

DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE

A PASTORAL AND DOCTRINAL TREATMENT ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

PREFACE

This undertaking is the humbling response of my heart to being pierced by the truth of God's word on the subject matter at hand.

There is no escaping the unpleasantness of this topic; to ignore it is to leave the door open among God's people by which adultery will be perpetuated and multiplied, and to preach it is to offend a great many in the Church today.

Being aware of this terrible reality, I have elected to preach this message with as much grace as the Holy Spirit gives in Scripture.

Before the completion of this study I have already seen the truth of God's word turn brothers away from the path of adultery. There have been struggles and wounds, but there has also been grace and times of refreshing. This is my prayer, that by preaching the grace of God's word on this subject, many may turn to righteousness and live!

I am acutely aware of how painful this topic will be for many readers. If I were not convinced of the dire seriousness of this subject, I could wish to leave the topic alone because we live in a divorce-saturated society that has normalized divorce and made it out to be innocent. But the realization that divorce is a terrible mechanism by which adultery is perpetuated and multiplied throughout the world has penetrated my heart with the truth of God's word.

Being convinced of these truths myself, I must make my appeal to God's Church and call on my beloved brothers and sisters not to put aside God's word just so that we do not have to face the terribly inconvenient realities thrust upon us by divorce. I believe the single greatest act of love we can offer a divorce-saturated world is to humbly and compassionately speak the truths of God's word by which they can be "set free indeed!"

INTRODUCTION

The most illuminating truth for me in this study was the reality that the sin of divorce is not divorce itself, but adultery. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:31-32 on divorce is the second part of the greater context of His teaching on adultery from Matthew 5:27-32.

Divorce is a mechanism by which adultery is perpetuated and multiplied among God's people and the whole world. Divorce perpetuates adultery by the false notion that divorce legitimizes adulterous relationships. And divorce multiplies adultery because one divorce can bring adultery on up to four people: the husband who divorces his wife – except for sexual immorality – and remarries another woman brings both himself and the woman he marries into adultery, and the wife who is divorced – except for sexual immorality – if she remarries another, brings both herself and the man she marries into adultery as well.

If this is true that divorce perpetuates and multiples adultery in this manner, then divorce is far from being innocent; it is a destructive mechanism by which men and women are snared in the sin of adultery and the coming judgment of God.

Therefore this study could rightfully be considered a study on “*adultery*”. Divorce will be treated as the mechanism by which adultery occurs, but divorce will not be treated as the primary sin. When Paul addressed the divorced believer in 1st Corinthians 7:10-11, he did not treat the divorce as sin, but instructed divorced believers that they either remain single or be reconciled to their first spouse.

I also must offer my personal plea to the reader not to approach this study subjectively, but to approach this study objectively; there are going to be many deeply offensive words in this study, but they are words that I sincerely believe reflect the uncompromised words of God that are given to us as the truths by which we can be set free. My appeal to the reader, then, is to accept offense for the sake of the cross in the faith that God's grace is sufficient to see each one who follows Him in the truth into the coming glory of His Kingdom.

Therefore, having these words in mind, let us proceed with the following faith:

Psalm 19:7, 8 *“The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul... the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart!”*

DEFINITION

Our study at large will greatly benefit from a brief look at a few definitions.

DIVORCE

Divorce is simple enough to define as “*the dissolution of marriage*” (The Eerdmans Bible dictionary – p. 288); it is the condition in which the covenant union between a husband and wife has been broken.

Etymologically, the Hebrew words for divorce are גְּרוּשָׁה (gerushah); כְּרִיתוּת (kerithuth), and the Greek words for divorce are ἀποστάσιον (apostasion); ἀπολύω (apolyō); ἀφίημι (aphiēmi); χωρίζω (chōrizō);

“There are a number of words in Hebrew and Greek translated as ‘divorce’ in English versions of the Bible. Of the list given in the definition, only two, כְּרִיתוּת (kerithuth) and ἀποστάσιον (apostasion), are nouns. Both translate as ‘certificate of divorce’ (Deut 24:1, Matt 5:31). The remaining words are verbs with connotations not necessarily implied by their translation as ‘divorce.’ The Hebrew verb form גְּרוּשָׁה (gerushah) implies casting out. In Greek, the verb ἀπολύω (apolyō) implies letting loose or setting free, while χωρίζω (chōrizō) means ‘to separate’ and ἀφίημι (aphiēmi) indicates sending off or abandoning.” (The Eerdmans Bible dictionary – p. 288)

FORNICATION / SEXUAL IMMORALITY

Fornication is often mistakenly believed to be sexual intercourse *before* marriage. This has led many modern translations to begin using the phrase “sexual immorality” instead of “fornication”.

Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words (Vol. 2, p. 252) offers the following definitions:

πορνεία, (porneia, #4202) is used (a) of “illicit sexual intercourse,” in John 8:41; Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; 1 Cor. 5:1; 6:13, 18; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:3; Rev. 2:21; 9:21; in the plural in 1 Cor. 7:2; in Matt. 5:32 and 19:9 it stands for, or includes, adultery; it is distinguished from it in 15:19 and Mark 7:21; (b) metaphorically, of “the association of pagan idolatry with doctrines of, and professed adherence to, the Christian faith,” Rev. 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3; 19:2; some suggest this as the sense in 2:21.

πόρνος, (pornos #4205) denotes “a man who indulges in fornication, a fornicator,” 1 Cor. 5:9, 10, 11; 6:9; Eph. 5:5, RV; 1 Tim. 1:10, RV; Heb. 12:16; 13:4, RV; Rev. 21:8 and 22:15, RV (KJV, “whoremonger”).

Most notably 1st Corinthians 10:8 uses the word *porneia* for the sexual immorality committed by those in Israel who would have included married persons.

Therefore, Eerdmans Bible Dictionary (p. 391) offers the following definition:

(Gk. *porneía* “unchastity”).* Sexual intercourse performed outside the bonds of marriage, considered an immoral work of the flesh (Matt. 15:19 par. Mark 7:21; cf. Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5). The Old Testament depicts this as “harlotry” or “playing the harlot” (e.g., Gen. 38:24; Deut. 22:21); as such the concept is used figuratively with regard to Israel’s abandonment of its covenant ideals (e.g., Isa. 23:17; Ezek. 16:26; cf. Rev. 17:2, 4; 18:3; 19:2).

I have treated this topic more extensively in a separate study on *Fornication and Adultery*.

ADULTERY

In the secular world *adultery* is limited to sexual infidelity against one’s spouse. However, the Biblical usage of the word *adultery* takes on a greater scope and context.

Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words (Vol. 2, p. 14):

A. Nouns.

1. **μοικός**, (*moichos*, 3432) denotes one “who has unlawful intercourse with the spouse of another,” Luke 18:11; 1 Cor. 6:9; Heb. 13:4.
2. **μοιχαλῖς**, (*moichalis*, 3428), “an adulteress,” is used (a) in the natural sense, 2 Pet. 2:14; Rom. 7:3; (b) in the spiritual sense, Jas. 4:4. In Israel the breach of their relationship with God through idolatry was described as “adultery” or “harlotry” (e.g., Ezek. 16:15, etc.; 23:43), so also believers who cultivate friendship with the world, thus breaking their spiritual union with Christ, are spiritual “adulteresses,” having been spiritually united to Him as wife to husband, Rom. 7:4. It is used adjectivally to describe the Jewish people in transferring their affections from God, Matt. 12:39; 16:4; Mark 8:38. In 2 Pet. 2:14, the lit. translation is “full of an adulteress”.
3. **μοικεῖα**, (*moicheia*, 3430), “adultery,” is found in Matt. 15:19; Mark 7:21; John 8:3 (KJV only).

B. Verbs.

1. **μοιχάω**, (*moichao*, 3429), used in the middle voice in the NT, is said of men in Matt. 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11; of women in Mark 10:12.
2. **μοιχεύω**, (*moicheuo*, 3431) is used in the passive voice in Matt. 5:27-28, 32 (in v. 32 some texts have No. 1); 19:18; Mark 10:19; Luke 16:18; 18:20; John 8:4; Rom. 2:22; 13:9; Jas. 2:11; in Rev. 2:22, metaphorically, of those who are by a Jezebel’s solicitations drawn away to idolatry.

The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology (pp. 378–379) offers the following analysis:

Adultery presupposes the existence of marriage. When God formed Adam and Eve, He initiated the marriage relationship in which ‘a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh’ (Gen. 2:24, NIV).

In Matthew 19:5–6 Jesus quotes this verse from Genesis and states that it is the Creator who has made the pronouncement, adding, ‘So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate’ (NRSV). The ‘one flesh’ relationship of marriage involves a joining together of the man and the woman at all levels... Adultery is the violation of this one-flesh relationship, the intrusion of an outsider into the total, unique, and exclusive commitment which husband and wife are to have to each other.

Thus in its literal sense, ‘adultery’ refers to the act in which a spouse engages in sexual behavior with a third party. Adultery is also an expression of disloyalty to the marriage partner, to whom alone one is to be united through sexual encounter: ‘she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant ... do not break faith with the wife of your youth’ (Mal. 2:14–15, NIV).

Therefore, the definition of adultery that is most faithful to its widest Biblical use is a two dimensional definition that includes (1) the violation of the one-flesh marriage union by the intrusion of an outsider and (2) an expression of disloyalty and unfaithfulness towards one’s spouse.

I have treated this topic more extensively in a separate study on *Fornication and Adultery*.

OLD TESTAMENT AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS

In this section I will briefly provide the crucial backdrop against which *New Testament* doctrine on divorce is set.

DIVORCE IN THE PENTATEUCH

Eerdmans Bible Dictionary (p. 288) offers the following analysis of divorce in the Pentateuch:

“The Old Testament teachings on divorce can best be understood against the background of the institution of marriage. According to Gen. 2:18 ff, God presented the woman to the man as his helper, whom he had created from the man. The author of Genesis then concludes that their love relationship is the basis for monogamous marriage, a complete union between the two partners (v. 24).

The Law indicated a restriction making divorce permissible only on the grounds of ‘some indecency’ (Heb. *erwa* *dā* *ār* ‘shameful matter’) that a husband had discovered in his wife (Deut. 24:1). The meaning of “some indecency” varied from sect to sect. The rabbinic school of Shammai interpreted it to mean unchastity or adultery; these scholars permitted divorce only when the wife had been sexually unfaithful to her husband. The school of Hillel, on the other hand, understood these words to signify anything unappealing; these teachers allowed the husband to send his wife away even for such a trifle as a burned meal. The precise meaning of the ancient phrase ‘some indecency’ is no longer clear.”

Likewise, the Lexham Bible Dictionary also gives the following analysis:

“Most references to divorce in the Bible involve the legal code and its interpretation. Levitical priests are restricted from marrying a divorced woman, or any woman who is not a virgin (Lev 21:7, 21:14; also Ezek 44:22). A priest’s daughter who is divorced, however, is allowed to return to her father’s home and eat his food (Lev 22:13). These two rulings about a priest’s household signal that divorce is in some ways an impure state, but not to the extent that divorced women are cast out from the society altogether. These laws also assume that divorce is practiced. In Numbers, divorced women are held accountable to any oaths that they take. Unlike married women or unmarried daughters who live in their fathers’ houses, the oaths of divorced women are not subject to the approval of the male head of household (Num 30:9).

Deuteronomy protects some rights of women, preventing a man who falsely accuses his wife of not being a virgin at the time of marriage from ever divorcing her (Deut 22:19). If the accusations prove to be true, however, the woman is to be stoned to death (Deut 22:21). If a man is found to have had sex with a virgin, he must pay her father and marry her, and he is not allowed to divorce her during (Deut 22:28–29). A first husband cannot remarry a woman he divorced after she has married another man (Deut 24:1–4).”

While it is noted that modern scholarship is unable to add any further clarity on what “indecent” means from a historical-contextual vantage point at this time, Jesus authoritatively defines it for us in terms of sexual impurity (Mt. 19:9).

It is important to note the role that the conflict between the rabbinic school of Shammai and Hillel over how to interpret “indecent” in the law played in creating a culture in which invalid divorce became accepted. While the school of Shammai more correctly interpreted it along the lines of “adultery”, the school of Hillel broadened the definition to make the meaning of “indecent” to be “anything unappealing”. By interpreting the law in this fashion, those who subscribed to this line of thought “nullified the commandments of God”; if “indecent” meant anything “unappealing”, then anyone could divorce their spouse for any reason and divorce would be acceptable.

This was the background behind the line of questioning posed to Jesus by the Pharisees when they tested Him in Matthew 19:3, saying “is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?” Divorce had become common place because of this misinterpretation of the Law. The Pharisees’ hoped to trap Jesus by either getting Him to oppose this culturally established and popular lie, or to cause Him to give them credibility by agreeing with their position.

DIVORCE AS METAPHOR IN THE PROPHETS

While divorce between husband and wife in prophetic literature is less pronounced, it is metaphorically central to prophetic scriptures.

The Lexham Bible Dictionary offers the following analysis:

“The prophets tend to use images of divorce to describe a broken relationship between God and Israel/Judah. Israel is represented as God’s transgressive wife (Isa 50:1; Jer 3:1–8). Prophecy tends to use female imagery to represent faithless Israel, however, the prophet Malachi associates unfaithfulness with the masculine priesthood of Judah. In this case, the priests are accused of turning away from their ‘wife by covenant’ (Mal 2:14), which likely represents the knowledge and worship of God.”

Israel’s unfaithfulness to God – to whom she had been covenantally betrothed – was the act of spiritual adultery against which much of the Old Testament’s prophetic literature is set. This covenantal relationship between God and His people is sacred and unfaithfulness on our behalf towards God is seen by God as adultery.

DIVORCE IN THE HISTORICAL BOOKS

The historical books introduce a challenging perspective to Biblical doctrine on divorce as the tangled mess of Israel's wicked conduct unfolds.

The Lexham Bible Dictionary offers the following analysis:

“The author of Ezra calls for the people of Israel to separate themselves from their foreign wives and children (Ezra 10:3–19) in an effort to renew the covenant with God. In this case, divorce seems to serve the purpose of purification.”

The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary (p. 288) offers the following analysis:

“Opposition to divorce seems to have become more intense following the Exile. Malachi records that God hates divorce, specifically between the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem and their first wives—Israelites whom they had exchanged for foreign wives (Mal. 2:13–16). The prophet's condemnation of divorce may also reflect Nehemiah's reform policy regarding marriage between Jews and Gentiles (Neh. 13:23–27) and imply concurrence with Ezra's insistence that the returned exiles divorce their foreign wives (Ezra 9–10).”

While unfaithfulness to the marital covenant was sinful, entering a marital covenant with foreign wives was seen as a betrayal to God and to their Israelite identity. Separation from their foreign wives was enacted as a sign of Israel's return to God's covenant.

Ezra's policy that the Israelite men divorce their pagan wives reflects the reality that God's people must be faithfully committed in a *valid* marriage union.

THE JEWISH CONTEXT

By the time of our Lord, adultery was being perpetuated at an astonishing rate by means of divorce and the Jews were justifying it through misinterpretation of the Law.

John MacArthur offers the following analysis (<https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/2220>):

“Now to further illustrate this very same point about adultery He indicates verse 31; "It hath been said," and by that He means in your religious system, according to your teachers, according to the things you believe, "whosoever shall put away his wife let him give her a writing of divorcement". Now as I told you, they taught that divorce was valid for any and every reason based on the rabbinic tradition. It was only necessary to be sure you did the paper work. In other words, whoever wants to put away his wife just be sure he gives her a writing of divorcement, make sure you do the paper work, keep the technicalities, abide by the external law and then you'll be righteous before God.

Now this was the dominant view in the time of our Lord. That no matter what a woman did, her husband could divorce her if in his eyes it was for good reason to get rid of her. Now they based this on a wrong interpretation of Deuteronomy chapter 24. In Deuteronomy chapter 4 it tells about a man who had a wife and he found in his own eyes some uncleanness in her, the Talmud translates the word - obnoxious. Something that she did he didn't like. So he decided to divorce her. But the way the rabbis interpreted the verse they turned it into a command. And they said there was a man who found in his wife an uncleanness - let him divorce her. And they turned around the meaning of the Scripture to force that there be a divorce. So according to the Jewish tradition of interpreting Deuteronomy 24 if you find something about your wife that's obnoxious you're commanded to divorce her. And as I told you, that could be anything at all from finding somebody prettier than her to having her put too much salt on your dinner. And that's why in Matthew 19:7 when the Jewish people - the scribes and the Pharisees - came to Jesus they said to Him, "Why did Moses command to give a writing of divorcement?" Because, you see, in their minds it was a command because they had misinterpreted Deuteronomy chapter 24. They saw it as a permission to divorce.

For example the Targum of Palestine was written in the first century A.D. It gives us some insight in to how the Jewish people interpreted the Old Testament. And in the Targum of Palestine written in the first century A.D. we find the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24 given by the rabbis was exactly this, they had turned verse 1 into a command. And what is amazing about it is that is exactly the way it is translated in the King James; they've made the same mistake. So that in the King James it says the same thing, - "If you find an uncleanness in your wife give her a bill of divorcement", but that is not what the Hebrew text is saying. But they misinterpreted it and therefore they came up with the fact that divorce is commanded if you find something obnoxious about your wife.

Well, of course, by the time Jesus came around they were shedding their wives rather whimsically. And Jesus knew this was their interpretation and that's why He confronts them with verse 31. The Jews were shedding their wives at random and all the while they're supposing that they were righteous because, after all, Moses said if you find something obnoxious about your wife, get rid of her, give her a paper and send her off on her way just be sure you do the paper work.”

The Jewish context was one in which adultery was being perpetuated among the people through divorce because they were not properly handling God's word in Deuteronomy 24.

NEW TESTAMENT CLARITY

This brings us to the cynosure of our study; the New Testament. Having the Old Testament backdrop in place, we are prepared to receive the clear illumination that Christ has given to the Church for God's glory in the New Testament.

OVERVIEW OF JESUS' TEACHING ON DIVORCE

I want to emphasize how important it is to remember that Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage is placed in the greater context of adultery; the issue Jesus is addressing is the Pharisaical misuse of the Law that was bringing God's condemnation against adultery upon them.

The Lexham Bible Dictionary offers this concise analysis of this conflict:

In Matthew and Mark, the Pharisees mention that divorce is allowed in the law of Moses (presumably Deut 24:1–4), but Jesus begins with Genesis, arguing that in marriage the two become one. The passages in Deuteronomy that the Pharisees reference do not designate when divorce is allowed, but rather concern remarriage after divorce. In fact, in the passages from the Hebrew Bible associated with divorce, divorce is presumed but not prescribed as a practice in Israel.

While divorce was tolerated by God, He never prescribed divorce. The Law makes certain prescriptions based on the presumption that divorce will happen because of the hardness of man's heart, but Jesus demonstrates that God has always hated divorce. Therefore, Jesus' primary declaration to the Jews was that divorce does not cover-up or nullify adultery, rather, it perpetuates adultery!

Another matter to take into consideration is the move of the gospel from Jewish contexts into Gentile contexts.

The Lexham Bible Dictionary offers the following analysis of this situation:

In almost all the passages discussed so far with, divorce is initiated only by men, not by women. The implication is that women lacked the legal rights to divorce husbands. The hard line that Jesus takes against divorce can be understood as protective of women, who in the first century would have been subject to poverty and abuse without the guardianship of a man. However, Mark 10:2–12 presents both men and women as capable of divorcing their spouses.

As the gospel moved out into Gentile contexts it begins to address Jesus' words to those expanded contexts. Mark 10:12 applies to women what Matthew and Luke applied only to men because gentile women had rights to divorce their husbands not possessed by Jewish women; the apostle Paul then builds on this in his first letter to the Corinthians.

SERMON ON THE MOUNT - ADULTERY

The Lord's Sermon on the Mount is the foundation of our topic.

In the Lord's sermon, divorce occurs in the context of adultery and is offered as the mechanism through which adultery – which begins in the heart – is perpetuated and multiplied.

Matthew 5:27-32 “You have heard that it was said by the ancients, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away. For it is profitable that one of your members should perish, and not that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is profitable for you that one of your members should perish, and not that your whole body be thrown into hell.

It was said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife, except for fornication, causes her to commit adultery. And whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.

While the Jews claimed that they were not adulterers because they had the written certificates of divorce, Jesus rejected this notion and preached against their adultery by saying that adultery occurs in the lustful heart and concludes through divorce in remarriage.

Jesus' exposes their cataclysmic sin of adultery by removing their false sense of justification. We must grasp the goodness of Christ in doing this because adultery disqualifies from the kingdom of God (1st Co. 6:9-10). The Pharisees, like many modern teachers today, were deceiving the people by mishandling the Law of God to justify the illegitimate divorces through which exponential adultery was wrought upon the people of God.

My first point in this study is to assert that the holy union between a husband and wife must not be broken, and when it is broken, the consequences are very painful no matter how you slice it; sin begets death. As painful as Jesus' words are on this topic, we must heed them or the consequences will be dire; Jesus very clearly confronts us with the reality that certificates of divorce are meaningless in God's sight unless they are initiated due to *fornication* (sexual immorality outside the marriage bonds).

Now a closer look is warranted:

Matthew 5:31-32 ³¹ It was said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife, except for fornication, causes her to commit adultery. And whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”

Mark 10:11-12 “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

Illegitimate divorce perpetuates adultery coming, going, and staying!

Whoever divorces their spouse and remarries another, brings both themselves and the one they remarry into adultery. Likewise, a terrible stumbling block is laid before the divorced spouse so that if the divorced spouse remarries, they bring themselves and the one they remarry into adultery. By just one divorce up to four individuals can be brought into adultery.

Rightfully God has said that, “He hates divorce, for it covers one’s garment with violence. Therefore, take heed to your spirit *that you do not deal treacherously!*” (Malachi 2:16)

This last clause is imperative: “take heed to your spirit that you do not deal treacherously”. Divorce and the desire to remarry can sway any person’s spirit to deal treacherously within themselves; Jesus’ words here are an anchor for our soul to prevent us from falling through unbelief in adultery.

THE DIVORCED SPOUSE

The most challenging aspect of Jesus’ doctrine on divorce and remarriage are His words to the divorced spouse. Therefore, closer attention must be given to Jesus’ words to the divorced spouse in Matthew 5:32:

“Whoever divorces his wife, except for fornication, causes her to commit adultery”

Three important implications need to be addressed; we need to examine *purpose*, *subject*, and the *prepositional clause*.

Firstly, Jesus’ purpose is to invalidate man’s futile attempt to nullify God’s sovereign ordination of the marriage union between a husband and a wife with mere certificates of divorce. Jesus cannot say that a divorced wife commits adultery against her husband unless they are still rightfully married in His eyes.

A husband and wife are bound together by God, as Jesus said, “whomever God has joined together, let no man separate” (Mark 10:9). If someone divorces their spouse for any reason other than sexual immorality, *their divorce is invalid*; this places a stumbling block before the divorced spouse by causing them to perceive the false option of remarriage, which would lead to adultery for both the divorced spouse and whomever they remarry (Mark 10:11-12).

Secondly, the subject of this imperative clause is “whoever” initiates the divorce. The divorced spouse is the object of the subject’s action. I believe this statement may be applied reciprocally to both a divorced wife and a divorced husband as indicated in Mark 10:11-12, where Jesus applies the binding nature of marriage to both the husband and the wife. The reciprocally binding nature of the marriage union between a husband and wife means that either a divorced wife or a divorced husband commits adultery if they remarry unless their fornication was the cause of the divorce.

Thirdly, the prepositional clause “except for fornication” indicates that the only instance in which divorce can be valid in God’s sight is where the cause of divorce was sexual intercourse outside the bonds of marriage.

I must emphasize here that the prepositional clause does not read “except for adultery”, which would give justification for divorce anytime a spouse was caught with lust; the exception is given when the divorce is initiated on the grounds of sexual immorality outside the bonds of marriage (fornication).

I also cannot state in sufficiently strong enough terms that Jesus’ teachings on forgiveness and love exclude viewing this as any kind of “divine loophole” by which discontented spouses can seek a justified divorce. Scripture emphasizes the necessity of mercy (Hosea 6:6), forgiveness (Matthew 6:15), and love (Matthew 5:44-48), even towards ones enemies; likewise, the relationship between a husband and wife is likened to that of Christ and His Church. All efforts at reconciliation must be exhausted and divorce even in the case of fornication should be seen as a concession to the unwillingness of the unfaithful spouse to reconcile.

My conclusion, then, is that whoever divorces their spouse, except for fornication, and remarries another person brings both themselves and whoever they remarry into adultery, and places a stumbling block before their divorced spouse to bring them and whoever they remarry into adultery as well.

Perhaps the prophet Malachi’s words are a fitting way to bring this section to a close:

Malachi 3:5 “And I will come near you for judgment; I will be a swift witness against sorcerers, against adulterers, against perjurers, against those who exploit wage earners and widows and orphans, and against those who turn away an alien – **because they do not fear Me.**”

THE PHARISEE'S TRAP: MATTHEW 19:3-9; MARK 10:2-12; LUKE 16:18.

When the Pharisees approached Jesus to test Him on the topic of divorce, it may have been possible that they were hoping to trap Jesus in the same fate that befell John the Baptist, who was arrested and executed for preaching against king Herod's adulterous relationship with Herodias, who was the wife of Herod's half-brother Phillip. Indeed, not only does divorce perpetuate adultery and fill the home with contention and strife, it also brings violence upon God's servants who oppose it!

But Jesus did not shirk back in His answer:

Matthew 19:3-9 “³ Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?’ ⁴ And He answered and said, ‘Have you not read that He who created *them* from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, ⁵ and said, ‘FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH?’ ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.’ ⁷ They said to Him, ‘Why then did Moses command to GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND *her* AWAY?’ ⁸ He said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. ⁹ And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.’”

Mark 10:2-12 “² Some Pharisees came up to Jesus, testing Him, and *began* to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife. ³ And He answered and said to them, ‘What did Moses command you?’ ⁴ They said, ‘Moses permitted *a man* TO WRITE A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND *her* AWAY.’ ⁵ But Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. ⁶ But from the beginning of creation, *God* MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE. ⁷ FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER, ⁸ AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH; so they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.’ ¹⁰ In the house the disciples *began* questioning Him about this again. ¹¹ And He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; ¹² and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery.’”

Luke 16:18 “¹⁸ Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery.”

The marriage union between a husband and wife is sacred because it reflects the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:24; 1 Cor. 11:3, 7; Heb. 1:3; Eph 5:23-25); this sacred marriage union is the foundation and conclusion of Jesus' answer to the Pharisees: “whomever God has joined together, let no man separate!” If God joins a man and a woman in holy matrimony, man's empty certificates of divorce cannot separate them.

Fornication, not divorce certificates, is acknowledged as the means by which this union is broken; and that I believe is given as a concession to the unwillingness of the unfaithful spouse to be reconciled.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON JESUS' TEACHINGS

Jesus confronts the commonly accepted reality of divorce in His day with the reality that divorce perpetuates and multiplies adultery through remarriage. Divorcement certificates only give the illusion of freedom to remarry to the divorced spouse, which becomes a terrible stumbling block to them if they choose to remarry.

I feel obligated to state that legitimate interpretations of Jesus' teaching on divorce can range from "strict" to "stricter", but there is no legitimate "lenient" interpretation.

Noted theologian, John Piper, believes the exception clause refers to fornication that was discovered on the wedding night, and that even fornication afterwards does not justify divorce. I am not going to address this interpretation in any great length because anyone who is interested can readily find his position online; I respect his reasons but feel they fall short of adequately addressing Jesus' words.

I also want to emphasize that in the case of fornication, the divorce must be enacted because of the fornication. I find it impossible to envision Jesus having in mind a wife being divorced by her husband, then hiring a private detective to follow her ex-husband around until he sleeps with another woman. Once a marriage is entered into by a covenantal vow between a man and a woman, that marriage cannot be nullified unless one party has entered into unrepentant and irreconcilable fornication.

DIVORCE IN PAUL'S LETTERS

Paul's letters reflect the gentile audience by addressing divorce to both *husband* and *wife*, acknowledging the gentile reality that women could divorce their husbands as well.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul writes about divorce in a relatively symmetrical way. Although he states that a man should not divorce (ἀφίημι, *aphiēmi*) his wife, he also charges that a woman should not separate (χωρίζω, *chōrizō*) from her husband. Both parties evidently had rights to divorce, which became the case in the Roman Empire as women's rights improved (Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 442–43). Paul is the only biblical author who uses *aphiēmi* in the context of divorce, and he uses it in the same passage as *chōrizō* (1 Cor 7). Separation and divorce were equal legal statuses in the Graeco-Roman world, and the two terms could indicate the difference between a Jewish divorce and a Graeco-Roman one. Paul also might have chosen *aphiēmi* to emphasize the seriousness of the obligation of marriage (Instone-Brewer, "1 Corinthians 7," 108). (*The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press)

With this backdrop in place, we will read Paul's instructions:

1st Corinthians 7:10-16 "Now to the married I command, not I, but the Lord, do not let the wife depart from her husband. But if she departs, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And do not let the husband divorce his wife. To the rest I speak, not the Lord: If any brother has an unbelieving wife who consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And if the woman has an unbelieving husband who consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean. But now they are holy. But if the unbeliever departs, let that one depart. A brother or a sister is not bound in such cases. God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?"

The command that neither husband nor wife are to divorce one another is stated plainly as "the Lord's command".

Singleness or reconciliation is prescribed to whoever divorces their spouse.

Paul also treats a topic not plainly commanded by the Lord regarding believers who are married to unbelievers. Paul's primary concern in this matter is *sanctification*. He instructs the believing spouse to remain married to their unbelieving spouse, if their spouse is willing, with the end-salvation of the unbelieving spouse in view. However, Paul says that if the unbeliever leaves, then the believer is not held accountable for the separation.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON PAUL'S TEACHINGS

Paul's teachings assume Jesus' commandments and applies them in both directions to male and female.

When Paul addresses the believing spouse who is married to an unbeliever, it is assumed by the clause "if the unbeliever is willing to remain" that the believing spouse converted after marriage.

It is evident that Paul's primary concern in such a situation is the ultimate conversion of the unbelieving spouse.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

Biblical doctrine on divorce and remarriage emphasizes the powerful union God creates between a husband and wife to which they will be held accountable. Jesus emphasized this reality even in a culture that embraced divorce because divorce perpetuates and multiplies adultery through remarriage among God's people and He knew the coming judgment that will be brought against adulterers.

As painful as this topic is to those brothers and sisters who find themselves in the many difficult situations brought on by divorce, I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to follow Christ even at great costs.

Therefore we conclude:

Luke 9:23-26 “Then He said to them all, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father’s, and of the holy angels.’”

DOCTRINAL STATEMENT

We believe that God's created design for the marriage union between a man and a woman reflects His image and is indissoluble by divorcement certificates.

We believe that divorce should not be an option between two Christians – even in the case of infidelity – because the divine attributes of mercy, forgiveness, and love must reign supreme in Christian life.

We believe that divorce is permitted on the grounds of infidelity as a concession when the unfaithful spouse is unwilling to reconcile; but divorce must never be desired.

We believe that anyone who divorces their spouse and remarries another, except for sexual immorality, commits adultery; whoever otherwise divorces their spouse must remain single.

We believe that anyone who is divorced by their spouse and remarries another, except for sexual immorality, commits adultery; whoever is otherwise divorced by their spouse must remain single.

We believe that anyone who marries someone who has been divorced, except for sexual immorality, commits adultery; marrying someone who is divorced apart from sexual immorality constitutes an intrusion into a sacred marriage union and is adultery.

We believe that divorce is a mechanism through which adultery is perpetuated and multiplied among God's people.

We believe that singleness or reconciliation to the original spouse is the only prescription for anyone who divorces their spouse that does not lead to adultery.

We believe that a spouse who converts after marriage should remain with their unbelieving spouse, if they are willing, with the salvation of their spouse through the testimony of Christ in view.

We believe that Paul set an example of humility before the Church by acknowledging that his counsel to the believer with an unbelieving spouse was his own counsel and not the Lord's commandment.

We believe that the Church must take a position of equal humility when prescribing solutions to those situations not directly addressed by the commandments of our Lord.