule they’ve been breaking and it’s a very big rule. Jesus never broke one of the commands of the Bible and they often break one of the major commands of the Bible: don’t commit adultery, don’t get divorced. Isn’t it amazing how religious hypocrisy can sometimes strain over details and ignore major issues?

Here’s how Jesus says it. Luke 16:18, “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

Now, here’s what was going on. These religious leaders were very popular and very rich. And one of the reasons why? They would grant people divorces without biblical cause and grounds. “You’re not happy? That’s fine. You want an annulment? We’re fine with that. Just come to us, tell us you’re unhappy, write a big donation check to our ministry. We’ll pull a few verses out of context and tell you God’s okay with it.” Some churches, denominations, and leaders still do this. The Bible calls them false prophets, false teachers, false apostles. They’re people who are for hire. You come in, tell ‘em what you want, write a check, and they’re parrots who say what you told them to say.

There are a few large churches in America, I’m not gonna name the names, but it’s amazing today because the pastors are in the process of divorcing their spouse, some under the charge of adultery, and they’re not even taking a week off of work. It just keeps going. And the people in their congregation don’t leave or declare war or hire someone else. And part of the reason may be that the people came to that church because they wanted to live disobedient lives, and as long as their leadership gives them permission to live disobedient lives, they will not be upset by the disobedient life of the leader. And it’s horrendous, but it’s common.

There are some churches that, in an effort to keep their giving high and to keep their attendance up and to keep those who are most powerful among them, don’t call people to repentance of sin. Instead, they accommodate and tolerate. And the truth is that’s not loving to God and it’s not loving to the people, particularly when it comes to marriage.

And we’ll get into the issue of divorce, but the truth is many Christians do not have biblical grounds for divorce. Some do. We want to be kind and tender and loving regarding that issue, but with the number of Christians getting divorced and the number of churches that are sanctioning this kind of behavior, and even tolerating and accommodating adultery, not everyone has biblical grounds. And some churches are not doing their job and they’re falling into the same tragic error and folly as these religious leaders. And it’s sad. It’s grievous.

How about your marriage? Some of you are single, but, statistically, 93% of you will marry. As Jesus hits this issue of divorce, it is an issue, quite frankly, that touches us all. For some of you, this was your grandparents, this was your parents. For some of you, this is extended family, friends, people you love and you know and your life is a front-row seat to their pain and it’s hard to watch. We’re all affected by it, family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, people we love and care about. For some, you are divorced. For some, you’re in the process of divorce. For some, apart from some fast grace, you are headed toward disaster, devastation, divorce.

And Jesus tells these religious leaders, “Why in the world would you criticize everyone while you’re divorcing your own wife? Why would you lay heavy burdens on people when you’re committing adultery on your own wife? Why would you argue with people over secondary issues that don’t matter and when the most important thing in the world after their relationship with God, their relationship with their spouse, is brought before you, you

don't examine, you don't investigate, you don't help, you don't counsel. You just cash their check and let them have a divorce and tell them that God's okay with it."

Some are subtle about this. Others are very overt. I'll give you one example that I think I might have shared before. It was fairly early on in ministry. I had a man who came in for counseling and he had repeatedly, habitually committed adultery on his wife. And this included the hiring of prostitutes. And he told me and I said, "We have to tell your wife. You tell her or I'll tell her, but she's gonna know soon. And she needs to go in and get a test 'cause, who knows, you may have given her something." They've got kids. It's a disaster. He says, "Oh, no, no, you can't tell her." "Yeah, I can. I can." "Oh, I believe in confidentiality." "Really? I believe in Jesus, so, you know, Jesus beats confidentiality. Rock, paper, scissors. Jesus, confidentiality—hey, Jesus wins, you know?" And he looked at me, he said, "Well, how about if I write a check for \$250,000?" I said, "I'm not a prostitute. I'm not for sale." Right? You can't buy the approval of God. You can't buy a rewriting of the Bible to fit your sinful heart. No. No. No, we love your wife and we love your kids and we love God and we love the truth and yeah, we love you, but the truth cannot be for sale. The truth can never be for sale because the truth belongs to God. And we all must give an account before him, including me.

DIVORCE

So we're gonna talk about divorce. Jesus here is not providing a lengthy instruction on divorce. He's pointing it out as a sin example in their life. But I know it raises for us all a host of complicated, difficult, painful questions. So let me try and answer them in an effort to serve you. Normally, I would just keep moving through Luke, but when we hit something that is such a cataclysmic issue in our day as divorce, we have to stop and unpack it biblically. If you're married, I'm gonna ask you to hold hands. And if you can't, it shows me you're in trouble.

WHAT CONSTITUTES THE BIBLICAL GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE?

First question regarding divorce, what constitutes the biblical grounds for divorce? This is the first question. This is the first question. Now, let me preface all of this by talking about this pastorally. As I'm going to answer questions and give you Bible verses, and I would encourage you to read and study for yourself, please, please, please don't turn this into a math equation. We're dealing with human beings and their lives. We're dealing with the second most important relationship, the relationship with your spouse, which is the relationship after your relationship with God in terms of priority. And what some people like to do is to lazily, religiously, sometimes hypocritically turn issues like divorce into a math equation. "Oh, yes, no, yes, no. Oh, yes. No, you can't get a divorce. You can get a divorce." It's not math, it's life. Math is easy, life is hard because the variables are very complicated, very difficult. And so, yes, we want to obey the Bible, but to do that the Bible tells us as well to be people who are in the lives of those who are suffering, pastors giving counsel and care. Please don't treat this as a math equation.

Furthermore, don't rush to judgment. Just because your friend is hurting and/or filing for divorce, don't immediately just rush to their defense. The Bible says in Proverbs that everyone seems right until the other side is heard. That is particularly true when it comes to matters of marriage. How many of you have heard one side, gotten furious, and then heard the other side and said, "Wait, that's a very different story"? Welcome to pastoral counseling.

I learned this the hard way early on in ministry, and I've used this illustration a few times. I'm a man who cares very much that women are treated lovingly and respectfully and that men are not harsh with their wives. A woman, I can't remember if she called or came into the office, but she was very emotional and crying and a young, newly married woman. And she said, "Pastor Mark, my husband grabbed me and he scared me and he restrained me." "Not in our church." I put my red cape on, got my shirt with the S on it, and I was gonna go fix this. So I call this guy into my office, I said, "Is this true?" "Yes, it is. But can I explain the details?" "Yes, you may." He says, "Well, you see this huge gash on my head?" "Yeah, I did notice that." "Well, we were eating dinner. She got mad, picked up her plate, and hit me in the head with it. And then she grabbed the steak knife, so I grabbed her wrists." I looked at her, I said, "Is that what you meant when you said he restrained you?" "Well, sort of." "Well, those are variables that are very important to the story. He grabbed your wrists so he wouldn't die." That seems—all of a sudden, this seems more reasonable than I was expecting. Right?

And the point of the story is everyone seems right till the other side of the matter is heard. So don't just rush to defense. If your friend, family member, coworker is hurting, all right, and they tell you something, you say, "That sounds horrible and I'm sorry for that," but don't immediately—you can be comforting and kind, but don't immediately rush to a judgment unless a full investigation is done. And if you're not in a position of spiritual leadership, you're not in a position to do that kind of investigation.

So there are grounds for divorce. We are not a church that believes that no one ever has a right to a divorce. We believe, sadly, tragically, painfully, there are occasions when divorce is permitted. And here they are: Number one, it's not technically divorce, but it is the cessation of the marriage, and that is death, Romans 7:2-4 and 1 Corinthians 7:39. Marriage is a covenant that lasts until death do we part. Upon death, the marriage covenant has ended and the widowed or widower spouse is welcome to remarry if in fact they so desire. It's okay. Grace and I love one another. In the providence of God, teaching this sermon this week, we just finished a book on marriage that we sent off to the publisher. It'll be out in January. And we just celebrated our twenty-third anniversary of our first date. That was this week. We're very excited about that. By the grace of God, we'll be together until one of us dies. And then the Bible seems to indicate, according to the teaching of Jesus, that in heaven we'll be like the angels, not married. So our marriage covenant ends at the end of this life. Our friendship will continue in the kingdom of God and the resurrection of the dead, but should one of us pass, the other is free to remarry if that's in fact what they want to do.

Number two, adultery, Deuteronomy 22:22 and Matthew 5:32. Jesus says that it is, both in the old covenant and the new covenant, it is permissible to get a divorce in the case of adultery. Part of the covenant of marriage is that one man and one woman would be one flesh, and adultery is the betrayal of the oneness of the covenant. It is the breaking of the covenant vows. This means that, yes, adultery can destroy a marriage. And adultery is a sin, and sin

leads to death, and sin can lead to the death of the marriage. This does not mean, if adultery is committed, that you have to get a divorce, but it means that you may have biblical grounds to do so.

Subsequently, you need to be very careful who you marry. For those of you who are single, the second most important decision you will ever make is who you marry. (The first important decision you will ever make is which God you will worship.) If it is not someone you can be faithful to and they can be faithful to you, you will be in a horrible position, particularly if and when you have children. And I see it repeatedly where there are children involved and adultery has been committed, and it leaves the marriage in a very painful place because those who are married with children who have been cheated on by an adulterating spouse know that simply to get a divorce does not mean that it's over, because, as long as there are children, it's never over. You've got birthdays and holidays and, someday, grandchildren.

Subsequently, some people decide, "We're not going to get a divorce. We're going to get help. We're going to work on it. We're going to try and get through it." Those are noble people. It takes both the adulterer to earnestly repent and the spouse who has been sinned against to earnestly forgive. Trust is built slowly, lost quickly. This takes a lot of tears and time. We have seen couples make it through adultery. It's not required. It is noble. But divorce is permissible. It is permissible.

Number three, sexual immorality, Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9. Matthew 5 and Matthew 19 are the two sections of the Bible where Jesus deals with marriage, adultery, divorce in the most extensive fashion if you want to read it. And the word for adultery therein—it's a Greek word. In the original text, it's *moikea*. And then he uses another word, *porneia*. It's the same root from which we get *pornography* and it's a general term meaning all kinds of sexual immorality and sin. And Jesus is saying that sometimes it's hard to prove adultery because people are secretive in their sin. There are other kinds of sexual sin that may not fit the technical definition of adultery, but they do qualify as infidelity.

Today, this would include such things as, you know, a spouse who's got online nefarious relationships of various sorts and kinds, addiction to pornography, things of that nature. And they would say, "Well, I've not technically committed adultery and been physically present with someone," but you've committed *porneia*. You are sexually corrupted.

And that doesn't mean that you have to get a divorce, again, but it does mean if there is this ongoing pattern of sexual sin and filth that violates the covenant terms of oneness and fidelity, then yes, there may be grounds for divorce. And these are difficult circumstances and judgment calls. That's why it takes leadership that is loving and prayerful and careful and biblical to be involved, to help understand and unpack all of this. See, some of you guys are single and you have these kinds of sins and issues in your life. You think, "Well, if I get married, that'll fix it." No, it won't. You put your sin to death before you get married. Otherwise, you will kill your wife.

Number four, another condition or ground for divorce is that a non-Christian quits the marriage. This is in 1 Corinthians 7:10–24. And this can happen a few different ways. A Christian marries a non-Christian, you're not supposed to do that, but some people do. I would beg you, I would implore you, I would invite you, do not marry a non-Christian. Go through the Mars Hill premarital process. Let us get to know you. Let us unpack your history, baggage, and all the carry-ons. Let's look at all of it. Let's take our time. Let's open the Bible. Let's help you make this decision. And you may say, "No, we're in a hurry!" The best decisions are made prayerfully and carefully, not hurriedly. Furthermore, some of you won't go through premarital because you know we'll say no. We're going to say no because we love you. We see it over and over and over.

And this is the devastating part of pastoral ministry. You get married, you have kids, and then it absolutely explodes in chaos and disaster. Let us help you. The reason we have since day one had intensive premarital counseling is to help people make the second most important decision of their life. We love you. We're here for you. We care for you. It's free. It's not about the money. It's about you and your kids and your grandkids and your legacy and your lineage and your joy. Let us help.

So sometimes a Christian marries a non-Christian and the non-Christian just leaves at some point in the marriage. Sometimes two people marry as non-Christians, one becomes a Christian, and then the non-Christian says, "I did not sign up to be married to a Christian," and they leave. They file for divorce, and when you have a no-fault divorce society, you can't stop it. There's nothing you can do about it. They file for divorce, you're gonna get divorced.

I've seen this repeatedly and it's very hard and sad. Already today I've prayed with a number of women who are believers, but their husbands are unbelievers. Now let me say this. For those of you women who are believers and your husband is an unbeliever, you need to have a long view of things. You need to love, pray, care, serve. Places like 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Peter 3 are where you need to anchor your heart. Women like Esther are those you need to look at and learn from. There are also books for women in that condition. One is by a guy named Strobel (*Surviving a Spiritual Mismatch in Marriage*). The other is by Murrow (*How Women Help Men Find God*). These are books for wives who are believers that have husbands who are unbelievers, practical ways to help them find God.

But here, and I say this not to discourage you because I have seen God answer the prayers of believing women and see their husbands come to faith in Jesus, but statistically it is unusual. A lot of women think, "Well, I'll influence him." It tends not to go that way. For those of you men who are believers and your wives are unbelievers, statistically there are greater odds that she will convert in that scenario because if you love her as Christ loves the church and you're humble and gracious and you're the family leader and you're opening the Bible and praying and going to church, it is more likely that she will follow your faith than you would be to follow her faith. And again, we've seen miracles and God do amazing things and that's what we want for everyone, but sometimes what happens when two unbelievers marry and one converts, is that the unbeliever leaves. They want nothing to do with the believer.

This can also happen in a third scenario, where two professing Christians marry, and at some point in the marriage, one becomes what we will call

apostate. They decide, "I want nothing to do with Jesus, Bible, and the church, and so I'm leaving you." Or they'll make an ultimatum like, "You're not allowed to pray with our kids, take them to church, or tell them about Jesus." I had a woman recently who was given this ultimatum by her unbelieving husband. She said, "I love you, but Jesus is my first relationship. And I don't want a divorce and I'm not trying to pick a fight but at the end of the day, I'm gonna read my Bible, pray, and I'm gonna talk to the kids about Jesus." And he said, "If you do, I will leave." She said, "That's not what I want, but you have to make your decision. I've made mine." Those are painful situations, very hard situations. But when an unbeliever leaves, the Bible says you're not bound in such circumstances. That is grounds for divorce.

Also, number five, treachery or treasonous betrayal and behavior. This comes from Malachi 2:14–16. And in that section, there's a verse that often gets taken out by religious people to beat people up. And I want to correct the misuse of that verse. It says, "God hates divorce." What it doesn't say is that God hates the divorcee. That's not what it says. The divorcee hates divorce too. See, it breaks the heart of God as it breaks the heart of the divorcee.

Because when people get married, they're not anticipating divorce. They're thinking of the rest of their life together, growing old together, taking care of one another. And when divorce comes, it's devastating for them. The whole life they had envisioned comes crashing around them. Financially, it becomes very complicated. The lawyers get involved. If there are children, now there are custody agreements, and there's parental swapping, and haggling over holidays and birthdays and weekend visitation and stress. And should you remarry or remain single? And how long? And what if they are in love with someone else and you have to see them with their new beloved? The whole thing is horrible. It's painful. We've got a dear friend of ours who is in the midst of divorce and she has said, quote, "I hate divorce because of all the complexity and the pain and the suffering and the anguish that it brings." God doesn't hate the divorcee. God loves the divorcee. But he hates divorce just as the divorcee does because sin leads to death, and when there is divorce, it means that sin has led to the murder of the marriage.

And the condition in Malachi 2 is this. Believing men disobeyed God and married unbelieving women who worshiped false, foreign gods—exactly what God said not to do. And this is like some of you who are now dating, flirting, God forbid living, sleeping with people who are not Christians. You shouldn't be living and sleeping with anyone. But you're in a relationship as a Christian with someone who's a non-Christian and you shouldn't be.

Well, God's men got in these relationships and the reason they did was because these women were beautiful. Okay, and I tell you this all the time. Yeah, they're hot. So is hell. Don't lose perspective. Right? So these guys are thinking, "Whoa, those gals are really nice to look at. We'll marry them." And then they marry them, and you know what? They don't like them. "She doesn't worship my God. She doesn't obey the Bible. She doesn't want to go to church with me. She doesn't want to pray with me. She wants to worship a different god. Oh, now we have kids. She wants our kids to worship her god."

And then the men became very harsh with their wives, very cruel, very mean, very treacherous. And they said, "We're gonna try to shove you out so that then we can get a divorce and go marry some godly women." And God says, "No way. I told you not to marry those women and you did. Now you married them and you have children with them. You can't just mistreat them, abuse them, divorce them, and trade them in." God loves the unbelieving women as well and God commands the believing men to stop treating them in a treacherous or treasonous way.

And in marriage, people do some horrendous, nefarious things to one another. I've seen people do the most cruel, bitter, mean-spirited things to one another. And the Bible here is talking about various ways that we destroy one another. And again, it takes spiritual leadership to investigate it, but sometimes it does rise to the level of being grounds for divorce.

And, number six, it ultimately is the result of hardness of heart. And Jesus in Matthew 19:8 and Mark 10:5, he talks about Moses in the Old Testament, who permitted divorce because of, quote, "hardness of heart." Hardness of heart is where one person in the marriage refuses to admit any wrongdoing. "Did you contribute to this?" "Nope, I didn't do anything. It's their fault." They're blame shifting, defending, accusing, attacking. "So you have nothing to work on? You have nothing to change?" "You know what? They're the problem in the marriage. I'm good, they're bad. It's their fault." "Yeah, but you said or did this." "Yeah, well, they made me because that's the way they are." Hardness of heart. No recognition of your own transgression. And/or when you're sinned against, you just refuse to forgive. "Look, they're crying. They're devastated. They've admitted it. They're sorry. You don't need to fully trust them yet, but can you forgive them so that there is the possibility of regaining and rebuilding trust?" "No, I'll never forgive them. What they've done is unforgivable. They're dead to me." Ah, hardness of heart. They just—you can't move. The people are just stiff-necked, hard-hearted, stubborn, and entrenched in their position. Under such conditions, it may rise to the level of grounds for divorce. It may.

And as a pastor, I just tell you this, emotionally, this is so hard to see. Adultery, treacherous behavior, hardness of heart, sexual immorality of various sorts and kinds. Man, I just—all day, I just keep thinking of people that I know and people that I love and conversations that I've had and tragedies that I've witnessed. We're not a church that often says, "Yes, get a divorce. It's hard." We're not that church. We're also not the church that says, "Nobody should ever get a divorce." Somewhere between hard, rough, legalistic religion that says nobody ever gets a divorce, and permissive, liberal, "We'll cash your checks and be false prophets, so just tell us what your reasons are and we'll say God's okay with it." Somewhere between those two extremes of all or nothing is biblical wisdom, discernment that comes with a broken heart, compassion, love, affection for people. We really want to help. And these are the grounds.

And like I told you, when you're dealing with issues of life, particularly those regarding marriage, it's more of an art than a science. It's not math, it's shepherding. Got to get to know people, got to check it all out, got to see what's going on. Got to prayerfully, carefully, biblically, patiently come to a conclusion.

WHO GETS TO DECIDE IF BIBLICAL GROUNDS HAVE BEEN MET?

So that leads to the next question. Who gets to decide if biblical grounds have been met? Now let me say this, you don't get to decide if you have

biblical grounds. You can't be the umpire in your own life. I would also tell you not to be your own doctor or do surgery on yourself, right? Get somebody else who's a little more objective to look at your life. So just 'cause I teach you the Bible doesn't mean, "Oh, I have grounds for divorce. Pastor Mark said so." People go crazy with this stuff. I actually get this on Facebook. I've had many people on Facebook, "Pastor Mark, my husband did this. Can I get a divorce?" In 140 characters, we're going to unpack divorce? It's going to take more than that. Like, I'm going to need to talk to him maybe or interview some people or meet you. There are variables, all right? But see, those who want to have a "godly divorce," they will simply pick whatever information justifies their position and then render a verdict about their own status and then declare themselves holy in the sight of God. It's not that easy.

That's why God gives us not only the Bible, but spiritual leadership to help us understand the Bible and obey it by the grace of God. So 1 Peter 5:1-2, Peter says, "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder," or pastor. Those words are used synonymously. "Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight." So the Bible says that Jesus is our chief shepherd, pastors are like under-shepherds, and that people are like sheep and that the church is like a flock and that it is our duty and joy and privilege and responsibility to shepherd and provide oversight, to help oversee things.

So you may say, "Okay, here's my situation." Great. Talk to a pastor and we have other leaders as well, deacons and biblical counselors and community group leaders and redemption group leaders, and it's our joy and privilege and honor and responsibility to help figure these issues out with you.

Additionally, it says in Hebrews 13, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." Okay, what he says is first of all that, as leaders, we need to love you and serve you, want good for you, speak the truth to you, come alongside of you, help you, care for you. And I'll tell you this, your leaders in this church are not in it for the money. They really do love you. It's not just a religious shell game, it's just not. We really want the best for you. We really do care for you and your marriage and your family and your lineage and your legacy. We really do. And I'm not saying we're perfect and I'm not saying we never make a mistake. And if we do or you think we're wrong, tell us, because the truth is, if we can do better, by the grace of God, we want to do better.

So that is our responsibility, that we have to stand before God and give an account for the people in this church, for the systems, policies, procedures, group, doctrine, curriculum, and council. It's a massive weight of responsibility. To be honest with you, sometimes it feels a bit overwhelming to me if I'm quite honest. Ten thousand people? Give an account for? That's a massive responsibility. So pray for us.

And he says part of your duty is to be respectful, to listen, to not always bristle. Just 'cause you don't like what you're hearing doesn't mean it's not true. Give it a while, pray about it, read your Bible. Consider it, ask the Holy Spirit to help you see the truth. Otherwise, the work is not a joy, it's a burden. It becomes groaning and moaning and sleepless nights and heartache and ulcers and stress and conflict and division, and sometimes, tragically, a church split. That's not what God wants. God wants us to love you well and you to listen so that we might help you. And some of you don't like words like *authority* and *submit*. Carefully, prayerfully pick a church, and when you do, respect the authority, submit to its leadership. If that's Mars Hill, we welcome you. If not, we want you just to be under authority and in community with God's people. That's what we want for you.

WHAT WILL THE ELDERS/PASTORS DO IF MY CHRISTIAN SPOUSE INSISTS ON DIVORCING ME WITHOUT GROUNDS?

Additionally, another question that is often raised, what will the elders or the pastors do if my Christian spouse insists on divorcing me without grounds? They moved out, they met somebody else, they gave up, they hit the eject button, they called the attorney, they "fell in love" with somebody else, which is always not true. You don't fall into adultery. You, with your eyes wide open, walk into adultery.

Well, here's what we do. We're going to pursue them, we're going to call them to repentance, we're going to beg them to not have a hard heart, we're going to ask them to submit to authority, we're going to ask them to come in for counseling, get whatever help they need. We're going to invest a lot of hours and energy to try and bring them to repentance. And if they've committed adultery, it is not required necessarily that you would bring them back into the covenant of marriage, but we're going to do all we can to bring them back to Jesus and then you can decide where your heart is and what your future is.

This has included in the history of Mars Hill, various pastors getting on airplanes and going to other states to go knock on doors of people who have moved out of their family's home to go live with someone else that they're not married to. We'll get on a plane and go find 'em. And with ten thousand people, imagine how complicated this gets. But that's our commitment to you. We can't make someone repent, but we can do all we can, including church discipline, which is not to destroy them, but just to help them see that what they are doing is rebellious, foolish, and deadly. We're going to try our best. So pray for your leaders.

MUST PEOPLE ENDURE ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS?

Now, this often raises another question in regards to women. Must people endure abusive relationships? "You're saying Pastor Mark, that no one can get a divorce?" That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying a lot of people get a divorce without biblical grounds and due process. I'm saying that some churches are too lenient and loose, and because they're in it for the money, sometimes they're just lazy and don't want to be involved in the hard stuff of people's lives. They just hand out divorces like Vegas hands out marriages. And that's not good.

But I am saying that some people do have biblical grounds for divorce and under no circumstances is our earnest desire to try to see as many marriages saved and spared as possible the sanctioning of any abuse. Grace and I have got a whole section in the book we finished on marriage about abuse in marriage and I'll pull out a few details: Sexual assault in marriage happens 10%–14% of the time. So between 10%–14% of marriages have just sexual

abuse. In addition, there's physical abuse, emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, mental abuse. People can be incessantly, incredibly cruel to one another. And it's tragic and it grieves the heart of God. Now, when there is abuse of any sort or kind, 95% of the time it is the wife who is abused, 95% of the time.

And curiously, in my research, the first place that enacted laws forbidding a husband from abusing his wife was among the Christian Puritans in Massachusetts between 1640 and 1680. Based upon their biblical convictions, they enacted laws saying, "Husbands are not allowed to mistreat their wives, and if you see it among your neighbors, you have a Christian duty to get involved and to protect that woman."

We believe that, based on many verses of the Bible, particularly these two. First Peter 3:7, "Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel." Weaker here does not mean to regard her less. He is like a thermos; she's like a crystal goblet, right? You can drop him on the floor; he's going to make it. You drop her on the floor, different result. Women are different than men. Men tend to be physically tougher and are able to bully, intimidate, harm their wife, but the Bible says, "No. Be considerate. Be understanding. Be loving. Be gentle." That's absolutely the opposite of abuse.

Furthermore, Ephesians 5:25 says clearly and emphatically, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church," that marriage is ultimately a picture of the gospel, that Jesus is like a groom and the church is like a bride. And the church respects Jesus and Jesus loves, serves, cares for, pursues, adores, and blesses the church. And so to be a Christian husband who is consistent with Christian conviction is to love your wife like Jesus loves the church. Jesus is not harsh, mean, boorish. Jesus is altogether, only, always loving, gracious, merciful, and good to the church. And any man who would profess Christian faith and harm his own wife is a heretic in his lifestyle. His hands are preaching a different theology, his mouth is preaching a different theology than the one that he would say that he holds. So in no way are we saying that a wife—and that is most often the case—should endure any abuse at all.

And the way that we get abusive situations in churches is when we command the women to obey the Bible, but not the men. The only way to not have abuse in a marriage is to call the men and the women to obey the whole Bible. If you only call one gender, then you are setting up a situation of abuse for the other. If you're a woman in that condition, you need to tell a pastor. You may need to tell the police. You may need to get a restraining order. He needs to get serious help. He may never change, and if he does, maybe someday there's the possibility of reconciliation, but there is no way we would encourage a woman to be in a dangerous position. That violence tends to only escalate, it extends to the children, and can result in the murder of the wife. Of course that is not what we want. We want to see marriages last, but not marriages last with abuse.

WHAT ABOUT REMARRIAGE AFTER A DIVORCE?

What about remarriage after a divorce? The victim of adultery, not the adulterer, may remarry. If you cheat on your spouse and leave them for someone else, you don't get a whole new marriage. Now they may have grounds for remarriage and we tell them to take their time, see what God does, and not rush into a rebound relationship. But they may have grounds for remarriage.

Back to our initial text as we've come full circle, Luke 16:18, "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." If you're going to destroy the marriage, you don't get another one. If you've destroyed the marriage, they may get another one.

Additionally, if it is a believer and an unbeliever and the unbeliever leaves, the believer may have grounds to remarry. And again, we'll investigate all of this. 1 Corinthians 7:15, "If the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace."

And lastly, if it was two unbelievers and they got divorced and then one became a believer, it is possible for them to remarry in the Lord to another believer. So those are the conditions for potential remarriage. But again, friends, this is not math, this is life. We want to get to know you, look at all the variables, be involved, walk with you, help figure this out.

HOW CAN WE SAFEGUARD OUR MARRIAGES?

Now, in closing, there's one final question that I want to answer, and it is probably a question that many, if not most of you, have. In light of a culture of divorce—and whether you're divorced or single or still married—we all agree it's a real problem and it hurts a lot of people. We all agree on that. The question is, how can we safeguard our marriages? See, every year at Mars Hill, hundreds of people get married. How do we safeguard our marriages?

How many of you have heard that there is no statistical difference between Christians and non-Christians when it comes to such things as adultery and divorce? Have you heard that? It's almost now an urban legend and here's the good news: it's not true. It's not true. Some of you have been discouraged. You say, "Well, statistically, if I'm a Christian and they're a Christian and we do everything that God wants and we're going to get divorced anyways, where's the hope?" And it becomes very discouraging.

And so I did some research on this for the book that Gracie and I just finished and I found that it came from a study from a guy named George Barna, who is a Christian that does some good research, but it's a flawed study. It just is. Because he asked people, "Are you a Christian?" but that's not enough to know whether or not they are. You ask that question in some place like Alabama, everybody's going to say, "Yes, I belong to Jesus," even if they don't. So it's not just profession of faith, it's possession and practice of faith that matter. Jesus says elsewhere, "Many will come to me and say, 'Lord, Lord, we belong to you,' and he will say, 'Depart from me, I never knew you.'" You can profess faith that you do not possess or practice. That was the case with those who were arguing with Jesus. They professed faith, but they did not possess saving faith and they were not practicing saving faith and it showed up in the fact that they loved money and were leaving their wives. And he says, "You're not acting like you know God. You profess

something that you do not possess or practice.”

And so we did a bit of research and I think the best sociologist in this area is a man named Bradford Wilcox. He’s at the University of Virginia. He did a massive study, the largest of its kind. And he published a book on his findings called *Soft Patriarchs, New Men*. And he says that for those who are Christian, there are three variables that do not necessarily guarantee marital success, but drop the divorce rate in half. So we need to know what they are.

Number one, regular, joint church attendance. Husband and wife going to, part of, involved in community with the same church. The same church. This allows you to be under teaching, under authority, in community, getting accountability, positive examples, negative examples, encouragement for being obedient, and discouragement for becoming disobedient. Go to church together. And don’t just go to church together, be in community, get in a community group, get in a redemption group. Even if you are married and you didn’t get premarital, go to the premarital class. You need to learn too.

Number two, shared theology. You agree on Jesus and the Bible and marriage and roles. Gracie and I, again, we celebrate twenty-three years together this week. Some years ago, we took a study looking at kind of what we have in common and the study basically said we have nothing in common. And we knew that. And this just sort of confirmed what we already assumed. I like cage fighting; she likes ice skating. I like indie rock; she likes hip-hop, right. I mean, I like big potato chips; she likes the crumbs at the bottom of the bag. We have nothing—I’m a boy, she’s a girl. We’re different, right? We’re just different. And what the test revealed was we only have one thing that we really share in common, and that’s theological conviction. We basically scored 100 percent on that. And I’m glad, because if I had to base my marriage on something, I hope it would be more than we both like to rock climb, right? ‘Cause I don’t know if that’s going to do fifty years, right? Joint biblical conviction. We both say the Bible is God’s Word, Jesus is God’s Son, the law of God exposes our sin, we need the grace of Christ, we need the humility of the Holy Spirit, we need to repent to one another, we need to forgive one another, we need to obey the Bible because Jesus is Lord and I’m not. If we agree on those things, you can build a marriage. The rest is all details.

So it’s participation in church community and theological agreement. Number three, bring your faith home. Do you read the Bible together at home? Do you read Christian books together? Are you in a community group together? Do you pray together? If so, your odds of divorce go down by 50% because the couple that prays together stays together. Grace and I make it a habit every night, snuggle up with her and I pray for her, I pray over her, I pray with her. Couples who take their faith home, they tend not only to not get divorced, 70% report being, quote unquote, “very happy in their marriage.”

So here’s the good news. God’s way still works. God’s way still works. And if you’re one of those couples who are here, you really need to be in community with God’s people, you need to be under the authority of God’s Word. And this can’t be something that just happens for a few hours a week on Sunday. It needs to be a lifestyle practiced in your home between you and your spouse.

And if you will do those things, it’s not a guarantee, but statistically your rate of divorce goes down by 50% and your rate of joy goes up by the grace of God. For those of you that are not Christian, before that relationship, it’s your relationship with Jesus. You need to come to Jesus and be a Christian. Jesus used the analogy it’s like gates opening up and people storming in because the kingdom of God has been opened up. He told us that earlier in Luke 16. Our sin has kept us separated from God, and Jesus died and rose to open the gates and we’re all supposed to, by faith, pass through if we want to experience that life with God that never ends. I’m going to pray for you, friends. I hope you hear my heart in this. We desperately love you. We want good for you. We don’t want you to be divorced. Tragically, sometimes there are cases that require that. But let us help you and do all that we can to see as few as we can meet that fate.

Father God, I pray for those for whom this is a hard word, God, those who are paralyzed with fear and struggling to even consider marriage because they lived through the divorce of their parents and it has marked them. God, I pray for those who right now are facing divorce, their marriage is in crisis, or it is at least headed toward destruction. May it please be averted, Father. For those, Lord God, who are here, they’ve already been divorced, their marriage has already fallen apart, like some that shed tears when we’ve prayed for them already today. God, I pray for those people, that they would know that when Jesus died, he died for all sin, even sins that they have committed, not to excuse their sin, but to release them from condemnation. God, for those who have been cheated on, for those who have been betrayed, for those who have been abused, for those who have been abandoned, God, those wounds go deep and I’m just mindful of the faces of the people that I love and that you love who have faced that pain. God, I pray we would be a loving community of truthful, helpful, biblical, prayerful, careful, sincere help and support. God, I do pray for the children growing up in Mars Hill, the fifteen hundred children ages ten and under who will be with us today, that they would have a mom and dad who love Jesus and finish well on the last day together, holding hands, worshiping him. We ask for that, amen.

[End of Audio]

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.