

What Did Jesus Say About Divorce?

Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-9

Introduction: 1) It was the headline that immediately caught my attention. In all bold letters it read, “Family lawyer reveals divorce horror stories from 40 years of seeing the damage caused to children by their warring parents.” (Dailymail.com, 2-19-16). Inside the article the news is as bleak as the title. Divorce lawyer turned mediator Mary Banham-Hall has dealt with close to 3,000 troubled marriages in her years as an attorney. Her judgment? “Divorce is worse than death, there’s no question. Why? People don’t generally choose death.”

2) I think Mary is right. There are few experiences in life that bring more pain, sorrow, grief and heartache than divorce and the break-up of marriages and families. A little girl in a poem called “The Monster” perhaps said it as well as I have ever heard: “The monster’s here, the monster’s there, the monster is everywhere. In my milk, in my tea, doesn’t it ever think of me? Mom’s here, Dad’s there, and I’m just not anywhere! How can I say this, without any force; the monster is called divorce!”

3) The difficulty of the subject is so great many persons will go to any lengths to avoid it. Others brush it off, wrongly, as no big deal in our sexually progressive 21st century western context. Fortunately, Jesus did neither. He did not ignore the issue and He did not say the issue was no big deal. Here, in Matthew 5:31-32, as well as Matthew 19:3-9, He tackles the subject head on. Bringing the two texts together, as well as other Scripture that speaks to the issue, I want to examine nine biblical and theological truths concerning the issues of marriage, divorce and remarriage. Marriage is a good gift from a great God, but it will only work rightly if we follow his blueprint and pattern. So, what does God say?

I. God's plan for marriage is one man and one woman until separated by death.

Virtually every Bible believing Christian is in agreement that this is God's ideal and plan for marriage. This is certainly implied in the Creation account in Genesis 2:24, but it is made explicit by Jesus in Matthew 19:6 where He says, "What God has joined together, let not man separate." Don Carson summarized well what Jesus is teaching, "in Matthew 19:3ff, [Jesus] goes back to first principles. In the beginning, God made one man and one

woman, and they were joined together. Initially, all divorce was inconceivable; when God made men and women, no allowance was made for it....God in fact hates divorce (Mal. 2:16)” [*The Sermon on the Mount*, 45].

II. Sexual immorality constitutes biblical grounds for divorce

It is not surprising that our Lord’s discussion of divorce follows immediately his teaching on lust and adultery (5:27-30). Here and in Matthew 19:9 we find what is often referred to as “the exception clause.” Sexual immorality is a biblically permissible reason for a spouse to pursue a divorce against their mate. There is no gender distinction in the Bible as to who may initiate a divorce, though in verse 32 Jesus specifically is addressing a husband divorcing his wife, the more common practice of the day. No, this principle applies equally to men and women. The phrase “sexual immorality” translates the Greek word *porneia*. Chuck Quarles notes, “The best evidence supports the view that *porneia* [in this verse] involves sexual relationships with anyone other than the husband during the betrothal or after marriage (p. 131). Craig Blomberg helpfully, adds, [*Porneia*] should therefore be translated as adultery, possibly including but not limited to related sexual sins

such as incest, homosexuality, prostitution, molestation, or indecent exposure. This is its typical semantic range” (“Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3-12”, *TJ* 2 (1990):177.

III. Divorce and remarriage without biblical grounds constitutes adultery

Jesus is clear and direct in 5:32: “Everyone,” there are no exceptions. “Who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of sexual immorality;” here is the one instance where divorce is permissible in God’s eyes. “Makes her commit adultery;” the implication is she will, of necessity, need a husband to survive and because there were no biblical grounds for divorce, she is forced into an act of adultery. Furthermore, the man who marries a woman who is divorced without biblical permission also is guilty of the act of adultery. Once again, as Osborne notes, Jesus is clear with respect to the divine idea: “Jesus is saying that in God’s eyes marriage is a lifelong covenant and should not be sundered, but when sexual immorality of one kind or another occurs, this breaks the bond in God’s eyes, and the innocent party can remarry” (*Matthew*, ZECNT, 200).

IV. The Old Testament law on divorce was designed to protect the wife from frivolous divorce and character assassination

By the time of Jesus, two rabbinic schools dominated the discussion of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and the issue of divorce.

Shammai said sexual sin was the only permissible reason to end a marriage by divorce. Hillel said anything a wife did that displeased her husband provides valid and viable grounds.

Hillel's position would become the dominate view. And, just how permissive did this position become? Chuck Quarles does an excellent job in answering that question. He writes,

“By the time of the composition of the Mishnah (AD 200), most rabbis seem to have embraced the view of Hillel. The Mishnah specified numerous and ridiculous grounds for divorce that made the covenant of marriage meaningless.

The Mishnah stated that a man could divorce his wife if she were barren (*m. Yebam.* 6.6; *m. Git.* 4:8), if she became a deaf mute (*m. Yebam.* 14:1), or if she had epilepsy, tetanus, warts, or leprosy. *Mishnah Ketubbot* 5:5 insisted

that a man could divorce his wife if she failed to perform certain services in the home...if her husband considered her lazy he had the prerogative to divorce her.

Rabbinic law also stated that certain physical defects in the wife were so offensive that they were legitimate grounds for divorce...Consequently a man could divorce his wife if she had a head that was wedge shaped, turnip shaped, or hammer shaped, or if her head was otherwise malformed such as “sunk in” or “flat at the back.” He could divorce his wife if she had poor posture or if she had thinning hair. He could divorce her if she had no eyebrows, only one eyebrow, or bushy eyebrows. He could divorce her if she had a pug nose. The condition of her eyes was particularly important. If she had eyes too high or too low, if she were cross-eyed, had no eyelashes, had eyes of two different colors, watery eyes, or eyes big as a calf or small like a goose, any of these justified divorce. The man could divorce his wife if her nose were too big or too little, her ears too little or too floppy, if she had a overbite or underbite, missing teeth, a poor figure, a

swollen belly, a protruding navel, oversized or damaged sexual organs, a dark complexion, bony ankles or knees, swollen feet, if she were bowlegged, suffered from swelling of the big toe, if her heel had protrusions, if the sole of her foot was as wide as that of a goose, or if she were ambidextrous...a man could divorce his wife if she ate something he had forbidden her to eat, if she visited the home of her parents, or if against her husband's wishes, the in-laws, moved into the same city to be near their daughter. The husband had the right to divorce his wife if she broke the laws of Moses or if she transgressed Jewish customs by going outdoors with her hair unbound, spun cloth in the street, or spoke to any man other than her husband. She would also be divorced if she cursed her husband's parents or yelled at her husband so loud that her voice could be heard outside the house. A man could divorce his wife if she had a bad reputation (*m. Git.* 4:8), if she burned his supper, or if he simply found someone he thought was prettier (*m. Git.* 9:10).

Not offering sexual relations frequently enough was also grounds for divorce, and the law specifically expressed appropriate expectations regarding this matter. The wife had to satisfy her husband every day if he had the time, twice a week if he were a day laborer, every 30 days if he were a camel driver, and every six months if he were a sailor (*m. Ketub. 5:6*).” (Quarles, 125-27).

Today we, in our arrogance and superiority complex, find such a worldview comical. In our enlightened way of thinking, we don't need a reason at all to end a marriage by divorce. We call it no-fault divorce. Jesus in Matthew 5 and 19 clearly and forcefully condemns the idea of frivolous divorce that clearly was gaining in popularity in His day. The wife, in particular, must be protected from such insanity. Marriage is a sacred, divine and ordained institution given as a gift by a great God. We dare not trifle with it.

V. Though divorce is permitted in very specific circumstances, it is never commanded.

Sexual immorality gives one permission to divorce a spouse per Matthew 5 and 19. First Corinthians 7:12-16 appears to give permission for divorce if a believing spouse is left or abandoned by an unbelieving partner. But, even in these instances, divorce is permitted but not required. There is nothing in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation that would mandate a divorce. The only possible exception to this is the very difficult issue of intermarriage with idolatrous pagans in Ezra 9-10. No, our God is a God of reconciliation. He would always prefer that partners in even the most troubled marriage would pursue and find reconciliation and restoration (see 1 Cor. 7:10-11). It is acknowledged that in our fallen world genuine reconciliation will not always take place. This does not negate the fact that reconciliation would be God's perfect will and desire. Through the gospel, God delights in putting broken lives back together. Through the gospel, God delights in putting broken marriages and homes back together too!

VII. Frivolous divorce is sinful and leads to the sin of adultery

This point has already been made so we do not need to belabor the point. Jesus' words are clear. If you divorce your spouse "except on the ground of sexual immorality," the remarried spouse is guilty

of adultery. That there is any question as to what Christ meant is an indictment of our sinful heart. As John MacArthur well says, “The many confused and conflicting ideas in our day about the biblical teaching on divorce are not caused by any deficiency in God’s revelation but by the fact that sin has clouded men’s mind to the straightforward simplicity of what God has said” (*Matthew 1-7*, 307).

VIII. Those who are guilty of the sin of adultery should repent and pursue anew God’s standards of sanctity in marriage.

None of us is capable of going back in time and undoing our past. No doubt all of us immediately would do so and change some things if we could. But we can’t. We have to live in the now and deal with life in the present. When it comes to divorce on unbiblical grounds, that is sin. When one remarries for any reason other than sexual immorality or desertion by an unbeliever, that is sin. However, our God is a gracious and forgiving God who immediately and fully forgives confessed sin (1 John 1:9). I agree completely with my friend Chuck Quarles who writes, “The new marriage is initially but not perpetually adulterous. Thus remarriage without biblical grounds is sinful, even adulterous, but

the marriage does not remain so” (p. 134). Divorced Christians who have remarried on unbiblical grounds should ask for God’s forgiveness. They should also ask for forgiveness from their prior spouse who they wronged and make reconciliation and restoration to the fullest degree that they possibly can. What they should not do is divorce their current spouse and try to get back with their previous spouse. Blomberg is right, “[they] should begin afresh to observe God’s standards by remaining faithful to their current partner” (*Matthew*, NAC, 111). Bottom-line: do the right thing now, today and tomorrow, before God and in relation to your current spouse. Be a faithful spouse today and in the future til separated by death. Commit daily to life-long faithfulness and fidelity. Model today the difference the gospel makes in a marriage. Do not excuse your past sin and failures. Acknowledge them, confess them, repent of them, and then move forward in the grace and forgiveness and mercy of God doing the right thing to all!

IX. Jesus expects divorce to be the rare exception and not the rule within the community of faith.

Divorce may be the norm in the culture. It must never be the norm in our churches. As a community of new covenant believers who have received a new heart through the gospel (Jere. 31; Ezk. 36), we possess an internal power by the Holy Spirit to remain faithful and honor our marriage vows that others may not be able to do. This is a natural, no (!), a supernatural result of our new life in Christ that now characterize our lives. Further, it is the spiritual implementation of our living out the beatitudes (5:3-12) as citizens of Christ's Kingdom. As the great patristic preacher John Chrysoston (c. A.D. 349-407) said, "For he who is meek, and a peacemaker, and poor in spirit, and merciful, how shall he cast out his wife?" (Quoted in Quarles, 135). No, as repenting sinners who daily seek our Savior's forgiveness, we gladly extend that same forgiveness to our spouse. As those who have been reconciled to God, we continually pursue reconciliation, not divorce, as we live life together up close and personal in marriage. This is our Lord's command. This is His will. This is our daily and life-long pursuit!

Conclusion: Marriage is not a fairytale. It is hard work. But, it is worthwhile work. It is work that needs to say from the very beginning, the "D" word is not allowed. Divorce will not be an option for us. We

will stay true and faithful. We will stay committed and work through the tough times. This is what our God asks of us. In light of what He has done for us in Christ, how could we even consider saying no to Him?