

“Till death do us part”: A Christian Theology of Divorce and Remarriage

by

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Members of the clergy bear some responsibility for the divorce problem,”¹ charges syndicated columnist Ron Schafer. Given the multiple opinions on divorce among denominations, I tend to agree with him. Clergy tend to uphold the position of their respective churches and usually do not reflect on the biblical teaching on divorce before giving advice to endangered couples. Some churches permit divorce only on the grounds of adultery, while others include desertion, abuse, irreconcilable differences, and other reasons permitted by civil law. In this essay, I seek to examine the biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage as it relates to Christian relationships.

What is the biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage as it relates to Christian relationships? In answering this question, I would like to highlight the only two New Testament passages that address the issue in detail: Matthew 19:1-12 and 1 Corinthians 7:10-15. Whether viewed separately or in tandem, these two passages provide *clear* counsel for those who are seeking an answer to the question of the biblical legitimacy of divorce and remarriage among professed Christians. I know this claim may seem simplistic, but I hope that by the time you finish reading this essay, you will also agree that the teaching is *clear*.

Matthew 19:1-12

As Jesus leaves Galilee on his final journey to Jerusalem, some Pharisees approach him with a pop quiz. The text actually states that they came to “test” him (19:3a). The question they pose to him concerns the much-debated issue of divorce. In order to get to the heart of Jesus’ teaching in this pericope, it is necessary to follow the flow of the dialogue. Many who analyze this passage tend to jump from verse 3 to verse 9, and forget that there is a logical progression to the discussion. As we conduct our analysis, we must realize that as the original discourse unfolded, the inquisitors did not have the luxury of reading a few verses ahead.

The Pharisees’ Question (19:3b)

The Pharisees’ question seems pretty basic: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for *every* reason?” On one level, it may seem as if the Pharisees are inquiring about legitimate grounds for divorce. I’m sure many of us have had this

1. Tom Schaefer, “Clergy must help prevent divorce,” *Huntsville Times* (Saturday, November 27, 1999), C7.

question echoed to us countless times during our ministries. Some of us may have even asked the question to ourselves as we struggled with issues in our own marriage relationships. However, as we look closely at the text, we see that the issue for the Pharisees is not whether there is *any* reason for divorce, but whether one could divorce for “*every* reason” (*pasan aitian*). The Pharisees had no problem with divorce. They did not dispute its legitimacy. They simply wanted Jesus to share his opinion on the grounds for which a divorce could be secured.

In order to understand the question, we must become familiar with the social context of the inquiry. The Pharisees were actually attempting to engage Jesus in an ongoing rabbinic debate over the grounds and methods of divorce. Much of the discussion is recorded in Mishnah Gittin, which ends with the following statement:

- 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).”²

It seems that the Pharisees were attempting to align Jesus either with the conservative position of Shammai, or the more liberal stance of Hillel, which is preserved in later tradition by Rabbi Aqiba.

Jesus’ Initial Response (19:4-6)

Although Jesus is probably aware of the rabbinic debate, he responds by appealing straight to scripture: “Haven’t you read that the one who created from the beginning made them male and female? And said *because of this a man shall leave father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall be one flesh.* Therefore, they are no longer two but one flesh. That which God has yoked, let no person separate.” In typical style, Jesus constructs a logical argument that places him in control of the discussion. He does not even attempt to engage in the legitimacy of rabbinic authority, but takes the issue back to scripture. Now the issue concerns the legitimacy of divorce itself!

By appealing to scripture, Jesus elevates the divine ideal. He first refers to the summary account of human creation in Genesis 1:27 as he heralds the institution of marriage as a divine initiative. Then, he points to Genesis 2:24 as evidence that

2. Mishnah Gittin, 9:10. (Jacob Neusner’s translation)

not only did God place the first couple together, but he is actively involved in solidifying the unions of all marriage relationships. In some mysterious way, the married couple becomes “one flesh.” In his pronouncement, Jesus uses the metaphor of “yoking” to describe the marital union. Like two yoked oxen on a field, husband and wife are forged into an inseparable union as they work towards a common goal.

With this in mind, if we were to reduce Jesus’ answer to a single word, it would have to be “No!” A person cannot secure a divorce for *every* reason stipulated in rabbinic tradition. For Jesus, the scripture is clear that marriage was a lasting institution in which God binds two individuals together. Constructing a list of escape clauses to unyoke what God has yoked is to trivialize the sacred and mystical nature of the union. Consequently, the very mention of divorce should not even be a part of the equation.

The Pharisees’ Counter Question (19:7)

Not satisfied with Jesus’ answer, the Pharisees prod him further: “Why then did Moses legislate that a husband could give his wife a divorce writ and put her away?” They have followed Jesus onto his turf and are willing to fight scripture with scripture. In appealing to creation, Jesus set the grounds for the indissolubility of the marriage union, but Moses allowed for divorce. The Mosaic legislation is found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 where Moses states that a divorced woman who marries a second husband is not permitted to return to her first husband. In appealing to this text, the Pharisees are suggesting that Jesus is going against Moses himself.

Jesus’ Secondary Response (19:8-9)

Knowing the stability of his thesis, Jesus refuses to budge from his position as he places the Mosaic stipulation in its social context. He answers, “Because of your hard heartedness Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the *beginning* it was not so.” This is not so much an indictment against Moses as it is against the rebellious people who refused to submit to the Divine ideal. Moses did not initiate the divorce law he simply permitted (*epetrepson*) the citizens to follow its establishment. Notice that the purpose of the Mosaic legislation was not to establish grounds for divorce, but to discuss the issue of sexual defilement. The existence of the divorce law is taken for granted in Deuteronomy. There is no explanation concerning its origin, it simply exists. However, although it existed it was clear to Jesus that it was not a part of God’s original plan.

Given the flow of the discussion so far, the interpretive task would have been a lot easier if Jesus had stopped here. If Jesus had ended his discussion at this point, much of the current controversy would have been alleviated. However, Jesus ends

his dialogue with a stern pronouncement: “I say to you that whoever divorces his wife, except for *porneia*, and marries another, commits adultery.” Some manuscripts go even further: “and the one who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” What makes this statement even more astounding is the fact that the parallel version in Mark 10:1-12 says absolutely nothing about an “exception” clause. Even Luke’s brief reference is absolute (Lk 16:18). Matthew’s is the only gospel that provides an escape hatch.

The exact interpretation of *porneia* has challenged commentators for centuries. The normal biblical understanding of the term is “fornication,” but the pre-marital connotation of “fornication” has led to obscure translations like “unchastity,” “unfaithfulness,” “infidelity,” and even “adultery.” I say *even* adultery because many pastors hold that this is *the* unpardonable sin in marriage.³ However, if Matthew meant adultery, he would have used the correct term as he does further on in the verse and also in 15:19. Further, in 5:27, adultery is defined as an act of the mind, which would mean that one had grounds for divorce even if a spouse thought about having an affair! So, what *is* the meaning of *porneia*?

The term itself is related to the Greek word for a female prostitute (*porne*) and a male who solicits a prostitute (*pornos*).⁴ It is from these words that the English term “pornography” is derived. The noun *porneia* refers primarily to the activity of prostitution. However, it is not only used to describe this ignoble profession, but also refers to other forms of sexually deviant behavior, particularly premarital sex. The idea is that those who engage in premarital sex are behaving in the manner of prostitutes. Is it possible that Jesus has this understanding in mind? Could Jesus have been stating that the only ground for divorce is premarital sex?

I’m sure you probably read the previous paragraph a couple of times and are wondering if the editors made a typographical error. No! I wrote it. Could Jesus have been talking about premarital sex? Allow me to explain. As in many African and Eastern cultures, Jewish marriages in the first century commenced at the time of the engagement. However, the marriage was not consummated until twelve months after the engagement.⁵ If she were found to be pregnant during the time of the engagement, one of three questions would be asked:

3. See extensive discussion in Craig S. Keener, *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991).

4. Walter Bauer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2d edition. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1079), 693.

5. Mishnah Ketubot, 5:2a

1. Was it the impatient fiancé?
2. Was it another man *after* the engagement?
3. Was it another man *before* the engagement?

If it were the fiancé, the marriage would commence immediately. If it were another man who impregnated her after the engagement, she would be guilty of adultery and consequently executed (Deut 22:23-24). On the other hand, if she was involved with another *before* the engagement, she would be guilty of *fornication* and biblical law mandated that she also be executed (Deut 22:13-21). However, for the third category, rabbinic law does not appear to be as harsh as biblical law, and although the Mishnah upholds execution for adultery, it permits a man to divorce on the grounds of *fornication* (Mishnah Gittin, 9:10 a-b). Could Jesus be agreeing with the House of Shammai at this point?

Think about it. Matthew is the only gospel that provides the real scoop behind the engagement of Joseph and Mary. Matthew 1:18 tells us that while the two were engaged, Mary was found to be “with child from the Holy Spirit.” Joseph’s initial reaction in verse 19 is to “divorce her quietly.” We are not sure at what point in their relationship that Mary was chosen to be the mother of the Savior, but we do know that the “righteous” Joseph chose the option of divorce. Joseph’s action would have indicated to the village spectators that Mary had engaged in pre-marital sex. As such, she would have been guilty of *porneia*. It is only the intervention of the heavenly messenger that stopped Joseph from making a perfectly legal decision.

The Disciple’s Reaction (19:10)

While the case of Joseph and Mary does provide a likely context in which to understand Matthew’s exception clause, I must admit that the verdict is still out on the exact meaning of *porneia*. Whatever it means it certainly caused a stir among the disciples. Apparently after the Pharisees had left, the disciples commented to Jesus: “If this is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry!” This extreme reaction suggests that Jesus’ statement seriously limited any grounds for divorce. The disciples in effect are saying that if a man is stuck with his wife for life, it is better to remain single. The impact of Jesus’ statement is even greater when seen in the light of the immediate rhetorical context. Just before the encounter with the Pharisees, Matthew records Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness (18:15-34). I don’t think it is mere coincidence that the topic of marriage follows these important lessons on forgiveness. No hurtful action perpetrated by a spouse is unforgivable—not even adultery.⁶

6. For a contemporary treatment of the concept of forgiveness in marriage see C. Welton Gaddy, *Adultery and Grace: The Ultimate Scandal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

Jesus’ Concluding Statement (19:11-12)

Knowing the hyperbolic nature of the disciples’ statement, Jesus retorts: “Not all can take this saying, but [only] those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who are that way from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs on account of the kingdom of heaven. The one who is able to receive this let him receive it.” Jesus recognizes the disciples’ impulsiveness and brings them home to reality. Not many people are willing to sacrifice the pleasures of marriage for a lifetime of celibacy. He also acknowledges that not many people are able to accept the seriousness of the divine ideal—“not all can take this saying.” Nonetheless, in spite of the difficult challenges that arise in a life long marital commitment, God encourages His followers to take the union seriously.

Paul’s Reinforcement

Those who are still not convinced about the radical nature of Jesus’ statement can look to Paul’s parallel admonition in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11. Surely any confusion over Jesus’ admonition would have been resolved by the time that Paul wrote to the church in Corinth.⁷ According to 7:1, Paul is responding to inquiries about marriage and sexual relations between Christians. His teaching is crystal clear: “To those already married I command (not I, but the Lord), that a woman is not to separate from her husband (if she separates, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.” Paul gets straight to the point: Christian partners are bound together for the rest of their natural lives. Christian husbands who have the power to initiate a divorce are prohibited from such action. Similarly, Christian wives who want release from the relationship are not free to remarry but must remain single for the rest of their lives.⁸ And just in case Paul is accused of *inventing* this “difficult” saying, he makes it clear that he received it directly from the Lord himself.

The only exception Paul makes is with marriages in which only one person has converted to Christianity: “To the rest I say (I, not the Lord): if a certain man has an unbelieving wife and she agrees to live with him, he must not divorce her; and if a woman has an unbelieving husband and he consents to live with her, she must

7. One also sees remnants of this teaching in the early church. For primary documents and commentary see David G. Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

8. See also 7:39 (=Rom 7:1), “A wife is bound [in marriage] for as long as her husband lives....”

not divorce her husband.... But if the unbeliever leaves, let him leave; the brother or sister is not bound in such cases....” (7:12-13, 15) Paul admits that he did not receive this piece of advice from the Lord, but feels that it makes sense. If one’s spouse does not profess Christianity, he or she cannot be forced to share the values that are promoted in verses 10-11. Divine command means nothing to a person who does not recognize divine authority. In such cases, if the unbeliever *chooses* to separate, the Christian brother or sister is not “bound.” While not blatantly stated, Paul seems to be saying that only those Christians who fall in this category are free to remarry. However, those marriages in which both partners claim to be Christian are expected to last until the death of a spouse (1 Cor 7:39; Rom 7:1).

Conclusion

As our investigation concludes, I hope that you concur with my initial contention that the basic biblical teaching is *clear*. Jesus prohibits divorce for Christian couples. Instead, he promotes life long unions for those who unite together under God. For those couples who feel that they cannot live under the same roof—for whatever reason—the Bible suggests that they remain single until either reconciliation or the death of the other spouse.⁹ According to the biblical teaching, a Christian can only be released from the marriage relationship under two circumstances: (1) if it is discovered soon after marriage that the spouse has either impregnated or been impregnated by another; (2) if a married person becomes a Christian and the unchristian spouse decides to desert him or her. The rest of us are bound by the vows we made before Divine and human witnesses: “Till death do us part.”

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9. See discussion in Calvin Rock, “Separation in Marriage,” *Adventist Review* (October 14, 1993), 1074.