

God's Pattern: Broken

A Biblical Study of Divorce and Remarriage¹

INTRODUCTION:

Why study the subject of divorce and remarriage?

- It has an affect on everyone.

One Newsweek journalist rhetorically asked, "Is there anyone left in the land who has not heard a friend, a child, or a parent describe the agony of divorce?"² Some pollsters estimate that half of all marriages will end in divorce.³

- There is great confusion in the Christian community.

"If there is confusion about the subject of divorce and remarriage, it is not because God has given us a confused word in Scripture. Rather, it is because rampant sin entering the world has confused the simplicity of what God has said."⁴

- The need to bring biblical counsel to those who are considering divorce or have been through one.

"Contrary to some opinions, the concept of divorce is biblical. The Bible recognizes and regulates divorce. Certain provisions are made for it. This must be affirmed clearly and without hesitation. Because divorce is a biblical concept, used and referred to frequently in the pages of the Bible, Christians must do all they can to understand it and to teach what God, in His Word, says about it. Moreover, the church is required to apply to actual cases the Scriptural principles regarding divorce."⁵

- Some respond to the problem by lowering the standard.

These are people who say that we must "forgive" and let people work it out the best they can. If they feel they need a divorce then let them get one. Just this week I received an email that said this, "I will be filing for divorce very soon, I know that it's sinful but I have asked God to forgive me...I am happier now than I have ever been in my whole life and I cannot and will not give this up."

- Some respond to the problem by raising the standard beyond the scriptures.

These are people who believe that to stop the alarming growth of divorce, we must embrace a doctrine that says, "No divorce for anybody, for any reason, and absolutely no remarriage for anyone, anytime, for anything."

¹ Paul Lamey, *Divorce and Remarriage*, Grace Community Church: Unpublished notes, 2004.

² Cited in John MacArthur, Jr., *On Divorce* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 2.

³ *The World Almanac and Book of Facts: 1992* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992), 938. The exact figures are as follows: In the United States in 1990 there were 2,448,000 marriages and 1,175,000 divorces.

⁴ John MacArthur, Jr., *The Family* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 107.

⁵ Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 23.

MacArthur has well noted, “Now that sounds like a very good standard. In fact, I wish I could believe it. Why? Because it would end a lot of counseling problems. We could just say, ‘All divorce is wrong. Period.’ There would be no remarriage, and we wouldn’t have to counsel people in that area. It would be nice if it was that airtight, but we can’t do that. We can’t look at the problem in the world and say, ‘In order to stop the problem, let’s take the Bible’s standard and raise it.’ That’s not right.”⁶

- The dearth of clear teaching and understanding of the subject.

In fact a survey of what Christian writers have written would lead us to believe that the Bible is somehow confused when it comes to this issue. As we noted before, many are held captive by extreme views rather than a balanced-biblical approach to the subject.

Among Christian writers, we can find at least four positions on the subject of divorce and remarriage.

1. **No divorce, no remarriage.**⁷
2. **Divorce in some cases but no remarriage.**⁸
3. **Divorce and remarriage in a wide variety of circumstances.**⁹
4. **Divorce and remarriage in very limited circumstances.**¹⁰

The goal of this study is to get an overall view of the Bible’s teaching regarding divorce/remarriage so that we can be better equipped to protect our marriages and carefully counsel those who may be considering divorce. I believe the fourth position is the most accurate position regarding the subject of divorce and remarriage.

I. God’s **Precept** on Marriage.

To understand what the Bible teaches on divorce we must first understand what it teaches on the subject of marriage. When Jesus taught on the subject of divorce (cf. Mt. 19:2-12) he began by clarifying the institution of marriage. The passage that He quoted from is the

⁶ MacArthur, *On Divorce*, 4.

⁷ This view is advocated by writers Bill Gothard, *Rebuilder’s Guide* (Oak Brook: Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, nd); and most notably J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1986) among others.

⁸ This view is held by William Heth and Gordon J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985); also by John Piper, *Divorce and Remarriage: A Position Paper* (accessed at http://www.desiringgod.org/library/topics/divorce_remarriage/div_rem_paper.html).

⁹ This view is advocated by Michael A. Braun, *Second Class Christians? A New Approach to the Dilemma of Divorced People in the Church* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1989); James Dobson, *Hot Topics: Divorce* (accessed at <http://www.family.org/married/topics/a0025105.cfm>) among many others.

¹⁰ This view is held by the majority of evangelical writers. See John MacArthur, Jr., *On Divorce* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985); Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980); John Murray, *Divorce* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961); and the Westminster Confession of Faith (chapter 24).

foundation of the Bible's teaching on marriage (cf. 1 Cor. 11:8-9; 1 Tim. 2:13). That key passage is Genesis 2:18-24:¹¹

Genesis 2:18-24 ¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." ¹⁹ Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought *them* to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. ²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. ²² The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. ²³ The man said, "This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man." ²⁴ For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.

Verse 24 is the key verse in this passage. The "For" at the beginning of verse 24 introduces Moses' application of the principles of the first marriage to every subsequent marriage. The verse has three parts and describes three aspects that are essential to all marriages.

A. Marriage is Exclusive

Israelite marriage was usually patrilocal, i.e., the man continued to live in or near his parents' home. It was the woman who left home to join her husband. The "forsaking,"¹² of course, was relative and not absolute. At marriage the man's priorities change. Before marrying, his first obligations are to his parents. Now they are to his wife.

The exclusivity of marriage consists not only in the receding of the man's parental obligations, but also in his being joined as "*one flesh*" with his wife. This phrase ("one flesh"), together with the fact that God formed one man and one woman, clearly suggests that monogamy is the God-designed form of the marriage relationship.

B. Marriage is Permanent

The man "*shall cleave to his wife.*"¹³ The Hebrew word¹⁴ translated "to cleave" may be rendered "cling, cleave, and keep close." The word "to cleave" is often used in the Old Testament to designate Israel's covenant relationship to the Lord (Deut. 4:4; 10:20; 11:22; 13:4 [MT, v. 5]; 30:20). The point is that marriage is to be considered a permanent

¹¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the *Updated New American Standard* (Anaheim: Foundation Publications, 1995).

¹² The verb יָצָא may be translated by the English present or future. It is a qal imperfect suggesting customary action. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 47. Delitzsch (*A New Commentary on Genesis*, 1:145) prefers to translate it as a future, as does the NASB.

¹³ Kidner (*Genesis*, 66, n. 1) wisely observes, "Note the order: 'leaving' before 'cleaving': marriage, nothing less, before intercourse."

¹⁴ קָרַב

bond between a husband and a wife rather than a makeshift arrangement. Today we would say to cleave to something is to be “glued” together.

C. Marriage is a God-sealed Covenant

The verse concludes, “And they shall become one flesh.” Jesus clearly gives His own commentary on this when He states, “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (Mark 10:9). He unequivocally states that a marriage is a union created by God. This means all that is expressed (an intimate, personal, spiritual, and physical union) is the solidarity of the relationship before God.

- God’s definition of marriage is one man and one woman for life. They are “glued” together and considered one with perfect unity. Marriage in the sight of God is a monogamous life-long oneness.

II. God’s **Perspective** on Divorce.

God’s confirms His original marriage ideal by giving His perspective on divorce. In Malachi 2:13-16:

Malachi 2:13-16 ¹³ "This is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts *it with* favor from your hand. ¹⁴ "Yet you say, 'For what reason?' Because the LORD has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. ¹⁵ "But not one has done *so* who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did *that* one *do* while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. ¹⁶ "For I hate divorce," says the LORD, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the LORD of hosts. "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously."

The people of Israel had broken their marriage covenants by divorcing their wives and marrying pagan women. The man who separates from or puts away his wife does what God hates. He “covers his garment with wrong” (vs.16). God is saying that when a man divorces his wife, he has a sin-splattered garment. God’s perspective on the subject is inescapable. Divorce is sin, and His holiness responds to it with a righteous hatred. “Even in cases of the most intense conflict and severe sin, God desires a husband and a wife to maintain their marriage union.”¹⁵

- Not part of God’s original plan.
- Always involves unfaithfulness to the covenant of marriage.
- Brings harmful consequences to the whole family.

¹⁵ MacArthur, *Family*, 113.

III. God's **Permission** on Divorce.

A. The teaching of Jesus on divorce/remarriage.

God gives permission for divorce only in the sense that He acknowledges its existence and regulates its practice.

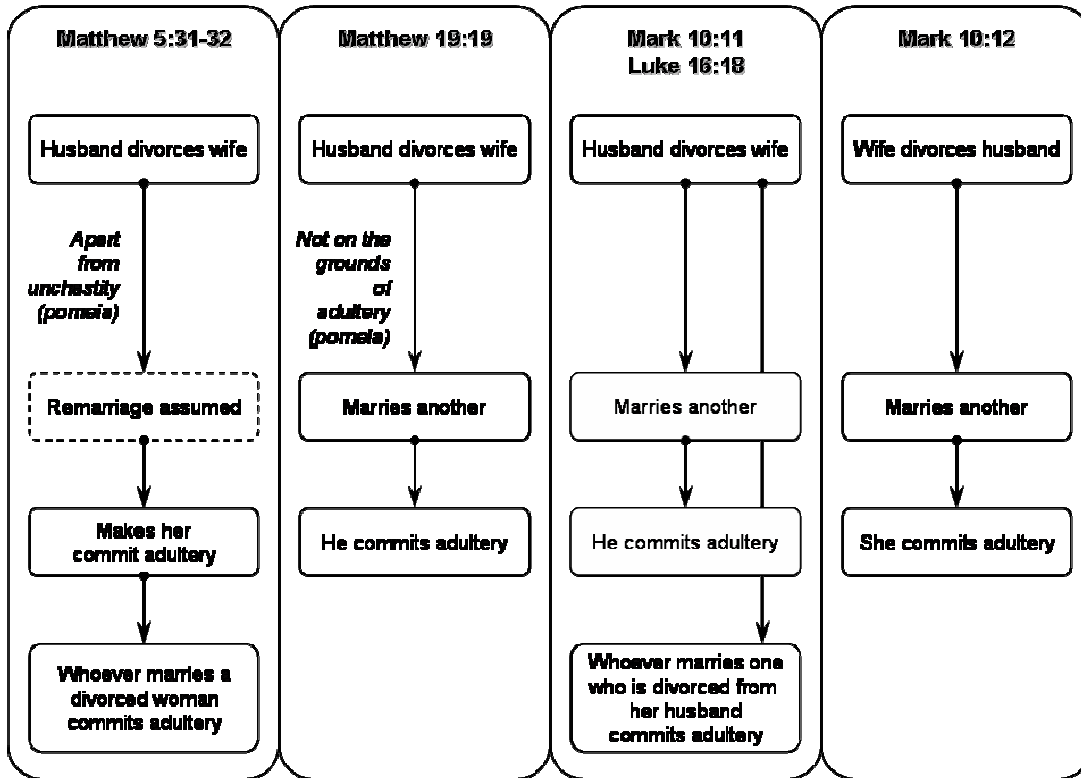
The teaching of Jesus in regards to divorce is crucial to understanding its practice. There are four primary passages in which Jesus specifically addresses the use and misuse of divorce. The key passage is Mt. 19.

Matthew 19:3-9 ³ Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, "Is it lawful *for a man* to divorce his wife for any reason at all?" ⁴ And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created *them* from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, ⁵ 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'?" ⁶ "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." ⁷ They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND *her* AWAY?" ⁸ 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. ⁹ "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

1. The Pharisees are disputing over the meaning of Deuteronomy 24:1-4.
2. The passage itself does not permit or require divorce. It deals with the prohibition or remarriage after an unrighteous divorce.
3. The point of the passage (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) is that unrighteous divorce causes adultery and defilement.
4. The Pharisees were primarily represented by the Jewish school of thought known as Hillel which said that Moses was allowing divorce for any trifling thing which displeased the husband.
5. Jesus is correcting their wrong view of divorce.
6. He correctly points out that God *permitted* divorce because of the "hardness"¹⁶ of men's hearts.
7. Therefore divorce was not for any cause at all but was a merciful concession to man's sinfulness.
8. Because remarriage was a concession under the original law, it must be assumed here as well.
9. Christ's primary point: to correct Jew's idea of divorce for "any cause at all."
10. Jesus allows for divorce and remarriage where adultery has taken place.

¹⁶ "Hardness" means destitution of spiritual perception; reluctance to respond to God due to the chosen inability to hear, which renders man liable to judgment.

Gospel Passages on Divorce



B. The teaching of Paul on divorce/remarriage.

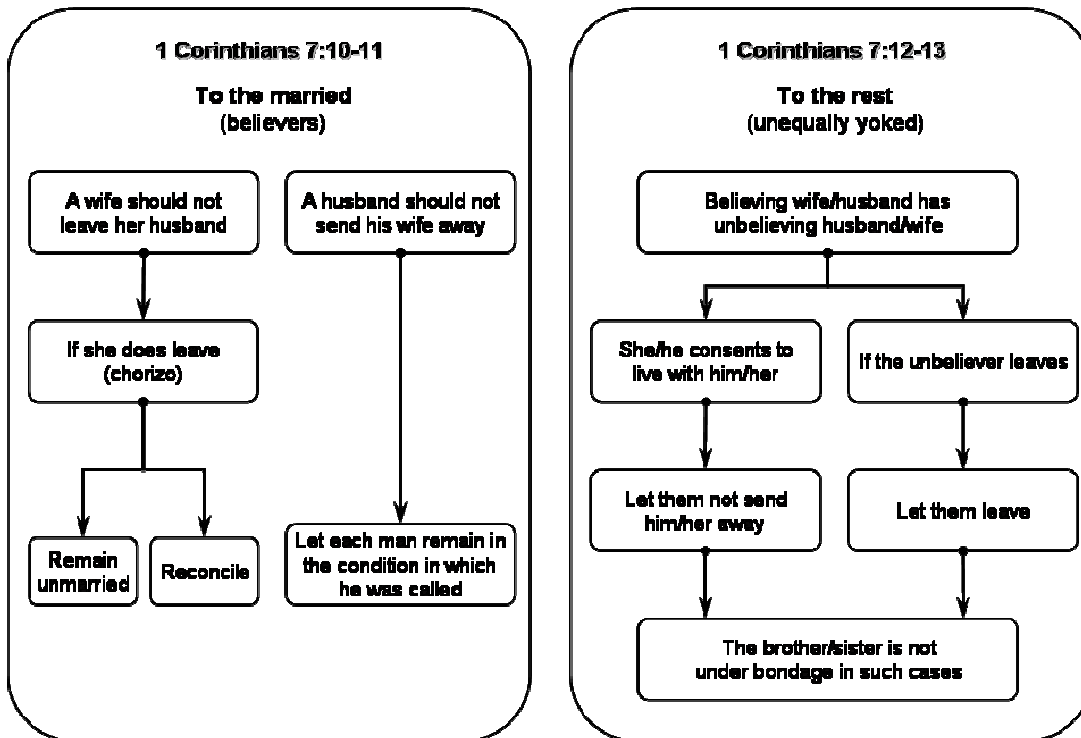
In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul gives added instruction concerning a situation of divorce for less than adultery, specifically when an unbeliever divorces a believer.

1 Corinthians 7:8-15 ⁸ But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. ⁹ But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn *with passion*. ¹⁰ But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband ¹¹ (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. ¹² But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³ And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. ¹⁵ Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such *cases*, but God has called us to peace.

1. In vv. 10-11 Paul gives an absolute prohibition of divorce for believers.
2. Should a divorce take place, the believer is to remain unmarried or be reconciled.
3. The “rest” in vv. 12-15 are those who are in “unequally yoked” marriages.
4. If an unbeliever leaves a believer (cf. vs. 15), the believer is “not under bondage.”
5. After all efforts to reconcile have been exhausted the believer has been released from the marriage bond and therefore is free to enter a new marriage relationship.

“Throughout Scripture, whenever legitimate divorce occurs, remarriage is always assumed. Where divorce is permitted, remarriage is never forbidden. So the Scripture is wonderfully consistent. The believer is not to divorce at all. But if a believer is divorced as a result of adultery when all efforts to restore are rejected, or divorced by someone who does not want anything to do with Christ, then and only then is he or she free to remarry.”¹⁷

1 Corinthians Passages on Divorce



¹⁷ MacArthur, *Family*, 127.

CONCLUSION:

A Summary

1. Divorce is not God's ideal. The ideal was to leave the parents, cleave to the marriage partner, and be one flesh (Gen 2:24).
2. Along with the fall of mankind came the potential for divorce to occur.
3. God righteously hates divorce (Mal. 2:16) but He permitted it for adultery.
4. Jesus corrected the Pharisees liberal view of divorce (for any reason at all).
5. The Apostle Paul reaffirmed Jesus' strong stand for the sanctity of marriage
6. Paul adds the only other exception outside of adultery—when an unbeliever deserts the home and wants out of the marriage.
7. In those two instances remarriage is allowed.
8. Even when both of those instances are true, God is most glorified in reconciliation (see Hosea).
9. God never commands or demands divorce.

Recommended Resources:

Adams, Jay E., *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980.

Halstead, Tom and John Zimmer, Shepherd's Conference Notes, *Divorce and Remarriage*, ND, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA. (out of print).

MacArthur, John F. *On Divorce*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1985.

_____. *The Family*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1982.

Murray, John, *Divorce*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1961.

Shannon, Bill, Shepherd's Conference Notes, Session #1020, *Till Death Do Us Part: A Biblical Look at Divorce and Remarriage*, 2003, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA. (<http://www.biblebb.com/files/MAC/SC03-1020.htm>).

The Biblical Perspective on Divorce & Remarriage, The Elder's Perspective Series, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA. (<http://www.gracechurch.org/divorce.asp>).