

EAST
Singapore

Dr. Jack L. Arnold
Equipping Pastors Int'l, Inc.

CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

Lesson 19

What Christ Taught About Divorce

Matthew 19:3-10

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Divorce is an epidemic in the USA. One out of three marriages ends in divorce. In large cities, one out of two, and in some communities, more divorces take place than marriages.
- B. Today about 65% of all adults (eighteen and up) have been divorced at least once or married a divorcee. This statistic is not quite as high among Bible believing Christians but it is rising as our non-Christian society becomes more tolerant and receptive to divorce.
- C. It is time God's people, those who know and love Christ, to get back to the Bible for their beliefs about divorce and remarriage. We know from Malachi 2 that God hates divorce.
 1. In context, he is lamenting how Israel, God's people, accepted the standard of the unsaved world and were divorcing their wives in order to marry pagan, unsaved, Gentile wives. The Israelites were weeping and wailing at God's altar because He no longer responded to them. They wanted to know why and God says it was because they had become liberal in their understanding of divorce.

Another thing you do: You flood the LORD'S altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. "I hate divorce" says the LORD God of Israel. (Mal. 2:13-16a).

2. God hates divorce and if God hates divorce we should hate it too.
- D. God's standard, God's ideal is no divorce. However, we live in a sin-cursed, fallen world and divorce happens. God also has the ideal of no sin but sin happens. When divorce happens which is outside of God's perfect, moral will, we must be prepared to deal with it from a Biblical, Christ-centered approach. We Christians must have a healing, redemptive ministry to those who have gone through the tragedy of divorce. We must point people to the Savior who can forgive them of their sins, remove their guilt and heal them spiritually and psychologically so they might live moral lives before a holy God.
 - E. According to my understanding of the Bible, divorce and remarriage is allowed if an unbeliever deserts the marriage (1 Cor. 7:15) or for marital unfaithfulness (Matt. 19:9).

II. **DEFINITION OF DIVORCE:** A divorce is an official, legal severance of the marriage union designed to free the marriage partners and terminate their marriage with the right and intent of marriage.

III. **CHRIST'S TEACHING ON DIVORCE** Matt. 19: 3-10

A. The Challenge of the Pharisees (19: 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?”*

1. A group of Pharisees who believed in very liberal reasons for divorce came with the specific purpose to test Jesus concerning divorce. It is obvious they were trying to get Him to make a choice between the two views on divorce which were held in that day among the Pharisees and people.
2. The School of Shammai was very strict and felt the words “find something indecent about her” in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 meant adultery only. They felt the only legitimate reason for divorce was adultery and this alone broke the marriage bond. The School of Hillel believed it was right for a man to divorce his wife for almost any reason. If the wife burned the toast or socially embarrassed the men, this was a basis for divorce. This view was the popular view in Christ's day and all a man had to do was write out a bill of divorcement to his wife for any reason.
3. The Pharisees knew Christ taught on divorce earlier in his ministry in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:31-32). In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ makes a contrast between the Pharisees perverted views of the Old Testament law with His own correct interpretation of the law.
4. In Matthew 19, Christ allowed for divorce in His teaching but said divorce for any other reason than “marital unfaithful” (NIV) or “fornication (KJV) or “unchastity” (NASB) is tantamount to committing adultery. If a person marries someone who has been divorced for any other reason than marital unfaithfulness is committing adultery. Furthermore, the man (or wife in our society) who puts away his wife (husband) for any other reason than marital unfaithfulness causes that person to commit adultery if he or she remarries. Obviously Christ took a very hard line on divorce.

B. The Ideal Marriage (19:4-6): *“Haven't you read,” he replied, “That at the beginning the Creator made them male and female’ 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’? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.”*

1. Christ, the master teacher, takes the Pharisees back to the original design for marriage. In the very first marriage of Adam and Eve. God's plan, God's desire, God's moral will was to have one man for one woman for a lifetime. God's ideal is no divorce.
2. God's standard for marriage is very high. His desire for people is that they should establish marriages for a lifetime and this brings the special blessing of God.
3. Divorce, if it occurs, is sin. Divorce is the breaking of God's moral law. It is always sin and involves some form of sin.

C. The Second Challenge Of The Pharisees (19:7): *“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man gives his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”*

1. The Pharisees felt they had trapped Christ for if the ideal is no divorce why did Moses allow for divorce in the Old Testament?
 2. They tried to get Christ to speak against the Mosaic Law. This would discredit Him with the people.
- D. Why Moses Allowed For Divorce (19:8): *“Jesus replied ‘Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.’”*
1. The Pharisees alleged that Moses commanded divorce as if God was giving His approval of it. Not so. It says that Moses permitted it, indicating allowance and sufferance due to sin. Divorce is always in the permissive will not directive will of God.
 2. Divorce was permitted because of the hardness of the Israelites’ hearts. The word “hard” means stubborn or callused, showing the Israelites were disobedient.
 3. Divorce is allowed and permitted as any sin is allowed and permitted in God’s plan. However, divorce was not part of the original marriage law before the Mosaic Law ever came into existence.
 4. Jesus said. “It was not this way from the beginning.” This refers back to Adam and Eve, God’s ideal marriage. Again God’s ideal is no divorce because man and wife are one flesh and this is to be an indissoluble union.
- E. Christ Allowed For Divorce On The Basis Of Marital Unfaithfulness (19: 9): *“I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness and marries another woman commits adultery.”* Christian scholars have violently disagreed over the word “marital unfaithfulness” (*porneia*). There are three schools of thought.
1. View #1: Porneia refers to Jewish marriage customs. While I do not have time to present the arguments for this view (and there are many good ones) these scholars believe Jesus taught no divorce for any reason, not even adultery. They believe the word *porneia* refers either to sexual unfaithfulness during the engagement period, or marriage of close relatives, or marriages to unbelieving Gentiles. This has been the position of the Roman Catholic Church and a few Protestants.
 2. View #2: Porneia refers to adultery only.
 - a. The Greek has a word for adultery (*moicheia*), and sometimes the word *porneia*, means adultery. *“Let her remove the adulterous look (moicheia) from her face and the unfaithfulness (porneia) from between her breasts”* (LXX) Hos. 2:2.
 - b. The Apocryphal book Sirach says. “So it is with a woman who leaves her husband and provides an heir by adultery (a friend - *porneia*). Historically Church has taken this view.
 - c. In 413 AD, Augustine wrote: “Nor is it clear from Scripture whether a man who left his wife because of adultery, which he is certainly permitted to do, is himself an adulterer if he remarries again.”
 - d. The Jesuit scholar Theodore Mackin, in his book Divorce And Remarriage, said. “Christian writers on the subject of adultery, divorce and remarriage, beginning in the middle of the second century and continuing at least until Augustine, never call the following persons adulterers: (1) A husband who remarries after dismissing an adulterous wife; (2) A husband who remarries

after being abandoned by his wife; (3) A woman who marries a man in either of these two cases.”

- e. The Eastern Orthodox Church in the discipline of the Byzantine Church recognized *porneia* to mean adultery and extended it even to abortion and attempted murder.
- f. The Reformers acknowledged adultery (*porneia*) as a ground for divorce and remarriage.

The Westminster Confession of Faith says “Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage: yet. nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church, or civil magistrates, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage: where in, a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills, and discretion, in their own case (XXIV-VI).

3. View #3: *Porneia* is a more extensive term than *moicheia* and refers to various sexual immoralities.
 - a. *Porneia* and *moicheia* are separate terms, indicating that *porneia* is a broader term for sexual immoralities. “For out of the heart came evil thoughts, murder, adultery (*moicheia*), sexual immorality (*porneia*)” Matt. 15:19.
 - b. *Porneia* may refer to sexual sin before marriage. “Marriage should be honored by all . . . God will judge the adulterer (*moicheia*) and all the sexually immoral (*porneia*)” Heb. 13:4b.
 - c. It may refer to incest “It is actually reported there is sexual immorality (*porneia*) among you, and a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father’s wife” 1 Cor. 5:1.
 - d. It refers to adultery “Let her remove the adulterous look (*moicheia*) from her face and the unfaithfulness (*porneia*) from between her breasts” Hos. 2:2.
 - e. To sexual sin in general “Flee from sexual immorality (*porneia*) 1 Cor. 6:18.
4. *Porneia* refers to adultery, prostitution, incest, homosexuality, lesbianism and bestiality. All of these sexual acts break the marriage union and all of these sins called for the death penalty in the Old Testament. Divorce may be granted on the above sexual abuses.
5. Jesus did not take the strict view of divorce held by the School of Shammai, which said divorce for adultery only. Nor did He take the liberal view of the School of Hillel, which said divorce for any reason. Jesus took a mediating position and said divorce for adultery, incest, prostitution, homosexuality, lesbianism and bestiality.
6. Practically, it does happen that professing Christians at times cheat on their mates and divorce them. Does this mean the innocent party must be consigned to a life of misery and celibacy without a mate for life?
7. Since marital unfaithfulness is a basis or ground for divorce between two professing Christians, it does not mean divorce is to be automatic when

unfaithfulness occurs. There must be every attempt to put the marriage back together. Marriage is holy and sacred and every marriage is worth fighting for even if there has been marital unfaithfulness.

8. Incompatibility is not a basis for divorce, nor is substance abuse, nor is verbal or physical abuse. However, these are a basis for legal separation with no intent to remarry or be sexually promiscuous. No one has to live with an abusive person.
- F. The Reaction of the Disciples (19:10) “The disciples said to him, ‘If this is the situation between husband and wife, it is better to not marry.’”
1. With such high standards for marriage and strict requirements for divorce, the disciples, who probably believed the liberal views of divorce in that day, concluded it was better not to marry at all.
 2. Jesus never taught that incompatibility was grounds for divorce. It is not. Yet, most divorces today are sought on the basis of incompatibility and irreconcilable differences.

III. PRACTICAL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS IN DEALING WITH DIVORCES

A. Before Conversion

1. Before conversion to Christ, people make all kinds of messes of their lives. Sometimes this includes one or more divorces and more than not adultery is involved. Answer: Salvation wipes away a person’s past sins and makes him or her a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Adultery and divorce are horrible sins but not unforgivable sins. There may well be many historical consequences of this sin but God can and does take away the guilt, and He can give a person a new life and a new partner in Christ.
2. What if a person is converted after his or her divorce but his mate is not yet converted? Answer: He or she should do all that is possible to reconcile the marriage. If the partner shows no desire to become a Christian, remarries or dies, he or she is free to remarry, but only in the Lord. However, there should be a long period of time before a person who is converted gives up the responsibility of his or her mate being converted.
3. What responsibilities do converted men or women have to their divorced unsaved mates or children of that relationship? Answer: The converted person has personal and financial responsibilities to the children, for this is part of the inevitable consequences of sin, even though the sin has been forgiven.

B. After Conversion

1. Sometimes true Christians become rebellious to God and commit marital unfaithfulness. Is the innocent partner free to seek a divorce if his or her mate is guilty of adultery? Answer: Yes. Adultery and other sexual sins are grounds for divorce. If the innocent party cannot live with the hurt and anger of being offended, then that party is free to seek a divorce and remarry.
2. Is divorce mandatory when marital unfaithfulness is involved? Answer: No. The grace of God can overcome the hurt of the offended partner and win back the erring partner.
3. Does marital unfaithfulness permanently destroy the marriage union? Answer: Not if both parties are willing to renew their commitment and seek a better foundation for their marriage - the foundation God has laid in His Holy Word.

4. Is the guilty party free to remarry? Answer: Some have taken it that the guilty party is not free to remarry and this is the safest position. However, some feel that the guilty party is free to remarry if the innocent party dies or remarries. The guilty party may be asked to leave a particular local church so as to keep down rumor and confusion with the innocent party.
5. Certainly one who is guilty of marital unfaithfulness and destruction of a marriage should not be permitted to hold any official office in the local church although he may be free to fellowship if he has truly repented. The guilty party may not be able to teach in the local church.
6. One reason a guilty party may be free to remarry if he or she truly repents is that God wants holiness from His people. If the guilty party is forced to stay single, he or she may be tempted also into a life of sexual immorality. Is it better to be divorced and in sexual immorality or is it better to be married to a person as the guilty party in a previous marriage? God wants sexual morality.

A Woman came to me for counseling who was from a very fundamentalist Baptist Church which believed in divorce but no remarriage. This woman and her husband had both committed adultery and he left her and the divorce was final for over three years. She loved her church but she was having an affair with a man. I asked her why she did not marry him. She said, "My church would never approve of it. I would be looked upon as an adulteress." Yet, the woman was sexually immoral. Such are the inconsistencies among Christians without sound Biblical teaching.

7. What if the guilty party destroys his marriage and marries another person when the innocent party has not remarried, but the guilty party later truly repents? Answer: Two wrongs do not make a right. It would not be wise to divorce his or her present mate, who also may be a true believer, and go back to the first mate. He or she must make the best of the present situation even though there may be great discipline from God.

There was this company president and elder of his Presbyterian church who fell in love with his secretary, divorced his wife and married his secretary. The secretary was not converted yet he professed faith in Christ. His first wife never remarried and did not profess Christ. Years later the man and his second wife came to my church. After sitting under the Word, she became a Christian, and he came under tremendous guilt of what he had done to his first wife. They called me over to their home and explained to me their dilemma. He did not love his first wife who was now an alcoholic, but loved his second wife who was a true believer in Christ. He asked if he should leave his second wife and go back to his first wife. My answer was that two wrongs do not make a right. I advised him to stay with his second wife and make sure his first wife was well taken care of. Also I informed him he could never hold office in our church because he was the guilty party who destroyed his marriage. He accepted this as from God.

8. What if a person deliberately commits adultery to get out of the marriage union or deliberately drives his or her mate to adultery so as to attain a legal divorce in the eyes of God? Answer: The person who does this can expect to face the stern discipline of God, the rebuke of the elders and the censure of the church. This, of course, could result in excommunication if there was not true repentance.

IV. PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES FOR THE DIVORCEE TO CONTEMPLATE

- A. Fulfillment of God's ideal for marriage is always the number one aim - no divorce.
- B. God's ideal is one man for one woman for one lifetime.
- C. Divorce is always a sin because it is a transgression of God's moral law and ideal.
- D. God is love and compassion and is always seeking to make a bad situation into a good one through forgiveness.
- E. God's grace is always available to restore, reinstate and surmount the obstacles of divorce if there is true repentance and faith.
- F. Divorce, even wrongful divorce, can be forgiven through Christ's gracious redemption.
- G. Forgiveness restores the relationship but may not change the situation a divorced person has brought upon himself or herself because of sin. The person needs to be willing to accept the inevitable consequences of wrong acts, but at the same time be free from guilt.
- H. A divorced person can remarry in Christ and find a meaningful, useful and satisfying existence, but may have to experience the effects of sin and the discipline of God for a lifetime.