

When Adultery Occurs: Does Jesus Permit Divorce?

The Lord's Commands, The Marriage Commitment, and Biblical Love

Introduction

In Matthew 19:3-9, Jesus talks about God's perspective on the commitment of marriage. He said that if a person divorces their spouse (for any reason *other* than their spouse committing adultery) and then marries another person, then they would be actually be committing adultery against their former spouse. In other words...

JESUS: IF you divorce your *faithful* spouse AND you marry someone else THEN you *are* committing adultery.

IMPLIED: IF you divorce your *unfaithful* spouse AND you remarry THEN you are *not* committing adultery.¹

This “implied” statement is often used to support the decision to divorce an unfaithful spouse. While Jesus indeed indicates that the divorced person may remarry without committing adultery, it is a stretch to conclude that this fact alone *specifically grants permission* for the previous divorce.² In context, Jesus had just commanded *against* divorce on the grounds that God Himself was involved in joining the couple in marriage. Scripture repeatedly affirms that the marriage commitment has no “exception clause” even in cases of unfaithfulness...

Unconditional Marriage

- 1) God's Command.** Scripture directly prohibits divorce (Matthew 19:6, Mark 10:9, 1st Corinthians 7:10-13, 27). All of God's commands against divorce lack an exception clause for adultery.
- 2) God's Committed Love.** Though God's “bride” (the Jews of the Old Testament) was repeatedly unfaithful to Him, He loved her as part of an unending relationship (Malachi 2:11, Jeremiah 3, Romans 11). To provide a living word-picture of His commitment, the prophet Hosea was told by God to *keep loving* (and *remain married to*) his adulterous wife (Hosea 1:2, 3:1). Hosea was an example of God's great *agape love* that husbands are unconditionally commanded to have towards their wives (Ephesians 5:25).³
- 3) No Alternative Option.** In cases of marital separation, reconciliation (not divorce) is God's specific direction (1st Corinthians 7:11).⁴ God states (without exception) that the marriage commitment ends at death (1st Corinthians 7:39, Romans 7:2-3).⁵
- 4) Unconditional Vows.** Most traditional wedding vows include the pledge of an unconditional, lifetime commitment to the other spouse. An “unconditional” vow means that there is an obligation to keep the vow, even if the other party does not.⁶ These vows are broken when the choice to divorce is made. Betrayal of the unconditional marriage covenant is why God states that He “hates” divorce (Malachi 2:16).

¹ The initiator of the divorce would not be considered guilty of betraying the bond of marital intimacy – the unfaithful spouse has already departed from that bond.

² Notice that the *only* moral judgment Jesus is making in verse 9 is whether the *remarriage* is adulterous.

³ “Agape” is defined as *selfless, unconditional love*; it is not conditional upon the recipient's faithfulness (see Matthew 5:44ff). Agape should trump adultery in determining the status of a marriage relationship. Agape love “endures *all* things” and “never fails” (1st Corinthians 13:7-8). It “covers a multitude of sins” (1st Peter 4:8, cf. Proverbs 10:12).

⁴ Conflict between believers is to be resolved by forgiveness & reconciliation (Romans 12:18, Matthew 5:31-31, 18:15-17, Luke 17:2-3, Colossians 3:13). Divorce is simply not an adequate way to gain biblical peace between Christ-followers, especially since a Christian is not permitted to bring another Christian to a secular divorce court (1st Corinthians 6:1-6).

⁵ A “hard heart” was the reason that Moses gave *the Jews* permission to divorce (Matthew 19:8). Since Christians have “new hearts” (Ezekiel 11:19, 36:26, Hebrews 10:22), they have no valid, biblical reason to use that permission. The permission that was not give to them and does not reflect God's original intent for marriage (Matthew 19:8).

⁶ The vows do not include any statements like, “I will love you for better and for worse – *if* you love me the same way.”

Questions About Exception Clauses

#1) “Doesn't Matthew 5:31-32 provide permission to divorce if your spouse has been unfaithful?”

Jesus' instructions in Matthew 5 are very similar to those in Matthew 19, with two important differences: (1) He speaks about *divorce by itself* (without the next step of remarriage),⁷ and (2) Jesus says the initiator of divorce actually *causes*⁸ the *faithful* spouse to commit adultery.⁹ Put another way, the two possible scenarios are...

JESUS: If you divorce your **faithful** spouse then you are causing that spouse to commit adultery.
This is adultery-caused-by-divorce.

IMPLIED: If you divorce your **unfaithful** spouse then you are not causing that spouse to commit adultery.
This is divorce-caused-by-adultery.

A married person may wonder whether Matthew 5 permits them to divorce their unfaithful spouse. While divorce would indeed not “cause” the unfaithful spouse to commit adultery, this fact doesn't nullify God's *commands against divorce* nor the faithful spouse's *unconditional commitment*. Specifically, the ability to avoid a negative *consequence* of divorce¹⁰ doesn't avoid the guilt of the *choice* to divorce.¹¹ The fact that divorce wouldn't “cause the spouse to commit adultery” is simply a truism: the spouse has *already* committed adultery.

#2) “If there are no exceptions to the command against divorce, why would Jesus say 'except for unfaithfulness' when discussing divorce and remarriage?”

Defining the Exception: In Matthew 5 & 19, the “exception” is *unstated* and is merely an *implied truism*. In cases of marital unfaithfulness, the Bible does not include any “exception clause” for God's *prohibition* against divorce and remarriage, only an exception to the *normal result* (adultery) of divorce and remarriage. God's command against divorce remains.¹²

The Author of Scripture knows that there will be cases when a married person could sin by being unfaithful. In God's eyes, the adulterous intimacy obviously does not (by itself) *create* a new marriage with the third party. Similarly, that same adulterous intimacy (by itself) cannot *end* the marriage covenant. It can end only by a spouse's decision. God provides his authoritative *direction* and *consequences* regarding that decision.

The Height of God's Standards: Jesus' statements serve as warnings against the real severity of divorce and remarriage. In Matthew 5, Jesus says that divorce is so serious that it can cause the faithful spouse to be an adulteress/adulterer. Similarly, in Matthew 19, Jesus teaches that remarriage can result in adultery against an *ex-spouse*. Because God's standard for the marriage commitment is usually different from society's standards, it can be difficult for some people to accept. Such was the experience of the disciples in Matthew 19:10-11.

⁷ The issue of remarriage appears at the end of Matthew 5:32, but Jesus' statement about divorce stands on its own.

⁸ This is the Greek word *poieo* / ποιέω (Strong's #4160) which is defined as “renders, makes, or authors.”

⁹ This shows how closely the “two have become one” (Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:6). In some cases, initiating a divorce may prompt the other spouse to begin a romantic relationship with another person, but even without doing so Jesus pronounces the faithful spouse to be an adulterer. As Scripture, this statement is true whether or not we fully understand why. At minimum, the faithful spouse is prevented from faithfully maintaining their marital bond while being divorced. This situation also occurs in the scenario of Matthew 19:9 at the time the divorce happens.

¹⁰ The consequence of divorce that Jesus describes (that is, “causing” the faithful spouse commit adultery).

¹¹ Similarly, the ability to avoid having a car accident doesn't provide permission to break the speed limit.

¹² 1st Corinthians 7:15 provides direction for how a Christian should respond to their non-Christian spouse if that spouse chooses to divorce. However, this verse does not provide permission for the *Christian* to *initiate* the divorce, and also does not provide God's approval for the non-Christian's choice to divorce.

Practical Considerations

- Society often does not realize that every divorce (except those prompted by unfaithfulness) results in adultery.¹³ Society often does not realize that a subsequent remarriage often produces a second instance of adultery¹⁴ (Matthew 5:32, Matthew 19:9, Luke 16:18).
- Jesus states that God is primarily concerned with a person's heart (1st Samuel 16:7), so much that He considers even lust to be adulterous (Matthew 5:28). If God permitted divorce in circumstances of adultery (including heart-level adultery), then He would open the door to divorce for a large percentage of marriages.
- Even Christians rarely think through Jesus' statement that if an adulterous person divorces their faithful spouse, then they make their faithful spouse into an adulterer (Matthew 5:31-32). This realization should motivate betrayed spouses to *seek help* for their marriages, knowing that if the unfaithful spouse divorces them to pursue another person, this would render the *faithful* spouse as an *adulterer* – and as such, be unable to remarry (Matthew 5:32).
- When considering God's high standards for marriage, it is important to keep in mind that divorced believers are 100% accepted and forgiven by our loving God, and have the same identity in Christ as the other members of the Body of Christ.
- Jesus' purpose in prohibiting divorce is not to downplay the severity of adultery. Instead, the purpose is to show the God's high standard of the permanence of the marriage relationship. In situations of adultery, maintaining the marriage commitment (and responding to the unfaithful spouse in a godly way) can be extremely difficult, and those who are attempting to do so deserve much support.

¹³ In which the person *being divorced* is made to commit adultery (Matthew 5:31-32).

¹⁴ Here, the *initiator* of the divorce is committing adultery.