

# Jesus' Teaching on Divorce

Does Jesus allow divorce under certain circumstances (such as adultery), or does Jesus teach that divorce is never allowed?

As we attempt to answer this question, our primary goal is to submit to the authority of Scripture. This means that we must be as diligent as we can in our interpretation of Scripture, and after we have made our best effort to fully understand the truth of Scripture's teaching, we must align our beliefs with the full teaching of Scripture.

At the same time, we want to acknowledge that any time it comes to matters of interpretation, there is the possibility for disagreement among believers on some details. We may agree 100% that the Bible is our sole authority, but we may disagree on exactly how to interpret or apply the Bible's teaching at some points. When that is the case, we need to realize that our agreement is much greater than our disagreement. We can stand together and be united because of our submission to Scripture and our commitment to live out the Bible's teachings even as we disagree about some of the details of what that looks like. As Paul instructs, we should follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in our own personal conscience and graciously allow others to do the same (1 Corinthians 8-10; Romans 14).

## The relevant texts concerning Jesus' teaching on divorce:

**Matthew 5:31-32:** "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

**Luke 16:18:** "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

**Matthew 19:3-9:** Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

**Mark 10:11-12:** Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

"What did Moses command you?" he replied.

They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."

"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."

**There are two main issues that make the interpretation of these texts difficult:**

1. The "exception clause" is in Matthew but not in Mark and Luke.
  - ◆ Mark and Luke record that divorce and remarriage is adultery, and they do not mention any exceptions to this. Matthew, on the other hand, records that in the case of "marital unfaithfulness" (NIV), divorce and remarriage is not adultery.
2. Matthew uses *porneia* instead of *moicheia*.
  - ◆ *Moicheia* is the Greek word for "adultery." Matthew uses this word twice in Matthew 5:32 to say that divorce and remarriage is adultery.
  - ◆ *Porneia* is a more generic, broader term for sexual immorality. It is sometimes translated fornication (KJV), unchastity (NASB), sexual immorality (ESV), and marital unfaithfulness (NIV).
  - ◆ Because Matthew 5:32 says, "But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness (*porneia*), causes her to become an adulteress (*moicheia*), and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery (*moicheia*)," some people argue that Matthew does not have adultery in mind in his "exception clause." If he meant adultery, he would have used *moicheia*, because he uses it in two other places in the same verse. Thus, he must mean something other than adultery by *porneia*. (Same is true in Matthew 19:9.)
  - ◆ On the other side of the argument, *porneia* refers to all forms of sexual immorality, including but not limited to adultery, so some argue that Matthew's wording allows for divorce in even more cases than just adultery.

**Two main interpretations:**

1. No divorce under any circumstances, because Mark and Luke don't give us an exception clause. Matthew is brought into agreement with Mark and Luke by interpreting that, in this context, *porneia* refers specifically to fornication that is discovered during the betrothal period prior to marriage. In other words, if it is discovered that your fiancé participated in premarital sex, you are no longer bound to the engagement.
  - ◆ Two conservative biblical scholars who explain this view well are John Piper (see [www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Articles/ByDate/1986/1544\\_On\\_Divorce\\_and\\_Remarriage\\_in\\_the\\_Event\\_of\\_Adultery/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Articles/ByDate/1986/1544_On_Divorce_and_Remarriage_in_the_Event_of_Adultery/) and [www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Articles/ByDate/1986/1488\\_Divorce\\_and\\_Remarriage\\_A\\_Position\\_Paper/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Articles/ByDate/1986/1488_Divorce_and_Remarriage_A_Position_Paper/)) and Billie Friel (see *Citizens of the Kingdom: Interpreting the Sermon on the Mount for Daily Living*, pp. 121-128).
2. Divorce is allowed in the case of adultery, and perhaps even other instances of sexual immorality, because that is the meaning of Matthew's exception clause. Mark and Luke are brought into agreement with Matthew by noting that Jewish law in the first century required divorce in the case of adultery, and therefore, that fact was simply assumed in any teaching on divorce. In other words, Matthew explicitly spells out what Mark and Luke assume.
  - ◆ Three conservative biblical scholars who explain this view well are D. A. Carson (see *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, *Matthew-Luke*, pp. 152-3, 411-8), Craig Blomberg (see *The New American Commentary*, Vol. 22, *Matthew*, pp. 110-2, 289-94), and John MacArthur (see *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Matthew 1-7*, pp 307-318).

### **The Background Text: Deuteronomy 24:1-4**

"If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance."

When the Pharisees come to Jesus in Matthew 19 and Mark 10, this is the passage they are using to test Him. There were two basic schools of thought led by two Pharisees in Jesus' day:

1. Pharisee Shammai focused on the word "indecent" in Deuteronomy 24:1 and said that word referred to sexual immorality, so divorce was only allowed in the case of sexual immorality
2. Pharisee Hillel focused on the word "something" in Deuteronomy 24:1 and said that meant a man could divorce his wife for anything indecent. For example, this interpretation included something as trivial as burning his food.

That's why the Pharisees ask if a man can divorce his wife "for any and every reason" (Matthew 19:3).

Notice how Jesus answers: He points out that they have misunderstood Deuteronomy 24. It neither permits nor commands divorce. It simply gives instructions for what to do once hard-hearted people have already gotten divorced. Jesus goes all the way back to creation and emphasizes that God's intent is for marriage to be permanent.

#### **Four things we need to make sure we realize:**

1. Jesus' emphasis is on the sanctity and permanence of marriage, not on reasons for divorce.
2. Even if Jesus allows for divorce in the case of adultery, He is saying that's not ideal.
3. Even if Jesus allows for divorce in the case of adultery, He does not command divorce. This is drastically different from the Jewish law of His day.
4. Even if Jesus allows for divorce in the case of adultery, He is raising the bar compared to the Pharisees, many of whom argued that divorce was allowed for any reason, as long as you gave your wife the proper legal certificate.

#### **The Main Point and the Huge Common Ground that We Share:**

Whether you believe Jesus allows for divorce in the case of adultery or does not allow for divorce in any situation, His main point is that God intends for marriage to be permanent. We must have a very high and holy view of marriage. We must strive to honor our marriage and pray that other believers will do the same. And even in the case of adultery, we should realize that, at the very least, divorce is not required, and we should strive to be reconciled by the grace of God.

So, rather than being divided by the one instance where we may disagree (is divorce allowed in the case of adultery?), we should be united by the overwhelming instances where we agree (marriage is supposed to be permanent; we need to be fully committed and faithful to our spouse; if a marriage is broken, it is a travesty and a violation of God's intent for marriage; it is a great expression of God's grace if a marriage can be redeemed after adultery; etc.).

Also, because there is clearly room to be faithful to Scripture and still disagree on interpretive issues here, we need to be careful not to legalistically force our understanding on others. We can discuss and provide evidence for our interpretation, but we should be faithful to our own conscience and graciously allow others to do the same.

With that said...

## Reasons why I believe the best interpretation is that Jesus allows for divorce in the case of adultery:

1. *Porneia* can refer to adultery in Scripture. For example, Paul uses *porneia* to describe the adulterous affair between a man and his step-mother in 1 Corinthians 5.
2. Craig Blomberg points out, "*Porneia* (rather than *moicheia*)... was the term more commonly used to describe female rather than male infidelity" (*The New American Commentary*, Vol. 22, *Matthew*, p. 111). That fits the context perfectly in Matthew 5 and 19. Jesus is talking about a man divorcing his wife, so He would likely use the term for female infidelity (*porneia*).
3. Even if *porneia* means sexual immorality in general and not just adultery, this does not negate the exception clause. In fact, it broadens the exception clause. In that case, Jesus allows for divorce in instances of sexual immorality that are not specifically adultery. Some scholars have mentioned bestiality, homosexual behavior, and sexual misconduct that did not involve intercourse as possible instances of *porneia* that might justify divorce. As a biblical example, Paul uses *porneia* to describe prostitution in 1 Corinthians 6, and certainly that would fit with Jesus' intent in the exception clause.
4. The understanding that Jesus does not forbid all divorce fits well with the tone of the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:9, He tells us to be peacemakers, but Romans 12:18 tells us that we are only able to do this in so far as it depends on us. In Matthew 5:22, Jesus forbids anger, but we know He does not forbid all anger, because He was rightly angry at times (Mark 3:5) and because Ephesians 4:26 says to be angry without sinning (meaning it's possible to be angry and not sin). Similarly, Jesus forbids divorce, but acknowledges that there are certain circumstances where divorce is permitted.

Remember, Jesus is not just dictating behavior. He's describing what our hearts should be like. If we think He has simply given a command never to get divorced, we are missing the greatest depth and force of His teaching. He's telling us to have a heart that honors marriage and is fully faithful and committed to marriage. It's possible that this could be true of your heart and your spouse could still commit adultery or leave you (although that is much less likely to happen if you truly have a pure heart for marriage).

5. MacArthur gives three good reasons why Jesus is allowing the end of a marriage and not just the end of a betrothal: (1) The background text is Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which clearly has marriage in mind and not just betrothal. (2) The indissoluble union in a Hebrew marriage began at betrothal, so even if Jesus was allowing the end of a betrothal, He was allowing the end of a marriage. (3) It is clear in Matthew 19 that both the Pharisees and the disciples understood that Jesus was talking about marriage and divorce, not just about betrothal.
6. MacArthur also rightly points out that the Bible only has to say something once for it to be true and authoritative. The exception clause in Matthew adds to our understanding of Mark and Luke. (In much the same way, we know that when Jesus says, "Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (Mark 11:24) does not mean that we always get every single thing we pray for. Why? Because other passages explain that if we ask with the wrong motives, we won't receive it (James 4:3), and we must ask according to God's will (1 John 5:14-15).) Matthew's teaching on divorce expands and further explains Mark's and Luke's in much the same way that James 4:3 and 1 John 5:14-15 expand Mark 11:24.
7. In 1 Corinthians 7:15, Paul gives a second biblical exception that allows for divorce. If a believer is married to an unbeliever, and the unbeliever decides to leave, the believer "is not bound in such circumstances." Because divorce is biblically permitted in that instance, we know that we are on safe grounds to assume that Mark and Luke are not forbidding all divorce in all instances. Further, because Paul gives a second biblical exception that allows for divorce, we know that Jesus did not give us an exhaustive list of exceptions in the gospels. He simply acknowledged that such exceptions exist. From the biblical teaching in these passages, we can deduce that divorce is allowed in instances where the behavior of a spouse has fundamentally violated the marriage covenant. Adultery violates the "one-flesh" union. Abandonment violates the "leave parents and cleave to spouse" commitment. Because of this, many pastors and biblical scholars also include abuse as another legitimate grounds for divorce.