

TILL DEATH DO US PART

WHAT JESUS TEACHES ABOUT DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE

By Greg Sidders

There are very few topics that are more controversial in the church than that of divorce. One of the reasons that is true is because divorce has wounded more people per square inch than almost any other type of relational tragedy. Statistics say that more than half of all marriages will end in divorce—and for every person who divorces, there is a whole network of family and friends that is impacted by that divorce. I would venture to say that there are very few people left in our society who have not in some way been scarred by the shrapnel of someone's divorce. Bitterness or guilt or strife or shame or despair due to the ending of a marriage have touched almost all of us in some way, no matter what our age.

I must say that this is a subject I approach with fear and trembling—not the fear of offending people, but the fear of bruising people. I don't want to pour salt on the open wounds of those who have already experienced more than their fair share of pain due to a divorce.

Unfortunately, I don't have the luxury of speaking to you one-on-one and telling you what I believe Jesus would say to you as an individual about this subject, based on your life experiences. Instead I have the task of addressing a diverse group of readers that contains a mix of single people, married people, divorced people, and remarried people. But in that sense I am addressing a group that is really not all that much different than the one Jesus faced when He gave His Sermon on the Mount. As Jesus looked out at the crowd gathered on the mountain, He saw many people who had experienced what you have experienced in the area of divorce. He knew their hearts; He knew their soft spots. He understood the pain of those who had gone through a divorce.

He was aware of the loyalty that existed between those who had been divorced and others who loved them.

Knowing what He knew about every individual in that audience, how did Jesus address the issue of divorce?

Like a bull in a china shop.

At least on this occasion, He didn't pull any punches. Look at His straightforward words in Matthew 5:

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'"

—Matthew 5:31

Jesus begins by recognizing the current divorce law. Essentially the law said: "Men, if you're going to leave your wife, give her the legal right to remarry; don't leave her in limbo." It was a law that was based loosely on an Old Testament passage, Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which does not command divorce but tells people what to do in light of the fact that divorce was happening.

But then Jesus does what He did with several other hot topics; He sets the record straight about how God views divorce. And from the perspective of perfection, the issue is pretty black and white.

"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

Jesus states the truth very strongly, and it all points to one basic fact: Marriage, in God's eyes, is

for life, and any violation of that lifelong covenant is strictly forbidden.

The biblical word for extramarital sex—that is, sex with someone other than your spouse—is “adultery”. And Jesus says, “Sex with a second spouse is adultery against the first spouse, even if you’re not legally married to that person anymore. The piece of paper does not nullify the covenant you made to be faithful to your first spouse as long as you both shall live, till death do you part.”

In this one verse Jesus points His accusing finger at everybody who is involved in breaking that covenant.

First, He points to the one initiating the divorce, and He says, “You have made your spouse commit adultery.” How? By putting her in a position of almost irresistible temptation—the temptation to marry someone else. That remarriage is adultery. And Jesus says—to men, although it applies equally to women—“If you divorce your wife, and then she remarries—and she probably will—then God will hold you responsible for her sin of adultery, because you made her do it!”

It’s striking to me that Jesus would place so much blame on the one person in this equation who doesn’t commit adultery. The reason He does that is because He is very sensitive to the intense need that people feel, once they have been married, to be married again. That desire is so strong, Jesus implies, that most people will give in to it. And when they do, Jesus points to the spouse who initiated the divorce, and He says, “I hold you responsible for your partner’s sin.”

The only exception to this truth, Jesus says, is the situation in which you divorce your spouse after they have already committed serious sexual sin. In the New International Version, it’s called “marital unfaithfulness”. In the New American Standard Bible, it’s translated “unchastity”. The King James calls it “fornication”. The word that Jesus uses is the Greek word *porneia*; it’s the word from which we get the word “pornography”. And it refers to a wide variety of serious sexual sins, including extramarital sex, homosexuality, bestiality and incest. Basically Jesus says, “If you can’t stomach

remaining in a relationship with a spouse who has committed gross sexual sin, I will not hold you responsible for their adultery; they are already an adulterer.”

Notice that Jesus does not command or even encourage divorce when sexual sin is discovered. In fact, if you look at the Old Testament book of Hosea, a strong case can be made for doing everything possible to save the marriage even after fornication has been committed. But Jesus says, “I know how deeply that kind of sin hurts. If you divorce because of your partner’s sexual sin, they alone will be responsible for the adultery that will occur when they remarry.”

Now, obviously the divorced person who remarries is also guilty; Jesus calls her an adulteress. And then Jesus points to the person who marries a divorcee, and He says, “You too are committing adultery.”

Here’s the bottom line:

Remarriage = Adultery

Why? Because it is a violation of the lifelong covenant made at the outset of the original marriage. And when remarriage occurs, everyone involved is guilty—the one who initiated the divorce, and both partners in the remarriage. The only exception is that, if the one divorced was divorced because of serious sexual sin, the original partner is not guilty. As painful as it may be to hear that, it is what Jesus clearly teaches.

He says essentially the same thing in two other places:

Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

“What did Moses command you?” he replied.

They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.”

“It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Jesus replied. “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘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."

When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, "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 10:2-12

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

—Luke 16:18

According to both of these statements by Jesus, anyone who is involved in a remarriage while the original spouse is still alive commits adultery.

Let me show you one more New Testament passage which addresses the same issue. These words come from the pen of the apostle Paul:

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

Notice whom Paul identifies as the source of his teaching: Jesus! He is claiming to be repeating the teaching already given by Christ. That teaching is that God's Plan A is for no separation to occur between a husband and wife. But if a separation should occur, God's will is for both partners to either remain unmarried or to be reconciled with one another.

That is the general teaching of Scripture on divorce and remarriage. But there are two types of extenuating circumstances in which

the rules change. We have already seen one in the Gospel of Matthew. When one's divorce occurs because of the sexual immorality of his/her spouse, divorce is permitted.

The other exception is what is often called "desertion by an unbeliever". It is found in 1 Corinthians 7.

If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.... But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.

—1 Corinthians 7:12-13, 15

Paul says that you can't use the unequal yoke argument to get out of a marriage. Even if you violated God's will by marrying a non-Christian, or you became a Christian after you were married and your partner is still a non-Christian, you are still just as married in God's eyes as you would be if both of you were believers. When it comes to the marriage bond, the glue is permanent no matter what a person's spiritual condition.

By the way, that also means that if you were divorced as a non-Christian, nothing changed how God viewed your marriage when you became a believer. Some people think that, when it comes to marriage, they get a fresh start after they are saved. That is not true. The original covenant of marriage is still binding.

However, if a non-Christian spouse refused to stay in the marriage, the Christian spouse "is not bound in such circumstances". What does Paul mean by that? Is he saying, "You are not legally bound to that marriage anymore, and you are therefore free to remarry", or is he saying, "You are not bound to that marriage in the sense that you have to fight to prevent a divorce so as not to disobey God"? Many people believe that Paul is talking about legal status—that he is saying, "In this case, God frees you from your marital obligations

and you are free to marry someone else.” Let me tell you three reasons why I struggle with that interpretation.

First, I don’t think it fits the context. Right before these words, Paul says: “Let the unbeliever leave.” Right after these words, he says: “God has called us to live in peace.” I think he is talking about fighting to save the marriage, and he is saying, “You’re not obligated to do that. Live in peace with that person.”

Second, it doesn’t fit what Paul said in the immediately preceding verse:

...If [a wife] does [separate from her husband], she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband.

—1 Corinthians 7:11

Third, it doesn’t mesh with the teaching of Jesus. In both Mark 10 and Luke 16, Jesus makes it very clear that to divorce someone and then to remarry someone else is adultery.

In this passage, I believe Paul is simply saying that a believer who is divorced by an unbeliever does not need to worry that God will frown on them for that divorce. They can let go of that marriage with a clear conscience.

There is one more very important passage that deals with the other biblical cause for divorce and perhaps remarriage. In Matthew 19, we find Matthew’s account of the same interchange that Mark wrote about in the 10th chapter of his gospel.

Some Pharisees came to [Jesus] to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

“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.”

“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.”

—Matthew 19:3-8

Same question, same response by Jesus. But look carefully at the following verse:

I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

—Matthew 19:9

The words sound almost the same as in the Gospel of Mark—and they are, except for that phrase “*except for marital unfaithfulness.*” In Mark 10:11-12, Jesus simply states that divorce plus remarriage equals adultery. But here that extra little phrase is stuck right between divorce and remarriage. And, because of that, it could mean one of two things.

- It could mean that both divorce *and* remarriage are allowable in the case of serious sexual sin; in other words, the exception may apply to both the previous statement about divorce and the following statement about remarriage. We would paraphrase the idea like this: *I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery—unless that person divorces and remarries due to serious sexual sin.*
- The second possibility is that the exception applies only to the statement about divorce. In this case we could paraphrase the statement this way: *Divorce for any reason except serious sexual sin is forbidden, and remarriage after any divorce is adultery.*

Which interpretation is correct? I honestly don’t know. This one passage of Scripture has been the toughest verse in the Bible for me to interpret.

And it seems that the more I study it, the more tentative I become in my conclusions.

My best attempt at understanding Jesus' words is that He is *not* giving any allowance for remarriage in this verse. He is saying that divorce is allowable for serious sexual sin—as He said earlier in the Sermon on the Mount—but remarriage is not allowable. What sways me toward this viewpoint is my attempt to harmonize this passage with all the other passages we have looked at. One of the most basic rules of interpreting the Bible is to compare Scripture with Scripture. So let's do that:

- Mark 10:11-12: *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.* Notice that when divorce and remarriage are discussed together, Jesus gives no exception.
- Luke 16:18: *Anyone—literally, everyone—who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.* Notice that there is no mention of any exceptions to this principle.
- 1 Corinthians 7:10-11: *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.* Here Paul addresses the specific question of remarriage after divorce, and he says the divorcee must remain unmarried. He gives no exceptions to that rule, and he says he is repeating the teaching of Jesus.
- Matthew 5:32: *I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.* Here Jesus allows for divorce due to sexual sin, but when He goes on to talk about remarriage, He says that anyone who marries a divorcee commits adultery.

It is my desire to put all the pieces of Scripture together that leads me to believe that all remarriage is adultery. All sexual unions outside of the original marriage relationship are adulterous, because the first time we leave our father and mother and are united to our partner, the two become one flesh. We have entered into a covenant. And it is not a covenant that we are permitted to break—even if our partner does.

In Ephesians 5 Paul says that the marriage relationship is to be patterned after our relationship with Christ. One of the implications of that model is that, in the same way that Jesus Christ remains faithful even if we are faithless (2 Timothy 2:13), God calls us to remain faithful even if our partner is faithless.

That's the ideal. That's the standard. That's God's will.

Am I saying that everyone who is remarried is guilty of adultery? I would hesitate to say that to those who were divorced due to their partner's sexual sin or because an unbelieving spouse deserted them, but in every other case I can say with certainty, that, yes, those who have remarried are guilty of adultery.

And so is every person who has ever lusted after someone other than their spouse! That is precisely what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount right before discussing the issue of divorce and remarriage.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

—Matthew 5:27-30

One thing that we cannot forget is that, by labeling remarriage as adultery—a sin punishable by eternal separation from God in hell—Jesus is simply throwing remarried people into the same category as everyone who has ever been angry (Matthew 5:22) or ever lusted with their eyes (Matthew 5:29) or ever told a lie (Matthew 5:37) or ever been less than perfect (Matthew 5:48). The biggest chunk of Matthew 5 is intended by Jesus to create in us a poverty of spirit and a longing for mercy. If you feel you have been nailed by these teachings of Jesus, welcome to the club. He nails every one of us. We all fall short of God's perfect will. And if you have been divorced for the wrong reasons, or remarried, yes, you are a sinner—but you are no more a sinner than anyone else.

Matthew 5 tells us what we deserve because of our sin. We deserve hell. But there's another chapter that tells us how Jesus deals with our sin. It's John chapter 8:

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"

They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

—John 8:3-11

If you have sinned in this area of your life, Jesus says this to you:

- "I do not condemn you. You're forgiven. You're clean. Pure. Holy. Spotless."
- "Do what's right from now on. Forget the past—after all, I have—and do what you know is right from here on out." Are you in another marriage relationship? Make that relationship the very best it can be.

To those who are divorced and not yet remarried, Jesus says the same thing: "I don't condemn you for your past. I only expect you to do what is right from now on." And what is that? Look again at 1 Corinthians 7:11:

...If [a wife] does [separate from her husband], she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband.

That's God's word to both divorced men and divorced women. Is there any possibility of reconciliation? If your ex is not remarried, there is that possibility. And if reconciliation is impossible, you are instructed by Paul to remain unmarried.

I know that seems terribly unfair. Perhaps you're thinking: "The person who has already remarried is off the hook, but I have to stay single? How about if I get married in Vegas tonight and start doing what is right tomorrow?"

My best answer to that is to challenge you to believe what the word of God says about being single. If you were to say to Paul, "You're sentencing me to a lifetime of loneliness and misery!", he would say, "What are you talking about? Marriage can't hold a candle to singleness." This tone is weaved throughout 1 Corinthians 7, but he gets right to the point in verses 32-35:

I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried

woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

The Scriptures say that God is not relegating you to a sub-satisfying existence. He is calling you to an adventure of faith that will lead you to satisfaction you cannot now imagine. I know that might be tough to swallow, but it is the truth.

How does this truth about divorce and remarriage apply to those who are married? It's very simple: Divorce is not an option. Erase the word from your vocabulary. Erase the temptation from your mind. God says that you are in your marriage for life. When you said, "Till death do us part," He took those words as a vow that you are allowed to break for only one reason—serious sexual sin on the part of your spouse. Even then, the ideal, the goal, is to remain faithful to your partner. God hates divorce with a passion. So if divorce ever becomes a live option in your mind, it's at that point that you must get help. You must. You made a covenant, not just with your partner but with God.

Finally, let me apply these truths to those who are single. It is critically important that you grasp the sobering reality that God is going to give you one shot at marriage. Despite what you have seen in the culture you have grown up in, God says marriage #1 is for life. So please be very careful about whom you choose. Keep yourself pure so that you can think straight, and choose a godly person who not only loves you, but loves God even more—so much so that you know he or she will

obey Him at all costs. Make sure you marry someone who, like you, doesn't have the word "divorce" in his or her vocabulary.

I must tell you that studying this subject was an agonizing experience for me. I found myself wrestling and writhing as my heart bounced back and forth from an intense desire to teach the word of God without compromise and at the same time a passionate sensitivity to the divorced people who have to live with what this word says. That tension tears me up inside.

It was in the midst of this tension that it struck me: What I feel as I wrestle with this issue is exactly what God feels—with even greater intensity. When you look at His word, you see Him at times holding up the highest standard, and at other times wrapping his arms around those who fail to measure up to that standard. You see the violent clashing in His heart between His holiness and His compassion. His hatred of sin is more intense than we can imagine, but His love for sinners is even more intense.

That's what the cross is all about. When Jesus hung there, He did so because He loves us—and when He died, He did so as our substitute. We may think Him unloving for saying what He said about divorce and remarriage, but when you realize that every ounce of condemnation He put on us with His words came back to haunt Him on the cross—and when you realize that He subjected Himself to that agony voluntarily, you begin to grasp what Jesus is really like. He loves us. And whatever He calls us to do flows from that same love that sent Him to the cross. He is not out to ruin our lives, but to give us life that is more fulfilling than we can imagine. And that life is waiting for every one who does what is right, from this point on. ●