

# What the Bible Teaches About Divorce and Remarriage

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## BACKGROUND

In March 1998, I received a call from a dear friend, twenty-two years old, whose marriage was falling apart. He was seeing a Christian marriage counselor (fictitiously called "Bill Jones" below) who at the outset of their counseling asked him to make a vow not to remarry should his wife (fictitiously called "Jane") divorce him but to remain celibate and faithful to her for the rest of his days. My friend, also a Christian and a person of his word, was uncomfortable making such a vow. He called me and asked for my advice. The following is what I wrote him, after first showing it to three mature, trusted Christian friends, all of whom are teachers of the Word (two of them have taught for years at the seminary level).

## THE BIBLE ALONE IS THE ULTIMATE STANDARD OF TRUTH

Jesus clearly taught that the Bible is ultimate and only standard of truth and of right and wrong. Jesus said that we are to live by "every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4 = Deut. 8:3) and by no other words. In John 17:17 Jesus prays to his heavenly Father: "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." Jesus did not say: "Your word is true" (Gk. adj. *alethinós* or *alethes* – "true"). Instead he used the Greek noun *aletheia* ("truth") to say that God's Word is truth itself. Thus the Bible does not conform to a higher standard of truth but rather is truth itself, the very expression of the nature, character, and will of God because it is the very words of God (2 Tim. 3:15-17). What the Bible says, God says. So the Bible is the measuring stick by which every other claim to truthfulness is to be measured. Teachings that conform to Scripture are true; those that do not are false. Truth is what God says, not what men think (Col. 2:20-23).

Jesus condemned the Pharisees for teaching their own opinions and laws as if they were God's (Matt. 15:9). He called their teaching "heavy loads," which they tied up and put on men's shoulders (Matt. 23:4), thereby unduly burdening them. Those who accepted such extra-biblical laws were considered to be under the yoke of the Pharisee's teaching and thereby their disciples (Acts 15:5, 10). Those who try to impose such a yoke are said to "test God" (Acts 15:10). Therefore Jesus invites all people who labor under the yoke of extra-biblical rules and regulations to come to him so he can give them two things: rest and a new yoke—his way of discipleship—which is easy and light because the rest he provides is the supernatural, divine rest of intimacy with him that refreshes (cf. Jer. 6:16) and strengthens (Matt. 11:28-30) those who like Jesus approach God with meek and humble hearts. Jesus' words "I will give you rest" echo the words "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" in Exodus 33:14.

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So what we need to do is find out what the Bible teaches about divorce and remarriage. Are there biblical grounds for divorce? If so, what are they? Does the Bible permit divorced people to remarry? If so, under what conditions? These are the pertinent questions.

### ARE THERE BIBLICAL GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE?

According to Jesus, God's intention is for a marriage to last until, as we would say, "death do you part." Divorce is not part of God's original plan for marriages (Matt. 19:3-8). Jesus narrowed the Old Testament grounds for divorce from petty fault finding (Deut. 24:1-4) to a single condition (Matt. 5:31-32; 19:7-9).

According to Jesus, the one and the only legitimate ground for divorce is physical marital unfaithfulness, that is, any sort of physical sexual immorality, including but not restricted to adultery (Matt. 5:32). I say "physical" to distinguish what Jesus is saying from the sort of sexual immorality we can commit in our hearts. Sinning in our hearts is not a biblical ground for divorce. According to Jesus, for a man to divorce his wife for any reason other than sexual immorality (for example, incompatibility, "falling out of love") makes her an adulteress and her new husband an adulterer (Matt. 5:32; 19:9). The assumption behind these words is that the divorced wife will remarry and have sexual relations with her new husband, even though in God's eyes she is not legitimately divorced from her first husband.

Jesus gives what is called his famous "exception clause" here (Matt. 19:9). What is the meaning of *porneia* (NIV "marital unfaithfulness"; KJV "fornication")? Some relate it to incest. Others have argued that it refers to premarital unchastity: if a man discovers his bride is not a virgin, he may divorce her. Still others hold that it means "adultery" here, no more and no less. Yet in Greek the normal word for adultery is *moicheia*. Matthew has already used *moicheia* and *porneia* in the same context (15:19), suggesting some distinction between the words.

It must be admitted that the word *porneia* itself is very broad. Occasionally it can refer to a specific kind of sexual sin, but only because the specific sexual sin belongs to the larger category of sexual immorality. *Porneia* covers the entire range of sexual sins and should not be restricted unless the context requires it.

Consequently, what Jesus seems to be saying is that divorce and remarriage always involve evil; but as Moses permitted it because of the hardness of human hearts, so also does he—but now on the sole grounds of *porneia* (sexual sin of any sort). Admittedly, Jesus would appear to be abrogating something of the Mosaic prescription; for whatever the general "something indecent" refers to in Deut. 24:1, it can hardly refer to adultery, for which the prescribed punishment was death. But *porneia* includes adultery as a sexual sin, even if not restricted to it. Jesus' judgments on the matter are therefore both lighter (no capital punishment for adultery) and heavier (the sole exception being some form of sexual sin) than

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Moses. [From the *NIV Bible Commentary*, eds. Kenneth Barker and John Kohlenberger III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994)]

Thus Jesus permits but does not require divorce in the case of adultery. In the case of adultery, it is not wrong for the offended party to divorce the offending party (Matt. 5:31-32; 19:9). But forgiveness, reconciliation, and continuing love are a higher and better way to resolve the problem—a way that mirrors the Lord's own faithfulness to us despite the untold ways we are unfaithful to him (see 1 Cor. 13:4-8a).

In 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 Paul presents a second ground for divorce, one that has to do with mixed marriages. If an unbelieving spouse "leaves" (vs. 15, NIV) a believing spouse, the believer is "not bound in such circumstances" (vs. 15). What do "leaves" and "not bound" mean? "Leaves" refers to willful desertion or abandonment that cannot result in reconciliation because of the wishes of the deserting party. According to Paul, like adultery, this also breaks the marriage contract. In the case of desertion, the believer is not putting away the unbeliever, which would be a breach of Matt. 19:3-9, but is being deserted by the unbeliever. For the meaning of "not bound," see below under "Does the Bible Permit Divorced People to Remarry?"

But there will sometimes be relationships in which one partner or the other will not respond to love and will reject commitment to the other. In such cases, in which heart commitment to covenant love is consistently rejected, a legal divorce may follow. In such cases it is not the divorce that is the sin, but the sin that necessitates the divorce. God, then, has provided divorce for those whose marriages have already been destroyed by the hardness of a human heart....The inability to give and receive love—something that may be imposed by a loveless childhood home—is probably the greatest destroyer of marriages today. [From the article "Divorce and Remarriage" in *The Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* by Lawrence O. Richards (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991)]

### DOES THE BIBLE PERMIT DIVORCED PEOPLE TO REMARRY?

The Bible counsels younger widows "to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander" (1 Tim. 5:14). Thus in the case of widows (and one assumes by analogy, widowers), remarriage not only is permitted, it is encouraged.

Elsewhere regarding widows, Paul said: "It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am" (1 Cor. 7:8). He said this because there was a "present crisis" (1 Cor. 7:26)—perhaps a pending persecution and accompanying curtailment of freedom to witness—because he wanted to spare people suffering by encouraging singleness (1 Cor. 7:28), because "the time [for doing the Lord's work] is short" (1 Cor. 7:29), because the present form of the world is passing away (1 Cor. 7:31), and because he wanted them to be free from cares so they could focus on pleasing the Lord (1 Cor. 7:32). Unmarried people can concentrate with undivided interest on pleasing the Lord, rather than their marriage partner, and devote themselves to the Lord in body and spirit (1 Cor. 7:32-35). However in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul does not forbid widows to remarry. Although for the sake of doing God's work it is good for them not to remarry, Paul does not say it is wrong for them to remarry. In fact he says if their sexual urge is uncontrollable, they should marry, "for it is bet-

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ter to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Cor. 7:9). Both Jesus (Matt. 19:11-12) and Paul (1 Cor. 7:7) note that celibacy is a divine gift, not a requirement. Like celibacy, marriage also is a gift (1 Cor. 7:7). God gifts different individuals in different ways (Rom. 12:6).

If it is permissible for widows to remarry, what about divorcees? Some people have argued that Mark 10:11-12 (cf. Luke 16:18) forbids remarriage after divorce on the grounds that such remarriage is adultery: "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." Some have taken these verses to mean that unlike Matthew's quotation of Jesus in Matthew 19:9, Mark quotes Jesus in such a way as to prohibit remarriage after divorce for any reason. But Mark's reporting of Jesus words about divorce draws attention to something unique in the annals of Jewish teaching. Unlike the Old Testament or the Rabbis, Jesus taught that a man could commit adultery against his wife.

In rabbinic Judaism a woman by infidelity could commit adultery against her husband; and a man, by having sexual relations with another man's wife, could commit adultery against that other man. But a man could never commit adultery against his wife. Jesus, by putting the husband under the same moral obligation as the wife, raised the status and dignity of women. Furthermore, Jesus went on to recognize the right of a woman to divorce her husband (v. 12), a right not recognized in Judaism. Matthew, writing for Jews, omits v. 12; but Mark, writing for Romans, includes it." [Ibid]

Thus unlike Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:11-12 does not reflect on the legal situation created by adultery but on the abrogation of the Mosaic provision for divorce (Deut. 24:1ff) and the practice of divorce among Jews and Gentiles.

Some people have argued that Paul declares any remarriage after divorce to be adultery, and therefore wrong, citing Romans 7:3a as proof: "So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress." This is a misinterpretation of this text. To establish the pivot point for his analogy about Christians' relation to the law (Rom. 7:4ff.), Paul states that women in Jewish society were bound by law to remain married to their husbands, for women in this society had no legal right to divorce (Rom. 7:2). The only way out of a marriage for a woman in Jewish society was through the death of her husband (Rom. 7:2, 3b). Thus when Paul says: "If she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress" (Rom. 7:3a) he does not imply that a divorce has taken place, since the wife could not divorce her husband. He is simply saying that if a married Jewish wife marries another man while her undivorced husband is alive, she is committing adultery because she still is married to her first husband.

As we have seen, Jesus' words in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 permit divorce for the cause of adultery. For a husband to divorce his wife for any reason other than adultery makes her an adulteress should she remarry (*idem*), and vice versa should the wife divorce the husband for adultery (Mark 10:12). The clear inference is that to divorce because of adultery does not make the other partner an adulteress or adulterer should he or she remarry because the original marriage relation has legitimately been dissolved in God's eyes. In such a situation both the divorced husband and the divorced wife are free to remarry, regardless of who committed adultery. The same logic applies to Matthew 19:9.

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In 1 Corinthians 7:15a Paul says: "But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances." In this verse "leaves" means willfully deserts—abandons, and "not bound" means the partner who is left no longer is legally obligated to the marriage contract. Thus God sanctions divorce in cases where an unbelieving partner leaves the believer. And in these cases, Paul does not prohibit the unbeliever who has left or the believer who has been left from remarrying. And what God does not prohibit, he permits.

Additionally, the sharp contrast between 1 Cor. 7:12, where no divorce is allowed, and vs. 15 strongly suggests that in the case of desertion, the believing partner is free to remarry.

Finally, in 1 Cor. 7:27-28 Paul says (ASV): "Art thou bound unto a wife? Seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? Seek not a wife. But shouldest thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned." Paul's guiding principle in this section (1 Cor. 7:25-28) is stated in verse 26: "Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are." In other words, because of the situation Christians in Corinth were facing, Paul thought it best for them not to make any life-altering changes in their marriage relationships (see the second paragraph in this section for more detail). The NIV translation of 1 Cor. 7:27-28 does not preserve the double use of the Greek *luo*—"loosed"—as the ASV does. What Paul is encouraging, not commanding, is that if you are married ("bound," Gk. *deo*), do not seek to be "loosed" (Gk. *luo*), that is, divorced.

Conversely, he says if you are "loosed" (Gk. *luo*), that is, divorced, don't seek to be married. But "shouldest thou marry, thou hast not sinned." In other words, if you choose not to follow his suggestions, you have not sinned. The "thou" in this verse (vs. 28) clearly refers to divorced people. Paul is saying divorced people can remarry, presumably if they meet the biblical requirements for having a legitimate divorce (see above).

### SOME CONCLUSIONS

- (1) Death dissolves the marriage contract and leaves the remaining partner free to remarry.
- (2) Sexual immorality by one partner gives the other partner a legal right, but not an obligation, in God's eyes to divorce the unfaithful partner. Both partners then are free to remarry.
- (3) If an unbelieving marriage partner deserts the believing partner and refuses to be reconciled, the believing partner is free to divorce. Then both partners are free to remarry.
- (4) All Christians who have been properly divorced, that is, for one of the two biblical reasons, are free to remarry. Also see: Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1980): 86.
- (5) Something we have not discussed in this note but that nevertheless should be stated is that Christians are only to marry other Christians. A Christian is not to marry a non-Christian. 1 Cor. 7:39; cf. 2 Cor. 6:14ff.
- (6) God values love, mercy, and forgiveness in us far above the dissolution of relationships, especially marriage, and the legalistic exacting of punishment:
  - A. 1 Cor. 13:4-7: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. [5] It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of

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wrongs. [6] Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. [7] It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

- B. Matt. 9:13: "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."
- C. Matt. 18:21-22: "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times!'"
- D. James 2:12-13: "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, [13] because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!"
- E. Prov. 19:11: "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense."
- F. 1 Pet. 4:8: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."
- G. Col. 3:12-14: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. [13] Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. [14] And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

## BACK TO THE ORIGINAL REQUEST BILL JONES MADE TO YOU

If the forgoing analysis of what the Bible teaches about divorce and remarriage is correct, then for anyone to ask you to vow before God that you will remain faithful to Jane forever, no matter what she does, is asking more of you than God does. To ask more of someone than God does is a manifestation of legalism. Jesus came to set us free from many things—e.g., the power of sin (Rom. 6:6ff.), the fear of death (Heb. 2:15)—including legalism (Gal. 5:1ff.).

God has chosen to provide three conditions when people who have been married can remarry: (1) when one partner dies, (2) when divorce takes place because of sexual immorality, and (3) when an unbelieving partner definitively deserts the believing partner. If God has graciously chosen to allow us to remarry under these conditions, we should be thankful for his mercy, kindness, and grace and not subject ourselves to a legalistic yoke that creates a heavy burden few could bear.

It is not "more spiritual" to demand more of ourselves than God does; it is just proud, misguided legalism. It's exactly what the Pharisees did. A vow that would require you to remain chaste, celibate, and unmarried should Jane divorce you is a false asceticism; and asceticism is a variety of legalism. Paul vehemently attacked false asceticism in Colossians 2:20-23, which I commend you to read. Any form of legalism involves putting confidence in our flesh (Phil. 3:3) and thereby making ourselves enemies of the cross (Phil. 3:18). God resists pride in any and every form, but he gives grace to the humble and exalts them in due time (1 Pet. 5:5-7; cf. Prov. 16:5; Isa. 57:15; 66:1-2). In your situation, what God greatly values is humbling yourself, throw-

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ing yourself completely on his mercy and grace, and casting all your anxiety on him (1 Pet. 5:5-7), not making a heaven-shaking vow.

We can never right a wrong or prevent a sin by taking an oath. Only God can bring good from evil (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28) and protect us in the future (John 17:11-12, 15; 2 Thess. 3:3). We need to place our trust in God's ability to change us, not in our ability to make commitments. Every day we should pray that God will perfect that good work he began in us (Phil. 1:6) and conform us to the image of Jesus (Gal. 4:19; Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18), realizing that it is God who personally and mysteriously and supernaturally is at work in our hearts, souls, and minds, wooing us to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:13) because of his mighty love for us that "surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3:19).

God is not impressed with nor does he reward us according to macho spiritual acts. God is impressed with brokenness, humility, and meekness (Isa. 57:15; 66:1-2), and he freely and graciously bestows his blessings on us—"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). Our mighty spiritual deeds and awesome vows will never impress an omnipotent God who spoke the worlds into being (Gen. 1:1ff.; Ps. 33:6). 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 clearly proves that. No matter how earth shaking the spiritual feat we accomplish, if we do it without loving the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind and our neighbor as ourselves, then God regards us as nothing more than an irritating, ear-splitting, booming gong and clashing cymbal (1 Cor. 13:1). In fact he regards us as less than that; he regards such people as nothing (1 Cor. 13:2, 3). What impresses God, what pleases God, what gets God's attention, and what gets his blessing and anointing presence is being loving, compassionate, kind, humble, meek, gentle, patient, merciful, and forgiving (Col. 3:12ff.).