

Divorce and Remarriage

By Dr. David A. DeWitt

- *Is there a biblical basis for divorce?*
- *Does divorce end marriage or is a divorced person actually still married in God's eyes?*
- *If I'm divorced, can I remarry?*

Three Positions

With all the variations and sub-points being taught today, in Christianity there are still only three basic positions on this subject.

(1) No divorce—no remarriage

This is the traditional Roman Catholic view, and although I am not a Roman Catholic, this is the view I hold and the one I will defend in this brochure. The point here is that marriage is a lifelong (not eternal, as the Mormons say) covenant made before God and other witnesses. Divorce happens because people sin. Pursuing divorce is sin. Remarriage is sin (while your former spouse is living).

(2) Divorce and remarriage for adultery. This is the traditional Protestant view. This view says marriage is lifelong, with one exception. If either partner commits adultery, the other partner is free to, although not obligated to, get divorced and remarried. The assumption here is that freedom from marriage is freedom to remarry.

(3) Divorce and remarriage for various reasons. This is the most common view in post-modern Christianity. The view says, although marriage is designed to be lifelong and divorce is not God's ideal, many sins make it inevitable and therefore not sinful. Sins like adultery, mental stress, physical or mental abuse, and not allowing a spouse's self-fulfillment may be reasons for divorce. The point made here is that the grace of God applies to divorce just as it does to every other sin.

The Nature of Marriage

Before we can understand divorce, we must understand marriage. It would seem that marriage is (1) leaving one's childhood family, (2) cleaving to a spouse, and (3) forming a one-flesh relationship—the basis for a new family.

Malachi 2:14-16 says, ... *the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, ... she is your companion and your wife by covenant ... "For I hate divorce," says the LORD, the God of Israel . So marriage is more than physical. Essentially, it's a covenant or promise made both to God and a spouse. Marriage is bigger than the couple and not to be defined by the couple (a common post-modern practice). Marriage is defined by God and entered into by a man and a woman. [By the way, homosexual marriage is not marriage at all—it's just sin. See 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.] Therefore,*

Marriage is a covenant, a promise made between a man and a woman, before God, with witnesses, in a public place, which declares leaving, cleaving, and the establishing of a lifelong one-flesh relationship.

The Reality of Divorce

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 says, *When a man takes a wife and ... he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce ... and [she] becomes another man's wife, ... then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed*

to take her again to be his wife Referring to this passage, the disciples asked Jesus, "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" (Matthew 19:7-8).

Notice—Moses did not permit divorce as being non-sinful. He recognized it as a reality and regulated its consequences. If I murder you, and they write you a certificate of death, it does not mean your death was okay, just real. Three verses later, Moses wrote, *If a man is caught kidnapping any of his countrymen ... then that thief shall die ...* (Deuteronomy 24:7). The "if" part only recognizes the reality of the kidnapping. Surely no one would suggest Moses is approving of kidnapping just because he recognizes it. The same is true for his recognition of divorce.

What Jesus Taught about Divorce

There are three basic passages:

And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery (Matthew 19:9, see also 5:31-32).

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 10:11 -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).

These passages do not teach divorce as always being sinful, but that remarriage always is sinful.

There is not one single passage anywhere in the Bible which condones or permits or allows remarriage of a divorced person whose former spouse is living. Divorce, sometimes— remarriage, never.

The Mark and Luke references are clear. But Matthew adds *except for immorality*. This "exception clause" has been the subject of much discussion. View #2, mentioned earlier, says this justifies divorce and remarriage for adultery (or some say, for any sexual perversion). View #3 says it justifies divorce and remarriage for various sins (in which case, nearly everybody could divorce and remarry anybody at any time). But we must make one clear observation. Whatever the exception clause refers to, it is talking about divorce, not remarriage. In all three passages, Jesus says remarriage is adultery. Views #2 and #3 take Matthew as saying divorce and remarriage are permitted (non-sinful) in the case of adultery. They then impose that view on the Mark and Luke passages (and every other passage, for that matter), negating the clear teaching of those verses.

But there is an important principle of interpretation to observe here—**one passage clarifies and adds information to another passage, but it can never nullify or change its clear teaching**. For example, Jesus' discussion of the Trinity in John 14–16 adds to but does not nullify or change Deuteronomy 6:4, *The Lord is One*. So Matthew may be adding some information or clarifying something, but he cannot be contradicting Mark and Luke. Mark says *whoever*, and Luke says *everyone who*, both with the exact same meaning—no exception. If Matthew were introducing an exception, it would not be just a clarification, it would be a contradiction.

Since Jewish marriages included a betrothal period (Deuteronomy 22:25-27), and Matthew illustrates this with Mary and Joseph (Matthew 1:18-19), it seems best to understand Matthew's *except for immorality* to refer to fornication during betrothal, not adultery after marriage. Anyway, in all passages, being divorced is a disqualification for marriage.

What to Do After Divorce

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, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not send his wife away (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

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 (Romans 7:2-3).

What should we do if we are divorced? Paul says to remain single, unless your former spouse dies. Most people see this as a great burden, but if it is, why do so many people want to get divorced? If you have already remarried, confess it as sin and press on. But the mistake of views #2 and #3 is to think that the grace of God eliminates the consequences of sin. When we confess our sin, God promises to forgive us our sin (1 John 1:9), not erase its consequences.

Questions and Answers

Q: *Is there a biblical basis for divorce?*

A: There is no sin in being divorced. It is pursuing divorce or encouraging your spouse to pursue divorce that is sinful.

Q: *Does divorce end marriage or is a divorced person actually still married in God's eyes?*

A: One will never "get away from" a former spouse, as some hope. Nevertheless, it seems that divorce is real but disqualifies one for remarriage as long as the former spouse is living. Just because you are single does not qualify you for marriage. Divorce, like being the same sex or being a close relative, is a disqualification for marriage.

Q: *If I'm divorced, can I remarry?*

A: Not without sin. If you sin, confess your sin. But remember, God promises to forgive you your sin not erase its consequences.