

**Jesus Teaches About Divorce**  
**Matthew 19:7-9**  
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Matthew 19 begins a new section of Matthew, as seen by the words “*When Jesus had finished these words.*” We see this phrase repeated five times in this Gospel (Matthew 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 26:1), each marking the end of one of the five major discourses in this Gospel. This forms a structural construction that transitions the reader to the next section of the narrative account.

Matthew 19 records interactions that Jesus had with the Pharisees, and later others, on His way to Jerusalem (Matthew 19:1; 20:17). The Pharisees sought to trap Him by asking “*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?*” While they asked about divorce, Jesus responded by teaching about the importance of marriage.

Jesus taught that marriage is between one man and one woman, because “*He who created them from the beginning made them male and female*” (19:4). Marriage includes leaving father and mother and being joined together (19:5). Since “*they are no longer two, but one flesh*” Jesus taught that “*no man should separate*” what “*God has joined together*” (19:6).

This led the Pharisees to conclude that Jesus believed there was no place for divorce whatsoever.

**The Pharisees ask about Moses and divorce (19:7)**

The Pharisees respond to Jesus’ statement against divorce, “*let no man separate.*” with a reference to Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Significantly, both the Pharisees and Jesus agree that Moses wrote Deuteronomy, unlike most modern scholars.

*“When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man’s wife, and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance” (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).*

Notably, the Pharisees ask “*Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?*” where Deuteronomy 24:1-4 gives no such command. Jesus rightly recognized this by stating that “*Moses permitted you to divorce your wives.*” There was no command to divorce, only an allowance for divorce by Moses.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 addresses a specific case where a woman who is divorced by a man and then marries another man, who in turn also divorces her (or dies), is prohibited from being remarried to the original husband. Moses, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote to govern the practice of divorce in Israel.

By providing the wife with a certificate of divorce, Moses protected the woman from accusation of adultery. This certificate also served to elevate the value of marriage, for it made the husband come to a place of finality before sending his wife away. This prevented a man from sending his wife away and then claiming that she left him.

Furthermore, by sending his wife away with a certificate of divorce, he ran the risk that she could marry another man. Not only would this prevent him from regaining her as a wife in a practical sense, but this would also prevent him from regaining her even if the other man also divorces her or if the other man dies. In other words, Deuteronomy provided a sense of solemnity to the ending of a marriage with this certificate of divorce and the prohibition to receive the wife back again. Marriage was designed to be lifelong and with divorce came consequences.

### **Jesus answers about Moses and divorce (19:8)**

So then, the purpose of the certificate of divorce was to allow remarriage for the woman, but Deuteronomy 24:1-4 limits further remarriage by prohibiting the woman from returning to her first husband. Therefore, this management of divorce by Moses was to deal with the difficulties that were created by the fall of man.

Jesus makes this point when He states, “*Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives.*” All divorce stems from hardness of heart, that is sinfulness. Without sin, every marriage would continue and there would be no divorce.

Divorce was not God’s intent for man, “*but from the beginning it has not been this way.*” The ESV provides a better translation, “*but from the beginning it was not so.*” When God created male and female, He did not provide for divorce because He made them without sin.

Therefore, because God did not intend for men to divorce their wives and because the purpose of the certificate of divorce established by Moses was to prevent husbands from taking advantage of their wives in divorce, divorce is not God's will. This corresponds to what Jesus said in verse 6, *"What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."*

### **Jesus addresses the result of divorce (19:9)**

We have been taught by Jesus the seriousness of divorce through God establishing marriage from the beginning and through His words that no man should separate what God has joined together. In Matthew 19:9, Jesus adds the result of divorce to the reason why a man should not send his wife away. *"And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."*

Mark 10:11-12 records Jesus saying that the same sin would apply if the wife divorced her husband, *"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery."* Mark included this statement about the woman because in the Roman empire, it was permissible for the woman to divorce her husband.

The statement by Jesus tells us that one can divorce and remarry and commit adultery. Simply by the act of remarriage, with the implied sexual union, creates an ongoing adulterous situation. To remarry does not resolve the sinful divorce, indeed, it compounds the sin by committing adultery.

Jesus had already taught about this in Matthew 5:32, *"I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."* So Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 combined describe three adulterous circumstances, (1) a divorced man who marries another woman, (2) a divorced man who marries another woman even if she is divorced, and (3) a woman who is divorced by her husband. In this third case, the implication is that the woman will necessarily end up in a relationship with another man.

But Jesus noted an exception to this result, namely sexual immorality. This exception appears in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, though it does not appear in the parallel passage of Mark 10:11-12 or Luke 16:18. The plain sense of this is that the person who divorces the spouse and marries another is not guilty of adultery.

There have been differences of opinion regarding whether the exception only applies to divorce or to remarriage as well. However, it is evident from Matthew 5:32 that remarriage is assumed to occur. To allow for divorce without remarriage renders this exception quite meaningless since that does little for the one sinned against.

Another issue regards the meaning of immorality (PORNEIA). It is not the exact word for adultery (MOICHEIA). Some consider only incest to be in view, others consider this to be pre-marital sex only, prior to the actual marriage, others consider this to be spiritual adultery, and others view it as an illegal marriage. However, PORNEIA is a broad term for sexual immorality, encompassing adultery, prostitution, and any other form of sexual activity that God forbids.

Therefore, if the spouse has broken the sexual bond of marriage, the other partner is not guilty of adultery by ending the marriage and marrying someone else. Although this exception only appears in the Gospel of Matthew, it nevertheless is the words of Jesus and He makes this allowance. Importantly, it is not required that the spouse that has remained sexually committed to the marriage divorce. The option exists for a restoration of the marriage.

There is a second basis for divorce that is found in 1 Corinthians 7:15, *“Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace.”* Therefore there is an allowance for divorce and remarriage when the non-Christian spouse abandons the marriage. In this case, the believing spouse cannot initiate the separation, but if such a departure occurs, there is freedom to remarry. There is no expectation that the Spirit of God will work in the life of the unbeliever to return and to restore the marriage.

Another issue is when there is abuse on the part of the spouse, typically the husband. Does the wife have the right to divorce if she is abused? The biblical answer is there is no exception for this, but this does not mean that the spouse must remain in a dangerous situation, for there can be separation. *“But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife” (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).* This should be done in real threatening situations, for normal marriages will suffer from times of distress and difficulties, due to the nature of two sinful people living together.

In our society, it is sometimes difficult to conclude that a person is an unbeliever. Many will profess to be Christians in a cultural sense only. Ultimately, and also practically, if from the perspective of the spouse, the one who left is an unbeliever, then it is hard to hold them to a different understanding since departing a marriage is indicative of lack of faith in Christ.

So then, divorce is wrong because it creates adultery on many levels. How then does a person repent from the adultery that results from divorcing their spouse and remarrying? How could the wrong of divorce become the remedy for the wrong of adultery?

The issue is whether divorce is always wrong. First, if divorce is always wrong, then there would be no allowable exceptions. Also, there is the case of when the men of Israel had taken foreign wives in disobedience to Deuteronomy 7:3. Ezra directed the people to repent by divorcing their foreign wives that they had wrongly married.

*“Now while Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women and children, gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept bitterly. Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, said to Ezra, ‘We have been unfaithful to our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. Arise! For this matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act.’ Then Ezra rose and made the leading priests, the Levites and all Israel, take oath that they would do according to this proposal; so they took the oath” (Ezra 10:1-5).*

Ezra says he does this according to the counsel of “my lord” (which could be understood as being either the Lord God, or being Shecaniah). Nevertheless, Ezra clearly views this as doing the will of God, *“Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives” (Ezra 10:11).*

So then, if not all divorce is intrinsically wrong, but all adultery is wrong, then the person who has divorced and remarried without biblical grounds for doing so ought to return to their true spouse. To continue in their current marriage is considered to be adultery, according to the present tense of *“commits adultery”* in Matthew 19:9.

At a minimum, the one committing adultery must repent and turn from this sin, which would involve no longer continuing this unrighteous other relationship. Whether the spouse that was sinned against will want to receive the sinning spouse back is another matter.

With this in mind, one objection could be the view that if God hates divorce, then it would be wrong to divorce the second spouse in order to return to the first spouse. However, the better translation of Malachi 2:16 is not *"I hate divorce"* (NASB), but rather, *"For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD"* (ESV). The context of Malachi 2 is regarding the Jews who divorced their wives to marry foreigners. Thus Malachi 2:15 rebukes them with, *"let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth."* In the same way, no man should send away the wife of his youth for someone he perceives to be better. This verse then actually supports returning to the true wife.

It is much easier to grasp this truth immediately after the spouse leaves the marriage for an adulterous relationship. Even if that person quickly finds a way to marry the other person, it is possible to understand that a marriage does not make everything fine. This is particularly true when families with children are affected.

However, since we live in a society that tends to accept divorce for any reason at all, people can be conditioned to think there is no problem with divorce even if there is no biblical grounds, and view the subsequent marriage as a good thing. Indeed, these situations become more and more complicated as more time in the adulterous relationship passes. This only highlights the degree of damage the fall of man produced. Yet simply because situations are complicated and difficult to navigate, the truth of the matter does not change. All adultery is sinful.

## **Conclusion**

Marriage has been instituted by God as a covenant relationship, yet because of the failings of man He allows for divorce and remarriage in the case of adultery and desertion by an unbelieving spouse. Divorce should not be understood as a necessary option in cases of immorality. We have the opportunity to trust in God's grace and exercise forgiveness, for mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13). In cases of being divorced by an unbelieving spouse our goal should be to seek for peace and allow the unbeliever to leave without a fight.

Finally, when divorce occurs it is a very difficult situation even under the best circumstances. God's grace is sufficient for all those who draw near to Him from a truly submissive heart. For those who love God and are called according to His purpose, He promises to work all things together for good (Romans 8:28).