



# Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

by

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## **MARRIAGE, DIVORCE and REMARRIAGE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Nowhere does the New Testament contain a formal or complete presentation of the Christian approach to divorce and remarriage. Each time the subject arises, it is in response to a particular situation, such as:

*"The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?' "* *Matthew 19:3*

*"Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman."* *I Corinthians 7:1*

In each situation the background must be considered before the response can be fully understood.

Therefore we must accept the authority of the Old Testament rule on this subject, except where the New Testament writers deliberately modify the Old Testament statements.

This study will establish that:

1. Marriage is intended to be permanent.
2. Divorce should be permitted on two grounds only:
  - (i) Fornication;
  - (ii) The wilful desertion of a Christian by an unbelieving partner.
3. Where divorce is allowed by God, remarriage is also permitted as a necessary and humane consequence.
4. Remarriage is not permitted if divorce occurs on any grounds other than the two stated above.

At the moment we are born again, we enter into a blood covenant relationship before God. We become a part of the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4:4,11-13,15-16) – we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones (Ephesians 5:30). The one who breaks this blood covenant does so at great peril (Hebrews 10:28-30).

Similarly with marriage, a husband and wife enter into a sacred covenant relationship before God. They become one flesh (Genesis 2:24) and enter into a union ordained by God which, if broken, will bring great trauma, grief and damage.

## **THE SAYINGS OF CHRIST**

*“Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.”* Matthew 5:31-32

*“The Pharisees came and asked Him, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ testing Him. And He answered and said to them, ‘What did Moses command you?’ They said, ‘Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her.’ And Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. But from the beginning of the creation, God ‘made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’; so then they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no man separate.” In the house His disciples also asked Him again about the same matter. So He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”* Mark 10:2-23

*“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery.”* Luke 16:18

*“The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?’ And He answered and said to them, ‘Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female’, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.’ They said to Him, ‘Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?’ He said to them, ‘Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.’ His disciples said to Him, ‘If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry.’ But He said to them, ‘All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given: for there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother’s womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it.”* Matthew 19:3-12

## 1. A BASIC PROHIBITION

*The primary statement of Christ is simply this:*

***Divorce, and  
remarriage after divorce  
are both forbidden.***

This caught the Pharisees and the disciples quite by surprise –

*“His disciples said to Him, “If such is the case of the man with this wife, it is better not to marry.”*  
*Matthew 19:10*

There were several reasons why the Pharisees sought to tempt Jesus on this subject. Divorce at that time was reasonably easy to obtain and occurred frequently. The Pharisees sought to create a dissatisfaction in Jesus' followers by seeking to show a marked division between His teachings and the popular interpretation of those of Moses and the Rabbis, and thus enlist public feeling against Him.

This discussion took place in Peraea – the territory of Herod – and no doubt they hoped by raising the sensitive matter of divorce and remarriage to incur the hatred of Herod against Jesus as it had been aroused against John the Baptist.

Apart from these reasons, their main objective was to involve Christ in controversy with and between the Rabbinic schools. There were two main schools of thought among the Jews of that time on the subject of divorce:

- (i) Those who allowed divorce only on the grounds of definite unchastity (fornication)
- (ii) Those who allowed divorce for almost any reason.

All held that divorce was lawful – their only disagreement was on the basis of the grounds for such divorce. The whole controversy was based upon the point – “for every cause”. Both schools based their arguments on Deuteronomy 24:1-4 -

*“When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's wife, if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after 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 is giving you as an inheritance.”*  
*Deuteronomy 24:1-4*

The Pharisees tested Jesus by endeavouring to force him to favour one school, thus antagonising the other, or to make enemies of both by countermanding Moses. Christ avoided both by going back to a still earlier authority – the Genesis record.

*“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”* Genesis 2:24

Thus Jesus fully restored and developed what God had ordained and what the Old Testament had originally taught regarding marriage.

The fundamental law of marriage is *“a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh”*. The relationship between husband and wife is closer than between parents and children. The parent/child relationship is not easily broken; much less may the marriage union be broken.

Marriage is a union of two people. They *become one flesh*. While children are a *product* of those two people, yet in marriage the wife is actually *part of* the man himself. What God has joined together (literally *yoked together*), let not man put asunder, nor separate. A husband and wife are *God's joining together*. God Himself has instituted the relationship between husband and wife. The husband and wife, being joined together by the ordinance or decree of God, are not to be parted asunder by any law or edict of man.

A further revelation of the divine purpose in instituting marriage is given in Malachi 2:13-16 –

*“And this is the second thing you do: You cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and crying; so He does not regard the offering anymore, nor receive it with goodwill from your hands. Yet you say, ‘For what reason?’ Because the Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. ‘For the Lord God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one’s garment with violence,’ says the Lord of hosts. ‘Therefore take heed to your spirit that you do not deal treacherously.’ ”* Malachi 2:13-16

### **God hates divorce! Why?**

- (i) Because it involves breaking solemn oaths and covenants.
- (ii) Because it hinders the creation of godly homes in which children can be raised in love and security. Ephesians 6:1-4
- (iii) Because it involves cruelty, violence and sin. In Jesus’ words, “Whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual

immorality (fornication) causes her to commit adultery."  
(Matthew 5:32a)

This clause "causes her to commit adultery" can be regarded from two different aspects, yet both interpretations reinforce the clarity of Jesus' words.

Firstly, because of the low esteem in which a woman was held in Jewish society, a woman divorced was virtually abandoned to starve. She could sustain herself only by sin. There were no government pensions, nor any alimony. While the situation is not so extreme today, it is still true that divorce almost always involves unfaithfulness, cruelty and violation of the law of God.

In considering the second and more common interpretation, we shall also need to look at Jesus' words in Matthew 19:9:

*"And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery, and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."*

Once divorced for any reason other than infidelity, should the woman remarry first, both she and any new husband she may take would be committing adultery because the first marriage is not annulled by sexual immorality, and therefore in God's eyes the marriage covenant is still in force. Should the husband remarry who has so divorced his wife, he would then be committing adultery.

### ***So Christ prohibited divorce.***

Not even the strictest of the Pharisees actually prohibited all divorce with the one exception of adultery. Only Jesus enunciated and reinforced the eternal principles established by God.

## **2. REMARRIAGE PROHIBITED**

*"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery."*

*Luke 16:18*

This passage further enforces and strengthens the prohibition of divorce. The Lord God refuses to permit a man to casually destroy His law concerning the inviolate nature of marriage.

A couple may divorce, but in the reckoning of God they are still bound to each other, and any subsequent marriage is therefore adulterous.

### **3. THE ONE EXCEPTION**

In Deuteronomy 24:1-4, the Authorised Version does not fairly render the original meaning. Moses was not commanding the man to divorce his wife, as indicated in the Authorised Version, but Christ stated Moses merely allowed or permitted the man to do so (Mathew 19:7-8 NKJ). The passage in Deuteronomy 24 is more accurately translated in the New King James Version: "If he writes her a certificate of divorce ... then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled."

This is a strong refutation of those who say that divorced people who have married again should break up with that spouse and return again to their original partners.

The Pharisees asked Jesus, "Why did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce?" Jesus corrected their error concerning the Law of Moses. The Pharisees called it a "command", but Jesus called it a "permission", something that was merely tolerated. Jesus was presenting Scriptural reasons against divorce, but the Pharisees were keen to grasp hold of a supposed Scriptural authority in favour of divorce.

Jesus told them the reason for this toleration, this permission, was because of the hardness of their hearts. The children of Israel had hearts that were hardened against God. Jesus was showing the Pharisees that an even greater work of hard-heartedness is when a man is harsh and severe with his own wife.

The Lord defined the meaning of Moses as being that fornication alone comprised sufficient ground for divorce. However even in this circumstance, divorce was not commanded ... it was merely permitted or allowed.

Jesus brings their focus again to the original institution of the marriage covenant – "But from the beginning it was not so."

Christ therefore declared his basic opposition to all divorce and remarriage. However, He allowed one exception: divorce was permitted on the ground of fornication.

### **4. "FORNICATION" or "UNCHASTITY"**

"Fornication" has a wide application in Scripture, but in the passages we are at present considering it can only mean fornication in relation to the married state as listed in Leviticus 20:10-21.

Strong's Exhaustive Concordance defines "fornication" as "harlotry, adultery, incest".

Webster's Dictionary defines "fornication" as "incontinency in single persons. If either party is married, it is adultery."

In the context under consideration, the meaning of the word is premarital intercourse, adultery, incest, homosexuality, perversion.

## 5. WHEN IS REMARRIAGE PERMITTED?

- (i) When the divorce is *lawful*, Moses said that the woman "may go and be another man's wife" (Deut 24:2). So both divorce and remarriage are forbidden except where fornication has occurred, when both are then allowed to remarry.

Among the Jews of Christ's day, on the basis of the Mosaic law, it was automatically accepted that a lawfully dissolved marriage left the couple free to remarry. Christ appears to have accepted this principle with the clear exception that He placed a definite limitation as to what constitutes a *lawful* divorce.

- (ii) The view is sometimes held that the guilty party is to remain unmarried or is not allowed to remarry until the innocent party does. If the marriage covenant has been destroyed by unfaithfulness, then both parties are free to remarry. If the marriage has been abandoned for any other reason, then the parties, if they are Christians, are not free to remarry - see Section 8(a), page 10. If one partner is an unbeliever, see Section 8(b), page 10.
- (iii) If it is argued that in Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18 Christ specifically forbids ALL remarriage, then these passages must be read in the light of the exception found in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. Since Christ based this exception on His reference to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, it must be interpreted as applying not only to divorce but also to remarriage. Thus a lawfully divorced couple are free to remarry another partner.

## ***THE TEACHING OF PAUL***

Paul's teaching in Romans 7:1-3 seems to indicate that no-one can remarry while the former partner is alive.

*"Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives? For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress;*

*but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is not adulteress, though she has married another man.”* Romans 7:1-3

In this chapter, Paul is discussing the relationship of the believer to the law. He uses the illustration of death automatically dissolving a marriage to demonstrate how death also delivers us from the law. However Paul's comments regarding marriage still hold true for the Christian marriage – refer Section 8(a).

Jewish practices of divorce arose not from what was actually lawful, but from their discussing upon what grounds a man could set the law in motion and make use of the provision of the law for his own purposes.

Although in practice many of the Pharisees and Rabbis condoned divorce for several or all reasons because of the laxity of their views and customs, yet Jewish law regarded marriage with a woman divorced under any circumstances as unadvisable. If any doubt was raised as to the legal validity of a divorce or its documentation, the Law always pronounced against the divorce.

While the Talmud insists on “the duty of divorce in the case of sin” (sexual immorality), it closes the section on divorce with the words, “He who divorces his first wife, the very altar sheds tears over him.”

We shall now turn to Paul's answers to the Corinthian Church as outlined in I Corinthians 7:1-40. The questions asked by the Corinthians appear to have been:

- (a) Is celibacy better than marriage? (v.1-2,6-9)
- (b) What are the duties of husband and wife to each other? (v.3-5)
- (c) Is divorce permissible for Christians? (v.10-11)
- (d) What rule applies when one partner is an unbeliever? (v.12-16)
- (e) Should those who are unmarried desire a mate? (v.25-38)

## **6. THE QUESTION OF CELIBACY**

(I Corinthians 7:1-2,6-9,25-38)

- (i) Celibacy was much admired in the ancient world, and Paul himself was a bachelor (v.7). The early believers, because they were influenced by the world in which they lived, no doubt thought they had apostolic authority for their position. Paul carefully points out both the advantages and weaknesses of celibacy.

- (ii) Verse 1 – Note “good” does not mean “better than”. The state of celibacy is not necessarily superior to marriage. There is much “good” within marriage (see Ephesians 5:22-33; I Timothy 3:1-4; 5:14).
- (iii) Paul was writing to the Corinthians at the time they were facing a period of persecution (verse 26); hence his suggestion for people to remain as they were (verses 27-28).

Opinion is divided as to whether verses 36-38 refer to a father giving his daughter in marriage, or to a betrothed couple; but in either case Paul suggests that marriage should be delayed until the time of trouble is past. However there is no wrong in going ahead with the marriage.

- (iv) Generally, only three groups can accept celibacy – see Matthew 19:10-12. The first two of these groups may be considered to be “natural” – that is, by birth or by the intervention of man. The third group is comprised of those “who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake” – those who for the sake of the Gospel and in the service of Christ remain celibate. This is not what the German Reformers called *immunda continentia* (unchaste continency), which is bare abstinence from marriage.

Rather it is such an overwhelming and inward preoccupation with their work for the Lord as to remove all thoughts and desires for the state of marriage. They are so engrossed in their work for the Lord that thoughts, wishes and impulses for marriage no longer exist in them. Jesus stated that celibacy is a state not everyone can accept, but only for those whom God has appointed.

- (v) With all of the foregoing in mind, Paul writes, “But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am; but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” (verses 8-9)

## 7. THE QUESTION OF MARITAL DUTY

(Verses 3-5)

This passage shows that each marriage partner has a responsibility toward the other. The word “due” could be translated “their debt to each other”. The husband is to seek to give full satisfaction to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. They are to concentrate, not on getting their due, but on giving their due.

Paul says, “Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and to prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” (verse 5)

## 8. THE QUESTION OF DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

(Verses 10-16, 39-40)

### (a) Where both partners are Christians

(Matthew 5:31-32; I Corinthians 7:10-11)

- (i) Christians ought not to divorce or separate; rather they should seek the help of God to enable them to reconcile their differences.
- (ii) If they find it impossible to be reconciled, and they separate, they are both to remain unmarried (I Corinthians 7:11). Their commitment is:
  - (a) To pray for and to work towards reconciliation (II Corinthians 5:18-19).
  - (b) To live a Godly life.
- (iii) Should either one of them remarry, that person and the new partner both become guilty of adultery, which is a serious offence (see I Corinthians 6:9-10; Hebrews 13:4). Once the marriage covenant has been broken by the adulterous union of the partner who remarries, the remaining partner is free to remarry since the marriage union has been broken and dissolved (refer Section 5 page 8).
- (iv) In the event of the death of a former partner, the survivor is free to remarry.
- (v) The only exception would be the one stated by Christ. While not commanded to do so, a Christian is free to divorce an unchaste partner, and following such a divorce, to remarry.

### (b) Where one partner is an unbeliever

(verses 12-16)

Note: Paul does not discuss the question of a Christian marrying a non-Christian, for this was strictly forbidden (I Corinthians 7:39; II Corinthians 6:14-18)

- (i) By "the rest" (verse 12) he means marriages other than where both partners are Christians. Paul states:
- (ii) No Christian should leave an unbelieving partner, nor refuse to cohabit, solely on the ground of that person's unbelief.

