

Marriage and Divorce

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Adapted from *The Sermon on the Mount*.

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DIVORCE (Matthew 5:31-32)

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

Since Jesus proceeds to discuss divorce, it may appear that he is moving on to the next subject or example in his sermon; however, several indications suggest that verses 31 and 32 are only a continuation and extension of what Jesus started in the previous verses.

First, the beginning of verse 31 in fact contains the Greek connective *de*, which can be translated as "also," "and," or "moreover." It is often unexpressed in English, so that it is absent from the KJV and NIV, but it shows up in the NASB, so that it reads, "*And* it was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'" Second, whereas the other five sections or examples all begin with "You have heard that it was said" (v. 21, 27, 33, 38, 43), verse 31 begins with the words, "It has been said." Thus it seems that Jesus here cites a new quotation without starting an entirely new topic. Third, although the subject seems to be about divorce, the relevant sin in question is still "adultery" (v. 32), which is the topic of the previous passage (v. 27-30). Fourth, after this passage on divorce, Jesus begins the next example by saying, "again" (v. 33), which probably signals to the audience that he is starting a new topic. Therefore, it seems certain that verse 31 does not begin an entirely new topic, but follows what Jesus has just finished saying about adultery (v. 27-30).

Now, it has been said, "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce" (v. 31). This alludes to how the Jews understand Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which reads as follows:

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

In Matthew 5:31, Jesus is not directly quoting from the Old Testament, but he is referring to the Jews' understanding of and inference from this passage.

First, we must note that *even if* the passage really says, "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce," it does not imply that God approves of divorce, or that he regards it as not serious.

To illustrate, in some places, convicted sex offenders are required to register and update their personal information with the local police – that is, "If you are a sex offender, then you must register." However, this does not imply that the government approves of sex offenders so long as they register with the police. In fact, the intent of this requirement is to protect the potential victims of sex crimes.

Likewise, *even if* God's law says, "If you divorce your wife, then you must write her a certificate of divorce," it does not imply that divorce is a morally good or neutral thing. Rather, the custom is most likely in place for the benefit of the "victim" in a divorce, which would almost certainly be the woman in those days.

In any case, Moses here does not command the man to write a certificate of divorce, but he merely assumes the practice, and mentions it in passing as he makes his point. The main thrust of this passage may not be immediately obvious because of its numerous details and qualifications, but if we remove most of the clauses for the moment, we see that it reads, "If a man...sends [his wife] from his house...and...she becomes the wife of another man...[he] is not allowed to marry her again." This, and not the certificate, is the main thrust of what Moses is saying. To paraphrase, "If you divorce your wife, and if she then marries another man, then you must not marry her again." A man is not permitted to remarry his former wife once she has married a second man, even if the second man then dies or divorces her.

Among other reasons, this regulation is perhaps meant to prevent hasty divorce, or to prevent "legal" wife swapping. That is, if the law permits men to marry, divorce, and remarry whomever and whenever they wish, then the men could practice wife swapping, and technically remain innocent from adultery, since each man would be married to the woman that he is with during the time that he has her. This regulation prevents this and other practices that God regards as "detestable." But rather than acknowledging and obeying the obvious meaning of this command, the Jews have made it into a law about writing out the certificate.

In Matthew 19, the Pharisees came to test Jesus, and ask, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" (v. 3). When Jesus, in effect, answers in the negative (v. 4-6), they then ask, "Why then...did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" In other words, the Pharisees indeed interpret Deuteronomy 24:1-4 as granting them permission to divorce "for any and every reason," so long as they write out a certificate of divorce. However, the main thrust of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is to decree a *prohibition* related to remarriage, and not a *permission* related to divorce.

Against their disregard for and distortion of God's law, Jesus pronounces, "But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to

become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery" (Matthew 5:32).

Since what we call the exception clause ("except for marital unfaithfulness") is exactly that – that is, it states an *exception* – it may be profitable to first read the verse without it, so that we may focus on the main point, and then return to it. Without the exception clause, the verse then reads, "But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife...causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

The statement is obviously a very broad disapproval of divorce, and warns about its disastrous consequences. Although the verse is already very clear, it will help us to obtain a fuller picture of Christ's teaching on divorce if we also look at what he says about the subject elsewhere.

First, there are the verses in which Christ gives a positive statement about marriage, which will also help us understand and apply his teaching on divorce:

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate....Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning." (Matthew 19:4-6, 8)

Marriage is not a human invention, but it is a creation ordinance initiated by God himself. Since it is God who joins together the man and the woman in a marriage, only God can properly dissolve it, and this he does only by the death of at least one of the two. This is an established teaching, so that Paul uses it as an example when he wishes to make a point about something else:

For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man. (Romans 7:2-3)

A marriage is properly dissolved only when at least one of the two dies. Paul does not say that the woman commits adultery if she marries another man without first getting a divorce, but he says that she commits adultery if she marries another man if the original husband is "still alive." Elsewhere Paul writes, "A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives" (1 Corinthians 7:39) – not just as long as they do not get a divorce.

Thus it seems that even a divorce does not dissolve a marriage, but only death does. In other words, if you are married now, even if you divorce your spouse before a human court, you are still not allowed to marry again; if you do, then you commit adultery, and God will hold you accountable for it.

Now we will turn to the parallel passages in which Jesus describes what happens when people divorce their spouses. Again, for now we will remove the exception clause in each verse where it appears:

"But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife...causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery." (Matthew 5:32)

"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife...and marries another woman commits adultery." (Matthew 19:9)

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery." (Mark 10:11-12)

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." (Luke 16:18)

Thus, when a divorce occurs, the following people will end up committing adultery:

1. The man who divorces, and then remarries.
2. The woman who divorces, and then remarries.
3. The man who marries the divorced woman.
4. The woman who marries the divorced man.¹

We can summarize Christ's teaching this way: "It is God who joins together a man and a woman in marriage, so that only God can and may dissolve it by the death of at least one of the two; therefore, *do not divorce at all.*"

We can see that this understanding of Christ's teaching is correct by noting how Paul restates it to the Corinthians: "To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). Although he is giving this command to the Corinthians, he says, "not I, but the Lord," because he is merely restating what Jesus says as recorded in the Gospels.

¹ The fourth proposition is the only one not directly stated in these verses, but if the man who divorces and then remarries commits adultery, then it is necessarily true that the woman who marries such a man is an adulteress. This fourth proposition is true for the same reason that the third proposition is true.

What Paul says here is identical to what Jesus teaches, and may be summarized as follows:

1. A wife must not divorce her husband.
2. A husband must not divorce his wife.
3. If they do separate,² then they must remain unmarried.
4. Otherwise, they must be reconciled to one another.

Christ's teaching on divorce is such that the disciples say to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry" (Matthew 19:10). Without expounding on Christ's answer (v. 11-12), we will just take this strong reaction from the disciples as an additional confirmation to our understanding, that Christ indeed intends to assert a very strict view on marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Indeed, biblical teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage is so strict that, without shying away from marriage altogether, we must not rush into marriage, thinking that we may always get a divorce and remarry if it does not work out. Rather, since God says that he hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), we must adopt the same attitude.

Now we will return to the exception clause. Since the exception clause is an *exception* clause, it is not even mentioned in the parallel verses in Mark and Luke, nor does Paul mention the exception clause when he restates Christ's teaching on divorce. An exception is an *exception*, so that it is not something that should usually happen. This is important, because many wicked men and women would love to seize on any provision for an exception to distort and universalize it, and to broaden what is supposed to be a very narrow allowance.

Only Matthew includes the exception clause; the two verses in which it appears are as follows:

"But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery." (Matthew 5:32)

"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." (Matthew 19:9)

Christ teaches that a person is not permitted to divorce for any reason, but here he offers one exception, and only one very narrow and specific exception – namely, when there is

² Paul is probably referring to a separation that occurs when one of the two has committed fornication; otherwise, he is assuming that one might disobey Christ's teaching and separate anyway.

"marital unfaithfulness." Even so, one is not commanded to divorce the unfaithful spouse, but merely permitted to do so.³

Then, although many biblical scholars argue that a divorce caused by marital unfaithfulness properly ends the marriage, so that at least the innocent party is free to remarry, others have rather convincingly argued otherwise, so that even the innocent one is to remain unmarried, or else be reconciled with his or her spouse (1 Corinthians 7:11).⁴

The Pharisees approach God's commandments with the intent to find out just how far they can go and how much they can get away with without committing sin. But with this attitude, they invariably twist and distort God's law to make more room for their sin. If a person is obsessed with finding out how he can get out of a marriage, then he is already guilty of subverting God's commandments. Rather, based on a sound understanding that marriage is meant to endure for life, he should actively discover biblical ways to solidify, improve, and if necessary, repair his marriage.

But just as Jesus is not limiting his ethical teaching to only those examples that he cites in the Sermon on the Mount, rebellious and corrupt individuals do not limit themselves only to distorting God's commandments on marriage. For example, many contemporary theologians spend their time trying to argue for the bare minimum of what it takes to become a Christian, or receive salvation. They ask, "What is the bare minimum of what one must believe to receive salvation? What is the least the one must do? How sinful and corrupt can a person's lifestyle be, and still be called a Christian?" Some of them even teach that you may receive Christ as Savior but not as Lord, and still be saved. But this is not the kind of ministry that honors Christ, who says, "Go and make disciples...teaching them to *obey everything* I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Nowadays, professing Christians divorce one another for almost any reason, and their churches do very little to stop them. In some congregations, the members have divorced and remarried so often that, in effect, they have been swapping spouses with one another and with the world. "Christians" commit adultery with one another, divorce their spouses, and then marry one another. Then, after a while, they cheat again, divorce again, and remarry again. This is an abomination.

Against this horrifying trend, those of us who truly follow Christ must practice and teach what he commands; that is, marriage is for life, so that there is to be no divorce at all.

³ Some have argued with some skill that what is translated "marital unfaithfulness" refers only to gross and extreme perversion (such as incest), and that alone is legitimate grounds for divorce. See J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth*; Bethany House, 1981.

⁴ See David J. Engelsma, *Better to Marry*; Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1993.