UNGLUED

If you have ever worked with strong glue, you know how to be careful not to stick together things you do not intend to keep together. Once they are stuck together, you may be able to separate them, but it will not be without significant effort, and both objects are likely to experience some damage.

Any time a relationship ends, it is a painful experience that makes an impact on one’s psyche. The death of a loved one, severing ties with a community due to a job relocation, breaking an unfruitful liaison—these all occur with varying degrees of hurt. The closer the connection that is sundered, the more excruciating the experience.

When individuals come together sexually, they achieve the highest level of physical intimacy. The physical connection has involuntary emotional, psychological, and spiritual effects on them. In a supernatural way, the sexual act binds individuals together. Even outside the bonds of marriage, breaking a sexual relationship is significantly more painful and more damaging than if the relationship had not been sexual in nature.

Divorce has come to be viewed by many as a viable solution to marital stress—If it is not working, just end it. But in marriage, God glues two people together. From the practical tasks of managing a household together to the intangible manner in which society now views them, marriage welds a couple’s lives together. To crown it all, the one act that embodies the glue effect of marriage, where two become one, is sex. The divorced couple may be separated, but not without damage to both parties.
Write out Matthew 19:3–11 from the Bible translation of your choice. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
TROUBLE IN PARADISE

At its best, the sexual act is a selfless celebration, in the presence of an approving God, of mutuality, difference, unity, and plurality. It is the emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual coming together of two consenting adults as husband and wife. But in reality, our experiences often do not correspond with the ideal. Our differences divide us, while our sameness conjures up insecurities. We strive for individuality in place of unity, and codependent homogeneity where there ought to be distinctiveness. The very things that should contribute to making the experience fulfilling are perverted to turn the blessing into a curse. Instead of augmenting the emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of our lives, our sexuality can actually degrade them.

Leaving off talking about the supposedly “ideal” sexual encounter, many married couples in committed relationships rarely have sex. Even when it is not perfect, sex helps a couple to connect in a way that is unique to their relationship. Yet in the setting where sexuality ought to be freely expressed, couples are not engaging in the experience. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7:5, instructs married couples, “Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” It is in the best interest of the marriage relationship to come together sexually often. Notwithstanding other mitigating circumstances, failure to do so is both an indication that the relationship is in danger and a forecast that trouble lies ahead. It has been said that before marriage, the devil does all he can to get you to engage in sexual activity, and after marriage, he does all he can to keep you from doing so with your spouse.

In light of the fact that our experience of sexuality is more often flawed than not, how should we navigate this reality? What is the Bible’s ideal response to our distorted experience of sexuality?
Until Seventy Times Seven

In the main text for this week, Jesus weighs in on what was a theological hot topic of His day—what constitutes biblical grounds for divorce. Views ranged from a wife’s sexual indecency to her ruining her husband’s dinner as grounds. Jesus takes a biblical-chronological approach to the question, pointing out first what God’s original intention for marriage was by quoting from Genesis 1 and 2 (Matt. 19:4–6). In a perfect world, there is no such thing as divorce. As far as God’s intentional will goes, the marriage vow is binding for a lifetime.

According to Jesus, there is just one circumstance where it is permissible to seek a divorce, and that is in the case of adultery (v. 9). Jesus draws a strict standard that only illicit sexual intercourse (porneia) is legitimate grounds for a divorce. In fact, in Mosaic law, both the offending spouse and the other sexual partner caught in adultery would be executed, thus dissolving the marriage de facto (see Leviticus 18 and 20). Nonetheless, according to Jesus, divorce under these circumstances of adultery is not mandated but permitted (v. 8). Nor is divorce a privilege granted to God’s people but a divine concession.

While the discourse in Matthew 19:1–20:16 occurs in Perea and the one in Matthew 18 occurs in Capernaum, the two are thematically connected. Of particular interest is the theme of hardheartedness. In chapter 18 Jesus calls His disciples to tenderheartedness. The parable of the unforgiving servant comes in answer to the disciple’s question, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” (Matt. 18:21). Apparently, Jesus’ prescription for how to deal with someone who has wronged you (Matt. 18:15–20) seemed so involved that they could not conceive of going through all of that every single time. They likely thought themselves to be quite generous in their suggestion of seven times, the number of completion. But Jesus counters that we are to forgive until we have lost count (Matt. 18:22)!

Then in Matthew 19:8 Jesus gives the reason why, although it is not part of God’s ideal plan, He grants permission for divorce in the case of adultery—that reason being the “hardness of your hearts.” Evidently, the heart of forgiveness He had elucidated in the previous chapter is to be applied in the closest of human relations, the marriage context. Even without the painful complication of adultery, a happy marriage requires healthy doses of forgiveness, because no one can hurt you like the person you have made yourself vulnerable with. Indeed, it is those closest to us that can cause us the most hurt.

The seemingly easy way out of the pain of hurtful relationships is to sever the relationship. But what if that is not an option, as is the case in the indissoluble union of marriage? Some Pharisees had created loopholes to get out of inconvenient marriages. Instead of seeking a heart transformation and patiently working and praying for their spouse’s transformation, they found it easier to simply dissolve the marriage and look for a better situation.

Christ’s requirement for longsuffering in relationships becomes even more challenging when a spouse has egregiously betrayed the marriage vow through adultery. If you were tenderhearted, Christ is saying, then even in this most painful of circumstances you may choose to remain with your erring spouse and be reconciled. However, “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives” (v. 8). Jesus hastens to reiterate that this is not God’s ideal, “but from the beginning it was not so” (v. 8).

The disciples understood the intensity of Christ’s words, because they responded, “If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry” (v. 10). Even in the one instance that God permits divorce, Christ’s teaching points to forgiveness as the best course of action.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

1 John 2:1, 2
1 Corinthians 7:10–16
Matthew 18:1–20:16
Romans 7:1–6
1 Corinthians 13

What other verses come to mind in connection with divorce in Scripture?

Review your memorized verse from Matthew 19:3–11.
In the final analysis, a marriage is a union between two individuals, both of whom need to be consenting to the union for it to continue and thrive. When one party obstinately refuses to remain in the union, then the marriage is broken.

This has been and continues to be God’s challenge with His people. He likens His covenant with Israel to a marriage covenant (Jer. 31:31), but His wife has insisted on committing adultery with false gods (Jer. 3:1–10). For a married person to leave their partner and join themselves to another person in that most intimate of interactions communicates most forcefully that they do not value their marriage and they devalue their spouse. In the metaphorical case of Christ’s covenant relationship with His bride, Israel, she has not only joined herself to another, but to multiple others (Jer. 3:6b).

If ever a being had grounds for divorce, God is one who has every right to throw in the towel on His relationship with humanity. As Creator, He has every right to receive our devotion, and as Redeemer He has claims on our affections. He invests in humanity whether they acknowledge Him or not (Matt. 5:45) and places special care over those who have accepted His offer of salvation (Deut. 32:10). After all that God has done for all human beings, and more so for those who identify themselves with Him, it is no wonder that He would file for a divorce in the face of their adultery (Isa. 50:1). Unlike our human relationships, where no party is ever completely guiltless, God has only ever been faithful to His covenant (cf. Ps. 89:1). This only heightens the feelings of betrayal He must experience!

When your spouse has so vehemently communicated through their actions that they do not love you and they do not want to be with you, how humble would you have to be to still seek to win them back? It is one thing to pursue new love with the promise of bliss in coming days, but it is quite another to pursue someone who has already hurt you. Yet this is precisely what God does (Jer. 3:7). What wondrous love is this!

No matter how earnest and persistent God is in His pursuit, however, He cannot force humanity to love Him. Moreover, when someone has already tasted the unparalleled joys of a covenant relationship with God but rejects it, what other enticements could be used to draw them back in (Heb. 6:4–6)? God granting a divorce is only Him acquiescing to the determined will of the one He loves. He does not stop loving. He simply loves enough to let go.

Jesus intimately understands the pain of divorce. When He says that “He hates divorce” (Mal. 2:16), we must not see an aloof judgmental deity who is out of touch with the realities that lead to divorce. No, He gets it. He has often been rejected by the one He loves and has entered a covenant with.
STILL MARRIED IN GOD’S EYES

“In the youthful mind marriage is clothed with romance, and it is difficult to divest it of this feature, with which imagination covers it, and to impress the mind with a sense of the weighty responsibilities involved in the marriage vow. This vow links the destinies of the two individuals with bonds which naught but the hand of death should sever.

“Every marriage engagement should be carefully considered, for marriage is a step taken for life. Both the man and the woman should carefully consider whether they can cleave to each other through the vicissitudes of life as long as they both shall live. . . .

“When the Pharisees afterward questioned Him concerning the lawfulness of divorce, Jesus pointed His hearers back to the marriage institution as ordained at creation. . . . Then marriage and the Sabbath had their origin, twin institutions for the glory of God in the benefit of humanity. Then, as the Creator joined the hands of the holy pair in wedlock, saying, A man shall ‘leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one,’ He enunciated the law of marriage for all the children of Adam to the close of time. That which the eternal Father Himself had pronounced good was the law of highest blessing and development for man.

“Jesus came to our world to rectify mistakes and to restore the moral image of God in man. Wrong sentiments in regard to marriage had found a place in the minds of the teachers of Israel. They were making of none effect the sacred institution of marriage. Man was becoming so hardhearted that he would for the most trivial excuse separate from his wife, or, if he chose, he would separate her from the children and send her away. This was considered a great disgrace and was often accompanied by the most acute suffering on the part of the discarded one.

“Christ came to correct these evils, and His first miracle was wrought on the occasion of the marriage. Thus He announced to the world that marriage when kept pure and undefiled is a sacred institution. . . .

“A woman may be legally divorced from her husband by the laws of the land and yet not divorced in the sight of God and according to the higher law. There is only one sin, which is adultery, which can place the husband or wife in a position where they can be free from the marriage vow in the sight of God. Although the laws of the land may grant a divorce, yet they are husband and wife still in the Bible light, according to the laws of God. . . .

“If the wife is an unbeliever and an opposer, the husband cannot, in view of the law of God, put her away on this ground alone. In order to be in harmony with the law of Jehovah, he must abide with her unless she chooses of herself to depart. He may suffer opposition and be oppressed and annoyed in many ways; he will find his comfort and his strength and support from God, who is able to give grace for every emergency. He should be a man of pure mind, of truly decided, firm principles, and God will give him wisdom in regard to the course which he should pursue. Impulse will not control his reason, but reason will hold the lines of control in her firm hand, that lust shall be held under bit and bridle.” (White, The Adventist Home, 340, 341, 344, 345.)
inQuire

Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How does it seem unfair to you that divorce can be sought only in the case of adultery?

If divorce is not an option, what principles can be applied to situations of domestic abuse?

Are all divorcees going to hell (except those whose spouse committed adultery)?

Is your local church doing enough to offer support to those going through the pain of ended relationships (divorcees, widow[er]s)?

How have divorce and messy marriages impacted the next generation’s view of marriage?

What obstacles hinder you from ministering to those suffering from broken relationships?

How can your local church support the marriages in your congregation to prevent divorces from happening and nurture happy marriages?