

## **Jesus' Hard Teaching on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage**

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One of the most difficult teachings in the Gospels is found in Matthew 19:9 "*And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.*" It is a part of Jesus' teaching on His law of Marriage, when He was challenged by the Pharisees on the Mosaic Law on divorce.

When Jesus responded, He first laid out His law on marriage. He defined marriage as being between one man and one woman. He declared that they were joined by God (alone), and that division was defined by God (alone). This law ended the rules of Moses and the Patriarchs. For example, it ended the prohibition on mixed marriages (1 Cor. 7:14). It ended the allowance for polygamy. Finally, it ended divorce as Moses instituted.

It was subsequent to this that Jesus' hard teaching on remarriage came. He declared that whomever married after divorce was committing adultery. This teaching was understood by Jesus' apostles to be a "hard saying".

Throughout the New Testament it is clear that marriage itself is a matter of judgment (Hebrews 13:4), and our conduct in marriage is something that we will be personally judged for (1 Peter 3:7). Jesus and His disciples taught first that divorce itself is wrong (Matthew 19:6, 1 Corinthians 7:10). In addition the New Testament teaches the following: only a person who has never married, who has married and their spouse has died (Romans 7:1, etc), or who has married and their spouse has committed an act of physical infidelity, has God's permission to enter into marriage.

### **The Sin of an Adulterous Marriage**

In His teaching, Jesus was not pointing to the divorce as the exclusively sinful issue, but His focus is the remarriage, and He makes it clear that such a marriage is not a divinely created marriage, but a formal arrangement of adultery. Jesus stated in Matthew 19 that marriage is something that God Himself makes in each instance; "God has joined" (Matthew 19:6). What confuses many is that the adulterous remarriage "appears" to be legitimate in the eyes of men, and we interpret it as legitimate in the eyes of God. Would God sanction adultery and then call it a marriage?

Marriage is called a covenant in the Scriptures (Malachi 2:14). Scripture gives us a few key descriptions of the nature of a covenant: it is unbreakable and unchangeable (Galatians 3:15); it contains laws or rules (Deuteronomy 9:9); it contains promises or rewards (Hebrews 8:5); violation of a covenant leaves one party in a (legally) worse condition than prior to entering it (Leviticus 26:15,18, 2 Peter 2:20). So marriage is far more than a mere contract, but a binding that cannot be severed except by death. If it is broken by one or both parties, they find themselves in a situation where the "latter end is worse for them than the beginning". Thus the person who has entered a covenant and then broken it cannot enter into another marriage covenant while the original parties live (Romans 7:2-3).

It is that punitive nature of the marriage covenant that leaves most people in such jeopardy. Jesus was clearly saying that someone who has entered a marriage covenant cannot remarry, despite the legal device of a divorce. In case we choose to interpret this differently, Jesus went on to make it abundantly clear by the following:

Matthew 19:12 "For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it."

The point Jesus seeks to make is that for the sake of the Kingdom, some must live as eunuchs. In other words, they cannot live in a marriage arrangement.

Jesus did bring up an exception to His law on remarriage. That exception is not mentioned in Mark or Luke, but Matthew, emphasizing that it is an exception, not the rule. Jesus states that the exception was "sexual immorality". To be clear, He did NOT say that the exception was adultery. He specifically used a word that is probably best rendered "fornication" The word in Greek, *Porneia*, is defined very narrowly. Greek scholars and lexicons all agree that this word means "illicit sexual intercourse". Both agree, this is a physical action with another person that nullifies the covenant.<sup>1</sup>

### **Common Counterpoints**

**SOME SAY:** *The forgiveness of sins at baptism forgives the divorce and legitimizes marriage.* We are clearly taught that forgiveness of sin occurs at baptism (Acts 2:38). We are also taught that before baptism we must repent of our sins (Acts 2:38). Many believe that repentance is merely the acknowledgment or confession of our sins. In fact, repent means to turn away from the commission thereof. If the only sin involved in adulterous remarriage were the divorce, then perhaps one might have a case to say that baptism might validate the new marriage. The problem is that God calls the marriage itself a circumstance of adultery. It is not the divorce but the remarriage that is the adultery; it is not a onetime act, but a state or condition of living. Repentance means change; the marriage is what must be changed in order for repentance to be real.

**SOME SAY:** *the teaching of Matthew 19 occurred under the law of Moses, so it is not legally part of the New Testament doctrine.* This concept points to the time of the teaching of Jesus and states that as Jesus did not fulfill the Old Law until the cross, any teaching prior to this has no legal merit. Such a statement would necessarily void a large chunk of New Testament doctrine, such as Jesus' teaching on hate, vengeance (Matthew 5) or sin between brethren (Matthew 18). However, Jesus did not appeal to the law of Moses to validate His teaching, but to the laws of Creation in Genesis 2. Thus His teaching was not part of the Law of Moses. Second, Jesus told His disciples that the teachings He had given them were to be given as the foundation of the church and the New Testament when He gave them the great commission in Matthew 28:19-20.: "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you"

**SOME SAY:** *Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 permits divorce and remarriage.* This idea can only be considered if we invalidate what Jesus taught in the Gospel accounts. Our prior point made clear that was not possible; therefore, any teaching that Paul or any other made subsequent to the Gospel's is secondary to the previous teachings. But specifically, Paul did not teach on the merits of remarriage. He only instructed pertaining to being bound. There is no permission suggested for remarriage in his statement: But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. (7:15)

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<sup>1</sup> STRONGS: illicit sexual intercourse: (1) adultery, fornication, homosexuality, lesbianism, intercourse with animals etc. (2) sexual intercourse with close relatives; [Lev. 18](#); (3) sexual intercourse with a divorced man or woman  
THAYER: a. properly, of illicit sexual intercourse in general (Demosthenes, 403, 27; 433)

SOME SAY: *Paul's statement "Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called" in 1 Corinthians 7:20 tells us we may remain married in the fashion we are called.* Again, confirming that Paul's teaching here was subordinate to what Jesus said, this simply cannot be the case. But we can even discern this using a parallel example. Let us return to our earlier example of the two homosexual men who married in the eyes of the state and society. Let us now say that they have heard the word of God and obey the Gospel calling. Can they remain in the same marriage in which they were called?

The one who states that a person married in a state of adultery is now sanctified and permitted to remain in that marriage must also accept the two homosexual men's marriage as legitimate. The defendant has chosen to ignore the circumstance of the first couple as being legitimate marriage. Remember that God did not join them, but they were joined only in the eyes of the state, and God calls their relationship adultery. The same applies to the homosexual couple; God did not join them, but they were instead joined only in the eyes of the state, and God calls their relationship homosexuality.

### **Conclusion**

Some people will be called to sacrifice much for the Kingdom of Heaven. We cannot afford to teach otherwise. We must choose the person we are marrying with great care and with a mind that this is the only marriage I will enter into in my life.