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The Disciple-Making Minister

Biblical Principles for Fruitfulness and Multiplication

By David Servant

Chapter Thirteen Divorce and Remarriage

The subject of divorce and remarriage is one that is often debated among sincere Christians. Two fundamental questions are the basis of that debate: (1) When, if ever, is divorce permissible in God's eyes? and (2) When, if ever, is remarriage permissible in God's eyes? Most denominations and independent churches have an official doctrinal stance on what is permissible and what is not, based on their particular interpretation of Scripture. We should respect them all for having convictions and living by them—if their convictions are motivated by their love for God. It would surely be best, however, if all of us held convictions that are 100% scriptural. The disciple-making minister does not want to teach what falls short of what God intends. Neither does he want to place burdens upon people that God never intended for them to carry. With that goal in mind, I'm going to do my best to interpret Scripture on this controversial topic and let you decide if you agree or disagree.

Let me begin by telling you that I am, like you, grieved that divorce is so rampant in the world today. Even more grievous is the fact that so many professing Christians are divorcing, including those in the ministry. This is a great tragedy. We need to do all we can to prevent this from happening more, and the best solution to the divorce problem is to preach the gospel and call people to repentance. When two married people are genuinely born again and both are following Christ, they'll never be divorced. The disciple-making minister will do all he can to make his own marriage strong, knowing that his example is his most influential means of teaching.

May I also add that I've been happily married for over twenty-five years and have never been previously married. I can't imagine ever being divorced. So I have no motive to soften difficult divorce scriptures for my own sake. I do, however, possess a strong sympathy for divorced people, knowing that I could have easily made a bad decision as a young man myself, marrying someone whom I would have later been sorely tempted to divorce, or someone less tolerant of me than the wonderful woman I did marry. In other words, I could have ended up divorced, but I have not because of the grace of God. I think that most married people can relate to what I'm saying, and so we need to restrain ourselves from throwing stones at divorced people. Who are we, who have low-maintenance marriages, to condemn divorced persons, having no idea what they might have endured? God might consider them to be much more righteous than us, as He knows that we, under the same circumstances, might have divorced much sooner.

No one who marries expects to be ultimately divorced, and I don't think anyone hates divorce more than those who have suffered through it. So we should try to help married people stay married, and help divorced people find whatever grace God might be offering. It is in that spirit which I write.

I will do my best to allow scripture to interpret scripture. I've noticed that verses on this subject are often interpreted in such a way that they contradict other scriptures, which is a sure indication that those verses have been misunderstood, at least in part.

A Foundation

Let us begin with a foundational truth with which we can all agree. Most fundamentally, Scripture affirms that God is very much against divorce in general. During a time when some Israelite men were divorcing their wives, He declared through His prophet Malachi:

I hate divorce...and him who covers his garment with wrong....So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously (Mal. 2:16).

This should not surprise anyone who knows something about the loving and just character of God, or anyone who knows something about how divorce damages husbands, wives and children. We would have to question the moral character of anyone who was in favor of divorce in a general way. God is love (see 1 John 4:8), and thus He hates divorce.

Some Pharisees once asked Jesus a question regarding the lawfulness of divorce "for any cause." His response reveals His fundamental disapproval of divorce. In fact, divorce was never His intention for anyone:

And some Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?" And He answered and said, "Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh'? Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matt. 19:3-6).

Historically, we know that there were two schools of thought among Jewish religious leaders in Jesus' day. We'll explore those two schools of thought in more detail later, but suffice it to say for now that one was conservative and one was liberal. The conservatives believed that a man was permitted to divorce his wife only for very serious moral reasons. The liberals believed that a man could divorce his wife for just about any reason, including even finding a more attractive woman. These contradicting convictions were the very basis of the Pharisees' question to Jesus.

Jesus appealed to verses of Scripture from the earliest pages of Genesis that show how God's original plan was to join men and women together *permanently*, not temporarily. Moses declared that God made the two sexes with marriage in mind, and that marriage is such a significant relationship that it becomes the primary relationship. Once it is established, it ranks higher than one's relationship with his or her parents. Men *leave* their parents to *cleave* to their wives.

Moreover, the sexual union between man and wife points to their God-ordained oneness. Obviously, such a relationship, one that results in offspring, was not meant by God to be temporary, but meant to be permanent. I suspect that the tone of Jesus' response to the Pharisees indicated His grave disappointment that such a question was even being asked. God *certainly* did not intend that men would divorce their wives "for any cause."

Of course, God did not intend that anyone sin in any way, but all of us have. Mercifully, God made provision to rescue us from our slavery to sin. Moreover, He has some things to

say to us *after* we have done what He did not want us to do. Likewise, God never intended for anyone to divorce, but divorce was inevitable among humans not submitted to God. God was not surprised at the first divorce or the millions of subsequent divorces. And so He not only declares His hatred of divorce, but He also has some things to say to people after they've been divorced.

In the Beginning

With this foundation laid, we can begin to explore more specifically what God has declared about divorce and remarriage. Since the most controversial statements about divorce and remarriage are those spoken by Jesus to Israelites, it will help us to first study what God said hundreds of years before on the same subject to earlier Israelites. If we find that what God said through Moses and what God said through Jesus are contradictory, we can be sure that either God's law changed or that we've misinterpreted something said by either Moses or Jesus. So let us begin with what God first revealed regarding divorce and remarriage.

I've already made mention of the passage in Genesis 2 that, according to Jesus, has some relevance to the subject of divorce. This time, let's read it straight from the Genesis account:

And the Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. And the man said, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh (Gen. 2:22-24).

Here then is the origin of marriage. God made the first woman *from* the first man and *for* the first man, and *personally* brought her to him. In the words of Jesus, "God...joined [them] together" (Matt. 19:6, emphasis added). This first God-ordained marriage set the pattern for all subsequent marriages. God creates about the same number of women as men, and He creates them so that they are attracted to the opposite sex. So it could be said that God is still into arranging marriages on a grand scale (even though there are many more prospective mates for each individual than there were for Adam and Eve). Therefore, as Jesus pointed out, no *human* should separate what *God* joins together. It was not God's intention that the original couple live separate lives, but that they would find blessing in living together in mutual dependence. A violation of God's clearly revealed will would constitute sin. Thus, from the second chapter of the Bible, it is an established fact that divorce was not God's intention for any marriage.

God's Law Written in Hearts

I would also like to suggest that even those who have never read the second chapter of Genesis instinctively know that divorce is wrong, as the covenant of lifetime marriage is practiced in many pagan cultures where the people have no biblical knowledge. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans:

For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them (Rom. 2:14-15).

God's code of ethics is written on every human heart. In fact, that code of ethics that speaks through the conscience is all the law that God ever gave *anyone*, except the people of Israel, from Adam until the time of Jesus. *Anyone* even contemplating a divorce will find

that he has to deal with his conscience, and the only way that he can overcome his conscience is to find some good justification for divorce. If he proceeds with a divorce without a good justification, his conscience will condemn him, although he may well suppress it.

As far as we know, for twenty-seven generations from Adam until the giving of the Law of Moses to Israel around 1440 BC, the law of the conscience was all the revelation that God gave to anyone, the Israelites included, regarding divorce and remarriage; God considered that to be sufficient. (Remember that Moses didn't pen the Genesis 2 creation account until the time of the Exodus.) It certainly seems reasonable to think that during those twenty-seven generations before the Mosaic Law, which included the time of Noah's flood, some of the millions of marriages during those hundreds of years ended in divorce. It also seems reasonable to conclude that God, who never changes, was willing to forgive those who incurred guilt from divorce if they confessed and repented of their sin. We are certain that people could be saved, or declared righteous by God, before the giving of the Law of Moses, as was Abraham, through his faith (see Rom. 4:1-12). If people could be declared righteous through their faith from Adam until Moses, that means they could be forgiven of anything, including sin incurred in divorce. Thus, as we begin to probe the subject of divorce and remarriage, I wonder: *Would people who incurred sin in divorce before the Mosaic Law and who received forgiveness from God then be convicted by their conscience (since there was no written law) that they would incur guilt if they remarried?* I only pose the question.

What about divorce *victims* who had not incurred sin, those who were divorced through no fault of their own, but only because of selfish spouses? Would their consciences have prohibited them from remarrying? That would seem unlikely to me. If a man abandoned his wife for another woman, what would ever lead her to conclude that she had no right to remarry? She had been divorced through no fault of her own.

The Law of Moses

It is not until we come to the third book of the Bible that we find divorce and remarriage specifically mentioned. Contained within the Law of Moses was a prohibition against priests marrying divorced women:

They shall not take a woman who is profaned by harlotry, nor shall they take a woman divorced from her husband; for he is holy to his God (Lev. 21:7).

Nowhere within the Law of Moses is there such a prohibition addressed to the general population of Israelite men. Moreover, the just-quoted verse implies (1) that there were divorced Israelite women and (2) that there would be nothing wrong with non-priestly Israelite men marrying women who had been previously married. The above-quoted law applies only to priests and divorced women who might marry priests. There was nothing wrong, under the Law of Moses, with any divorced woman remarrying, just as long as she didn't marry a priest. There was nothing wrong with any man, other than a priest, marrying a divorced woman.

The high priest (perhaps as a supreme type of Christ) was required to live by even higher standards than regular priests. He was not even permitted to marry a *widow*. We read just a few verses later in Leviticus:

A widow, or a divorced woman, or one who is profaned by harlotry, these he may not take; but rather he is to marry a virgin of his own people (Lev. 21:14).

Does this verse prove that it was sinful for any and *all* Israelite widows to ever remarry or that it was sinful for any and *all* Israelite men to marry widows? No, certainly not. In fact this verse strongly implies that it would not be sinful for *any* widow to marry *any* man as

long as he wasn't the high priest, and it strongly implies that any man besides a high priest was permitted to marry a widow. Other scriptures affirm the complete legitimacy of widows remarrying (see Rom. 7:2-3; 1 Tim.5:14).

This verse also implies, along with the previous verse we considered (Lev. 21:7), that there would be nothing wrong for any Israelite man (other than a priest or high priest) to marry a divorced woman or even a woman who was not a virgin, "profaned by harlotry." It likewise implies that, under the Law of Moses, there was nothing wrong for a divorced woman to remarry or for a woman "profaned by harlotry" to marry, just as long as she didn't marry a priest. God graciously gave both fornicators and divorcees another chance, even though He was very opposed to both fornication and divorce.

A Second Specific Prohibition Against Remarriage

How *many* "second chances" did God give divorced women? Should we conclude that God gave divorced women just *one* more chance under the Law of Moses, permitting just one remarriage? That would be a wrong conclusion. We read later in the Law of Moses,

When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife, and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance (Deut. 24:1-4).

Note that in these verses, the sole prohibition was against the twice-divorced woman (or once-divorced once-widowed woman) remarrying her first husband. Nothing is said about her incurring guilt for remarrying the second time, and once she was divorced the second time (or widowed from her second husband), she was *only* prohibited from going back to her first husband. The clear implication is that she would be free to remarry *any other man* (who is willing to take the chance on her). If it were a sin for her to remarry anyone else, then there would have been no need for God to give this kind of specific instructions. All he would have had to say was, "Divorced people are forbidden to remarry."

Moreover, if God permitted this woman to marry a second time, then the man who married her after her first divorce could not have been incurring guilt either. And if she was permitted to be married a third time, then any man who married her after she was twice divorced would not be sinning (unless he had been her first husband). So the God who hated divorce loved divorced people, and He mercifully offered them another chance.

A Summary

Let me summarize what we've discovered so far: *Even though God declared His hatred of divorce, He gave no indication before or during the old covenant that remarriage was a sin, with these two exceptions: (1) the twice-divorced or once-divorced once-widowed woman remarrying her first husband and (2) the case of a divorced woman marrying a priest. Furthermore, God gave no indication that marrying a divorced person was a sin for anyone except priests.*

This stands in apparent contrast to what Jesus stated about divorced people who remarry and those who marry divorced persons. Jesus said such people commit adultery (see Matt. 5:32). So we are either misunderstanding Jesus or Moses, or else God changed His law. My suspicion is that we might be misinterpreting what Jesus taught, because it

would seem strange that God would suddenly declare something to be morally sinful that was morally acceptable for fifteen hundred years under a Law that *He* gave to Israel.

Before we tackle this apparent contradiction more fully, may I also point out that God's permission of remarriage under the old covenant did not carry any stipulations that were based on the reasons for one's divorce or the degree of guilt one incurred in the divorce. God never said that certain divorced people were disqualified from being remarried because their divorce was not for legitimate reasons. He never said that some people were uniquely worthy to remarry because of the legitimacy of their divorce. Yet such judgments are often attempted by modern ministers based on one-sided testimony. For example, a divorced woman tries to convince her pastor that she is worthy to be permitted to be remarried because she was just the victim of her divorce. Her former husband divorced her—she didn't divorce him. But if that pastor was given an opportunity to hear her former husband's side of the story, he might become somewhat sympathetic for him. Perhaps she was a beast and shares some blame.

I've known a husband and wife who both tried to provoke the other to file for divorce so that each could avoid the guilt of being the person who filed for the divorce. They both wanted to be able to say after the divorce that it was their spouse, not they, who filed for divorce, thus making their subsequent second marriages lawful. We may be able to fool people, but we can't fool God. For example, what is His appraisal of the woman who, in disobedience to God's Word, continually withholds sex from her husband and then divorces him because he became unfaithful to her? Is she not at least partly responsible for the divorce?

The case of the twice-divorced woman we just read about from Deuteronomy 24 does not say anything about the legitimacy of her two divorces. Her first husband found some "indecency" in her. If that "indecency" had been adultery, she would have been worthy of death according to the Law of Moses, which prescribed that adulterers be stoned (see Lev. 20:10). So, if adultery is the only legitimate reason for divorce, perhaps her first husband did *not* have good reason to divorce her. On the other hand, perhaps she had committed adultery, and he, being a righteous man like Mary's Joseph, "desired to put her away secretly" (Matt. 1:19). There are many possible scenarios.

Her second husband is said to have simply "turned against her." Once again, we don't know who was to blame or if they shared the blame. But it doesn't make any difference. God's grace was extended to her to remarry anyone who would take the chance on a twice-divorced woman, with the exception of her first husband.

An Objection

"But if people are told that it is lawful for them to remarry after divorcing for any reason, that will encourage them to divorce for illegitimate reasons," it is often claimed. I suppose that *might* be true in some cases of religious people who are not truly attempting to please God, but trying to restrain people who are not submitted to God from sinning is a fairly useless exercise. People who are truly submitted to God in their hearts, however, are not trying to find ways to sin. They are trying to please God, and those kinds of people usually have strong marriages. Moreover, apparently God was not too concerned about people under the old covenant divorcing for illegitimate reasons due to a liberal law of remarriage, because He gave Israel a liberal law of remarriage.

Should we avoid telling people that God is willing to forgive them of any sin, lest they be encouraged to sin because they know that forgiveness is available? If so, we'll have to stop preaching the gospel. Again, it all comes down to the condition of people's hearts. Those who love God want to obey Him. I know very well that God's forgiveness would be available for me if I ask for it, no matter what sin I might commit. But that doesn't motivate me at all to sin, because I love God and have been born again. I've been transformed by God's grace. I want to please Him.

God knows there is no need to add one more negative consequence to the many unavoidable negative consequences of divorce in hopes of motivating people to remain married. Telling people with troubled marriages that they better not divorce because they will not ever be permitted to remarry provides very little motivation for staying married. Even if he believes you, the prospect of a life of singleness compared to a life of continual marital misery sounds like heaven to the miserably-married person.

Paul on Remarriage

Before we tackle the problem of harmonizing Jesus' words on remarriage with Moses', we need to realize there is one more biblical author who agrees with Moses, and his name is Paul the apostle. Paul clearly wrote that remarriage for those divorced is not a sin, agreeing with what the Old Testament says:

Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy. I think then that this is good in view of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. *But if you should marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin should marry, she has not sinned.* Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you (1 Cor. 7:25-28, emphasis added).

There is no doubt that Paul was addressing divorced people in this passage. He advised the married, the never-married, and the divorced to remain in their current state because of the persecution that Christians were suffering at that time. However, Paul clearly stated that divorced people and virgins would not sin if they married.

Note that Paul didn't qualify the lawfulness of remarriage of divorced persons. He didn't say remarriage was only permitted if the divorced person shared no blame in his previous divorce. (And what person is qualified to judge such a thing as that other than God?) He didn't say remarriage was only permitted for those who had been divorced prior to their salvation. No, he simply stated that remarriage is not a sin for divorced persons.

Was Paul Soft on Divorce?

Because Paul endorsed a gracious policy on remarriage, does that mean he was also soft on divorce? No, Paul was clearly opposed to divorce in general. Earlier in the same chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, he laid down a law on divorce that harmonizes with God's hatred of divorce:

But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not send his wife away. But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but 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? Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And thus I direct in all the churches (1 Cor. 7:10-17).

Note that Paul first addressed believers who are married to believers. They should not divorce, of course, and Paul states that this is not his instruction, but the Lord's instruction. And that certainly agrees with everything we've considered in the Bible so far.

Here is where it gets interesting. Paul was obviously realistic enough to realize that even believers might divorce in rare cases. If that occurs, Paul stated that the person who divorced his or her spouse should remain unmarried or be reconciled to his or her spouse. (Although Paul gives these specific instructions to wives, I assume the same rules would apply to husbands.)

Again, what Paul writes does not surprise us. He first laid down God's law regarding divorce, but is intelligent enough to know that God's law might not always be obeyed. So when the sin of divorce occurs between two believers, he gives further instructions. The person who divorced his spouse should remain unmarried or be reconciled to his or her spouse. That would certainly be the best thing in the event of divorce between believers. As long as they both remain unmarried, there is hope of their reconciliation, and that would be best. Of course, if one remarries, that ends the hope and possibility of reconciliation. (And obviously, if they had committed an unpardonable sin by divorce, there would be little reason for Paul to tell them to remain unmarried or be reconciled.)

Do you suppose that Paul was intelligent enough to know that his second directive to divorced believers might not always be obeyed? I would think so. Perhaps he gave no further directive to divorced believers because he expected that true believers would follow his first directive not to divorce, and thus only for extremely rare cases was his second directive even needed. Surely true followers of Christ, if they had marital problems, would do all they could to preserve their marriage. And surely a believer who, after every attempt to preserve the marriage, felt he or she had no alternative but to divorce, surely that believer out of personal shame and desire to honor Christ would not consider remarrying anyone else, and would still hope for reconciliation. It seems to me that the real problem in the modern Church regarding divorce is that there is such a high percentage of false believers, people who have never truly believed in and thus submitted to the Lord Jesus.

It is quite clear from what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7 that God has higher expectations of believers, people who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, than He does of unbelievers. Paul wrote, as we read, that believers should not divorce their unbelieving spouses as long as their unbelieving spouses are willing to live with them. Once again, this directive does not surprise us, as it lines up perfectly with everything else we've read in Scripture on the subject. God is against divorce. Paul goes on to say, however, that if the unbelieving one wants to divorce, the believer is to allow it. Paul knows that the unbeliever is not submitted to God, and so he doesn't expect the unbeliever to act like a believer. May I add that when a non-believer consents to live with a believer, it would be a good indication that either the non-believer is potentially open to the gospel, or the believer is backslidden or a phony Christian.

Now who would say that the believer who has been divorced by an unbeliever is not free to remarry? Paul *never* says such a thing, *as he did in the case of two believers who were divorced*. We would have to wonder why God would be opposed to the remarriage of the believer who had been divorced by an unbeliever. What purpose would that serve? Yet such an allowance apparently stands in opposition to what Jesus said about remarriage: "Whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (Matt. 5:32). This, again, makes me suspect that we have misinterpreted what Jesus was trying to communicate.

The Problem

Jesus, Moses and Paul clearly all agree that divorce is an indication of sin on the part of one or both parties of the divorce. All are consistently against divorce in general. But here is our problem: How do we reconcile what Moses and Paul said about remarriage with

what Jesus said about remarriage? Certainly we should expect that they should harmonize since all were inspired by God to say what they said.

Let's examine exactly what Jesus did say and consider to whom He was speaking. Twice in Matthew's Gospel we find Jesus addressing the subject of divorce and remarriage, once during the Sermon on the Mount and once when He was questioned by some Pharisees. Let's begin with Jesus' conversation with those Pharisees:

Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?" And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 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'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?" 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. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery" (Matt. 19:3-9).

During this conversation with Jesus, the Pharisees referred to a portion of the Mosaic Law that I mentioned earlier, Deuteronomy 24:1-4. There it was written, "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some *indecency* in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house..." (Deut. 24:1, emphasis added).

In Jesus' day, there were two schools of thought concerning what constituted an "indecency." About twenty years before, a rabbi named Hillel taught that an indecency was an irreconcilable difference. By the time Jesus had His debate with the Pharisees, the "Hillel" interpretation had become even more liberal, allowing divorce for just about "any cause," as the Pharisees' question to Jesus indicates. One could divorce his wife if she burned his dinner, put too much salt on his food, spun around in public so her knees were exposed, took her hair down, spoke to another man, said something unkind about her mother-in-law, or was infertile. A man could even divorce his wife if he saw someone who was more attractive, thus making his wife "indecent."

Another famous rabbi, Shammai, who lived prior to Hillel, taught that an "indecency" was only something very immoral, such as adultery. As you might suspect, among the Pharisees of Jesus' day, Hillel's liberal interpretation was much more popular than Shammai's. The Pharisees lived and taught that divorce was lawful for any cause, and so divorce was rampant. The Pharisees, in their typical pharisaical way, emphasized the importance of giving your wife a divorce certificate when you divorced her, so as "not to break the Law of Moses."

Don't Forget that Jesus' was Speaking to Pharisees

With this background in mind, we can better understand what Jesus was up against. Before Him stood a group of hypocritical religious teachers, many of whom, if not all, had divorced one or more times, and probably because they had found more attractive mates. (I think it is no coincidence that Jesus' words about divorce in the Sermon on the Mount directly follow His warnings regarding lust, also calling it a form of adultery.) Yet they were justifying themselves, claiming to have kept the Law of Moses.

Their question itself reveals their bias. They clearly believed one could divorce his wife for any cause at all. Jesus exposed their very flawed understanding of God's intention in marriage by appealing to Moses' words about marriage in Genesis chapter 2. God never

intended that there be *any* divorces, much less divorce “for any cause,” yet the leaders of Israel were divorcing their wives just as teenagers break up with their “steadies”!

I suspect that the Pharisees already knew Jesus’ stand on divorce, as He had stated it publicly before, and so they were ready with their rebuttal: “Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?” (Matt. 19:7).

This question again reveals their bias. It is phrased in such a way that makes it sound as if Moses was commanding men to divorce their wives when they discovered an “indecency,” and requiring a proper divorce certificate, but as we know from reading Deuteronomy 24:1-4, that is not what Moses was saying at all. He was only regulating a woman’s third marriage, prohibiting her from remarrying her first husband.

Since Moses mentioned divorce, it must have been permitted for some reason. But notice how the verb Jesus used in His response, *permitted*, contrasts with the Pharisees’ choice of verb: *commanded*. Moses *permitted* divorce; he never *commanded* it. The reason Moses permitted divorce was because of the hardness of the hearts of the Israelites. That is, God permitted divorce as a merciful concession to people’s sinfulness. He knew that people would be unfaithful to their spouses. He knew there would be immoralities. He knew people’s hearts would be broken. So He made allowance for divorce. It wasn’t what He had originally intended, but sin made it necessary.

Next, Jesus laid down God’s law to the Pharisees, perhaps even defining what Moses’ “indecency” was: “Whoever divorces his wife, except for *immorality*, and marries another woman commits adultery” (Matt. 19:9, emphasis added). In God’s eyes, *immorality* is the only valid reason for a man to divorce his wife, and I can understand that. What could either a man or woman do that would be more offensive to his or her spouse? When one commits adultery or has an affair, he/she sends a brutal message. Jesus certainly was not just referring to adultery when He used the word “immorality.” Surely passionate kissing and fondling someone else’s mate would be an offensive immorality, as would the practice of viewing pornography, and other sexual perversions. Remember that Jesus equated lust with adultery during His Sermon on the Mount.

Let us not forget to whom Jesus was speaking—Pharisees who were divorcing their wives for any cause and quickly remarrying, but who would, God forbid, *never* commit adultery lest they break the seventh commandment. Jesus was telling them that they were only fooling themselves. What they were doing was no different than adultery, and that makes perfect sense. Anyone who is honest can see that a man who divorces his wife so that he can marry another woman is doing what an adulterer does, but under a guise of some legality.

The Solution

This is the key to harmonizing Jesus with Moses and Paul. Jesus was simply exposing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. He was not laying down a law that forbids any remarriage. If He was, He was contradicting Moses and Paul and creating a confusing mess for millions of divorced and millions of remarried people. If Jesus was laying down a law of remarriage, then what should we tell those who have been divorced and remarried before they heard about Jesus’ law? Shall we tell them that they are living in adulterous relationships, and knowing that the Bible warns that no adulterers will inherit God’s kingdom (see 1 Cor. 6:9-10), instruct them to divorce again? *But doesn’t God hate divorce?*

Shall we tell them to cease having sex with their spouses until their former spouses die so to avoid regularly committing adultery? *But does not Paul forbid married couples from withholding sex from each other?* Would not such a recommendation lead to sexual temptations and even foster desires for ex-spouses to die?

Shall we tell such people to divorce their current spouses and remarry their original spouses (as advocated by some), something that was forbidden under Mosaic Law in Deuteronomy 24:1-4?

What about divorced people who have not been remarried? If they are only permitted to remarry if their former spouse committed some immorality, who will take it upon himself to determine if an immorality was actually committed? In order to remarry, will some people be required to prove that their former spouse was only guilty of lust, while others will need to bring forth witnesses to their former spouses' affairs?

As I asked earlier, what about cases where a former spouse committed adultery due in part to being married to a person who withheld sex? Is it fair that the person who withheld sex be permitted to remarry while the person who committed adultery not be permitted to be remarried?

What about the person who committed fornication prior to marriage? Is not his or her fornication an unfaithful act towards a future spouse? Would not that person's sin be equivalent to adultery had he or his sexual partner been married at the time of their sin? Why then is that person permitted to marry?

What about two people who live together, unmarried, who then "break up." Why are they permitted to marry someone else after their breakup, just because they weren't officially married? How are they any different than those who divorce and remarry?

What about the fact that "old things pass away" and "all things become new" when a person becomes a Christian (see 2 Cor. 5:17)? Does that really mean every sin committed *except* the sin of illegitimate divorce?

All of these and many more questions¹ could be asked that are strong reasons to think that Jesus was not laying down a new law concerning remarriage. Certainly Jesus was intelligent enough to realize the ramifications of His new law of remarriage if that is what it was. That in itself is enough to tell us that He was only exposing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees—lustful, religious, hypocritical men who were divorcing their wives for "any cause" and remarrying.

Surely the reason Jesus said they were "committing adultery" rather than simply saying that what they were doing was wrong is because He wanted them to see that divorce for any cause and subsequent remarriage is really no different than adultery, something they claimed never to do. Are we to conclude that the only thing Jesus was concerned about was the sexual aspect of a remarriage, and that He would approve of remarriage as long as there was abstinence from sex? Obviously not. So let us not make Him say what He never meant.

A Thoughtful Comparison

Let us imagine two people. One is a married man, religious, who claims to love God with all his heart, and who begins to lust for a younger woman next door. Soon he divorces his wife and then quickly marries the girl of his fantasies.

The other man is not religious. He has never heard the gospel and lives a sinful lifestyle, which ultimately costs him his marriage. Some years later, as a single man, he hears the gospel, repents, and begins following Jesus with all his heart. Three years later he falls in love with a very committed Christian woman whom he meets at his church. They both diligently seek the Lord and the counsel of others, and then decide to get married. They do get married, and serve the Lord and each other faithfully until death.

Now, let us *assume* that both men have sinned in getting remarried. Which of the two has the greater sin? Clearly, the first man. He is just like an adulterer.

But what about the second man? Does it really seem that he has sinned? Can it be said that he is *no different* than an adulterer, as can be said to the first man? I don't think so. Shall we tell him what Jesus said about those who divorce and remarry, informing him that he is

¹ For example, consider the comments of one divorced pastor who found himself cut off from the body of Christ when he remarried. He said, "It would have been better if I had murdered my wife than divorced her. If I had murdered her, I could have repented, received forgiveness, lawfully remarried, and continued in my ministry."

now living with a woman whom God did not join him to, because God considers him still married to his first wife? Shall we tell him that he is living in adultery?

The answers are obvious. Adultery is committed by married people who get their eyes on someone other than their spouse. So divorcing one's spouse because one has found a more attractive mate is the same as adultery. But an unmarried person *cannot* commit adultery since he has no spouse to be unfaithful to, and neither can a divorced person commit adultery since he has no spouse to which he can be unfaithful. Once we understand the biblical and historical context of what Jesus said, we don't come up with conclusions that make no sense and that contradict the rest of the Bible.

Incidentally, when the disciples heard Jesus' response to the Pharisees' question, they responded by saying, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry" (Matt. 19:10). Realize that they had grown up under the teaching and influence of the Pharisees, and within a culture that was greatly influenced by the Pharisees. They had never considered that marriage was to be so permanent. In fact, up until a few minutes before, they too probably believed it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause. So they quickly concluded it might be best just to avoid marriage all together, and not risk committing divorce and adultery.

Jesus responded,

Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it (Matt. 19:11-12).

That is, one's sexual drive and/or one's ability to control it is more of the determining factor. Even Paul said, "It is better to marry than to burn" (1 Cor. 7:9). Those who are born eunuchs or who are made eunuchs by men (as was done by men who needed other men whom they could trust to guard their harems) have no sexual desire. Those who make "themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" would seem to be those who are specially gifted by God with extra self-control, which is why "not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given" (Matt. 19:11).

The Sermon on the Mount

We should keep in mind that the crowd to whom Jesus spoke during His Sermon on the Mount were also people who had spent their lives under the hypocritical influence of the Pharisees, the rulers and teachers in Israel. As we learned in our earlier study of the Sermon on the Mount, it is obvious that much of what Jesus said was nothing less than a correction of the false teaching of the Pharisees. Jesus even told the crowd that they would not get into heaven unless their righteousness exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees (see Matt. 5:20), which was another way of saying that the scribes and Pharisees were going to hell. At the end of His sermon, the crowds were amazed, in part, because Jesus was teaching "not as their scribes" (Matt. 7:29).

Early in His sermon, Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of those who claim to have never committed adultery, but who lust or who divorce and remarry. He expanded the meaning of adultery beyond the physical sinful act between two people who are married to others. What He said would have been obvious to any honest person who would have just given it a little thought. Keep in mind that until Jesus' sermon, most of the people in the crowd would have thought that it was lawful to divorce for "any cause." Jesus wanted His followers and everyone else to know that God's intention from the beginning was a much higher standard.

You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery"; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell. And it was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce'; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matt. 5:27-32).

First, as I pointed out earlier, notice that Jesus' words about divorce and remarriage not only directly follow His words about lust, linking them to that degree, but that Jesus equates *both* as being adultery, linking them even more so. So we see the common thread that runs through this entire portion of Scripture. Jesus was helping His followers understand what obeying the seventh commandment actual entails. It means not committing lust and not divorcing and remarrying.

Everyone in His Jewish audience had heard the seventh commandment read in the synagogue (no one owned personal Bibles), and they had heard the exposition as well as observed its application in the lives of their teachers, the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus next said, "but I say to you," but He wasn't about to add new laws. He was only going to reveal God's original intent.

First, lust was clearly forbidden by the tenth commandment, and even without the tenth commandment, anyone who thought about it would have realized that it is wrong to long with desire to do what God condemns.

Second, from the earliest chapters of Genesis, God made it clear that marriage was to be a lifelong commitment. Moreover, anyone who thought about it would have concluded that divorce and remarriage is much like adultery, *especially* when one divorces with the intent to remarry.

But again in this sermon, it is clear that Jesus was only helping people to see the truth about lust and the truth about divorce for any cause and remarriage. He was not laying down a new law of remarriage that had heretofore not been "on the books."

It is interesting that very few in the church have ever taken Jesus' words about plucking out their eyes or cutting off their hands literally, as such ideas run so counter to the rest of Scripture, and they clearly serve only to make a strong point about avoiding sexual temptation. Yet so many in the church attempt to interpret quite literally Jesus' words about the remarried person committing adultery, even when such a literal interpretation contradicts so much of the rest of Scripture. Jesus' goal was to get His listeners to face up to the truth, with the hope that there would be fewer divorces. If His followers would take to heart what He said about lust, there would be no immorality among them. If there were no immorality, there would be no legitimate grounds for divorce, and there would be no divorce, just as God had intended from the beginning.

How Does a Man Make His Wife Commit Adultery?

Note that Jesus said, "Everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, *makes her commit adultery.*" This again leads us to believe that He was not laying down a new law of remarriage, but only revealing the truth about the sin of a man who divorces his wife without a good cause. He "makes her commit adultery." Some say that Jesus was thus prohibiting her remarriage, because He makes it to be adultery. But that is absurd. The emphasis is on the sin of the man doing the divorcing. Because of what *he* does, his wife will have no other choice but to remarry, which is no sin on her part as she

was just the victim of her husband's selfishness. In God's eyes, however, because the man left his wife destitute with no other choice but to remarry, it was just as if he forced his wife into bed with another man. So the one who thinks he has *not* committed adultery is held guilty for a *double* adultery, his and his wife's.

Jesus could not have been saying that God held the victimized wife to be guilty of adultery, as that would be completely unfair, and in fact would be utterly meaningless if the victimized wife never remarried. How could God say she was an adulteress unless she remarried? It would make no sense whatsoever. Thus it is plain to see that God is holding the man guilty for his own adultery, and the "adultery" of his wife, which is really not adultery at all for her. It is lawful remarriage.

And what about Jesus' next statement that "whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery"? There are only two possibilities that make any sense. Either Jesus was now adding a third count of adultery against the man who thinks he has never committed adultery (for a similar reason as He added the second count), or Jesus was speaking of the man who encourages a woman to divorce her husband in order to marry her so as "not to commit adultery." If Jesus was saying that any man on earth who marries a divorced woman is committing adultery, then every Israelite man during the previous hundreds of years committed adultery who, in complete compliance with the Law of Moses, married a divorced woman. In fact, every man in Jesus' audience that day who was presently married to a divorced woman in full compliance with the Mosaic Law suddenly become guilty of what he was not guilty just one minute before, and Jesus must have changed God's law at that moment. Moreover, every person in the future who married a divorced person, trusting Paul's words in his letter to the Corinthians that such was not a sin, was actually sinning, committing adultery.

The entire spirit of the Bible would lead me to admire a man who married a divorced woman. If she had been a blameless victim of her former husband's selfishness, I would admire him as much as I admire a man who marries a widow, taking her under his care. If she bore some blame for her previous divorce, I would admire him for his Christ-likeness in believing the best of her, and for his grace in offering to forget the past and take a risk. Why would anyone who has read the Bible and who has the Holy Spirit living in him conclude that Jesus was forbidding everyone from marrying any divorced person? How does such a view fit with God's justice, a justice that would never punish someone for being a victim, as is the case of the woman who is divorced through no fault of her own? How does such a view fit with the message of the gospel, which offers forgiveness and another chance to repentant sinners?

In Summary

The Bible consistently says that divorce always involves sin on the part of one or both parties. God never intended for anyone to divorce, but mercifully made provision for divorce when immorality occurs. He also mercifully made provision for divorced people to remarry.

If it wasn't for Jesus' words about remarriage, no one reading the Bible would have ever thought that remarriage was a sin (except for two very rare cases under the old covenant and for one rare case under the new, namely, remarriage after one was divorced from a Christian as a Christian). We have, however, found a logical way to harmonize what Jesus said about remarriage with what the rest of the Bible teaches. Jesus was not replacing God's law of remarriage with a stricter law that forbids all remarriage in every case, an impossible law for people who are already divorced and remarried to obey (like trying to unscramble eggs), and one that would create unlimited confusion and lead people to break other laws of God. Rather, He was helping people to see their hypocrisy. He was helping those who believed they would never commit adultery to see that they were committing adultery in other ways, by their lust and by their liberal attitude toward divorce.

As the entire Bible teaches, forgiveness is offered to repentant sinners regardless of their sin, and second and third chances are given to sinners, including divorced people. There is no sin in any remarriage under the new covenant, with the exception of the believer who has been divorced from another believer, which should never occur since true believers are not committing immoralities and there is thus no valid reason to divorce. In such a rare event that they do, both should remain single or be reconciled to each other.