



*New Testament
Teaching
On The Subject Of*

Divorce

by

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New Testament Teaching On Divorce

In *Matthew 19:1 – 9* Jesus establishes the New Testament Church Doctrine on divorce and remarriage. Neither the Apostle Paul nor any of the other writers of the New Testament contradict or annul what Jesus teaches in this passage. Mark and Luke record parts of the teaching of Jesus that Matthew records fully. Their exclusion of certain details does not nullify the legitimacy of the inclusion of those details by Matthew.

Jesus' words emphasize the sanctity or purity and consecration to God of marriage. Paul agrees in *Hebrews 13:4*. In *Ephesians 5:22 – 33* Paul gives us the reason why God puts so much emphasis on the importance of unity in marriage in the New Testament. It is a picture of Christ and His Bride. Marriage is to be a commitment of faithfulness of one man and one woman to each other for their lifetime. That is God's standard. That is what we are to desire and look to God to accomplish in our lives. He will always show Himself faithful to those who look to Him in faith.

The Reality of Divorce – Divorce has always been and will always be a reality in our society. It is a result of the hardness of man's sinful heart against the will of God. The question is how do we in the Body of Christ deal with those who have been divorced.

When Jesus addressed the Pharisees, there were two schools of thought on divorce among them. One school taught there was never ever any legitimate cause for divorce and remarriage. To divorce was sin without exception. The other school of thought was that one could divorce and remarry for any reason at all. Jesus did not side with either group. His response made it clear that frivolous excuses of incompatibility were not

acceptable to God who had established the union of marriage as sacred and to be faithfully protected, guarded and nourished. He declared divorce and remarriage under such carnal excuses to be equal with the sin of adultery. However, He clearly allows one exception to the rule. “Except for fornication” – sexual unfaithfulness which is a breaking of the covenant made between the two. The innocent victim of unfaithfulness by a spouse has clear liberty to divorce the offender and remarry without the shame of being declared to be living in sin. Jesus’ exception could not be clearer and yet some insist on condemning those whom God Himself does not judge.

We know that Jesus’ earthly ministry was to the lost sheep of the nation of Israel. We also know that Paul is God’s chosen instrument to reveal Church doctrine in this Church Age. That does not mean, however, that everything that Jesus taught in His earthly ministry is to be rejected as not being doctrine for this Church Age. There are truths that transcend dispensations. Jesus pointed back to the beginning of creation, long before the Law of Moses was given, and declared that what He taught in Matthew 19 has always been and will always be God’s standard.

Paul’s teaching in *I Corinthians 7:1 – 16* appears to expand on Jesus’ teaching, but does not contradict it. The real theme of Paul’s teaching in this passage has to do with our service to the Lord. Ideally, we could all serve the Lord best by not having any relationships or obligations to others that would take up our time and energy that could be used in promoting the Gospel. That being the ideal, some in the early Church might think it best, upon being saved, to abandon those relationships and obligations altogether, including

marriages. Paul exhorts them to remain in those marriages if the spouse is not opposed to them honoring the Lord. The believer is not to initiate a divorce. **(Vs. 10)** Everything possible should be done to patiently win the unbelieving spouse over to the Lord. If they feel it unbearable to stay, they may leave, but remain unmarried. **(Vs.11)** If all else fails and the unbelieving spouse refuses to live with the one who wants to serve and honor the Lord, Paul declares that the believing spouse is free to accept the divorce of that individual and is not under bondage to that covenant of marriage. **(Vs. 15)** It is difficult for me to interpret this freedom from bondage in any other way than to be freedom from being bond to the marriage contract made with the departing unbeliever. I believe if God gives liberty from the first marriage covenant, the liberty to remarry must be concluded since God no longer acknowledges the first marriage. We are called to peace.

I believe abandonment and abusive and criminal behavior can also be included in the description of an unbelieving spouse whether saved or unsaved. There are those who are saved and yet are unbelievers for they do not walk by faith. These are not “loop holes” in the marriage contract, but are God’s protection of His people that He has called to peace. Individuals who divorce and remarry under these circumstances are not committing sin. However, these things only emphasize the need not to enter into marriage lightly. The Scriptural permission to divorce and remarry without committing sin is very limited and excludes all the frivolous excuses of the hardened heart of the flesh. It is so important to heed Paul’s warning not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers so that one is never put in such circumstances. ***II Corinthians 6:14***

Any who divorce and remarry for any other reasons than those covered by Jesus' and Paul's teaching are committing a sin that is equal to that of adultery. How does the Church deal with divorced people? The answer is simple. The same way we deal with any sinner. The sin of divorce is not the unpardonable sin. When there is repentance and a turning to God, God will take people right where they are and begin to transform them into the image of Christ. We cannot go back and undo the damage of sin in the lives of people. Those scars are there for the remainder of this life. Jesus didn't tell the Samaritan woman at the well to go back to the man she had four husbands ago. He only invited her to drink of the living water. We can't erase the scars of their past sin, but we can encourage God's people to live in obedience to God's loving instruction from this point on.

Are divorced people never to have a place in the Church? Well, let's answer that question with another question. Is anyone who has ever committed a sin of any kind to be embraced into fellowship once they have turned their life over to the Lord in repentance? The obvious answer is yes, they are to be received and openly embraced. Otherwise, there would be no Church.

What about those who are Christians and divorce and remarry for reasons other than the scriptural license that Jesus and Paul gave in their teachings? They should be dealt with as anyone who commits sin in the circle of fellowship of God's people. They should be confronted with their disobedience and if there is no repentance, fellowship is severed until they agree with God. ***II Thessalonians 3:14, 15***

I want to deal with one last area that has been a

problem for some along this line of divorce and remarriage. Should an individual that has been divorced and remarried be allowed to preach or teach the Word or given a place of leadership in the Church? Some answer with a resounding “no,” based on Paul’s teaching in *1 Timothy 3:2*. Early in my ministry I taught the same thing simply because that’s how I had been taught. Later, after much study and comparing of Scripture with Scripture, I have come to the conclusion that Paul is addressing another issue in this passage. Paul says that the bishop must be the husband of one wife. Those who say there is never any grounds for divorce and remarriage say that a divorced man who remarries has two wives.

First, I believe it is wrong to assume that Paul had divorce and remarriage in mind at all when giving the requirements for elders. He is addressing the common practice of the day known as polygamy. Polygamy was still considered legal and moral in Paul’s day by most societies. Paul declares that the world’s standard is not to be the Church’s. Paul is forbidding the practice of polygamy by those in places of spiritual leadership in the Church.

Secondly, if anyone divorces and remarries in accordance with Jesus’ and Paul’s teaching, God no longer recognizes the first wife. No sin has taken place when one divorces an adulterous wife and marries a faithful one. Such an elder has only one wife that God acknowledges and approves and is therefore fit for ministry if truly called of God.

Thirdly, if before being called to the ministry, one has been divorced and remarried and committed sin by doing so, is he to be forever rejected as a spiritual leader on that basis even though he has repented and

turned his life over to God in loving obedience? Let me ask you this. Is the sin of adultery greater than the sin of murder or blasphemy? If a thief gets saved, turns his life over to God and is called to preach, should he be allowed in the pulpit? The Apostle Paul was a murderer and a blasphemer before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. God saw fit to call the former murderer and blasphemer to be the Apostle to this Church Age. I believe God can take those who have messed up their lives with the sin of adultery, forgive them upon repentance and give them a ministry among God's people if He so chooses. It is not a violation of Paul's requirement that they have only one wife.

Lastly, how should we deal with spiritual leaders that are already in places of authority and commit adultery by divorcing and remarrying contrary to scriptural teachings? Again, the answer is simple. The same way we deal with elders that fall into any kind of sin. They are to be confronted, encouraged to repent and return to obedience to the will of God. If there is no repentance, they are to be removed from office and fellowship withdrawn so that they might feel their shame. *Titus 3:10, 11; I Timothy 5:19, 20; I Corinthians 5*

For the sake of time and space I have not dealt with the devastation of divorce on individuals and especially on children. Divorce is never good and is the result of sin in the flesh. However, the Bible teaches that there are times when divorce is necessary and permissible. It also teaches that there is forgiveness and restoration for all who come to God in repentance. He will take you where you are and make you what He wants you to be. *I John 1:7 – 10*

Based on the preceding convictions and in an

effort to promote the Scriptural sanctity of marriage while at the same time allowing God's grace to minister to those who are scarred by sin, I have formulated the following Marriage Policy that I use in my ministry as a Pastor.

Prerequisites for Wedding Ceremonies in the Church Building

- 1) Both persons must be born again.
- 2) The couple must not be living together or having sexual relations before the ceremony.
- 3) They must be willing to sit under my ministry or a similar ministry for an extended period of time. In other words, must faithfully attend Church.
- 4) If the couple meets the first three prerequisites, but one or both have been married before or have had live in partners, I will be willing to conduct a small private ceremony in a home, but a ceremony in the Church Building will not be permitted. The Church building is set aside to proclaim the Gospel. That Gospel promotes godliness, morality and life long marriage. Nothing we do here should conflict with that message. However, God's grace is sufficient to receive us where we are when we look to Him in faith. God does not throw divorced people on the scrap heap, and Scripture does give license for divorce and remarriage in some cases, but they must choose to obey God's order in any future marriage. If such a couple is willing to base their new marriage on God's Word and principles, God can bless that union. Therefore, I will consent to a private home ceremony.

I hope these thoughts have been helpful to those who may have been wrestling with the difficult topic of divorce.