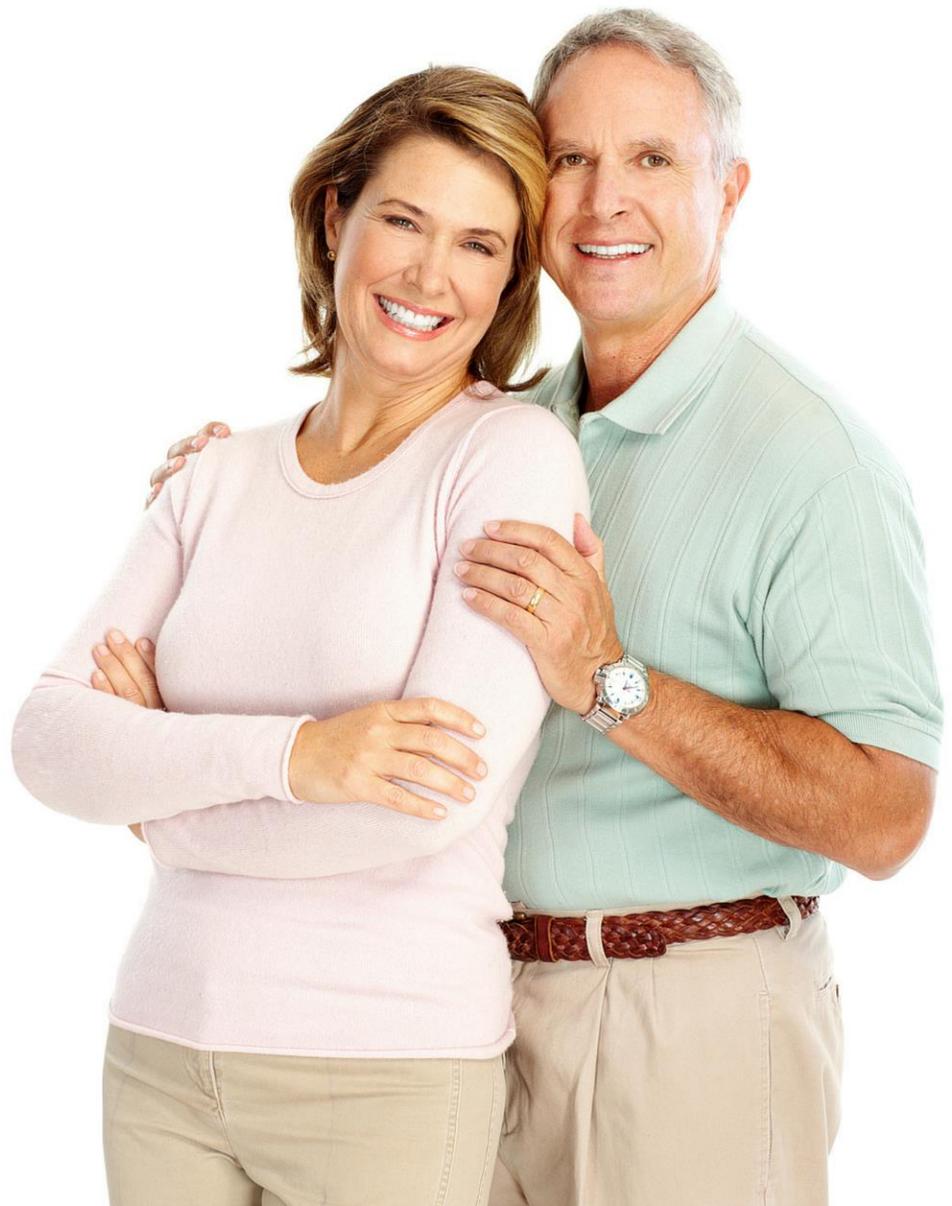


Glendale Christian Church



Divorce & Remarriage

Brian Reed



I. Introduction – This is a Difficult Topic

- Many people have personally experienced divorce (or have family members/friends/co-workers, etc. who have gone through a divorce) and it is always an emotionally devastating experience.
- In the church, divorced people are often ostracized and treated as “second-class Christians” (whether intentionally or unintentionally).
- In Western society as a whole, we are experiencing a “divorce crisis”: something that was once rare is now commonplace. Among Christians, the divorce rate is not significantly different than that of the general public, which damages our witness to the world..
- There are many different positions held by different Christian interpreters concerning the validity of divorce and remarriage, and so it is difficult to know how Jesus wants us to think on this issue.

II. Starting Presuppositions

- The Bible is the word of God, and, as Christians, we are obligated to submit ourselves to what God commands us through His word, knowing that we will have to answer to Him for our moral choices.
- If what the Bible teaches seems in conflict with our cultural/societal view, this just shows that our societal view is wrong. Our Creator knows us best, and ignoring His commands will come back to “bite us.”
- In areas where there are differing Christian perspectives, Scripture instructs, “*Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind*” (Rom 14:5) and warns us that “*whatever does not proceed from faith is sin*” (Rom 14:23)—it is a responsibility for each of us to reach a conclusion and act in obedience to what we believe God to be telling us.

III. Range of Positions

No Divorce views ¹	Divorce, but No Remarriage views ²	Divorce, and Remarriage views ³
Divorce is not allowable on any ground; the marriage bond is unbreakable except by death.	Divorce may be allowable when one’s spouse commits sexual immorality or when one is abandoned by a non-believing spouse, but these still don’t break the marriage bond and so remarriage is not allowable.	There are morally acceptable grounds for divorce (e.g. sexual immorality, abandonment by a non-Christian spouse, and maybe others), and if the divorce is permissible, then remarriage is permissible as well.

¹ In our bibliography, J. Carl Laney [in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*] takes this position.

² In our bibliography, Andrew Cornes, William Heth [in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*—his earlier position which has since changed], and Gordon Wenham [in *Remarriage after Divorce in Today’s Church*] take this position.

³ In our bibliography, John and Paul Feinberg, Stanley Grenz, Richard Hays, Thomas Edgar and Larry Richards [in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*], David Instone-Brewer, and William Heth (his current position) and Craig Keener [in *Remarriage after Divorce in Today’s Church*] take this position.

IV. Survey of the Biblical Evidence

Genesis 2:18-25

18 Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” 19 Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. 21 So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22 And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” 24 Therefore a man **shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.** 25 And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

Observations:

- Genesis 2 is speaking about the origin of humanity, so this has **relevance to every human being**.
- Marriage is **God’s idea** (v. 18), and it is **God who joins** the couple together, according to Jesus’ comment in Matt 19:6 (“*What therefore God has joined together...*”)
- Marriage is treated as a **covenant** in the Old Testament (e.g. Prov 2:17, Mal 2:14), and the language of “hold fast” (v. 24) implies a very strong bond.⁴
- This episode occurred **before the Fall** of humanity (Gen 3). Gen 2:24 clearly represents God’s intention for marriage, but it **may not** always be possible to achieve God’s **intention** in the post-Fall world where humans are so profoundly affected by sin.

No Divorce	Divorce, No Remarriage	Divorce and Remarriage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Marriage establishes kinship (blood relationship) between husband and wife (that’s the meaning of “one flesh”). ○ Since God created the marital bond, it cannot be broken. ○ Since marriage involves a covenant, it cannot be dissolved, because a covenant is permanent. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Scripture nowhere says that the marital bond cannot be dissolved, and everyone agrees that it is dissolved by the death of a spouse. ○ If Jesus has to command people not to separate what God joined together (Matt 19:6), this implies that it can be broken (though it shouldn’t). ○ Permanence is not intrinsic to the notion of a covenant—the Mosaic Covenant was breakable, and Jeremiah said Israel broke it (Jer 31:32). Many covenants were more like “contracts”—agreements between two parties that were mutually binding and contained stipulations and penalties for not keeping the stipulations.

⁴ To call it an “unbreakable” bond solely on the meaning of the word may be a bit of an overstatement, though, because the same word (Hebrew *dāḇāq*) is used of clods of dust sticking together (Job 38:38) and a loincloth that clings to the waist of a man (Jer 13:11)—both of which suggest something less than permanent.

Exodus 21:7-11⁵

7 “When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. 8 If [the slave girl] does not please her master, who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has broken faith with her. 9 If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. 10 If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her **food**, her **clothing**, or her **marital rights**. 11 And if he does not do these three things for her, **she shall go out for nothing**, without payment of money.

Observations:

- A slave wife was **entitled to** “food...clothing...marital rights” and if the man did not provide these things for her, this was **grounds for her to secure a divorce** from him.⁶
- The rabbis reasoned that if the husband had to provide these three things **to a slave wife**, he would surely have to provide them **for a free wife**, too. And if a wife should be guaranteed these three provisions, then **so should the husband**.
- In rabbinic sources, these three obligations were classified under two headings: **material neglect** (“*food...clothing*”) and **emotional neglect** (“*marital rights*”). In addition to these, the rabbis accepted **childlessness** (on the basis of Gen 1:28 “*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth*”) as a ground for divorce and made divorce compulsory in the case of **marital unfaithfulness**.⁷
- By Jesus’ day, **every Jew**—including both the followers of Shammai and the followers of Hillel—accepted these **four grounds for divorce**.

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 her a certificate of divorce** and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house,² and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife,³ 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,⁴ then her former husband, who sent her away, **may not take her again** to be his wife, **after she has 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.

Observations:

- This law **assumes divorce is being practiced**, and it seeks to regulate the practice of divorce in a specific kind of situation

⁵ The recognition of the importance of this passage in the divorce/remarriage discussion is a significant contribution by David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*.

⁶ The statement that she “goes out” (Hebrew *yās’a*) is the same word used in Deut 24:1 of the woman who receives the certificate of divorce and “departs” out of her ex-husband’s house.

⁷ Stoning for adultery was prescribed in the Mosaic Law (Deut 22:22) and was, theoretically, a capital offense even in Jesus’ day. However there is no record of it ever being applied. Rather, the rabbis assumed that divorce must be compulsory in cases of adultery.

Divorce and Remarriage: Understanding Scripture

- Purpose of the law: to **protect the woman** by giving her the right to marry any other man.⁸
- It is **uncertain what “some indecency”** (Hebrew *’erwat dāḇār*) **referred to**.
 - It probably **didn’t** originally refer to **adultery**, because the Law required adulterers to be stoned to death in Deut 22:22.
 - The interpretation of this phrase became a **point of controversy** between the followers of the rabbi **Shammai** and the followers of the rabbi **Hillel**: “*The School of Shammai say: A man should not divorce his wife unless he found in her a matter of indecency (dāḇār’erwat), as it is said: For he finds in her an indecent matter (’erwat dāḇār). And the School of Hillel say, Even if she spoiled his dish, since it says For he finds in her an indecent matter (dāḇār’erwat).*” (m. Git. 9.10).
 - Followers of **Shammai** interpreted the phrase to mean “a matter of indecency,” which they understood to mean “**adultery**” (in a later context when adulterers were rarely actually stoned to death).
 - Followers of **Hillel** interpreted the phrase as allowing **two grounds for divorce**: an “indecency” or “a matter”—thus providing grounds for a divorce for “**any reason**” (e.g. “no-fault” divorce).
 - In both positions, divorce **granted** the right for both partners to **remarry**.
 - This debate stands in the background of Mark 10 and Matt 19 (below).

No Divorce	Divorce, No Remarriage	Divorce and Remarriage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ This law reflects a concession to humanity. Because of Israel’s hard-hearted rejection of God’s design for marriage, it is not likely that a general prohibition against divorce would have been obeyed at this time, so God chose to progressively reveal His displeasure with divorce to bring people back to His standard. ○ Divorce for “some indecency” does not dissolve the marital bond, so the woman’s sexual relations with her 2nd spouse were adultery, and that is why she has “been defiled” (by her subsequent “marriage”) and her 1st spouse cannot take her again as a wife. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ This law reflects God’s compassion and willingness to accommodate humanity’s weakness. ○ Divorce and remarriage are permitted and it is not treated as a sin issue (i.e. there is no sin offering necessary). ○ Marriages involved contractual financial obligations: the bride’s father paid a dowry. If the husband divorced the bride without grounds for divorce, the bride took her dowry with her and the husband would often have a financial penalty. If there were grounds for divorce, the husband kept the dowry and paid nothing out. In this situation, the 1st marriage ended with the husband citing valid grounds (“some indecency”) for divorce, so he would have kept the dowry; the 2nd marriage ended without valid grounds (he merely “hates” her), so the woman would have kept an amount awarded to her from the estate. This creates a situation where there was a financial motive for the 1st husband to take her back after he formerly had claimed grounds against her.⁹

⁸ The language of the Jewish divorce certificate to the woman is: “*You are allowed to marry any man you wish*” (m. Git. 9.3). This phrase has been observed on surviving Jewish divorce certificates from as far back as the 5th Century BC.

⁹ This is argued in Raymond Westbrook, “Prohibition of Restoration of marriage in Deuteronomy 24:1-4,” in *Studies in Bible* (ed. S. Japhet; Scripta Hierosolymitana 31; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986), 387-405.

Malachi 2:11-16

11 Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, which he loves, and **has married the daughter of a foreign god**. 12 May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob **any descendant of the man who does this**, who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts! 13 And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. 14 But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and **the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant**. 15 Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. 16 "**For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her**, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless."

Observations:

- Malachi 2:11-16 deals with the breaking of marriage vows, which apparently involved Jewish men **divorcing their long-time wives** (v. 14 "the wife of your youth") and **marrying foreign women** (v. 11 "the daughter of a foreign god"). This was particularly worrisome because foreign wives leading the people into idolatry was one of the reasons God let the nations of Israel and Judah be conquered by Assyria and Babylon, respectively.
- The translation of Malachi 2:16 is difficult:
 - It is often translated with God as the subject saying, "**I hate divorce**" (e.g. NIV1984, KJV, NRSV, the Message, NLT, NASB), but the only way to get this translation is to "reconstruct" the underlying Hebrew on the assumption that it is wrong.
 - The Hebrew text, **as it is written**, makes God speak about the one who divorces saying, "**He who hates and divorces**" (e.g. NIV2011, ESV), and this is argued to make the best sense in the context—and without needing to "reconstruct" the underlying Hebrew.¹⁰

No Divorce	Divorce, No Remarriage	Divorce and Remarriage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If the reconstructed text ("I hate divorce") is accurate, then this reaffirms that God does not permit divorce and reveals His attitude toward divorce in general. ○ If the text stands as written in Hebrew ("He who hates and divorces"), it still is condemnatory of those who initiate divorce. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If the reconstructed text ("I hate divorce") is accurate, then this could be only a statement that God hates the kind of divorce that is taking place in this instance, not all cases of divorce—after all, He does allow divorce and remarriage in the case of Deut 24 ○ If the text stands as written in Hebrew ("He who hates and divorces"), then this is a strong warning/condemnation against the one who divorces so heartlessly and frivolously.

¹⁰ G. P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: A Study of Biblical Law and Ethics Governing Marriage, Developed from the Perspective of Malachi* (Vetus Testamentum Supplement 52; New York: Brill, 1994).

Matthew 19:3-12

3 And Pharisees came up to him and **tested him** by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife **for any cause?**” 4 He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 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’? 6 **So they are no longer two but one flesh.** What therefore **God has joined together**, let not man separate.” 7 They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” 8 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. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, **except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.**”

10 The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is **better not to marry.**” 11 But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 12 For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been **made eunuchs by men**, and there are eunuchs who have **made themselves eunuchs** for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.”

Matthew 5:31-32

31 “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32 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**.”

Observations:

- The Pharisees initiate the account in Matt 19 in order to **test Jesus**.¹¹
- The addition of the **phrase “for any cause”** (19:3) is probably referring to the “any reason” interpretation of divorce in Deut 24 among the followers of **Hillel**.
- Jesus refuses to give a legal judgment, but rather takes the discussion back to God’s **intention in Creation** (Gen 1:27 and 2:24): that people **should not separate what God has joined together**.
- Jesus attributed the permission to divorce in Deut 24 (written by Moses) is given **because of hardness of the people’s heart**.
- Jesus’ main conclusion is: “*whoever divorces his wife...and marries another, commits adultery*” (19:9, 5:32).
- The statement in Matt 5:32 that divorcing the wife “*makes her commit adultery*” is usually understood to **assume that she would remarry**.
- In both Matthew passages, Jesus gives an **exception** to this conclusion: “*except for sexual immorality* (Greek *porneia*)” (19:9, 5:32).

¹¹ Suggestions as to why the Pharisees wanted to test Jesus include: hope that Jesus would say something that opposed divorce or remarriage and so would fall foul of Herod Antipas (who divorced his wife and married his brother’s wife), hope that Jesus would lose His popular following when the crowds heard His strict views regarding divorce and remarriage, or hope that Jesus would contradict the Mosaic Law and give the Pharisees something to use against Him.

Divorce and Remarriage: Understanding Scripture

No Divorce	Divorce, No Remarriage	Divorce and Remarriage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Jesus' views represent an attempt to restore God's creation standard for marriage. ○ Formal/legal divorce does not dissolve the actual marriage bond that was made permanent by God. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ A legal divorce always granted the right to remarry in Judaism and Roman marriage law, though both allowed divorce without any legitimate grounds. Jesus comes down against "for any cause" divorce.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ "except for sexual immorality" means "not even in the case of sexual immorality," or reflects Jesus' refusal to comment on sexual immorality as a ground for divorce, or refers to immorality in the Jewish betrothal period (resulting in a "divorce" of the betrothal), or refers to mixed marriages between Christians and non-Christians, or refers to an incestuous marriage which violates Jewish incest laws in Lev 18. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ "except for sexual immorality" only applies to the divorce, not the remarriage. ○ In the first 500 years of church history, the overwhelming understanding of the exception was that it permitted divorce but did not allow remarriage; these earliest Christians were closest in time to Jesus and were native Greek speakers. ○ The disciples' surprise at Jesus' saying (Matt 19:10) indicates that they understood it to be much more restrictive than the Judaism of Jesus' day—including Shammai (who restricted grounds for divorce to adultery only). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Jesus does not comment on His opinion regarding other legitimate grounds for divorce (e.g. Exod 21:11) which were universally held by Jews of the day, but this suggests that He accepted these additional grounds rather than rejecting them.¹² ○ "sexual immorality" is a very general term for any kind of sexual impurity, including adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and incest. ○ Going through divorce without have any legitimate grounds to do so is adultery (either literally or rhetorically¹³); divorcing because of legitimate grounds allows one to remarry without committing adultery. ○ The church history argument is problematic: the Church Fathers held many strange ideas¹⁴—especially on marriage, due to a growing asceticism in the early church¹⁵—and they were not very familiar with the Jewish background of the Gospels.

¹² Instone-Brewer notes that Jesus' silence regarding **other grounds** for divorce (as found in Exodus 21:10-11) and His silence regarding **remarriage** after the death of a spouse are interpreted inconsistently: interpreters usually conclude that Jesus allowed no other grounds but did allow remarriage after death of a spouse (especially in the light of 1 Cor 7:39 and Rom 7:2). It would be **more logical** to conclude that He agreed with the unanimous opinion of the rest of Judaism on both points in the absence of any explicit statement to the contrary.

¹³ Craig Keener, *Remarriage after Divorce*, brings attention to the **character of Jesus' saying**, given that He often uses **hyperbole** and other **graphic rhetorical devices** in the Sermon on the Mount (where the Matt 5:32 statement is found): He calls **lust** "adultery" even though it only takes place in the heart/mind (Matt 5:28), and tells people, "*If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.*" (Matt 5:29-30). Both of these statements occur **right before** Jesus' saying regarding divorce in Matt 5:32.

¹⁴ E.g. the *Shepherd of Hermas* taught that people could **only repent once**, and any sin committed after baptism would be **unforgivable**, Athenagoras and Tertullian forbade remarriage **even after the death of a partner** (conflicting with 1 Cor 7:39 and Rom 7:2), and Origen taught that Moses only **gave his opinion** in Deut 24 (so it was not "inspired" by God) and he physically **emasculated himself** to try to control his lustful impulses on the basis of Matt 5:29-30(!).

¹⁵ Asceticism refers the practice of giving up various facets of customary social life—especially with regard to marriage—for religious reasons. It was a contributing factor to the rise of monks and nuns and the vow of celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church.

Mark 10:2-12

2 And Pharisees came up and **in order to test him** asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” 3 He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” 4 They said, “Moses **allowed** a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.” 5 And Jesus said to them, “Because of your **hardness of heart** he wrote you this commandment. 6 But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ 7 ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, 8 and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are **no longer two but one flesh**. 9 What therefore **God has joined together**, let not man separate.”

10 And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11 And he said to them, “Whoever **divorces his wife and marries another** commits **adultery** against her, 12 and if **she divorces her husband and marries another**, she commits **adultery**.”

Luke 16:18

18 “Everyone who **divorces his wife and marries another** commits **adultery**, and he who marries **a woman divorced** from her husband commits **adultery**.”

Observations:

- The Mark account is very similar to the account in Matthew. The main differences are:
 - There is no mention of “**for any cause**” (Matt 19:3).
 - There is no mention of an **exception** (“*except for sexual immorality*” Matt 19:6, 5:32).
 - There is a mention of the **woman divorcing her husband** (Mark 10:12), was much more common in a Gentile context, where women could initiate a divorce.¹⁶

No Divorce	Divorce, No Remarriage	Divorce and Remarriage
○ There is no exception given in Mark and Luke (or in Paul) ; that must mean that the exception which is given in Matthew was peculiar to Matthew’s audience (Matthew wrote to Jews, and Mark and Luke wrote to Gentiles)		○ Since the exception is given in Matthew (which records the same encounter as Mark) it has to be read into the passage here. Mark sometimes does not include details that Matthew does (e.g. Mark 8:11-12 vs. Matt 12:39), so the absence of the exception is not as significant as it seems. ○ First-century Jewish readers would likely have mentally inserted the phrase “for any matter” into the question that the Pharisees asked Jesus, whether or not it occurred in the text because whether “any matter” was a legitimate ground of divorce was the point of the question. Similarly, when Jesus said “whoever divorces his wife...” they would have mentally added the phrase “except on valid grounds.” ¹⁷

¹⁶ Since only a Jewish husband could write the certificate of divorce, many interpreters have assumed that Jewish women could not initiate a divorce. Instone-Brewer presents evidence that that Jewish women could bring a divorce case to a Jewish court and the court would force her husband through a variety of sanctions to write the certificate of divorce.

¹⁷ This is the other main contribution from David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, who goes on to argue that the Jewish background of this debate was lost in the early Greek-speaking Gentile church. The early loss of this Jewish background in the Greek-speaking, predominantly Gentile early church explains why the early Church almost unanimously forbade remarriage after divorce.

1 Corinthians 7:10-15

10 To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife **should not separate** from her husband 11 (but **if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband**), and the husband **should not divorce** his wife.

12 To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. 13 If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 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.

Observations:

- Paul writes to Corinth, and in the Greco-Roman world **men and women** could divorce their partner by unilateral separation with no need to prove any grounds.
- Paul says that his teaching in vv. 10-11 is **from the Lord**—which probably means that he understands that he is repeating **what he knows Jesus taught** on this subject and his instructions are **congruent with Jesus’ teaching**: people “*should not separate/divorce...*” (v. 10).
- Paul uses his own (inspired) judgement in vv. 12-15 concerning a situation that **Jesus didn’t directly address** (v. 12, “*I, not the Lord*”): the marriage of a believer to an unbeliever.

No Divorce	Divorce, No Remarriage	Divorce and Remarriage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The only options given “if” divorce occurs is to remain unmarried or be reconciled to one’s spouse (vv. 10-11)—the “exception” given in Matthew is not mentioned because it does not constitute a ground for divorce or remarriage outside of its Jewish context. ○ If an unbelieving spouse divorces from a believing spouse,¹⁸ the believer is not “enslaved” to try to thwart the divorce, but he/she is not free to remarry. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The Greco-Roman procedure was a “no fault” divorce, but Paul understood Jesus’ teaching to only allow divorce for valid grounds. If a spouse initiates divorce without valid grounds, they should remain unmarried or be reconciled to their spouse. ○ If an unbelieving spouse initiates the divorce, the believer is no longer “enslaved” in marriage to the unbeliever; he/she is free to remarry; Paul gives his own judgment on this because Jesus didn’t speak about this situation.¹⁹

¹⁸ The words “separate” (Greek *chōrizō*) and “divorce” (Greek *aphiēmi*) are both recognized as synonyms for divorce.

¹⁹ Craig Keener, *Remarriage after Divorce*, suggests that we may be called to apply the Bible’s teaching to situations that neither Jesus nor Paul directly addressed, and must “hear and obey its point, not just quote its words.”

V. Conclusions

- **God’s original intention in His creation of marriage is that it be lifelong and permanent**
- **Because of the reality of human sin and failure, God allowed divorce**
 - There are occasions when human “hardness of heart” so deeply wrongs another that divorce could loom as a better alternative than remaining married.
 - Jesus agreed that God made this concession to such “hardness of heart” in the OT.
 - In my judgment, in this era between the first and second coming of Christ we all still wrestle with a sin nature that makes such “hardness of heart” still a possibility today.
- **While specific grounds for divorce are given in Scripture, we must be careful not to construct a “new” legalism to replace the “old” legalism of the Scribes and Pharisees**
 - In my judgment, Jesus explicitly identified sexual immorality as a valid ground for divorce and Paul explicitly identified abandonment by an unbeliever as another valid ground for divorce. I am also persuaded that they both would have assumed that material neglect and emotional neglect (based on Exod 21:11) would also be valid grounds.
 - In my judgment, there are other kinds of “hardness of heart” that could be considered valid grounds for divorce—such things as mental/physical/sexual abuse come to mind, for instance, if they would not be included above—but the emphasis of Scripture is not on deriving a set of stipulations, as the Pharisees did.
- **Christians ought to fight for marriage and strive to achieve God’s ideal**
 - Christians who are struggling in marriage should employ as many strategies as possible/feasible to save their marriage (e.g. counseling, separation for a time, etc.).
 - Christians should generally not be the one to initiate divorce unless 1) marriage vows have been violated, 2) extensive forgiveness has been extended in view of genuine repentance (Luke 17:3-4), and 3) the vowbreaker stubbornly refuses to repent or change their actions.
 - When divorce has occurred against one’s will, I recommend prayerful openness to the possibility of reconciliation.
- **In my judgment, remarriage cannot be excluded for those who have been divorced**
 - Personally, I am comfortable with remarriage in such cases as when there seems to have been a valid ground for divorce, when a Christian is abandoned by their spouse,²⁰ or when a Christian’s former spouse has remarried (which precludes the possibility of reconciliation with them).
 - In both marriage and remarriage, a Christian should only seek to marry another Christian (1 Cor 7:39, 2 Cor 6:14).
- **Divorce and remarriage are not “unforgiveable sins”**

²⁰ Paul did not address the possibility of what to do if a **Christian** is abandoned by **their Christian spouse** in 1 Cor 7—I understand 1 Cor 7:11 to be referring to a Christian woman who initiates the divorce against her Christian husband without valid grounds, and Paul’s instructions to her are to remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband—but I would be inclined to view this as a valid ground for the abandoned spouse.

VI. Bibliography

- Cornes, Andrew. *Divorce and Remarriage: Biblical Principle and Pastoral Practice*. London, U.K.: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993. [Divorce/No Remarriage] The author is a British pastor in the Anglican tradition. There is significant space devoted to pastoral practice based on his position.
- Feinberg, John S., and Paul D. Feinberg. *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1993. [Divorce/Remarriage for Adultery and Desertion] Probably the best overall survey of the various positions and succinct arguments for their position in two chapters of a book devoted to ethics. If you want to get an overview of the views out there, this is the book to read—that's true of most of the ethical issues they discuss.
- Grenz, Stanley J. *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1990. [Divorce/Remarriage for a variety of reasons] Emphasizes the reality of failure to uphold God's ideal and argues for an approach that avoids "legalism" when approaching the issue.
- Hays, Richard B. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996. [Divorce/Remarriage for Adultery, Desertion, and Abuse (and maybe others)] A preeminent NT ethics teacher who stresses the importance of recovering the idea that divorce is an exceptional situation and should not be the norm.
- House, H. Wayne, ed. *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990. [No Divorce; Divorce/No Remarriage; Divorce/Remarriage for Adultery and Desertion; Divorce/Remarriage for a variety of reasons] A very good survey of four representative positions on the divorce and remarriage question. The first two views are the best argued (No Divorce; Divorce/No Remarriage).
- Instone-Brewer, David. *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002. [Divorce/Remarriage for Adultery, Desertion, Material Neglect, Emotional Neglect] Makes a significant contribution to the scholarly discussion of divorce and remarriage with a well-argued reconstruction of the first century Jewish background to the Pharisees' questions to Jesus and the role of Exod 21:10-11 as additionally accepted grounds for divorce in the first century Jewish context. I highly recommend this one.
- Wenham, Gordon J., William A. Heth, Craig S. Keener, and Mark L. Strauss. *Remarriage after Divorce in Today's Church: 3 Views*. Counterpoints. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006. [Divorce/No Remarriage; Divorce/Remarriage for Adultery and Desertion; Divorce/Remarriage for a variety of reasons] A very good, recent survey of the three main approaches to remarriage. Although focused on remarriage, if you are looking for one book arguing for a variety of views, this one is preferable to the *Four Views* one above.