

DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE

“What God has joined together let no man separate.”

Key question

What does the Bible say about divorce and remarriage?

Key text

Matthew 29:8

“He said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.’”

A. Introduction

1. The Biblical elements of marriage

- a. The consent of the partners and of the parents to marry -- Gen.21:21; 34:4-6; I Cor.7:37-38.
 - b. The public avowal of marriage -- Gen.29:25; 34:12.
 - c. The physical consummation of the marriage.
 - d. **NOTE:** Sexual intercourse alone did not constitute a marriage for the following reasons:
 1. The O.T. distinction between wives and concubines.
 2. The sequence of events involved in Deut.22:28-29.
2. **The original intent of marriage** was that it not be dissolved -- (Gen.2:24; Matt.19:4-6).
 3. The fact that marriages have been dissolved both in Biblical times and in our own day is **recognized but not condoned.**
 4. While those outside the Christian faith may conclude that in the pursuit of happiness, if the marriage does not “work out” people should be free to “get out,” this is not the primary consideration for the disciple of Christ.
 - a. The Scripture constrains those who are following Christ.
 - b. Their goal is holiness, not just happiness.

B. Relevant Scriptures

1. Major texts
 - a. **Deut.24:1-4**
 - b. **Matt.19:3-9**

c. **I Cor.7:10-15,27-28**

2. Secondary texts

Gen.2:24; Ex.21:7-11; Deut.21:13-14; 22:13-21; Isa.50:1; Jer.3:1,8; Ezra 9-10; Neh.13:23-31; Mal.2:10-16; Matt.5:31-32; Mk.10:11-12; Lk.16:18; Rom.7:1-3; I Cor.7:39

C. Four positions held by Christians

1. Divorce is never recognized by God, therefore remarriage after divorce is adultery.
2. Divorce is valid under certain circumstances, but remarriage is not permitted.
3. Divorce is valid under certain circumstances and implies the freedom to remarry.
4. Divorce and remarriage should be governed by the principle of “damage control” which means that many different principles must be taken into account. Divorce should be recognized and remarriage is not a sin.

D. Four conditions for divorce espoused by Christians.

1. Unlawful marriage or unfaithfulness during the betrothal period.
2. Adultery after marriage.
3. Desertion by a non-Christian mate.
4. Any number of irreconcilable differences.

E. General observations

1. The **N.T. material is of primary** importance in that it takes into consideration the O.T. texts (Matt.19:7-8).
2. The teaching of **Jesus is summarized in Matt.5 and 19**. He is addressing a situation involving two people both of whom are a part of the covenant family of God. For them, divorce is not justified except for “*fornication*” (for which, apparently, it is permitted). Remarriage constitutes adultery when the original divorce is unjustified. A wife in Jewish Palestine could only “leave” not “divorce”; in Roman society, either partner could divorce the other.
3. The teaching of **Paul in I Cor.7** underscores Jesus’ teaching (vs. 10-11) and gives added insight into a situation Jesus did not address -- the mixed marriage. Paul seems to indicate that desertion on the part of the non-Christian constitutes legitimate grounds for divorce with the freedom to remarry (vs. 12-15, 27-28).
4. The question of **secular divorce** (before coming to Christ) is not addressed directly in Scripture. Based on Paul’s emphasis in I Cor.7, grace should be applied.

F. Key questions in understanding relevant Texts.

1. **What is the force of Gen.2:24** “*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 . . .*” **as alluded to by Jesus in Matt.19:8?** “*He said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.’*” **Are there Biblical exceptions to this principle of “no divorce” (as in**

- Deut.24), or is Matt.19:6** (*"What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate"*) **intended to be the first and last word?**
- a. Jesus seems to be saying that this is the first and last word except when a society is so broken down that there has to be some control or monitoring of the effects of sin.
 - b. The description of divorce in Deut.24:1-4, which was a part of the custom from Moses' day, is identified as a concession on Moses' part (by rabbi Jesus) because of the *"hardness of heart"* or lack of obedience in Israel.
 - c. Deut. 24 describes divorce but does not necessarily approve it as God's will.
2. **How do the two clauses in Matt.5:32 relate to one another? Does the last clause** (*"whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery"*) **describe any divorced person, or only one who has been divorced illegitimately according to the stipulations of the first clause** (*"every one who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity"*)?
- a. Jesus' words are significant only if they go beyond the custom of His day, which permitted divorce (at least) for fornication (see below). Therefore I sense that he is saying that to marry a divorced person is an act of adultery since the person was never really freed from the first marriage in God's sight.
 - b. *"Unchastity"* is to be understood as unfaithfulness during the betrothal period or *"unlawful marriage"* as I explain below.
3. **In Matt.5:32 and 19:9, Jesus uses the phrase** *"except for immorality."* **Does this refer to 1) adultery after the marriage has been consummated, 2) a special situation of unfaithfulness during the Jewish betrothal period (before the consummation of the marriage), or 3) unlawful incestuous relationships** (this is the view most defended among scholars)?
- a. A special situation of unfaithfulness during the Jewish betrothal period or unlawful incestuous relationships are probably in view here for the following reasons:
 - 1) The general **tone of Jesus' teaching** seems to exclude divorce once two people *"become one flesh"* (Matt.19:3-6).
 - 2) In **Deut.22:13-21** it is implied that if a girl is unfaithful before the marriage is consummated, there is just grounds for divorce. If it could be shown that she was indeed faithful, then there can be no divorce.
 - 3) The *"exception clause"* appears **only in Matthew** (the gospel written to a Jewish audience), not in Mk.10:11-12 or Lk.16:18.
 - 4) The Greek word translated *"unchastity"* in Matt.5:32 and *"immorality"* in Matt.19:9 is the word for *"fornication"* (**porneia**) not *"adultery"* (moicheia). This would suggest a special situation like the betrothal period or incest. NOTE that in Jn.8:41 Jesus is called *"the son of fornication."*
 - 5) The **disciples startled reaction** in Matt.19:10 *"The disciples said to Him, 'If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.'"* suggests that Jesus position is more restrictive than they had anticipated. They were no doubt aware of the controversy among Jewish rabbis of the day in which the conservative position restricted divorce only to sexual adultery (Shammai) and the liberal for any reason at all (Hillel).
 - 6) The use of **porneia to describe the unlawful marriages** of Lev.18:6-18 is seen in I Cor.5:1 and Acts 15:20,29.

- b. Those who interpret Jesus' teaching to refer to sexual unfaithfulness after the marriage has been consummated must answer the following questions:
 - 1) Why does Jesus not use the Greek word for adultery?
 - 2) Why does Paul not pick up on this exception clause when dealing with Gentiles? Is there any indication that this exception clause is in the mind of any other N.T. writer?
 - 3) Is adultery really a practical reason to terminate a marriage? Are there not other circumstances that might be more critical?
 - 4) Does God divorce His church for spiritual adultery?
4. **Is Jesus' teaching directed at God's family (a situation involving two believers) or is it more general (including all situations)?**
 - a. It is best to see Jesus' teaching as applied to those within a covenant community (and not the whole of humanity) for the following reasons:
 - 1) Jesus ministry was among Jews and to the Jews almost exclusively.
 - 2) The Law in question in Matt.19:3 was not given to the Gentiles but to Israel only.
 - 3) In I Cor. 7 Paul's personal advice is added to that of Jesus because he is addressing the situation of mixed marriages. This seems to imply that Jesus' advice was restricted in its application.
5. **What does Paul mean by "leave" & "send away" (I Cor.7:10-13)? Does he have divorce in mind or just separation?**
 - a. He probably has divorce in mind since he says of the one who "leaves" that they should "remain unmarried."
 - b. It should be noted that this is a reiteration of Jesus' teaching in Matt.5,19. (I Cor.7:10) "*But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord,*"
 - c. It should be noted also, that the same Greek word (CHORIZO) is used in Matt.19:5 of what God has joined together "*let no man separate.*"
 - d. In this case (where we have two people within the covenant community), if there is a divorce, remarriage is not permitted (except to each other).
6. **What does Paul mean by "not under bondage" (I Cor.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.")? Does he imply freedom to remarry or just freedom from responsibilities of bread and board?**
 - a. In I Cor.7:39 we read "*A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.*" This suggests that to be free from the "bound condition" is to be free to remarry.
 - b. In Rom.7:2 Paul says that the wife is "bound" to her husband until death, at which time she is no longer bound and free to marry another.
 - c. **NOTE:** This is applicable to mixed marriage situations only.
7. **How is I Cor.7:27-28 to be understood? (vs.27) "Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. (vs.28) But if you should marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin should marry, she has not sinned." If these verses are meant to relate closely to one another, they suggest that remarriage after divorce is permitted (assuming that by "released" vs. 27 is referring to divorce**

and not just the death of the spouse). If vs. 28 starts a new and more general teaching, then support for remarriage after divorce cannot be found here.

- a. The fact that Paul contrasts the “you” in “*But if you should marry*” of vs. 28 with “*a virgin*” later in the same verse suggests that he has in mind those who have been married before (those described in vs. 27).
- b. This would include those who had been released from marriage by 1) the death of a spouse or 2) deserted by an unbelieving mate.

G. The position of the early church fathers

When one party was guilty of fornication, usually understood to mean adultery, the other party was expected to separate, but did not have the right to remarry. The church fathers also denied the right to remarry to the Christian deserted by an unbelieving spouse. This was the view of all the Greek and Latin fathers, save one.

H. Objections

1. **Do not Jer.3:1-8 & Isa.50:1 recognize the validity of divorce for adultery since they say that God divorced Israel for her unfaithfulness?**
 - a. Isa.50:1 is either a rhetorical question, one presupposing a negative reply, or it should be understood as an allegory, like Jer.3:8.
 - b. It is evident from Rom. 11 that God has not really divorced Israel.
2. **Does not Deut.24:1-4 indicate that: 1) Divorce is God’s will in certain circumstances and 2) Divorce implies the freedom to remarry?**
 - a. This passage describes divorce as a permitted custom, but it does not indicate that it is God’s will.
 - b. Although the second marriage is recognized as legal, it is important to note that returning to the original husband is forbidden on the grounds that the wife has been “defiled.” This suggests that (in God’s eyes) the first marriage was never really dissolved.
3. **Does not Ezra 9-10 provide a precedent, if not a mandate, for dissolving marriages that are spiritually incompatible?**
 - a. In Ezra’s eyes this was not a question of breaking up legitimate marriages, but of nullifying those, which were contrary to the Law.
 - b. Judaism forbade intermarriage on religious grounds: Deut.7:3; Lev.20; Num.25:6-15.
4. **Does not divorce imply the right to remarry?**

In Lk.16:18 we read “*Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery.*” It is clear from this text that it is possible to have a legal divorce and yet be guilty of adultery if one remarries. The implication is that the divorce was not recognized (by God) as granting freedom to remarry.

I. Conclusion

1. Divorce is recognized in a fallen world, but it is not God’s will.

2. Marriages between two Christians are not to be dissolved even when adultery is an issue. If there is a separation, there is no freedom to marry another without being guilty of adultery.
3. In the case of unlawful or mixed marriages, the believer is to strive to preserve the relationship. But if the unbeliever departs, the believer may be free to remarry, since the first marriage is annulled (as with a mixed marriage in the day of Nehemiah).

J. Pastoral guidelines

1. While structured separation may be recommended in some Christian marriages, divorce should not be sanctioned as God's perfect will.
2. When a legal divorce does take place between two Christians, the couple should not be encouraged to marry other persons.
3. If remarriage does take place, it is not advisable to dissolve the second marriage to restore the first. We must call upon God's grace and forgiveness in these situations.
4. In a mixed marriage, the believer should strive to stay in the marriage. But if the unbeliever leaves, the believer may be free to remarry another believer.
5. In marriages and divorces before coming to Christ, the believer should treat them as mixed marriages.
6. A fallen world presents a less than ideal environment where ethical decisions can often be complicated. Deut.24:1-4 seems to respect a principle of "damage control" where divorce is permitted because of a hardened heart (Matt.19:8). We can affirm that God is against physical violence and war as a solution to disputes but in a fallen world war cannot be avoided. So, it can be said of divorce. It is not God's will but it is permitted and sometimes cannot be avoided. In some cases it should be viewed as we view war – not desired but sometimes necessary.
7. If divorce is to be permitted between believers there are certain "common sense" expectations that should be met.
 - a. The couple should **earn the right to divorce** by doing all they can to preserve the marriage – self-sacrifice, counseling, forbearance, perseverance, etc. Divorce that is not in the wake of heroic sacrifice to save the marriage cannot be justified.
 - b. The divorce should be a **loving response**. That is to say it should be motivated by the desire to help the other person and not just satisfy the comfort of the one seeking the divorce. Divorce that is not motivated by love cannot be justified.
 - c. When **children** are involved, there should be special consideration given to making sacrifices for their wellbeing. Divorce is almost always damaging to a child's life. Divorce that does not give major consideration to the emotional welfare of the children cannot be justified.

Observations from the social sciences

A. Some facts and figures on divorce in the U.S.

1. Every year there are between 1,150,000 and 1,250,000 divorces in the United States. This is about 50% of all marriages in the same year.

2. Divorces may now be granted in 48 states without regard to fault.
3. The median age for divorce: husbands -- 33; wives -- 31.
4. About 1/2 of divorced men are involved with another woman at the time they separate from their wives.
5. Career-oriented women who have attended graduate school have a greater likelihood of divorce than women who have less education.
6. About 80% of divorced persons are likely to eventually remarry. A disproportionate number of these subsequent marriages will not be successful.
7. Couples who live together before marriage tend not to stay together after marriage.
8. The effects of divorce upon children are dramatic and long lasting. They tend to be distrusting of intimate relationships throughout their lives.
9. The involvement of fathers with their children after divorce tends to diminish. The result is that the children's sense of self-worth is insulted.
10. **The pollster George Barna has done extensive research on divorce among people of faith. His results verified findings of earlier polls: that conservative Protestant Christians, on average, have the highest divorce rate, while mainline Christians have a much lower rate. They found some new information as well: that atheists and agnostics have the lowest divorce rate of all. George Barna commented that the results raise "questions regarding the effectiveness of how churches minister to families." The data challenge "the idea that churches provide truly practical and life-changing support for marriage." Donald Hughes, author of *The Divorce Reality*, said: "In the churches, people have a superstitious view that Christianity will keep them from divorce, but they are subject to the same problems as everyone else, and they include a lack of relationship skills. ...Just being born again is not a rabbit's foot." Hughes claim that 90% of divorces among born-again couples occur **after** they have been "saved." www.religioustolerance.org/chr_dira.htm , www.barna.org/cgi_bin/ , *Diversity in Families* by Zinn and Eitzen, 2005, Allyn & Bacon, p.403**

Religion% have been divorced

Born-again Christians	27%
Other Christians	24%
Atheists, Agnostics	21%

B. Characteristics of Divorced people

1. Marrying in teens
2. Premarital pregnancy
3. Having divorced parents
4. Limited income
5. Crowded home
6. No high school education
7. Not spending time together
8. Urban residence
9. Having no children (Most divorces take place during the first 2 years of marriage.)
10. Having girl children only (This is especially true in some ethnic groups.)
11. Being African American

12. Sexual alternatives

C. Societal influences that make divorce more likely.

1. Personal mate selection in contrast to family input with respect to choice of marriage partner.
2. Unrealistic romantic ideal.
3. A melting-pot society fosters contact with people from very different backgrounds.
4. Liberal divorce laws make it easier to get out of painful marriages.
5. Employed wives who are financially independent.
6. The goal of personal happiness puts pressure on a relationship.
7. Low income tends to stress relationships.
8. Fewer moral and religious sanctions encourage selfishness.
9. The diminished role of the family in the face of the individual's importance and one's personal achievement in the workplace puts stress on marriage.

D. Individual factors that make conflict and divorce more likely.

1. Unrealistic expectations set people up for disappointment.
2. Inflexibility in relationships makes intimate communion difficult.
3. Different role expectations can create relational stress.
4. Power struggles and competition, tend to push people apart.
5. Trying to “make a partner over” is usually damaging to the relationship.
6. Serious unmet personal spiritual needs will push people to a posture of seeking to “get” rather than “give” in a relationship.
7. Lack of conflict negotiation skills can turn little problems into big ones.
8. Radical changes can put stress on a marriage.
9. Boredom can drive individuals to seek life outside the relationship -- in work or in other people.
10. Extramarital relationships complicate and compromise the marriage.

E. The Divorce Proneness Scale.

NOTE: After reading each sentence carefully, number from 1 (strong yes) to 5 (strong no) which best represents your feelings. A score of over 30 is a red light.

1. My parents have never been divorced.
2. My closest friends have never been divorced.
3. My partner and I can negotiate our differences.
4. This is my first marriage.
5. I am a religious person.
6. I married when I was over age 19.
7. I do not require a number of sexual relationships to be happy.
8. I married my partner after I had known her or him for more than 12 months.
9. My parents approved of the person I married.
10. My partner and I have an adequate source of income to meet all of our expenses and some money left to play with.

F. How to tell if your marriage is in trouble.

1. Frequent and unproductive arguments.
2. Little pleasure in each other's company.
3. Feelings of loneliness and isolation.
4. Lack of sexual satisfaction.
5. Inability to communicate.
6. Turning against each other when things don't go well.
7. Viewing marital conflicts as the result of a bad choice of partner.
8. Persistent thinking about divorce.
9. Consistent operating "in the red" in terms of cost/reward ratio or comparison level.

G. The process of conflict and divorce.

1. **THE LATENT STAGE** (hidden and unexpressed negative feelings)
2. **THE TRIGGER STAGE** (a relatively insignificant event triggers a hostile reaction)
3. **THE CLASH STAGE** (negative feelings are turned loose after long time repression)
4. **THE ESCALATION STAGE** (attack and counter-attack lead to insecurity and irresponsibility)
5. **THE SEARCH-FOR-ALLIES STAGE** (recruiting of armies)
6. **THE EMOTIONAL WITHDRAWAL STAGE** (emotional divorce through seeking alternative sources of gratification)
7. **THE PULLING OUT STAGE** (separation)
8. **THE DISSOLUTION STAGE** (divorce)

H. Situations that make divorce really nasty.

1. The activity of lawyers who exaggerate the conflict.
2. The presence of a third romantic party.
3. Unresolved hurts and a sense of vengeance.
4. The unwillingness to communicate in a civil way.
5. Competition for the children.

I. Emotional effects of divorce.

1. Feelings of having failed in one of life's most important tasks.
2. Feelings of grief and depression.
3. Feelings of anger, frustration, and inadequacy.
4. Feelings of self-recrimination and guilt.
5. Feelings of rejection and being unlovable.
6. Feelings of intense loneliness and having lost their identity as a marital partner.
7. Feelings of regret and thoughts of "what might have been."
8. Irrational thoughts and behavior -- such as uncontrollable crying spells, suicidal thoughts, excessive drinking and drug abuse, and in some cases "reunion fantasies."

Note: Men tend to deal with divorce better than women.

J. Social effects of divorce

1. Divorce can often bring with it an economic crisis, especially for women.
2. Divorce can often make someone vulnerable to searching for love in the wrong places.
3. Divorce can often result in a sense of rejection by the Christian community and a deterioration of one's involvement with that community.

K. Effects of divorce on children.

1. Most children are not prepared for a divorce and are surprised by it. This adds to their stress.
2. Girls tend to be harder hit by divorce than boys.
3. Children tend to blame themselves for the divorce.
4. Intense loneliness is a common characteristic of children who have gone through a divorce.
5. Long-term effects include:
 - a. A tendency to distrust others.
 - b. A fear of intimate commitments.
 - c. A tendency toward instability in relationships.

L. Helping children of divorce

1. Do

- a. Reassure the child that he or she will not be abandoned.
- b. Make it clear that the child is not responsible for the parent's separation.
- c. Help the child work through his or her feelings of anger toward the parent who initiated the separation.
- d. If the father-son relationship is a close one, take precautions to ensure that it remains that way. Father-son relationships are twice as likely to deteriorate after divorce than are father-daughter relationships.
- e. Consider the possibility of joint custody, and try to agree on and maintain consistent disciplinary rules.
- f. Recognize that this period of stress can be a wonderful opportunity for spiritual renewal.

2. Don't

- a. Don't get involved in custody battles that force the child to make a choice. This can be highly stressful for the child.
- b. Don't overburden the child with too many roles and responsibilities -- particularly the role of the absent parent.
- c. Avoid blaming the other parent and forming parent-child coalitions against the absent parent. Don't use the child as a pawn in a war game between the parents.
- d. Don't neglect the child during the stressful period when the mother or father starts dating or remarries.
- e. Don't require the child to renounce a biological parent as the price of winning the support of a stepparent.