

Matthew 19:3-9

Divorce

3 The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?"

4 And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,'

5 "and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?"

6 "So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

7 They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?"

8 He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted 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; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."

In these verses the clear intention of the Pharisees is to trap Christ, by setting before him a question probably intended to put him at odds with one of the two schools of Rabbinical interpretation of the commands of Moses in Deut. 24:1-4

Deuteronomy 24:1 "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house,

2 "when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's wife,

3 "if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife,

4 "then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

You will remember from the sermon last week that there were schools in Judaism who viewed the word "uncleanness" (*ervah*) as meaning anything from "finds someone prettier" to "burns a meal".

If he were to answer affirmatively, those who had taken a strict view of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 would be offended, while if he answered no, the party of loose interpretation would take offense.

So how does Jesus answer the question? He immediately appeals back to the teaching of scripture and points out that this is not primarily a question about divorce but rather it is a question about the nature of marriage and the sinfulness of men's hearts. Christ begins by pointing out that God gave marriage as a creation ordinance and that in turn it was never intended to be put asunder. That this was intended to be a one flesh relationship for life.

The Pharisees then ask why if that was the case did Moses command that a man give his wife a bill of divorcement and send her away? This is an important turn of phrase. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 does not contain a command to obtain a divorce, it regulates divorces if they occur. Christ points this out, by telling them that "Moses permitted you to divorce..." not commanded. Jesus then goes on to explain

why this was permitted – "because your hearts were hard". In other words, because after the fall men were prone to sin and because of this sin divorces would occur, but not that they should occur. He drives this point home, that it was not so from the beginning. Had not the fall occurred, sin would not have entered in and marriages would have remained indissoluble.

Christ goes even further in showing under what circumstance sin makes divorce possible, namely marital unfaithfulness. He then prohibits divorce under other circumstances by saying that all divorces for other reasons are illegitimate, and thus if a spouse remarries following such an illegitimate divorce, they are guilty of adultery, for the original covenant bond of marriage had not been severed in this case.

The word translated in the above verse as sexual immorality is the Greek word *porneia*, which is usually rendered fornication. Here again the Lord's choice of words is important, for if Christ had wanted to say "except for adultery" he could have done so. The Greek word for adultery is *moikeia*. His reasons for not using *moikeia* have been an issue for debate even within the reformed community. Some have inferred that by not using the word for adultery (which would mean sexual sin within the marriage covenant) Christ was indicating circumstances in which that marriage covenant had not yet come into being, (i.e. sexual sin during the engagement period). This thesis however is doubtful.

It is likely that what *porneia* does refer to is sexual sin of any and all sorts, by both married and unmarried people, therefore fornication is given as a reason for the dissolution of an engagement and divorce. Also, the scope of sexual sin is expanded outside of just intercourse with a third party during marriage to include all sexual relations outside of the marriage covenant.

Once again, it is worth noting that Christ does not frame his admonishment in terms of a **command** to divorce. It is clear that he is outlining the only grounds under which it is acceptable to divorce, not commanding that if the grounds in which a divorce may take place are fulfilled, that a divorce must take place. As Murray says: "**It does not intimate... that the man is obligated to divorce his wife in the event of adultery on her part. It simply accords the right or liberty.**"¹¹ Again we see that there is no positive command (especially in the way in which the Pharisees framed their question) to divorce. This reinforces the teaching that we see again and again in the bible, that divorce is something that has come about because of sin.

To quote Jay Adams, "*God did not originate the concept as part of His order for society. Divorce, then, is a human innovation.*"¹² *Because it has happened, God has set forth regulations that restrain the circumstances in which divorce may occur, but we grievously err if we assume that we are ever presented with a positive command to divorce.*

This is not the only passage in the gospels where Jesus discusses divorce. Discussions of divorce also occur in Mark 10:11-12, Luke 16:18, and Matthew 5:31-32. In all cases the teaching of our Lord regarding divorce is consistent – with one critical difference. Only the passages in the gospel according to Matthew contain the exceptive clause "except for marital unfaithfulness (*porneia*)." Both Mark and Luke simply say that everyone who puts away his wife and marries another commits adultery.

Since I believe it would be intellectually dishonest to ignore the omission at this juncture, I will readily admit that I find the explanation given by Loraine Boettner to be the simplest and most plausible:

The Gospels do not always give our Lord's teaching in full, and in this instance as in numerous others Matthew simply gives a more complete account. Compare, for instance, the fullness with which Matthew reports the Sermon on the Mount, three full chapters, 5, 6, 7, and Luke's abbreviated account given in thirty verses (6:20-49). The accounts concerning the baptism of Jesus, the crucifixion, the inscription on the cross, and the resurrection, are given in greater detail by Matthew than by Mark or Luke. Most commentators take the view that there is no conflict between Matthew and Mark and Luke, but that Matthew has simply given a fuller report.¹³

If we assume, and it seems likely, that Matthew simply gave us more detail as to what Christ actually said, the practice of zeroing in on Matthew when examining the Lord's teaching on divorce is extremely wise.

So we see therefore that Christ again reiterates the fact that divorce is the result of sin, is never good or commanded, but is permissible in the case of adultery. We are also clearly instructed that remarriage after a divorce for unbiblical reasons is adultery (and presumably bigamy). This leaves us with the question, is remarriage after a divorce identified by Christ as legitimate permissible? On this question the church has historically been divided. Roman Catholicism clearly answers "no" to this question, but the Roman Catholic church also regards marriage as "absolutely indissoluble"¹⁴ and tends to either ignore the exception clause present in the verses in Matthew or to regard the exception clause as applying only to "divorces his wife" in verse 9 of Matthew 19, but not to "marries another woman". In all fairness, this was also the solution adopted by Augustine, so it is not entirely without ecclesiastical pedigree.

This interpretation maintains that separation for adultery is permissible, but does not allow for the remarriage of either party. Most Reformed commentators feel that this position is untenable for three major reasons.

First, there is no support in the Greek for restricting the exceptive clause to the divorce and not extending it to the remarriage.

Second, Christ here is not merely discussing divorce, he is also discussing remarriage. Indeed in the sentence it is assumed that the party obtaining a divorce will remarry.

Thirdly, and most importantly, Christ is not here attempting to say that the teaching of Moses regarding divorce was wrong, but rather that the loose interpretation of it as being allowed for any and every reason was wrong. Therefore, as Murray points out "Jesus does not in any way suggest any alteration in the nature and the effect of divorce." Divorce in Mosaic Law was considered to be a dissolving of the marriage bond, therefore if the Marriage Bond was legitimately dissolved by the fornication of one member, then remarriage cannot be forbidden as this would introduce a concept entirely "alien" to scripture:

Divorce and Remarriage of Calvin's Brother Anthony - Anthony Calvin, the brother of the Reformer, had for his first wife Anne de Fer, the daughter of a refugee of Arras, whom he divorced for adultery. Viret wrote on this occasion to Calvin: "What you write to me of this domestic sorrow very much distresses me. It was not enough for the vile woman to have once offended in so disgraceful a manner the whole church, and troubled and discredited so pious a family. May God have pity on her. Do you in your wisdom moderate your distress of mind." Letter of the 9th January 1557. (Library of Geneva, volume 107 a.)

The divorce was pronounced a short time afterwards, as the Registers of the Council of the 15th February 1557 testify: "Anthony Calvin obtained his divorce on account of the adultery of his wife, who is banished on pain of being publicly whipped." Anthony Calvin married the 14th January 1560, Antoinette Commelin, the widow of the minister John de Saint-Andre, by whom he had several children, mentioned, as well as those of the former marriage, in the Testament of the Reformer.

It is surely reasonable to assume that if the man may legitimately put away his wife for adultery the marriage bond is judged to be dissolved. On the other supposition the woman who has committed adultery and who has been put away is still in reality the man's wife and is one flesh with him. To take action that relieves of the obligations of matrimony while the marital tie is inviolable hardly seems compatible with marital ethics as taught in the Scripture itself. It is true that Paul distinctly contemplates the possibility of separation without dissolution and propounds what the law is in such a contingency (1 Cor. 7:10-11). But to provide for and sanction permanent separation while the marriage tie remains inviolate is something that is alien to the whole tenor of Scripture teaching in regard to the obligations that inhere in and are inseparable from the marital bond. (Boettner)

Another issue that must be taken into consideration is the fact that to view Jesus as teaching in the Gospel that remarriage after divorce on the grounds of marital infidelity is impermissible opens the possibility of setting his teaching at odds with that of Paul in his letter to the Corinthians. Paul there writes:

27 Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife.

28 But even if you do marry, you have not sinned; (1 Cor. 7:27-28a NKJV)

Here commentators such as Jay Adams, believe that Paul is giving clear instruction that remarriage after divorce is permissible, but not recommended. His criteria for doing so is that the word *luo* meaning loosed. Clearly loosed can only mean divorced, and it would seem clear that for the second instance of "loosed" to make sense, it must mean the same as thing as in the first case. Therefore, to be remarried after a (we would presume legitimate) divorce is not to sin.

So then we see that while it is not explicitly stated, the evidence would strongly suggest that remarriage after a divorce for legitimate reasons is permissible. But this leaves us to question, is fornication the only reason for which a divorce may be lawfully granted?

In his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul indicates to us that there is one other circumstance under which divorce may legally occur – the desertion of a believer by an unbeliever:

10 Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband.

11 But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife.

12 But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her.

13 And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him.

14 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.

15 But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. (1 Cor. 7: 10 - 15)

Paul also includes a notable appeal to the providential workings of God in the following verse (16):

16 For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

This is undoubtedly given as an added reason for a believer not to leave the unbeliever to whom they are unequally yoked.

Before addressing the teaching of this passage in general it is important that we examine what Paul meant by the parenthetical expressions in verses 10 and 12 (i.e. "not I, but the Lord" and "I, not the Lord"). Do these parentheses break the teaching of Paul in these verses into two groups? The first being instruction from the Lord and the second being godly personal advice?

Both Reformed doctrine and the Bible that it is based on tell us there is no such thing as "uninspired" scripture:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16)

"Scripture is the Word of God. Again, the selfsame apostle to the Thessalonians: When, says he, you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it, not as the word of men but as what it really is, the Word of God, etc. (1 Thess. 2:13.) For the Lord himself has said in the Gospel, It is not you who speak, but the Spirit of my Father speaking through you; therefore he who hears you hears me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me (Matt. 10:20; Luke 10:16; John 13:20)."16

The distinction that Paul is making in verses 10 and 11, is between what Christ specifically taught in his earthly ministry and what Paul is now teaching. Verse 10 and 11 are, therefore, a recapitulation of the teaching of Christ in his earthly ministry. Verse 11 indicates the beginning of Paul's specific teaching on issues concerning divorce that have arisen amongst the gentile Christians of the Corinthian congregation. These were not issues during the ministry of Christ so they were not addressed. Here it is important to note that in these sections of Corinthians Paul is probably addressing specific questions that were sent to him by the congregation.

Paul gives several important commands to believers in the context of verses 10 – 15

1) **In verses 10 – 11 Paul again re-emphasizes the sanctity of marriage**, and also indirectly instructs all believers that becoming a Christian does not, and should not affect their marital status. As we will see this rule applies even if they are currently married to non-believers.

In keeping with the teaching of Christ, Paul also teaches that if a wife divorces her husband (presumably for some reason other than the porneia mentioned by Christ) then she must not remarry lest she become an adulteress as Christ warns would be the case in Matthew 19:9. He does however leave open the possibility of reconciliation and remarriage to her spouse.

While Paul uses the example of a wife in this example (possibly because the Corinthian question had been about wives) one could see how this teaching would also be true for husbands, the same inter-applicability between wives and husbands is also true of the teaching of Christ regarding divorce.

2) *In verses 12 – 14 Paul gives believers specific instruction not to leave their unbelieving spouses if those spouses will consent to remain married.*

3) *In verse 14 Paul mentions what many Reformed exegetes throughout the ages have regarded as a second reason for a legitimate divorce – desertion.* Under this view, if an unbeliever deserts his believing spouse, the marriage bond is dissolved, and the believer is free to marry again. This is the position taken, for instance, by the Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter 24):

... nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage: wherein, a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills, and discretion, in their own case.¹⁷

1 Corinthians 7:15, the passage in question, is cited as a proof text for this conclusion.

It should go without saying that this desertion is one of the unbeliever deserting the believer in 1 Corinthians. The Apostle has already given instruction to believers not to leave their unbelieving spouses if at all possible, and if they sinfully do so, they must not compound this disobedience by adding to it the sin of adultery.

With Paul's addition of desertion in 1 Corinthians 7 to fornication in Matthew 19, we are at an end of biblical criteria for the dissolution of marriage. With the exception of death, no other reason is given in Scripture for which a marriage may be terminated and a valid divorce may be obtained. As a result, we have arrived at the Reformed doctrine of divorce, for in this issue as Reformed believers we cannot go further in allowing divorce beyond that which the Bible permits, lest we fall into the error of allowing divorces that God does not condone and which would result in a state of adultery were a remarriage to occur.

Consequently, we can conclude that the "no fault divorces" spoken of in the beginning of this essay cannot constitute biblical divorces, and should not be named amongst believers. Similarly, emotional incompatibility is not legitimate grounds for divorce any more than a simple desire to be rid of the individual one is married to.

In recent years speculation has arisen as to whether spousal abuse, verbal or physical, might not constitute a form of desertion that might justify divorce. To do this is to engage in speculation, and ultimately any conclusion that we may come to will not be directly informed by Scripture, which should always be our primary objective. We may safely say, however, that spousal abuse can and should be addressed with church discipline, and in the case of abuse that is physical or where threats against life and limb are made, the civil magistrate should intervene to insure the safety of the threatened spouse. While it is outside the scope of this essay, one can speculate that in order to prevent physical harm, separation, but not divorce would certainly be an appropriate measure. Nowhere in the bible are we informed that a spouse must remain in a situation in which they are likely to be physically harmed, even though this still does not constitute a biblical criteria for divorce.