

Divorce and Remarriage: A Biblical Perspective

In this article we want to examine what the Bible says concerning the question of divorce and remarriage. Jesus' words recorded in Matthew's gospel, usually translated as "except on the grounds of sexual immorality", do not contradict the clear rejection of divorce in other texts of the New Testament. Although the Old Testament law permitted divorce because of peoples' sinfulness, it has never been God's will. Jesus showed us unmistakably what God's will is in this matter. By his work of salvation he changes our hearts and enables us to remain faithful in accordance with God's will, even if it may be necessary under certain circumstances to live separated from one's unbelieving spouse. In closing we will add some thoughts that should provide guidance for those seeking solutions to today's often complex and tangled life situations.

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⚓ 1 Is Divorce the Solution?

Loving someone means seeking the best for that person regardless of any difficulties that it might involve. Married people are also constantly faced with the challenge to deny themselves. In the very situation when problems arise it can be tempting to choose the easier way and get divorced or to be remarried after having been left by one's spouse. Yet marriage is an irreversible step, even if it was a step taken in disregard of one's own conscience.

Therefore we want to encourage anyone considering divorce or remarriage to be courageous enough to open themselves to receive the words of Jesus. He not only shows us the right way, but he helps us to put his words into practice, even if that is hard for us to imagine.

The following Bible passages on this topic show that Jesus expects unconditional, life-long faithfulness to one and only one partner. The Bible passages are followed by more detailed explanations.

⚓ 2 Clear Words from the Bible Concerning Divorce and Remarriage

Several passages in the New Testament show us that monogamy is God's will, i.e. to be married to one

spouse and to remain faithful until the marriage partner dies:

Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery. (*Luke 16:18 ESV*)

And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away." And 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.' 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast 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 not man separate."

And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." (*Mark 10:2-12 ESV*)

To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. (*1 Corinthians 7:10-11 ESV*)

For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress. (*Romans 7:2-3 ESV*)

God rejects divorce clearly, even in the Old Testament :

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 2:13-16, NASB*)

⚓ 3 Except for Sexual Immorality?

There are two passages in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:1-12) where an exception seems to be possible in the case of sexual immorality. Why don't we find this important exception in other Gospels and letters of the New Testament? The Gospel of Matthew was written for Jewish readers. In the following section we will show that the Jews understood these words differently than most people nowadays. Unfortunately today's understanding has also influenced the modern Bible translations, so we

will have to explain some questions of translation. We will, however, try to keep this as brief and concise as possible.

⚓ **3.1 Matthew 5:32**

The ESV translates Mt 5:31–32 as follows:

It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’
But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

The Greek word “parektos” translated here as “except” literally expresses that something is outside, not mentioned, or excluded (e.g. in 2 Corinthians 11:28 it is translated either with “external” things or “unmentioned” things. Here it does not refer to an exception.)

A translation keeping as close as possible to the text could be rendered:

It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’
But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife (the ground of sexual immorality is excluded), causes adultery to be committed concerning her [1] , and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. [2]

⚓ **Sexual immorality was generally accepted as a reason for divorce**

In the whole context of Matthew 5 Jesus refers to the Jewish law and the Jewish traditions. In verses 31–32 he refers specifically to a passage in Deuteronomy 24:1:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house,
... (*Deuteronomy 24:1 ESV*)

The expression “some indecency” was understood by the rabbinic schools of that time to mean “sexual immorality”. For many Jews this was the only legitimate reason for divorce.[3]

⚓ **Jesus brings something new**

Jesus said, “It was also said, ... But I say to you”. It is obvious that Jesus was teaching something new—something the Jews had never heard before. In the context of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) Jesus intensifies God’s commands in regard to purity and love. In Matthew 5:21–48 Jesus commented on the commandments of the Old Testament with the words, “But I say to you ...” and pointed out what God’s originally clear will was concerning the topics he addressed. For instance in verses 21–22 he says:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; ... (*ESV*)

If Jesus had only wanted to express in Matthew 5:32 that he agrees with the generally accepted reason for

divorce, his statements about divorce would not fit this context. He would not be bringing anything new (the “new” things brought by Jesus are, however, the “old” eternal will of God).

The message of Jesus is that the generally accepted reason among the Jews for divorce is no longer valid. Jesus excludes this reason with the words “the ground of sexual immorality is excluded”.

This does not mean, however, that a person is obliged to remain together with his or her spouse in all circumstances, even if the spouse’s behaviour is unacceptable. It may indeed be necessary to separate from one’s partner due to their bad moral conduct. Under certain circumstances, this separation can even take the legal form of a divorce. Even then, though, the bond of marriage still remains intact and with it, the obligation to marital faithfulness. What this means is that no further marriage is possible. A divorce in which the marriage bond is dissolved and both partners are free to marry again was rejected by Jesus.

✚ 3.2 Matthew 19:9

With Matthew 19:9 the situation is very similar to Matthew 5. Darby translated close to the Greek text:

And the Pharisees came to him tempting him, and saying, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? But he answering said, Have ye not read that he who made [them], from the beginning made them male and female, and said, On account of this a man shall leave father and mother, and shall be united to his wife, and the two shall be one flesh? so that they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate. They say to him, Why then did Moses command to give a letter of divorce and to send [her] away? He says to them, Moses, in view of your hardheartedness, allowed you to put away your wives; but from the beginning it was not thus. But I say unto you, that whosoever shall put away his wife, not for fornication, and shall marry another, commits adultery; [and he who marries one put away commits adultery.] His disciples say to him, If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry. (*Matthew 19:3-10*)

There are two words in the Greek language which can be translated into English as “not”. One is the Greek word “me” found in the phrase “not for fornication” which is used in the context of prohibitions. There are several examples in the New Testament where the word “me” is used without a verb that explains it, and where the content of the prohibition has to be derived from the context^[4]. So Jesus is saying that something in particular should not be done in the case of fornication. From the context we can see that what should not be done is to divorce. Thus the meaning is: “not even for fornication (sexual immorality)”.

Mark 10:12 shows that in the reverse case, that is, when a wife sends her husband away, the same is true.

Matthew 19:1-12 and Mark 10:1-12 are parallel in content and speak about the same situation. In reply to the Pharisees’ question, whether it is lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause^[5] Jesus refers to the order of creation in which man and woman are one flesh and what God has joined together, man must not separate. The giving of a certificate of divorce, commanded by Moses, was allowed only because of the hardness of their hearts. God’s original will was different. Jesus “corrects” the law at this point. The indissoluble character of the marriage covenant is founded in the order of creation.

The reaction of the disciples in Matthew 19:10^[6] also shows us that what Jesus was teaching on this matter was something completely new for them. According to Jewish law, it was lawful to divorce and remarry, for instance when the wife had sinned in sexual immorality (according to Rabbi Shammai). The disciples understood from the words of Jesus, however, that according to God’s will the bond of matrimony

cannot be dissolved, not even if a man's wife commits an act of sexual immorality—and then they ask themselves whether it is advisable to marry at all. This reaction also shows that Jesus brought something new. If Jesus had taught that a husband was permitted to remarry after a divorce which was due to adultery, his teaching would have been the same as that of many other contemporary Jews and would not have been so astonishing for his disciples.

⚓ 3.3 Concerning Both Passages

In both Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 we find that the Mosaic law of the certificate of divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1) is in the background of the words of Jesus. In both passages Jesus expressed that it is not according to God's will to regard sexual immorality as a reason for divorce. As the question of the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1 was important especially for Jewish Christians, it should not surprise us that these two verses in which Jesus said that not even sexual immorality can be a reason for divorce (with the option of remarriage) are only found in Matthew [7]. Mark and Luke, whose audience was mainly non-Jewish, did not want their readers to deal with the question of how to interpret the reason for divorce mentioned in Deuteronomy 24:1 and thus omitted these words of Jesus which were directed to Jews.

Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 are in agreement with all the other words of the New Testament and do not speak about a possible reason for divorce but just the opposite—they explain that the reasons the Jews held on to were not valid.

⚓ 4 Why Was Divorce Permitted in the Old Testament, But Not Any More According to the Words of Jesus?

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 very few really strove for obedience. The majority were often disobedient. That is why God permitted divorce and remarriage in the Old Testament, because otherwise some people would have had to suffer greatly due to the sins of others. A woman who had been sent away was practically forced to remarry because she could not provide for herself, and without children she had no prospect of support in her old age. That is why Moses commanded a husband who sent his wife away to give her a certificate of divorce. This certificate was an important means of protection for her because it was proof that she was neither a prostitute nor had she had any sexual relations outside of marriage (a crime punishable by death). It showed that she had been sent away and was lawfully permitted to marry again.

To live together in obedience, love and deep unity was never attainable for the whole nation of Israel—but Jesus made this a reality in the Church. There are no unbelievers in the church [8], but every single member has decided to follow Jesus without compromise. They have all received the power of the Holy Spirit to live a life of holiness, devotion, love and obedience. It is only by understanding and practising Jesus' command to share our lives in brotherly love that we can fully comprehend the standard set by Jesus—from God's perspective, there is no such thing as divorce, and as Christians it is possible to live according to this standard. In God's eyes, a marriage is valid until the death of one of the partners. If one partner is an unbeliever, and he or she wants to separate from their 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 remarried, the Christian 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), which means that a Christian wife whose husband has separated from her will be taken care of. She will not be on her own either, because through sharing their lives in brotherly love and unity, God gives every Christian deep joy and fulfilment.

⚓ 5 How Should We Assess Marriages from One’s “Old Life” (Before Becoming a Christian)?

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (*2 Corinthians 5:17 ESV*)

Paul’s words here are very important and show that becoming a Christian involves a complete transformation. Yet this does not mean that all our commitments from the time before becoming a Christian are invalidated.

Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’! (*Matthew 5:37 ESV*)

This is especially valid for wedding vows. As already mentioned (section 3.2) Jesus based the indissolubility of marriage on the order of creation. The belief that a marriage which a person entered into before becoming a Christian is not valid and can therefore be dissolved (because becoming a Christian means beginning a new life), is a heresy and disregards Jesus’ words.

In 1 Corinthians 7:12–15 Paul writes about Christians who got married before their repentance:

(12) To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. (13) If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. (14) For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. (15) But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.

Paul’s principle is that if the unbelieving partner accepts their Christian partner’s new way of life with good will they should not separate. If a separation does occur (verse 15), Paul’s advice from verse 11[9] still applies, i.e. that the Christian is either to remain alone or reconcile with his or her partner.

At this stage, we would like to point at Romans 7:2–3 again. Here, Paul is making general statements about marriage that applies to all people, independently of whether they are believers (Christians) or not. A person is bound to his or her spouse as long as he or she is living. Only when he or she dies is it possible to enter a new marriage.

⚓ 6 Some Thoughts Concerning the Situation Today

We live in an age in which God’s intended standard for marriage, i.e. that a husband and wife share their lives in mutual faithfulness until death as they promised one another when they married, has become a rare exception. “Blended families” are becoming increasingly common. Even the teachings and practices of

various “churches” and religious groups are being influenced by this development.

In order to understand the Bible’s clear rejection of divorce with the option to remarry, it is helpful to keep in mind the positive value of marriage within God’s plan of creation. You can read more about this in our article on “[Marriage and Staying Single for God](#)”. It is also always important to consider how a general biblical teaching ought to be applied practically to each specific individual’s situation.

Jesus brought to light the original clarity in regard to the issue of divorce and remarriage. This shocked even his disciples, who were well acquainted with the practice of the Old Testament.

Among the first Christians there were certainly some (from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds) who were living in their second marriage. We cannot derive from the Holy Scriptures that these couples had to dissolve their second marriage, as they had not entered the second marriage with the awareness that they were doing something that was absolutely forbidden by God, even if Jewish believers, at least, ought to have known that God did not regard divorce as good.

Paul wrote to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:2 that an overseer must be the husband of only one wife. This shows that men who had remarried (before becoming Christians) were not allowed to be elders, but that they certainly were accepted as members of the church. In our time the practice that in the church remarried people can continue their second marriage cannot be applied in all cases. This is because the New Testament, and consequently Jesus’ clear position on this issue, are widely known. Many people are aware of the (theoretically) clear view of the Roman Catholic Church on this matter. Thus, there is a stronger awareness nowadays that entering a second marriage is wrong than at the time of the first Christians. Certainly, a lot depends on how much a person knew about God’s will at the time when he entered his second marriage. If someone remarried with the knowledge that this contradicts God’s will, this marriage cannot be considered to be a marriage according to God’s will. The problem often has deeper roots, especially if when entering one’s first marriage, a person neglected to face the spiritual questions, most importantly the question of which attitude one’s partner had towards God.

However, it is always necessary to examine each specific case and to look honestly for God’s will. Even if the result of this honest examination turns out to be that the second marriage cannot be continued, various other factors must be considered. Especially if both partners are Christians the consequence will probably not be a complete separation. In many cases there will be tasks which need to be shared, especially the task of bringing up their children. It is certainly not helpful for children to see that their parents are separated. But in such a case (if the conclusion has been reached that the second marriage cannot be continued) there will be no room for a sexual relationship within this partnership.

7 Summary and Encouragement

Jesus emphasizes that life-long faithfulness to one marriage partner is God’s will. This is visible from the way he argues that the two become one flesh and from his statement that a man should not divorce his wife. If they 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 enters into a new marriage while his original partner is alive, he is committing adultery. From God’s point of view there is no such thing as divorce. A marriage is valid as long as both partners are still alive. Jesus does not make an exception in any of these passages depending on whether the partner who was sent away was guilty or innocent.

Because Jesus makes no exceptions in Mark or Luke, he cannot have intended to make an exception in Matthew either. The reaction of the disciples also shows that in the matter 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 partner, then the Christian should allow this:

“In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you 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.

What may be hard to imagine for many is nevertheless not an unbearable burden. Through Jesus Christ a Christian has a new relationship with God. This new relationship confronts us much more strongly with what God’s holiness requires of us. A higher demand is placed on us than on the believers of the Old Testament. In this way we are made much more aware of our own weaknesses and sins and God teaches us to become fully dependent on him. Our close relationship with him gives us strength to do what goes beyond our own strength.

With him and through him the “impossible” becomes possible. God also helps us through the fellowship with brothers and sisters which every Christian needs very much. This is the fellowship with those who listen to God’s words and do them. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ, our spiritual family that remains for eternity. So even without a spouse a Christian is never on his own.

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Footnotes

1. This rendering, in contrast to the usual rendering since the Vulgate: “makes her commit adultery,” ought to underline that the adulterous act is carried out by the husband who divorces his wife. The matter is not adultery in the fullest sense (i.e. a sexual relationship with another woman), yet even divorcing one’s wife is regarded as an adulterous act.
2. You can find a detailed explanation (in German) of this proposed translation in: Karl Staab, Die Unauflöslichkeit der Ehe und die sog. “Ehebruchsklauseln” bei Mt 5,32 und 19,9: Festschrift für E. Eichmann, Paderborn 1940, pp. 435–452
3. There was, however, also a quite different interpretation of this verse. The school of Rabbi Hillel allowed divorce for many, even very trivial, reasons.
4. E.g. the Jewish leaders in Matthew 26:5 said, “Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the

people.” In this sentence the verb is missing. From the context it becomes clear that the leaders did not want Jesus to be arrested during the feast (but beforehand). The complete sentence would be: “Not during the feast (should he be arrested), lest there be an uproar among the people.”

5. Similar to Matthew 5:32 the background is the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1.
6. The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” (ESV)
7. The earliest sources which comment on Matthew’s Gospel (Papias, Irenaeus, Origen) regard this Gospel as being addressed to readers with a Jewish background. The content itself (e.g. many references to the Old Testament) lend support to this view.
8. Read more about this here: [The Church is Holy](#)
9. ...but if she does [divorce], she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband...

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