

Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

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Introduction

Every other couple that says, "I do," is later saying, "I don't." The ratio is three out of five marriages ending in divorce in California. Divorce laws in America have been constantly undergoing liberalization since the 1960s, increasingly making of marriage anything but a life-long commitment. Most states have adopted "no fault" divorce laws. Marriage has been so cheapened by such developments that it has become a common practice for couples to cohabit without bothering to marry at all.

Cicero, the Roman poet, had the wisdom to observe in 78 BC that "the first bond of society is marriage, the next children, then the family." Bertrand Russell, an atheistic philosopher, observed more than 40 years ago that "the more civilized people become, the less capable they seem of lifelong happiness with one partner." While he probably meant it as a slap at Biblical morality, there is perhaps a sobering question raised by his observation: "Have we become too 'civilized'?" Whatever broadly affects society will eventually affect the church, thus the Lord's church is increasingly feeling the effects of the marriage-family revolution in society. Tragically, instead of preaching and teaching the Truth on marriage, divorce, and remarriage and urging men and women to conform their lives to the inspired standard, some of our most able men are now propagating devilish, divisive, diversionary, and degenerate doctrines to excuse the violation of Divine Law on the subject.

As there is now, so there was in Jesus' generation, a very liberal attitude toward divorce and remarriage. Such is indicated by the guile-laden question of the Pharisees in Matthew 19:3, "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" Were Jesus on earth today this question would surely be appropriate, correctly representing the prevailing view: divorce and remarriage are acceptable (or at least legal) on almost any pretext. We need not wish Him here, if to gain His answer to this question. The answer He clearly gave in AD 30 is the same He would give now. (Oh, the preciousness of infallible, inspired, objective Truth that changes not from age to age, person to person, or circumstance to circumstance!) In Matthew 19:3-12 we have the summary of God's perfect will for the marriage relationship and that which dissolves it in the eyes of God. The reader is encouraged to reread this passage. Jesus sets forth the Truth in literal terms, as opposed to figurative. It is stated as a categorical imperative, not as mere

indefinite, or optional advice. All other New Testament passages on the subject must harmonize with it or our understanding of them is proved faulty.

Who Is Responsible, Amenable, to God's Law as Stated Here by Christ?

Jesus roots His teaching on this subject in God's Law governing marriage from the beginning of man's existence. In Matthew 19:4 He refers to "the beginning" when man and woman were created (Gen. 1:27), and in verse 5 He quotes God's first statement of His will regarding marriage (Gen. 2:24). Notice that when God stated this law there was no distinction between Jew and Gentile. It was stated ages before God gave His covenant to Israel through Moses, thus there were no "covenant" and "non-covenant" people distinctions. This statement from Genesis is manifestly cited by Christ as God's all-time, universal, fundamental principle for marriage and the family: one man, one woman, joined by one God to become one flesh. Thus, it applied and applies to all men in all ages.

Jesus also included all men in His answer to the Pharisees by using the word *whosoever* (v. 9). There is no justification for limiting *whosoever* to fewer than every person on earth unless Jesus Himself limits it in the context. The Lord obviously was not speaking only of those who were God's "covenant people" in Matthew 18:4 when He said, "Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Neither was He limiting the term in Matthew 19:9. In the complementary passage (Mat. 5:31-32), he uses *whosoever* twice and *everyone* once to emphasize the universal application of His teaching.

James O. Baird proposes two questions to determine if one is responsible for any given law or command (*And I Say unto You*, B & B Bookhouse, p. 66). First, are there prior conditions which the Scriptures require before this law or command can be acceptably obeyed? (e.g., before one can be baptized, he must believe; before one is "qualified" to partake of the Lord's supper one must be baptized, etc.). Second, is the law or command exclusive in its statement? (e.g., a woman cannot be an elder, a child cannot obey parents who are dead, etc.) If neither of these apply, then we must understand that we are under the given law or command. There are no prior conditions to obeying this law on marriage except being old enough to marry. All who are old enough, except eunuchs (which Jesus excludes in the context), are able to obey this law. Therefore, Baird correctly reasons, this teaching of Jesus applies to all who are able to be married. If the Lord had intended to make this a universal law, how could he have more clearly expressed it than by using the universal terms, *whosoever* and *everyone*?

This context contains a third indication of the universality of this teaching that has not received much emphasis, but that I judge to be of considerable force. First, notice that the disciples understood the obvious import of Jesus' words and mildly complained that the teaching was harsh: it would be better never to marry if marriage is so restricted, they reasoned (v. 10). Jesus responded by saying, "Not all men can receive this saying, but they to whom it is given" (v. 11). The force of this statement is that not all men are responsible to his law on marriage and divorce – there is an excepted class. Who are excluded? Did Jesus exclude all Gentiles or "non-covenant" people, as James D. Bales and others aver? **Absolutely not!** The **only** ones excluded by Christ are eunuchs, either natural-born, man-made, or self-made for the kingdom's sake. Jesus therefore indicated that His teaching on this subject applies to **all others** besides eunuchs; no man has the right to exclude any others. Whatever Jesus teaches in this passage it applies to Jew and Gentile, "covenant" and "non-covenant" people, yea to all men, both before and after they become Christians.

The Divine Rule Stated

The Lord conclusively answered, "No," to the Pharisees' question, "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" *Lawful* in this question is a reference to God's Law. He offers several reasons why casual and careless divorce is unlawful to God.

1. It rejects the authority of the Creator of man, woman, and marriage "from the beginning" (v. 4).
2. It ignores God's explicit law, intended to govern the marriage relationship through all time: "a man (singular) shall cleave to his wife (singular), they two (only the two) shall become one flesh (singular)" (v. 5).
3. They are joined (made one) not merely by men or by the man and woman, but by God (v. 6).
4. No man has any right to tamper with any Divine institution or appointment, one of which is marriage (v. 6).
5. This is not a new teaching, nor a new interpretation of an old teaching, but is God's Law from the first man and woman (vv. 4, 8).
6. Careless, easily obtained divorce, divorce on various grounds, came in by human reasoning and weakness (vv. 3, 7-8).
7. Divorce for any but the one cause involves one in adultery if he remarries (v. 9). The Lord left no doubt in the minds of the tricky Pharisees about divorce. Neither need we have any doubt about His doctrine on this subject.

The Divine Exception Stated

The motive of the Pharisees' question was to place Jesus in conflict with Moses, or at least with one of the popular rabbinical interpretations of Moses, and thereby discredit Him (vv. 7-8). "You say divorce is unlawful, but Moses commanded it. Who should we follow?" First, Jesus corrected them: "Moses **suffered**, rather than commanded, divorce." Without batting an eye, Jesus pointed to human rebellion "hardness of heart" as the basis of the Deuteronomic concession to which they referred. He then unhesitatingly took His stand with God's Law from the beginning, even though it meant:

1. Correcting Moses, the most revered of all the Jews' prophets and teachers.
2. Condemning the Jews to their faces for their "hardness of heart" – their unwillingness to abide by God's marriage and divorce Law;
3. Contradicting the spirit or moral compromise of His time (as illustrated by John's rebuke of Herod for taking his brother's wife [Mark 6:18]).
4. Calling upon His fellowmen to completely change their thinking and practice on this matter.
5. Arraying His authority against the lawful judicial and civil authority of His time.
6. Directly denying the position occupied by the religious leaders of His time and of His immediate company.

When we stand with Jesus on this issue, we find ourselves in almost the identical relationship toward our comparable contemporaries.

The exception itself involved two elements (v. 9a). **First**, Jesus grants the right to divorce. **Second**, He states the Scriptural reason for the divorce that allows remarriage. The Pharisees had selfish excuses in mind for divorce in their question. Paraphrased, their question seems to ask: "Is any excuse lawful to get rid of one's wife when one grows tired of her or finds someone he likes better?" It is a matter of record from a survey of a few years ago that most divorces were filed **after** a new love was found. Our world is gripped by this very spirit to which our young people are daily exposed. Most people view marriage as a throw-away, expendable contract. By far, the prevailing view of those at the marriage altar is, "If this one doesn't work, I'll dispose of this partner and try again."

Jesus, by contrast, gives the **only** Divinely authorized exception to lifetime marriage: fornication by one's spouse. We need to understand the meaning of *fornication* (Mistakenly called "fornication" at times). *Fornication* translates the Greek word *porneia*, the all-inclusive Koine Greek term for sexual impurity, including harlotry, homosexuality, bestiality, and adultery, whether by males or females. To divorce one's mate for this cause is fundamentally an

unselfish reason. The one sinned against in such cases does not seek a divorce primarily for the purpose of remarrying or for freedom to seek another mate, but to maintain one's own moral purity and a home free of the corrupting influence of immorality. Note: Christ does not **command** divorce of the unchaste spouse, any more than He commands remarriage after such a divorce occurs. However, He does **allow** both (divorce and remarriage) on the grounds of fornication in one's spouse, or language means nothing at all.

Consequences of Ignoring Christ's Exception

To divorce and remarry for any cause besides fornication in one's mate makes one so doing guilty of adultery (v. 9b). To marry one who has been divorced by one's mate makes one an adulterer, furthermore (Mat 5:32; Luke 16:18). Some are now adding the exception clause to the last half of Matthew 19:9, making it mean that the spouse who was guilty of fornication has as much right to remarry as the innocent spouse who put him or her away **because** of his or her fornication. This is erroneous for several reasons:

1. No one has the right to add this clause and to do so makes the last half of the verse contradict the very purpose of the first half.
2. The exception clause here is as exclusive as it is in John 3:5 (there is no other way to enter the kingdom except by being born of water and the Spirit). Likewise, there is no other way to Scripturally divorce and remarry unless one's mate has committed fornication.
3. The guilty spouse (the one committing fornication) has not met this condition, therefore he or she cannot possibly have the right to remarry.

While a marriage may be **legally** dissolved for almost any cause, freeing two people **legally** from each other, they are not thereby freed from God's Law on divorce and remarriage for various causes. It is at this point that the illustration of two mules hitched together and then one's being released, fails. It is argued that if one spouse is freed, then the other is automatically freed and is no longer bound. This completely ignores the obligation that both partners in a marriage have to God and His marriage law. A truer illustration would be of two mules hitched together, but one of them only kicks and will not work. Their owner releases the working mule into the open pasture but keeps the misbehaving mule confined to the small barn lot. The kicking mule is no longer hitched to the working mule, but he is still bound to his owner's "law" and is not afforded the same rights as the working mule.

God's Law says that the one **sinned against** has the right to remarry, not the one who sinned. God never allows one to gain a selfish advantage or benefit from his own sinful behavior, as this absurd doctrine would afford. If both spouses (fornicating and nonfornicating) have equal Scriptural right to remarry, one wonders **why Jesus even bothered to discuss the**

matter. These (and other) principles being so, the Lord is therefore actually implying a **strong prohibition** of remarriage for the fornicating spouse in the very course of allowing only the innocent spouse to remarry.

Various ploys are currently being used to redefine and mitigate the sin of adultery. “Adultery is simply the breaking of the marriage covenant and putting away of one’s spouse, whether or not sexual relations with another have been involved. Therefore, one can later marry another by simply saying, ‘I’m sorry for breaking up our marriage.’” As ridiculous and untrue as it is, some brethren are actually teaching this. Literally, *adultery* always refers to unlawful intercourse with the spouse of another person. The literal act of adultery cannot be defined apart from sexual intercourse, as any recognized Greek lexicon will attest. These new definers of *adultery* argue from Ezekiel 16 that Israel committed “figurative adultery” by merely breaking God’s Covenant. However, a correct reading of this passage shows that she “went a whoring” after strange gods and therein was the “adultery” (vv. 15-32). Their “adultery” broke the covenant, but breaking the covenant was not that which constituted adultery (vv. 35-39). John 8:4 defines *adultery* as used in Matthew 19:9 and every other literal passage: “This woman hath been taken in adultery, **in the very act**” (v. 4, emph. DM). Was she caught merely suing her husband for divorce (i.e., for “breaking their covenant”)?

Another ploy is to say that adultery is only a one-time act in an unscriptural marriage, rather than a continuous or repeated act. None would ever take such an untenable position did he not have some very unorthodox position to uphold. Those who take this position, take it only on adultery (on no other sin), and only lately have they done so on adultery. Adultery is not depicted as a one-time act in Matthew 19:9. Notice the following: *put away* is a one-time act as indicated by the aorist tense; *shall marry another* is likewise a one-time act (aorist tense). However, *committeth adultery* is a present tense form, which, except in very rare cases, denotes a process or an on-going activity. This fact must be the intent of the Lord here as indicated by the abrupt change in the verb tenses. The sin of adultery in Matthew 19:9 is committed just as often as one is sexually intimate with his or her forbidden mate, just as one commits theft as often as he steals. This absurd position argues further that it is unscriptural to speak of one’s “living in adultery.” However, Colossians 3:5-7 counters this allegation. Paul mentions fornication and several other sins and then says “Wherein ye also once walked when ye **lived** in these things” (emph. DM). One surely does no violence to Scripture to refer to the continual practice of any sin as “living” in said sin.

Conclusion

Many other strange and new winds of doctrine on this subject are being blown about by brethren, but space forbids further notice of them. It is no wonder that some of these are meeting with wide acceptance because they are at the same time soft, compromising, ear-tickling, self-justifying, and convenient. They represent the old adage, "If you can't lick 'em, join 'em." Many are being swept away because they are almost totally ignorant of God's Word on this subject. Tragically, these doctrines are filling the churches with impenitent adulterers and fornicators, and it is frightening to anticipate the fruit that will be produced when a whole generation in the church has been influenced by them, including elders and deacons.

Some are actually teaching that such admitted changes in attitude toward marriage, divorce, and remarriage are necessary because there is so much divorce and remarriage in the world and the church. Such an argument is situation ethics, unabashed. Against all such compromising, Jesus' teaching on this subject, as on all subjects, is unapologetic, narrow, dogmatic, and therefore as unpopular now as it was in the first century. Nonetheless, we must stand with Him and for Him on this and every other subject, for to reject His word is to reject Him (John 12:48). Hebrews 13:4 still declares: "Let marriage be had in honor among all, and let the bed be undefiled: for fornicators and adulterers God will judge." Will Jesus' 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 deceived and lost because of their impurities?

[**Note:** I wrote this MS by request for, and it was published in the May 1983 edition of *The Restorer*, ed. Gary Workman.]

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