

JESUS' ANSWER TO THE QUESTION OF DIVORCE

Matthew 19:3-10

Matthew 19:3 states the occasion of the text: And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" The Pharisees were the moral examples, religious leaders, and theological scholars of the day. With few exceptions, they despised Jesus and sought to halt his growing influence. They did not want to hear the truth from Jesus. Verse 3 says tested him. They tried to get Jesus to take a position on the wrong side of the controversial topic of divorce. It was all the more controversial after John the Baptist was beheaded when he condemned King Herod for taking his brother's wife.

They asked, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" There were two schools of thought related to this question. The more liberal HILLEL school held that a man could divorce his wife for virtually any cause, including burning his dinner. The more conservative SHAMMAI school held that a man could divorce his wife only for infidelity. They wanted to know where Jesus stood on this issue. What camp was Jesus in? How did Jesus read the scriptures? What was Jesus' position on the controversial topic of divorce? More than 2,000 years later divorce remains a controversial subject. Statistics report that half of all marriages end in divorce. And the state of Christian marriages is no different than their unbelieving counterparts. One in four adults will go through at least one divorce. It is fair to call divorce an epidemic in our society.

Why do so many couples divorce? I submit that the problem is at the beginning and at the end. Many couples enter marriage unadvisedly. One of the questions I ask in premarital counseling is: What makes you think your relationship has matured to the point that you are now ready for the commitment of marriage? By asking this question I am making a statement. Marriage is for grown-up people who have developed a grown-up relationship and are ready for a grown-up commitment. You should absolutely not get married if you are not ready for a lifelong commitment, with all of its ups-and-downs. At the same time, while many couples marry prematurely, many also divorce prematurely. Civil law makes no-fault divorces relatively simple. Citing irreconcilable differences, marriages break up for all kinds of reasons. As a result, there is not a person here who has not had divorce touch someone you love. It may be you. You may have been the guilty party whose behavior caused the divorce. You may be the innocent party whose marriage was broken by your spouse's sinful choices. Or you may have been a child who became the collateral damage of your parent's inability to hold their marriage together. Children tear up a house. Adults break up a home.

What does Jesus think about all of this? What does he have to say about the question of divorce? Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause? The answer Jesus gives in verses 4-9 makes it clear that it is not the will of God for a marriage to end in divorce. And the person or couple that wants to be in the will of God must determine that divorce is not an option.

I. JESUS AFFIRMS THE SANCTITY OF MARRIAGE

In verse 3, the Pharisees tested Jesus with a question about divorce. Verses 4-6 record Jesus' initial response. It was not a direct answer. The Pharisees focused on the controversy surrounding the proper interpretation of **Deuteronomy 24:1**. Jesus' response focused on two passages from **Genesis 1** and **2**.

In verse 4, Jesus answered their question with a question: "Have you not read..." This is sarcasm. The Pharisees were scholars of the Law of Moses. Of course they had read it. Jesus asked this rhetorical question to expose their sinister motives. Yet there is a practical lesson here. To properly understand marriage, divorce, and remarriage, you must read the Bible for yourself. As a Christian, the word of God is to be your final authority, not human opinion. But you cannot trust and obey the word if you don't know it. I would also advise you to read the Bible for yourself, even if you are not a Christian. You may not believe the Bible to be true, God-breathed, infallible, sufficient, and divinely authoritative. But you would at least agree that the Bible is the most influential book in history. And the cultural debates about marriage and divorce either support or reject what the Bible says. It would only be fair to read a source before taking a position against it. So read the Bible for yourself. And don't do what the Pharisees did. Don't just pick out verses that support your predetermined position. Study the relevant passages on the subject. Let scripture interpret scripture. Then draw your conclusions. Jesus models proper Bible study here as he references **Genesis 1:27** and **Genesis 2:24**.

A. JESUS REFERENCES GENESIS 1:27

In verse 4, Jesus answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female..." The Pharisees' question sought to drag Jesus into the contemporary debate about when it was lawful to get a divorce. Jesus responded by taking this contemporary issue back to the beginning. This is the proper way to understand a thing. First, understand what it was originally designed to be. This is what Jesus did. He looked beyond the debate over **Deuteronomy 24:1** and pointed them to God's plan and work in creation. **Genesis 1:27** says: "So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Jesus references this verse in response to the Pharisees' question. But notice that Jesus skips over the fact that God created man in his own image. He instead focused on the fact that God created them male and female. There are two points to be made here. First of all, marriage is God's idea. It was a part of God's plan for humanity from the beginning. Marriage is a creation ordinance from God. Likewise, from the beginning God intended marriage to be between a man and a woman. Christians should not try to deny homosexual couples basic civil rights in a free, democratic society. But we must take a stand for the God-ordained, biblical, and historical definition of marriage as a covenant of companionship between one man and one woman.

B. JESUS REFERENCES GENESIS 2:24

In verses 4-5, Jesus asks, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’” In verse 4, Jesus references **Genesis 1:27**. But in verse 5, Jesus directly quotes **Genesis 2:24**. It is the Bible’s most foundational statement about the nature of marriage: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Jesus quotes this verse. Then he makes his point. Verse 6a says: “So they are no longer two but one flesh.” The point Jesus emphasizes from **Genesis 2:24** is that marriage is a one-flesh union. This means that sexual intimacy is to be reserved for marriage. But this is about more than sex. To become one flesh describes the mystical bond between a husband and wife. Married people remain individuals. Yet they are bound together in such an intimate way that it is as if the two have become one flesh.

Then in verse 6b, Jesus says, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” This is arguably the most famous statement about marriage in the Bible. Jesus says that God joins people together in marriage. He is not talking here about Christian marriages, or happy marriages, or marriages that work out. He is talking about all marriages. Whenever a legitimate marriage takes place, God joins a man and woman together as one flesh. So your marriage does not belong to you. It belongs to God. Getting married is just something you do. It is also something that is done to you. God joins couples together in marriage. And since God is the one who joins couples together, only God has the right to separate a couple. God separates a couple in death. Man separates a couple in divorce. But Jesus says, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

God is God and we are not. So we do not have the right to separate anything that God joins together. Yet Jesus says this is what happens in divorce. It is the human destruction of a divine creation. What separates what God has joined together? Sin. How can a man separate what God has joined together without there being guilt, sorrow, and consequences. Jesus cannot be clearer. It is not God’s will for marriage to end in divorce. God permits divorce in limited circumstances. But it’s not what God wants for any marriage. We must not separate what God has joined together. Your marriage is meant to be a permanent, lifelong commitment.

- Do not let selfish behavior separate you.
- Do not let spiritual disunity separate you.
- Do not let family and friends separate you.
- Do not let money problems separate you.
- Do not let sex issues separate you.
- Do not let child-rearing decisions separate you.
- Do not let work issues or career goals separate you.
- Do not let communication breakdowns separate you.
- Do not let the loss of physical attraction separate you.

II. JESUS EXPLAINS THE GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE

The conversation should have been over. But the Pharisees had another question. Verse 7 says: They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” The passage they site is **Deuteronomy 24:1-4**: “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife, and the latter man hates 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 man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she had been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.”

This is the only Old Testament passage that explicitly discusses divorce. The point of this passage is found in verse 4: If a man divorced his wife and she married another man, if that second marriage ends, the first husband is not permitted to marry the woman again. But this point was overlooked as focus was placed on verse 1. It was a man’s world. And only a man could initiate a divorce. But to protect the woman, Moses required that she be given a certificate of divorce. This regulation was taken to mean that if you don’t want to be married any more for whatever reason, all you had to do was give your wife a certificate of divorce. So the Pharisees threw this common misinterpretation in Jesus’ face. Unable to trip Jesus up by getting him to disagree with Hillel or Shammai, they now try to place Jesus in conflict with Moses. Jesus responds in verses 8-9. He corrects their misinterpretation of Moses in verse 8. Then he states his own position on divorce and remarriage in verse 9.

A. WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE SAY ABOUT DIVORCE?

In verse 8, Jesus says: He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.” Note that contrast between the Pharisees’ question in verse 7 and Jesus’ response in verse 8. They said Moses commanded divorce. Jesus said Moses allowed divorce. That’s a big difference. The word of God never commands anyone to divorce. And the person who believes God led him or her to divorce is at best deceived and at worst a liar. God hates divorce. Yet there are circumstances in which God permits divorce. Why? In verse 8, Jesus says “because of your hardness of heart.” This is the reason why divorce happens. It is the result of a hard heart. The offending party may seek a divorce because of a hard heart that needs to receive forgiveness. The innocent party may seek a divorce because of a hard heart that needs to extend forgiveness. This is not a legitimate excuse for divorce. It is a condemnation of sin. **TERENCE KELSHAW** said it well: “Divorce tells us the truth about man. It tells us nothing about marriage.” Jesus makes this clear in the last clause of verse 8: “but from the beginning it was not so.” Again, Jesus looks beyond the contemporary

debate and points them back to the beginning. The first mention of marriage in the Bible makes it clear that God hates when marriages end in divorce. Marriage is designed to be a lifelong commitment.

B. WHAT DOES JESUS SAY ABOUT DIVORCE?

Verse 9 reads: “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” Jesus does not hide behind Moses. He ends this conversation with an authoritative statement about divorce and remarriage. It is the same way Jesus speaks in THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT. **Matthew 5:31-32** reads: “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” Jesus makes a parallel statement here in verse 9. It is the climax of this debate with the Pharisees. And it is the key statement about divorce in the New Testament.

In this debate with the Pharisees, as Jesus upholds the sanctity of marriage, he gives one ground for divorce. It is called “THE EXCEPTION CLAUSE.” Jesus says: “whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” Sexual immorality translates the Greek term from which we get our English word “pornography.” It applies to all kinds of sexual sins. But here it refers to marital infidelity. Sexual immorality violates the one-flesh union. And when it happens, God mercifully grants the victim of adultery permission to divorce. There is only one other ground for divorce. It is recorded in **1 Corinthians 7:15**: “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.” Outside of desertion by an unbelieving spouse, the only time God permits divorce is when sexual immorality has been committed. All divorces are the result of sin. But Jesus says that it is not a sin if a person seeks a divorce when his or her mate has committed sexual immorality.

This exception clause permits a person to divorce and remarry for sexual immorality. But it does not mean you should run to the lawyer’s office if your spouse cheats. I believe Jesus uses the term sexual immorality here to refer to an unrepentant lifestyle, not a single act. It is not incidental that the Lord’s instructions on divorce in **Matthew 19** immediately follow the Lord’s instructions on forgiveness in **Matthew 18**. When Peter asked Jesus how often we have to forgive, Jesus answered seventy times seven. Then he told a parable to teach that forgiveness must be a way of life for Christians. And there is no relationship where forgiveness is needed more than marriage, especially when sexual immorality has breached the union. We should forgive as God has forgiven us for Christ sake. Israel committed spiritual adultery against God with idols. In **Isaiah 50:1** the Lord asked, “Where is your mother’s certificate of divorce, with which I have sent her away?” God had not given her one. In **Jeremiah 3:6-8**, God’s patience is exhausted and he finally gives them a decree of divorce, because they have played the whore on every hill and under every tree. But in that same chapter, he commands Jeremiah to tell his

people to return to him and he will be merciful. God is a God of rescuing grace. But he is also a God of restoring grace. The God who has saved your life can also save your marriage. I have seen him do it again and again.

What happens if you get a divorce without biblical grounds? Paul addresses this in **1 Corinthians 7:10-11**, Paul says, “To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.” If you divorce for reasons God does not permit, you have two options: remain unmarried or be reconciled to your spouse. In **Matthew 19:9**, Jesus calls remarriage for such persons “adultery.” I believe that entering into a new marriage without divine approval is an act of adultery. However, I do not believe that marriage remains in a continual state of adultery before God. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin. Yes, you can begin again. So what do you do if you are in this category? Repent. **1 John 1:9** says: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Receive God’s forgiveness through the blood and righteousness of Christ. Then remain in that marriage.

We do not know how the Pharisees responded to the high standard Jesus set. But we are told how the disciples responded. Verse 10 says: The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” This is a cynical response that indicates the disciples may have shared the culture’s liberal perspective toward marriage. In verses 11-12, Jesus agrees that singleness is a legitimate lifestyle choice that can be better than marriage for the right reasons. Specifically, singleness is better than marriage if you are going to devote your life to the advancement of the kingdom. But that’s it. And that’s not for everyone, only those to whom it is given. Jesus does not give any other reason why someone would choose singleness. And I am sure Jesus would not endorse the selfish reasons many people, especially young men, give for not wanting to be married. To the degree the disciples had adopted the lax attitude of the culture, they were wrong. And so are you if you allow the world to shape your attitude toward marriage. If you are like me, you have seen more dysfunctional marriages than healthy ones. But do not let the failure of your parents or relatives or friends cause you to avoid marriage. Marriage is a good thing. **Proverbs 18:22** says: “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord.”

However, even though the disciples’ attitude may have been wrong, their conclusion was right. They got what Jesus was saying, if the Pharisees didn’t. God designed marriage to be a total, intimate, lifelong commitment. If you think it is okay to divorce if you are unhappy or have problems or the thrill is gone, you should not get married. I discourage couples from writing their own vows. In too many instances, self-written vows are self-centered, sentimental, and superficial. The vows in a marriage should be concrete, other-centered, exclusive, and permanent.

And if you are Christians, your vows are to be gospel-centered, Christ exalting, and God glorifying. Either way, nothing beats the traditional marriage vows: Do you take this woman (or man) to be your lawful wedded wife (or husband), to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, forsaking all others, till death do you part?

What should be our response to Jesus' answer to the question of divorce? I believe we should respond two ways.

WE SHOULD HATE DIVORCE. **Hebrews 13:4a** says: "Let marriage be held in honor among all." God honors marriage. And so should we. We do so by living in purity before marriage and fidelity within marriage. We should uphold the sanctity of marriage. And we should only divorce on the grounds God permits. Of course, we should not expect the unbelieving world around us to live by these standards. It is foolish to expect non-Christians to submit to the Christian way of life. But it is only right to expect Christian people to obey the Lord Jesus Christ. In **Luke 6:46**, Jesus says: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?"

So the church must be a believing community that hates divorce. And it must start with the leaders of the church. This does not mean elders and deacons must have perfect marriages. It means that we should be one-woman men who love our wives. We must keep watch over our lives and our teaching. How can we lead the church to hate divorce if we have a cavalier attitude toward our own marriages? Every Christian couple in the church should determine that divorce is not an option. Take the word out of your vocabulary. Work through your problems in the security that you are not going to leave if things don't go your way. Likewise, do guard your relationship against emotional divorce. You do know that you can stay together and live apart at the same time, don't you? Is that you? How would you describe your relationship to your spouse? Are you roommates, checkmates, cellmates, stalemates, or helpmates? Remember your marriage is a miniature picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. So we should love and respect one another. We should continually seek to draw closer to Christ and to one another. And we should determine not to separate what God has joined together.

WE SHOULD LOVE DIVORCED PEOPLE. Let's face it. Divorce happens. It happens in the church. It happens to good people. It happens to people we never thought it would happen to. It happens to people who have done everything they know to do to make their marriage work. **ANDREW COMES** said it well: "Divorce is a bombshell. However much it has been anticipated and even thought through, it almost invariably turns out to be much harder for both partners than either ever imagined." How should the church receive such people? We should love them. **Galatians 6:2** says: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." It would be great to have a program that ministers to those who are going through the grief of divorce. But our duty to bear one another's burdens transcends a program. We are to bear one another's burdens with our hearts, our hands, and our homes. It is our Christian duty and privilege to love divorced people.

This is not easy to do. We are prone to fall into one of two extremes. We uphold the standard and show no mercy for divorced people. Or we are so merciful that we water down the standard. So we need God's help to balance truth and love, righteousness and mercy, conviction and compassion. This only happens by keeping our eyes focused on the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you know how a waitress carries so many glasses and plates without dropping them? She doesn't focus on what she's carrying. She focuses on where she is going. It works the same way as our faith follows Christ. Don't focus on the burden you are carrying. Focus on the one you are following. **Hebrews 12:1-2** says: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."