

# DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE: What Does The Bible Teach?

## CONTENTS

Mixed Signals. . . . .	2
What Does The Bible Teach? . . . . .	4
<i>The Divine     Permission</i> . . . . .	4
<i>The Proper     Procedure</i> . . . . .	21
<i>The God-Honoring     Goal</i> . . . . .	23
Questions People Ask . . . . .	27
Spiritually Equipped . . .	32

Some students of Scripture say that the Bible gives no grounds for divorce or remarriage. Others suggest that the Bible allows for divorce under some circumstances but does not allow for remarriage. Some say that if a divorce is justified, so is the possibility of remarriage. Still others say that God's primary concern is our happiness.

In the following pages, RBC research editor Herb Vander Lugt offers help in the midst of all the confusion. He comes to this difficult subject not only with 60 years of marriage and over 50 years of pastoral ministry but also with many years of careful attention to the biblical issues. After performing hundreds of marriages and providing countless hours of marital counseling, Herb has come to conclusions that combine reverence for the Scriptures with compassion for those whose marital hopes have turned into regret and loss.

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## MIXED SIGNALS

Divorce statistics can be confusing. On one hand, we are told that one of every two marriages will end in divorce. What we observe seems to bear this out. Far more children than in the past are growing up in single-parent families. On the other hand, we are told that the divorced segment of our population only equals about 12 percent of the married segment. According to *Grolier's Encyclopedia*, "In the United States in 1987, there were 123 divorced persons for every 1,000 married persons."

Public opinion expert Louis Harris offers an explanation. He says, "The fact is that in 1981 the number of divorces did hit a record total of 1,213,000. Marriages also reached a

record of 2,422,000. Some quick-read experts then put the two sets of facts together and concluded that since there were half as many divorces as marriages, it could be concluded that half of the marriages were doomed to failure. But the facts show that only 10% of all ever-married men and a slightly higher 13% of all ever-married women are divorced" (p.86, *Inside America*, Louis Harris, 1987, Vintage Books, New York).

Mixed signals also come from the painful experiences of life. During many years as a pastor, I have been involved with scores of divorce situations. Sometimes, as in cases of extreme mental or physical abuse, I longed to see a woman become freed from the terror of an abusive husband. Yet, I was uncomfortable advising action that had no clear biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage.

In many cases, I wanted to help the abusive husband overcome his problem. Changed lives seemed more preferable than divorce action that would divide children, friends, and family assets.

Yet, sometimes I felt great relief when the divorce proceedings began. In one instance, a wife patiently endured a heavy drinking, sexually immoral husband for 4 years, during which she twice contracted a venereal disease. He had professed faith in Christ shortly before they were married, attended church with her for a short time, and then went back to his old ways.

The confusion over divorce, however, is not just rooted in statistics, or even experience. Mixed signals are also found in the Bible. On one hand, the Old Testament prophet Malachi declared, "The Lord God of Israel says that He hates divorce" (Mal. 2:16). Yet God Himself

admits to divorcing Israel (Jer. 3:8). On one occasion, the prophet Ezra insisted that the men of Israel divorce the pagan wives they had married (Ezra 10:10-17). Later, Jesus said that sexual immorality is the only grounds for divorce (Mt. 19:9). Yet the apostle Paul taught that divorce is also permissible if a Christian is married to a non-Christian who no longer wants to be married (1 Cor. 7:15).

Does the Bible contradict itself about divorce? No. Even though many godly Bible students disagree on what the Bible teaches about divorce and remarriage, I believe the Scriptures offer guidelines for those contemplating divorce and remarriage. Even in cases of physical abuse, which has become such a troubling issue in our day, I am convinced that the Bible gives us answers.

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH ABOUT DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE?



### THE DIVINE PERMISSION

While God desires that a husband and wife stay together until death, He permits divorce in some circumstances. Three Bible passages give us His guidelines on this matter. They are: Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Matthew 19:1-10, and 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. We will study each passage, taking into consideration

the historical situation, the permission given, and the restriction imposed.

### Deuteronomy 24:1-4

*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 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.*

In this passage, Moses declared that after a man had divorced his wife because he had found “some uncleanness” in her and both had entered new marriages, they could not dissolve the new marriages and marry each other a second time. Men apparently were already divorcing their wives for “some uncleanness.” We don’t know when Moses began allowing such divorce, but that he had done so previous to the writing of Deuteronomy 24 is clear. Jesus, some 1,500 years later, told a group of Jewish leaders, “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, *permitted* you to divorce your wives” (Mt. 19:8).

### ***The Historical***

***Situation.*** At the time of Moses and throughout the Old Testament era, a man became the master of the woman he married. This was true in all the cultures of the time, even among the Israelites. A wife was a husband’s possession in a manner similar to his property, his animals, and his slaves (Ex. 20:17). Jewish law did not permit a woman to initiate a divorce. She could remarry only if given a certificate of divorce. Any promise she made could be overruled by her husband (Num. 30:4-16). The husband could have his bride stoned if on the wedding night he discovered that she was not a virgin (Dt. 22:13-21). The society in Israel was definitely patriarchal like that of neighboring nations.

God, however, did not permit men unlimited power over their wives.

They could not sell a wife into slavery, like neighboring nations could—not even if she were a war prisoner who had been made a secondary wife (Dt. 21:10-14). The children were commanded to honor the mother as well as the father (Ex. 20:12). A man could not humiliate his wife by marrying a sister as a rival (Lev. 18:18). The Lord gave these laws as a merciful provision for women in a male-dominated society. Through these regulations, God showed the men in Israel that their wives were to be viewed as people, not merely as property.

***The Permission Given.***

Because of the hardness of men's hearts, Moses allowed divorce (Mt. 19:8). In the process, however, God provided guidelines. A man had to obtain a certificate of divorce and give it to the unwanted

wife. When he did take such action, the divorce certificate would show that the woman had been legally released from marriage and that she was now free to marry another.

Moses permitted such action if a man found some uncleanness in his wife. The exact meaning of the expression "uncleanness" is not clear. It is a word that was almost always translated "nakedness" by the King James translators. An exception is when the word was used to describe an "unclean camp" in which human excrement had not been properly buried (Dt. 23:14). In some cases, as in Leviticus 18 and 20, the word was linked to specific instances of family sexual abuse. Given this usage, it's possible that if a man suspected his wife had been sexually molested by a family member prior to

marriage, he could give her a certificate of divorce. Such an allowance might seem unmerciful. But keep in mind that this stipulation was granted because of “hardness of heart” circumstances. If a man could not deal with something that caused his wife to be despised in his eyes, the law allowed for her to be freed rather than to be subject to his contempt.

We know that Moses was not allowing divorce just in instances of adultery, because adultery was an offense punishable by death (Dt. 22:22). The “uncleanness,” therefore, must have referred originally to conduct on the part of the wife that the husband deemed shameful or offensive, but not limited to physical adultery. We have no knowledge of how this was interpreted during Israel’s early history.

At the time of Christ, Jewish rabbis disagreed about what Moses meant by the expression “some uncleanness.” The followers of Rabbi Shammai limited this term to some kind of sexual impropriety (not necessarily adultery). The followers of Rabbi Hillel (the vast majority) gave it almost unlimited latitude—even making minor offenses like burning food a legitimate basis for divorce.

***The Restriction Imposed.*** The focus of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is the following restriction: Once the divorced pair had married new mates, they could never marry each other again. The reason for this restriction is difficult to determine. One widely accepted explanation is that it would make a husband think carefully before divorcing his wife and marrying another woman.

In summary, while we

have no record of the occasion when God led Moses to make it possible for the men in Israel to divorce their wives, Jesus made it clear that it happened. He declared that God did this “because of the hardness of your hearts” (Mt. 19:8). Callous-hearted men would perpetrate greater evils against wives who were despised in their eyes if divorce were not an option. As noted earlier, God had already forbidden the sale of a wife into slavery. But a hard-hearted man in a male-dominated society could find many other ways to make life difficult for a wife he no longer wanted to support. He could vex her by marrying and lavishing all his attention on a second wife. He could burden her with too much work while openly resenting her continued presence.

I believe it was God's

tender concern for women that led Him to permit divorce in Israel.

### **Matthew 19:1-10**

*Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings, that He departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there. 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.”*

This is the second key passage on the divorce issue. It expresses our Lord’s teaching on this

subject more fully than any other Gospel passage.

***The Historical***

***Situation.*** As noted earlier, the religious leaders among the Jews disagreed sharply on the divorce issue. The followers of Rabbi Shammai were far more strict than the followers of Rabbi Hillel. The enemies of Jesus asked Him, “Can a man divorce his wife for any reason?” hoping they could force Him into giving an answer that would put Him at odds with one group or the other. Jesus didn’t fall into their trap. He corrected their statement that Moses *commanded* men to divorce their wives by reminding them that Moses *permitted* divorce because of the hard hearts of the men. He also called them back to God’s ideal before making a pronouncement that agreed with the teaching of neither of the prominent rabbinical schools.

***The Permission Given.***

Jesus said that divorce is wrong “except for sexual immorality.” The Greek word He used was *porneia*, a term covering a wide range of sexual sins. When used in a sentence alongside *moicheia* (adultery), it denoted a sexual sin involving at least one unmarried person or a perverted form of sexual behavior. The feminine form of this word *porne* means “prostitute.” The masculine  *pornos* denoted either a man who was promiscuous or who engaged in perverted sexual behavior. On rare occasions, when specified by the context, it referred to a marriage of close relatives. Therefore, all the modern versions render the word *porneia* here as either “unchastity,” “unfaithfulness,” or “sexual immorality.”

In sanctioning divorce for sexual immorality, Jesus also permitted remarriage

for people thus divorced. A careful study of the Bible passages dealing with divorce makes clear a principle that we can apply: *Whenever a divorce occurs on grounds God has declared valid, that divorce carries with it the right of remarriage.*

We can express this principle with confidence on the basis of the historical situation into which Jesus spoke these words and on the grammar of the words themselves.

First, let's place ourselves in the shoes of those to whom Jesus spoke. The Jews in His audience, whether followers of Hillel or Shammai, agreed that legally divorced people had the right to marry new mates. As far as we know, no Jewish teachers of that time differed on this point. We can therefore assume that the people Jesus addressed had never heard of a divorce

that did not carry with it the right to remarry. The divorce regulations mentioned in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 completely dissolved prior marital commitments. The only prohibition was that a divorced couple not remarry each other after marrying and divorcing new mates.

The second basis for our conviction that a God-permitted divorce carries with it the right to remarry is found in the very words recorded in Matthew 19:9, “Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” The phrase “except for sexual immorality” appears in the middle of the sentence. But the meaning would be the same if it appeared at the beginning of the sentence. “Except for sexual immorality, whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery.” It would be the

same if it read, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, except for sexual immorality.” An exceptive clause grammatically applies to the whole sentence, whether it appears at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end.

The idea that God permitted divorce for sexual immorality but forbade remarriage arose in the post-apostolic era when some of the Church Fathers began to view human sexuality as a necessary evil and exalted celibacy as the most God-honoring lifestyle. Not only did they discourage marriage, they forbade remarriage either after a divorce or the death of a spouse.

We conclude, therefore, that Jesus permitted divorce on grounds of sexual immorality, and that this divorce assumed the right of remarriage.

***The Restriction***

**Imposed.** The words of Jesus, “except for sexual immorality,” express a restriction as well as a permission. If a person obtains a divorce on grounds other than sexual immorality and remarries, he commits adultery. The Lord’s use of the word *moicheia* rather than *porneia* is significant. *Moicheia* focuses on the broken marriage covenant. When two people whose divorces were not valid in God’s sight come together in the sexual union of marriage, they break their former marriage covenant. But this is not a continuing state. From this point on they are husband and wife.

God considers two people as married when they have met the civil requirements. This is true even when their divorces were not valid in God’s sight. Jesus told the

Samaritan woman that she had five husbands before her present live-in arrangement (Jn. 4:17-18). It is unlikely that she was widowed five times. We can therefore assume that at least a couple of her marriages followed a divorce. Jesus still recognized each man she married as a husband.

In 1 Corinthians 7:20 Paul urged first-century believers to do their best to remain in the marriage they had when they were converted. The people he addressed must have included some who had married new mates after divorces obtained on trivial grounds. If these people were living in perpetual adultery, we can assume that Paul would have told them to separate immediately.

This leads us to the conclusion that when two people marry after a divorce

on grounds less than specified by Jesus and Paul, they sin against the covenant they made in the previous marriage. But this occurs only once. Their first sexual union breaks the former bond. The new marriage covenant is now in effect. This fact, however, should not be taken as weakening the force of Christ's restriction. Deliberate disobedience is always a serious matter. Believers who truly love the Lord will not lightly ignore or disobey Him.

### **I Corinthians 7:10-16**

*Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife. But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any*

*brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?*

Apart from a passing comment in Romans 7, these few verses contain everything Paul wrote about

divorce. Some critics say that in the process he contradicted Jesus' stipulation that the only basis for divorce was sexual immorality. But a careful consideration of the historical circumstances makes it clear that Paul was faithful to Jesus' words on this matter.

***The Historical Situation.*** When Jesus made His statements about divorce, He addressed Jewish people living under the Mosaic law. But Paul addressed believers, both Jews and Gentiles, on this side of Calvary and the empty tomb. Many of these Gentile believers undoubtedly came out of a paganism that was morally decadent. Its worship involved temple prostitution and sexual orgies. The city of Corinth itself was known far and wide as a center of sexual indulgence and other forms of immorality.

The pagans who became Christians often needed to be reminded of God's moral standards. Then too, some of those who had become believers were living with a mate who had not become a Christian. Apparently, a number of the non-Christian spouses were content to allow the marriage to remain intact. Other nonbelievers, however, wanted the mate either to renounce Christ or to end the marriage.

Paul was concerned that fellow believers be as unencumbered as possible from the normal cares of life so they could serve Christ freely in the difficult days that were ahead. Therefore, in chapter 7 of his first epistle to the Corinthians he gave inspired advice and instruction about singleness, marriage, divorce, and remarriage. We will consider only the verses that deal directly with the divorce and remarriage problems.

***The Permission Given.***

Paul advised single people to remain single, and married people to remain with their present mate. However, he declared that the unmarried would not sin by marrying a believer. He also said that a Christian married to a non-Christian who wanted out of the marriage would not sin by allowing the unbeliever to obtain a divorce.

*But if the unbeliever departs [the word Paul used here was an official term for divorce on the certificate of that day], let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases (1 Cor. 7:15).*

The fact that Paul made the desertion of a believer by an unbeliever grounds for divorce, while Jesus gave the only valid reason as “sexual immorality,” does not put him into conflict with his Master. He was addressing a

different situation—a mixed marriage. Jesus, addressing Jews under the law, had in mind marriages between Jews—marriages within the covenant community. Paul confronted a different problem—marriages between believers and nonbelievers.

God through the apostle Paul mandated that a believer does not sin by allowing a divorce when the unbeliever wants out. A divorce in such circumstances is therefore valid. God sees the marriage as ended. Therefore, the believer thus divorced has the right to remarry.

From the words of Jesus in Matthew 19 and from Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:15, we have found only two grounds upon which God sanctions divorce: sexual immorality and the desertion of a believer by an unbeliever. This raises the question, “Is divorce

wrong under all other circumstances? What about abuse? Must a woman continue to live with a man who is beating her and sexually abusing her?

There is no verse in the Bible specifically stating that a woman in an abusive marriage has a right to obtain a divorce. Nor is there any mention of a legal separation. Many pastors and other Christian leaders have gone through great emotional and mental turmoil when confronted with extreme cruelty situations. I know I have. And in my searching of the Scriptures, I have found a principle that I believe we can apply in such situations. It has permitted me to advise some women to seek a divorce even when the husband was a professing Christian and free from sexual immorality. Let me explain.

God in His compassion

sometimes allows His people to set aside strict conformity to certain rules He has given. He did this on one occasion when David and his men were hungry. He allowed them to eat consecrated bread in the tabernacle—bread which He had declared holy (1 Sam. 21:1-6).

God also did this with His Sabbath rules. He had commanded the Israelites to keep the seventh day as a day of absolute rest—even for domestic animals (Ex. 20:8-11). He forbade the kindling of a fire to cook food (Ex. 35:1-3). The importance of these rules was seen when He ordered that a man be stoned for gathering sticks on the Sabbath (Num. 15:32-36). It was to be a day of absolute rest!

Yet Jesus healed on the Sabbath. When rebuked by His adversaries, He reminded them that even a



legalistic Jew worked to free an animal that had fallen into a pit (Mt. 12:9-13). The strong “no work” regulation could be set aside when an animal needed help or a person needed healing. The Bible doesn’t say this explicitly, but the Jews knew it to be true. The Lord Jesus expressed this fact when He said, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mk. 2:27).

Let’s apply this principle to God’s regulations about divorce. Why did God give men permission to divorce their wives? Jesus answered this question when He told His critics, “because of the hardness of your hearts” (Mt. 19:8). God had declared that a man should cleave to his wife in a one-flesh relationship (Gen. 2:24). He never rescinded this rule. Yet He permitted men to divorce their wives. Why? The only logical reason I can think of is that

He did so to protect the wives of hard-hearted men. If a man didn’t want a woman as a wife any longer, he couldn’t just discard her, he had to give her a certificate of divorce. This would give her the freedom to marry another man.

The Old Testament divorce laws were a merciful provision. God hated divorce then just as He does now. But He preferred divorce to the abuse of wives and mothers.

Divorce is often a terrible evil, but in some situations it represents a wise and loving course of action. Ezra insisted that Israelite men put away their pagan wives and children (Ezra 10:10-19). God Himself divorced the northern tribes of Israel (Jer. 3:8). He took such action only after enduring their prolonged spiritual unfaithfulness which He compared to sexual unfaithfulness.

Since divorce is not always wrong, it is not like lying, stealing, coveting, or sexual immorality. These other actions are always wrong. God can never approve of them. But divorce is not always a sin. It is always caused by sin, but is not an act of disobedience when permitted by God.

Believers are not necessarily sinning when they divorce a spouse who through sexual sin has shattered the exclusive commitment of the marriage covenant. In fact, a woman who is married to a physically abusive husband may not be sinning when, with the encouragement of her spiritual counselors, she seeks divorce action—even if her husband is not guilty of sexual immorality. If such a wife has given careful consideration to the name and reputation of Christ, if she has sought to fulfill the

requirements of love, and if she has followed the biblical procedures for confronting a sinning brother (Mt. 18:15-17), then she may have reason to seek divorce action against someone who is no longer being treated by the church as a brother.

As noted earlier, Jesus taught that sometimes the spirit of the law allows specific legal requirements to be overridden (Mt. 12:1-13). By His own example, Jesus allowed His hungry disciples to pick and eat grain on the Sabbath, just as He also took the opportunity to heal a man with a crippled hand on a day when no work was to be done.

I believe the apostle Paul could have had this same spirit of the law in mind when he wrote:

*Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does*

*depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife (1 Cor. 7:10-11).*

Notice that after commanding the Christian wife not to divorce her husband, the apostle inserted, “But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband.” Why didn’t he just tell both husbands and wives to refrain from divorcing one another without inserting “but even if she does”? I believe that Paul may have been making a compassionate provision for an abused woman.

I have encountered situations in which I could not in good conscience tell a woman to remain with her husband. One man quit beating his wife after she called the civil authorities and had him arrested for assault. But he would push her, put a knife to her

throat, or point a gun at her in front of their terrified children. After much effort at getting him to change was unsuccessful, and after the psychological damage to the children became obvious, I encouraged her to obtain a divorce. The man, to avoid child support, left for places unknown. To this day she doesn’t know where he is. Paul could have had such situations in mind.

***The Restriction Imposed.*** Paul told the woman who obtained a divorce on grounds other than sexual immorality that she was to “remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband.” Such a divorce is not as complete a severing of the marriage bond as one where a mate has been guilty of sexual immorality or where an unbeliever refuses to continue living with a believer. To enter a new marriage while the possibility

of reconciliation is still open is to commit adultery, as specified in Matthew 19:9. It seems logical to assume that once one of the parties makes remarriage impossible by entering a new union, the other party is released from this requirement just as if the former mate had died.

I realize that there is an element of subjectivity in determining when principles of wisdom and love call for a divorce under such conditions. But we make such decisions all the time in all areas of life.

What's important is that our personal judgment be guided by the right principles. Any exception to the "law" should be considered only in light of the most basic principles of Scripture. We cannot be justified in a divorce action if we have not first considered what effect our actions will have on the name and reputation of the One whose

name we bear. Is this action being taken to please the Lord? (1 Cor. 7:29-35).

Is the motive for the action godly? Is the action being considered only for a person's own self-protection, or also for the good of the sinning mate? (1 Cor. 13:1-3). Has the sinned-against spouse sought safety in the advice of wise counselors? (Prov. 11:14). Has the one considering divorce carefully weighed the implications of two Christians pleading their dispute before a civil judge or jury? (1 Cor. 6:1-7). Is divorce a last-resort action taken with the support of wise counsel, when the other party can no longer be treated as a follower of Christ? All of this and more is necessary to assure that persons who are taking exception to their marriage vows, and to the binding law of marriage, are doing so according to the proper biblical procedure.



### **THE PROPER PROCEDURE**

When nonbelievers decide to get a divorce, they can go directly to the civil authorities and take action. Not so for Christians! In the first place, we must think of 1 Corinthians 6:1-8, where Paul said that we dishonor Christ before the unbelieving world when we go to court against a fellow believer.

Second, the love principle calls on us to seek the spiritual good of fallen Christians, no matter what they have done. Then too, a believer should think very carefully before breaking

the “for better or for worse as long as we both shall live” marriage vow.

After failing on their own to get the attention of their mate, wronged or hurting Christians can take steps to increase pressure on the offending spouse by asking one or two others to act as witnesses to the problem. This procedure was outlined by Jesus and recorded in Matthew 18:15-21.

In my experience as a pastor, I have found that following the confrontational strategy of Matthew 18 can be effective. I vividly recall occasions when I felt nervous and actually trembled at the thought of going with a church member to confront an erring spouse. I expected anger and defiance. Instead, I observed the husband's embarrassment and sense of shame, and I was deeply stirred as the wrongdoer repented before God, his wife, and myself.

Such confrontation, however, does not always work. The next step is to ask the church to use its influence in seeking to bring about a change of heart. If the offending mate still doesn't respond, then the church must formally disassociate itself from the sinning member. Paul gave us an example of this when he told the church in Corinth to excommunicate a man who was living in an incestuous relationship (1 Cor. 5:4-5).

After much prayer and serious effort to lead the sinning person to repentance has failed and the excommunication process has been carried out, the wrongdoer is to be treated "like a heathen and a tax gatherer" (Mt. 18:17). The person may be a genuine believer, but he is now looked upon as an unbeliever. This means that though we still love him and

desire his spiritual restoration, we can now go to a secular court for a divorce. Even then, the wronged believers must be careful about their testimony. It should be apparent to the judge and all other observers that the innocent mate is not a greedy or vindictive person. We must always keep in mind our Lord's exhortations to go the extra mile (Mt. 5:41) and to love our enemies (Mt. 5:43-44). Remember too that the apostle Paul declared that we should be willing to be cheated rather than to bring reproach on Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 6:7).

This suggested procedure cannot be followed completely if the erring spouse is not a church member. But even then, wronged persons can seek counsel, exercise patience, and be conscious of their testimony when reaching a settlement.



### **THE GOD-HONORING GOAL**

The apostle Paul told us that we are to do everything to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). This should be our goal, even when considering a divorce. In such a situation we glorify God by doing all we can to protect the name of Christ from reproach and by seeking the eternal good of everyone involved—including the offender.

A divorce between Christians tends to reflect badly on the Lord Jesus. It can be viewed by nonbelievers as an indication that faith in Christ is not as life-changing as we proclaim it to be. Even after

church discipline has given believers the authority to deal with the sinning mate as an unsaved person, the people in the court and the public will view both parties as believers. It seems to me that the Christian who has been wronged should be fair, even to the point of being overly generous. A bitter court fight should be avoided if at all possible. This is in line with Paul's challenge to believers to let themselves be cheated in order to protect the name of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 6:7).

We also glorify God by showing love for the offenders. We can do this by treating them kindly, by doing our best to lead them to repent, and by forgiving them when they do. These repentant offenders should feel the warmth of our love.

After they have given good reason for the church to believe in the reality of their repentance, they

should be restored to fellowship. Paul had to address this situation in 2 Corinthians because the congregation was apparently withholding restoration to the man who had been excommunicated for an incestuous relationship (see 1 Cor. 5:4-5). In 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 he wrote:

*If anyone has caused grief, he has not grieved me, but all of you to some extent—not to be too severe. This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him. . . . Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I*

*have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.*

Those who repent should also gradually be restored to places of service. The time frame and the degree of the restoration must be determined case by case.

It is almost impossible to set up a rigid timetable procedure. The situation is quite similar to that of restoring a pastor who has fallen into sexual immorality. Sometimes full restoration is possible; sometimes it is unwise. After immoral conduct or an unwarranted divorce, we must be keenly aware of Paul's requirement that a church leader be "blameless" and "have a good testimony among them who are outside" (1 Tim. 3:2,7).

One mistake often made is that divorce is viewed as



the sin of all sins. Men who repent of sexual immorality are often restored to service far more readily than those who wrongly obtain a divorce. I have seen Christian workers who had been guilty of sexual immorality restored to their offices, while innocent victims of an unfaithful mate were rejected.

A former pastor I know lost his position in a Christian organization when his wife left him and married another man. She admitted that he had been a good husband and father, but said his income level had been too low. He now is not permitted to serve as an elder because he is viewed as not meeting the “husband of one wife” requirement of 1 Timothy 3:2. This man, an innocent victim of his wife’s greed, had been dealt with far more severely than many pastors who repented after immorality. This troubles me. A man thus divorced

still meets the “husband of one wife” qualification, even after a new marriage. The Greek expression is literally “a one-woman man.” This refers to a man whose life as a husband was marked by fidelity to his mate. A good husband who remarries after his wife dies is also a “one-woman man” in spite of having a second wife.

We must therefore recognize that divorce is sometimes permitted by God. Since this is true, a person does not sin when he or she obtains a divorce on grounds of sexual immorality or desertion by an unsaved spouse. Let’s not treat such people as somehow and somewhat tainted!

People who have divorced on inadequate grounds and remarry have sinned. But their sin is just as forgivable as any other sin. They should be treated the same way as those who are guilty of fraud, theft, sexual immorality, or

any other sin. We are to forgive all who repent. And we must seek their restoration to usefulness in the Lord's service.

Restoration to leadership—a deacon, elder, pastor, Bible teacher—is to be handled with much care. In 1 Timothy 3:1-7, the apostle Paul placed much emphasis on making sure that the prospective elders and deacons be “blameless” and have a “good reputation on the outside.” When Christian leaders obtain a divorce and remarry, a group of Spirit-filled believers should work with them. Sometimes these church-appointed people may be led to grant full restoration; sometimes not. The wrongdoer, realizing that the name and reputation of Christ is at stake, should humbly accept their decision.

In summary, the Bible permits divorce and remarriage on two grounds:

sexual infidelity and the desertion of a believer by an unbeliever. However, a Christian should never rush into divorce, no matter what the situation. Sincere effort must be made to bring the wrongdoer to repentance. Spirit-filled men and women should be involved with the wronged spouse to reach this goal. If the sinning party is a church member, the discipline procedure of Matthew 18 must be carried out. If not, fellow believers can offer counsel and be involved in supportive prayer. People who disobeyed God in their divorce and remarriage must be shown love, even though we do not approve of what they did. The aim should be their repentance and restoration to fellowship. Restoration, especially to that of leadership, must be handled very carefully to protect the name and reputation of Christ.

## QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

### **Why did Mark and Luke (along with Matthew 5:32) omit the “except for sexual immorality” clause found in Matthew 19:9?**

Some critics theorize that Jesus did not say “except for sexual immorality” in His original statement, but that Matthew (or somebody who copied his gospel) inserted these words to make Christ’s teaching more acceptable to the public. But they can produce no evidence for this conjecture.

This exceptive clause was omitted in the other gospels simply because it wasn’t needed. All first-century readers—Jewish, Greek, and Roman—agreed that sexual infidelity was legitimate grounds for divorce.

Commands that have well-known or obvious exceptions are often stated without a repetition of the exceptions. For example, Paul in Romans 13:1-7 told us to obey governing authorities and states no exceptions. Peter in his first epistle (2:13-16) told us to submit to “every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake” and gave us no exceptions. But both knew full well the principle expressed by Peter and recorded in Acts 5:29, “We ought to obey God rather than men.” They assumed their readers did too.

Why repeat the obvious and well-known? We normally don’t. Peter and Paul didn’t when they commanded obedience to civil authorities. Why should it be deemed strange that Mark and Luke didn’t?

**Isn't it unfair to suggest that Christians who divorce on grounds other than infidelity or desertion should remain unmarried? Didn't Jesus say that some people can't live the single life?**

No, it's not unfair. God has a right to call for celibacy. Moreover, He gives grace to those who look to Him for strength to obey Him. Jesus was not discussing a celibate life for divorcees when He said, "All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given" (Mt. 19:11). He was responding to the disciples' objection that if sexual immorality is the only grounds for divorce and remarriage, it is best to stay single. Moreover, though Paul declared that one practical reason for marriage is to avoid sexual immorality (1 Cor. 7:2), he

wasn't giving improperly divorced people an excuse for marrying a new mate. The fact is that later in this chapter he suggested that remaining unmarried was a good option (7:27,39-40).

**What about the teaching that a sexual relationship makes two people married and that sexual infidelity automatically breaks a marriage?**

I believe that's wrong! When Paul declared that a man who has sex with a prostitute becomes "one body with her" (1 Cor. 6:16), he was making the point that there's no such thing as casual sex. It's always significant. Marriage and divorce have always required some kind of legal commitment or action.

**Some pastors accept divorced and remarried people as church members but have a policy of never performing a marriage if one or both parties have had a divorce in their past. Do you think they are acting consistently?**

Yes, they believe that remarriage after all divorces is wrong, but at the same time they hold that people who have repented after remarrying should be received back into the fellowship of the church.

However, pastors who take the position set forth in this booklet but don't perform weddings for any divorcees because they wish to avoid criticism are not being fair to those who have a biblical right to remarry. The spiritual welfare of a believer is so important that pastors

should be willing to take the time necessary to determine the rightness or wrongness of remarriage in each specific case.

**I have heard it said that Jesus was thinking only about sexual immorality during the Jewish betrothal period when He used the term *porneia* (fornication) instead of *moicheia* (adultery) in Matthew 19:9. The proponent of this view referred to Joseph's intention to divorce Mary when he learned that she was pregnant. What about this idea?**

This theory doesn't take into consideration the fact that betrothal among the Jews was far more significant than a present-day engagement. The betrothed woman already

belonged to her man. If she committed sexual sin during this time, she was executed just as if she were married (Dt. 22:22-24). She was considered guilty of adultery—of infidelity to her betrothal vow. Therefore, the technical word would be *moicheia*, not *porneia*.

**Why do we find it harder to forgive and restore people who remarry after an unbiblical divorce than those who committed adultery but were able to preserve their marriage?**

Perhaps it's because it just seems wrong to us that people who have an unbiblical divorce can have a happy marriage while their former mates are brokenhearted. I've felt this myself. It has troubled me that they can repent and be restored to fellowship as if

nothing ever happened.

However, we should realize that the second marriage is no more blissful than the first. After a short time, they settle down to the same kind of married life as everyone else. I have met men who confessed that they were actually more happy with their first mate. In fact, the percentage of failure is greater with second marriages than the first. People in second marriages need our love and fellowship.

**In Romans 7:1-6, Paul declared that a woman who leaves her husband and marries another man is called an adulteress as long as her first husband is alive. Doesn't this indicate that the apostle didn't consider remarriage after divorce a valid option?**

No, it doesn't. First of all, in Romans 7:1-6 the apostle was not dealing with the subject of divorce and remarriage. He was simply illustrating the truth that we have been freed from the law system. In that we have died to all that we were before we were saved, we are now set free.

Second, Paul didn't mention the wife obtaining a divorce. A Jewish woman at that time would have had to go to the Roman civil authorities to do so. Such a divorce was not recognized as valid by the Jewish religious leadership.

Another possibility is that the apostle was thinking of a woman who ignored or bypassed the Jewish divorce laws. It appears that this was done among the elite Jews like the Herods. A man and woman simply left their mates and started living together as husband and wife.

Whether Paul was thinking about a woman who obtained a divorce through Roman law or changed partners without legal action is not clear. It really doesn't matter. It is not relevant to the truth he was illustrating.

## SPIRITUALLY EQUIPPED

**L**iving up to what the Bible teaches about sexual morality, marriage, and divorce is very demanding. Abstinence before marriage is out of style in our society. So is submission by the wife and self-sacrificing love on the part of the husband. The idea that believers should remain unmarried if they obtain a divorce on grounds less than sexual infidelity or desertion by an unbeliever is scoffed at or ignored. These ideals are attainable, but in today's world it is more difficult than ever to do so.

On the other side of the coin, we are challenged to be sympathetic, accepting, and forgiving toward divorced people—even to the point of fully restoring those who repent. We find ourselves saying, “This is too much! God challenges

us to a high standard of purity and selfless love, and then He expects us to be kind to people who didn't take His challenge seriously. Besides, if we are too kind and forgiving, won't we encourage others to take the low and easy road?”

If we have these feelings, we need to join Paul in praying that we, “being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend . . . what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:17-19). When God answers this prayer, we will be amazed at His love. And through the indwelling Holy Spirit, we will want to live up to God's expectations for us and be eager to forgive and accept those who have stumbled and fallen.



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