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Jesus and Paul on Divorce and Remarriage
Part One

Mark 10:1-12

I have **two goals that seem to be incompatible and irreconcilable**. It is going to be difficult for me to achieve them both. **It seems as if to emphasize one is to minimize the other**. Let me explain.

On the one hand, I want to emphasize the value and dignity of marriage. Jesus himself in the passage from Mark 10 is emphatic about the divine design for marriage: “*What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.*” Therefore, sundering or severing what God has forged or united is a serious matter.

The problem is that marriage is not held in high regard in our society. Even worse, it isn't held in high regard in some of our churches across the land. When it comes to marriage, our standards have gradually eroded until we've come to view it as **merely a temporary arrangement** between two people rather than a permanent covenant. ***Whether or not people stay married has become an issue of what brings immediate happiness or instant gratification, rather than an issue of obedience to the Word of God.***

Whereas statistics can often be twisted to prove just about anything, when it comes to the problem of divorce in American society the message is loud and clear. In 1910 only 1 in every 10 marriages ended in divorce. By 1920 it had risen to 1 in 7. By 1940 it was 1 in 6. By 1960 1 in every 4 marriages ended in divorce and by 1970 it had escalated to 1 in 3. By 2000 1 of every 2 marriages today ended in divorce. Today, it is approaching 2 of 3 that end in divorce.

So, my first goal is to emphasize the divine design in marriage: life-long commitment between a man and a woman.

On the other hand, however, and here is my dilemma, **I want to eliminate the stigma and shame that divorced people live with, especially those in the church.** Divorced people are kept at arm's length and even held in contempt and viewed with suspicion. They are regarded as **second-class citizens in the kingdom of God and are treated as if they have committed the unpardonable sin.** You may *think* you don't *think* about them that way, and I hope you don't. But because of both the *public* nature of divorce and its incredibly *painful* impact, divorced *people feel extraordinarily vulnerable* to these things.

So here's the problem: *How do I honor and esteem marriage without dishonoring and defaming those who have experienced divorce? And how do I encourage and affirm divorced people without appearing to minimize the importance of honoring one's marital commitment and vows? If I magnify the value of marriage and stress the importance of faithfulness to one's marital vows, divorced people will feel judged and rejected and unfit for ministry and service in the church. And I don't want that! But if I express compassion and love for divorced people and remind them how much God really does love them, others will think I'm glossing over their failures and that I'm contributing to the very devaluation of marriage that I earlier denounced.*

So, how do I stress the permanence of marriage without condemning the divorced? And how do I love and affirm the divorced person without condoning sin and failure?

Our challenge is to mingle the call to obedience with the tears of compassion . . . to be both tender to those who have failed without compromising the high standards of Scripture.

Here, then, is my two-fold appeal. **(1)** To the divorced I say that my emphasis on the importance of marriage and honoring one's vows and fighting to stay together *does not mean we don't love you and care about you or that you aren't wanted or can't fit in or can never be active in ministry.* **(2)** To the married I say that my emphasis on the dignity of the divorced person and their value to God and the forgiveness and restoration that is available to them through the cross *does not mean that we can take a flippant, casual attitude toward marriage or that marriage isn't worth preserving or that we are adopting a loose view toward sin.*

Why this special concern over divorce and remarriage? Four reasons:

(1) Divorce invariably involves sin that is **more destructive** than many others. The devastation caused by the breakup of a marriage is so widespread and deeply painful that it needs to be addressed in a clear and forthright way. Divorce is **indescribably painful**. It is **emotionally wrenching**, more so than the death of a spouse. It is often the **culmination** of years of anguish and pain and bitter words and hurt feelings. The sense of **guilt and shame** and **failure** and **rejection** is more deeply felt in divorce than in perhaps any other human experience. There are the accompanying feelings of loneliness, betrayal, abandonment, and hopelessness. Court proceedings, financial settlements, custody battles, and the **inescapable wounds that are inflicted on the children**, all combine to make this issue one of extreme importance for the church to address.

(2) Marriage, divorce, and remarriage involve the taking of **sacred oaths and vows** and entering into a sacred physical relationship, together with the breaking of those vows and the severing of that relationship.

(3) **Marriage is unique** among all human relationships in that it is ordained by God to illustrate the relationship between Christ and the church. Not parent/child, not friend/friend, not brother/sister, but husband/wife. Therefore the preservation of this bond, or conversely, its breaking, is crucial to the message we send to each other and to the world.

(4) **The stability and growth of the church**, as well as its witness to the world, is in large part dependent on both its commitment to the pre-eminence of marriage as well as how it responds to the divorced in its midst.

Our concern is not to determine why the divorce rate is so high, but to evaluate what the Bible says about the grounds, if any, for divorce, and the grounds, if any, for remarriage.

I'm going to do my best to keep this **simple and uncomplicated**. Trust me, that is no easy task! There are, broadly speaking, **two categories or positions**, within which there are number of variations and options:

1. **Divorce is never permissible**

According to this view, divorce is never permissible **under any circumstances**. Neither adultery nor abandonment nor any other sin can warrant the dissolution of the marital bond. Indeed, the marital bond is inherently **indissoluble**. Although a husband and wife may obtain a certificate of divorce from the state and subsequently pursue other relationships, perhaps even remarriage, this view insists that they are committing adultery insofar as their original marital covenant is, **in the eyes of God**, still in force.

Advocates of this strict view argue that if a person is divorced by his/her spouse, he/she must remain single or be reconciled with their partner. Even should the partner who initiated the divorce marry another (who, by the way, therein commits adultery), the victim of the divorce is

not free to remarry. **Very few** evangelical scholars embrace this view of divorce and remarriage.

The key question is this: *Is the marital bond inherently and irrevocably indissoluble or only ideally indissoluble?* Those who argue against divorce on any grounds insist the marriage covenant **cannot** be broken. There is nothing anyone can do to end a marriage between a man and wife. Others, such as myself, insist that the bond **should not** be broken but acknowledge that in reality it *can* be under certain circumstances. **Marriage is not inherently indissoluble.** Jesus says, “What God has joined together *let* no one put asunder.” He is not saying you can’t put asunder what God has joined together, but that you **shouldn’t**. There are certain grounds on which a marriage can be ended. Both sides agree that *physical death* severs or breaks the marital bond (Rom. 7:1-3; 1 Cor. 7:39), thereby freeing the partner to remarry. Does this argue against the notion of absolute and inherent indissolubility?

2. **Divorce is sometimes permissible**

Under this general heading you typically find two positions. There are those who argue that whereas divorce is on occasion permissible, **remarriage is not**. Others insist that if divorce is **ever** permissible, so too is remarriage.

I must confess that the position which says that divorce is sometimes permissible but remarriage never is, strikes me as incoherent and unintelligible. It simply makes no sense to me. If God permits a marriage to end by divorce, there is no reason why he would not permit remarriage. The first marriage has ended. The covenant has been broken. The **innocent** victim of such a divorce is now truly single and thus ought to be free to remarry.

The question, of course, is this: on what grounds does God permit divorce and remarriage? Please note: ***Divorce is never mandatory / Divorce is never required. Nothing that happens in life necessitates divorce.*** Divorce may be an option, but let us labor to make certain it is the *last* option. Let us labor in the grace of God to make it the final choice that comes only after prayer, humility, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, and relying upon the Spirit of God to rebuild trust and facilitate reconciliation.

Having said that, I do believe that on certain grounds divorce may be allowed with the freedom to remarry. On what grounds? There are generally speaking three views:

- (1) Adultery only**
- (2) Adultery and Abandonment (or desertion)**
- (3) Adultery, Abandonment, and Abuse (whether emotional or physical)**

We all know what adultery means: sexual infidelity. But what is meant by Abandonment and Abuse? These two topics we will examine next week when we look at what the Apostle Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 7.

Several issues have not been addressed:

First, what is the status of those who were married and divorced *before* coming to saving faith in Christ? Do conversion, forgiveness, and the fact that they are now a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17) have an effect on their freedom to remarry? In other words, does conversion or salvation in a sense wipe the slate clean in terms of one’s experience with divorce and remarriage? The Bible doesn’t say, but my inclination is to say No.

Second, no attempt has been made to address the practical complexities that arise when someone has been married and divorced several times (for illegitimate reasons).

Third, nothing has been said about issues related to the status of the “guilty” party in a divorce. The NT never explicitly addresses the rights or freedom of the person who has caused a marriage to end either by adultery, abandonment, or abuse.

Note: Reasons people give for divorce that are *not* permitted by Scripture:

- “We don’t have anything in common: goals, values, hobbies, joys, etc.”
- “I don’t love him/her anymore”
- “Staying married will do more harm to the children than getting divorced”
- “We never have sexual relations”
- “He/she isn’t a believer”
- “I’m exhausted. He/she will never change. Its useless and hopeless”
- Incompatibility . . .

It’s important for us to be aware of the extremely complex and therefore controversial nature of this issue. The passages we will examine are not as clear as we might wish. Christian scholars of both the Old and New Testaments, all of whom embrace the inspiration and authority of Scripture, continue to disagree on what the Bible says about divorce and remarriage. We need to be cautious about how we state our positions and remember that we are dealing with an issue that, unlike other doctrinal disputes, touches the heart and soul of people who are often already deeply wounded and filled with shame. This isn’t to say we shouldn’t hold firmly to our convictions. It is only to say that pastoral sensitivity and tenderness are especially crucial as we try to help people embrace a biblical perspective.

Jesus on Divorce and Remarriage

There were two schools of thought on divorce in the time of Jesus, each being associated with a famous Jewish rabbi who advocated it. Both Rabbis and their followers based their view on a particular interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (particularly v. 1):

[1] “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found **some indecency** in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, [2] and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, [3] and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, [4] then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance (Deut. 24:1-4).

We are only concerned with v. 1 and the words translated “some indecency.”

The followers of Rabbi Shammai insisted that this referred to adultery; thus divorce was only permissible in the event of adultery.

The followers of Rabbi Hillel argued that the words referred not only to adultery but also to “any cause” that might lead a man to become dissatisfied with his wife: not only for adultery but for a seemingly harmless act such as burning his breakfast or if he happened to find someone more physically attractive than she. In fact, this view of Rabbi Hillel came to be called the “*Any Cause*” view of divorce. It was the dominant view in the first century when Jesus lived. Divorce among the Jewish people was a common practice and it was allowed for virtually “any cause” in addition to adultery.

We must keep this in mind as we look at both **Matthew and Mark**.

In Matthew 19:3 the Pharisees approach Jesus and ask him this question: “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife *for any cause*?” Some people have read that and assumed that what they were asking was this: “Jesus, is it **ever** lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

But that’s not what they were asking. The Pharisees wanted to know what Jesus thought about the rather liberal and broad view of Rabbi Hillel. They were asking him: “What do you think about the ‘Any Cause’ type of divorce? What is your opinion about the way Hillel and his followers have interpreted Deut. 24:1?” Jesus responds by saying that Hillel and his followers have misunderstood the OT. Moses never said you *must* divorce your wife or that you can divorce your wife for “any cause.” Rather, Moses **permitted** you to divorce your wife **because of the hardness of your hearts**.

Jesus then responds to them in Matthew 19:9 – “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” If you divorce your wife for “any cause” other than adultery (i.e., any of the many causes Rabbi Hillel acknowledged), you are in the eyes of God still married to her and she is still married to you. In other words, a divorce obtained on the basis of “Any Cause” other than sexual immorality is invalid.

Jesus isn’t making a universal statement about all possible grounds for divorce. He is simply saying: “Rabbi Hillel and his followers are wrong when they take this view of Deut. 24:1. Getting a divorce based on their ‘any cause’ view is invalid. Unless such a person has committed adultery, they are still married to their partner.”

Now, notice carefully that **Mark does not use the words “any cause” in his version.** Look at Mark 10:2b – “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” Notice also that **in v. 11 Mark does not include the words: “except for sexual immorality.”** At first glance it appears that Jesus is forbidding divorce on any grounds whatsoever. What’s going on here? Why would Mark have omitted these statements that Matthew included?

Although several explanations are possible, it seems most likely to me that the reason is that everyone in the first century would simply have **assumed** that the Pharisees were referring to the “any cause” view of divorce advocated by Rabbi Hillel. It was common for people in the first century as it is for us today to compress our language and omit words that we believe everyone will simply take for granted. Example:

“Is it lawful for a sixteen year-old to drink?”

No one here today is going to think that I’m asking whether it is lawful for a sixteen year-old to drink water or soda or coffee! We all know what is implied. We naturally assume that the question is: “Is it lawful for a sixteen year-old to drink alcoholic beverages?”

Likewise, the exception for adultery was so obvious and well known to the people of our Lord’s day that they would have thought it entirely unnecessary to add the words “except for sexual immorality” in the same way we deem it unnecessary to add the words “alcoholic beverages.” It was simply taken for granted that this was what he meant.

Consider another example. Imagine that you go into any evangelical, Bible believing church today and ask the question:

“Do you believe in the Second Coming?”

Everyone knows you are talking about the Second Coming of Christ, even though you didn’t use the words.

We even have other examples of this in the teaching of Jesus. In Matthew 5:22a Jesus says, “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.” What Jesus didn’t say, because he didn’t need to, is: “**angry without cause.**” Everyone naturally assumes that this is what he meant. Sometimes anger is justified. There are good reasons for it. But Jesus is obviously talking about unjustified anger even though he doesn’t use the words to say it. [I’ve adapted these illustrations from David Instone-Brewer in his book, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (IVP).]

Matthew simply makes explicit what Mark merely assumes.

The key to understanding what Jesus is saying, then, is to remember that he is answering the Pharisees’ question about the meaning of Deut. 24:1. In summary, Jesus says: “When it comes to Deut. 24:1, only sexual immorality is a valid grounds for divorce. People who get a divorce for ‘any cause’ other than adultery are still married to each other. That is why for them to remarry is to commit adultery.”

Jesus is not addressing the question of whether abandonment or abuse are valid grounds for divorce. He is only saying: “I agree with Rabbi Shammai when it comes to Deut. 24:1. The only ground for divorce in that passage is sexual immorality.”

So what has Jesus done with regard to the prevailing view of divorce and remarriage in the first century? ***He has said in no uncertain terms that the liberal view of Rabbi Hillel in which a man could divorce his wife for virtually “any cause” whatsoever is invalid.*** And since it is invalid, to remarry after such a “divorce” leads to adultery. But there is one **exception** to the “no divorce” principle: adultery.

Three issues remain.

First, the word Jesus uses that is translated “sexual immorality” in Matthew 10 is *porneia*, from which we get our word “pornography.” Now, that isn’t what the word meant in the first century, but it does raise the question of whether pornography today would be included in what Jesus had in mind. Most scholars argue that by *porneia* Jesus is referring to any form of sexual immorality: adultery, incest, homosexuality, bestiality, pre-marital sex, etc. The one question I am asked today more than any other is whether or not a man’s addiction to pornography is grounds for divorce. More on this next week.

Second, are we to understand Jesus to be saying that the **only** legitimate ground for divorce in the whole of Scripture is sexual immorality? **In my opinion, no.** Remember what Jesus is doing. He is answering or responding to the Pharisees who asked him his opinion about Hillel’s interpretation and application of the OT. “**Do you believe in the ‘any cause’ divorce policy of Hillel?**” “No,” says Jesus. “**No one should divorce his wife except for the cause of sexual immorality.**”

But does that mean that sexual immorality in the NT is the **only** legitimate ground for divorce? Next week we will see that the Apostle Paul permits divorce on the grounds of **desertion**, or **abandonment**. We will have to figure out what he means by that term. Others argue that severe, unrepentant **abuse** (whether emotional or physical or both) is a legitimate ground for divorce. What about the failure to provide financially for one’s spouse? What about alcoholism or a severe gambling addiction and the devastation it brings to a marriage? What about pornography? These are matters to be taken up next week.

Third, if a divorce occurs, whether on grounds of sexual immorality or desertion, is the innocent victim **free to remarry**? I believe the answer is Yes. Notice that I said, “the innocent victim.”

The NT never talks about the rights or freedom of the guilty party. It is only the person against whom adultery has been committed or the person who has been deserted that is said to have the right to remarry. That doesn't necessarily mean the guilty party has no such freedom. It just means the Bible doesn't explicitly address it.

Conclusion: Let's return to my two goals that appear to be so incompatible. Can we affirm the dignity of marriage and God's design for marriage that it be with one partner for life? Yes! Can we also love and encourage those who have suffered through a divorce and feel ashamed and different and disqualified? Yes!

So let me summarize part one of our study with four statements:

- Marriage is ideally permanent.
- Divorce is never necessary.
- Divorce is occasionally permissible.
- Remarriage is open to those whose divorce was on biblical grounds.

Jesus and Paul on Divorce and Remarriage Part Two Mark 10:1-12; 1 Corinthians 7:1-16

Last week we looked at the perspective of Jesus on divorce and remarriage in Mark 10 and Matthew 19. We saw that **Jesus acknowledged sexual immorality as a legitimate ground or basis for divorce and remarriage.** Some have argued that adultery is the *only* legitimate ground for divorce and remarriage, but we will shortly see that **Paul clearly acknowledges yet another: abandonment.** And we must also reckon at least with the possibility that certain forms of **severe abuse** may be legitimate grounds. To do this we turn our attention today to 1 Corinthians 7.

We need to begin by taking note of what provoked or moved Paul to write what he does. The **Corinthians had evidently sent Paul a letter** in which they made several statements about things they believed as well as asked several questions.

The statement or assertion made by the Corinthians that sparked Paul's response in chapter 7 is found in **v. 1** – "*It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.*" Contrary to the way some English translations have made it appear, this is **not** Paul's statement of what **he** believed. **This is the belief of certain misguided and misinformed people in Corinth.**

When it came to the subject of sex, two extremes existed at Corinth. At one end of the spectrum were those who argued for *sexual indulgence*: do whatever you want sexually with whomever you want. It had gotten so bad that some of the men in the church at Corinth were regularly visiting prostitutes. At the other end of the spectrum were those who insisted that sexual relations were inherently *defiling*. It must be avoided at all costs, even by married couples.

Where did this latter view come from? Evidently, there was a present in Corinth what can only be called hyper-spirituality, a belief that since they had been redeemed and were now a new creation in Christ, all things earthly and physical and material were to be shunned; this entailed a failure to honor, respect, and embrace creation and the physical blessings the Lord has provided.

It is the **letter** of these two extremes that Paul is addressing in 1 Cor. 7. They had written to Paul and said, in effect:

"As priests before God we (Corinthian Christians) must remain ceremonially clean and pure; therefore, we will abstain from all sexual relations. Wives and husbands must cease sexual contact, those who are not married must remain single, and those already married may wish to divorce their spouses lest they succumb to the temptation of sexual passion. This would especially be true of those who are married to non-Christians who are already unclean because of their unbelief. In a word, we find it morally necessary to abstain from sex. It is sinful to have sexual intercourse. It is good not to touch a woman or to have sexual relations with her."

Paul responds to this in vv. 1-9, but that is not our primary concern. We aren't going to spend much time here. Our primary focus is vv. 10-16.

But let me sum up what he says: To remain celibate or single and thus to abstain from all sexual relations is a good thing, **if** that is what God has called and gifted you to do, but **not** because sexual intercourse is evil. Celibacy or the permanent single life is good **if** and only if one has received a gift from God that enables you to resist your sexual urges. This is Paul's point in v. 7.

However, for those not called to be celibate, for those who have not been enabled by God to suppress their sexual desires, marriage is recommended (vv. 2,9), and within marriage sexual relations are not only good, they are essential. **Therefore, men, do not deprive your wife of sexual intimacy. Women, do not deprive your husband of sexual intimacy. This is Paul's point in vv. 3-5.**

I don't want to spend any more time on this point, so let's move on to what Paul says concerning divorce and remarriage in vv. 10-16.

Paul addresses two cases: one on which the Lord Jesus did speak (v. 10) and one on which Jesus did not speak (v. 12). And this brings us to the subject of divorce and remarriage.

1. *When husband and wife are both Christians (vv. 10-11)*

There are **two** possibly ways of understanding what's happening here in vv. 10-11, and in fact both of them may be true.

First, **Corinth was under Roman rule** and the Jews who lived there could and most often did avail themselves of Roman law. **In Roman law, divorce was incredibly easy**, perhaps even more so than our "No Fault" divorces in the U.S. All that a person had to do was walk away. You didn't need a plausible reason and you didn't have to prove anything in a court of law. **Separation was equivalent to divorce**, and those who divorced were always entirely free to remarry.

What was Paul's advice to the church at Corinth when believers there took advantage of Roman law and initiated "divorce-by-separation"? We read his response in v. 10. Please remember that the Greek word translated "**separate**" here does not mean what it does today. Today, to "separate" simply means you choose to live apart from your spouse for a season. It doesn't mean you have gotten a divorce or even that you are thinking about it.

Not so in first century Corinth. There, to "separate" meant you had divorced your spouse. Since the man typically owned the home, if the wife wanted to divorce him she would simply "separate" herself by leaving. The husband, on the other hand, as the end of v. 11 indicates, would "dismiss" or send away his wife. The ESV goes ahead and translates this "divorce."

Paul's point here is simply that Christians should *not* avail themselves of the Roman "divorce-by-separation" law. Divorce on such baseless, frivolous, and unbiblical grounds is not

permitted. That is why Paul gives the advice he does in v. 11. If the wife has divorced her husband simply by walking out, as Roman law permitted, and she has no legitimate biblical grounds for doing so, she and her husband are still married in the eyes of God. That is why Paul tells her and him, either remain unmarried or go back and reconcile with your spouse.

The second thing we need to be aware of, as I've already pointed out, is the false belief among some "super-spiritual" Corinthians that since sex, even in marriage, is defiling, it would be better to divorce than to expose oneself to the temptation. Evidently **the Corinthians were actually divorcing one another to avoid sexual relations**. Since sex is spiritually defiling, they believed they must divorce lest they be exposed to temptation.

This, by the way, is probably why Paul says nothing about adultery being grounds for divorce (as Jesus did). Paul is dealing with people who, far from engaging in illicit sex, were *opposed to sexual relations with anyone in any context*. In other words, these Corinthians were divorcing each other in order *not* to have sex. Thus a discussion of divorce on grounds of adultery would make no sense to them.

Regardless of the reason for their action, if they do avail themselves of the Roman "divorce-by-separation" policy (v. 11a), in violation of what both Jesus and Paul have taught, they must not remarry. Why? Because the marital bond is still intact and remarriage would constitute adultery.

Therefore, in vv. 10-11 Paul is most likely addressing a problem traceable to a **false asceticism** in Corinth, according to which abstinence from sexual relations with one's spouse was necessary for holiness.

This ascetic view of the Christian life had led some in Corinth to divorce their spouses for fear of succumbing to the temptation of sex. It is divorce for *that* reason which Paul prohibits (as well as divorce based on Roman "divorce-by-separation"). **The question of adultery is utterly foreign to his point and thus his teaching is not in conflict with that of Jesus**. If, in spite of his instruction, a divorce occurs, remarriage is forbidden. There are only two options: remain single or be reconciled.

2. *When one spouse is a Christian, the other an unbeliever (vv. 12-16)*

When Paul says in v. 12 that this is his instruction and not that of Jesus he is not telling us that his instruction is less than inspired and authoritative. He simply means that he is now going to address a situation that Jesus never faced and therefore one concerning which Jesus never spoke.

Paul now addresses the case in which two non-Christians get married and one is subsequently saved (cf. v. 39).

Paul is **not** saying it is ok for a Christian to marry a non-Christian. He is describing a situation in which the gospel comes to a city like Corinth for the very first time, an entirely pagan city, and one of two individuals in a marriage responds to the gospel and gets saved while the other remains in unbelief.

Those given to asceticism in Corinth also believed **marriage to an unbeliever was spiritually defiling, in some sense, both for themselves and their children**. Paul says emphatically "No!"

What Paul means in v. 14 by the terms *sanctified* and *holy* with regard to the unbelieving spouse and their children is not our immediate concern. However, two comments are in order. First, that it does *not* mean the unbelieving family members are automatically saved is clear from **v. 16**. Second, it does suggest that something along the lines of a **sacred environment** is created in such a home that increases the opportunity and potential for salvation to extend to the entire family

unit. True spiritual blessings come to the unbelievers in a home because of the presence of a Christian there. For one thing, the unbelieving spouse and all the children are consistently exposed to the gospel and the presence of saving grace and the power of the Spirit in the life of the believer. There is a sense in which a household where one Christian lives is set apart or consecrated or made "holy" by God, and the non-Christians who live there cannot help but benefit and be blessed by it.

His primary point is two-fold:

(1) The Christian spouse is *not* free to divorce his/her unbelieving partner, **simply because** they do not trust in Christ (vv. 12-13). **Rejecting the gospel is a serious matter, but it is not grounds for divorce.**

(2) However, **if the unbeliever chooses to leave**, if the unbeliever initiates divorce, the Christian "*is not enslaved*" or "*is not under bondage*" (v. 15).

Not under bondage to what? Not enslaved to what? What does v. 15 mean?

At least two things: **First**, I believe he means not under bondage to pursue the deserting spouse, not under bondage to discharge marital responsibilities, not under bondage to the obligations stated in vv. 2-5. If an unbeliever is determined to walk away and abandons the believer, there simply isn't anything the Christian can do to force his or her hand. If they are persistent in their decision to end the marriage, you as a believer don't have to continue to fight to preserve what the non-Christian has chosen to destroy. You are free. You are not in bondage to your marital vows. God has called you to live in peace and not in the perpetual turmoil and unrest and chaos that would come if you were obligated to never give up in the battle to keep the marriage together.

Note: This doesn't mean you *can't* strive and struggle to keep it together, if that is what you choose to do. It simply means you aren't obligated to do so. You can let the unbeliever go his/her way and you are not in sin if you do.

Second, I also believe Paul means "not under bondage" to the marriage **covenant** and thus *free to remarry*. The believer in such cases is not responsible for the breakup of the marriage and is thus free to remarry whomever they wish, as long as the new partner is a Christian.

It is not God's desire or intent to punish the believer for the unbeliever's sin. It is not God's intent to hold you to a commitment when the unbeliever has fully and finally abandoned theirs.

We can now step back for a moment and summarize what Jesus and Paul have said about divorce and remarriage. My understanding is that thus far the teaching of the NT (Jesus and Paul) allows (but does not require) divorce on two grounds: sexual infidelity and desertion of a believer by an unbeliever: or, Adultery and Abandonment. If divorce has been secured on either of these grounds, remarriage is permitted.

Are these the *only* legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage? Many, perhaps **most** evangelicals, say Yes. But there are other factors that we must also consider that may lead us to another answer to that question.

The question that I believe needs to be asked and answered is this: **What is abandonment?** What does it mean to say that a person abandons or deserts their spouse? Should we restrict this to the idea that they simply walk away or move out of the house. When they do walk out or move out of the house, they are violating their marriage vows. They are causing a breach in the marriage

covenant. They are willfully refusing to honor, love, protect, and provide for their spouse. **[Question: Can a man or woman effectively “abandon” their spouse while yet remaining physically present in the home?]**

What happens when willful neglect and hardhearted refusal to honor one’s marriage vows becomes serious harm, which in turn becomes outright abuse that threatens the emotional and physical welfare of the victim?

What I’m asking, then, is this: **Is it fair and biblical to say that persistent and unrepentant abuse is itself a form or expression of abandonment?**

The practical problem one faces here is **the definition of abandonment or desertion**. The Bible provides no explicit guidance on this point. That is why much of what I’m saying comes in the form of questions. This is why I use such terms as “may” or “possibly” rather than speak dogmatically and with complete confidence.

So what, then, are we to do with other issues that often come up today that Paul did not address or envision in his first century context? What about severe abuse, whether it be physical, sexual, or emotional?

Let’s consider why adultery and abandonment are indeed acknowledged as legitimate grounds for divorce. Both actions, in their own way, are a **fundamental assault on the marriage covenant of one flesh. Both adultery and abandonment are actions that violate the commitment of a husband or wife to be faithful with regard to material support and physical affection.**

The question we are asking, then, is this: What about other extreme cases in which a husband or wife violates the marriage covenant and utterly disregards the vows they have taken? **Does physical, emotional, or sexual abuse likewise constitute a violation of the marriage covenant that is sufficiently damaging and severe that divorce is permitted?**

Hear me well. As horrible and inexcusable as it is, I’m not talking about a one-time instance of a man losing his temper and hitting his wife. I’m not talking about the seasons in a married couple’s life when emotions run raw and patience is in short supply and harsh and hurtful words are used. I’m not talking about occasional outbursts of verbal abuse.

I’m talking about *serious, stubborn, hard-hearted, unrepentant abuse that threatens the very life and well-being of a spouse or children*. I’m talking about circumstances where a husband’s abuse of his wife is a sustained practice over time. I’m talking about what happens when a wife perseveres through extremely difficult circumstances over time, has sought out every possible means for ending the abuse: counseling, temporary separation, etc., all to no avail.

What might be some **examples** of this sort of sustained, stubborn, unrepentant abuse by one partner of the other? **Gambling addiction**, in which a man refuses to seek help and brings financial ruin (bankruptcy, foreclosure, etc.), emotional devastation, and thus a threat to the physical well-being of the family members / **Drug addiction / Alcoholism / Physical beatings / Sexual abuse of the children . . .**

I cannot tell you with great confidence that these are legitimate grounds for divorce because the Bible does not say that. But I’m sympathetic and open to the possibility that they may be. **If** we were to conclude, somehow, that such grievous and unrepentant violations of the marital covenant did constitute legitimate grounds for divorce, . . . **if** we were to conclude that such grave and sustained refusals to honor one’s marital vows were on a par with adultery and abandonment, *we should be careful never to suggest that occasional failures in these arenas was*

sufficient.

The Scriptures call for patience, longsuffering, love, forgiveness, dedicated commitment to go to whatever lengths are humanly possible to provide God the opportunity to change the offending spouse. Then and only then, if at all, such *might* be legitimate grounds for divorce. And if such abuse is to be added to abandonment and adultery as legitimate grounds for divorce, the innocent victim would be free to remarry.

I do not believe that a man or woman is free to divorce their spouse simply because he/she has failed on occasion to honor their marital vows. **We all fail to honor our marital vows.** We have all in one form or another and at one time or another violated the marriage covenant.

What I'm asking, however, is this: Is it possible that persistent and stubborn sin, unending and willful breaking of the marital vows, a hard-hearted and unrepentant refusal to honor one's marital commitment such that a person refuses or fails to provide material support and physical affection or subjects their spouse to life-threatening neglect and abuse . . . is it possible that this is equivalent to abandonment and thus would justify divorce and the freedom to remarry?

Those who answer yes to this question thus acknowledge that divorce is permitted not simply for adultery and abandonment but also for *any persistent and unrepentant sinful action that violates one's marital vows and thus breaks the marital covenant.* The innocent party is permitted to remarry.

Earlier I noted that little if anything is said about the rights or freedom of the guilty party. But we must ask: Would the guilty or offending party ever be free to remarry? The Bible doesn't say. It is silent probably in order not to give such a person any added incentive to persist in their sinful behavior. In other words, if a person knew from Scripture that the guilty party was free to remarry even after he/she initiated or caused an invalid divorce, they might say to themselves: "Well, I don't think I'll do what is necessary to change, because even if I end up destroying this marriage the Bible tells me I can marry someone else."

A few other questions must be addressed.

(1) Is divorce permissible for a woman who discovers that her husband is addicted to pornography? Clearly, the NT doesn't and indeed couldn't address this matter. I'm not talking about *sporadic* use of pornography or an occasional lapse when a man yields to temptation. I'm not talking about a man who is broken because of his sin, is repentant, is seeking counsel and is pursuing relationships of accountability. I'm talking about a persistent, stubborn, unrepentant addiction that is so severe that all trust has been shattered. I'm talking about a situation, not at all uncommon, in which a man's emotional life, his affections, his physical and sexual energy are willfully withdrawn from his wife and squandered on his addiction. **Is this a contemporary equivalent to what Jesus meant when he spoke of adultery?** And if it is, does it constitute a legitimate ground for divorce and remarriage?

One thing that may justify saying Yes is the word Jesus uses translated "sexual immorality" (Gk. *porneia*). Jesus didn't use the normal word for adultery. The word *porneia* surely includes adultery but need not be limited to it. The word actually refers to *any kind of sexual sin or sexual unfaithfulness.*

I wish that I could answer this question with unwavering confidence and say either Yes, persistent and unrepentant addiction to pornography is grounds for divorce, or No, it isn't. But I can't. And the reason I can't is because the Bible simply doesn't speak to it in sufficiently clear terms.

I feel deep sympathy and compassion for the woman who has been subjected to this form of abuse. And I can understand why she might feel as if the only option left to her is divorce. And I can't say that she would be in sin if that is the choice that she makes. Perhaps a temporary separation would help. Certainly extensive counseling. But if her husband persists unrepentant, if he, over time, refuses all help and continues in this grievous violation of the marriage covenant to the point that he has caused a definitive and decisive breach in the marriage bond so that little if anything is left of the unity between them, she *may* well have grounds for divorce. And I emphasize the word "may".

(2) What of this reason: "It is better for the children that we divorce lest they suffer the pain of living in a home with so much discord and so lacking in love"? Response: a) Let's ask the kids which one *they* prefer! b) Is it *really* better for the kids? Certainly parental discord is damaging to children. But it can't begin to compare with the destructive effects of the loss of a father or mother from the home through divorce. c) To say it is better for the children if the parents divorce *poses a false dilemma*. It assumes there are only two options, either divorce or the status quo. This argument is blatantly hypocritical. They try to justify their decision to divorce based on their love for their kids. But **if people really cared all that much about their children they would move mountains to do whatever necessary to heal the relationship**. They're not getting divorced because they love their kids. **They're divorcing because they selfishly love themselves**. This is little more than an act of selfishness disguised as a noble act of self-sacrifice for the good of the children.

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(3) "This divorce is God's will. I know it is because I prayed about it and God gave me a real peace in my heart." Here we encounter the ultimate rationalization: divine sanction. Are we now to believe that God has spoken in His Word on what are legitimate grounds for divorce, only to reverse himself in *your* case by means of a private, subjective revelation. *God does not speak out of both sides of his mouth! God does not speak with forked tongue!*

(4) Does going through a divorce render a man ineligible and unqualified to serve as an Elder or Pastor in a local church? In my opinion, No, it does not. But what about 1 Timothy 3:2,12 where Paul lists as one qualification for being an Elder that a man be "**the husband of one wife**"?

I'm not going to list and respond to the many interpretations of this passage (I've written a long article interacting with all views and you can find it on my website, www.samstorms.com). My only concern here is the view of some that this text excludes a divorced man from serving as an Elder or Pastor. Two objections:

First, if "husband of one wife" means "never divorced" it is surely a strange way of saying so. And why would not a divorced man who remained single be qualified? It could not be said of him that he is the "husband of *two* wives."

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Second, if divorce is permissible on grounds of adultery or abandonment (and I have argued that it is), the marriage bond is dissolved. The individual is free to remarry. In such a case I see no reason why this man would not be the "husband of one wife." His first marriage has been biblically terminated and the woman to whom he was married is no longer his wife.

We should note, however, that **a divorced man may be disqualified on other grounds**, such as the inability to manage his house well (1 Tim. 3:4). Or the circumstances surrounding his divorce may indicate that he is no longer "above reproach" (1 Tim. 3:2) and does not "have a good

reputation with those outside the church" (1 Tim. 3:7). However, these criteria do not relate directly to the issue of divorce. **A married man may well fail in these respects.**

The view that I endorse is as follows. To be the "husband of one wife" or the "wife of one husband" simply means that one is *faithful and devoted and loyal* to his or her spouse. It is surprising to me that there is no other qualification relating to one's sexual morality. I find it likely, therefore, that "husband of one wife" is speaking to that very point. If a man is to be an elder **he must be neither flirtatious nor adulterous**. He must be a man who is diligent to maintain sexual fidelity to *one* woman, the one to whom he is married. He must be, quite literally, a "one-woman man." Sexual promiscuity was rampant in the ancient world (as it is in ours), and this qualification is designed to address that problem. An elder must be a man of *unquestioned morality and fidelity*.

Conclusion:

First, if I have not addressed your particular situation or experience, it is only because of a lack of time. I apologize to you who may have been waiting for me to say something about the unique circumstances that led to your divorce. It may be that nothing I have said has yet addressed what you've been through. I'm sorry for that. I hope that at least the principles I've mentioned will be helpful to you as you try to make sense of what has happened.

Second, if you were responsible for the breakup of your marriage or you initiated and obtained a divorce on other than biblical grounds, **you have not committed the unpardonable sin!** You simply treat this matter like you would any other area of failure in life, whether it be sexual immorality or lying or an abortion or theft or gluttony or lust or whatever. **The sin of a divorce on unbiblical grounds is not unpardonable, unforgiveable, or the end of the world.** Like all other sins, confess it and ask for the forgiveness of the Lord. The cross of Christ and his shed blood was designed to make provision for this sin no less so than for all others. **You do not need to live under the shadow of shame or guilt any longer!**

Third, if you divorced for unbiblical grounds and are still single, and your former spouse is still single, I strongly urge you to do everything within your power to reconcile and restore the marriage. Humble yourself, make whatever sacrifice is necessary, extend forgiveness where it is needed, and be willing to work hard in the power of God's grace to restore your marriage. However, if your former spouse eventually remarries another, in spite of your efforts to reconcile, I believe you are free to remarry.

Fourth, you may be among those who initiated and obtained a divorce on unbiblical grounds. You have since remarried, perhaps more than once, and are confused about the status of your current marriage. Jesus said that those who divorce on unbiblical grounds commit adultery when they remarry. So, what should you do? **Should you divorce your second spouse (or third) because your first divorce was invalid? No.** Two wrongs don't make a right. Acknowledge the sin committed, thank God for his forgiveness, and devote yourself to your spouse and become the most godly and faithful and loving husband or wife you can be.