

**CHRIST'S INTERPRETATION OF DIVORCE**  
**(Matt. 5:31, 32; 19: 3-12)**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

- A. Divorce is on the increase in America. At the present time one out of three marriages ends in divorce. In some upper middle class sections in the larger cities like New York and San Francisco, the ratio is one out of every two marriages ends in divorce.
- B. Divorce is the break up of the family unit and the family unit is the foundation of any society. A nation that makes divorce easy is on its way to ethical decadence.

**NOTE:** History shows us that in the last few decades before the fall of both the Grecian and Roman empires, marriage was held in such low esteem that it was a common thing for the women to keep tab on their divorces by the number of rings worn on their fingers.

- C. The world has its own standard of morality, which by Biblical standards is very low. We should remember that these teachings on divorce are for true Christians, who believe in the authority of God's Word for their lives.

**NOTE:** It is because Christians have accepted a high viewpoint of divorce and remarriage that Christian homes are more solid. An interesting statistic is that only about one out of every 1000 Christian marriages ends in divorce.

**II. BACKGROUND (Matt. 5:31, c.f. Deut. 24:1-4)\**

- A. Much of Matthew 5 is a contrast between the external, hypocritical righteousness of the religions Jews and the internal, true righteousness He requires of real believers. The Jews had built up hundreds of man-made traditions around the law of the Old Testament. These traditions were taking precedence over the genuine spiritual interpretation of the law.
- B. It hath been said, "Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement." These Jews went back to Deut. 24:1-4 to support a very flexible and loose viewpoint of divorce. Because their traditions they had added to the meaning of the Law. These Jews implied that the law commanded a husband to divorced his wife (which it never does), and he could put his wife away for just about any cause he pleased, as long as he gave her a bill of divorcement.

1. Spiritual Interpretation Of Deut. 24:1-4:

Divorce was permitted for uncleanness (unseemly thing), which probably refers to adultery. In those days there was much divorce for about any cause, and God sent forth this law to protect women from ill treatment by their husbands, for they were being divorced for frivolous reasons. God allowed divorce to improve a chaotic condition. God, through Moses, was not approving of divorce, but merely allowing its continuance-- even as He allowed polygamy-- for a time. A woman would also have to have a bill of divorcement, for she had legal status only through her father or husband. Without this bill of divorcement, she was likely to end up as a harlot.

**NOTE:** God gave this law to Israel to make it hard to get a divorce, for marriage is

not something that people can walk in and out of at will.

2. False Interpretation Of The Pharisees:

During our Lord's ministry on earth, there were two interpretations among the Pharisees on the meaning of "uncleanness". The School of Shammai, which was very strict, held that "uncleanness" meant sexual immorality or adultery; thus the only basis for divorce was adultery. Their interpretation was correct but they in the minority. The School of Hillel, which was very lax, held that "uncleanness" applied to almost anything that would warrant divorce. If a wife spoiled the supper, chatted with another man, spoke disrespectfully of her husband or any such little thing, she could be divorced. They did not take marriage seriously at all, and it was very popular with people, especially the husbands. **NOTE:** Of course the ultimate motive behind all this freedom was nothing but lust and passion, for these Jews wanted a respectable way to sin.

**III. WHAT JESUS CHRIST TAUGHT ABOUT DIVORCE** (Matt. 5:32 cf. 19: 3-12)

- A. Background: Matt. 5:32 gives the Lord's teaching on divorce but it is more clearly taught in Matt. 19:3-12. A group of Pharisees make an attempt to test Christ and ask him, ("Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?") (v. 3). These Jews think they have trapped Christ, for if he agrees with them that a woman can be put away for any cause, He contradicts Moses' teaching in Deut. 24. If He agrees with Moses teaching that any kind of \_\_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_\_ is the only cause, then His teaching is no higher than Moses', which lessens his authority.

**NOTE:** Jesus, the master teacher goes back to the original design for marriage to show that the concept of no divorce has been the ideal in God's mind for marriage (v. 4-6). God never intended that marriage should end in divorce for any reason.

B. Why Moses Allowed For Divorce (19:7, 8):

Christ teaches that divorce was allowed or permitted in the Old Testament because of the hardness of the Israelites' hearts. The word "hardness" means stubborn or calloused, showing that the children of condition of the nation and the low moral condition of the people. It was a stop-gap measure to elevate the institution of marriage and rescue it from chaotic conditions.

**NOTE:** The key to understanding this section is found in the words, ("But from the beginning it was not so.") Divorce was not part of the original design for marriage as seen in Adam and Eve. God's ideal is no divorce, because man and wife are one flesh and are in an indissoluble union. Remember, Christ is talking to real Christians who believe that Christ is the authority for their lives. The Christian standard for marriage is much higher than that of the unsaved world.

C. What Is The Meaning Of "Fornication"? (19:9a.)

1. Fornication Is Adultery: The most common interpretation is that there is one condition to break a marriage and that is adultery, for those who accept this view equate "fornication" with "adultery." Fornication does at times refer to sexual immorality in the broadest sense (Eph. 5:3; I Thess. 4:3; Rev. 2:20, 22) and may refer to adultery. There are, however, some obvious objections to this viewpoint:

- a. The Greek word for "fornication" is porneia. The Greek has a word for

adultery which is moicheia. Why didn't the Lord use moicheia?

- b. In Matthew 15:19 (also Gal. 5:19), a distinction is made between fornication and adultery.
- c. In I Cor. 7, where the Apostle Paul is discussing divorce, no mention is made of adultery as being a cause for divorce. Surely Paul knew our Lord's teaching.
- d. If Christ is making adultery a cause for divorce, then His standards for marriage are no higher than that of Jews, whether of the School of Shammai or the School of Hillel.
- e. "Fornication" is not mentioned in the parallel accounts in the Gospel of Luke (Lk. 16:18) and the Gospel of Mark (Mark 10:2-12). Perhaps "fornication" refers to some Jewish custom, for the Gospel of Matthew was written to the Jews.

- 2. Jewish Engagement Customs: Engaged couples were spoken of by the Jews as husband and wife. (Matt. 1:18-20). This engagement period was as binding as marriage but there were not the sex privileges that go along with marriage. When Christ says "except for fornication" He is speaking of release from the bonds of betrothal, not of marriage. If a woman was found unfaithful during this period, she could be put away.
- 3. Marriage Of Relatives: Leviticus 18:1-18 forbids physical relations and marriage with close relatives. For instance one could not marry his father's wife (stepmother). This was sometimes called a "fornications marriage" (I Cor. 5: 1). If this were the case, then the marriage could be resolved.

D. What Are The Consequences Of Divorce? (19:9a)

If a man puts away his wife for any other reason than fornication (either unfaithfulness to an engaged partner before marriage or marrying a close relative), then he is guilty of committing adultery if he marries another. Also, if the woman, put away for an unjust cause, is married by another that one is committing adultery with her.

E. The Reaction Of The Disciples (19:10-13):

Here is the second key to understanding this section for his disciples clearly understood that the Lord was teaching a very high standard for marriage, which was no divorce, not even for adultery. The disciples concluded it was better not to marry if there was no way to get out of it.

**POINT**: Jesus Christ has a high standard for marriage.

IV. **EXHORTATION TO CHRISTIANS**:

Christ had a high view on marriage. He has been talking to Christians and His words are authoritative for them. Whatever else may be implied in Matthew 19, it is clear that Christ is teaching that there is no divorce for those who call themselves Christians and followers of Jesus Christ. Christian young people, be wise, go slow and pray much about your life's partner, for when you choose him or her, it is for life and there is no condition

for backing out. If you make the wrong decision, then you have to live with that decision the rest of your life. Divorce for two Christians in marriage brings the discipline of God. The standard is higher for God's children than the world.

**V. EXHORTATION TO THE NON-CHRISTIAN:**

Someone might say, "What about the person who has been married and divorced before he or she became a Christian?" All the unsaved are tangled in sin because of the world system. The sin of divorce is no worse than any other sin, although it may leave more permanent scars than other sins. It is my firm conviction the Bible teaches that the person who is divorced before salvation cannot be penalized by other believers (Isa. 43:25). He or she may remarry but only in the Lord. Even adultery is not the unforgivable sin. It is a terrible sin, but God forbid that there should be anyone who feels that he or she has sinned himself or herself outside the love of God or His Kingdom because of adultery or divorce. If you will trust Christ as your Saviour and Lord, He will forgive you and give you a new life. But remember the words of our Lord, who said to the sinful woman, who trusted in Him, "Go and sin no more." NOTE: If God can forgive the sins of divorce and adultery, surely he can forgive any sin. If you have sin that plagues you night and day, Jesus Christ can pardon you, and He will pardon you if you will turn to Him to bestow His mercy, love and grace on you.