

## **The Biblical Perspective of Divorce and Remarriage**

Firstly, the passages from the Bible that refer to the question of divorce are cited. Explanations then follow.

**You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell. It was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce'; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5:27-32)**

**When Jesus had finished these words, He departed from Galilee and came into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan; and large crowds followed Him, and He healed them there. Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?" And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality<sup>1</sup>, and marries another woman commits adultery." The disciples said to Him, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry." But He said to them, "Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. "For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it." (Matthew 19:1-12)**

**But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife. But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Corinthians 7:10-16)**

**A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 7:39)**

**Getting up, He went from there to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan; crowds gathered around Him again, and, according to His custom, He once more began to teach them. Some Pharisees came up to Jesus, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife. And He answered**

and said to them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and the two shall become one flesh; so they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." In the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again. And He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery." (Mark 10:1-12)

Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery. (Luke 16:18)

Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives? For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man. Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. (Romans 7:1-4)

For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. (Genesis 2:24)

"Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers? "Judah has dealt treacherously, and an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD which He loves and has married the daughter of a foreign god. "As for the man who does this, may the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob everyone who awakes and answers, or who presents an offering to the LORD of hosts. "This is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favour from your hand. "Yet you say, 'For what reason?' Because the LORD has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. "But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. "For I hate divorce," says the LORD, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the LORD of hosts. "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously." (Malachi 2:10-16)

The passage mentioned last shows that God chose a nation and remains faithful to it, even though it committed spiritual adultery. By acting in this way, God establishes monogamous marriage and excludes the possibility of remarriage, making it a sin.

## Definition of terms

### To divorce/separate (Greek: *chorizein*):

This word is used for a separation from the marriage partner (without any further tie). It is used in Matthew 19:6 "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." In 1 Corinthians 7:10, *chorizein* is used for the separation of the wife from her husband "...that the wife should not leave

her husband”.

**Send away (Greek: *apolyein*):**

Apolyein is used almost exclusively in the meaning that a Husband separates from his wife, that is to say, he sends her away. Only in Mark 10:12 is apolyein used for the wife as well, that is, when **she sends her husband away**.

From the verses quoted above, it is clearly visible that the terms 'send away' and 'divorce' are used in the same way in these passages.

Irrespective of this, some try to argue that 'send away' refers to being sent away on the basis of guilt, and 'divorce' to separating without being guilty (i.e. of adultery... etc.). The aim of this is to say that an innocent partner can remarry "...Whoever sends his wife away..." That is, she committed adultery, and therefore, her husband is permitted to remarry.

Mark 10:11-12 shows very clearly, however, that Jesus doesn't make this exception. The emphasis here lies on the section "...and marries another commits adultery against her". Here is the whole verse again: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself sends her husband away and marries another man, she is committing adultery."

**Fornication (Greek: *porneia*):**

Porneia is a general term used for sexual sin, most commonly for adultery, or in seldom cases for incestuous marriages, which were forbidden among Jews.

**Covenant:**

A promise made for life.

**Explanation**

Considering that with the exception of Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 all other passages speak clearly against remarriage after divorce, here we will focus on these two passages.

Matthew 5:32 has its parallel in Luke 16:18 (see below for the comparison of these verses).

In the context, Jesus speaks about the fulfillment of the Old Testament law. For example, in Matthew 5:27-28:

**You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**

By the formulation "You have heard it said", and "but I say to you", Jesus places the value of his words above the Mosaic law and the revelation of the old covenant (that means, adultery begins in thoughts. The heart of man, however, should be pure and holy).

Further, in Matthew 5:31-32, Jesus says:

**It was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce'; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.**

Here too, Jesus places his words above the commandment regarding divorce - he annuls the

certificate of divorce, which was never God's will, but was a concession that Moses gave to the disobedient Jewish nation. What Jesus means here, is that **whoever sends his wife away, surrenders her to the prospect of adultery**, because she has to remarry in order to have what she needs to live on – **unless it was the wife herself who committed adultery, in which case, her husband is not the one who surrendered her to adultery, but she herself**. The parallel passage in Luke 16:18, in which Jesus considers the perspective of the husband, shows clearly that regardless of the reason for divorce, he breaks his marriage with her as soon as he remarries.

The **'adultery clause'** in Matthew 5:32 "except for the reason of unchastity" (Greek: *parektos logou porneias*) does not mean that if a husband has sent his wife away because she committed adultery, that he can marry again. If he marries again, he himself breaks the marriage. Verse 32b shows clearly that whoever marries someone who has been sent away from a former marriage, regardless of whether they were innocent or guilty, commits adultery. If the wife already committed adultery, then she is the one who already broke the marriage, and not the husband, but that doesn't entitle him to remarry.

Divorce was never God's will. Moses permitted divorce because of the disobedience of the nation. It was an unfortunate fact that in the Jewish nation, only ever very few really sought to be obedient, and that the majority were disobedient. That is why God allowed divorce and remarriage, because otherwise some people would have had to suffer greatly at the hands of others. A woman who had been sent away was all but forced to remarry because she could not provide for herself, and had no prospect of support in her old age from her children. That is why Moses commanded the husband to give her a certificate of divorce. This certificate was an important means of protection for her, because it was proof that she was not a prostitute or had had any sexual relations outside of marriage (for which she could be given the death penalty). She had been sent away, and was rightfully permitted to marry again.

Among the Israelites, it was never possible that **all of them** live in obedience, love and deep unity. Jesus fulfilled these things, however, in the Church – where unbelievers cannot remain, and where each member has decided to follow Jesus without compromise – and where each one has therefore received the power of the Holy Spirit for a life of holiness, devotion, love and obedience. It is only really possible to understand the high demand that Jesus makes – that **from God's perspective, there is no such thing as divorce** – if we understand the command to live in brotherly love, and that therefore, Christians are able to live out Jesus' claim regarding marriage. In God's eyes, a marriage is valid as long as both partners are alive. If one partner is an unbeliever, and wants to separate from the Christian partner, Paul expresses that this is possible. From God's perspective, however, this does not constitute a divorce which would entitle them to remarry. As far as God is concerned, they are still married, but they can live separately.

Marriage is a covenant before God – to which one must remain faithful, even if the other partner breaks this covenant. Should the unbelieving partner separate from the Christian, regardless of the reason, and the Christian then remarry, they would not only be breaking the marriage covenant, but drawing their 'new' partner deeply into the sin of fornication and adultery with them.

Christians share their possessions as an expression of brotherly love (Acts 2:44-47, Acts 4:32-37), and therefore there is no problem for the Christian wife, whose husband has separated from her, because she will be provided for. She will not be alone either, because God gives every Christian deep joy and fulfillment through the brotherly love and unity among them.

### **Comparison of Matthew 5:32 and Luke 16:18 (and Mark 10:11-12 to strengthen the point)**

**...but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery... (Matthew 5:32a)**

**Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery... (Luke 16:18a)**

**Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her... (Mark 10:11)**

**...and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery... (Mark 10:12)**

**...and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery... (Matthew 5:32b)**

**...and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery... (Luke 16:18b)**

**...and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery... (Luke 16:18b)**

Mark 10:12 shows that in the reverse case, that is, when a wife sends her husband away, that the same is true. Matthew 19:1-12 and Mark 10:1-12 are also parallel in content. Jesus explains here, why Moses commanded that the Jews give a certificate of divorce if they send their wife away, and that it was not originally God's will, and that what God has joined together, no man shall separate. Here he also 'corrects' the law, that is, he shows how we can live up to this law. Through HIM we can live as God originally wanted. Jesus was speaking to Jews – his disciples were still Jews. He expresses that the **indissoluble character of the covenant of marriage is founded in the order of creation**. It follows therefore, that becoming a Christian does not change the validity of the covenant of marriage.

Unfortunately, the false teaching is very widespread that says that after becoming a Christian, a new life begins and therefore the divorce that was earlier was not a true marriage which was valid in God's eyes, and therefore the Christian can marry again.

By the reaction of the disciples we can see that what Jesus was teaching on this matter was something completely new to them. According to Jewish law, it was lawful to divorce and remarry, for instance when the wife had committed adultery (according to Rabbi Shammai). The disciples understood, however, that God does not view any divorce as valid, **not even** when the wife commits adultery – and then they ask themselves, whether it is advisable to marry at all. This reaction, shows too, that Jesus brought something new. The possibility for the husband to remarry after the wife committed adultery would not have so astonished the disciples.

In the '**adultery clause**' in Matthew 19:9 'except for fornication', or 'not for fornication' (Greek: *me epi porneia*), the Greek text has a double meaning. It could mean either, "Divorce is not permitted, except in the case of fornication," or "even in the case of fornication." The solution to this question can be derived from the context above, not from the formulation of the words themselves. The context, as in Mark 10, excludes the possibility of remarriage.

Paul writes about how it should be among Christians in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 and 39.

## Summary

Jesus emphasises one marriage partner for life as God's will. This is visible from his argumentation regarding the marriage covenant (one flesh) and that it he says that a man should not divorce his wife. If they do divorce, then neither he nor she may enter into a new marriage, as long as the former partner is alive, because the first marriage covenant still stands as long as both are alive. If one partner does enter into a new marriage, that is adultery. Before God there is no such thing as divorce. A marriage is valid as long as both partners are alive. Jesus does not make any difference in all of these passages depending on whether someone was guilty or innocent in being sent away.

Because Jesus doesn't make any exceptions in Mark and Luke, he cannot have intended to make any exception in Matthew either. The reaction of the disciples shows too, that in the question of divorce, there is no exception. It is not possible to remarry as long as both partners are alive.

Paul addresses other cases in more detail in 1 Corinthians 7.

If someone is already divorced, and then becomes a Christian, they should remain alone or be reconciled to their original partner. If the unbelieving partner wants to separate from the Christian, then the Christian should allow this 'the brother or the sister is not under bondage (lit. enslaved) in such cases, but God has called us to peace'.

The point that the brother or sister is not '**enslaved**' in such cases means that they are not condemned to a life with an unbeliever in strife and problems. They can separate, and remain unmarried.

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### **Footnotes:**

1. literally: fornication

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