

**Text:** Matthew 19:1-12

**Title:** Divorce and Remarriage under the Law of Moses

**Truth:** God regulated, but was not pleased with, divorce and remarriage

**Date/Location:** Wednesday June 8, 2022 at FBC

## **Introduction**

This passage inevitably raises controversy. I trust you can handle differences between believers with grace and mercy.

I have taught for years that the standard for Christians is no divorce, but if there is divorce, no remarriage. That is *clear* regardless of your emotions or experience in the matter, from this later passage of the Bible written specifically in the church age and to the church:

### **For Marriages between Two Christians:**

1 Corinthians 7:10-11 Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. 11 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.

This sounds an awful lot like “no divorce, no remarriage,” does it not?

### **For Marriages between One Christian and one Not a Christian:**

1 Corinthians 7:12-13 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. 13 And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him.

Here, the unbeliever divorces the believing spouse. The believer is not to be guilty of hard-heartedness in this matter. There is a question about remarriage after this point. I take it that it is not advisable for a person to be married again, given the “commits adultery” phraseology of 19:9 (see below).

### **For Marriages with Both Spouses Not Christians:**

There is no specific instruction for pairs of unbelievers in this passage, because it is unlikely that they will be interested in obeying God anyway. Still, the general teaching about marriage does apply to them and they are expected by God to follow it, and will be held accountable if they do not. And that teaching is what we see in Matthew 19:6—what God has joined together, let not man separate. You understand, don't you, that even two unbelievers who are married are joined together in the sight of God? God joined them together by his ordination of the marriage institution and their voluntary, public promises to one another to forsake all others and live together as husband and wife. If I were to ask, “Did God join those two unbelievers together?” You might be inclined to answer “No, God is not in their marriage.” But the reality is that they are truly married in the sight of the law and of God and of society. And *that* means that God has in fact joined them together. They are not to be separated.

I suppose we could construct a situation in which the marriage was invalid—like not voluntarily entered into by both parties, oppression, or something like that. But in the normal case, those things are not an issue.

I turned our attention to 1 Corinthians because there is confusion about this Matthew 19 passage. It clearly fits under the prior administration of the Law of Moses, while also obviously teaching principles from that Law that are expressions of God’s immutable holiness. But it does not deal with the breakdown of “case A, case B, case C” like Paul does in 1 Corinthians. We need that kind of breakdown sometimes, because we are dull and slow to pick up what God is trying to explain.

Marriage is the glue that holds family and society together. With no-fault divorce and lack of marriage commitment in the first place, society is crumbling. The world can mock all they want the “Victorian prudishness” of the older western culture. The reality is the reality—discarding those values has left us in a mess and it is undeniable.

So what did the Lord teach about divorce?

## **I. Setting, v. 1-2**

- A. The Lord had just finished His teaching about humility, little ones who believe in Him, lost sheep, unrepentant brothers, and how His followers must be forgiving people.
- B. He left Galilee then and went down to Judea, but the portion of Judea on the “other side” of the Jordan River. This means on the East side of the Jordan in a region technically called Perea. Today it is in the country of Jordan, whose capital Amman is a bit farther to the east, northeast of the Dead Sea.

C. The Lord continued to teach, undoubtedly, because great crowds followed Him. He was providing healing for them from disease and demons and disability.

## **II. Question from the Pharisees, v. 3**

- A. The always-helpful (!) Pharisees brought another test question to the Lord Jesus.
- B. The question is about divorce, but notice the specifics of it: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?”
- C. The Law of Moses is clear that divorce was a thing that happened in Israel, and it was regulated by God. See Deut. 24:1-4. I hesitate to say that God “permitted” divorce because He did not really want it, nor permit it in a positive sense. He loathes it, but to keep some order in society and avoid anarchy, He regulated the sin. He also made provision to protect some sanctity of marriage and to protect women from being destitute or exploited. See Exodus 21:10-11.
- D. But notice the phrase at the end of the verse. This is not just about whether divorce was lawful or not. It was about whether it was permitted “for any reason at all.” They wanted to know if basically no-fault, any reason, no reason, free divorce and remarriage was permissible.
- E. Since this question was a test, they were trying to trip up the Lord in some detail or inconsistency or some-such.

## **III. Initial Answer by Jesus, v. 4-6**

- A. As He often did, the Lord side-stepped their testing intent by going to the core of the matter, going back to basics, and showing them that their whole premise was

wrong in the first place. They misunderstood the intention of God regarding marriage.

B. Jesus takes them back to Genesis:

Genesis 1:27 So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Genesis 5:2 He created them male and female, and blessed them and called them Mankind in the day they were created.

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

C. He concludes from the above texts that the two have become one flesh. Something amazing and somewhat inexplicable has happened between the man and his wife that they are glued together and have become one before God as a new family, as a unit, physically as well as inter-personally.

D. Furthermore, as they have become one flesh and God does not make any provision here for “un-doing” that one-flesh relationship, severing it or changing it, the Lord Jesus concludes that God intended for that relationship to stay that way, evidently until death severed it. Death changes a lot of things, including the marriage bond. If it can separate the spirit from the body, then it is a powerful thing. This initial, creative statement by God is how He intended things to be. We ought to stick with that.

E. The Lord then applies this truth: what God has joined, man must not separate. Since divorce is the separation

that we are talking about, He is saying this: what God has married, man must not divorce. By the way, not only divorcing husbands or wives should worry about this. How about divorcing judges, friends of the court, etc.? Do you have any idea that what you are doing is displeasing to God?

- F. The short answer to the Pharisees' question is this: NO, God does not permit you to divorce your wife for any reason at all. In fact, He does not really permit you to divorce at all!
- G. Jesus makes clear the elevated and holy status that marriage has in God's design. It is sacrosanct. It is to be treated with great care. It is not disposable. It is not something you "try on" and discard later if it does not feel just right.
- H. Society should put as much effort into saving marriages as divorcing them, but that is not what is happening right now in any society. Count up the hours, people, governmental staff, judges, money, and lawyers that go into the divorce industry. Is there anything close to that working on marriage education and counseling and other helps to keep families together? I'm not saying there is no help for marriages, but the track record is pretty bad. If 50% of marriages end in divorce, there is a lot of work to do—to help struggling marriages, to avoid bad marriages in the first place, etc.

#### **IV. Second Question by the Pharisees, v. 7**

- A. This all must have been quite a shock to the Pharisees. If what the Lord says is true, they reason (and it is true), then why did Moses "command to give a certificate of

divorce, and to put her away?” It seems, to the dull mind at least, that it is opposite of what Jesus is saying. They may have thought they had him in their trap.

- B. They understood what the Lord was saying: what God has joined together, He does not want man to separate. Now, if *they* understood what the Lord was saying, should not we also understand it?
- C. What they failed to recognize is that there was a great distance between what Moses said in 1400 B.C. and what God said at creation more than two millennia before that. God had laid down the situation: marriage is for a man and a woman for a LONG time—life.

Moses “commanded” a certificate of divorce in order to regulate, limit, constrain, and restrain the sin of the people. It was a concession to the fact that we live in a sin-cursed world. It was a standard to bring society up from the lowest possible condition to a slightly higher level that would be better for people. Far from perfect indeed, but better than the baser condition in which the world would exist if there were *no* limits.

## V. Second Answer by Jesus, v. 8-9

- A. The Lord makes clear the “why” of the instruction in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The reason was “the hardness of your hearts.” It was not a problem in *God* that brought about the divorce certificate instruction. It was not a problem in the teaching of *Jesus*. It was a problem in the hearts of men and women. Human nature, not divine nature, was the problem.
- B. This human sinful hardness led God to “permit” divorce—not in a favorable permissive way, but in an

unfavorable permissive way. It was an accommodation to the sinfulness of mankind that was required to keep some semblance of law and order in the nation of Israel.

- C. From the beginning, from the original design, this was not so. That's it. If you want to get down to the bottom of what marriage is supposed to be, that's where you must go: what God has joined together, let not man put asunder.
- D. Verse 9 is probably where most of the controversy comes in this passage. It is the "exception" clause.
1. Let us leave behind the exception for a moment. In every other case...
  2. If someone divorces his wife and marries another, he commits adultery. Why is that? Because he is supposed to still be faithful to his wife. That's right, his wife, not his prior wife. His wife. God joined it together. If man breaks it and sleeps with someone else, it is a violation of the command against adultery.
  3. If another man marries the woman who was divorced, he also commits adultery.
  4. And of course, since it takes two to commit adultery, the counter-parties in each case are also guilty of adultery.
  5. You think about this: are you wanting to be guilty of adultery? If not, then do not get a divorce! And if you do, do not be remarried. But do notice this please: even if you divorce but do not remarry, you are **STILL** guilty of a sin against Scriptural teaching, because you owe your spouse your body in terms of intimacy. 1 Cor.



7:2-5. If you are living apart, you are obviously not doing what the Lord has said (through Paul).

6. Now we can process the exception clause. Here is how I begin to process it: In every other case, the result is adultery. Let's face it—when people get divorced, they often get remarried, or live with someone as if they are married in an attempt to satisfy their needs but justify themselves that they are OK because at least they are not making a marriage commitment. So if every other case basically results in adultery in one or both partners, and the exception clause is adultery, then that means EVERY CASE boils down to adultery.
7. Many Christians take a broad view of the exception clause, namely that any act of adultery by one spouse justifies the other to divorce. Some even have the idea that an act of adultery permanently breaks the marriage bond. It certainly breaks the promise of exclusivity made on the wedding day, but it does not immediately cause the cessation of a marriage as if that marriage is now irretrievably broken. In fact, the offending spouse can offer contrition, and the offended spouse can receive with forgiveness. It is not easy. It is very difficult, it takes very diligent effort, but it is possible to restore a marriage to wholeness after such an indiscretion.
8. Other interpreters, and I am included in this bunch, have taken the view that the exception clause was demonstrated in the lives of Joseph and Mary during betrothal. It seems un-arguable that it is at least that. But the question is whether it expands beyond that. Because of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 (see

the introduction), where he flat-out commands Christians to stay together, or if they are separated to remain unmarried, I do not take the exception clause in the broad sense. I understand why many do on exegetical grounds. I wonder if many of those who take the broader view do so because of emotion or how “difficult” the situation is, etc.

## **VI. Exclamation by the Disciples, v. 10**

A. What did the disciples “get” from Jesus’s answers? What did they understand? They understood the very same thing that the Pharisees did—that marriage is a high and holy estate that is permanent. This shocked them, coming from the lax culture in which they lived. Indeed, the true Christian way is very different than the way of the world.

With lax divorce restrictions, annulments (what kind of pretend is *that*?) and the like, the world is so conditioned that when they hear what Jesus says, they are in a state of shock. Christians should not be in such a state!

The world tries to treat marriage as if it is not that special or important. Far from that, God elevates the holy estate of matrimony far beyond the world’s dim estimation of it. And people know this intuitively in their hearts, that you are not to enter marriage lightly. But education and conditioning over the years have softened this so that it does not have any “edge” to it.

B. This led the disciples to take an extreme position: if the standard of marriage is so high—and they were right—then it is better not to marry at all.

- C. But that is itself displeasing to the Lord. You cannot junk the whole idea of marriage without endangering men and women to the fate of “burning with passion,” not procreating to propagate the human race, and not following God’s desire for the race to be fruitful and multiply, or at least destroying the basic home life structure that has been the bedrock of every society for millennia.
- D. So they are guilty of swinging the pendulum too far to the other side. Instead, the right answer is to be very intentional and careful about selecting a mate, having all the help you can in terms of counselors, doing due-diligence, spending long enough in dating/courtship to be able to know the person, etc. And beyond knowing the potential future spouse very well, you have to both be committed to do marriage the way that God has commanded it to be done. You must be fixed on Ephesians 5, 1 Peter 3, Colossians 3, and other passages that instruct about marriage. You both have to be committed to the idea that marriage is not a trial run, it is not temporary, it is “permanent” permanent, not temporary permanent!

## **VII. Clarification by Jesus, v. 11-12**

- A. The Lord replied to their extreme conclusion by bringing them back to reality. Only some people can take that, i.e. eunuchs. A eunuch was sometimes a court official, but in this context, it is one who is either uninterested in the opposite sex, impotent to have children, or has been castrated and unable to have normal physical relations with the opposite sex. The three categories frankly stated are: castrated, celibate, or impotent. Isaiah 56:3

mentions eunuchs as those who are unable to have children.

- B. Only some people have that ability to be happily single: either people born that way, or people who have committed themselves by a voluntary vow of celibacy, or those who have been forcibly castrated or sterilized. This was not uncommon in the ancient world, with its harems and such.
- C. The people who can accept the “it is better not to marry” dictum, let them do that. But others, in fact most people, are not gifted or disabled that way, so the normal condition is for men and women to marry. Remember: it is not good for a man to be alone. Most men need a woman, period. To complete them, to help, to soften the rough edges of their character, to enjoy, to provide companionship, to be life partners and co-workers, etc. Two is better than one, except in the relatively rare cases where someone desires to be single and serve the Lord in an undistracted way (1 Cor. 7:32-35).

## Conclusion

The bottom line for me is that God has established marriage as a very high and holy calling. It is no joke, and it is to be maintained, jealously guarded, protected, nurtured, strengthened, etc.

We ought not focus on the exception clause, as if that is the main point of this passage—because it is not. It is only a sub-point that *might* apply in certain difficult situations, but does not soften the reality that divorce is SIN or demonstrates a deep-rooted SIN problem in marriage.