

Chapter 11. Matthew 19

As mentioned earlier, the other frequently cited divorce passage in the Gospels is Matthew 19:1-12:

1 When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. 2 Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. 3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

The Pharisees are specifically asking Jesus to comment on Deuteronomy 24, and in particular, are asking Jesus to choose between the two prevailing interpretations of the passage—divorce is permitted only for indecency—essentially the same as fornication or adultery—or divorce is allowed for any reason.

Deuteronomy 24 is indeed ambiguous on this point, and so rather than simply expressing an opinion, Jesus calls his listeners to consider the fundamental principles behind marriage, found in Genesis 1 and 2:

4 “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ 5 and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? 6 So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

Jesus concludes that marriage is a divine institution, which God blesses, having invented it in Eden before sin entered the world. Jesus declares that God joins a married couple together. He doesn’t state, however, that God’s work *can’t* be undone. Rather, he plainly states that people can undo a marriage, but to do so is sin.

The fact that God joins the couple together hardly leads to the conclusion that man *cannot* un-join them, only that man *should not* un-join them. Salvation is a work of God that can be undone by man (Heb. 10:26). Just so, God gives life, but murderers can take it away.

God is a party to all our covenants. If I make a contract to deliver goods for a price, and if a break that covenant, I have offended both my customer and God. However, once the contract is broken, my customer doesn’t have to pay for the goods and I don’t have to deliver the goods if he declares the contract terminated. It’s impossible for me to be bound to a covenant that the other party isn’t also bound to. However, a sufficiently severe breach allows the other party to terminate the covenant—even though God is in a sense a party to it.

7 “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

This is an entirely sensible question. If divorce is wrong, why does the Law of Moses make provision for it? However, Moses certainly did not command that husbands divorce their wives. It's important to realize that the rabbis taught that adultery requires a divorce.

8 Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning."

Jesus says that divorce is not part of God's plan. God intends that marriage be for life. However, God (who is really the author of the Law of Moses—not Moses) recognized that some people would fail to make their marriages work, and so divorce was anticipated. Not approved, but regulated.

Moreover, Jesus denies that divorce is ever mandatory. It's simply permitted.

It is entirely fair to ask whether modern men still have hard hearts, or did God expect divorce to no longer occur under the new covenant (other than for fornication)? Jesus was not saying that hard-heartedness was over and that allowance for it was no longer needed. He was merely saying that it is sin to terminate a marriage covenant.

It is important to know that the NIV is inaccurate in translating "because your hearts *were* hard," implying that hardness of hearts was a thing of the past. The KJV is more accurate in translating "because of the hardness of your hearts," which plainly presumes that hearts were still hard when Jesus was speaking and leaves no implication regarding the future hardness of hearts.

Ultimately, the statistics quoted at the beginning of this book plainly demonstrate that hard-heartedness is very much still with us—even in the church. It would be absurd beyond words to assert otherwise.

God's regulation of divorce is seen in Deuteronomy 24, which requires that a husband divorce his wife by giving her a certificate of divorce. This wasn't to encourage or approve divorce, but to give the wife a method of remarrying. Without a certificate, she would have trouble proving that she is no longer married and free to remarry. Plainly, while God did not want men and women to violate their marital commitments, he made merciful allowance to allow divorced spouses to remarry. (Husbands didn't need certificates of divorce, because polygamy was allowed at the time of the Law of Moses.)

9 "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

The KJV extends this verse by adding "and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery." The phrase has since been omitted by nearly all later translations. The reason is that the very oldest manuscripts we have of Matthew entirely omit the phrase.

This is important because there is no reference to the husband causing the wife's sin in this passage, whereas Matthew 5:31-32 plainly says her adultery is caused by the husband who put her away. This erroneous translation is surely one reason so many preachers have argued that there never is an innocent party so that the one wrongfully put away may not remarry.

The key point in Matthew 19 is that "adultery" does not necessarily refer to sexual relations. As we discussed in an earlier chapter, "adultery" is very frequently used in both testaments as a metaphor for any covenant breaking. Thus, a likely translation would be "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman *violates the marriage covenant*." In other words, while God's children have the power in them to terminate a marriage, doing so makes one a covenant breaker—the moral equivalent of an adulterer or of the children of Israel when they forsook God as described by the prophets.

This brings us to the question of why Jesus addresses remarriage if all he is really saying is that divorce (terminating a marriage) is wrong. The answer is found in re-reading Deuteronomy 24, which is all about remarriage. Jesus is simply commenting on the question posed. More precisely, as noted by Lenski, in Deuteronomy 24 the reason for the divorce was to remarry.

Jesus' point is that you can't avoid the proscription of the commandment to refrain from adultery simply by getting a divorce before having sex with another woman. The sexual relations with the second wife may not be sin, but putting away the first wife to get a second wife is—and is the moral equivalent of adultery. You've still violated the marriage covenant and have tainted yourself with your sin. (This, however, does not put you entirely outside of grace—a subject not at issue in Jesus' commentary on the Law of Moses.)

Reading this passage together with Matthew 5:31-32, we see that violating the marriage covenant by wrongfully ending the marriage imposes the consequences of sin on the guilty spouse, the innocent spouse, and any second spouse of either. Thus, although getting a divorce before having sexual relations with a new spouse would seem to avoid the sin of adultery, Jesus is saying that sin is judged on weightier things than such technicalities.

I'd add that a woman who induces a man to divorce in order to marry her is, in Jesus' teaching, as much an adulterer as a woman who has sex with a married man. Either way, the marriage covenant is violated and the pain given clearly shows the sinfulness of the conduct. (Of course, it works the same way for a man inducing a woman to get a divorce. But that wasn't an issue under the Law of Moses when Jesus was speaking.)

There is nothing honorable or right about waiting to get the divorce before having sex with the new lover. Rather, so long as the man is married, he is obligated not to allow himself to be overly attracted to anyone else.⁶⁸

I think it is Ann Landers who points out that most of us will meet three or four people in our lives that we could fall in love with and marry. As God says through Malachi 2:15b, “So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.”

Therefore, while breaking the marriage covenant is wrong in any instance, there is a difference between divorcing your wife and divorcing your wife to marry another woman. In the second instance, the other woman is party to the sin and the second marriage is truly a sin against the first wife.

Leon Morris makes the point that the verb tense of “has been loosed” in 1 Corinthians 7:27-28 indicates that Paul only permits the remarriage where the divorce is a settled state.⁶⁹ That is, a second marriage is not a sin—unless the desire for the second marriage was the reason for the divorce, in which case the second marriage (the marrying—not the having sex in marriage) is adultery.

Thus, Jesus and Paul thus say the same thing. The second marriage that is the reason for the divorce is wrong, and yet it is a marriage, and sex between married spouses is not sin. Breaking up a marriage *is*, however.

Finally, it’s worth mentioning that Jesus here is assuming a non-polygamous marriage. He makes a point of saying the “two become one,” which is taken from the Septuagint’s translation of Genesis 2. The original Hebrew omits “two” and does not contradict polygamy. Jesus picked his text for a reason.

Paul seems to have picked up on the point, as 1 Corinthians 7 seems to only permit a monogamous marriage. 1 Corinthians 7:2, for example, states that “each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.”

And so, should elders attempt to compel a divorce by a husband and wife who have wrongfully broken up a marriage to get married? I don’t think so. Two wrongs don’t make a right. The marriage having been made, it would be the rarest of cases where the first marriage could be put back together (real people just don’t act that way) and a violation of Deuteronomy 24, to the extent it continues to have force. The need is not for a second divorce, but for a better second marriage and for Godly regret and repentance of the sin—not only the sin of breaking a marriage, but also of the sins that led to breaking the marriage (perhaps lust, selfishness, or being inconsiderate, for example).

⁶⁸ Recall Matt. 5:27-28: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

⁶⁹ *E.g.*, Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.1958).

It is therefore urgent that we do a better job of teaching on marriage and counseling our troubled couples. It's not enough to threaten men and women who have problem marriages with a denial of the right to remarry. Threats aren't the solution.

I'm no marriage counselor, but even a casual observer can see that we aren't coping with this problem well. Divorce is far too frequent—even in the church. We need to teach our members to be less self-indulgent, more giving, less demanding, and just plain better people.

I'm afraid that part of our problem is our failure to pastor members as individuals. Often times, our members' closest contact with the ministers and elders is through the pulpit. We've got to find a way to have a more hands-on ministry—especially to the weaker Christians. It's easy to hang around strong Christians—they aren't as high maintenance as weak Christians. But it's the weak Christians that we often pastor the most poorly. Just a thought ...

Some would argue that allowing the remarried couple to “profit” from their sin by remaining married condones the sin of the divorce—indeed, it appears that the couple will have gotten away with their sin with no real consequences! And isn't it awfully easy to claim to have repented after the second marriage?

Such a view fails to understand the nature of grace. The first mistake is not realizing that only God may exact penalties for sin.⁷⁰ It is not the role of an eldership to exact punishment for sin.⁷¹ And, of course, we can't refuse to extend grace to those who've repented just because some will falsely claim to have repented. The problem of knowing who has truly repented comes up with every baptism and every restoration. We really have no choice but to offer outwardly repentant remarried couples the benefit of the doubt, or else we risk becoming a very cynical, judgmental group of people—surely not what God wants of us.⁷²

Moreover, suggesting that allowing the couple to continue in the second marriage allows the couple to avoid the consequences of the divorce greatly misapprehends the severe earthly consequences of a divorce. Generally speaking, even the spouse that initiates the divorce suffers mightily from all the problems that a divorce brings on both spouses—not to mention their children.

⁷⁰ *Rom 12:19* “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.”

⁷¹ This does not contradict the doctrine of disfellowshipping. The goal of disfellowshipping a Christian is to bring the Christian to repentance, *2 Thess. 3:14-15*, not to punish sin.

⁷² Now *1 Corinthians 5:12-13* does enjoin us to judge those within the church, meaning that we should use Godly judgment to judge whether our brother is living such an immoral life as to jeopardize his salvation. This concept applies, of course, to unrepentant sin, where the Christian must change his conduct to retain his relationship with God. Thus, a spouse who continues in the same wicked behaviors that destroyed the first marriage may well be appropriately disfellowshipped by the church in an effort to rescue the second marriage. This is not punishment, but sound pastoring. See further on this subject in *The Holy Spirit & Revolutionary Grace*.

I should add that whatever I've said regarding a wrongful remarriage is also true regarding a murder. How does the Bible say that we should deal with a Christian who is guilty of murder? Plainly, a Christian guilty of murder may be accepted as a forgiven Christian, no longer accountable to God for his sin, if he is truly penitent. This is so even though he can't bring his victim back to life and can't undo the pain he's caused the victim's family. Allowing a murderer to be forgiven by the mere expedient of repentance hardly condones the murder—rather, it is the very definition of grace. And there is no imaginable reason that grace should be denied a penitent divorcee or granted a penitent murderer.

Thus, breaking a marriage is certainly not okay. But the cure is not to be found in having the church take on the role of avenger of sins. Rather, the cure is in doing a better job of pastoring the married to keep them married. If the marriage nonetheless breaks, we should recognize that the church has failed as well as the spouses. We will discuss this further later.

10 The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

11 Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. 12 For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."

The disciples evidently got Jesus' point. Marriage is not for the faint of heart. It's a lifetime commitment. And Jesus makes it clear that marriage is not for everyone. At the time, the Pharisees taught that a man was not fully Godly unless he was married. Jesus says that you don't have to marry to please him. Indeed, some may need to renounce getting married for the sake of God.

Recall Matthew 5:29-30—

29 If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Jesus said this just before speaking on divorce in the Sermon on the Mount and just after warning about lust of the eye. Some people have personal issues that prevent them from making the commitment of marriage. They shouldn't marry. And the church shouldn't treat them as second class citizens. Rather, we should respect their decision, as it may well involve considerable discipline and personal sacrifice.

Now we need to review a critical point here. Many have contended that in the absence of fornication a couple *cannot* be divorced in the eyes of God. But note carefully the words of the Savior:

6 “So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate. ... 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

First, Jesus plainly teaches that it is *wrong* to separate a husband from a wife, but he doesn't say that it is *impossible*. Now the usual argument is that because divorce is impossible, the second marriage is no marriage at all in God's eyes, but adultery—meaning a sexual violation of the still-existing first marriage.

And yet Jesus says in verse 9 that the man who wrongly divorces his wife next “marries another woman.” Jesus didn't say that he “wants to marry,” “tries to marry,” or “fictitiously marries” the second woman—our Savior said that the guilty man “marries” his second wife. And if Jesus says they are married, they are married. And if they are married, then it would be sin to separate them—even though the second marriage was entered into sinfully.

Some have argued that the apostles' astonishment at Jesus' statements proves that Jesus taught something much more difficult to accept than the interpretation I make. But the Scriptures don't say the apostles were astonished, only that they thought it just might be better to remain single.

While my interpretation is much less harsh than the traditional interpretation, you have to compare it to what the rabbis taught to see why the apostles felt marriage to be a less attractive option because of what Jesus had said.

The rabbis taught that divorce was perfectly acceptable. Many taught that divorce could be had for any reason at all. All taught that there was no stigma associated with divorce or marrying a divorcee, unless she was divorced for adultery.

The rabbis also taught that a husband owed no sexual allegiance to his wife. A man could sleep around to his heart's content, and his wife would have no grounds to complain.

The rabbis approved polygamy.

Jesus taught that marriage is supposed to be a lifetime commitment, and it's a sin to put your wife away. Moreover, he especially criticized putting your wife away to marry another woman.

Jesus taught that adultery is a sin, even if committed by the man.

Jesus taught that the “two” become one, implicitly rejecting polygamy, which also means that men owe sexual fidelity to their wives.

The apostles grew up in a culture of disposable wives, with the freedom to look around for a second or third—imagine being allowed to date other women while married,

and all of society condoning it! And if your wife grows a bit fat or sullen, you sign a document, toss her out the door, feel no remorse, and go looking for another.

Obviously, any man who'd grown up in First Century Palestine would be less than pleased to learn that God meant for him to be bound to his marriage covenant for life, and to just one woman, and to be true to her and only her. Many of our members struggle to make this commitment even today. It's no surprise the apostles struggled to accept the lesson 2,000 years ago.

Now, let's turn to the two other Gospel passages.