

**A Needed Second Look
at Jesus' Teaching
on
*Divorce & Remarriage***

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For literally centuries, followers of Christ have held to the belief that divorcing one's spouse is sanctioned by the Bible, if only in the event your husband or wife cheats on you. Likewise, entering a second marriage has also been understood by many to be permitted by the Scriptures. And generation after generation, countless numbers of believers have lived out this understanding, dividing their homes with a divorce that often leaves great heartache and destruction in its wake.

But is this really what our Savior had in mind in Matthew 19:9? Is epidemic divorce the legacy our Heavenly Father expects us to pass down to our children? Or have we simply fooled ourselves into thinking we can deny the marriage covenant voluntarily entered into for life...

For years, my father has referred to Matthew 19:9 as a “lawyer’s loophole”—a trap that would quickly ensnare anyone who stuck his neck through it. After discovering for myself some very eye-opening Scriptural truths, I now understand why...

"This is a game-changer. It changes everything!"

—Reviewer comment

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Note: For clarity and emphasis, certain words within the Scripture
texts cited have been emphasized with **bold** text.

Dedication

This Bible study booklet is dedicated to all genuine seekers of truth, who steadfastly hold to their commitment to follow Jesus Christ without attempting to guard their own interests.

Grateful acknowledgement is due to the truth-seekers of Kansas City, MO for their assistance in bringing these monumental and rather earth-shattering Scriptural truths to light. I also wish to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my father and mother for their assistance in the production of this study booklet, both through editorial counsel and their devoted example of Christian marital fidelity. Without my parents' modeling of these concepts in real life, my courage to address such sensitive issues would be nonexistent. Finally, I thank the Father in Heaven for helping me overcome the supernatural opposition faced while laboring to produce this Bible study.

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Preface

There are a few things I wish to clarify up front. This is in no way an exhaustive study on the very sensitive subject of divorce and remarriage in the Lord's Church. It is, however, a statement of critical Biblical truths I have been fortunate enough to glean from my own study of God's Word in addition to the wisdom and research of others—specifically with regards to *Jesus' own words* on the subject. I also feel the need to emphasize that all of the cited statements of Scripture included in this text originated from the Almighty Creator. I didn't make them up. You can believe whatever you wish, but it doesn't change what our God said in His divine Word.

John the Baptist is one of my heroes. In the interest of full disclosure, there is something he and I have in common. John wasn't married. He was a powerful man of God, and was given the opportunity to take a stand for the institution of marriage as God designed, while yet single.

Finally, I must confess that I won the lottery. While I don't gamble, I did hit the jackpot in a way that makes the largest recorded Powerball in history look like pocket change. And I'll be the first to admit that it's not fair. You should have been afforded the same opportunity.

Let me explain.

On a cold spring day some 30 years ago, I was born into a very unique family. My parents had each entered into their first marriage, and would prove to be faithful until parted by death. They have never been divorced, and never will. They faithfully and willingly sacrifice themselves for each other, serving and loving one another genuinely from the heart.

Do you realize how rare that is? I graduated from a Christian high school, and yet nearly every one of my classmates (other than my siblings) had at least one parent who had previously been married to someone else before getting divorced. More notably, I've

attended weekly church services my entire life, and almost every Christian I've seen on Sunday has been divorced and married someone else at some point in his or her life. I have to think hard to remember those rare few married church-going adults who hadn't ever been divorced. Also not uncommon, numerous relatives in my family tree have been divorced and re-married. Even most of the close friends I've had have lives that were touched by either the indirect or direct effects of divorce and a second marriage.

So I admit my perspective is a bit jaded. In spite of the culture's overwhelming acceptance of divorce, I actually think lifelong faithfulness to one marriage partner is the expectation. I've been blessed enough to witness this in the home I grew up in.

In summary, I encourage you to investigate the following Biblical truths with an open heart. If you're reading this with a mind to justify your lifelong-held position, don't waste your time. But if you truly wish to follow Jesus, it's my prayer that the following words of admonition and encouragement will inspire you to pursue God's best according to His terms and experience the fullness of His richest blessings.

John the Baptist's Last Stand

You may be aware of the story of how John the Baptist was beheaded after being confined in Herod's prison. Why was he martyred? Here's the story as recorded in Matthew:

For when Herod had John arrested, he bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, **the wife of his brother Philip.** For John had been saying to him, "**It is not lawful for you to have her.**" Although Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded John as a prophet. But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod, so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Having been prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist." Although he was grieved, the king commanded it to be given because of his oaths, and because of his dinner guests. He sent and had John beheaded in the prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. His disciples came and took away the body and buried it; and they went and reported to Jesus. (Matthew 14:3-12)

This account is also recorded in Mark's gospel, where we find additional details:

For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, **the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her.** For John had been saying to Herod, "**It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.**" Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so; for Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him. A strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee; and when the daughter of

Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you.” And he swore to her, “Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom.” And she went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?” And she said, “The head of John the Baptist.” Immediately she came in a hurry to the king and asked, saying, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her. Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about this, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb. (Mark 6:17-29)

Herod had married Herodias, who was already married to Herod's brother Philip. John had called him on it, confidently stating that it was wrong for Herod to be married to Herodias because she was someone else's wife. Remarriage can be a very sensitive, loaded topic. The greatest man of God under the old covenant (Matthew 11:11a) was martyred over it. I dare say it's been a touchy subject ever since. The question I would like to pose is, why didn't John just instruct Herod to help Herodias get a divorce? Then he could marry Herodias and everything would be O.K., wouldn't it? After all, that's what we do, isn't it?

Jesus' Radical Position

Many conservative Christians today could easily label Jesus' position on divorce and remarriage as extremist, radical, or outrageously ridiculous. Jesus took on the issue of divorce and remarriage in Mark 10:1-12, Luke 16:18, Matthew 5:31-32, and Matthew 19:1-12. In the gospel of Mark, He is quoted as saying,

“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery.” (Mark 10:11-12)

Jesus also stresses this position in Luke’s gospel account:

“Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery. (Luke 16:18)

How extreme is that? If you divorce your first spouse and get married to someone else—according to the Son of God—you’re an adulterer! Maybe you personally don’t get divorced at all. But you get married for the first time to someone who was previously married and got a divorce. You’re still an adulterer or adulteress!

Jesus smashed the status quo. Not unlike our modern American culture, the Roman culture of His day was steeped in divorce and remarriage. It was common for Romans to get married a *minimum* of 2 or 3 times (sometimes up to 5 or 6 times), divorcing their living spouses in order to do it. According to our Savior, such practices constitute **adultery**—a grave sin condemned in the Scriptures.

But isn’t there an exception to this standard? Certainly there are situations that would warrant divorce in God’s eyes, aren’t there?

The Matthew 19:9 Phenomenon

Many professing followers of Christ today don’t believe that a marriage to a second spouse while the first is still living constitutes adultery. Many more hold the position that adultery is a legitimate reason (if the only reason) for *getting* a divorce. How ironic.

This position stems from Jesus’ statements on marriage and divorce in the gospel of Matthew. While explaining the higher

standard of the law of Christ over the old covenant, in chapter 5 Jesus says,

“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 reason of unchastity**, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5:31-32)

Jesus states here that a man who divorces his wife makes her commit adultery, unless she is unchaste. Most (if not virtually all) Christians today have understood this to mean that the Scriptures sanction divorcing your spouse if your marriage partner has sexual relations with another person.

This position is further based on Jesus' later statement in Matthew chapter 19:

“And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, **except for immorality**, and marries another woman commits adultery.” (Matthew 19:9)

Here the word “immorality” is included as a legitimate reason for divorce. With only two exceptions, every believer I have ever heard talk about Matthew 19:9 has explained it in the following way: “You’re allowed to pursue divorce if your spouse cheats on you.”

But if this is the case, why don’t these verses use the term “adultery” instead of “unchastity” or “immorality”? Because adultery **isn’t** what God was referring to in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9.

Let me explain.

There are two Greek words used in the New Testament Scriptures to identify sexual immorality. The first is porneia, Strong’s #4202. The definition of this word is sexual relations between two individuals, neither of whom are married. **Every single time** in

the New Testament that you find the words “**immorality**” or “**fornication**,” they are translated from this Greek word “porneia.” In other words, the English words “immorality” and “fornication” are exclusively “porneia.” This Greek word “porneia” is never translated into any other English words besides “immorality” or “fornication”— with only one exception: It is translated once as “**unchastity**” (you guessed it, in Matthew 5:32 above).

The second Greek word used in the New Testament to identify sexual immorality is moicheia. Strong’s #3430. The definition of this Greek word is **adultery** (sexual relations where either one or both persons are married to someone else). **Every single time** in the New Testament that you find the word “**adultery**,” it has been translated from this Greek word “moicheia.” Additionally, this Greek word “moicheia” is never translated into any other English word besides “adultery.”

(To illustrate the significance of the level of consistency of these Greek and English terms as conveyed through the New American Standard translation of the Bible, I would refer you to the term “**salvation**.” While “salvation” is **always** translated from the **same Greek root**, this Greek root is **not** always translated into the English word “salvation.” In other words, the distinct concepts of **adultery** and **fornication** have been more clearly translated in the New American Standard Version than the Greek term for salvation!)

But there’s more. In a most significant way, the Word of God goes further to emphasize this distinction between immorality and adultery. There are **4** places in the New Testament where these Greek terms “porneia” (fornication) and “moicheia” (adultery) are **both found in the same verse** describing **distinctly different types of sin**:

“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, **adulteries, fornications**, thefts, false witness, slanders.”
(Matthew 15:19)

“For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, **fornications**, thefts, murders, **adulteries**,” (Mark 7:21)

“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither **fornicators**, nor idolaters, nor **adulterers**, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals,” (I Corinthians 6:9)

“Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for **fornicators** and **adulterers** God will judge.” (Hebrews 13:4)

In every one of these 4 cases, the distinction between **fornication** (the same porneia translated as “unchastity” in Matthew 5:32 and “immorality” in Matthew 19:9) and **adultery** is made.

In the word of God, adultery and immorality are NOT the same thing. In fact, the difference between “porneia” (unchastity in Matt. 5:32 and immorality in Matt. 19:9) and “moicheia” (adultery) could not be any greater. There is no clearer way to emphasize the distinct difference between the original meaning of the word “immorality” in Matt. 19:9 and the (incorrect) understanding of adultery by either God or the translators. Our Master made the difference as clear as He possibly could in the original Greek text by using two very different and distinct Greek terms, which have been correctly translated into two distinct English terms.

To put it another way, in the strictest sense of the Scripture texts, to commit adultery is **not immoral**. It’s *adulterous*.

What, then, is the true meaning of Matt. 5:32 and 19:9, with their use of porneia as the “exception” by which divorce is legitimate, as so many Christians have been led to believe?

An Accurate Understanding

Matthew was written to a primarily Jewish audience. This gospel account is also the only place in the New Testament we find an “exception” to Jesus’ view that divorce and remarriage is adultery. This is not a coincidence.

In the Jewish culture, a man and woman became betrothed before they were married. Unlike becoming “engaged” in our American culture, this betrothal was so binding that in order to break off the planned marriage, a divorce was required. The only reason a betrothal would be broken off by the groom-to-be is if it was discovered the bride-to-be had been unchaste—that is, had committed an act of fornication or sexual immorality (*porneia*) before the planned wedding took place.

This information becomes very clarifying when the story of Mary and Joseph is examined in the *first* chapter of Matthew:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been **betrothed** to Joseph, **before they came together** she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away **[divorce her]** secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to **take Mary as your wife**; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 1:18-20)

Before Joseph and Mary consummated their marriage, her pregnancy was discovered. Under the Mosaic law, this would be labeled fornication or immorality, and the woman could be executed by stoning. (See Deuteronomy 22:20-21.) Joseph didn’t realize the baby Jesus had been conceived through the Holy Spirit, and that Mary was still a pure virgin. But Joseph had a righteous heart. So he planned to divorce her [break off the betrothal and planned marriage] without it becoming public. An angel stopped

him, however, by explaining Jesus' miraculous conception and telling Joseph to go ahead with the marriage.

Matthew is the **only** gospel account where we find Jesus giving a legitimate reason for divorce and remarriage (in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 alone). Jesus' statements concerning divorce and remarriage were understood to be the breaking of an engagement before the marriage was consummated. Once a marriage was physically consummated, Matthew would have used the term "adultery" (*moicheia*) rather than "*porneia*," which he definitely and deliberately did not. So our non-Jewish perception of the concepts of marriage and divorce confuse the issue significantly. In Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, "divorce" is only being sanctioned when an engaged individual commits sexual immorality before the pending marriage has been consummated. Divorce in this case equates to breaking off the engagement.

This clarification is thus not only explained in the use of the Greek terms, but also through the historical account of Mary and Joseph's near break-up in the context of the Jewish culture Matthew specifically was addressing. Not coincidentally, Matthew is the only gospel account where we find Mary and Joseph's engagement described. For Joseph to "divorce" Mary before their wedding and the physical consummation of the marriage was within the realm of righteousness. For Joseph to divorce Mary *after* their marriage consummation would be *unrighteous*, and contrary to the will of God.

The statements of Jesus in Matthew clearly and adamantly indicate that once a marriage has been consummated, you are committed, and God does not authorize divorce. This harmonizes with Jesus' other statements as recorded in Mark and Luke which were written to a primarily Roman audience, a Gentile culture like ours that didn't require divorce proceedings to break off an engagement. Consider Mark's account of the same statement by Jesus that we examined in Matthew 19:

"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman **commits adultery** against her; and if she herself divorces

her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery." (Mark 10:11-12)

Furthermore, note Luke's account of the same statement made by Jesus that we examined in Matthew 5:32:

"Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another **commits adultery**, and he who **marries one who is divorced** from a husband **commits adultery**. (Luke 16:18)

The Context of Matthew 19:9

While verse 9 of Matthew chapter 19 is often cited as a "way out" of a bad marriage, the vital context of this verse is often overlooked. Even when correctly understood, verse 9 constitutes only a small part of Jesus' teaching on marriage. A great deal of truth is being expressed from the very beginning of the chapter:

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 [*after becoming engaged and prior to the consummation of the marriage*], and marries another woman commits adultery." (Matthew 19:3-9)

The passage begins with the Pharisees asking the very question wrestled with yet today: Is there a legitimate reason for divorce? Citing the very first marriage back in Genesis, Jesus stressed the purpose and design of the Father—unity for life. As the first institution ordained by the Creator, marriage is a solemn covenant—one which God seals with His own power in a rather permanent way, as evidenced by the fact that divorce and re-marriage constitutes adultery in His eyes. In other words, He sees the **original** covenant as still **binding**.

Without sanctioning a practice God hates (Malachi 2:13-16), Jesus addresses the **root** of the problem and pointedly rebukes the unrighteous Pharisees for having *hard hearts*. The Son of God emphatically states the breakup of a marriage has never been the Father's will.

The chapter continues:

The disciples said to Him, "If **the relationship of the man with his wife is like this**, it is better not to marry." But He said to them, "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." Then some children were brought to Him so that He might lay His hands on them and pray; and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, "Let the children alone, and **do not hinder them** from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." After laying His hands on them, He departed from there.

If there were to be any uncertainty remaining as to Jesus' position, the disciples' answer would seem to remove all doubt: "**If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.**" Jesus' disciples felt that if a marriage covenant was permanent and could not be reversed, a person was better off not

getting married at all in the first place. Note that they did *not* say, “If this is the situation in a marriage, it’s a good thing we can get a divorce if things get tough. All she has to do is cheat on me, and I’m relieved of any responsibility to her.”

At this point, Jesus does not “pull any punches” or withdraw His position. Rather, He confirms the severity of the permanency of the marriage covenant by supporting lifelong celibacy as a valid course to those who can accept it. To those who choose to follow Christ, there are only two legitimate options: faithfulness to your marriage partner “as long as you both shall live,” or singleness with purity (abstinence). As Solomon had pointed out centuries earlier, “It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.” (Ecclesiastes 5:5)

At the close of Jesus’ dialogue, *He addresses the needs of the children*. Before He leaves the crowd, Jesus welcomes the children and prays with them. To the observant disciple, Jesus is making a statement: Take care of the children! Don’t let a divorce hinder their life path! In any divorce, the children suffer the very most. While modern studies show many dramatic ill effects of divorce on the offspring, it’s no secret to those directly involved that the breakup of a marriage wreaks great damage in the lives of the kids. In context, this appears to be one of the reasons why our Eternal Master so strongly denounces divorce.

In light of the above truths, the great care to be exercised in choosing a life mate *cannot be over-emphasized*. I dare say there is no other decision in the Christian’s life that bears more significance, both physically and spiritually. The impact and consequence (bad or good) of this covenant is nothing short of monumental. As the historic wedding vows themselves underscore, marriage is “not by any to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God.”

To summarize, taken by itself Matthew 19:9 is often misunderstood as allowing or even advocating divorce and re-marriage. But within context, it becomes abundantly clear to the

honest Bible student that Jesus was in fact pointedly *warning against it!* In fact, the common misunderstanding of verse 9 results in a position that is completely *antithetical* to Jesus' teaching in this chapter.

Married for Life

To many Christians today this information will no doubt prove to be a quite startling discovery. I was intrigued to discover in my research that the misunderstanding of Matthew 19:9 has literally been around for *centuries*. In fact, 2nd century writings indicate that this false teaching originated *within 100 years* of the time the book of Matthew was originally penned!

As I stated earlier, nearly every follower of Christ I've ever heard take a position on this issue has considered it acceptable in the eyes of God to divorce one's first spouse if he or she cheated on you. And according to American Christian culture today, a divorce completely severs the marriage bond. It's understood that once you're divorced, you're entirely free of that commitment and allowed to pursue a new relationship.

But according to Jesus, to divorce one person after the marriage has been physically consummated and marry another person is to commit adultery (*moicheia*). By definition, an adulterer or adulteress is violating an **existing marriage**. This clearly indicates that God sees the original marriage commitment as *still binding*, whether anyone else thinks so or not!

Jesus' position coincides with John the Baptist's original admonition to Herod. The prophet had fearlessly challenged Herod's second marriage to Herodias:

For when Herod had John arrested, he bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. For John had been saying to him, "**It is not lawful** for you to have her." (Matthew 14:3-4)

For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, "**It is not lawful** for you to have **your brother's wife.**" (Mark 6:17-18)

This great forerunner of the Christ emphasized that Herodias was still Philip's wife, even after she had rejected that original covenant and had become "re-married" to Herod.

Other New Testament Scriptures outside the gospel accounts further confirm God's perspective. Consider the following statements made by the Apostle Paul:

For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. So then, **if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress;** but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man. (Romans 7:2-3)

A wife is bound **as long as her husband lives;** but **if her husband is dead, she is free to be married** to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. (I Corinthians 7:39)

While the apostle only addresses the woman's position in these texts, Jesus confirmed the terms apply to the man involved in a marriage as well (Luke 16:18). Your marriage covenant is binding "as long as you both shall live."

Personally, I've never understood the logic of adultery being the one and only reason you could legitimately file for divorce as a believer. First, the overall thrust of the Scriptures has always indicated to me that once you're married, you're committed for life by covenant. And there are no contradictions in the Bible. Second, I can think of much more serious reasons that would seem to warrant divorce than a cheating spouse. For adultery to be the one exception just doesn't make sense.

If there's only one valid reason for getting a divorce, shouldn't it be the case where the husband is physically abusing his wife and beating her to the point he almost kills her? Or what about the husband who is sexually abusing and molesting his daughters, terrorizing them in a way that will give them deep psychological scars for the rest of their lives unless the wife *flees* with them? If there were going to be only one valid reason for divorce, personally I'd pick one of these! Isn't our Heavenly Father a God of reason and compassion?

Separation: The Way of Escape

Separation is the avenue of escape from dangerous situations, and even situations that are not so dangerous. **Abuse should never be tolerated, condoned, or accepted** (Ephesians 5:11). Our God is a God of justice, and He promises to repay such wickedness with His own *vengeance* if a person refuses to repent (Romans 12:19). Anyone who encourages a person to remain in an abusive situation shares guilt in these heinous crimes (Romans 14:22b). Physical separation (which may include legal separation by judicial decree) provides protection for the victim while acknowledging the permanency of the marriage covenant and preserving the ability of the offender to repent. As our Lord clearly stated in the Scriptures, the concept involves separation with the hope and goal of potential reconciliation, not 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, **she must remain unmarried**, or else be **reconciled** to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife. (I Corinthians 7:10-11)

There are many other situations where marriage partners may need time to "save face" and separate themselves to "cool off." Informal separation can serve as a much-needed "time out" with the goal of getting back together and making things right. In a relationship as close as marriage, it's no surprise there will be

times when one or both individuals need a way to relieve the pressure. But to file for divorce and consider the marriage covenant terminated is to rebel against Christ and violate His commands.

Separation, however, seems to be often overlooked in the pursuit of severing the marriage altogether. Christians will sometimes go so far as to *encourage or approve of* divorce without even considering legal separation. Looking at God's perspective of divorce, to me this is like overlooking the option of giving up an unborn baby for adoption in the pursuit of abortion!

Forgiven: A Brand New Start in Christ

In Christ, **all things** become new. When you are immersed into Him (Acts 2:38), any and all sin and guilt and shame are washed away. For every one of us, this is wonderful news. Your past is *erased* in the eyes of the Lord. Yes, failed relationships from years gone by will still carry consequences. But when a person surrenders his or her life to Christ and obeys the gospel, he or she is truly *freed* from the bondage of all past sin, including the sins of divorce, remarriage, fornication, or adultery. This is a most important point! Consider the following words of truth:

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; **the old things passed away;** behold, new things have come. (II Corinthians 5:17)

He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.
Just as a father has compassion on his children,
So the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him.
(Psalm 103:10-13)

**“FOR I WILL BE MERCIFUL TO THEIR INIQUITIES,
AND I WILL REMEMBER THEIR SINS NO MORE.”**
(Hebrews 8:12 / Isaiah 43:25)

When your sins were washed away by the blood of Christ, they were removed from God’s memory. While others may try to dig them up, *to God* those transgressions committed in your “past life” or “B.C.” (before Christ) no longer exist. Praise to the Father for providing His own Son as a perfect ransom by Whom every hopeless sinner is granted the opportunity of a brand new start!

The blood of Jesus Christ makes it possible for any repentant sinner to be buried with Christ in baptism and raised to live a new life (Romans 6:4). You begin afresh through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For those who are born again, the slate is wiped completely clean. You stand forgiven.

God’s Standard for the Christian Life

Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. (II Corinthians 7:1)

No matter what occurred in the past, once a person has given his or her life to Jesus, a new standard of living is in order, especially in regards to the permanency of the marriage bonds. We are called to be radically different than the “anything goes” culture all around us (II Corinthians 6:15-18). Our Savior expects obedience and adherence to His standards of righteousness. Sin is to be acknowledged and forsaken. We are called to “die to sin” and “live to righteousness” (I Peter 2:24). Consider the following warnings:

What shall we say then? **Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be!** How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us

who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? (Romans 6:1-3)

Or do you not know that **the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?** Do not be deceived; neither **fornicators**, nor idolaters, nor **adulterers**, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. (I Corinthians 6:9-10)

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will **judge [condemn] the adulterer** and all the **sexually immoral.** (Hebrews 13:4, NIV)

These Scriptures clearly state that a Christian who engages in a sexual relationship outside of the marriage bonds is in serious danger of *losing his or her salvation*. This is a grave warning! **Adultery should never be accepted, condoned, encouraged, or approved.** And Jesus Himself clearly emphasized that a Christian who either 1) divorces his or her marriage partner and enters a second marriage or 2) marries a divorced person *is committing this very sin.*

What Shall We Then Do?

Many have innocently mistaken the Word of God and have unwittingly accepted a practice detested by Him and condemned in His Word. They sincerely misunderstood their actions to be acceptable to Christ and fell victim to the great deal of confusion and misunderstanding surrounding the issue of divorce and re-marriage.

Others have committed the crime of adultery not so innocently. One particular case that occurred in my own community involved an *elder* at a local restoration movement congregation. He wanted to exchange his wife for another woman. So he divorced his wife, then feigned repentance and confessed his sin. After quickly requesting and receiving a second baptism, he married the other

woman. What? How can this be? God is not mocked! Grace is not a license to sin, and our God is a jealous God. Others have attempted to break up their marriage on purpose, even pushing their partners to infidelity. Be warned, Christian: God judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Whether intentional or unintentional, sin is still sin, and the offender is still guilty. As in the case of any other sin, the offense must be acknowledged and confessed, and Biblical repentance in dying to sin must be earnestly sought.

In the case of adultery due to the act of a second marriage or marrying a divorced person, the parable told by Jesus of the Pharisee and the tax collector (publican) seems to provide a fitting illustration of genuine repentance:

And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, **adulterers**, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was **beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'** I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14)

The Christian who discovers himself (or herself) guilty of entering a second marriage, forever “severing” the original marriage designed by God to be permanent, will find himself caught in an “impossible” situation. He cannot divorce his current spouse and return to his original marriage covenant. (God’s opinion of this is indicated in Deuteronomy 24:1-4.) Another “wrong” doesn’t make a “right.” What is he to do?

The Scripture above implores such a person to fall on his or her face before a holy God, crying out in repentance and begging for forgiveness and mercy! Plead for the strength to carry out your current marriage commitment with faithfulness. Solemnly commit to *honor and keep your current marriage covenant!* Today is the day of salvation (II Corinthians 6:1-3). Make sure your second marriage commitment works; prove to God that you are serious in your repentance. Adhere to your current vow and keep His commandments! Not only is the Father watching, but so are your fellow believers. And so are any children you may have. Do not continue to be a stumbling block! (Matthew 18:5-6)

For the man who has fathered children from a previous marriage, the path of repentance includes faithfully providing child support while those children are minors. The needless poverty inflicted upon many single mothers left to raise their children by themselves should **never** be acceptable to a divorced man who has committed to follow Christ. Contrary to our “spineless” culture, divorce does not relieve a person of his spiritual or financial responsibility to look out for the well-being of any minor children he helped bring into the world. As God’s Word solemnly warns:

But if **anyone does not provide for his own**, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is **worse than an unbeliever**. (I Timothy 5:8)

Divorce is a wretched and tragic act causing deep wounds in the souls of the spouses, to say nothing of the devastating psychological harm it often inflicts on the children. But while God hates the sin, He *loves the person*. God extends His forgiveness and support to the truly repentant individual. He graciously extends the fullness of His power to those who commit to follow Him in all things, *especially* the critical covenant of marriage. After all, His desire is for you to succeed.

For those of you who endured the pain of your own parents’ divorce, know that it doesn’t have to turn out that way for you. God expects you to be the one that breaks the cycle of divorce in your family tree. He has provided the power of His own Spirit.

We are redeemed from any sinful ways of life we learned from past generations:

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY." If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth; knowing that you were not **redeemed** with perishable things like silver or gold **from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers**, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. (I Peter 1:14-19)

The blood of Christ redeems anyone from all futility passed down from the previous generation. This is a most important point! You *do* have the potential to overcome any faulty behaviors and relationship patterns learned in your upbringing!

Reconciliation: The Key to God's Design

All followers of Christ have been given a ministry of reconciliation (II Corinthians 5:18). God reconciled us to Himself even though we didn't deserve it. Fellowship was restored between God and man through the blood of Jesus, and as His ambassadors, we are called to pass this good news on.

So if Christ has asked us to love our enemies, shouldn't we extend the same mercy to even the most difficult spouse? If we truly believe in the power of God's forgiveness, why is making amends so often abandoned? Why have so many husbands and wives in the body of Christ given up on each other? As Paul wrote in Colossians 3:13, the Christian way involves "bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you."

Reconciliation often involves forgiveness. And it always involves humility. Hard feelings must be left behind. Pride must be swallowed. The simple statements, “I am sorry... I was wrong” and “I forgive you” can go a long ways in patching up problems in any human relationship. There is perhaps no greater healing power than the power of forgiveness. “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?” (I Corinthians 7:16)

God created marriage to illustrate the bonds of love between Him and His church:

FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. This mystery is great; but **I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.** (Ephesians 5:31-32)

Our Heavenly Father designed the marriage covenant to illustrate our relationship with Him. If He loves us unconditionally, shouldn't there be unconditional love shown in a Christian marriage? Of course, in the extreme cases of dangerous or even life-threatening abuse, reconciliation may not be within God's will. As shared previously, separation is God's directive—not divorce.

The root of divorce lies in the heart. A break-up happens in the heart and mind before it ever happens on paper. Hearts that were once soft and gentle can become callous and bitter. The trials of life can try to undo your marriage, but the choice is still yours to make. Choose love, not selfishness. Choose humility, not pride. Rather than trying to place blame, pursue reconciliation. Choose kindness and truth, and you will find God's favor (Proverbs 3:3-4). Studies show that unhappy couples who stick it out are happier 5 years later than couples that got divorced. But Christians shouldn't need to rely on studies to believe that God's will is best. We can't see the whole picture. God can.

The spouse willing to humble himself or herself and regard the other as more important will not only avoid the misery and

condemnation of divorce, but will also strengthen the bond of marital unity our Heavenly Father designed. Jesus Christ forgave you. Go and do the same.

Conclusion

From the time of Adam and Eve, our Creator designed marriage as a permanent relationship lasting until either spouse passed on from this life. And He zealously guards and protects marriage with a required standard of purity both before and after a person enters into this holy covenant.

Although the exact words have taken on many variations throughout the years, Biblically based vows exchanged at the altar of marriage have been spoken for centuries. In fact, the phrase “to love, honor, and cherish” still included in weddings today can be traced all the way back to its origin in the Old Testament Law (Exodus 21:10). Throughout the history of mankind, wedding vows between a man and a woman have been the bond upon which true love prospered.

Before God and men, the vows of many a marriage have been heard. Sadly, there have been those who have reneged on their vows. The storms of financial loss or failed health came, and they gave in to the pressure to quit. They will give an account to God. Others, however, are fulfilling their promise to their life’s mate. Through the storms, they have remained anchored in their commitment. They have held fast to the one they committed to love for a lifetime.

A distant relative of mine is a shining example of one who remained faithful to her spouse until the end. I would like to bring this study to a conclusion with her inspiring story....

It was just a few days before Christmas when my family received the card in the mail. It was from Kathleen, my Dad’s cousin in California. Besides a Christmas greeting, the little card delivered the following message:

I have a new address because John is confined to a skilled nursing center due to a stroke, kidney failure and severe dementia. The rents in Turlock are much cheaper than the Bay Area, so I had him transferred. He may never be able to come home but I'm not giving up. I'm with him all the way. He is the love of my life. I may be broke, tired and lonely but I'll never leave him. Please keep him in your prayers. Love, Kathleen

Early Christmas morning, barely a week after these touching words were penned, John passed on from this life. For the last two years, before his condition required the assistance of the nursing home, his faithful wife Kathleen had cared for him in their home. She had bathed him, clothed him, and provided for his care in so many ways. Even through the last few weeks of his life spent at the nursing home, his wife was right there by his side. And she was there by his side holding his hand when the time finally came for them to part. *"I may be broke, tired, and lonely, but I'll never leave him."* Thirty-six years after walking down the aisle to take his hand in marriage, she was still there, holding his hand. She had fulfilled her vows. She had kept her promise. She had accomplished what so few attain today. She had loved him for a lifetime. Her tender words to me on the phone confirmed that the love within their marriage had been given and shared by both: *"I couldn't have asked for a better husband."*

Back at home, my own parents continue to be a living testimony that lasting marriage is indeed possible. I'm deeply grateful they have stuck it out through thick and thin, remaining faithful to each other. "Til death do you part" can be achieved, even in our morally bankrupt society.

And there are other examples out there, too. There are other husbands and wives who, in the midst of a world filled with one heart-rending divorce after another, are proving themselves faithful to their spouse. They are genuine heroes for God and His design for the family.

Epilogue

Divorce and remarriage is a very emotionally-charged subject. It can hit a real nerve. As a son, I have been spared the devastating effects of divorce. Yet for some reason it still hurts every time I learn of another marriage breaking up. Strangely, it hits me as if it were the first time a family had ever been divided in two.

When I consider God's position as shown in His holy Word, I am very alarmed by the way Christians have both accepted and encouraged divorce and remarriage. If God *condemns* it, how can we *embrace* it? The physical and spiritual casualties have reached epidemic levels. How many marriages have been needlessly abandoned over one little misunderstood word in Matthew 19:9? Like the Pharisees, many have tested God in the pursuit of their own interests. If there is one way out, when the pressure is on, people will always take it. *What have we done?* I shudder to think of the divorces that have been condoned and the remarriages that have been officiated by even the most well-meaning Christians.

What message is being sent to the next generation? A message of abandoning ship when the going gets tough? As James Baldwin aptly stated, "Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they've never failed to imitate them."

Some men have countered, "But I can't live with her for the rest of my life." If a person is in Christ, his time on earth is not the rest of his life! Faithfulness in tough marriage situations for a few years until you die will lead to an eternity free of hardship and frustration. Isn't following God's directions and making it to heaven the priority?

Women too can find themselves in an agonizing situation: they may be victims of abuse by a husband. Shouldn't such a woman be free to find a decent man, rather than stay "separated" for the rest of her abusive husband's life?

Perhaps God is sparing such a person from entering into a second more frustrating or abusive relationship, as is often the outcome.

Maybe our Creator understands something else about these situations that we don't. Perhaps God is trying to teach us something about the permanency of our commitments.

Marriage is a voluntary covenant. Each person chooses to enter a lifelong commitment to the other, whether one party should fail to follow through or not. It seems married couples in our society all too often love, honor, and cherish their spouses as long as they both *can get along*, as long as *he or she does everything right*.

I confess, sometimes I wonder myself why God's positions are so radical. But the truth is, His expectations are fundamentally different than the nature of fallen man. As a follower of Christ, I believe God knows what He's doing. I often don't understand, but I try to trust Him. He knows better than I. Last I checked, He's God, not me.

No matter the situation a person finds himself or herself in, we must remember that God's expectations of His people are not out of reach (Deuteronomy 30:11). We can do all things through Christ, through His strength. If we commit to truly following Jesus' directives, He will give us support from heaven. He will never abandon us. He will always be there to comfort us and lead us. He loves us, perfectly. Be encouraged, Christian:

For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His. (II Chronicles 16:9a)

You may choose to look the other way,
but you can never again say
that you did not know.

—William Wilberforce (1759 – 1833)