
Divorce and Remarriage

Are there any circumstances where the Bible permits a divorced Christian to remarry?

1.0 Principles of Interpretation

Before diving into the relevant passages in scripture, it is first necessary to lay out some hermeneutic principles that contrast with the popular dispensational system which traditionally “divides” scripture in ways that are inconsistent with scripture. Craig L. Blomberg describes this as “an older, rapidly vanishing breed of dispensationalism which renders Matthew’s teaching as irrelevant for Christians since it was addressed to Jews under the Law.”¹

1.1 Morality Does Not Change

What God regards as morally right and wrong does not change with different dispensations. This is first and foremost because God himself does not change:

23:19 God is not a man, that he should lie,
nor a human being, that he should change his mind.
Has he said, and will he not do it?
Or has he spoken, and will he not make it happen? [Numbers 23:19²]

1:17 All generous giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or the slightest hint of change. [James 1:17]

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1. Craig L. Blomberg. “Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, And Celibacy: An Exegesis Of Matthew 19:3–12.” *Trinity Journal Volume 11* (1990). Page 190.
 2. All scripture quotations are from NET unless otherwise noted.

^{3:6}“Since, I, the LORD, do not go back on my promises, you, sons of Jacob, have not perished. [Malachi 3:6]

^{13:8}Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever! [Hebrews 13:8]

Jesus himself was quite explicit about the fact that he did not come to eliminate any previously revealed law, saying:

^{5:17}“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish these things but to fulfill them. ^{5:18}I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth pass away not the smallest letter or stroke of a letter will pass from the law until everything takes place. ^{5:19}So anyone who breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever obeys them and teaches others to do so will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ^{5:20}For I tell you, unless your righteousness goes beyond that of the experts in the law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. [Matthew 5:17-20]

No scripture is obsolete. Paul wrote:

^{3:16}Every scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ^{3:17}that the person dedicated to God may be capable and equipped for every good work. [2 Timothy 3:16-17]

1.2 Context is Vital

An isolated short saying without immediate context is more susceptible to misinterpretation than a longer one embedded in a more extended narrative. We must therefore start with the passages that are easier to interpret. The harder to interpret passages must then be understood in light of the easier ones.

In addition to the immediate textual context as well as the context of the whole of scripture, we must also consider the historical and cultural context being spoken to, including the use of non-literal language such as figures of speech and symbolism appropriate to that context.

2.0 Matthew 19:3-12

2.1 Rabbinic Debate

^{19:3} Then some Pharisees came to him in order to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful to divorce a wife for any cause?” [Matthew 19:3]

The Mishnah and the Talmud preserve a record of the dispute within Phariseeism regarding what the legitimate reasons for divorce are. There were two schools of interpretation following two rabbis of the late first century BC¹. The school of Shammai took a very conservative view, allowing divorce only for unchastity, while the school of

Hillel was very liberal, allowing divorce for trivial, even silly reasons. The Mishnah says:

- 9:10** A The House of Shammai say, “A man should divorce his wife only because he has found grounds for it in unchastity,
B “since it is said, *Because he has found in her indecency in anything* (Dt. 24:1).”
C And the House of Hillel say, “Even if she spoiled his dish,
D “since it is said, *Because he has found in her indecency in anything*.
E R. Aqiba says, “Even if he found someone else prettier than she,
F “since it is said, *And it shall be if she find no favor in his eyes* (Dt. 24:1).”¹
[m. Git. 9:10]

Their differences turn on the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which will be discussed in more detail below. The Pharisees are asking Jesus which side of the debate he falls on.

2.2 Jesus Cites Creation

^{19:4} He answered, “Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator *made them male and female*, ^{19:5} and said, ‘*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and will be united with his wife, and the two will become one flesh*’? ^{19:6} So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” [Matthew 19:4-6]

Jesus cites Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, reaching back to creation itself rather than the law of Moses to say people shouldn’t be divorcing at all. “Let no one separate” is a command. This does not mean that such a separation is an impossibility.

By citing the teaching of the Creation events, Jesus is demonstrating that his teaching on the subject is not innovative. His teaching regarding morality is the same as morality was from the beginning of creation. Malachi 2:16 confirms this, saying that God hates divorce.

2.3 Hard Hearts

^{19:7} They said to him, “Why then did Moses command us *to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her*?” ^{19:8} Jesus said to them, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because of your hard hearts, but from the beginning it was not this way. [Matthew 19:7-8]

So, if God commands that divorce not happen and hates it, how is it that Moses gave a command that divorce could proceed with the giving of a “certificate of dismissal?” The passage cited is Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

1. “Shammai, House of.” *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. Doubleday. 1996.

1. m. Git. 9:10 in Neusner, Jacob. *The Mishnah : A New Translation*. Yale University Press, 1988.

24:1 If a man marries a woman and she does not please him because he has found something offensive in her, then he may draw up a divorce document, give it to her, and evict her from his house. **24:2** When she has left him she may go and become someone else's wife. **24:3** If the second husband rejects her and then divorces her, gives her the papers, and evicts her from his house, or if the second husband who married her dies, **24:4** her first husband who divorced her is not permitted to remarry her after she has become ritually impure, for that is offensive to the LORD. You must not bring guilt on the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance. [Deuteronomy 24:1-4]

If two faithful Christians are married to each other then, in obedience, they will not divorce. But the reality is that everyone is a sinner with a hardened heart, including everyone in the church. The Deuteronomy passage presumes a situation where the wife is at fault; there is "something offensive" as the NET puts it. The literal Hebrew is an enigmatic phrase "nakedness of the word/thing/happening."¹ While the gist of it, that it is something bad, is obvious, the exact meaning is not clear. The houses of Shammai and Hillel debated about how bad it is. The Septuagint, the Greek translation made a couple of centuries before Christ, translates it as "a shameful event."²

Before we proceed to look at how Jesus understood to be the nature of the wife's offense, which for Christians must be the authoritative interpretation, it is worth noting that the focus of the Deuteronomy passage is not on the divorce procedure itself. Rather, it is the closing of a loophole. If one could divorce and remarry without limits, then one could effectively freely have sex with multiple partners by simply divorcing and remarrying prostitutes as often as one wished. Technically one would be having sex within marriage, but it would make a mockery of the institution. So once you divorce one wife and marry someone else, you aren't allowed to remarry the first wife after a second divorce. But permission to remarry is presupposed.

2.4 The Exception Clause

19:9 Now I say to you that whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another commits adultery." [Matthew 19:9]

Jesus makes it clear that to divorce an innocent wife and marry another is adultery. The exception that he draws, her "immorality," indicates however that this does not apply when she is not innocent³. The Greek word⁴ certainly would include adultery (although in theory adultery wouldn't technically be grounds for divorce since adultery carried the death penalty in Leviticus 20:10!), the word has a broader meaning as we encounter it along side adultery in lists of sins. We should understand this word as Jesus' interpretation of the obscure idiom in Deuteronomy 24:1. Since Paul allows divorce in the case

1. עֲרוּת דְּבָר

2. ἄσχημον πᾶγμα

3. Some interpreters have tried to dismiss the exception clause to make the prohibition on remarriage absolute, but the arguments for this don't stand up to scrutiny, consisting mostly of exegetical gymnastics.

4. πορνεία

of unbelieving spouse abandoning the marriage, we should probably understand the Greek word to indicate any sinful violation of the sexual union of man and wife.¹

The point is, divorce always involves sin. There is no such thing as a “no fault” divorce. To simply send an innocent wife away for the purpose of marrying another woman is the same as cheating on her within marriage. It is adultery. But if the wife has violated the sexual union of the marriage, then verse 9’s characterization of the man’s remarriage does not apply as that situation comes under the exception. Other scriptures make it clear that this applies when the genders reversed as well, as we’ll see below.

2.5 The Disciples Upset

19:10 The disciples said to him, “If this is the case of a husband with a wife, it is better not to marry!” **19:11** He said to them, “Not everyone can accept this statement, except those to whom it has been given. [Matthew 19:10-11]

Jesus came down on the side of the conservative Shammai rather than the liberal Hillel. The disciples were disappointed with this, and much like a pouting child, said then “it is better not to marry.”

Jesus’ reply is difficult because it is not clear from a grammatical basis which statement (his own or the disciples’ that he refers to by “this statement.” However, to say, in effect, “not everyone can accept the law” (that is, referring to Jesus’ statement) seems out of place or off-topic for the conversation and contrary to Jesus’ attitude to the law (Matthew 5:17-20 quoted above). He would in effect be saying “obey the law if it works for you!”

Instead, Jesus seems to be referring to the disciple’s statement saying with a touch of irony “yeah, but I don’t think most people would agree with you, unless that’s their calling.” Read this way, one can almost hear the chuckles of those standing near by.

2.6 Eunuchs

19:12 For there are some eunuchs who were that way from birth, and some who were made eunuchs by others, and some who became eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who is able to accept this should accept it.” [Matthew 19:12]

Keeping with the humor of the exchange in verses 10-11, Jesus refers to single people as eunuchs in this verse. There is nothing in the overall context to make one think that Jesus is referring to literally castrated men. Rather, he is using hyperbole (see the discussion of Jesus’ use of hyperbole below). People may be single for various reasons, even for the sake of the kingdom. Paul noted that the work of pleasing a wife distracts a man from “the things of the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:32-34). But singleness is not the calling of most people.

1. It is difficult to imagine that spousal abuse wouldn’t come under this umbrella as well.

3.0 Mark 10:1-12 and Luke 16:18

3.1 The Synoptic Problem

TABLE 1.

Synoptic Parallels between Matthew 19 and Mark 10¹

Matthew 19

Questions About Divorce

19:1 Now when Jesus finished these sayings, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan River. **19:2** Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

19:3 Then some Pharisees came to him in order to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful to divorce a wife **for any cause?**”

19:4 **He answered, “Have you not read that** from the beginning the Creator *made them male and female*, **19:5** and said, ‘*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and will be united with his wife, and the two will become one flesh*’? **19:6** So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

19:7 They said to him, “Why then did Moses command us *to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?*”

19:8 Jesus said to them, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because of your hard hearts, **but from the beginning it was not this way.**”

Mark 10

Divorce

10:1 Then Jesus left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan River. Again crowds gathered to him, and again, as was his custom, he taught them.

10:2 Then some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

10:3 He answered them, “What did Moses command you?”

10:4 They said, “Moses permitted a man *to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.*”

10:5 But Jesus said to them, “He wrote this commandment for you because of your hard hearts.

10:6 But from the beginning of creation *he made them male and female*. **10:7** *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother,* **10:8** *and the two will become one flesh.* So they are no longer two, but one flesh. **10:9** Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

TABLE 1.

Synoptic Parallels between Matthew 19 and Mark 10¹

Matthew 19

19:9 Now I say to you that whoever divorces his wife, **except for immorality**, and marries another commits adultery.”

19:10 The disciples said to him, “If this is the case of a husband with a wife, it is better not to marry!”

19:11 He said to them, “Not everyone can accept this statement, except those to whom it has been given.

19:12 For there are some eunuchs who were that way from birth, and some who were made eunuchs by others, and some who became eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who is able to accept this should accept it.”

Mark 10

10:10 In the house once again, the disciples asked him about this.

10:11 So he told them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her.

10:12 And if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

1. Red text highlights some phrases in Matthew that are not in Luke, and colored backgrounds flag differences in order.

Mark’s account in chapter 10 parallels Matthew’s chapter 19, but there are some significant differences. Most scholars believe that Matthew’s gospel uses Mark’s as a source.¹ Almost all of Mark’s gospel is contained within Matthew’s (and Luke’s). But where there is a parallel, Matthew’s version is usually a shortened version of Mark’s, indicating that he systematically condenses Mark’s version. Scholars that believe Matthew is the source of Mark generally assume that Mark is systematically inventing additional details rather than reporting actual events.

Here, Matthew’s gospel is the one that contains additional details. Unless Matthew is making up these details from whole cloth, then he must also have an additional source for this account. Over the course of Jesus’ career, it seems unlikely that he would only speak about divorce a single occasion. Matthew may be pulling in details from another account of the same incident (possibly even his own memories) or of one of those different incidents.

1. D.A. Carson. “Matthew” in Frank E. Gaebelein. The Expositors Bible Commentary. Zondervan, 1984. Pages 11-17.

The exact literary history of these two passages isn't actually all that important for the purposes of interpretation (though it is for apologetics). The important thing to remember hermeneutically from this is that both authors are being selective of the details they are including. The Gospel of John acknowledges this:

21:25 There are many other things that Jesus did. If every one of them were written down, I suppose the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. [John 21:25]

3.2 The Question

10:2 Then some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" [Mark 10:2]

Mark's version of the question omits the "for any cause" phrase. Mark is generally believed to be writing for a Gentile audience.

Mark explains Jewish customs that would be unfamiliar to Gentile readers (7:2–4; 15:42); he translates Aramaic words (3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 15:22); he uses Latinisms and Latin loan words, a practice that in itself is no evidence of Gentile readership, but the large number of them (especially in comparison with Matthew and Luke) seems to suggest such readership; he reveals a special interest in persecution and martyrdom (8:34–38; 13:9–13), subjects particularly relevant to Roman Christians;¹

Tradition is that Mark wrote it in Rome for the Romans based on Peter's teaching². Matthew, in contrast, is much more Jewish in character. Since pagans had a much more lax attitude towards sexual morality and marriage than the Jews, Mark may be selectively focusing on what Jesus said about the divine intent for marriage being a lifelong commitment.

Divorce was common in the Roman world (Carcopino, 95–100), and under Roman law, children normally remained with their fathers (Pomeroy, 158, 169). Although the early republic probably granted divorces only under the most extreme circumstances (Plutarch *Rom.* 22.3), by the first century some writers said that only a coward would fail to divorce a troublesome wife (Plutarch *Virtue and Vice* 2, Mor. 100E). Probably as late as the middle republic women could still not divorce their husbands (McDonnell), but by the imperial period a Roman woman could get a divorce as easily as her husband could (Verner, 40). Either party could unilaterally terminate a marriage; because Roman law deemed private consent essential to the marriage union, it accepted lack of mutual consent in favor of continuing the marriage as sufficient grounds to dissolve it (O'Rourke, 181). Such divorces involved no stigma; dying or divorcing husbands sometimes even arranged new marriages for their ex-wives (Pomeroy, 64).³

1. Frank E. Gaebelien, D. A. Carson, Walter W. Wessel and Walter L. Liefeld, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984). p. 609.

2. p. 605

3. "Adultery, Divorce." in Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

3.3 The Discussion Begins

^{10:3} He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” ^{10:4} They said, “Moses permitted a man *to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce* her.” ^{10:5} But Jesus said to them, “He wrote this commandment for you because of your hard hearts. [Mark 10:3-5]

Matthew omits verse 3 and places this part of the conversation after Jesus’ Genesis appeal. The omission is typical of Matthew’s writing a shorter version of what he finds in Mark. However he also adds some phrases not in Mark in this pericope. He likely had another version before him in addition to Mark’s.

Mark also has the Pharisees say “Moses permitted” rather than Matthew’s “Moses commanded.” The later is more likely what they literally said, but is subject to misinterpretation that Moses required divorce (as even some rabbi’s also interpreted it). Mark appears to have paraphrased in order to avoid this misinterpretation and convey the correct contextual meaning to his readers..

See the discussion on Matthew 19:8 above about hard hearts.

3.4 Jesus’ Appeal to Genesis

^{10:6} But from the beginning of creation *he made them male and female.* ^{10:7} *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother,* ^{10:8} *and the two will become one flesh.* So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ^{10:9} Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” [Mark 10:6-9]

See the discussion above on Matthew 19:4-6.

3.5 The Divorce and Remarriage Pronouncement

^{10:10} In the house once again, the disciples asked him about this. ^{10:11} So he told them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. [Mark 10:10-11]

Matthew’s version of these events differs in two ways. First, he gives no indication that the discussion has moved inside to be between Jesus and his disciples. This is typical of his giving a condensed version of the events. More importantly, Matthew includes the exception clause while Mark does not.

So, does Mark’s apparent global prohibition of remarriage contradict Matthew’s version of the saying? Context is important here. Consider 1 Corinthians 7:2, where Paul says, “each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband” [ESV]. If taken at face value and out of context, that would seem to be a command for every man and woman to be married. But from the context we know Paul is giving this as general advice and not as a universal command.

Jesus is not legislating a law code in the context in Mark’s gospel (and neither is Mark in collecting Jesus’ sayings). Further, Mark is writing for a Gentile audience for whom

divorce and remarriage at will was a normal every day part of the culture. If the point he is trying to convey to his audience is the idea that treating marriage as a temporary arrangement is not moral, then mentioning the legitimate exception would distract from this point. Omitting the exception is not a denial of it; it just isn't relevant to the general principle he wishes to convey.

In general, one must be careful about absolute or universal language ("all," "whoever," "any," *etc.*). It often carries with it implicit exceptions in the language of ordinary discussion. For example, the law says to not kill or lie, but it also condones the death penalty for certain crimes and Rahab is praised for her deception to protect the lives of the spies Joshua sent into Jericho.

3.6 The Reciprocal Pronouncement

10:12 And if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."
[Mark 10:12]

Old Testament sexual laws are almost always cast in terms of the male. It is implicit that they apply to the female too. Jewish law and practice of the first century, however, generally didn't allow the woman to divorce her husband. Thus some interpreters assume verse 12 here is Mark's parenthetical interpretation for his Gentile audience, for whom female-initiated divorce was legal. While possible, there was at least one well known divorce by a woman in a Jewish milieu, that of Herodias from Philip in order to marry his brother Herod that ultimately occasioned the beheading of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-12). So it is not inconceivable that Jesus would have said this himself.

4.0 Luke 16:18

16:18 "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery, and the one who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery. [Luke 16:18]

Like Mark, Luke has a version of a divorce and remarriage saying that excludes the exception clause. There is no narrative context to give us a clue why. However, the preceding saying in Luke says "it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tiny stroke of a letter in the law to become void." It is therefore inconceivable that Luke intends to say that Jesus is repudiating the exception clause from Deuteronomy. Instead we should see the saying as focusing on a general principle while leaving the exception(s) unstated.

5.0 Hyperbole in the Sermon on the Mount

Before moving on to Matthew 5:31-32, it is necessary to examine an aspect of its context. Hyperbole is "a figure of speech in which exceptional exaggeration is deliberately used for emphasis rather than deception."¹ An example we've already seen is Matthew

1. *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed. Columbia University Press: 2000.

19:12. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus employs this technique in a number of sayings. We will survey several of these now (the hyperboles are highlighted with red).

5.1 Leaving Your Gift (Matthew 5:23-24)

^{5:22} But I say to you that anyone who is angry with a brother will be subjected to judgment. And whoever insults a brother will be brought before the council, and whoever says ‘Fool’ will be sent to fiery hell. ^{5:23} So then, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ^{5:24} **leave your gift there in front of the altar**. First go and be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your gift. [Matthew 5:23-24]

It would hardly be practical for petitioners to leave their gifts in front of the altar while they go make peace with a relative. The image of doing so, however, is a rather humorous portrayal of what one’s actual priorities should be.

5.2 Cut It Off! (Matthew 5:29-30)

^{5:29} If your right eye causes you to sin, **tear it out and throw it away!** It is better to lose one of your members than to have your whole body thrown into hell. ^{5:30} If your right hand causes you to sin, **cut it off and throw it away!** It is better to lose one of your members than to have your whole body go into hell. [Matthew 5:29-30]

I know of no interpreter who thinks Jesus advocates literal self-mutilation here. The image lays great emphasis on avoiding sin. A fourth century writer, Hilary, wrote:

Even the cutting away of a member might be beneficial if the heart (figuratively speaking) were also able to be cut away. But if the impulse of the heart is left unchanged, the cutting away of a member would be pointless.¹

Given the fallen nature of humanity, if this passage were taken literally, everyone would end up legless, armless, blind, etc. stubs of a human body.

5.3 Oaths (Matthew 5:34-37)

^{5:34} But I say to you, **do not take oaths at all** – not by heaven, because it is the throne of God, ^{5:35} not by earth, because it is his footstool, and not by Jerusalem, because it is the city of the great King. ^{5:36} Do not take an oath by your head, because you are not able to make one hair white or black. ^{5:37} Let your word be ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no.’ More than this is from the evil one. [Matthew 5:34-37]

Some sects have taken the prohibition against oaths literally and absolutely. But most interpreters believe that Jesus’ point is that one’s word should always be truthful. Hilary wrote, “Therefore those who are living in the simplicity of faith have no need for

1. Manlio Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT 1a. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001). Page 110.

the ritual of an oath. With such people, what is, always is, and what is not, is not. For this reason, their every word and deed are always truthful.”¹

If taken literally, one could not testify in court, execute a contract, hold a political office, or even recite marriage vows. Rather, every word spoken should effectively be our oath. Compare NIV’s rendering of verse 37a, “Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’”

5.4 Retaliation (Matthew 5:38-42)

Retaliation

5:38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*’ 5:39 But I say to you, do not resist the evildoer. But whoever strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other to him as well. 5:40 And if someone wants to sue you and to take your tunic, give him your coat also. 5:41 And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two. 5:42 **Give to the one who asks you, and do not reject the one who wants to borrow from you.** [Matthew 5:38-42]

Could one even survive if one took verse 42 at face value? Every Christian would quickly become penniless and homeless, slowly starving to death, if not murdered outright. Theodore of Heraclea (d. c. 355 AD) explains this well²:

In giving us these directives so that their sense might be diligently examined, he did not intend us to take them according to the bare sound of the words. For he does not command to give to everyone who asks without exception, even if one has nothing to give, for that is impossible. Nor does he instruct us, if we have plenty, to give to someone who asks with a bad motive. For the donation then goes for evil things, as when someone asks for the sake of lust and intemperance and not for real need, and the person who gives merely provides fuel for such intemperance. For why is it said concerning the apostles that “distribution was made to each as any had need” [Acts 4:35]? This tells us that they gave not so much to those who simply asked but that they provided for others on the basis of need. And do not forget about the verse that says, “A man is acceptable according to what he has, not according to what he does not have,” [2 Cor 8:12] and “not so that others should be relieved and you burdened.” [2 Cor 8:13]³

Jesus’ intent here is for people to be generous and merciful and to do good. Giving to someone who is only going to use the gift to satisfy lusts and greed does not fulfil that intent.

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1. Manlio Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT 1a. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001). Page 115.
 2. While ultimately excommunicated his reasoning here is sound and backed up by Scripture.
 3. Manlio Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT 1a. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001). Page 119.

5.5 Private Prayer (Matthew 6:5-6)

Private Prayer

6:5 “Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, because they love to pray while standing in synagogues and on street corners so that people can see them. Truly I say to you, they have their reward. 6:6 But whenever you pray, **go into your room**^[1], **close the door, and pray to your Father in secret**. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you. [Matthew 6:5-6]

Jesus himself prayed publically at times (eg. John 11:41-42 when the stone blocking Lazarus’ tomb was removed). The Lord’s Prayer, opens with a plural “Our Father,” indicating corporate, not just private, use. Jesus’ point is to not do prayer for show. The gesture of hiding in a windowless room (contrast with Daniel 6:10), while certainly an appropriate approach to serious prayer, is not an absolute rule.

5.6 Beam of wood (Matthew 7:3-5)

7:3 Why do you see the speck in your brother’s eye, but fail to see **the beam of wood in your own**? 7:4 Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye,’ while there is a beam in your own? 7:5 You hypocrite! First remove the beam from your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye. [Matthew 7:3-5]

The image of a “beam of wood” in someone’s eye should be an obvious hyperbole if ever there was one.

6.0 Matthew 5:31-32

Divorce

5:31 “It was said, ‘*Whoever divorces his wife must give her a legal document.*’ 5:32 But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. [Matthew 5:31-32]

This saying packs a lot of complexity into a few words and gives us precious little context to spell out exactly what he means. We must take great care with our exegesis.

Jesus cites Deuteronomy 24:1. This is the same passage we encountered in Matthew 19 above. There, Jesus opposes the lax interpretations of the law that many Pharisees have. He also cites the exception clause using the same Greek word in both places. The difference here is not the man’s adultery if he remarries after divorcing a faithful wife, but the woman’s adultery. But the statement seems bizarre on the surface. He says that a man who divorces a faithful wife makes her be an adulteress (the verb is passive in the Greek), even though he excepted the man from being an adulterer if he remarried after divorcing an unfaithful wife Matthew 19:9.

1. “Closet” or “inner room” in other translations

The important point to note here is that it is the first husband who bears the responsibility for the sin, not the woman: “he makes her...”. God’s ideal is that marriage is for a lifetime. The description of the faithful wife’s remarriage as adultery is hyperbole, which Jesus used frequently in the Sermon on the Mount. The clues that this is so are:

- in Mt 19:9, a man who divorces his wife could remarry if his first wife was guilty of sexual immorality;
- in several passages we see that sexual morality laws apply reflexively to both genders (so, if the wife of an unfaithful husband can’t also remarry, scripture contradicts itself);
- Jesus accepts it as a given she will remarry as he adds no further condition than the first husband divorcing her; and
- this passage is focusing on the guilt of the first husband who divorces a wife who is not guilty of sexual immorality, *even if he himself does not go on to another woman*.

Let that last point sink in for a moment. A man who divorces a faithful wife and then lives a celibate life is still guilty of sin and is held responsible for his former wife’s remarriage! Such a remarriage is a situation God does not want, but it is not the faithful wife who is at fault, but the fault of the husband who unjustly divorces her.

We can paraphrase this passage like this (note the anachronistic use of quote marks to signify the point that hyperbole is used):

If you divorce a wife who has not been guilty of sexual immorality, you are not innocent even if you don’t remarry; you are guilty of causing your wife and her future husband to “commit adultery” when she inevitably remarries.

Designating this as hyperbole should not be construed as weakening God’s moral law. Jesus is very serious in that he doesn’t want remarriage to happen. But the way it should not happen is for the divorce to not happen in the first place, not for the innocent party in the divorce to suffer a life of loneliness..

We will see more about this situation when, in the next section, we look at what Paul says about an unbelieving spouse abandoning a marriage.

7.0 1 Corinthians 7:1-16, 26-28

7.1 The Corinthian Inquiry

Celibacy and Marriage

^{7:1} Now with regard to the issues you wrote about: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” [1 Corinthians 7:1]

The Greek phrase is literally “It is good for a man not to touch a woman,” which is a well known Greek idiom for sexual relations¹. Regarding the quotation marks, the NET footnote on verse 1 says:

Many recent interpreters believe that here again (as in 6:12–13) Paul cites a slogan the Corinthians apparently used to justify their actions. If this is so, Paul agrees with the slogan in part, but corrects it in the following verses to show how the Corinthians misused the idea to justify abstinence within marriage (cf. 8:1, 4; 10:23).

It appears that the Corinthians had decided that celibacy was a higher calling than married life (discussed more below on verses 3-6). One might speculate that this attitude within the Corinthian church arose from a misapplication of the apostles' words recorded in Matthew 19:10 ("it is better not to marry").

7.2 Marry

^{7:2} But because of immoralities, each man should have relations with his own wife and each woman with her own husband. [1 Corinthians 7:2]

The Greek verb can mean "to have" in the sense of having someone sexually (as the NET translates above) or "to have" as in to possess (that is, to marry) as the NASB95 translates. The verb is a third person imperative. At face value, it is a command for everyone to marry (or even, marry and have sex). As a general rule, this is proper. But there are exceptions as we'll see in the greater context (eg. verse 7).

7.3 No Abstinence in Marriage

^{7:3} A husband should give to his wife her sexual rights, and likewise a wife to her husband. ^{7:4} It is not the wife who has the rights to her own body, but the husband. In the same way, it is not the husband who has the rights to his own body, but the wife. ^{7:5} Do not deprive each other, except by mutual agreement for a specified time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then resume your relationship, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ^{7:6} I say this as a concession, not as a command. [1 Corinthians 7:3-6]

It would appear that the Corinthians had decided that celibacy within marriage was somehow a more holy lifestyle (as already suggested by the slogan that Paul quotes in Verse 1). Paul firmly rejects this. While he allows a temporary abstinence, he is quite clear this is a compromise and does not have his endorsement.

7.4 Paul's Gift

^{7:7} I wish that everyone was as I am. But each has his own gift from God, one this way, another that. [1 Corinthians 7:7]

Paul's command that every man have his wife was obviously not without exceptions. Paul himself is single and he wishes everyone else could be too. According to verses 32-34 this was so they could be free to serve the Lord instead of a spouse. This does not contradict the command. He acknowledges that singleness is only possible as a spe-

1. Ellingworth, Paul, Howard Hatton and Paul Ellingworth. *A Handbook on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*. UBS handbook series; Helps for translators. New York: United Bible Societies, 1995. p. 143.

cial gift from God. The command is because the wish is not practical for most people. See Jesus' humorous hyperbolic remarks regarding "eunuchs" (ie, single people) in Matthew 19:12.

7.5 Let Them Get Married

^{7:8} To the unmarried and widows I say that it is best for them to remain as I am. ^{7:9} But if they do not have self-control, let them get married. For it is better to marry than to burn with sexual desire. [1 Corinthians 7:8-9]

The term "unmarried" is not very specific. It can include never married, divorced, and widowers. Would not Paul's logic about self-control apply equally well to all the above, however? There is nothing special about being divorced that makes self-control so much easier than it is for never married people. In fact, having "tasted of that fruit" it may even be harder for the divorced person.

7.6 Couples Should Not Divorce

^{7:10} To the married I give this command – not I, but the Lord – a wife should not divorce a husband ^{7:11} (but if she does, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband), and a husband should not divorce his wife. [1 Corinthians 7:10-11]

The saying of Jesus that Paul seems to have in mind is Mark 10:11-12¹, which we looked at above:

^{10:11} So he told them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. ^{10:12} And if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." [Mark 10:11-12]

The paranthetical portion appears thus to be Paul's advice. This does not mean there are no exceptions. Also, keep in mind that Paul is addressing Christian couples here. Faithful partners cannot divorce and remarry. In the following paragraph, Paul will deal with an exception: where one of the partners is a non-Christian and wants out of the marriage. For a couple who are faithful Christians, the command is certainly absolute as neither member of the couple will violate their union.

7.7 Divorce by Unbelieving Spouse

^{7:12} To the rest I say – I, not the Lord – if a brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is happy to live with him, he should not divorce her. ^{7:13} And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is happy to live with her, she should not divorce him. ^{7:14} For the unbelieving husband is sanctified because of the wife, and the unbelieving wife because of her husband. Otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. ^{7:15} But if the unbeliever wants a divorce, let it take place. In these circumstances

1. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians around 55 or 56 AD. Luke-Acts was probably completed at the time of the last event recorded, about 62 AD. If Mark is indeed a source for Luke as most scholars believe, then Mark must have been written prior to that, probably several years prior. So, Paul may well be quoting from Mark's Gospel.

the brother or sister is not bound. God has called you in peace. ^{7:16} For how do you know, wife, whether you will bring your husband to salvation? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will bring your wife to salvation? [1 Corinthians 7:12-16]

Paul recognizes that Jesus' saying has exceptions, even though the form he appears to know is absolute in form. Here he deals with one that presumably is relevant for the Corinthian congregation. If one member of a couple is not a Christian, the Christian member is "not bound" to the marriage if the non-Christian member divorces him or her. The natural reading of not being "bound" is to be free to marry someone else (see verses 26-28 below).

Many interpreters see this exception as an additional one to the one Jesus gave in Mathew 19, but I see abandonment of the marriage as a special case of *pornia*. It is rather like the situation of Matthew 5:31-32, where the husband divorces a faithful wife (i.e., abandons her) and becomes the one morally responsible for her future remarriage. Had Paul known that saying, he surely would have applied it to this situation.

7.8 Advise to not Marry, But...

...

^{7:26} Because of the impending crisis I think it best for you to remain as you are. ^{7:27} The one bound to a wife should not seek divorce. The one released from a wife should not seek marriage. ^{7:28} But if you marry, you have not sinned. And if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face difficult circumstances, and I am trying to spare you such problems. [1 Corinthians 7:26-28]

Here, Paul explicitly allows remarriage even while he advises against it. First, in verse 26 Paul advises for a *status quo*. He elaborates on this in verse 27 by saying the married man should not seek divorce (literally, to be released, in the Greek), and the released man (that is, divorced - otherwise, the first half of the verse is saying the married man should not seek to become a widower¹; compare with verse 17 although a different Greek word is used there) should not seek to be remarried. Verse 28 is the lens through which we must read the rest of what Paul has to say. If the divorced man (the antecedent of "you") marries, he has not sinned. Further if a virgin marries (that is, a never married woman), she has not sinned. But Paul goes on advise against it.

8.0 Summary

Divorce and remarriage does not happen without sin being involved. Malachi tells us that God hates divorce², and Jesus tells us that from creation a husband and wife were not meant to be separated, but divorce was permitted because of the hardness (i.e. sinfulness) of hearts.³

1. Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, The IVP New Testament commentary series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997). On Mt. 5:31-32.
2. Malachi 2:16
3. Matthew 19:4-6

When one spouse is faithful and the other is not it would hardly be just to keep the faithful spouse bound by the marriage. To stay in a marriage with a filandering or abusive spouse would endanger one's own health and life. Being single has its own dangers, including the temptation for sexual sin¹. Few have the gift of remaining single like Paul².

The guilt of remarriage lies not with the party that was faithful in the first marriage, but with the party that violated the marriage covenant in the first place!³ Divorce may not be used as a loophole to have a series of sexual partners nor to leave a faithful partner. Guilt is still incurred in those cases.

But God in his mercy permits an innocent partner in a broken marriage to remarry without sinning. It is the unfaithful partner who incurs the guilt not only of his own unfaithfulness, but also of his spouse's need to remarry.

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1. 1 Corinthians 7:9
 2. 1 Corinthians 7:7
 3. Matthew 5:31-32