

Feinberg, J. S., Feinberg, P. D., & Huxley, A. (1996, c1993). *Ethics for a Brave new world*.

IS IT PERMISSIBLE TO BREAK A MARRIAGE (DIVORCE) AND REMARRY?

STATEMENT OF POSITIONS

These issues have been heavily debated over the centuries of church history. In a sense the real culprit is the exception in Jesus' teaching on divorce as recorded in Matthew. In what follows we shall first state and explain the main views on divorce and remarriage. Then we shall turn to the interpretation of key OT and NT passages to see which view is best upheld by Scripture.

The many views on divorce and remarriage can be divided into three broad groups: 1) no divorce views; 2) divorce but no remarriage views; and 3) divorce and remarriage views.¹⁴ The issue is further complicated by another consideration, namely, did Jesus ever utter the exception clauses, or are they Matthew's or someone else's editorial insertion?¹⁵ Regardless of how one understands the origin of these clauses, this matter only increases the complexity of determining Jesus' and Scripture's teaching on divorce and remarriage.

No Divorce Views

No divorce views attempt to harmonize the exception clauses of Matt 5:31–32 and Matt 19:9 with Mark and Luke so as to allow no divorce on any ground. The first attempt is the *inclusivist view*. According to this view, the exception clause should be read as “not even in the case of *porneia*.” On this view, Jesus is saying there is no divorce at all, not even in the case of *porneia*. No grounds, including *porneia*, warrant divorce.¹⁶

A second view is the *preteritive* or “*no comment*” view. This view sees *porneia* in the exception clauses as a reference to “something indecent” in Deut 24:1. The Pharisees asked Jesus whether “something indecent” (*porneia*) is any cause at all, i.e., was Moses allowing divorce for any reason whatsoever? According to this view, Jesus refused to comment on that issue. He responded, instead, that the Pharisees had misunderstood the basic point that God's intention was no divorce, and Moses never commanded divorce. Divorce is a concession because of the hardness of the people's hearts. Moreover, Jesus said that whoever divorces and remarries commits adultery. The exception clause is parenthetical and refers to the question Jesus will not comment on, the meaning of “something indecent.”¹⁷ On this view, Matt 19:9 can be paraphrased as: “if anyone divorces his wife—except in the case of *porneia* about which I shall make no comment—and remarries, he commits adultery.” The preteritive view is obviously a no divorce position.

A third view focuses on Matt 5:32. That verse says: “but I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery.” On this view, Jesus offers no ground for divorce, but instead clarifies which action commits the offense. If the woman is an adulteress (she has committed *porneia* as this view interprets *porneia*), the divorce

and remarriage do not make her an adulteress, because she already is one. Her offense is her adultery that led to the divorce, not her divorce or remarriage. On the other hand, if she is not an adulteress and her husband divorces her, she becomes an adulteress (presumably because she will remarry, and her sex relations with her new husband will be adulterous).¹⁸ In this case the divorce is the offense, and it leads her to adultery (another offense). Clearly, none of this offers a ground for divorce.

The next three positions actually allow divorce in some cases, but the cases are so unusual that they do not cover most people. Each typically assumes that since Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience, the exception clause must be germane to them. The first position is the *betrothal view*. Jewish weddings involved three stages. The first was the betrothal period. Once betrothed, the couple was considered married, even though they did not live together and perhaps had not even met (parents arranged marriages for their children). After betrothal, the husband would take his bride from her parents' home to his home to live as husband and wife. The third stage of the ceremony was the wedding feast, held when the bride came to live with the groom. If the bride to be had sexual relations with some other man during the betrothal period, her act was considered adultery, and she was to be punished. If she was not stoned to death as the OT required, she was given a bill of divorce and the relationship was dissolved. According to the betrothal view, the exception clause refers to this point in Jewish law. As such, it did not refer even to all people of Jesus' day, let alone ours. Jesus' general teaching is no divorce. The exception pertains to another culture and another day.¹⁹

Another view appealing to the Jewishness of Matthew is the *mixed marriage view*. The incident recorded in Ezra 9–10 and passages such as Deut 7:3 (covenant people are forbidden to intermarry the heathen of the land) form the basis for this view. In Ezra's day the nation was trying to rebuild after the Babylonian Exile. In spite of the need for national and religious purity, Israelites, including priests and Levites, married heathen idolaters. Divorce was not only allowed but was mandated to purge the nation. The mixed marriage view comes in one of two forms. One claims that *porneia* in the exception clause refers to this incident in Ezra's time but nothing more. The other form of the view sees this exception as permitting believers in the newly forming church to divorce heathen spouses in order to ensure doctrinal purity in the early church. No other grounds at any other times were acceptable bases for divorce.²⁰

A final no divorce view sees the exception clause as a reference to the prohibition of incestuous marriages (Leviticus 18). Marriages to blood relatives should never be contracted, so Jesus allows annulment of such marriages. On this view *porneia* refers to incest or incestuous marriage, not adultery. Matthew's normal word for adultery is *moicheia*, and in Matthew 15 a distinction is made between *moicheia* (adultery) and *porneia*. Moreover, *porneia* has the meaning of incest in passages such as 1 Cor 5:1 and Acts 15:20, 29. Aside from incestuous marriages, no others may end in divorce.²¹

Divorce but No Remarriage View

This view was the majority opinion of the early church fathers. Only Ambrosiaster among the Greek and Latin fathers held a different view.²² On this view, only the death of a spouse can dissolve a marriage bond. Jesus' exception allows couples to separate in cases of *porneia*

(normally understood as adultery). However, since *porneia* does not break the marriage bond, neither spouse can remarry. Hopefully, while remaining apart, the erring mate would be driven to repent and return to his or her spouse.²³ Moreover, the so-called Pauline Privilege (1 Cor 7:15) does not allow deserted believers to remarry. Thus, this view allows separation when there is *porneia* but never allows remarriage.

Heth and Wenham (*Jesus and Divorce*), relying heavily on Jacques Dupont's *Mariage et divorce dans l'évangile* (1959), defend this view in contemporary discussions. They hold that the marriage bond is indissoluble and appeal to the Deuteronomy 24 and kinship argument in support. Likewise, Mark 10 and Luke 16 allow no one to divorce, and Jesus' comments (Matthew 19) on creation ordinances and leaving intact what God has joined leave no room for divorce. In Matt 19:9 Jesus says: "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, *except for porneia*, and marries another, commits adultery." Who commits adultery, according to Jesus? The person who both divorces *and* remarries. Separation alone without remarriage is not adultery. How does the exception clause affect this basic teaching? The crucial point for Heth and Wenham is the placement of the clause *between* "divorces" and "marries." As such, it qualifies only "divorces" (not "marries another"). It gives a basis for divorce (*porneia*) but gives no basis for remarriage. Heth and Wenham see Matt 19:9 as an answer to the Pharisees' question in 19:3 ("is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife *for any cause at all?*"). Jesus responds that only *porneia* is just cause, but even then, one may not remarry without committing adultery.²⁴

By combining this understanding of Matt 19:9 with the teaching of Matt 5:32a ("whoever divorces his wife, *except for porneia*, causes her to commit adultery"), Heth and Wenham derive a view that can be stated in four propositions: 1) divorce for any cause *plus* remarriage is adultery; 2) divorce because of *porneia* is acceptable, but no remarriage is allowed; 3) whoever divorces a woman forces her into adultery (i.e., once she remarries), unless the divorce resulted because of her *porneia* (adultery)—in that case she was already an adulteress before the divorce; and 4) whoever marries a divorcée commits adultery himself.²⁵

Divorce and Remarriage Views

There are several divorce and remarriage views, most of which are variations of what many call the Erasmian view (named after Erasmus of Rotterdam). Those who hold some form of the Erasmian view consider the exception clauses in Matthew to allow a morally acceptable ground for divorce. Moreover, if divorce is permissible, then remarriage is as well.

Some variations in the Erasmian view stem from one's understanding of *porneia*. Many interpret it narrowly to refer only to adultery. On this view, Jesus is saying that if a wife commits adultery, her husband may divorce her and remarry without committing any sin himself. Others object that Matthew's usual word for adultery is *moicheia* and that in Matthew 15 he distinguishes between *porneia* and *moicheia*. Thus, *porneia* in Matt 5:32 and 19:9 should be understood in a more general way to refer to any kind of sexual impurity, including adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and incest.

A further variation of the Erasmian view arises from interpreting Paul as allowing a second

ground for divorce (1 Corinthians 7). Paul instructs converts to Christianity not to leave their unbelieving spouses just because they are non-believers. However, if the non-believer leaves the believer and seeks a divorce, the believer is told to let him depart (v. 15); the believer is not bound in such a case. Many understand this to mean that willful desertion of a believer by a non-believer is permissible grounds for divorce. The believer may not initiate divorce proceedings, but if the non-believing spouse does, the divorce is not a sin. Typically, those who think Paul allows divorce for willful desertion argue that if the divorce is morally permissible, so is remarriage.²⁶

A complex divorce and remarriage position is found in William Luck's *Divorce and Remarriage: Recovering the Biblical View* (1987). Luck begins with the OT. When he turns to Deut 24:1–4, he says one must see it in the context that runs from Deut 23:15–24:7. All the other laws in the section attempt to protect a disadvantaged party from abuse by an advantaged one.²⁷ The function of Deut 24:1–4 is to protect a woman from a hard-hearted man who divorces her without cause. The passage prohibits her remarriage to such a man so that she would not be treated like a piece of chattel property that could be passed back and forth for the use of one man and then another.²⁸ As to OT teaching generally, adulterers were to be executed, but when that was not done, divorce was allowed as an act of discipline. If a husband was abusive to his wife, but no adultery was involved, the law allowed divorce in order to protect the woman.

As for remarriage, whether the husband was guilty or innocent for the divorce, he could remarry. Moreover, even when the divorce was groundless so that it did not break the marriage bond, the husband could remarry, for the OT permitted polygamy (actually, Luck says both the OT and NT agree that polygamy, but not polyandry, is morally acceptable).²⁹ As for women, if they were guilty for the divorce, they could not remarry but had to put away any subsequent partner and return to their former spouse. If they were not guilty of the divorce, they were allowed to remarry.³⁰ Luck believes Jesus basically repeats OT teaching, since he came to fulfill the law, not abolish it.³¹ Matt 5:32 is seen as teaching that groundless divorce is treachery, and is, in fact, adultery. What about divorce when there are grounds (*porneia*)? Divorce is allowed as an act of disciplining the guilty party. *Remarriage* is permissible, except when someone groundlessly divorces just to get a new mate.³²

Luck understands Matt 19:9 like Matt 5:32, but says more about remarriage on the basis of Matthew 19. The exception clause in Matthew 19 means that whoever divorces with grounds (the innocent party) is free to remarry without committing adultery, while those divorcing groundlessly just to get to a new mate commit adultery by remarrying.³³ As to the person groundlessly divorced (that innocent party), Luck says Matthew 19 does not discuss that person, but he thinks remarriage is allowed. For an innocent man groundlessly divorced, the morality of polygamy affirms his right to remarry. Deut 24:1–4 allows the woman wrongly divorced to remarry.³⁴

Luck allows other grounds for divorce in accord with the following line of reasoning: 1) Scripture defines adultery as *porneia*; 2) *porneia* breaks the marriage covenant and is justifiable grounds for divorce and remarriage; 3) since lust without the sex act is adultery (Matt 5:27–28) and so is groundlessly divorcing someone, there is non-sexual adultery. The net result of points 1)–3) seems to be that anything one thinks is adultery (whether sexual or non-sexual) is *porneia*

and thus an acceptable ground for divorce and remarriage. Luck does not quite say this, but his views seem to entail it. One thing is clear. He does think desertion (1 Corinthians 7) is non-sexual adultery and thereby a legitimate ground for divorce and remarriage.³⁵

¹⁴ For organization of divorce and remarriage positions on the basis of whether they are deontologically or teleologically oriented, see Bruce M. Haight, “Ethical Considerations on Divorce and Remarriage,” *Cov Q* 47 (May 1989).

¹⁵ For examples of views on divorce that presuppose that the exception clause was not said by Jesus, see Stanley B. Marrow, “Marriage and Divorce in the New Testament,” *Angl Th R* 70 (January 1988), and Don T. Smith, “The Matthean Exception Clauses in the Light of Matthew’s Theology and Community,” *Stud Bib Theol* 17 (April 1989). For further argumentation that Jesus did not utter the exception clause, see Garland, p. 424.

¹⁶ Heth and Wenham, p. 179.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 179-181.

¹⁸ Described by Luck, p. 93. Though one could use this understanding of the exception clause and still say on other grounds that divorce for porneia is acceptable (though the divorce does not make the woman an adulteress), this understanding of the exception clause could be used in the way explained to support a no divorce position.

¹⁹ Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple*, is one of the best-known scholars holding this view. See also Heth and Wenham, pp. 169-171 for a description of the view. This is precisely the situation that confronted Joseph when he learned during his betrothal to Mary that she was pregnant.

²⁰ Luck, p. 96ff. Some have also understood Mal 2:10–16 to relate to this issue. They have interpreted the passage to suggest that Jewish people in Malachi’s day were divorcing their wives and marrying foreigners. God says he hates divorce (2:16), and some take this to mean the divorce of Jewish women in favor of marrying foreign women. In such a circumstance, it might be argued, God would allow divorce of the foreign woman. Others claim that God’s real complaint is that his people have apostasized from their covenant with him and have gone after foreign gods. That kind of divorce is what he hates. Still others see a blending of the two ideas in Malachi; i.e., Judah has apostasized from the Lord, and one of the signs of that is the divorcing of Jewish wives in order to marry foreign women whose allegiance is to another God. For interesting discussions of Malachi 2 see Beth Glazier-McDonald, “Intermarriage, Divorce, and the BAT-’EL NEKAR: Insights into Mal 2:10–16,” *JBL* 106 (1987), and David Clyde Jones, “Malachi on Divorce,” *Presbyterion* 15 (Spring 1989).

²¹ Laney, Steele and Ryrie, F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, and J. A. Fitzmyer, “The Matthean Divorce Texts and Some New Palestinian Evidence,” *Th St* 37 (June 1976) are examples of those who hold this view.

²² Heth and Wenham, pp. 22, 38.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36. They show this to have been Tertullian’s view.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²⁵ *Ibid.* See their summary of the whole position.

²⁶ Variations of the Erasmian position are ably described in Heth and Wenham, Luck, and Ryrie and Steele.

²⁷ Luck, p. 59.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 228-243.

[30](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

[31](#) *Ibid.*, p. 88.

[32](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 122-123.

[33](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 144-146.

[34](#) *Ibid.*, p. 145. However, he also claims (p. 145) that to say that a husband who groundlessly puts away his wife could not remarry is to deny the OT doctrine of morally permissible polygamy. His position is not clear here.

[35](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 247-251.

Packer, J. I. (1995, c1993). *Concise theology : A guide to historic Christian beliefs*.

MARRIAGE

MATRIMONY IS MEANT TO BE A PERMANENT COVENANT RELATIONSHIP

*“I hate divorce,” says the LORD
God of Israel. . . .*

MALACHI 2:16

Marriage is an exclusive relationship in which a man and a woman commit themselves to each other in covenant for life, and on the basis of this solemn vow become “one flesh” physically (Gen. 2:24; Mal. 2:14; Matt. 19:4-6).

“Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with a legitimate issue, and of the church with an holy seed; and for preventing of uncleanness [sexual license and immorality]” (Westminster Confession XXIV.2; Gen. 2:18; 1:28; 1 Cor. 7:2-9). God’s ideal for marriage is that the man and the woman should experience mutual completion (Gen. 2:23) and share in his creative work of making new people. Marriage is for all mankind, but it is God’s will that his own people should only marry fellow believers (1 Cor. 7:39; cf. 2 Cor. 6:14; Ezra 9–10; Neh. 13:23-27). Intimacy at its deepest is impossible when the partners are not united in faith.

By using Christ’s relationship to his church to illustrate what Christian marriage ought to be, Paul highlights the husband’s special responsibility as his wife’s leader and protector, and the wife’s calling to accept her husband in that role (Eph. 5:21-33). The distinction of roles does not, however, imply that the wife is an inferior person: as God’s image-bearers, the husband and the wife have equal dignity and value, and they are to fulfill their role relationship on the basis of a mutual respect that is rooted in recognition of this fact.

God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16), yet he provided a procedure for it that would protect the divorced wife (Deut. 24:1-4); this, said Jesus (Matt. 19:8), was “because your hearts were hard.” The natural way to understand his teaching in Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:8-9 is that marital unfaithfulness (the sin of adultery) destroys the marriage covenant and warrants divorce (though reconciliation would be preferable); but he who divorces his wife for any lesser reason becomes guilty of adultery when he remarries and drives her into adultery in her remarriage. In this Jesus is simply stating the principle that all cases of divorce and remarriage involve disruption of God’s idea for the sexual relationship. He answered the question, When is divorce lawful? by saying that divorce is always deplorable (Matt. 19:3-6), but he did not deny that hearts continue to be hard; so that divorce, though always in itself an evil, may sometimes be permitted on a lesser-evil basis.

Paul says that one who has become a Christian and then been deserted by an unbelieving partner is not “bound” (1 Cor. 7:15). This evidently means that he or she may regard the relationship as finished. Whether this should be held to confer right of remarriage has been disputed, and Reformed opinion has long been divided on the matter.

The Westminster Confession (XXIV.5-6) states with cautious wisdom what most Reformed Christians, reflecting on the Scriptures quoted above, have down the centuries found themselves agreed on regarding divorce:

In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out [secure] a divorce: and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.

Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage: yet, nothing but adultery, or such wilful 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.

Wiersbe, W. W. (1997, c1992). *Wiersbe's expository outlines on the New Testament*.

I. A Request for Interpretation (Mark 10:1–12)

The rabbis did not agree in their interpretations of Deut. 24:1–4, so they kept asking (v. 2) what Jesus thought the passage taught. They were not questioning the legality of either divorce or remarriage, for Moses made it clear that God permitted both. The big question was, “For what cause may a man put his wife away and take another?” Of course, their motive was not to learn truth but to try to get Jesus into trouble. The disciples of the rabbi Shammai held to a strict interpretation (divorce only for unfaithfulness) while the disciples of Hillel held to a lenient interpretation (divorce for almost any reason). The Law commanded that those who committed adultery be stoned (Deut. 22:22; Lev. 20:10); but in Jesus’ day, this law was rarely obeyed (Matt. 1:18–25).

Instead of taking sides with either Shammai or Hillel, Jesus went back to Moses and the first marriage (Gen. 1:27; 2:21–25). From the beginning, marriage meant one man and one woman becoming one flesh for one lifetime. Moses’ commandment in Deut. 24:1–4 was a concession to the Jews because of their hardness of heart. It does not represent God’s ideal for marriage. The parallel passage (Matt. 19:1–12) indicates that Jesus did permit divorce on the grounds of sexual immorality (12:9). Divorce for any other reason—even one permitted by the courts—leads to adultery if the parties remarry (vv. 11–12).

Marriage is fundamentally a physical relationship (“one flesh”) and can be broken only by a physical cause, either death (Rom. 7:1–3) or adultery (Matt. 19:9). In the OT, the guilty party was stoned to death, thus leaving the other party free to remarry. Today, the church does not have the authority to kill people, so divorce is the NT equivalent of death, leaving the opportunity for remarriage. Of course, before getting a divorce, the husband and wife should do everything possible to rescue the marriage and rebuild the relationship. God established marriage, and He is the only one who can regulate it (v. 9). Man cannot divide that which God says is “one flesh,” but God can.

Mills, M. (1999). *The Life of Christ : A study guide to the Gospel record.*

COMMENTARY

192. Jesus Teaches on Divorce (Matt 19:3–12; Mark 10:2–12)

Exegesis

(Matt 19:3–12)

v 3 testing = putting to the test, tempting.

lawful = (or) permitted, proper, (even) possible.

divorce = ‘*apoluso*’ also means release, loose, send away, forgive (in the sense of release from sin’s consequence); here the context clearly indicates divorce. It is used thus in Matt 1:19; 5:31, 32, 32; 19:3, 7, 8, 9, 9; Mark 10:2, 4, 11, 12; Luke 16:18, 18 (i.e., 16 of 68 NT uses).

reason = cause, accusation, guilt, (even) relationship; the word is used in this last sense in v.10.

v 4 answered = responded.

read = (or) read in public (indicating the marriage ceremony).

He who made = (lit.) He who created (i.e., the Creator).

v 5 for this reason = because of this (not the same word as v.3).

leave = leave behind, the word can mean ‘abandon, forsake.’

be joined = unite oneself with, hold on to; to glue, cement together.

and the two shall become one flesh = (lit.) and shall be the two in flesh (or body) one.

v 6 joined together = (lit.) yoked together (in a marriage relationship).

separate = put apart; i.e., divorce (‘let ... not separate’ is an imperative).

v 7 certificate of divorce = this word was used for the document legalizing the divorce; it literally means ‘defection, a standing off’ (Vine, 331).

to put her away = divorce (same word as v.3).

v 8 hardness of your hearts = your stubbornness. The root word denotes ‘dryness,’ signifying trying, exacting, obstinacy (Vine, 534). This is a condemnation of their lack of spirituality.

permitted = (or) allowed.

so = like that.

v 9 and = (‘*de*’; or) but.

except = (lit.) not on the basis of; i.e., except on the basis of fornication.

sexual immorality = fornication (*'porneia'*). Vine (534) says this includes adultery in Matt 5:32 and 19:9, but notes that it is distinguished from adultery in Matt 15:19 and Mark 7:21. The NASB interprets this 'immorality' (and 'unchastity' in Matt 5:32), the NIV 'marital unfaithfulness,' the RSV and NEB 'unchastity' (the question of translation is discussed under Exposition).

and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery = a few texts (of the CT family) omit this phrase here, but not in Matt 5:32.

v 10 case = same word as translated 'reason' in v.3.

better not to marry = (lit.) not to one's advantage to have married.

v 11 all men cannot accept = (lit.) not all men accept, (or) practise, make room for (Newman, 200).

v 12 accept = (as above) practise, make room for.

(Mark 10:2–12)

v 2 man = husband (different word to Matthew).

v 7 be joined = cleave; this is an intensive form of the verb Matthew uses.

v 9 let ... not separate = an imperative, as in Matthew.

v 10 about the same matter = concerning this.

(Matt 5:31–32—§62)

v 32 except for = apart from (a different word to 19:9, but the meaning is the same; maybe a little stronger).

sexual immorality = (*'porneia'*; lit.) a matter of fornication, the same word as 19:9.

commits adultery = *'moicheuo'* (a completely different word from *'porneia'*; this word distinction is maintained in both Matthean passages).

Purpose

The purpose of this section is to instruct the Church that divorce and remarriage after divorce are not permitted.

Exposition

Jesus had addressed the subject of divorce in the Sermon on the Mount (§62, Matt 5:31–32) and just prior to explaining the post-death circumstances of the rich man and Lazarus (§184—Luke 16:18). Jesus' stand on divorce was so consistently opposed to it that the Pharisees specifically tried to trip Him up on the question (Matt 19:3; Mark 10:2), feeling that He was going beyond the Mosaic Law (Mark 10:4), and thus criticizing it. This, by their lights, would be blasphemy, and it is in this that they were hoping to trap Jesus. As Jesus was in Perea, Herod's domain, it may well be that the Pharisees were trying to engineer some provocative statement which could cause Him, like John the Baptist, to be imprisoned and executed by Herod. However, Jesus stayed with the Old Testament doctrine, and did not get involved in individual cases.

In order to appreciate fully the mood of this encounter and the bewilderment it revived in the disciples, let us analyze the order of this confrontation:

Matt
19 Mark 10

- a) 3 2 The Pharisees question Jesus.
- b) 3 Jesus turns the question on the Pharisees.
- c) 4 The Pharisees reply.
- d) 4–6 5–9 Jesus' explanation of the truth.
- e) 7 The Pharisees, in disarray, fall back on Moses for support.
- f) 8–9 Jesus explains why Moses gave the concession and repeats God's rule on divorce.
- g) 10 The disciples cannot believe their ears and privately ask Him about this teaching again.
- h) 11–12 Jesus repeats His previous teaching in confirmation.
- i) 10 The disciples acknowledge that He means it literally and comment on how onerous it is.
- j) 11–12 Jesus explains that God can enable man to comply with God's rule on divorce.

One appreciates that the bewilderment which today greets Jesus' clear teaching on divorce is no new thing and has always been so. One realizes, too, that the disciples must have thought it was not to be taken absolutely literally, so questioned Him on this in private. Jesus therefore repeated His simple, clear instruction, so that they would realize that He meant every word of it.

Because divorce has become so commonplace and is such a problem in society, let us consider Jesus' teaching carefully. He made the following points:

- i) He commanded that no man is to divide a married couple (Matt 19:6; Mark 10:9). The Greek text uses the imperative voice so this is a clear command.
- ii) He based His teaching on the Creator's intent in creation, thereby invoking the Creator's right to tell His creation how He wants it to live.
- iii) Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery (Matt 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18).

- iv) Whoever marries a divorcee commits adultery (Matt 5:32; 19:9; Luke 16:18).
- v) This applies to women and men with equal force (Mark 10:12).
- vi) There is one exception: a man may divorce his wife if she has committed fornication (Matt 5:32; 19:9).

The two points unique to one Gospel need comment: Mark was addressed to the Gentile church in Rome, and under Roman law a woman could divorce her husband, so this facet of Jesus' teaching was pertinent to its initial addressees. This was not important in Matthew which was initially addressed to Jews, for the Mosaic Law made no provision for a woman to divorce her husband. In any event, this truth is self-evident, for every adultery has to have two parties. Mark does not discuss the exception clause which Matthew repeats from 5:32, but as we shall see this was a situation that arose from Jewish law.

The second point is the exception recorded in Matthew, for there is much debate around the meaning of the Greek word translated 'fornication.' 'Fornication' is obviously distinguished from 'adultery' as both terms are used in the same verse; as a married woman cannot commit 'fornication' as distinct from 'adultery,' this poses a conundrum. A solution to this conundrum is indicated by the fact that only Matthew, the Gospel addressed to Jews, reports this exception. As we noted in Study 3, a Jewish betrothal could only be terminated by a formal divorce. Deuteronomy 22:13–21 discusses the circumstance of a bride who held herself out to be a virgin (during her betrothal), but on the consummation of her marriage was found not to be one. This gives us the answer to the conundrum: she had committed fornication because the event took place before her betrothal (if it occurred after betrothal it was adultery [Deut 22:22–27]), and the Mosaic Law imposed the death penalty on her for concealing this fact. Jesus explained that if this situation was discovered before the marriage was consummated (i.e., while still betrothed), then her husband (we would add 'to be') could divorce her. Now, this is exactly the circumstance Matt 1:18–19 reports, for the word rendered 'put her away' in v.19 is the identical word rendered 'divorce' in the gospel records of Jesus' teaching on divorce. The exception, then, is found in the Jewish practice of betrothal and marriage which differs from ours (and to that of the Romans and Greeks to whom Mark and Luke were addressed), and required a bill of divorce to terminate the betrothal which was instituted by a marriage contract. Notably, only Matthew, which is addressed to Jews, records this exception; the Gospels addressed to Gentiles do not. This, in our terms, is nothing more than permission to break an engagement on one ground only, the grounds of fornication. The necessity for this flows from Matt 5:37 ("let your yes be yes, and your no be no"), for this gives fiancées permission to breach their word in what must surely be the most solemn earthly matter in which a person can give his or her word. It also gives us insight into the chastity which Christ expects of His followers.

What, then, is the Christian teaching on divorce? The New Testament is plain that God commands man not to divorce; so He cannot recognize divorce. This explains why it classifies the relationship of a divorced and remarried person as adulterous; only a widowed person can remarry (Rom 7:2–3; I Cor 7:39). Our Lord's teaching on this vexed subject is plain and the disciples understood its clarity, for their exclamation (Matt 19:10) recognizes the finality of marriage. Jesus confirmed this assessment in vv.11–12; in summary, His teaching is:

- a) The marriage bond is indissoluble by man, so marriage is dissolved only by God in death.
- b) God's marriage laws are founded in His purpose in creation, which is the procreation of the

human race (the basic reason for male and female).

- c) God does not condone remarriage after divorce, and classifies copulation by a divorcee, or with a divorcee, as adultery.
- d) Jesus commends celibacy for the divorcee, while recognizing that this calls for a special strength.

The reasoning thus starts with the fact that Jesus, as Creator, has commanded man not to divorce. Thereafter everything falls into place simply: should we breach that command, He does not have to recognize what we have done, which is why copulation with another person after divorce is adultery, hence the recommendation to remain celibate. This also explains why a church leader is to be 'a one woman man' (II Tim 3:2, 12; Tit 1:6), for if God does not recognize divorce, remarriage after divorce must be the same as polygamy in His sight. Furthermore, if by his action he has destined himself to be 'least in the eternal Kingdom' (Matt 5:19), it is contradictory for him to have elevated status in God's Kingdom on earth (i.e., the privilege of leadership in the Church). Please remember, we are not talking about forgiveness, but the conferral of status, which is God's sole right, and for which He has stated His ground rules.

I Corinthians 7:8–16 is the only other New Testament passage that treats the subject of divorce and it clearly exhorts a Christian not to divorce. Its v.16 gives a clue to God's concern for the preservation of marriage, for it pivots on salvation. In the act of copulation a man and a woman can approach closest to the uniquely divine act of creation; however, God sees something much more than a life being created, for with the conception of every child an eternal soul comes into being. That soul, because of the fall, is lost and doomed to eternal damnation; and God rates the home, built on the foundation of marriage, as the best environment to bring that child to salvation. For this reason God protects the sanctity of marriage with an unbending decree; broken marriages contribute to doomed souls. I think it is no accident that the next recorded event in both Matthew and Mark has to do with children and salvation.

My dear fellow Christian this teaching, I know, is viewed as stern and is not popular, but Scripture gives no license to moderate it. John the Baptist stood against the travesty of divorce and lost his head for it. But that may indicate where we fall short in assessing this teaching, for, to believers, this life is not the end but merely the very short beginning of real Life. If we endure a deprivation for a short span, does that matter? We will have the whole of eternity in God's favor, and is that not behind what Jesus said in Matt 19:11–12 and what He taught in Matt 5:19? Please recall that Jesus taught that all who uphold this teaching and practice it will have the eternal title of 'great in the Kingdom of Heaven,' and that those who reject it and lead others into doing so will be classed 'least' in the Kingdom. Our concern for fellow-believers should place their eternal well-being above their temporal happiness. Surely, God's grace is sufficient to see us through all this life's deprivations.

We must remember that Jesus also taught that all sin will be forgiven the believer (Matt 12:31), but also that He expects believers to stop sinning (John 8:11). The sin of divorce is not the unforgivable sin, but it should be unthinkable for a believer to willingly ('hard-heartedly') embark on a sinful course of action simply because he or she is assured of forgiveness (see Rom 6:1).

In summary, it seems to me that we can grasp the clarity of Jesus' teaching by simply noting

the force of the fact that “What God has joined together, let not man separate” is an imperative, a command. As the Creator of mankind has ordered man not to divorce, there is simply no way to obtain a divorce that He will recognize (unless it be for the one exception He decreed). Clearly, we cannot insist that God recognize a piece of paper from some human judge.

The foregoing discussion has been fairly thorough and has tried to follow the plain meaning of Scripture on the assumption that Jesus would have been notably clear in addressing such an important matter that bears on the vast majority of humanity. However, this topic has been much confused by variant opinions on whether Jesus could have meant exactly what the Gospels seem to report. I therefore append an addendum to this study which enlarges this discussion, and also discusses the Old Testament teaching on divorce.

Mills, M. (1999). *The Life of Christ : A study guide to the Gospel record*.

ADDENDUM:
BIBLICAL TEACHING ON DIVORCE
INTRODUCTION

The subject of divorce is one which seems invariably to be charged with emotion. However, as marriage affects almost everybody, we need to recognize the responsibility to consider and unambiguously present the instruction which God has given on this subject. We need to recognize at the outset that this doctrine has the positive intent of preserving marriage and not the negative intent of legislating, branding, or chastising divorcees. Indeed, instruction on the biblical teaching on divorce should be given to a couple before they ever become engaged, for this doctrine is not an isolated doctrine on its own, but part of the biblical teaching on marriage as a whole. A common mistake in our modern churches seems to be to regard marriage as one thing and divorce as another; but the teaching on divorce is intended as preventative medicine for contracting a poor marriage, whereas, it seems, we usually try to apply it as curative medicine to a marriage that is already badly ailing.

We need to recognize at the outset that, as marriage affects the vast majority of people, Christ's teachings on the subject are likely to be plain and not call for the highly skilled interpretation of a theologian (in contrast, if you please, with prophecy). Therefore complicated explanations of these Scriptures should be suspect. So let us confine ourselves to the Scriptures and let them speak for themselves, for to become involved in studying this teaching with an eye on particular cases is likely to become emotionally charged. Remember, the majority of the addressees of the New Testament books were the folk in the pew; most of Paul's epistles were specifically addressed to the saints of various churches, as were James, I and II Peter, Jude, and Revelation. It is thus likely that the New Testament teaching on a subject so basic to the vast majority of believers as marriage and divorce should be read through the eyes of an average believer, and that highly complex explanations are unlikely to be appropriate.

The application of this teaching is simple yet calls for a firm resolve and dedication: to those couples who, by God's grace, have not had the trauma of a broken marriage, it is simply to covenant before God and with each other that divorce will not even be an option to be considered under any circumstances whatever. For those whose lot it is to advise those contemplating divorce, our responsibility is to simply, and with deep Christian love, present Scripture's plain teaching, but also to realize that we are not called upon to be God's instrument of judgment. We must learn to show God's loathing for divorce, yet at the same time show His spiritual love (*'agape'*) for the unfortunate souls caught in this scourge. When we do this we will aid their confidence in the promise that God's grace is sufficient for them in all the circumstances of life. Jointly, and this is possibly the most pressing need of all, in order to reverse this scourge which affects our Lord's Church, we should all resolve to give our young folk proper and adequate instruction in this doctrine as well as a glowing example of, and respect for, Christian marriage. Then, and only then, will we see the alarming growing trend of divorce reversed, and with God's help, banished from the Church, for only then will we have started to attack the problem at its basic, entry level. This should be our aim, and until we focus our prayers, our spiritual energies, and our best efforts on this, divorce will continue to plague us and undermine our testimony.

How will men know that we are Christ's disciples (John 13:35) if we cannot even love our spouses, we who are called upon to show the love of God to a lost world?

For those who did not know the New Testament teaching and became caught up in divorce, the remedy starts with recognizing that divorce and remarriage thereafter are sins. Like any other sin, these sins must be repented of and confessed, and then the promise of I John 1:9 of forgiveness and restoration accepted in faith. All I can suggest is that you earnestly seek God's guidance as to how you should handle your circumstances. We cannot expect God to tell us how to circumvent His rules, and He certainly will not, nor is there a set formula to follow, but we can rely on His grace and mercy, provided we are not making the mistake that Rom 6:1 condemns. It seems to me that God will graciously find some way to accommodate those who have disobeyed His instructions in ignorance (though it is as well to remember the role of conscience in this as we contemplate our 'ignorance' and then the warning of Jer 17:9—'the heart of man is deceitfully wicked above all else, who can understand it'). In the final analysis, all we can do is recognize our propensity to sin and throw ourselves on God's mercy. Read Psalm 51, for it records David's prayer when he fell into similar straits. However, note that while God forgave him the sin of murder (which he substituted for divorce), even a thousand years later Bathsheba was still called Uriah's wife (Matt 1:6). So while God used this union to produce the Messiah, He still did not recognize Bathsheba's separation from Uriah—'whom God has joined together let not man separate.' God separates by death, but even death must be left entirely in His hands.

Where one finds oneself the victim of divorce that one neither sought nor did anything to precipitate, then there surely is no sin to confess, and one can turn to God for solace and comfort, for He invites us to roll all our burdens on Him, for He cares for us (I Pet 5:7). Then read I Corinthians 7 for instruction and guidance on how you should conduct yourself.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY ON THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING

- a) A separate page (page 747) lists all NT teaching on the subject of divorce. This sheet presents the consolidation suggested in the study guide. Please check the full contexts of the other Scriptures, especially I Corinthians 7.
- b) The exegetical note on 'fornication' gives the shades of opinion that cause confusion in interpreting this Scripture. My own observations are:
 - i) I regard Vine's argument as inconsistent, for recognizing a distinction between 'fornication' and 'adultery' in Matt 15:19, leaves no reason not to see that same distinction in Matt 6:32 and 19:9 where the same human author uses the same two words in the same verse.
 - ii) The term 'unchastity' used by the RSV, NEB, NASB, and other translations can readily be understood to indicate the lack of virginity in a betrothed, and if so understood is supported by Deut 22:13–21.
 - iii) The KJV, RV, LB, German, and other versions use 'fornication' which follows the most common translation of the Greek word.
 - iv) All similar verbs and nouns are translated 'fornicator, fornication, harlot, or

whoremonger' in the KJV without any distress to the context; so cognate words support the translation of 'fornication.'

v) '*Porneia*' is used 25 times in the NT; the full list of references is:

Matt	5:32 A	Acts 15:29 B	1 Cor 7:2 B	Rev 2:21 D
	15:19 A	21:25 B	II Cor 12:21 B	9:21 B
	19:9 A	I Cor 5:1 C	Gal 5:19 A	14:8 D
Mark	7:21 A	1 C Eph	5:13 B	17:2 D
John	8:41 B	6:13 B	Col 3:5 B	4 D
Acts	15:20 B	6:18 B	I Thess 4:3 B	18:3 D
				19:2 D

vi) The verses marked a draw a distinction between 'fornication' and 'adultery'; those marked b are addressed to the church or to man in general, so the word 'fornication' is the appropriate classification, for it is axiomatic that if fornication is sin, adultery must also be. The verses marked c could indicate adultery, though, as the Pauline epistles use the word 'adultery,' etc., seven times, it seems better to regard the Corinthian example as a man living with his deceased father's wife (however, as the woman is referred to as 'wife' and not 'widow' one cannot be definite about this). The verses marked d are metaphorical, so provide no guide.

vii) Matthew's use of '*porneia*' gives no indication that the word means 'adultery'; indeed, as it is always used in the same sentence as 'adultery' a distinction is necessary. The possibility that I Cor 5:1 indicates adultery is not strong enough and is too remote to influence Matthew's use in my opinion; moreover, Matt 1:6 can be used to explain the use of 'wife' in this context. As there is no other Scripture that brings 'fornication' as the correct translation into any reasonable question, and as the use of 'fornication' can be explained as having reasonable significance to Matthew's original readers, I take the correct English equivalent of '*porneia*' in Matt 5:32, 19:9, Mark 7:21 to be 'fornication.'

c) Romans 7:2–3 is included in the table of New Testament teaching on divorce as these verses can be understood as an inspired commentary on Matt 5:32. It is not the fact of being divorced that makes a woman an adulteress, but the joining of her body with another man's that does so. To be consistent, then, neither the act of divorce, nor the act of remarriage constitute adultery in this context, but the physical act of copulation. Jesus did not redefine adultery, but stated the obvious—that marriage involves the physical joining of people (He indicated this in Matt 19:6, etc.).

d) This teaching is not for the Church alone, but for all mankind, for it has its foundation in the creation of the human race (Matt 19:4). So the command of Matt 19:6 and Mark 10:9 ("What

God has joined together, let no man separate”) applies to all mankind.

- e) I Corinthians 7 is an inspired commentary on Jesus’ teaching, for the Holy Spirit specifically draws attention to the fact that it is His instruction that the wife should not leave her husband (its omission of the Matt 19:9 exception can be seen as affirming that it was uniquely Jewish and not Gentile in application; in any case, the omission denies any suggestion of *porneia* meaning ‘adultery,’ for this epistle should otherwise have brought this exception to its readers’ notice). I understand ‘under bondage’ (v.15) to mean that a wife is no longer under her husband’s marital control if he divorces her (this is obviously eminently practical), and not as indicating a freedom to remarry, which, if it were the case, would directly contradict v.11.
- f) The imperative (command), ‘What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate’ rules out divorce, which is permanent separation, as an option. Legal separation may be as far as a Christian can go; however, even this step would be disparaged by I Cor 6:1.
- g) The term ‘joined together’ is defined by Rom 7:3 and I Cor 6:16, which suggest that ‘whom God has joined together’ is defined by copulation.
- h) Romans 7:2 seems to remove any dispensational argument which tries to restrict Jesus’ teaching to the dispensation of Law, for here, clearly in the dispensation of grace, this ‘law’ is recognized.
- i) Romans 7:2 indicates that in God’s sight only one thing terminates a marriage and that is natural death; i.e., a divorcee whose spouse dies becomes a widow or widower and subsequent remarriage is scriptural (I Tim 5:14).
- j) Jesus’ teachings on adultery and divorce are indeed more gracious than the Old Testament which imposed the death penalty on the ‘fornication’ for which He permitted divorce. Likewise, He forgave the adulteress and waived the death penalty (John 8:1–11). Jesus has graciously relaxed the law in order to preserve life for the soteriological purpose indicated in I Cor 7:16.
- k) We need to keep in mind Jesus’ spiritual emphasis as indicated in Matt 19:12; i.e., some Christians will respond to this teaching ‘for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.’ This Scripture puts its finger on our human tensions: if all we have is this life, then we need to wrest every drop of joy from it; but if we truly have an eternal life to live, then those who find themselves in the position of a divorcee can look to the grace of God to see them through the years He gives them to serve Him here on earth. Surely, this is the basis of I Cor 7:8–9; surely, too, His grace is sufficient for even this deprivation.
- l) Any interpretation of Jesus’ teaching on this issue has to account for not only Mark’s and Luke’s omission of Jesus’ “exception clause,” but also the disciples’ evident astonishment (Matt 19:10), even in the face of the “exception clause.” If Jesus had used an Aramaic word which meant either a confirmation of Deut 24:1 or allowed divorce on the grounds of adultery, could one reasonably expect the reaction of Matt 19:10?

THE OLD TESTAMENT TEACHING ON DIVORCE

The Old Testament teaching on divorce is not extensive but is clear in its elements. It

recognizes that divorce does exist (e.g., Lev 22:13; Num 30:9), but makes the following points:

- a) A priest is to marry a virgin (Lev 21:13) and is barred from marrying a widow, divorcee, or harlot (Lev 21:6, 14; Ezek 44:22).
- b) A husband may never divorce a wife who came to him as a virgin and whom he then publicly defamed as promiscuous (Deut 22:19).
- c) A man who violates a virgin and is forced to marry her may never divorce her (Deut 22:29).
- d) A man may not remarry a previous wife if she has subsequently remarried (Deut 24:1–4; Jer 3:1). The cause of divorce is here stated as ‘nakedness’ (*‘erwa’*) which KJV (788–89) classifies as probably meaning ‘indecent, improper behavior’ in this context and in Deut 23:15. The word also means ‘pudenda,’ shameful exposure (often a euphemism for cohabitation)—Lev 20:17 suggests it means sexual arousal. It seems that this legislation was designed to prevent using divorce as a means of financial gain. It prevents a couple from divorcing so that the wife can marry a wealthy man, divorce him after arranging a lucrative divorce settlement, and then remarry her original husband so that they can benefit from the divorce settlement.
- e) Divorce is used as a figure of speech in prophecy to depict God’s abandonment of Israel for her metaphorical harlotry (Isa 50:1; Jer 3:8).
- f) In Ezra’s time many Israelites took women contrary to God’s law, so to redress their sin they needed to terminate these liaisons (Ezra 9:1–10:4). It is noteworthy that this word, *‘yatsa,’* is only used here with the meaning of ‘separate’ from a marriage type liaison—the normal word for ‘put away’ or ‘divorce’ was inappropriate because God did not recognize these marriages which were contracted in disobedience to His law.
- g) God expresses His abhorrence of divorce in Mal 2:14–16, explaining His reasons as being:
 - i) a man’s first wife is his companion and wife by covenant;
 - ii) God constituted marriage as the basis for rearing godly offspring;
 - iii) Divorce is treachery to the spouse being divorced.

One pertinent point frequently overlooked by those who resort to the Old Testament for an admittedly easier position on divorce, is that the Mosaic Law legislated for an entire nation; in order to be practical, it had to take into account the problems the unregenerate would get into—hence, it had to recognize that man’s sin nature would lead to divorce and legislate for this contingency. By contrast, the New Testament addresses the Church. However, the Old Testament treats the subject of divorce very sparingly and with repugnance. The words it uses, and their entire occurrence in the Old Testament, are:

1. Qual participle of *‘garash’* Lev 21:7, 14; 22:13; Num 30:9; Ezek 44:22.
2. The noun *‘kerithuth’* Deut 24:1, 3; Isa 50:1; Jer 3:8.
3. Piel infinitive of *‘shalach’* Deut 22:19, 29; Mal 2:16.

4. Hiphil infinitive of 'yatsa' Ezra 10:3, 19.

Finally, we should note that Jesus' statements, "But I say to you, ..." (Matt 5:32; 19:9), and, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matt 19:6; Mark 10:9), clearly revoked the Old Testament concession to divorce.

The Old Testament looked forward to a day when God would 'write His law on the hearts of men' (Jer 31:31–33); Jesus ushered in that day by making it possible for man to be born of the Spirit (John 3:5). With the dawn of that day, it was no longer necessary for man to need recourse to divorce, for there was a divinely granted cure for man's 'hardness of heart.'

CONCLUSION

The position I have outlined above is a prayerful and, I trust, honest attempt to be strictly faithful to Scripture, treating it as God's inspired, infallible Word. All explanations have been sought from Scripture itself and no resort has been made to linguistics or secular sources to explain this teaching, for it seems to me that when God addresses a subject which touches so intimately the lives of the vast majority of the human race He would not be anything but clear. The resources used, therefore, have been confined to the one book which all believers should have, the Bible. However, I recognize that the view I have expressed, whilst similar to that held by several conservative Bible commentators and also in large part by the Roman Catholic Church, is certainly not that of the majority of Protestant churches.

The positions of various churches is summed up in a book published by Broadman Press in 1974, authored by Dr. R.H. Crook, *The Christian Divorcee*, which particularly addresses this question from a Baptist perspective (146–148):

In Protestant churches, for many years it was generally agreed that a divorced person could be remarried only if he were the 'innocent party' to a divorce on the grounds of adultery. In taking this position, the churches followed Matthew's report of the teachings of Jesus (5:31–32; 19:3–9) rather than Mark's (10:11–12) and Luke's (16:18). This was the officially stated position of the Methodists, the Presbyterians, the Lutherans and the Episcopalians. It was also the unofficially stated position of most Baptists, Disciples, and other more loosely organized groups ...

Baptist ministers are not governed by any set of regulations. What they do about remarrying divorced persons is up to them. In the past, however, their views on remarriage have not been significantly different from those of their colleagues in the other denominations. Although there has never been unanimity of opinion and action on this issue, it is quite probable that a significant number, perhaps most, would find themselves at home with the position represented by the new statements of the Lutherans, the Methodists, the Episcopalians, and the Presbyterians.

Dr. Crook then quotes the new Methodist position as an example:

In marriages where the partners are, even after thoughtful consideration and counsel, estranged beyond reconciliation, we recognize divorce and the right of divorced people to remarry, and express our concern for the needs of the children of such unions.

A useful book for those wishing to explore this question in greater depth and to be exposed to other views on the subject is *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, edited by H. Wayne House (published by InterVarsity Press, 1990). This book presents the differing views of four theologians on the biblical teaching on divorce; they are: No Divorce and No Remarriage (Laney); Divorce, but No Remarriage (Heth); Divorce and Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion (Edgar); and Divorce and Remarriage under a Variety of Circumstances (Richards). A distinctive feature of this book is that each author interacts with the other views presented, so the different views are supplemented by critiques of each view from three men who hold differing views. You will find one or other of these men make virtually all the points I have made, though no one man fully supports the position I have set forth.

Counseling individual cases is the province of the pastoral staff of a church and is best left to them. The ramifications can be very deep and very time consuming, so it is recommended that specific inquirers consult their church staff. Please remember that we as Christians are not to judge one another. Divorce is an issue which, on a personal plane, lies between the divorcee and God. God is quite competent to judge and dispense grace; all He calls on us to do towards the individual is to show love. Let us do this.

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996, c1989). *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. "An exposition of the New Testament comprising the entire 'BE' series"

Two Shall Be One (Mark 10:1–12)

Jesus completed His ministry in Galilee, left Capernaum, and came to the Trans-Jordan area, still on His way to the city of Jerusalem (Mark 10:32). This district was ruled by Herod Antipas, which may explain why the Pharisees tried to trap Him by asking a question about divorce. After all, John the Baptist had been slain because he preached against Herod's adulterous marriage (Mark 6:14–29).

But there was more than politics involved in their trick question, because divorce was a very controversial subject among the Jewish rabbis. No matter what answer Jesus gave, He would be sure to displease somebody, and this might give opportunity to arrest Him. The verbs indicate that the Pharisees "kept asking Him," as though they hoped to provoke Him to say something incriminating.

In that day there were two conflicting views on divorce, and which view you espoused depended on how you interpreted the phrase *some uncleanness* in Deuteronomy 24:1–4. The followers of Rabbi Hillel were quite lenient in their interpretation and permitted a man to divorce his wife for any reason, even the burning of his food. But the school of Rabbi Shammai was much more strict and taught that the critical words *some uncleanness* referred only to premarital sin. If a newly married husband discovered that his wife was not a virgin, then he could put her away.

As He usually did, Jesus ignored the current debates and focused attention on the Word of God, in this case, the Law of Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1–4. As you study this passage, it is important to note two facts. First, it was *the man* who divorced the wife, not the wife who divorced the husband; for women did not have this right in Israel. (Roman women did have the right of divorce.) Second, the official "bill of divorcement" was given to the wife to declare her status and to assure any prospective husband that she was indeed free to remarry. Apart from the giving of this document, the only other requirement was that the woman not return to her first husband if her second husband divorced her. Among the Jews, the question was not, "May a divorced woman marry again?" because remarriage was permitted and even expected. The big question was, "What are the legal grounds for a man to divorce his wife?"

The Law of Moses did not give adultery as grounds for divorce; for, in Israel, the adulterer and adulteress were stoned to death (Deut. 22:22; Lev. 20:10; also see John 8:1–11). Whatever Moses meant by "some uncleanness" in Deuteronomy 24:1, it could not have been adultery.

Jesus explained that Moses gave the divorce law because of the sinfulness of the human heart. The law protected the wife by restraining the husband from impulsively divorcing her and abusing her like an unwanted piece of furniture, instead of treating her like a human being. Without a bill of divorcement, a woman could easily become a social outcast and be treated like a harlot. No man would want to marry her, and she would be left defenseless and destitute.

By giving this commandment to Israel, God was not putting His approval on divorce or even encouraging it. Rather, He was seeking to restrain it and make it more difficult for men to dismiss their wives. He put sufficient regulations around divorce so that the wives would not become victims of their husbands' whims.

The Lord then took them back beyond Moses to the record of the original Creation (Gen. 1:27; 2:21–25). After all, in the beginning, it was *God* who established marriage; and He has the right to make the rules. According to Scripture, marriage is between a man and a woman, not two men or two women; and the relationship is sacred and permanent. It is the most intimate union in

the human race, for the two become one flesh. This is not true of a father and son or a mother and daughter, but it is true of a man and wife.

While the spiritual element is vitally important in marriage, the emphasis here is that marriage is a *physical* union: the two become one *flesh*, not one spirit. Since marriage is a physical union, only a physical cause can break it—either death ([Rom. 7:1–3](#)) or fornication ([Matt. 5:32; 19:9](#)). Mark did not include the “exception clause” found in Matthew, but neither did he say that death breaks the marriage union.

Privately, the Lord further explained the matter to His questioning disciples, who by now were convinced that it was a dangerous thing to get married. To remarry after divorce, *other than one granted on the grounds of fornication*, would make the person guilty of committing adultery, and this is a serious thing. Note that Jesus included the women in His warning, which certainly elevated their status in society and gave them equality of responsibility with the men. The rabbis would not have gone this far.

[Mark 10:9](#) warns us that *man* cannot separate those who have been united in marriage, *but God can*. Since He established marriage, He has the right to lay down the rules. A divorce may be legal according to our laws and yet not be right in the eyes of God. He expects married people to practice commitment to each other ([Mark 10:7](#)) and to remain true to each other. Too many people view divorce as “an easy way out,” and do not take seriously their vows of commitment to each other and to the Lord.

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996, c1989). *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. "An exposition of the New Testament comprising the entire 'BE' series"

The Mosaic Law of Divorce (Matt. 19:7–8)

Like many people who “argue religion,” these Pharisees were not interested in discovering truth. They were interested only in defending themselves and what they believed. This was why they asked about the Jewish law of divorce recorded in [Deuteronomy 24:1–4](#).

I suggest you read this important passage in the *New American Standard Bible* to distinguish the tenses of the verbs. This translation makes it clear that Moses gave *only one commandment*: The divorced wife could not return to her first husband if she was put away by a second husband. *Moses did not command divorce*; he permitted it. He commanded that the husband give his ex-wife a legal bill of divorcement. But the wife could not return to her first husband after being remarried and divorced.

What a wise law this was. To begin with, the husband would think twice before hastily putting away his wife, since he could not get her back again. Furthermore, it would have taken time to find a scribe (not everyone could write legal documents), and during that time the two estranged people might have been reconciled. The Pharisees were interpreting Moses’ Law as though it were a commandment. Jesus made it clear that Moses was only giving *permission* for divorce.

But what did Moses mean by *some uncleanness in her*? The Hebrew means “some matter of nakedness,” but this need not refer to sexual sin. That phrase is the equivalent of “some shameful thing” (see [Gen. 2:25](#); [3:7](#), [10](#)). It is the interpretation of this phrase that divided the two schools of Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai, famous first-century Jewish scholars. Hillel took a very lax view and said that the husband could divorce his wife for almost any reason, while Shammai took the stricter view and said Moses was speaking only about sexual sin. No matter which side Jesus took, He would surely offend somebody.

There were several laws of marriage given to the Jews, and we must examine them in order to get some perspective. For example, if a man married a woman and discovered that she was not a virgin, he could expose her sin and have her stoned ([Deut. 22:13–21](#)). Of course, he had to have proof; and if he did not, he was fined and had to live with the woman all of his life. This law was as much a protection to the woman as to the man.

If a man suspected his wife of unfaithfulness, he followed the procedure outlined in [Numbers 5:11ff](#). We cannot follow that procedure today (which certainly included elements of divine judgment) since there is no priesthood or tabernacle.

Remember that the Law of Moses demanded *the death penalty* for those who committed adultery ([Lev. 20:10](#); [Deut. 22:22](#)). Our Lord’s enemies appealed to this law when they tried to trap Him ([John 8:1](#)). While we have no record in the Old Testament that anyone was stoned for committing adultery, this was the divine law. The experience of Joseph ([Matt. 1:18–25](#)) indicates that the Jews used divorce rather than stoning in dealing with an adulterous wife.

Why did God command that the adulterer or adulteress be stoned to death? Certainly as an example to warn the people, for adultery undermines the very fabric of society and the home. There must be commitment in marriage, and faithfulness to each other and to God, if there is to be stability in society and in the church. God had to preserve Israel because the promised Saviour would come through that nation. God opposed divorce in Israel because it weakened the nation and threatened the birth of the Messiah (see [Mal. 2:10–16](#)).

But there was another reason for capital punishment: This left the other party free to marry

again. Death breaks the marriage bond, since marriage is a physical union ([Rom. 7:1–3](#)). It was important that families be continued in Israel that they might protect their inheritance ([Num. 36](#)).

We must note one final fact before leaving this section: The divorce that Moses permitted in [Deuteronomy 24](#) *actually severed the original marriage relationship*. God permitted the woman to marry again, and her second marriage was not considered adulterous. The second man she married was called a “husband” and not an adulterer. This explains how the woman of Samaria could have had five *husbands*, and yet be living with a man not her husband ([John 4:16–18](#)). Apparently all five of those marriages had been legal and scriptural.

This means that scriptural divorce does sever the marriage relationship. *Man* cannot break this relationship by his laws, but *God can break it*. The same God who gives the laws that join people together can also give laws to put them asunder. God can do it, but man cannot.

Finally, Jesus made it clear that this Mosaic Law of divorce was a concession on God’s part. God’s original law of marriage left no room for divorce, but that law was laid down before man had sinned. Rather than have two people living together in constant conflict, with one or both of them seeking fulfillment elsewhere and thus commit sin, God permitted divorce. *This divorce included the right to remarriage*. The Pharisees did not ask about remarriage, for this was no problem. They accepted the fact that the parties would seek other mates, and this was allowed by Moses.

Our Lord’s Law of Marriage ([Matt. 19:9–12](#); [5:31–32](#))

When Jesus said “And I say unto you,” He was claiming to be God; for only God can establish or alter the laws of marriage. He declared that marriage was a permanent union that could only be broken by sexual sin. The word *fornication* in the New Testament covers many kinds of sexual sins. The definition of fornication as “sexual sin between two unmarried persons” would not apply here, for Jesus was talking about married persons. Are we to believe that the 23,000 men who committed fornication under the enticement of Baalam ([Num. 25](#)) were all unmarried men? Was the admonition of [Acts 15:20, 29](#) sent only to single church members?

Marriage is a permanent physical union that can be broken only by a physical cause: death or sexual sin. (I would take it that homosexuality and bestiality would qualify.) Man cannot break the union, but God can. Under the Old Testament Law, the sinner was stoned to death. But the church today does not bear the sword ([Rom. 13:1–4](#)). Were adultery and fornication more serious under the Law than the same sins are today? Of course not! If anything, such sins are even worse today in the light of the full revelation of God’s grace and holiness that we now have in Jesus Christ.

The conclusion seems to be that divorce in the New Testament is the equivalent of death in the Old Testament: It permitted the innocent party freedom to remarry.

Notice that our Lord’s new law of marriage and divorce was based on the three previous laws. From the Edenic Law He took the principle that marriage was a physical union that could only be broken by a physical cause, and that only God could permit the breaking of the union. From the seventh commandment He took the principle that sexual sin did indeed break the marriage union. From the Mosaic Law of divorce He took the principle that God could ordain divorce and effectively break the marriage union, and that the freed party could remarry and not be guilty of adultery.

Our Lord’s teaching is that there is only one scriptural basis for divorce, and that is sexual sin (fornication). If two people are divorced on any other basis, and marry other mates, they are committing adultery.

Jesus did not teach that the offended mate *had* to get a divorce. Certainly there can be

forgiveness, patient healing, and a restoration of the broken relationship. This would be the Christian approach to the problem. But, sad to say, because of the hardness of our hearts, it is sometimes impossible to heal the wounds and save the marriage. Divorce is the *final* option, not the first option.

Happy marriages are not accidents. They are the result of commitment, love, mutual understanding, sacrifice, and hard work. If a husband and wife are fulfilling their marriage vows, they will enjoy a growing relationship that will satisfy them and keep them true to each other. Except for the possibility of sudden temptation, no husband or wife would think of a relationship with another person, so long as their relationship at home is growing and satisfying. And the pure love of a husband or wife is a great protection against even sudden temptation.

The disciples' response to Christ's teaching showed that they disagreed with Him. "If there is no way to get out of a bad marriage, then you are better off staying single!" was their argument. Jesus did not want them to consider divorce as an "out" because then they would not have a serious attitude toward marriage.

In [Matthew 19:12](#), Jesus made it clear that each man (and woman) must consider God's will concerning marriage. Some people should not get married because of physical or emotional problems from birth. Others should not get married because of their responsibilities in society; they have been "made eunuchs by man." An only child who must care for aged parents might be an example of this category. Some, like the Apostle Paul, stay single that they might better serve the Lord ([1 Cor. 7:7](#)).

It is fitting that our Lord's teaching about marriage should be followed by His blessing of the children for children are the happy heritage of those who are married. Jesus did not look on the children as a curse or a burden. "Two shall become one flesh" is fulfilled in the birth of children, and the love of the parents is deepened and matured as it is shared with others in the home.

The parents brought the children to Jesus that He might bless them. There is no thought here of baptism or even of salvation. Children who have not reached the age of accountability ([Isa. 7:16](#)) are surely covered by the death of Christ ([Rom. 5:17-21](#)). Children are born sinners ([Ps. 51:5](#)); but if they die before they are accountable, they are regenerated and taken to heaven ([2 Sam. 12:23](#); [Ps. 23:6](#)).

The children were certainly privileged to have Jesus take them in His arms and pray for them. Our practice of baby dedication today seeks to follow this example. How happy those children are whose parents are married in the will of God, and who are seeking to obey God, and who bring them to Jesus for His blessing.

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996, c1989). *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. "An exposition of the New Testament comprising the entire 'BE' series"

The husband of one wife (v. 2b). All of the qualifying adjectives in this passage are masculine. While there is ample scope for feminine ministry in a local assembly, the office of elder is not given to women. However, a pastor's homelife is very important, and especially his marital status. (This same requirement applies to deacons, according to [1 Tim. 3:12](#).) It means that a pastor must not be divorced and remarried. Paul was certainly not referring to polygamy, since no church member, let alone a pastor, would be accepted if he had more than one wife. Nor is he referring to remarriage after the death of the wife; for why would a pastor be prohibited from marrying again, in the light of [Genesis 2:18](#) and [1 Timothy 4:3](#)? Certainly the members of the church who had lost mates could marry again; so why penalize the pastor?

It's clear that a man's ability to manage his own marriage and home indicate ability to oversee a local church ([1 Tim. 3:4-5](#)). A pastor who has been divorced opens himself and the church to criticism from outsiders, and it is not likely that people with marital difficulties would consult a man who could not keep his own marriage together. I see no reason why *dedicated* Christians who have been divorced and remarried cannot serve in other offices in the church, but they are disqualified from being elders or deacons.

Instone-Brewer, David (2002). *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible : The Social and Literary Context*.

Conclusions

The NT teaching on divorce and remarriage has been interpreted in a wide variety of ways. The traditional view says that there are only two grounds for divorce and that remarriage is not allowed during the lifetime of the former spouse, though this view does not make sense when it is viewed through the eyes of a first-century Jew or Gentile. Also, it is internally inconsistent because it appears to allow divorce for some grounds but not for other more serious grounds such as physical abuse. Some scholars have attempted to broaden these grounds by novel interpretations of *porneia* or of Paul's exception, but these interpretations are contrary to the way the original readers of the New Testament would have understood the text.

The New Testament teaching on remarriage after a valid divorce is, admittedly, ambiguous and unclear. However, remarriage after divorce was a fundamental right in the first-century world, and it was often regarded as an obligation. Thus, the New Testament writers knew that they would have to enunciate their teaching extremely clearly and unambiguously if they wanted to teach the opposite of this universally held view.

Of all the interpretations that have been described in this chapter, there are two that are both internally consistent and consistent with the cultural context of the New Testament. The first is the view that Jesus condemned all divorce, and that the exceptions were not part of his intended teaching. According to this interpretation, the exceptions were either pragmatic additions by the Church, situations where divorce was unavoidably compulsory in the first century, or situations where marriage had not really taken place, such as an illegitimate marriage.

The second view that I regard as consistent with all the facts is, of course, my own: that Jesus and Paul affirmed all four OT grounds for divorce and remarriage while emphasizing that divorce should be avoided whenever possible and that believers should go the extra mile in trying to maintain a marriage. They allowed divorce on specific grounds from the Old Testament and rejected the no-fault divorces of the Hillelites and of Greco-Roman culture.

Commentary

Is Marriage Also a Kinship Relationship?

Some commentators have used two passages in Leviticus to state that in addition to a man and woman becoming “one flesh” when they are married (Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:5-6, Mark 10:8), they also establish a kinship relationship that connects the two families. The relevant passages are listed below:

Leviticus 18:6-18

6 None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him, to uncover their nakedness: I am the LORD.

7 The nakedness of thy father, or the nakedness of thy mother, shalt thou not uncover: she is thy mother; thou shalt not uncover her nakedness.

8 The nakedness of thy father's wife shalt thou not uncover: it is thy father's nakedness.

9 The nakedness of thy sister, the daughter of thy father, or daughter of thy mother, whether she be born at home, or born abroad, even their nakedness thou shalt not uncover.

10 The nakedness of thy son's daughter, or of thy daughter's daughter, even their nakedness thou shalt not uncover: for theirs is thine own nakedness.

11 The nakedness of thy father's wife's daughter, begotten of thy father, she is thy sister, thou shalt not uncover her nakedness.

12 Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy father's sister: she is thy father's near kinswoman.

13 Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy mother's sister: for she is thy mother's near kinswoman.

14 Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy father's brother, thou shalt not approach to his wife: she is thine aunt.

15 Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy daughter in law: she is thy son's wife; thou shalt not uncover her nakedness.

16 Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother's wife: it is thy brother's nakedness.

17 Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of a woman and her daughter, neither shalt thou take her son's daughter, or her daughter's daughter, to uncover her nakedness; for they are her near kinswomen: it is wickedness.

18 Neither shalt thou take a wife to her sister, to vex her, to uncover her nakedness, beside the other in her life time.

Leviticus 20:10-12, 14, 17, 19-21

10 And the man that committeth adultery with another man's wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbour's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.

11 And the man that lieth with his father's wife hath uncovered his father's nakedness: both of them shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.

12 And if a man lie with his daughter in law, both of them shall surely be put to death: they have wrought confusion; their blood shall be upon them.

14 And if a man take a wife and her mother, it is wickedness: they shall be burnt with fire, both he and they; that there be no wickedness among you.

17 And if a man shall take his sister, his father's daughter, or his mother's daughter, and see her

nakedness, and she see his nakedness; it is a wicked thing; and they shall be cut off in the sight of their people: he hath uncovered his sister's nakedness; he shall bear his iniquity.

19 And thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy mother's sister, nor of thy father's sister: for he uncovereth his near kin: they shall bear their iniquity.

20 And if a man shall lie with his uncle's wife, he hath uncovered his uncle's nakedness: they shall bear their sin; they shall die childless.

21 And if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing: he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless.

These passages clearly contain a warning against illicit (or incestuous) unions. While these verses could simply refer to incestuous unions, if the woman was still married, these acts would also be adultery and both parties would be subject to the death penalty. Therefore, some of these verses also suggest a prohibition on certain types of marriage relationships, perhaps after a divorce had occurred (Leviticus 20:20-21). That the union of a man and a woman in marriage connects the two families in a kinship relationship is indicated by the following verses:

1. Stepmother (Leviticus 18:8, Leviticus 20:11)
2. Daughter-in-law (Leviticus 20:12)
3. Brother's wife, sister-in-law (Leviticus 18:16, Leviticus 20:21)
4. Paternal uncle's wife, aunt (Leviticus 18:14)
5. Uncle's wife (Leviticus 20:20)
6. Sister of your wife, sister-in-law (Leviticus 18:18)
7. Mother-in-law (Leviticus 20:14)
8. Daughters or granddaughters of a woman (Leviticus 18:17)

Since the prohibition on the relationship of a man with his wife's sister was limited to the lifetime of his wife (Leviticus 18:18), this would seem to support the conclusion that the marital covenant continues until the death of one of the spouses (Romans 7:1-3, 1 Corinthians 7:39). However, since the kinship relationship between two families established by marriage also apparently terminates at the death of one of the spouses, it is not the same as a blood kinship.

The two situations mentioned in Leviticus 20:20-21 are interesting. There are four possible scenarios:

1. If a man had sexual relations with the wife of his uncle or his brother while they were still married, the man and the woman would be guilty of adultery and subject to the death penalty.
2. If the uncle or brother of the man had died and a man had sexual relations with the widow outside of marriage, this act would constitute fornication and the punishment "they shall die childless" appears more severe than for the case of sexual relations with either a maternal or paternal aunt mentioned in Leviticus 20:19.
3. If a man married the widow of his uncle or his brother, it seems reasonable to conclude that the kinship relationship, like the marriage bond (Romans 7:2-3, 1 Corinthians 7:39), was severed at the death of the uncle or the brother. In fact, a levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-10; also Genesis 38:8-10) was encouraged if a man died without children. His surviving brother was

expected to marry the widow and raise up children in his brother's name.

4. The most plausible circumstance covered by Leviticus 20:20-21 is that it was intended as a prohibition against marrying the divorced wife of your uncle or brother. In Matthew 14:3-4, John the Baptist rebuked Herod Antipas for exactly that relationship. Herod Antipas had married the wife (Herodias) of his brother Herod Philip while Philip was still alive.

Moses had permitted divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) because of the hardness of men's hearts (Matthew 19:8, Mark 10:5). According to Old Testament law, a woman was free to marry another man after she had received her bill of divorcement. However, the prohibitions mentioned in Leviticus 20:20-21 appear to indicate that even though the marriage was dissolved, the kinship relationship was still in place as long as both parties were still living.

Does Divorce Prior to Salvation Count?

Some Protestant groups state that if a person was divorced prior to becoming saved, they are free to marry either before or after salvation without sin. They most often base this on the following verse:

[2 Corinthians 5:17](#)

17 Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

The rationale is that if "all things are become new," then the marriage covenant that was established prior to salvation has been abrogated and the individual has a clean slate when they are saved. There are several considerations that impact on this conclusion. First, although the word "all" seems fairly straightforward in English, the Greek word, *πᾶς* (*pas*), from which it is derived has many shades of meaning (see *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Friedrich). Also, this verse is mostly commonly interpreted simply as a turning from things of the world toward God. Our sin nature, which we inherited from Adam, still remains, although subdued, as the Apostle Paul mentioned in several of his epistles, so, clearly not "all" things have changed. Finally, if salvation does in fact abrogate marriage covenants, then shouldn't all couples who were married prior to being saved renew their marriage vows as quickly as possible after salvation? Although some no doubt do this, it is not a common practice.

Is Remarriage Continual Adultery?

In the book, "Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views," H. Wayne House, editor, J. Carl Laney presented the case for no divorce and no remarriage. Mr. Laney stated that the only Biblical options for a divorced person were reconciliation with their spouse or a single life of celibacy. He also stated that he believed that both divorce and remarriage were sins. However, unlike some conservative Christian groups, Mr. Laney stated that he believed that remarriage was a singular sin, not a continual sin, and that God would forgive the people involved.

***Is Adultery Once or Continual?** It has been argued that the present tense of the verb *moichao*, “commits adultery,” indicates that divorce and remarriage involves acts of repeated adultery and that the only way to cease sinning and demonstrate genuine repentance is to end the “adulterous marriage.” While the present tense of *moichao* can be interpreted in this way, it is also possible that the present tense, “commits adultery,” may be used in an aoristic sense expressing the idea of a present fact without reference to progress. The aoristic present sets forth an event as now occurring. So interpreted, the adultery would involve one punctiliar action at the time of the remarriage.*

The context of the passage, which contains a succession of aorists, and the prohibition against returning to one’s former spouse after a second marriage (Deut 24:1-4) would point in the direction of the second view. It has been objected that this viewpoint may encourage a couple to remarry, commit adultery, confess it and go on their blissful way. But it should be noted that even one act of adultery is a serious sin in God’s sight (Heb 13:4; Prov 6:33). To presume on God’s grace by sinning willfully against the light of knowledge would be to provoke his wrath. True believers could not sin in such a manner without incurring God’s discipline (see Heb 12:6-11).

Since the present tense, “commits adultery,” can be used to argue in favor of either view, it seems that the matter must be decided on the basis of other clear statements of Scripture. Should sexual intercourse between married partners cease? Not according to Paul (1 Cor 7:5). Should marriage end in divorce? Not according to Jesus (Mk 10:9; Mt 19:6). It may be that confessing the sin, but continuing the marriage is the least culpable course of action for the divorced and remarried Christian.

Many people argue that God’s grace means that a divorced Christian gets a second chance at marriage. This smacks of license, not grace. It implies that God has a standard, but it really doesn’t matter if it is violated. What grace means is that a divorced and remarried couple need not break up. Although entering their marriage wrongfully, they should remain in that marital state in which they find themselves (see 1 Cor 7:17-24).

There is no place for absolute dogmatism on this issue. Ultimately the couple involved must determine their responsibilities from a study of Scripture. Those who choose to end their marriage because it was consummated wrongfully must be respected. Those who recognize their wrong (see 1 Jn 1:9), appropriate God’s forgiveness and choose to continue their marriages in good conscience must not be condemned (see Rom 14:3-12).

The phrases “committeth adultery” or “commits adultery” in Matthew 5:32, Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:11-12, Luke 16:18 are translated from the Greek words *μοιχᾶται*, *μοιχεύει* (from the Stephens Textus Receptus, 1550, which was the basis for the New Testament in the King James Version of the Bible; and the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament, 27th ed.). In each case, these verbs are in the present tense (verb, third person, singular, present, passive or active, indicative). The only time that the aorist tense was used was in the phrase “causeth her to commit adultery” in Matthew 5:32. Therefore, the Greek syntax of these verses suggests that remarriage following divorce without Biblical grounds constitutes continual adultery (assuming that the couple are not practicing abstinence).