

The Doctrine of Divorce – Ancient and Modern

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Carl Rowan, syndicated newspaper columnist, wrote an article appearing in the *San Angelo [TX] Standard-Times* edition of February 18, 1970, titled, “Divorce Increase Cause of Troubles.” In his article Rowan discussed the trend toward liberalization of divorce laws and correctly, I believe, connects the disintegration of morality and general disrespect for authority with the instability of modern family and home life. Rowan’s article well summarized the modern careless attitudes toward the subject of marriage and divorce. We will do well to delve into the Scriptural doctrine on this subject, the fullest statement of which on the subject is in Jesus’ words in Matthew 19:3–9. In His time, as in ours, there was a very liberal attitude toward divorce, as reflected by the Pharisees’ question, “Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?” (v. 3).

Were Jesus present in our modern society this question would certainly be appropriate. We need not wish Him here to learn His attitude on this matter; He answered quite clearly in A.D. 28 just as He would answer in 1970. The teaching of Jesus on this subject contains limitations on the practice of divorce that modern man has all but abandoned, but that he desperately needs to hear.

Jesus stated the **Divine rule** in verses 4–9. To the question of the Pharisees about the legitimacy of divorce “for every cause,” Jesus did not reply with a “yes” or “no.” Rather, He answered with a question about their knowledge of the teaching of the Law of Moses on the subject, designed to lead them to answer their own question. The Lord offered several reasons why divorce for various causes is unlawful before God:

1. It rebels at the authority of the Creator of man and woman, Who originally brought them together – said authority existing “from the beginning” (vv. 3–4).
2. It ignores God’s express law, intended to govern the marriage relationship through all time: “**a man** [singular] shall cleave to **his wife** [singular], they **two** [only two] shall become **one flesh** [singular]” (v. 5; cf. Gen. 2:24; emph. DM).
3. They are joined to each other not merely by man, but also by God (v. 6).
4. Men dare not tamper with God’s law: “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (v. 6).
5. This is not a new teaching; it has been God’s law “from the beginning” (vv. 4, 8).
6. Divorce for every cause came through human reasoning and weakness (vv. 3, 7–8)
7. Divorce leads to immorality (v. 9; cf. Mat. 5:31–32).

Jesus left no room for doubt in the minds of the tricky Pharisees who asked about divorce. Neither can we have any doubt about what he meant.

Jesus also stated the **Divine exception** in verses 7–9. The Pharisees sought to discredit Jesus by placing him in conflict with Moses: “You say divorce is unlawful, but Moses allowed it; whom should we hear?” might well paraphrase verse 7. Without hesitation, Jesus credited Moses’ allowance to human weakness and reiterated God’s *marriage-divorce* law that has existed “from the beginning.” Jesus took this position even though it meant:

1. Rebuking Moses, the most revered prophet and teacher of the Jews
2. Condemning the Pharisees’ “hardness of heart,” namely their unwillingness to abide by God’s plan for marriage
3. Contradicting the spirit of moral compromise so prevalent in that day
4. Calling upon his fellow men to completely change their thinking and practice on this subject
5. Arraying his own authority against the lawful judicial and civil authorities
6. Directly denying the position occupied by the religious leaders of his nation and of his immediate company

It is noteworthy that when one stands with Jesus Christ on this subject today he finds himself in almost the identical relationships toward those about him.

The exception granted involves two elements: (1) the **fact** that a divorce is permissible and (2) the **condition** making divorce permissible. Two basic motives exist that might cause one to seek a divorce from one’s mate—selfish and unselfish. The Pharisees illustrate the selfish approach to the issue. The question with which they approached Jesus seems to ask, “Is any excuse acceptable to divorce one’s spouse when you decide you don’t like him or her or if you find someone you like better?” I know of no statistics available to prove it, but likely a large percentage of divorces are filed nowadays **after** (and because) a new love has been found, constituting an entirely selfish motive.

The only divinely-authorized cause Jesus gives for divorce is an intolerable immoral situation—fornication by one’s spouse. Basically, divorce for this cause is unselfishly motivated. The person in this circumstance is not seeking an excuse to put away one’s mate that he or she may have another but is rather seeking to maintain a home free of moral corruption. Christ not only permits **divorce** from the fornicator, but also permits **remarriage** by the innocent party in the defiled marriage (v. 9).

Consider some possible reasons why this exception was/is granted:

1. So that the innocent party may be free of evil influence and reputation

2. So that any children of the union may be free of such influence
3. So that the innocent may not have to be penalized with undue suffering and hardship because of the guilty
4. Because the joining in marriage is such a sacred, holy, yea even spiritual union that it cannot be shared with another besides one's own covenanted partner without destroying that very covenant and partnership

Admittedly, it is as unpopular to stand with the Son of God now as it was when He spoke these words, but it is a position with which the believer cannot argue, both because of Divine authority and human necessity. "Let marriage be had in honor among all, and let the bed be undefiled: for the fornicator and adulterer God will judge" (Heb.13:4).

[**Note:** I wrote this article for and it appeared in the *San Angelo Standard-Times*, San Angelo, TX, April 17, 1970.]

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