

*Divorce and Remarriage:
What is the Biblical Response?*



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It is my opinion that the case for remarriage after divorce is clear due to the “exception clause” stated by Jesus in both Matthew 5:31 and Matthew 19:9, as well as Paul’s statements in I Corinthians 7:10-16. After much reading and analyzing of the different views that are and have been held on this subject by godly men through the ages, I cast my lot with Erasmus and many of the other Protestant Reformers. They taught, and I agree, that the Bible teaches that if the offended party has been divorced over the act of adultery or desertion of their unbelieving spouse then they are free to remarry without fear of sin or an act of adultery themselves.

Introduction and Thesis

Is it biblical for an offended party in a divorce to be able to remarry before the divorcing spouse dies? This is a question, or some form of it, that has been a source of debate since the time that the Law was handed down to Moses. Since the time of Jesus' word as recorded in the gospel of Matthew and Paul's words to the Corinthian church, this subject has been even more hotly debated. Since the cannon is closed, and we no longer receive any new revelation, I believe that we have all we need to determine God's heart on the issue and know the correct answer to this question. It is my opinion that while God hates divorce and only allowed it because of the hardness of man's heart, that He does indeed grant permission for a divorce to happen, but only for two reasons. If He grants it, then logically and scripturally I believe He allows for the offended party, which is no longer under covenant to the offending party, to remarry without fear of sin or adultery.

The Case Against Remarriage After Divorce for the Offended Party

Before stating the case against remarriage after divorce, I feel it is important to define what divorce is. Divorce is defined as "breaking of the marriage covenant. An action contrary to the pattern of the "one man, one woman, one lifetime" revealed by God in Gen. 1:27; 2:21-25."¹ There are four basic views on divorce; first is the secular view. This view states that there does not have to be a reason for a divorce. If a person simply no longer wants to be married then they can divorce. This is a popular view in society where 48 of 50 states in the United States have no fault divorces.² There is no biblical argument that can be made to support this view.

¹ *The Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. (Nashville. Holman Bible Publishers. 2003.) 435

² Davis, John Jefferson. *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing. 2004.) 99.

This paper will focus on the other three views: no divorce under any circumstance, divorce under some circumstance, but never remarriage, and divorce and remarriage is possible but only under certain circumstances.³ It must be stated that all three of these Christian views start with the same understanding: God hates divorce. Malachi 2:16a reads, “‘For I hate divorce,’ says the LORD, the God of Israel. . .” This is an important point to remember. All of these arguments are grounded in the fact that God deplores divorce and only made an option because of the hardness of man’s heart. Godly men throughout church history have held to all three of these views. This should make us all realize that the question of divorce and remarriage is not the easiest one to answer.

The first of the two views that hold that there should be no remarriage after divorce is called the preteritive view. Not only does this view believe that there should be no remarriage, but furthermore states there should be no divorce at all. Those who hold to this view believe that the Bible teaches there is no reason that a divorce should ever be permitted. Thus, there is no question to whether or not remarriage would be allowed. This way of thinking is not held by many. This view takes exception to the exception clause found in Matthew 5 and Matthew 19. “According to this view the exception clause is not to be interpreted as an exception at all. It is to be interpreted ‘completely apart from the question of unchastity’ rather than ‘except in the case of unchastity.’”⁴ Thus, all divorce, according to this view, is an act of adultery whether a person gets remarried or not. Those who hold fast to this way of thinking believe that the *except* that is found in the clause is not an exception at all, but rather is

³ MacArthur, John. *The Divorce Dilemma*. (Leominster, England: Day One Publication, 2009.) 7.

⁴ Green, Joel B. Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. (Downers Grove. Intervarsity Press. 1992.) 194.

suggesting that Jesus is saying that he does not want to talk about unchastity. It is taking adultery out of consideration. This view sees a harmonization of Matthew to Mark and Luke instead of further revelation as the most desirable understanding.

The second view teaches that there should be no remarriage permitted after a divorce. This is much more widely accepted than the first. It must be noted that those holding to this view would absolutely understand that remarriage is completely acceptable after a divorce if the old spouse were to die after the divorce; which would completely nullify the covenant. This is true of all three Christian views. This view, however, teaches that God does allow divorce, for adultery or desertion of an unbelieving spouse, but does not allow for remarriage for the offending or offended party. Many of the early church fathers held to this view until the time of the Protestant Reformation. There are several conservative Christian leaders today who hold to this view such as John Piper and Voddie Baucham. Piper states, “God ends the one-flesh relationship of marriage only through the death of one of the spouses.”⁵ Thus, divorce is permitted under some circumstance, but not remarriage under any circumstance.

One of the main arguments for this view is that the broad teaching of the New Testament treats any remarriage after divorce as adultery and is strictly prohibited. Just like the first group, they also take exception to the exception clause found in Matthew. Some think the phrase “except for unchastity” is interpreted as modifying the verb “divorce” and not in the verb “marries”. Thus, it would be interpreted, “whoever divorces his wife except for unchastity commits adultery and the one who remarries (without exception) commits adultery.”⁶ Therefore,

⁵ Piper, John. “Divorce and Remarriage: A Position Paper.” *Desiring God*. <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/articles/divorce-remarriage-a-position-paper> (accessed October 22, 2012)

the purpose of the exception clause is not giving the okay for remarriage, but rather saying that divorce in this situation is okay, but remarriage would be an act of adultery.

A second point this view makes is in the different usages of Greek words found in the Matthew text. The Greek word that is used for unchastity in Matthew 5 and Matthew 19 is *porneia*. Those who hold to this view argue that the Greek has a specific word for adultery, which is *moicheia*. They raise the question why Matthew would choose *porneia* over *moicheia*. *Porneia* refers to a number of unlawful acts such as incest, prostitution, and bestiality, while *moicheia* specially refers to adultery. They argue that Matthew must have meant something different than adultery. If it means something different than adultery, then in their minds this would bring cohesion with the Matthew texts and the other texts which do not include the exception clause.

One way this view tries to make sense of this is by saying that the divorce spoken of in Matthew is speaking about divorce during the betrothal period. They look at the Matthew 1:19 text which says, “And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly,” as a prime example of the type of divorce Jesus was alluding to in Matthew 5 and Matthew 19. John Piper notes, “Matthew includes the exception clause in particular to exonerate Joseph, but also in general to show that the kind of “divorce” that one might pursue during a betrothal on account of fornication is not included in Jesus’ absolute prohibition.”⁷ This is due to the fact that it was Jewish custom to issue a certificate of divorce if

⁶ Green, Joel B. Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall. Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels. (Downers Grove. Intervarsity Press. 1992.) 193.

⁷Piper, John. “Divorce and Remarriage: A Position Paper.” Desiring God. <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/articles/divorce-remarriage-a-position-paper> (accessed October 22, 2012)

a man wanted to divorce his wife after finding out that his wife had been unfaithful to him during or before their betrothal period. This was a necessary custom according to the Jewish understanding of Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

Answering the Case Against Remarrying After Divorce for the Offended Party

Answering the case against the preteritive view that believes the Bible teaches that there should be no divorce and consequently no remarriage is fairly easy. It is very hard to defend this view, which is why not many people hold to it. Grammatically the word “except” found in Matthew 19 is most often understood “except for.” It would be unnatural to interpret the verse the way this view suggests. The most natural way would be to understand the word “except” as “X is...except in the case of Y.” Thus, the customary way to understand this text’s reading is to read it “divorce and remarriage (X) is adultery except in the case of unchastity (Y).”⁸ Part of the problem with this way of understanding the exception clause is that it stresses the horizontal way of interpreting gospels rather than the vertical. It desires to harmonize the gospel, which is poor exegesis, rather than taking a vertical hermeneutic and looking at why Matthew wrote what he did in its context. This view simply cannot be sustained in light of the logical and grammatical analysis of the exception clause found in Matthew.

This view also cannot sustain itself when adding the I Corinthians 7 passage to the discussion. The context here seems clear that Paul is talking about marriage and divorce. Not only is Paul talking about divorce when he uses the language “not bound”, but he is seemingly indicating that it is okay to remarry after a divorce if it is indeed a just divorce. At least it is a logical deduction to believing that Paul meant this. John Jefferson Davis points out, “In Romans 7:2-3 Paul uses similar language in relation to marriage speaking of being “bound” and

⁸Green, Joel B. Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. (Downers Grove. Intervarsity Press. 1992.) 194.

“released” for the relationship. In this text “not bound” is equivalent to “release” and the one who is “released” is free to remarry.”⁹ When looking logically at the I Corinthians text, as well as the two texts in Matthew, the preteritive view has a hard time supporting its argument.

Answering the view that teaches that divorce is allowed under some circumstances, but never remarriage, is more difficult to argue against. Scripture does seem to support this view in some texts. The argument that states that every verse other than the two found in Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 never mention an exception for remarriage, has some merit. The parallel passage to Matthew 19 is found in Mark 10. John Piper points out, “we should seriously entertain the possibility that the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 should be understood in the light of the absolute statement of Matthew 19:6, (“let no man put asunder”) especially since the verses that follow this conversation with the Pharisees in Mark 10 do not contain any exception when they condemn remarriage.”¹⁰ While it is true that Mark, as well as all other verses pertaining to divorce, does not record the exception clause, I believe that we can take Matthew’s version as an absolute exception. There are several reasons why we can take Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 as absolute statements. One, the Jewish audience that Jesus was speaking to, and Matthew was likely writing to, would understand that divorce meant separation from a wife and the right to remarry.¹¹ “To permit the divorce but deny remarriage would turn mercy on its

⁹ Davis, John Jefferson. *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing. 2004.) 109.

¹⁰ Piper, John. “Divorce and Remarriage: A Position Paper.” *Desiring God*. <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/articles/divorce-remarriage-a-position-paper> (accessed October 22, 2012)

¹¹ Green, Joel B. Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. (Downers Grove. Intervarsity Press. 1992.) 193.

head.”¹² The audience would understand the “clause” and accept it in light of their understanding of Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

Another reason that this way of thinking is skewed is that God is God. He only has to state something once for it to be true. Not only did Jesus state the exception once, but He stated it twice. There are many principles in scripture that are taught in just a few places that are completely accepted as truth; so, why not Jesus’ teaching that it is acceptable for the offended party to remarry after a divorce? The simplest answer is a faulty hermeneutic. As stated before, when interpreting the gospel it is most important to first take a vertical reading of the gospel before a horizontal one . . . meaning that we do not need to harmonize the gospel to make it fit perfectly. The author of the specific gospel had a particular purpose for choosing the words he did. Matthew chose to focus on the exception where the other gospel writers did not. Just because the other writers did not record Jesus’ teaching in the same manner does not mean that Jesus didn’t say it and truly mean what seems to be the intended interpretation.

A final reason for this objection is the context. Some argue that this interpretation has to do with a divorce during the betrothal period. This simply does not seem to be the case. The context of both Matthew 5 and Matthew 19 is clearly talking about marriage as we know it and not during the engagement or betrothal period. Note Matthew 19:3, “And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, ‘Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?’” Jesus replies a few verses later in verse 6, “So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” When putting these two verses together and adding the context of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which Jesus was quoting from, and not Deuteronomy 22:20-21, it seems clear that the conversation was understood to be talking about a covenant marriage and

¹² MacArthur, John. *The Divorce Dilemma*. (Leominster, England: Day One Publication, 2009.) 26.

not just during the betrothal period. C.H. Mann says, “The notion that Jesus was allowing separations, but not divorce, cannot be sustained – as Judaism had no such custom, he would perform have had to explain it.”¹³ Seeing as how Jesus did not give any further explanation, the context seems clear and thus this basis does not have a firm foundation.

In Defense of Remarriage After Divorce for the Offended Party

There are only two New Testament reasons listed as acceptable reasons for divorce in God’s eyes: adultery and desertion by an unbelieving spouse. It is God who ordains marriage, and it is only God who can end it. It is important to remember that divorce was not part of the original plan of creation, but God allowed it for these two reasons only because of the hardness of man’s heart. Divorce was always and should always be the last resort. It was permitted, not commanded. This is important to remember. John MacArthur points out, “In the Old Testament God Himself divorced the Northern Kingdom of Israel because of her idolatry, which He likened to sexual sin (Jeremiah 3:6-9).”¹⁴ While God does hate divorce, He Himself did it to part of His covenant people because of their idolatry. Therefore following His permission He gives precedence for divorce, but only under His strict guidelines.

The question arises then, “Is it okay to remarry if you have been the offended party in a divorce?” I believe that God’s word gives us that answer in Matthew 5, Matthew 19, and in I Corinthians 7. Christ two times in Matthew says the words, “except on the grounds of unchastity”. Here He is giving the permission for a divorce for this reason. If He looks at a

¹³Heth, William A. “Jesus on Divorce: How my mind has changed.” <http://moodle.sbts.edu/mod/resource/view.php?id=71503> (WW 29250 – *Survey of Christian Ethics* Fall 2012, PDF), 16.

¹⁴MacArthur, John. *Right Thinking in a World Gone Wrong*. (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2009.) 74.

marriage covenant as a legally binding contract, and sees sexual immorality as a reason for breaking that contract, then He confirms that if the offending party desires a divorce because of it, He will nullify the covenant contract. If the contract is null and void, then logically it must mean that the offended party would be free to marry again without fear of committing adultery. This is the only logical interpretation in my opinion. If God accepts the divorce then it cannot be sin to remarry.

A second consideration to the exception clause in Matthew is that the word *porneia* that is used for unchastity is broad enough to cover not just illicit sexual sins, but also adultery. While it is true that *moicheia* is a specific word for adultery in the Greek language it falls under the umbrella of *porneia*. “Unchastity (*porneia*) has too broad a range of meaning to be interpreted so narrowly. It may indeed include these narrow meanings, but it cannot be restricted to them.”¹⁵ It would not be merciful of God to allow a divorce but deny the offended party remarriage. He accepts divorce because of the hardness of our heart, it is true, but He *does* accept it as a nullified covenant for the offended party.

Not only is it permitted for the offended party to remarry in the case of adultery, but it is also permitted for a believer to divorce and remarry if an unbelieving spouse deserts them. The argument that states that Paul in I Corinthians 7:15 does not directly say it is okay to divorce or remarry is one to be noted, but the context seems clear that he is speaking about divorce. As mentioned before, when you compare the language of this passage to Romans 7:2-3, it seems clear that his intention is to say that those who are “under bondage” can “let him leave.” This is talking about divorce especially when you look at whole context of I Corinthians 7. “Paul does

¹⁵ Green, Joel B. Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. (Downers Grove. Intervarsity Press. 1992.) 194.

not explicitly state that the believer whose unbelieving partner leaves is free to remarry, it is more than reasonable to draw that conclusion.”¹⁶ The logical conclusion is that if God accepts divorce under His rules, then He must also allow the offended party to joyfully remarry without the sin of adultery attached to it. It is the nature of a covenant. If it is broken, it is nullified.

Conclusion

God hates divorce. It is messy. It is painful. In many cases, it is sinful. He hates it so much that in the Law of the old covenant the penalty for defiling the marriage bed was death. However, He is a merciful God as well. He laid out in scripture only two acceptable reasons for divorce. Anything outside of those reasons, He does not recognize. That is why He calls it adultery when a person gets remarried after an unlawful divorce. The question raised in this paper is whether or not it is biblical for a person to remarry if they were the offended party in a divorce. As it has been laid out, I certainly believe that God does allow such a person to be remarried. While there have been many different interpretations throughout church history on this subject, my conscience agrees with Erasmus and many of the other Reformers (which is the majority view today). I believe that William A. Heth states a good warning to all when he wrote, “There is a danger that majority view will allow what God has prohibited and danger in the minority view that they may prohibit what God allows.”¹⁷ May we all seek to love the Lord with all that we are . . . take marriage seriously . . . and be willing to forgive as Christ forgave us . . . and never personally consider an option that which the Lord has said that He hates.

¹⁶ Hill, Michael. *The How and Why of Love: An Introduction to Evangelical Ethics*. (Kingsford, Australia. Matthias Media. 2002.) 167.

¹⁷ Heth, William A. “Jesus on Divorce: How my mind has changed.” <http://moodle.sbts.edu/mod/resource/view.php?id=71503> (WW 29250 – *Survey of Christian Ethics* Fall 2012, PDF.) 22

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