

Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

What is a Christian to do if he/she has been divorced? Should he/she stay single? Can he/she marry again? Is a Christian guilty of perpetual sin if he/she divorces and marries again? These questions impact believers who have been divorced and wish to live according to the Lord's will. In God's grace, His Word is not silent and offer clear guidelines on these matters.

Passages to Consider

- Genesis 2:24. One man with one woman. A monogamous, physical and spiritual union of a man and a woman for life has always been God's design for marriage.
- Exodus 20:14. Adultery is forbidden within the 10 Commandments. Malachi 2:11-16, God opposes divorce and at no time changes to like divorce, even though he permits it under certain circumstances.
- Leviticus 20:10-16. Amongst other sexual sins, adultery was punishable by death. Similarly, sexual purity and marital faithfulness is central in Hebrews 13:4, *let marriage be held in honour among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.*
- In Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Moses speaks of a husband finding some kind of *indecency* (KJV uncleanness) in his wife, he used a Hebrew word used for any indecency which included all forms of sexual impropriety. This passage is NOT referring only to wrong sexual relations before or during marriage. The Jewish men of that time were accusing their wives of anything which bothered them as justification for divorce.

Therefore, when Jesus discusses Deuteronomy 24:1-4 in Matthew 19:3-12, He is being faithful to the broader context of Moses comments in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, and He is NOT referring only to sexual indecency before marriage.

At some time between the Levitical Law, and before the time of writing Deuteronomy, God must have revoked the death penalty for adultery, as Moses did not instruct men to kill their wives if they found an indecency in her. He simply permitted divorce.

Jesus explained that Moses permitted the Israelites to divorce (Dt 24:1-4) due to the hardness of their sinful hearts (Mat 19:8). Divorce was never God's intention for married people, but when sin hardens the heart, there are certain circumstances where the concession of divorce applies.

- In Jeremiah 3:6-15, 31:31-33, God initiated His divorce with Israel.

An excerpt from Got Questions helps our understanding of this.

(<https://www.gotquestions.org>)

[Quote]

In their idolatry, Israel had polluted the land and broken their covenant with God. Due to the enormity of their sin, God punished Israel, and He illustrates that punishment like this: He “divorced” Israel and sent them away—a reference to the Assyrian invasion, which resulted in Israel’s removal from their homeland (see 2 Kings 17:5–7). Even given the example of Israel’s “divorce,” Judah remained unfaithful, as if daring God to mete out a similar punishment on them.

Having just cause, God, the faithful Husband, “divorced” Israel, His unfaithful wife. To make matters worse, God had asked, “If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him and marries another man, should he return to her again?” (Jeremiah 3:1). The answer, according to the Mosaic Law, was “no”; a man who had divorced his wife could not later remarry her (Deuteronomy 24:1–4). According to God’s metaphor, Israel seems to be in a hopeless situation: she has been divorced by God, and, according to the law, she can never be accepted back.

But then comes a surprising twist: God's mercy intervenes:

“Return, faithless Israel,’ declares the Lord, ‘I will frown on you no longer, for I am faithful,’ declares the Lord, ‘I will not be angry forever’” (Jeremiah 3:12).

In the same passage in which God sets up a scenario of hopelessness for Israel, He invites His people to “return” to Him and promises that His anger will end. Could it be that God's love is stronger than His people's rebellion? The Lord doubles down on His invitation:

“Return, faithless people,’ declares the Lord, ‘for I am your husband. I will choose you . . . and bring you to Zion” (Jeremiah 3:14).

God promises to do what the Mosaic Law could never do: restore the broken “marriage.” It was unthinkable that a human husband would take back his unfaithful wife, but God is greater than that; He can and will forgive His wayward people when they repent of their sin and seek Him again (Jeremiah 3:13).

God used the shocking illustration of a “divorce” of Israel to stress their guilt before Him. But God never cut Israel off unilaterally for all time. He only asked that they return to Him and experience His goodness. In fact, after God says that He “divorced” Israel, He commands them three times to “return” (Jeremiah 3:11, 14, 23).

The apostle Paul explains, “Did God reject his people? By no means! ... God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew... At the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace... Again, I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! . . . And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again” (Romans 11:1-6, 11, 23).

[End Quote]

Obviously, Scripture recognises divorce and remarriage both at the human level and within God's own household. "God does not give us illustrations of His own righteous behaviour that we cannot follow" (John MacArthur, Matthew Commentary, page 170).

- Ezra 10:11, 44. God required the men of Israel who had married foreign, idol worshipping woman, to separate from them even though many of them had children by their foreign wives.

Once again, the Lord recognised specific, extreme circumstances that enabled divorce to fulfil His holy requirements.

- Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18; Romans 7:2-3. All New Testament passages discussing divorce that do NOT deal with adultery or a dissatisfied unbelieving spouse, consistently presents marriage with no divorce as an option but affirms one man, one woman for life.

When considering Romans 7:2-3, remember that the context of Paul's discussion is the law. How law only has power over a person while they are alive. Paul only uses marriage as an example of this. Remember that marriage is not the actual subject Paul is discussing in Romans 7.

- Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-12, except for sexual adultery, divorce and remarriage constituted committing adultery. The Greek word for immorality is "*porneia*", from which we get the word pornography. It means illicit sexual intercourse, adultery, fornication, homosexuality, lesbianism, intercourse with animals etc. (This word is NO restricted to sexual relations outside of marriage only). This is why pornography is treated with the same seriousness as adultery. Matthew 5:28, *I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

Jesus did not disagree with Moses, nor did Jesus' attempt to reverse Moses' concession for divorce. Rather, Jesus reinforces Moses and gives

the reason for Moses' concession, the hardness of their hearts. Jesus also extends the application of Moses' teaching for New Testament times by adding that the concession was for adultery related divorce, and that it was not God's intention from the beginning for this to happen.

If God is gracious to the sinning spouse by tolerating divorce instead of requiring execution, He would surely also be gracious to the innocent spouse by permitting remarriage, which was permissible when a spouse died (cf. Rom 7:2-3). The purpose of permitting divorce is to show mercy to the sinning spouse, not to condemn the innocent one to a lifetime of singleness and loneliness that would not be required if the Lord had the sinning partner executed. Should God's grace to the sinner penalise the innocent? Absolutely not!

Humanly speaking, the purpose of getting divorced is to enable remarriage should you choose. If freedom to remarry was not the reason for divorce, permanent separation from your spouse would suffice.

The Lord allows divorce in order that the adulterer might have the opportunity to repent rather than be put to death. In Matthew 5:32 and 19:3-12, Jesus specifically allows remarriage by the innocent spouse in order that he or she might have the opportunity to enjoy again the blessings of marriage that were destroyed by the first partner's adultery. The qualification '*except for immorality*' clearly permits the innocent party who remarries to do so without committing adultery.

- 1 Corinthians 7:10-16, 39. If an unbeliever divorces a believer, the believer is to accept it and realise that the Lord has set them free from the marriage and therefore they are not bound by the marriage covenant. This means the believer is free to remarry without any stain or bondage from the previous marriage.

To enforce any legalistic prohibition upon the believer, who is the innocent person, would be to place them under bondage to the old marriage covenant which the Lord has set them free from.

- We read in John 4:6-42 of Jesus speaking with the Samaritan woman at the well. He made her aware that He knew of her 5 previous husbands (:18) and that she was presently living in an inappropriate relationship with a man to whom she was not married. While it's possible that she could have been widowed from some of those 5 husbands, it is highly unlikely that all 5 husbands died. It is reasonable to assume that she had been divorced and remarried at least once.

This being the case, it's worth noting that Jesus did not require the death penalty for her due to adultery as the Levitical law had required (Leviticus 20:10-16). He didn't instruct her on the wrong of multiple divorces, remarriage and living with a man outside of marriage. Nor did He condemn her as being guilty of perpetual adultery without any possibility of spiritual cleansing. Christ did not tell her that even if she did repent and surrender to Him as Lord, that she would not be permitted to fellowship with God's people. In fact, Christ did not inform her of any post salvation penalty for her wrong relationships.

Offering her the living water of eternal life (:13-15), Jesus used her past and present relationships to achieve at least the following: to make her aware that He knew of her sin. To tell her that He was the promised Messiah (:25-26, 42). And He used her as the mouthpiece to communicate His message to many Samaritans who believed in Him (:39).

- 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6. An elder is to be the husband of only one wife. Obviously, there were men in consideration for eldership who either were polygamist (Presently had more than 1 living wife) or had been divorced and remarried. This excludes being widowed and remarried as death sets a man free from his previous marriage.

Since it is highly unlikely that a practicing polygamist would have been permitted within a New Testament fellowship, it seems reasonable to assume that Paul was referring to men who had been divorced and remarried.

Christ's Sufficiency for Divorce and Remarriage

Scripture is clear, divorce has never been God's intention for married couples. However, when unrepentant sin prevents reconciliation in a damaged marriage and divorce ensues, we need to turn our focus upon Christ. The sufficiency of Christ's redemptive work at Calvary is pivotal in this discussion. It is this single most important truth that distinguishes mere religion from true faith in Jesus Christ. The once and for all, total sufficiency of Jesus bodily sacrifice on Calvary's cross to make the believer holy (Hebrews 10:10) and to maintain that state of holiness as washed sinners before holy God (Hebrews 10:14) is paramount to this discussion.

There is no sin that the Father does not only forgive but He totally cleanses all previous shame along with any guilty status (Colossians 2:13-14; Titus 3:5-7). Just as the Law was added so that the trespass might increase, so, consistently *where sin increases, grace abounded all the more* (Romans 5:20). These foundational gospel truths must abide for all believers, regardless of marital status.

Even if a believer should sin by wrongly divorcing and remarrying, there is available forgiveness of all components of that sin and all associated unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

It is too easy to forget the justification that Jesus' purchased for believers. Christ's presence through the Holy Spirit in our lives gives the saved sinner absolute freedom from all condemnation that may have come to them under law (2 Corinthians 3:17). That's why Paul could say with confidence that *"if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, behold all things*

have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). This new life and imputed righteousness (Romans 3:22) express the indisputable fact that *"there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death"* (Romans 8:1-2).

Conclusion

Particularly when discussing divorce, we need to observe how God implements grace in allowing people access to experience His love during the worst of life's situations, including divorce and remarriage. Nowhere does the Lord punish or stain the innocent believer for the sins of others (Ezekiel 18:19-20).

The Lord consistently creates ways (including concessions and exceptions) to present an equilibrium between His holiness and His mercy. Therefore, the innocent child of God should experience Christ's grace for a clean conscience while prayerfully and submissively considering remarriage following a biblically appropriate divorce without any fear of shame.

God's Word never speaks of an innocent believer being prevented from full fellowship with the Body of Christ. Likewise, any recategorising of a believer who is the victim of another's sin that would penalise them should be rejected. Any teaching that attempts to categorise a new believer as unfit for full fellowship in the Body of Christ because of sins prior to salvation must also be rejected. Otherwise, it would be necessary to have separate churches, those for once married Saints and those for remarried Saints.

It is very easy to create legalism that overlooks justification in Christ and enforces personal fears and discriminations upon the Body of Christ. This should never be the case when evaluating marriage relationships.