

DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE: A SHORT BIBLICAL SYNTHESIS

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What does the Bible teach concerning the morality of divorce and remarriage? I will answer this question in two steps. First, I will examine the Biblical data to determine if divorce is ever justified, and if so, under what circumstances. Then, I will do the same for remarriage. I will conclude by considering some practical applications of the Biblical teaching.

I will argue that God's intention for marriage is that "one man and one woman become one flesh for one lifetime,"¹ but due to human sinfulness, He allows for both divorce and remarriage for the innocent party in a limited number of circumstances.

Divorce

God's ideal for marriage is that it endure for the life of the participants (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-9). Divorce was man's idea, not God's. And yet, God permitted divorce for just cause in both the OT and NT.

Old Testament

While God opposed morally unjustified divorces (Malachi 2:13-16), divorce was permitted under the Mosaic Covenant. Not only did God explicitly allow divorce for matters of indecency (Deuteronomy 24:1) and a deprivation of basic necessities (Exodus 21:10-11), but He implicitly allowed for divorce by only prohibiting it in certain, limited circumstances (Deuteronomy 22:13-19, 28-29). Even more telling is the fact that God instructed Abraham to divorce Hagar (Genesis 21:12) and personally divorced Israel for her covenant unfaithfulness (Hosea 2:2; Jeremiah 3:8). In at least one case, divorce was commanded by a religious leader as repentance for the sin of marrying pagans (Ezra 10:2-12).

Malachi 2:13-16 *You also do this: You cover the altar of the Lord with tears as you weep and groan, because he no longer pays any attention to the offering nor accepts it favorably from you.* ¹⁴ *Yet you ask, "Why?" The Lord is testifying against you on behalf of the wife you married when you were young, to whom you have become unfaithful even though she is your companion and wife by law.* ¹⁵ *No one who has even a small portion of the Spirit in him does this. What did our ancestor do when seeking a child from God? Be attentive, then, to your own spirit, for one should not be disloyal to the wife he took in his youth.* ¹⁶ *"I hate divorce," says the Lord God of Israel, "and the one who is guilty of violence," says the Lord of Heaven's Armies. "Pay attention to your conscience, and do not be unfaithful."* (NET)

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 *When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor 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, ² and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, ³ and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, ⁴ then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.*

¹I am indebted to Greg Koukl for this pithy way of putting it.

Exodus 21:10-11 When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. ⁸ If she does not please her master, who has designated her [for marriage] for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has broken faith with her. ⁹ If he designates her [for marriage] for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. ¹⁰ If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. ¹¹ And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money.

Deuteronomy 22:13-19; 28-29 If any man takes a wife and goes in to her and then hates her ¹⁴ and accuses her of misconduct and brings a bad name upon her, saying, 'I took this woman, and when I came near her, I did not find in her evidence of virginity,' ¹⁵ then the father of the young woman and her mother shall take and bring out the evidence of her virginity to the elders of the city in the gate. ¹⁶ And the father of the young woman shall say to the elders, 'I gave my daughter to this man to marry, and he hates her; ¹⁷ and behold, he has accused her of misconduct, saying, "I did not find in your daughter evidence of virginity." And yet this is the evidence of my daughter's virginity.' And they shall spread the cloak before the elders of the city. ¹⁸ Then the elders of that city shall take the man and whip him, ¹⁹ and they shall fine him a hundred shekels of silver and give them to the father of the young woman, because he has brought a bad name upon a virgin of Israel. And she shall be his wife. He may not divorce her all his days. ... ²⁸ If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are found, ²⁹ then the man who lay with her shall give to the father of the young woman fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife, because he has violated her. He may not divorce her all his days.

Genesis 16:3; 21:9-12 So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. ... ^{21:9} But Sarah saw the son of Hagar [Ishmael] the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. ¹⁰ So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac." ¹¹ And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹² But God said to Abraham, "Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named."

Hosea 2:2 "Plead with your mother, plead— for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband—that she put away her whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts;

Jeremiah 3:8 She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce. Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore.

Ezra 9:1-2,10-15; 10:2-12 ^{9:1} After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. ² For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost." ... ¹⁰ "And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, ¹¹ which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. ¹² Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.' ¹³ And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, ¹⁴ shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape? ¹⁵ O Lord, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this." ... ^{10:2} And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, addressed Ezra: "We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of

the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. ³ Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the Law. ⁴ Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it.” ⁵ Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take an oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath. ⁶ Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib, where he spent the night, neither eating bread nor drinking water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles. ⁷ And a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem, ⁸ and that if anyone did not come within three days, by order of the officials and the elders all his property should be forfeited, and he himself banned from the congregation of the exiles. ⁹ Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month. And all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain. ¹⁰ And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. ¹¹ Now then make confession to the Lord, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.” ¹² Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, “It is so; we must do as you have said.

New Testament

Jesus

While the OT allowed for divorce more broadly, Jesus made it clear that this allowance did not reflect God’s perfect will. God only permitted divorce because the Israelites’ hearts were hard (Matthew 19:7-8; Mark 10:4-5). According to Jesus, God wills that our marriages endure for life. Those who desire to be righteous are called to fulfill God’s ideal for marriage (Matthew 19:3-6; Mark 10:6-9). Nevertheless, divorce is morally justified when a spouse has committed sexual sin (Matthew 5:32; 19:9). Since the Mosaic Law does not reflect God’s perfect will for marriage, we should look to the NT rather than the OT to inform our doctrine of divorce.

Matthew 19:3-9 And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” ⁴ He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? ⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” ⁷ They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” ⁸ He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

Mark 10:4-9 They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.” ⁵ And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. ⁶ But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ⁷ ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, ⁸ and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. ⁹ What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

Matthew 5:31-32 “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² 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.”

Paul

Paul instructed those in Christian marriages to remain in their marriages. They should not divorce. If they do, however, they have two options: reconcile the relationship, remain single (1 Corinthians 7:10-

11). Christians in religiously mixed marriages should remain in their marriages. They should not initiate divorce. If, however, their unbelieving spouse divorces them because of their Christian faith, the Christian is not morally responsible for the divorce and has no moral obligation to try to reconcile the marriage (1 Corinthians 7:12-16).

1 Corinthians 7:10-16 *To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. 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. ¹⁶ For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*

Remarriage

Old Testament

There is no OT passage that prohibits remarriage following a divorce. The permissibility of remarriage is implied by the fact that only priests were prohibited from marrying a divorced woman (Ezekiel 44:22). If remarriage were prohibited for everyone, there would be no reason to specifically prohibit priests from marrying a divorced woman.

Given that principle that what is not prohibited is allowed, Deuteronomy 24:1-4 implicitly approves of remarriage by not condemning the woman's second marriage. The only remarriage God opposed was the woman's remarriage to her original husband. The fact that God prohibited their reunion is important, because it demonstrates that their marriage was truly dissolved by the divorce. God no longer viewed them as husband and wife. After all, you cannot prohibit a married couple from getting married for the simple reason that they are already married. That would make as much sense as prohibiting a person from being born. God's prohibition against their remarriage assumes that they are no longer married. If God still considered the original couple to be married in His sight, it would also be inexplicable as to why God forbade them from reconciling. Why would God prevent a married couple from living as married people? Surely God would want married people to reconcile. The fact that God prohibited them from reconciling demonstrates that He no longer considered them to be husband and wife.

Ezekiel 44:22 *They shall not marry a widow or a divorced woman, but only virgins of the offspring of the house of Israel, or a widow who is the widow of a priest.*

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 *When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor 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, ² and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, ³ and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, ⁴ then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.*

New Testament

Jesus

According to Jesus, if either spouse remarries following an unjustified divorce they are guilty of adultery – as is any person they marry (Matthew 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18). This is in stark contrast to the allowances of Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Jesus explained that the reason His teaching differed from the Deuteronomic law is because the latter did not express God's true will for marriage. It was a concession to the hardness of human hearts (Matthew 19:6-8; Mark 10:4-5). Jesus' teaching represents God's ideal as found in Genesis 2:24.

Matthew 5:31-32 *"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' ³² 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."*

Matthew 19:6-9 *So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." ⁷ They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" ⁸ He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."*

Mark 10:4-5,10-11 *They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away." ⁵ And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. ... ¹¹ And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."*

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

Adultery: Literal or Hyperbole?

How should we understand Jesus' claim that those who remarry following an unjust divorce are guilty of adultery? This could be understood literally or hyperbolically.

On the literal interpretation, Jesus is charging those who remarry with actual adultery. Given the fact that the sin of adultery can only be committed by people who are not married to one another, it follows that God does not recognize the second marriage as a legitimate marriage. Despite the legalities of the divorce, the original couple remain husband and wife in the eyes of God. The second "marriage" is no marriage at all. It is an adulterous affair.

The implications of the literal interpretation are enormous. It would mean a person is living in perpetual adultery. Adultery is a sexual sin, so if the sexual intercourse is perpetual, so is the adultery. Repentance for this sin would call for more than confession. At the very least, true repentance would require the cessation of all sexual activity in the relationship. Arguably, it would also call for ending the relationship and, ideally, reconciling to one's original spouse.

In contrast, the hyperbolic interpretation views Jesus' charge of adultery as a rhetorical device. It is an exaggeration for the sake of effect. The context of Jesus' claim supports this interpretation. Divorce was

just one of six topics Jesus addressed in the immediate context: anger (vs. 21-26), lust (vs. 27-30), divorce (vs. 31-32) the taking of oaths (vs. 33-37), personal retaliation (vs. 38-42), and the treatment of enemies (vs. 43-48). There is a discernable pattern for each of the six topics Jesus addressed. Most follow the formulaic “you have heard that it was said X, but I say to you Y” pattern. The “you have heard it said” portion includes a quotation of Mosaic Law, while the “but I say” portion expounds on the deeper meaning of that law. Jesus moves from the immoral actions proscribed by the law to the deeper issues of the heart, condemning both as morally blameworthy.

1. The law forbids murder, and unjustified anger against a brother is a form of heart-murder. Both are morally blameworthy.
2. The law forbids adultery, and looking lustfully at a woman is a form of heart-adultery. Both are morally blameworthy.
3. The law allows a man to divorce his wife, but if he divorces her without justification, he causes her to become an adulteress when she remarries. Both are morally blameworthy.
4. The law forbids the breaking of an oath, and failing to keep one’s word is a form of oath-breaking. Both are morally blameworthy.
5. The law allows for *lex talionis* retribution, but Jesus says we should not avail ourselves of this.
6. The law says we should love our neighbor, so Jews interpreted this to mean we should hate our enemies. Jesus corrects this assumption, saying we should love even our enemies.

Jesus argued that we must do more than obey the law’s external commands if we wish to exhibit God’s righteousness. We must also obey the spirit of the law, which extends to matters of the heart (attitudes, motives, etc.). In essence, Jesus was saying, “Do you think you are righteous because you have not gone so far as to physically take someone’s life? You’re not. You are guilty of heart murder if you hate your brother. Do you think you are righteous because you have not gone so far as to have sexual relations with a woman other than your wife? You’re not. You are guilty of heart adultery if you have a strong desire to have sex with another woman. Do you think you are righteous because you divorced your wife and married that woman before having sex with her? Think again. God intended your marriage to endure for life, so if you are having sex with another woman while your rightful wife is still alive, you are still guilty of heart adultery – even if you married the second woman. In fact, you are also morally culpable for your ex-wife’s adultery when she remarries.”²

Jesus’ point was not that lust is identical to and morally equivalent to actual adultery, but that it is in the same spirit as adultery. It is adultery-lite, if you will. As such, it is also morally blameworthy, though not to the same degree as adultery proper. Similarly, Jesus was not saying that remarriage following divorce is identical to and morally equivalent to adultery proper, but that it is in the same spirit as adultery, and thus also morally blameworthy. It is adultery-lite.³ One is not righteous simply because their divorce was legal.⁴ Thomas Edgar’s insights are helpful here:

The Pharisees thought that it was righteous to divorce one’s spouse as long as the legalities were observed. Jesus makes it clear that, while it is permissible to divorce, it is not *righteous*. Divorce falls short of God’s will for us and

²David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 160.

³In calling remarriage “adultery-lite,” I do not mean to imply that it is morally acceptable, but only that the immorality of the action does not rise to the level of adultery proper. Both are morally wrong, but they differ in their moral gravity.

⁴Larry Richards, *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, H. Wayne House, ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 235.

reveals human failure. In view of God's ultimate standard for us, divorce, while permissible, is still sin. And remarriage, while permissible, involves an act which measured against the ideal must be acknowledged as adultery.⁵

Jesus recognized the second marriage as a genuine marriage, but still charges the couple with sin because at least one of the partners should rightly be with their first spouse. Since there was no violation of the marriage covenant, God does not recognize the divorce as morally justified, and thus does not recognize any subsequent marriage covenants as morally justified either. The original spouses ought to be with each other. The fact that they are not with each other, but with other people, shows that they are unrighteous – not for breaking the law as written, but for violating the spirit of the law.⁶ As Jay Adams writes:

[W]hile [the marriage contract] is truly broken..., nevertheless the divorced parties *have no right in God's eyes to be in a divorced state*. They are obligated to be reconciled in remarriage so that they can renew the contract and continue to pursue their vows. ... [A]nyone who marries either of the sinfully divorced persons (who are under divine obligation to remarry one another) commits adultery as well as the divorced person he/she marries, not because he/she is still married but because he/she is obligated before God to be married. He/she has no right before God to be in an unmarried state of divorce....⁷

Understanding Jesus hyperbolically does not mean we don't take Jesus seriously. Jesus clearly charged those who remarry following an unjust divorce with sin, but the sin He charged them with was not the sin of adultery proper. Their sin is akin to adultery. It is in the same spirit as adultery, but it does not rise to the level of adultery proper. It is adultery-lite. The man who lusts is guilty of sin, but his sin is a lesser sin than actual adultery. He should not be punished in the same way an actual adulterer would be punished. In the same way, those who remarry following an unjust divorce are guilty of sin, but their sin is a lesser sin than adultery proper. They should not be punished in the same way actual adulterers would be punished. The difference, then, between the literal and hyperbolic interpretations of Jesus is not that one takes Jesus seriously while the other does not. Both take Jesus seriously and both agree that Jesus charged the remarried with sin. The two interpretations differ (1) in their assessment of the severity of the sin and (2) the appropriate form of repentance required of those who commit the sin.

Matthew 5:21-48 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. ²⁷ "You

⁵Thomas Edgar, *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, H. Wayne House, ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 233.

⁶God does not recognize the divorce and subsequent marriage as morally valid is because He, as the guarantor of the marriage covenant (Malachi 2:14-15), upholds the terms of the marriage covenant against those who treacherously violate them. While the marriage covenant is intended to endure for life, it can be nullified prior to death if one or both parties violate the terms of the covenant. If no one has violated the terms of the covenant, however, there is no basis for nullifying it prior to death. If one attempts to nullify the covenant through divorce, they are guilty of treachery against the covenant. While a human court may sanction such treachery, they do so unjustly. God, who is the just judge in a higher court, and who was personally responsible for ratifying the marriage covenant to begin with (Malachi 2:15), does not recognize the unjust decisions of unjust people. God only recognizes a divorce when the terms of the marriage covenant are violated. As such, the first husband and his wife still have a moral obligation to their marriage covenant.

⁷Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible: A Fresh Look at What Scripture Teaches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980), 67-8.

have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.³¹ "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'³² 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.³³ "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.'³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.³⁶ And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.³⁷ Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 19:9-10 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.¹⁰ The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry."

The Exception Clause

Matthew 5:32 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.

Matthew 19:9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, *except for sexual immorality*, and marries another, commits adultery."

Jesus charged those who remarried following divorce with adultery-lite, but made an exception for *porneia* (sexual immorality). In so saying, Jesus makes a distinction between unjust and just divorces. He is not condemning all divorces, but unjust divorces; i.e. divorces without a morally just cause.

There is a debate as to whether *porneia* justifies both divorce and remarriage, or only divorce. There are several reasons to think Jesus thought *porneia* justified both divorce and remarriage. First, there was general agreement in that culture that when a divorce was justified, so was remarriage. Clearly Jesus saw *porneia* as justifying divorce, so it stands to reason that He saw *porneia* as justifying remarriage as well.

Secondly, an exception functions to negate what would otherwise be true given the rule in question. If remarriage following an unjust divorce is adulterous, then remarriage following a just divorce (one caused by *porneia*) is not adulterous.

If remarriage following an unjust divorce results in adultery, then Jesus' exception must mean that remarriage does not result in adultery when the divorce is just. Jesus' point is that those who remarry following divorce are guilty of adultery, unless the divorce was caused by *porneia*. In such a circumstance, those who remarry are not guilty of adultery.

Thirdly, Jesus' exception must include the moral permission to remarry because the sin of adultery can only be committed by remarriage. Adultery is a sexual sin. That sexual sin does not take place when one divorces, but only when one remarries. If one must remarry to be charged with adultery-lite, then one can only be exempted from the charge of adultery-lite if they remarry. The same act is in view (remarriage), but one person's participation in that act is justified while another person's participation in that act is not justified. Those who remarry following an unjust divorce are guilty of adultery-lite, but those who remarry following a just divorce are not guilty of adultery-lite. The only way to make sense of Jesus' exception is if the innocent spouse remarries. She is not guilty of adultery-lite when she remarries because her divorce was justified.

Paul

Same-faith Marriages

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

In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, Paul addressed Christian spouses. He charged them that they should not divorce. Knowing that some Christians either had or would divorce anyway, he further charged those who divorce to remain single or be reconciled to each other. He did not include the option to marry someone else. This is significant. When Christians wrongly divorce, remarriage is not an option for them. Presumably, this applies to both the guilty divorcer as well as the innocent divorcee. Both must remain single for the rest of their lives (or until one spouse dies) or choose to reconcile with their rightful spouse.⁸

⁸John MacArthur says the divorcee can remarry if the divorcer later proves to be an unbeliever, or if the divorcer remarries (since reconciliation is no longer possible at that point). In saying so, he has to presume that the new marriage truly ends the original marriage, such that the divorcee is free to remarry. See John MacArthur, "Divorce and Remarriage"; available from <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/DD04/divorce-and-remarriage>; Internet; accessed 23 April 2020.

Many Evangelicals have proposed something similar. For example, Instone-Brewer suggests that the church exercise its disciplinary role to force reconciliation. If the divorcer will not submit, then s/he is to be treated as an unbeliever and excommunicated from the church. As an unbeliever, the divorcee would no longer be subject to Paul's directives in verses 10-11, but rather his directives in verses 12-16 regarding divorce by an unbeliever. Since Paul allowed the Christian to remarry when s/he was divorced by an unbeliever, the Christian would be free to remarry.

This clever line of reasoning depends on two presuppositions: (1) Church discipline is called for when a Christian divorces a Christian spouse; (2) 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 allows for the Christian to remarry after divorce. I am not convinced that either is true. Regarding (1), Paul called for church discipline in other contexts, but not here. Indeed, he specifically grants permission to divorced believers to remain in that state in verses 10-11, which is the exact opposite of the forced reconciliation being proposed by Instone-Brewer. Regarding (2), I am not persuaded that Paul frees the Christian spouse to remarry in verses 12-16, but merely frees the Christian spouse from the obligation to preserve the marriage and continue evangelizing the unbelieving spouse. I will argue for this position in my comments on 1 Corinthians 7:12-16.

Better to Marry than Burn

1 Corinthians 7:8-9,27-28 *To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am.⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion. ...²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife.²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.*

Some have found justification for remarriage in 1 Corinthians 7:8-9 and 7:27-28. In the first passage, Paul said it was good for the “unmarried and the widows...to remain single, but if they cannot exercise self-control [in their sexual passions], they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” It is argued that the “unmarried” (Greek *agamois*) includes the divorced as well as the never-married, and as such, the divorced can remarry to avoid sexual sin. Does *agamois* include divorced people? It would seem so since the same word appears in verse 11 to describe a divorced couple. At the very least this demonstrates that the semantic domain of *agamois* includes the divorced. When you couple this with the close proximity of the two words, it is entirely reasonable to believe that Paul used the same word to mean the same thing in verse eight.

While this is a decent argument *prima facie*, we need to consider the broader context. When Paul addressed the formerly-married (*agamois*) in verse 11, he excluded remarriage as an available option for them. Paul only gave the divorced Christians two options: remain single (*agamois*) or reconcile with each other. If, when specifically addressing formerly married people, Paul does not give them the option to remarry, it is highly unlikely that he has formerly-married people in mind in the more ambiguous context of verse eight where explicit permission to remarry is given. As such, it is best to interpret Paul’s reference to “the unmarried” in verse eight as only including the never-married.

Also, it is highly unlikely that Paul, in this one verse, would abrogate both his own moral teaching on remarriage as well as Jesus’. While burning with lust is bad, disobeying Jesus is worse. It is good for the never-married to marry when they burn with lust because marriage is a moral good, however, it is not good for the divorced to remarry when they burn with lust because Jesus specifically prohibited them from doing so (under most circumstances).

In 1 Corinthians 7:27-28, Paul says, “Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife.”²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned.” Some theologians argue that if “free” refers to divorce with reference to those already bound to a wife, then “free” must also refer to divorce with reference to those free from a wife. As such, Paul is addressing both married and divorced people. Since both groups are given explicit permission to marry, this passage provides explicit evidence that the divorced can remarry without sin.⁹

While this interpretation is understandable, it misidentifies those who are “free from a wife” because it ignores the context. On three occasions in this chapter Paul explicitly identifies the people/situation he is speaking to by saying “now concerning” and then identifying the group he is addressing¹⁰:

⁹Craig Keener, *Remarriage After Divorce In Today’s Church: 3 Views*, Paul Engle and Mark Strauss, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 109.

¹⁰I say “explicitly” because there are times that Paul addresses a particular group of people without introducing his comments by the “now concerning” formula. For example, he addressed married people in 7:1-7 and widows in 7:39-40 without using this formula.

- In verse 8, Paul addressed the unmarried and widows
- In verse 10, Paul began to address married people
- In verse 25, Paul began to address betrothed people

The passage in question appears in the section specifically addressed to those who are betrothed. This section spans verses 25-38. Those who are “bound to a wife” are those who are betrothed to be married, while those who are “free from a wife” are those who have ended their betrothal. It must be remembered that in the Ancient Near East (ANE) a betrothal was legally binding, and the betrothed were considered to be married (even before consummating the marriage and living together as a married couple). The way one ended a betrothal was the same way one ended a consummated marriage: divorce via a certificate of divorce.¹¹ Given how the Corinthians had been responding to the present circumstances¹² (ceasing sexual relations with their spouse, divorcing their spouses, etc.), it is likely that some of those who were betrothed had already ended their betrothal in divorce, prompting the Corinthians to ask Paul for direction in this matter. Paul advised Christian men currently betrothed to a woman¹³ that there was no need to end his betrothal, and advised Christian men who had already ended their betrothal that they should not seek another betrothal/marriage. If they chose to do so, however, it was not sinful. He was not addressing the divorced and giving them permission to remarry.¹⁴

Mixed-faith Marriages

1 Corinthians 7:12-16 *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. ¹⁶ For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*

While there is no evidence that Paul allowed for remarriage writ large, many have argued that Paul allowed for remarriage in at least one circumstance not mentioned by Jesus, namely the situation in which a believer is divorced by his/her unbelieving spouse. In 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 Paul said that if an unbelieving spouse is happy to remain married to the Christian, the Christian should not divorce him/her. If, however, the unbelieving spouse wants a divorce, Paul said to “let it be so” and assured them that they are “not enslaved” in such circumstances. Many theologians have interpreted “not enslaved” to mean the marriage has been absolved. And if the marriage has been absolved, they argue, the Christian is free to contract a new marriage.¹⁵ If the believer is unable to remarry, then s/he is not free, but still bound to their former marriage. “Not bound” is equivalent to “you are free to marry any

¹¹Instone-Brewer, 276.

¹²Paul is not clear regarding what these circumstances were, but it was likely some form of persecution. Whatever it was, Paul’s instructions to the betrothed were influenced by it. It was due to the present circumstances that he advised the betrothed not to marry (v. 26) but to live in the state that God called them (vs. 17-24).

¹³The Greek word *gune* can mean woman or wife, depending on the context. It could be translated either way. From a legal perspective, the woman was his wife, and thus it could legitimately be translated as “wife.” And yet, because they had not yet consummated the marriage to live as a married couple, it could legitimately be translated as “woman.”

¹⁴William Heth and Gordon Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce: The Problem with the Evangelical Consensus* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), 147.

¹⁵Instone-Brewer, 189-91. Samuele Bacchiocchi, *The Marriage Covenant: A Biblical Study on Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* (Biblical Perspectives, 2006), available from <http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/books/marriage/4.html>; Internet; accessed 01 June 2015

man” in the divorce certificate.¹⁶ As such, Paul is affirming that the Christian is free to remarry. They find in this passage, then, a second justification for remarriage, namely desertion¹⁷/divorce by their unbelieving spouse.

I am not persuaded by this line of reasoning. First, the context supports interpreting “bound” to refer to the Christian’s obligation to preserve the marriage and evangelize the unbelieving spouse, not divorce. “Not enslaved” does not mean a Christian is free to remarry after being divorced, but rather that they are not obligated to preserve the marriage for the sake of evangelizing their unbelieving spouse or sanctifying their house.¹⁸ Indeed, interpreting “not enslaved” as permission to remarry makes no sense of the context. Paul provides two reasons for concluding that the Christian is “not enslaved”: “the brother or the sister is not bound in such cases” and “God has called us to peace.” Both reasons are connected together by the Greek conjunction *de* (but). Why would Paul say, “A woman is free to remarry, *but God has called us to peace*”? What does peace have to do with remarriage? Peace is an interpersonal concept; i.e. it describes the quality of relationship between two people. What two people does Paul have in view? Surely it is the unbelieving and believing spouses who have divorced. Paul wants there to be peace in that relationship. There would be no peace, however, if the believing spouse continued to pester the unbelieving spouse to reconcile the relationship. That is why Paul relieves them of the burden of attempting to reconcile. This is in stark contrast to Paul’s admonition to believing spouses who divorced. When both spouses are believers, he admonishes them to reconcile with each other (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

Second, the permission to remarry interpretation also makes a fictitious distinction between mixed-faith and same-faith marriages, allowing remarriage following an unjust divorce for the former group but disallowing it for the latter. Why think the two should be treated differently? A marriage is a marriage regardless of the faith commitment of the participants. Marriages involving two believers are just as real and valid as marriages involving two unbelievers or marriages involving one believer and one unbeliever. Anything that would justify the divorce of a mixed-faith marriage would also justify the divorce of a same-faith marriage. If the justifications for divorce are the same for both mixed-faith and same-faith marriages, then the justifications for remarriage ought to be the same for both groups as well. It would be inexplicable, then, why Paul would allow a Christian to remarry who was unjustly divorced by his/her unbelieving spouse, but not permit a Christian to remarry who was unjustly divorced by his/her believing spouse.¹⁹ Both were unjustly divorced, so why is remarriage justified for one group but not the other? This reading of Paul leads to a strange conclusion: It is better for a Christian to be married to an unbeliever than to a believer, because being married to an unbeliever will allow the Christian spouse to remarry in the event of a divorce, whereas they do not have that option if they marry a Christian. If your theology incentivizes being married to an unbeliever, something is amiss. What is amiss is the interpretation of “not enslaved” to mean “free to remarry.” If Paul meant to say the Christian was free

¹⁶William Heth, *Remarriage After Divorce In Today’s Church: 3 Views*, Paul Engle and Mark Strauss, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 75; Instone-Brewer, 202; Craig Keener, *...And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Peabody, M: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 61.

¹⁷Most people speak of this situation as one of “desertion,” but this implies that it is something other than divorce. The same Greek word *chorizo* is used in verse 10 to refer to divorce. In the ANE, a man could divorce his spouse simply by leaving the household. This is different from our modern context in which a spouse can desert his/her family but still be legally married.

¹⁸John Piper, “Divorce & Remarriage: A Position Paper”; available from <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/divorce-and-remarriage-a-position-paper>; Internet; accessed 23 May 2015. Robert Gagnon, “Divorce and Remarriage-After-Divorce in Jesus and Paul: A Response to David Instone-Brewer”; available from <http://www.robagnon.net/DivorceOUPEntrySexuality.htm>; Internet; accessed 29 June 2020.

¹⁹Luck; Laney, 43.

to remarry, he could have clearly said so like he did in verses 8 and 28. He did not.

Practical Application

When it comes to the practical application of the Biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage, we need to make a distinction between the direct teaching of Scripture and the theological/logical/practical extensions of those Biblical teachings. While some questions regarding divorce and remarriage are directly answered by Scripture, many are not. For example, is the guilty party allowed to remarry if they repent of their sin? Is remarriage morally permissible if one's divorce occurred prior to their conversion? Is the innocent spouse who was divorced unjustly allowed to remarry once his/her spouse forms a one-flesh union with someone else? Scripture does not address such questions directly, so we have to do our best to think through these situations in light of Biblical principles and wisdom. The questions we will consider are as follows:

1. Do divorced people have the option for remarriage?
2. Does remarriage following an invalid divorce result in perpetual adultery?
3. How should we respond to those who wrongly divorced and/or remarried?
4. How does repentance factor into the equation?
5. How does conversion factor into the equation?

Do divorced people have the option for remarriage?

There is only one person in one circumstance for whom Jesus explicitly permitted both divorce and remarriage: the person whose spouse commits *porneia* against them (Matthew 19:9). Presumably, all other people in all other circumstances are morally prohibited from divorcing and/or remarriage. "All other people" includes what we often call the "guilty spouse" as well as the "innocent spouse" in an unjust divorce. Let's consider both in reverse order.

The Innocent Spouse

While the innocent spouse who is the victim of *porneia* is permitted to divorce the guilty spouse and remarry, the innocent spouse who is the victim of an unjust divorce is not free to remarry. Jesus said that when a man unjustly divorces his wife, he causes her to commit adultery when she remarries (Matthew 5:32) as well as the man who married her (Matthew 5:32; Luke 16:18).

What if the guilty spouse remarries or commits sexual sin after the divorce? Does this end the one-flesh marital union and free up the innocent spouse to remarry? Possibly so. After all, if sexual sin committed *prior to a divorce* allows the innocent spouse to divorce and remarry, wouldn't the same moral permissions be given if the guilty spouse commits sexual sin *after the divorce*? If sexual sin is sufficient to justify divorce and remarriage prior to a divorce, surely it is sufficient to justify remarriage following a divorce. The only difference is when the sexual sin occurs. Jesus' exception would still seem to apply. Arguably, the innocent spouse is morally permitted to divorce the guilty spouse and remarry. Since a legal divorce has already transpired, the only change is in the court of heaven.

The Guilty Spouse

The spouse who is guilty of *porneia* is not free to divorce his spouse, but can be divorced by his spouse. Once divorced, he has no moral right to remarry until after his ex-spouse dies. If he remarries prior to her death, he is guilty on two counts: the first for his *porneia*, and the second for his remarriage (Matthew 5:32; 19:9). This seems right. If the guilty party was allowed to remarry, it would be a reward for both his sexual sin and for the ensuing divorce.²⁰ Why should he be rewarded for his unfaithfulness to his marriage covenant by being allowed to contract a new marriage covenant with someone else?

If the guilty party is prohibited from remarrying when *porneia* is involved, how much more when it is not? To divorce one's spouse without justification is treachery, and thus the divorce is not recognized by God. That is why Jesus said the man who unjustly divorces his wife commits adultery-lite when he remarries (Matthew 19:9; Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18). If he wants to do God's will, he must remain single or, presumably, reconcile with his wife before she remarries.

This is in stark contrast to the teaching of many Protestants who would say that such a man can remarry once his ex-wife remarries. Not only did Jesus call both remarriages "adultery" in Luke 16:18, but it would be a moral mockery to say the innocent spouse is guilty of adultery when she remarries, but the guilty spouse is not so long as he waits to remarry until after his ex-wife has done so. How could the spouse who ruined his first marriage be considered guiltless in contracting a new marriage while his innocent ex-wife is considered an adulterer for doing the same? The timing of one's remarriage seems morally trivial.

Perpetual adultery?

We already demonstrated that Jesus did not mean those who remarry after an unjust divorce are guilty of adultery proper, but rather adultery-lite. However, that does not settle the question as to whether or not this lesser sin is a one-time event or perpetual.

The logic of Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage strongly suggests that those who remarry after an invalid divorce are committing a perpetual sin. While adultery-lite is not as bad as adultery proper, nevertheless, it still sinful and it is still perpetual since adultery refers to the sexual act, and that act is perpetual. In the same way the sin of the perpetually lustful man is less sinful than adultery proper, but sinful and perpetual nonetheless, likewise the sin of the remarried man may be less sinful than adultery proper, but it is sinful and perpetual nonetheless.

How Should We Respond to Those Who Wrongly Divorced and/or Remarried?

If remarriage following an invalid divorce means one is living in perpetual adultery-lite, how are we to respond? What is the proper form of repentance? There are at least four levels of repentance one might require:

²⁰Adams argues that the innocent spouse is only guilty of adultery if his first wife divorced him without justification. If, however, she divorced him for committing *porneia*, he is free to remarry (p. 53). This makes no sense. It would mean that a husband wrongly divorced by his wife cannot remarry but a husband rightly divorced by his wife can. If a man's first marriage ended because his spouse wanted a wealthier man, he can't remarry without committing sin. But if his first marriage ended because he was cheating on his wife, he can remarry and it's holy? This is completely counter-intuitive, and dare I say immoral and unjust.

1. Acknowledgement that one's divorce and remarriage was sinful, and confession of their sin to God
2. The above, plus abstaining from all sexual relations
3. The above, plus a legal divorce
4. The above, plus a reconciliation to one's first spouse

There is no question that level #1 repentance is required. One must confess their sin to God. However, levels #2-4 would only be appropriate forms of repentance if the second marriage was not a bona fide marriage. On the hyperbolic interpretation of Jesus, while those in the remarriage are guilty of sin, they are not guilty of adultery proper. While the woman may have sinned by divorcing her husband and then sinned again by contracting another marriage, the fact of the matter is that the second marriage is a bona-fide marriage. The couple should not have gotten married, but they did. Now that a new marriage has been contracted, they are married. As such, they should engage in sexual relations and should not divorce or attempt to reconcile with their first spouse.

Jesus' purpose in affirming that remarriage following an unjust divorce results in adultery-lite was to encourage people to remain faithful to their spouses, not to institute new legislation for punishing those who have not followed God's ideal for marriage. As Instone-Brewer noted, "[J]ust as someone who hates his brother is not to be prosecuted for murder, so one who has married is not to be accused in court of committing adultery."²¹ Likewise, in the same way that Jesus was not suggesting the lustful man be prosecuted for adultery, He was not suggesting that the remarried be prosecuted for adultery. It is worth quoting Thomas Edgar at length to reinforce this point:

Remember that in Matthew 5 Christ's teaching on divorce immediately follows after his teaching on murder and adultery, and it follows the pattern they establish. In this pattern Christ states a law which deals with an *action*, then moves beyond behavior to deal with *motive*. In the case of murder, Jesus condemns the anger which motivates it. In the case of adultery, Jesus condemns the lust from which it springs. While the law can deal with acts of sin, no legislation can address a person's hidden motives and desires. In teaching this, Jesus was not calling for new laws that would impose the penalty for murder on a person who shouted out angrily at a brother. Christ was not suggesting a law that would impose the penalty for adultery on a person whose eyes lit up with lust at the sight of a beautiful woman. Jesus' teaching was obviously not a call for new social legislation. It was a demand that each listener face that he or she had violated the spirit of the Law, if not the letter of the Law! If the true implications of Mosaic Law are rightly understood, then no one can claim to be righteous. Who would be so foolish as to call for laws that apply the penalty for murder to anger or the penalty for adultery to lust? Neither is Christ attempting to impose a new law against divorce and remarriage. It would be inconsistent at best to contend such when the two parallel teachings do no such thing!²²

I think Edgar hit on an important point when he said, "If the true implications of Mosaic Law are rightly understood, then no one can claim to be righteous." I think this is one of the main themes of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Many have noted that some of Jesus' teachings in the Sermon seem impossible to keep. For example, who hasn't been angry with his brother (5:22)? How is it possible to live one's entire life without ever getting angry? We are told to give to the one who begs of us and not to refuse the person who asks to borrow from us (5:42). If applied literally and consistently, every Christian would be broke. We would be forced to lend money to those we know will not repay. Unbelievers would take advantage of us. Or consider the Golden Rule (7:12). As much as we may strive to live this way, none of us can be so selfless that we always treat others the way we want to be treated. What about our

²¹Instone-Brewer, 183.

²²Edgar, 235.

motives? Even the best of us have felt our hearts desiring the praise of men when we give, pray, and fast (6:1-18).

Jesus raised the standard for righteousness extremely high. In fact, He required moral perfection. In Matthew 5:48 Jesus said we “must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” People have tried to explain this away by saying the Greek word could be translated as “complete” instead of “perfect,” but this will not do. Jesus wasn’t telling us to be complete as the Father is complete. He was telling us to be perfect like God, echoing the Old Testament teaching that we are to “be holy” just as God is holy (Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26). God is our moral standard. One might protest, “But it’s impossible to be morally perfect like God!” Exactly! That’s the point Jesus is trying to make. The Sermon on the Mount is intended to show us just how unrighteous we are. Even when our actions may be righteous, our heart and motives are not. None of us can ever attain to all that Jesus taught in the Sermon. We may be able to keep a part here and there, but at the end of the day, the Sermon will reveal more of our unrighteousness than our righteousness. It is an ideal that we strive for, but cannot fully attain.

This point should not be lost on the current discussion. Jesus set forth God’s ideal for marriage. Those who fail that ideal fall short of God’s righteousness. Those who divorce and remarry may have been considered righteous according to the Mosaic Law, but not when measured against God’s righteousness and God’s ideal. An unjust remarriage following an unjust divorce falls short of God’s righteousness. If we want to be perfect like God, we will not divorce for unjust reasons and/or will not remarry. To do so may not be as unrighteous as adultery proper, but it is unrighteous nonetheless. Those who truly hunger for righteousness (Matthew 5:6) will seek to fulfill God’s ideal for marriage.

Jesus’ point is not so much to judge those who have already wrongly divorced and remarried, but to make it clear to those who are married that God wants them to preserve their marriage. They should be seeking God’s ideal rather than following their hard-hearted ways of divorcing and remarriage frivolously. If Jesus was not calling for a new law to deal with those who wrongly remarry (and He did not), then it would be wrong-headed to treat those who remarry as actual adulterers and penalize them accordingly. While the unjust divorce puts a moral stigma on the remarriage, it is still a genuine marriage, and as such, it is morally acceptable to continue in that marriage.

Add to this the fact that there is nothing in the NT that commands those who have wrongly divorced and remarried to divorce their second spouse or cease sexual relations. When Paul addressed believers who wrongly divorced, he did not use church discipline to force their reconciliation (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). If Paul would not command believers who had wrongly divorced to reconcile, surely he would not have commanded believers who had wrongly divorced and remarried to end their second marriage. We should encourage those who have wrongly divorced to reconcile with their spouse and charge them not to remarry. We should inform those who have wrongly remarried that they have sinned by doing so, and encourage them to confess their sin to God, and if possible, confess their sin to their original spouse. It will do no good at that point, however, to demand that they cease sexual relations, get a divorce, or reconcile to their first spouse.

How does repentance factor into the equation?

Forgiveness stands at the center of the Christian faith. What role, then, does repentance and forgiveness play when it comes to divorce and remarriage? Are those who are prohibited from remarriage due to an unjust divorce permitted to do so if they repent? Does the morally illegitimate second marriage become morally legitimate if both parties repent for their adultery-lite? Many theologians would answer in the

affirmative. So long as the woman acknowledges her sin to God and makes a good faith effort to reconcile with her spouse (if he is not remarried), she is free to remarry.

There are at least two problems with this line of reasoning: (1) It wrongly assumes that forgiveness erases all consequences for sin; (2) It effectively nullifies Jesus' teaching.

Wrongly Assumes that Forgiveness Erases All Consequences for Sin

While God may absolve a person of their moral guilt when they repent, that does not mean there are no enduring consequences for their sinful behavior. David was forgiven for his murder and adultery, but the child produced by his adulterous affair still died. Similarly, while God will forgive a person for acting treacherously against his/her spouse, there are still consequences for the sin, namely the inability to remarry.

If one is unable to reconcile with their spouse, they must remain single. They cannot remarry. If they marry someone else, they would be guilty of adultery-lite. Would God forgive a person who does so? Of course, but that does not mean it is morally acceptable. God would also forgive a person for committing theft or adultery, but no one suggests that this gives us moral permission to do these things. A true disciple of Jesus who is committed to loving Jesus by obeying His teachings would not knowingly and intentionally disobey Jesus' teaching by remarrying on the basis that God will forgive him/her for doing so (Romans 6:1-7; Titus 2:11-14; 1 John 2:4; 5:18; Jude 4). One would have to question the spiritual state, commitment, and sincerity of any Christian who plans both their future sin and their future repentance.

Effectively Nullifies Jesus' Teaching

If one could remarry after an unjust divorce simply by repenting of their sin, then Jesus' teaching would be effectively nullified. A woman could divorce her husband simply because they do not get along, ask God to forgive her, and then remarry. A man could commit *porneia*, get a divorce, remarry, then ask God to forgive him and go on his merry way. If anyone who repents of a wrongful divorce can get remarried without sin, to whom does Jesus' teaching apply? Who is prohibited from remarrying, and under what circumstances? In many churches today, divorce is accepted for virtually any reason, and no remarriage is prohibited. Jesus' teaching is being ignored in the name of forgiveness.

If merely confessing one's sin can abrogate Jesus' teaching, then why did the disciples conclude from Jesus' teaching that it is better not to marry at all? It would be easy to get around Jesus' teaching. Just marry, divorce, repent, and then you are free to marry again. The disciples' conclusion only makes sense if they rightly understood Jesus to mean that the grounds for divorce and remarriage were very narrow, and few would "qualify." While the guilty spouses do need to repent of their sin, there is no reason to believe that such repentance erases the consequences of their sin. While God may forgive them for what they did, that forgiveness is not grounds for a new marriage. Forgiveness for one sin does not entail the permission to commit another sin (remarriage).

How Does Conversion Factor Into the Equation?

While some would agree that repentance does not nullify Jesus' teaching, they believe conversion does. If someone divorced their spouse – or was divorced by their spouse – for reasons other than *porneia* prior to becoming a Christian, they are said to be exempt from Jesus' teaching. They can remarry, or if

already remarried, their new marriage is morally legitimate. There are two reasons provided for this conclusion, neither of which are adequate.

One could argue that their ignorance of Jesus' teaching prior to their conversion means they are exempt from it. They did not know that divorce was wrong, so they are free to remarry now that they are a Christian. The problem with this line of reasoning is that the Christian is not ignorant of Jesus' teaching regarding remarriage. They may have been ignorant of Jesus' teaching when they divorced as an unbeliever, but when they remarry as a believer, they are fully aware of Jesus' teaching that remarriage following an unjust divorce is adultery-lite. Their sin is not based on ignorance, but knowledge.

The second reason one may offer for thinking a new convert is exempt from Jesus' teaching is the fact that they have been forgiven of their pre-conversion sins. If one of those pre-conversion sins was an illegitimate divorce or illegitimate remarriage, they are forgiven. They are starting from a new slate now. "The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). This line of reasoning collapses into the same line of reasoning we examined previously. If God's forgiveness does not erase sin's consequences, why think this is only true for Christians who sin as Christians and not for sinners who sinned while sinners? Sin is sin, and the consequences for sin are the same for the new convert as well as the long-time Christian. It is only the Christian, however, who is willing to accept those consequences. When we tell new converts that they do not have to obey Jesus' teaching because they sinned prior to conversion, we are telling them that they do not have to accept the consequences that Jesus deemed appropriate for their sin. When the sin occurred is irrelevant.

Those who think conversion affects the applicability of Jesus' teaching fail to understand the logic of Jesus' teaching. Jesus declared that as a matter of fact, anyone who wrongly divorces his spouse and remarries commits adultery-lite. Whether they know it or not, both their divorce and their second marriage is morally wrong. There is no hint that this is only true for believers. These truths apply to anyone who has been married – believer and unbeliever alike. Indeed, the people to whom Jesus provided this teaching were not followers of Jesus (Matthew 19), and yet Jesus believed His teaching was applicable to them as well. Why? Because Jesus was communicating God's perspective on marriage and divorce. God doesn't have one perspective for believers and another for non-believers. God's perspective on marriage applies to all humans, whether they are believers or not. Given the logic of Jesus' teaching, I see no reason to think Jesus' teaching only applies to people after they become Christians. Marriage covenants, and our moral obligations to those covenants, are not dissolved upon conversion.

Conclusion

While the Bible acknowledges legitimate reasons for divorce in both testaments, divorce is always a tragedy and should be avoided if possible. Jesus called us back to God's ideal for marriage: one woman and one man becoming one flesh for one lifetime. If God joins us together in marriage, we should be looking for ways to preserve the marriage rather than looking for reasons to end it.²³ Nevertheless, Jesus believed that sexual sin provided moral justification for the innocent spouse to divorce and remarry. Divorce and remarriage for any other reason is sinful – except, perhaps, for a few other extenuating and abnormal circumstances.

²³Even where grounds for divorce exist, divorce is permissible rather than required. We should hope for repentance and work toward restoration rather than seek a divorce.

When divorce is justified, so is remarriage. Likewise, when divorce is not justified, neither is remarriage. Only the innocent spouse who was victimized by *porneia* has the moral right to divorce and remarry. Arguably, the innocent spouse who was victimized by an unjust divorce can also remarry after their ex-spouse has committed sexual sin or remarried. For everyone else, it is wrong to divorce and wrong to remarry. Those who have unjustly divorced their spouse need to reconcile or remain single. If they have already remarried, they must acknowledge their sin and repent. Repentance, however, never gives us permission to disobey Jesus' teaching.