

IS MATTHEW 19:3–12 REALLY SO HARD TO UNDERSTAND?

By Dub McClish

Introduction

For several years an average of fifty percent of the couples in our nation who say, “I do” have later said, “I don’t.” In some states the ratio has been much higher. Until about forty years ago divorce was almost universally stigmatized, and it was difficult to obtain apart from the cause of adultery. Then the social engineers did their work. Legislators began to liberalize divorce laws, which have steadily discouraged lifelong marriage commitment. “No fault” divorce is now almost universal. The “Women’s Liberation” movement of the 1970s strongly contributed to negativism toward the Biblical concept of marriage and the home. These developments have so cheapened marriage that (surprise!) millions of couples now shamelessly cohabit and breed, no more bothering to marry than brute beasts. The Lord’s body has increasingly felt the effects of the societal marriage-family revolution (though the opposite should be true [Mat. 5:13–16]).

In Matthew 19:3–12 Jesus summarized God’s perfect will for the marriage relationship and that alone which in His perfect will dissolves it. As one reads this passage he should note that the Lord speaks in literal, rather than figurative, terms. Further, Jesus states His doctrine in the form of obligatory legislation, not as mere optional advice. This context is the bedrock of Biblical teaching on the subject. If one fails to interpret all other New Testament passages on the subject in harmony with Jesus’ words here his understanding of them is necessarily flawed.

Liberal Attitudes

Tragically, instead of preaching and teaching the Truth on marriage, divorce, and remarriage, urging men and women to conform their lives thereto, some brethren have egregiously compromised with the world. They have taught and are teaching devilish, degenerate doctrines to excuse the violation of Divine law on this subject. They have devised perhaps two dozen clever (but corrupt) loopholes to Jesus’ statement of Divine law in Matthew 9:3–12.

The guile-laden question of the Pharisees (they came “trying him”) indicates their liberal attitude toward divorce and remarriage: “Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?” (v. 3). Were the Lord on earth today this question would be most appropriate because it reflects the prevailing current view (including that of not a few brethren), namely that divorce and remarriage are acceptable on almost any pretext. We need not wish Him here if to gain His answer to this question. The definitive answer He gave in A.D. 30 is the same one He would

give now, for His objective Truth does not change from age to age, person to person, or circumstance to circumstance.

Universal Application

One of the contrivances seeks to limit the application of Jesus' doctrine to Christians. However, Jesus bases His teachings on God's law governing marriage from the beginning of man's existence (v. 4 [Gen. 1:27]; v. 5 [Gen. 2:24]). Obviously, God's statements in Genesis 1 and 2 predated by ages the distinction He later made between Jew and Gentile by giving the law through Moses. The assertion that Jesus' words applied only to the Jews (God's "covenant" people then), and that they therefore apply only to Christians now (God's "covenant" people today), is as absurd as it is baseless. The purpose of this quibble is to allow men and women to divorce and remarry without limit **before** they obey the Gospel and then **remain** with their last-married mate. However, the Lord manifestly emphasized Deity's all-time, universal, fundamental principle for marriage: **one** man, **one** woman, joined by God to become **one** flesh for life (**not** one man joined to one man or one woman joined to one woman, incidentally).

Jesus also indicated the universality of His teaching by applying it to "whosoever" (Mat. 19:9). There is no justification for limiting *whosoever* unless or to what extent the Lord Himself limits it (which He does, v. 12). Even then, any such limitation must be restricted solely to that which He sets. In His complementary statement (Mat. 5:31–32), Jesus used *whosoever* twice and *everyone* once to emphasize the universal application of His teaching.

Another forceful indication of the universality of Jesus' marriage doctrine in the context deserves more emphasis than it has received. The disciples obviously understood the import of Jesus' words and mildly complained at their harshness (v. 10). Jesus responded, "Not all men can receive this saying, but they to whom it is given" (v. 11). In other words, the *whosoever* of verse 9 does have exceptions. The **only** ones Jesus excludes are eunuchs (those unable to consummate marriage)—natural-born, man-made, or self-made for the kingdom's sake (v. 12). Note who are **not** excepted: **Not Gentiles** before the cross **or non-Christians** since the cross (i.e., "non-covenant" people). The Lord's teaching thus applies to **all others** but eunuchs, and no one has the right to exclude **any others**. Whatever Jesus teaches in this passage applies to all human beings except eunuchs.

The Divine Rule Stated

The Lord answered a decisive "No" to the Pharisees' question, "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" By *lawful* they meant "God's law." Jesus stated that casual and careless divorce is a violation of God's law because it rejects:

1. The authority of the Creator of man, woman, and marriage “from the beginning” (v. 4)
2. God’s explicit law, intended to permanently govern marriage: “a man [singular]...shall cleave to his wife [singular]; and the two [only the two] shall become one flesh [singular]” (v. 5)
3. The fact that the two are joined (made one) not merely by men or by the man and woman, but by God (v. 6)
4. The fact that no man has any right to tamper with, nor can any man undo the Divine arrangement for marriage is (v. 6)
5. The fact that this is not a new teaching, nor a new interpretation of an old teaching, but it is God’s law from the very beginning (vv. 4, 8)
6. The fact that divorce on various grounds came in by human reasoning and weakness (vv. 3, 7–8)
7. The fact that divorce for any but the one stipulated exception of fornication involves one in adultery if one remarries (v. 9)

Jesus left no doubt in the minds of the tricky Pharisees, nor should there be any in ours, about divorce and remarriage.

The Divine Exception Stated

The Pharisees’ strategy was to place Jesus in conflict with Moses (or at least with one of the popular rabbinical interpreters of Moses), thereby discrediting Him with the multitude (vv. 7–8): “You say divorce is unlawful, but Moses commanded it. Whom should we follow?” After identifying human rebellion (“hardness of heart”) as the basis of Moses’ concession to which they referred (Deu. 24:1–4), Jesus immediately took His stand upon God’s law from the beginning, although it meant:

1. Correcting Moses, the most revered by the Jews of all of their prophets and teachers
2. Directly condemning the Jews for their “hardness of heart”
3. Contradicting the moral compromise of His time (cf. Mark 6:18)
4. Calling upon His hearers to completely change their thinking and practice
5. Arraying His authority against the Jewish judicial authorities
6. Contradicting the religious leaders of His time and of His immediate company

When we stand uncompromisingly upon the teaching of Christ on this issue **we find ourselves in almost the identical relationship toward comparable contemporaries.**

The exception Jesus states in verse 9 involves two elements: (1) The conditional right to divorce and remarry and (2) the only Scriptural condition upon which God allows divorce and remarriage. The Pharisees likely had selfish excuses in mind for divorce and remarriage in their question (i.e., “May I divorce my wife and marry another if I grow tired of her or find someone I like better?”). This spirit firmly grips our times and influences young people daily. The past two or three generations seem to have largely adopted the view that marriage is a meaningless throwaway contract: “If this marriage doesn’t work out, I can always try again with someone else.”

By contrast, Jesus gives the **only** Divinely-authorized exception to lifetime marriage: fornication in one’s spouse. *Fornication* translates the Greek word *porneia*, the “umbrella” Greek term for every sort of sexual impurity, including harlotry, homosexuality (both male and female), bestiality, and adultery. Divorcing one’s mate for such behavior would most likely be for a basically **unselfish** reason—not in order to take up with a new mate, but to protect one’s own person and home from the corrupting influence of immorality. Christ does not **command** divorce or remarriage in such cases. However, He **allows** both divorce and remarriage of the innocent mate, or His words mean nothing.

Some Attempts To Avoid the Consequence

One who divorces one’s mate and remarries for any cause besides the mate’s fornication (assuming the two were Scripturally married originally) commits adultery (v. 9b). Does the guilty mate have the same Scriptural right as the innocent to remarry once fornication has occurred? If so this is the only sin one can commit to one’s own benefit. Again, If so, **why did the Lord even bother to discuss the matter?** His words actually imply a strong prohibition of remarriage for the fornicating spouse.

Some would mitigate the sin of adultery by defining *adultery* to mean merely breaking the marriage contract. They then argue that one can divorce and remarry if one “repents” of the “adultery” by simply saying, “I’m sorry for breaking up our marriage.” Those who introduced this absurdity should have been laughed to scorn. Instead, the pursuit of “loopholes” to circumvent the Lord’s teaching has been so feverish that some have adopted it, seriously argued it, and even split churches over it. However, Greek lexicons universally attest that one cannot define the physical act of adultery apart from unlawful sexual intercourse.

Another common ploy is the assertion that the adultery in an unscriptural marriage is only a one-time act, rather than a continuing behavior. They then argue that couples in unscriptural marriages are not “living in adultery.” Thus they allege that only their **first act** of

copulation constitutes adultery, and that they can continue in the marriage as long as they “repent” of (i.e., say they are sorry for) that first act. This outlandish position reveals the desperation of some to avoid the force of Jesus’ teaching. Its advocates conveniently reserve this idea of “non-continuous” sin for adultery alone. However, Colossians 3:5–7 mentions “fornication” (which includes adultery) and other sins and then says that they had formerly “lived in these things.” The adultery of Matthew 19:9 is committed just as often as one is intimate with one’s forbidden mate. The only way to repent of an adulterous union is to sever it and cease the intimacy. When children are involved in these unions emotions are naturally stirred in sympathy for them. However, it is clear from Jesus’ teaching that their presence does not alter His doctrine. Neither does the presence of children render the separation of unscripturally married partners “intractable,” as some have asserted. Rather, **remaining in** an adulterous, unscriptural marriage is, in light of the eternal consequences, the “intractable” situation.

Conclusion

Brethren have invented many other far-fetched exceptions to Jesus’ one exception. Not surprisingly, the self-indulgent, secular, Biblically illiterate condition of so many church members has led to their wide acceptance. A preacher seriously suggested to me a few years ago that if we do not lower our standards on this subject we will soon run out of people we can convert because so many are involved in “adulterous marriages” as defined by “our traditional position.” Such is unabashed situation ethics and doctrine. When two people are married (by civil law) who have no right to be married, it is Divine law, not “tradition,” that determines such a marriage to be “adulterous.”

Against all such compromises, Jesus’ teaching is narrow, dogmatic, and unapologetic—and so must ours be. His doctrine is therefore as unpopular now as it was when He uttered it. We must stand with Him on this issue, as on all others, for to reject His Word is to reject Him (John 12:48). Hebrews 13:4 declares that God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Will His judgment be any less sore on those who have deceived fornicators and adulterers into believing that they are not such, thus allowing them to reach the Judgment lost because of their impurities?

[Note: I wrote this MS for and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the September 2001 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, of which I was editor at the time.]