



Further Explanations Regarding Questions of Divorce and Remarriage

This paper will present the exegetical basis for the decisions presented in our position paper on marriage, “Marriage, Singleness, Divorce, and Remarriage.” Specifically, it will argue that divorce and remarriage are both permissible in cases of sexual immorality and when an unbelieving spouse desires divorce. A word should be said at the outset about an implicit danger in this discussion. Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees comes in part from the fact that their discussion focused on the issue of what could and couldn’t be done to legitimize divorce. It is worth quoting DA Carson at the outset, “Therefore any view of divorce and remarriage (taught in either Testament) that sees the problem only in terms of what may or may not be done has already overlooked a basic fact—divorce is never to be thought of as a God-ordained, morally neutral option but as evidence of sin, of hardness of heart. The fundamental attitude of the Pharisees to the question was wrong” (Carson, *Expositors Bible Commentary, Matthew*, 413). The question is important as it has significant pastoral implications, but let us all take care as we think through the issue that our goal is not to figure out what is acceptable, but rather how we can elevate marriage appropriately to the glory of God and minister to those who are hurting in tragic situations.

Arguably the most important text relating to issues of divorce and remarriage is Matthew 19:3-9. The passage begins with Pharisees questioning Jesus about the acceptability of divorce, wondering whether a man can divorce his wife for any cause. The background to the passage is Deuteronomy 24:1-4, particularly verses 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” The phrase in question, “some indecency,” translates the Hebrew עֲרוֹת דָּבָר (‘erwat dabar), and is a bit unusual. The first word, ‘erwat is often translated as nakedness, normally literally (Genesis 9:22) but twice metaphorically (i.e., “the nakedness of the land,” Genesis 42:12). However, it is also used twice, by extension, to refer to something “unseemly” or “indecent” (HAL, “882”, עֲרוֹה). Here in Deuteronomy 24:1, given the context of marriage, it may be a roundabout way of indicating that something sexually indecent has been found,

though not necessarily adultery, for which the prescribed penalty was death (Merrill, *New American Commentary, Deuteronomy*, 318, n. 20; Carson, 413-414). The Septuagint is likewise somewhat vague, translating 'erwat as ἀσχήμων (aschēmōn), a word that can refer to that which is not openly done, unmentionable, or indecent, or by extension to those things which are unmentionable, i.e. the unmentionable parts of the body (BDAG, "ἀσχήμων," 147).

Rabbis contemporary with Jesus disagreed about how to understand this phrase in Deuteronomy 24:1 and what it allows, some understanding it to refer to sexual indecency, others to just about any "indecency." The Mishnah, a 2nd century AD collection of oral laws, presents the opinions of three rabbis on Deuteronomy 24:1 (Rabbis Shammai and Hillel were slightly older than Jesus, while Rabbi Akiba was born after his death). Mishnah *Gittin* 9:10 says,

- A The House of Shammai say, "A man should divorce his wife only because he has found grounds for it in unchastity,
- B "since it is said, *Because he has found in her indecency in anything* ([Dt. 24:](#))"
- C And the House of Hillel say, "Even if she spoiled his dish,
- D "since it is said, *Because he has found in her indecency in anything*. E
- R. Aqiba says, "Even if he found someone else prettier than she,
- F "since it is said, *And it shall be if she find no favor in his eyes* ([Dt. 24:1](#))" (Neusner).

Both Shammai and Hillel base their very different understandings of divorce on the understanding of the phrase "indecency in anything," indicating a fairly broad range of interpretation on what the phrase means.

It is with this background that the Pharisees approach Jesus to ask him about the basis of divorce. The contentious verse is Matthew 19:9, which reads, "And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." However, before discussing that verse it is essential to highlight that whatever we understand about Jesus' discussion of divorce and remarriage, the emphasis is on the sacredness of marriage. Jesus emphatically affirms marriage as both a God-ordained union and a God-made union between a man and a woman. Marriage is both created and enacted by God, and the covenant that exists between husband and wife is also a covenant between God and spouses together. The discussion of the seriousness and goodness of marriage is not an afterthought to Jesus' answer, but forms the basis for Jesus' answer to the Pharisee's question. The central point is not about divorce, but the importance of

marriage. The Pharisees have already missed this point. Carson, already quoted above, is worth re-quoting at this point, “Therefore any view of divorce and remarriage (taught in either Testament) that sees the problem only in terms of what may or may not be done has already overlooked a basic fact—divorce is never to be thought of as a God-ordained, morally neutral option but as evidence of sin, of hardness of heart. The fundamental attitude of the Pharisees to the question was wrong” (Carson, 413). If we do not hold this high a view of marriage, how we actually understand Matthew 19:9 or any of the other passages is largely irrelevant.

Turning now to Matthew 19:9, there are two related questions that need to be addressed. The first is the meaning of the phrase, “except for sexual immorality,” and the second is the relationship of that clause to what comes before and after it. “Except for sexual immorality” renders the Greek μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ (mē epi porneia). Porneia is a fairly general word, referring to any manner of sexual improprieties (BDAG, “πορνεία,” 854). The ESV translates all 24 of the uses in the NT as “sexual immorality.” It is not limited to adultery, but when spoken of in the context of marriage most naturally refers to adultery. The reason the more general term of porneia is chosen than the more specific term for adultery (μοιχεία, moicheia) is likely because it was the term more commonly used to describe the infidelity of a woman (Blomberg, *New American Commentary, Matthew*, 111). This is not to insinuate that women are more often unfaithful, but reflects the fact that Jesus is answering a question about a man divorcing his wife. Blomberg continues, “Jesus follows social convention by phrasing his example from the perspective of the man who has been defrauded but [Matthew 5:32b] makes plain that, in radical opposition to prevailing mores, he considers a man’s infidelity as equally grievous” (Blomberg, 111). Jesus is thus allowing some sort of exception in the case of marital infidelity.

The second question is to how this exception clause is related to the clauses that precede and follow it. Does the exception apply only to divorce, so that divorce is permitted in cases of infidelity, but not remarriage, or does it apply to both divorce and remarriage, so that in cases of sexual immorality it is permissible to both divorce a spouse and remarry another? Grammatically, the exception clause is related to the statement about divorce. But this does not mean Jesus is permitting divorce in cases of infidelity but absolutely prohibiting remarriage; it is simply the most logical place to locate the clause. It is infidelity that causes the divorce, not the remarriage (cf. Carson, 416), which makes the placement appropriate. Further, as will be discussed in more detail below, Jesus is picturing a single situation: divorce and remarriage, and the focus of the discussion is on remarriage. They stand together. There is a single subject (ὁς, hos) and subjunctive particle (ἀν, an) that

ties together both verbs. To divorce and remarry when there has been no immorality is wrong. To divorce and remarry when there has been immorality is not sinful. The exception clause, while being grammatically dependant on the divorce clause, is therefore related to the joined issue of divorce and remarriage (cf. Carson, Matthew 417-418).

This creates two simple options: divorce and remarriage where there has not been adultery, which is forbidden, and divorce and remarriage where there has been adultery, which is allowed but not mandated. If the exception clause is not distributed across the whole protasis, then a problem ensues. In that case, Jesus is saying that divorce where there has not been sexual immorality results in adultery, regardless of whether remarriage has taken place (cf. Blomberg, 111, who argues that this is exactly Jesus' point, though the adultery is spiritual rather than literal). While this is not impossible, it seems unlikely both given the context of the discussion, which assumes remarriage, and the structure of the clause, with a two part protasis and single apodosis.

Jesus' response here needs to be compared with his teaching in Matthew 5:32, where he says, "But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." We should note the similarities and the differences. Both passages make it clear that divorce is only acceptable in the case of sexual immorality. However, Matthew 5:32 differs from Matthew 19:9 in two significant respects. First, Matthew 5:32 speaks of the man causing the divorced wife to commit adultery except in cases of sexual immorality (Jesus is speaking here from the standpoint of a husband divorcing his wife because she has been unfaithful. Everything said would be equally true in a situation where the husband has been unfaithful). Divorce apart from sexual immorality causes the divorced spouse, especially the woman, to then commit adultery, as she is almost certain to remarry, marriage being her means of support. But when there has been sexual immorality, divorce does not cause the spouse to commit adultery, as she has already done so (Carson, 152-153; Bock, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1357; ESV Study Bible Notes, Matthew 5:31-32; contra Blomberg, 111, who asserts that the divorce in and of itself makes the spouse adulterous).

The second difference between Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is that the former passage clearly delineates the acts of divorce and remarriage, treating them separately with two clauses introduced by the relative pronoun, "whoever," and two consequences, "makes her commit adultery" and "commits adultery". Matthew 19:9,

on the other hand, treats the two actions together, with only one relative pronoun and one consequence.

Matthew 5:32

Everyone who divorces his wife
except on the ground of sexual immorality
makes her commit adultery
and whoever marries a divorced woman
commits adultery

Matthew 19:9

Whoever divorces his wife
except for sexual immorality
--
and marries another
commits adultery

As mentioned above, this supports the view that in Matthew 19 Jesus is focused on the unified act of divorce and remarriage. It is fascinating that Jesus does not highlight the man as sinning in divorcing his wife, but in the adultery that follows. This is not to say that divorce is acceptable in any situation, or that Jesus is unconcerned with divorce in and of itself. However, it is adultery in each instance that Jesus highlights as the grievous sin: the adultery of the wife who has been divorced, the adultery of the man marrying the divorced woman (presumably the woman who has been divorced for reasons not involving sexual immorality), or the man marrying any other woman after his groundless divorce. In cases where sexual immorality has not occurred, neither divorce nor remarriage is acceptable. When it has occurred, both are permissible, though not commanded. This view again sets Jesus apart from the Rabbis of his day, who mandated divorce in cases of sexual immorality (Mishnah *Sotah* 5:1; Carson, Matthew 415-416).

The differences between the Matthean passages and the similar passages in Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18, neither of which contain any exception, must be discussed. Both Mark 10:1-12 (a parallel passage to 19:3-12) and Luke 16:18 (possibly a parallel passage to Matthew 5:32) lack any exception clause, thus giving absolute statements about adultery when remarriage follows divorce. What is the explanation for the difference between the passages in Matthew and those in Mark and Luke, then? There are two options. Either the sayings reflect different occasions of Jesus' teachings where he taught different things or Mark and Luke (or their sources) have omitted the exception clauses. The former option is unlikely, at least in the case of Mark 10 and Matthew 19, as they clearly reflect the same incident. If Jesus did say them as Matthew has recorded, then the best explanation is that

Matthew has included the fuller expression, while Mark and Luke have shortened the expression (cf. Carson, Matthew 417). There are then two likely reasons why Mark and Luke would drop this statement. The first is that they removed it to clarify Jesus' teaching. Jesus really meant the prohibitions to be absolutely understood, so that remarriage was always wrong, but the wording preserved in Matthew is ambiguous, and Mark and Luke are clarifying his remarks. In this case, the Matthean texts must be convincingly able to be understood as absolute prohibitions as they stand. While this is possible in Matthew 19:9, though it seems unlikely, it is far harder to understand Matthew 5:32 in this way. The passive construction of "makes her commit adultery" following a husband's divorce when sexual immorality has not occurred carries with it the two implications mentioned above. First, she is made to commit adultery because her remarriage will then be a violation of her marital covenant, and second, if sexual immorality has occurred, her remarriage will not make her commit adultery, because that the marriage covenant will already have been violated.

The other possible explanation then is that Mark and Luke have omitted the exception clause because they felt it was obvious enough to not need mentioning, as divorce and remarriage in cases of infidelity was already presumed to be acceptable (Carson, 417-418; cf. ESV Study Bible Notes, Mark 10:10-11). Bock discusses the lack of the exception clause and emphasizes the intention of remarriage. Citing Marshall he says, "Jesus' words are put in absolute terms: divorce leads to adultery because the presupposition is that a person seeks a divorce in order to remarry, in which case the remarriage itself represents an act of unfaithfulness to the original vows" (Bock, 1357). The problem then was not divorce and remarriage in cases of adultery, but that hard-hearted sinful people would be willing to violate the terms of this covenant, a covenant made between man and women and between couple and God, in order to find better prospects somewhere else. Divorce, even in cases of sexual immorality, is tragic. But to reject that covenant for any other reason is sinful.

1 Corinthians 7:10-16 is also included in discussions of divorce and remarriage. The situation presented here is different than pictured by Jesus on two counts. First, no sexual immorality has taken place and second, the focus of Paul's discussion is on divorce in spiritually mixed marriages. Paul's exhortation falls into two parts, first to believers who are married (7:10-11), and then to a believer with an unbelieving spouse (7:12-16). Paul uses different language to speak of divorce here than in the gospels, and in fact uses two separate terms, χωρίζω (chōrizō) and ἀφίημι (aphiēmi). It is possible, following the ESV, to understand the former word to refer to separation and the latter to divorce, but given the fact that Paul

references a teaching of Jesus, who only spoke of divorce, that he exhorts the spouses in believing marriages who have been “separated” to remain unmarried or be reconciled, and that he speaks of the believing spouse to let an unbelieving spouse “separate” from them without being enslaved, he is almost certainly talking about divorce throughout the entire passage. Further, Jesus uses *chōrizō* in Matthew 19:6 and Mark 10:9 when he says, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate”, which is certainly a reference to divorce (cf. Garland, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, *1 Corinthians*, 281).

To the believers, Paul’s advice is abundantly clear and needs very little comment. When no sexual immorality has taken place, divorce is not allowed. Paul says this is a command from the Lord, which is best understood to mean Paul is reflecting on Jesus’ teaching ministry, not a direct word he has received from the Lord. Paul’s lack of discussion of sexual immorality may very well imply a familiarity with Jesus’ teaching as found in Mark (cf. ESV Study Bible Notes, *1 Corinthians* 7:10-11). Paul does not present a divorced Christian with two options, remain unmarried or be reconciled, but remain unmarried *to be* reconciled. Once remarried to another person, it would be improper to divorce them and return to their first spouse, as Deuteronomy 24:1-4 teaches (Garland, 283).

Verses 12-16 are interesting because Paul addresses a topic not spoken of by Jesus, which he makes clear in vs. 12. In speaking to spouses in spiritually mixed marriages, Paul encourages the believing spouses to remain married if the unbeliever will consent to it. But if the unbeliever wishes to divorce, then, Paul says, the believer is “not enslaved.” This last phrase is where the challenge comes in. What does Paul mean by saying that the believing spouse is not enslaved? Two possibilities present themselves. The first is that the believing spouse should not feel enslaved to try and remain married according to the instructions in vs. 10, but should indeed remain unmarried or be reconciled, according to the instructions in vs. 11. The second option is to understand Paul as saying the believing spouse should not only not feel that they must remain married, but that they may remarry as well (NET Bible Notes, *1 Corinthians* 7:15).

The latter option makes better sense of the context. First, Paul has already told believing spouses to remain unmarried or be reconciled in the event that divorce occurs. The fact that Paul tells this second group that they are “not enslaved” clearly marks some form of contrast to what Paul has already told the first group. It is not sufficient to say that Paul expects the second group to follow the instructions given to the first group, as that removes the distinction between the two. Second, there is likely a parallel to Paul saying the spouse is “not enslaved,”

which translates the Greek οὐ δεδούλωται (ou dedoulōtai) and his later teaching in 1 Corinthians 7:39, where he says that a wife is “bound” as long as her husband lives, but if he dies, she is free to remarry. “Bound” translates the Greek δέδεται (dedetai), a separate word from that which he uses in 7:12-16, but which carries a similar force. A believing spouse who is divorced by an unbelieving partner seems to be put in the same position as a believing spouse whose partner dies. They are both free to remarry (ESV Study Bible Notes, 1 Corinthians 7:15; Garland, 291, 297, argues that the words are not synonymous, but comes to the same conclusion that remarriage is permitted).

The greatest difficulty with understanding the passage is how verse 16 connects to vs. 12-15. Certainly the idea of a spouse bringing salvation to their partner makes sense according to what Paul teaches in vs. 12-14. By remaining married to an unbelieving spouse, they have the opportunity to be an instrument of God’s salvation to their partner. But how is it related to the freedom to be divorced and pursue remarriage? It could be, following the first option above, that Paul is not allowing for remarriage but only for separation or reconciliation when an unbelieving spouse wants to leave. In this case, the point of vs. 16 is that reconciliation is a desired outcome so that the believing spouse can be a means of grace in the unbeliever’s life if they would be reconciled. This would not be possible in the case of remarriage. But given the fact that Paul is granting a greater freedom to the divorced spouse, this is not the best understanding of vs. 16.

Interestingly, the ESV Study Bible assumes a negative answer to Paul’s rhetorical question, “i.e., that there is no assurance that an unbelieving spouse will be saved, and so the believer should feel free not to pursue the spouse who has left” (ESV Study Bible notes, 1 Corinthians 7:16). If this is correct, then Paul’s point is that rather than trying to force the unbelieving spouse into staying, they should recognize that God’s call to peace allows them to let the believer leave. If they are concerned about being the instrument of salvation to their unbelieving spouse, vs. 16 offers an explanation to remind them that they have no way of knowing whether this will be the case. Rather than feeling like they have failed, they are free to let the spouse leave. While this connects the passage together, the seeming indifference to the unbelieving spouse’s salvation seems a bit strange for Paul. Further, it doesn’t appear that the Corinthians were particularly struggling with the issue of remaining married, but were concerned whether it was appropriate to be married to an unbeliever to begin with (Garland, 279, 281, 285-286, 288).

Garland offers an interesting understanding of the passage. All of 7:12-16 is meant to support the continuation of these mixed marriages. It is possible that

some of the Corinthians believed that they might be defiling themselves by continuing in these marriages and would be better off divorcing. Paul insists that this is not the case. First, he briefly reminds the Corinthians of the sanctity of marriage in cases between believers. Then in 7:12-13 he states the premise: if the unbeliever will live with you, live with them. 7:14 argues that the unbelieving spouse is sanctified on the basis of the marriage. The discussion of children is support for that assertion. No believer would think of the child that comes from a mixed marriage as being somehow unclean and proper to dispose of, and the same is true of the spouse. 7:15 presents the situation where the unbeliever wants to leave, and Paul argues that this is acceptable. The end of 7:15 however, is not directly related to the beginning of verse 15, but to verses 12-13, as verse 16 makes clear. It presents a second reason for Christians to not divorce their unbelieving spouses: God had called them in peace. Peace would have characterized their marriage prior to the conversion of the believing spouse, and they should maintain that peace, as it is glorifying to the God of peace (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:33; Romans 15:33; 2 Corinthians 13:11). Not only would divorce create chaos in the marriage, but they would lose the possibility of being a means of God's grace in the unbelieving spouse's life, which is the point in verse. 16 (Garland, 288-295). This argument of vs. 12-16 can be seen as follows:

Statement: Believers should not divorce their unbelieving spouses if the latter are content (12-13)

Reason 1: For the believing spouse makes the marriage holy (14)

Concession: If they want to leave, however, let it be (15ab)

Reason 2: And God has called you to peace (15c)

Reason: For God may use you to save them (16)

Garland's understanding suffers from the fact that this structure is not clearly evident, specifically the break in the middle of verse 15, but it does seem to make better sense of the passage, especially verse 16. In either case, Paul's argument is best understood as allowing a believer who is abandoned by their unbelieving spouse to remarry.

It would be worthwhile, having examined the exegesis of the passages, to take a very brief historical survey of the issue. Tertullian, writing in the third century cites Matthew 5:32 and argues that all remarriage following divorce is adultery (*On Monogamy*, ix, in Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 4, 66). Aquinas quotes Jerome, in the fourth century, on Matthew 19:9 when he says, "Therefore it is commanded so to

put away the first, that a second be not married while the first is yet alive" (Aquinas, 657). Augustine, writing at the end of the fourth century, holds that divorce should never be followed by remarriage, even in the case of adultery, but that following 1 Corinthians 7, the two should remain unmarried or be reconciled (*Sermon on the Mount*, 1.14, in Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 1.6, 17). Aquinas quotes Rabanus, writing in the ninth century, as saying, "But there is no cause why while she who has been put away is alive, another should be married" (Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, 657). That Aquinas, writing the *Catena Aurea* in the 13th century, appears to only cite interpretations of Matthew 5 and 19 that forbid remarriage is not necessarily an indication that the early Christians all held this position, but it does reflect his position and the Catholic understanding.

A change is clearly seen by the time of the reformation. Calvin, in the 16th century, understands that the exception clause permits both divorce and remarriage in cases of adultery, saying, "This clause has been very ill explained by many commentators; for they have thought that generally, and without exception, celibacy is enjoined in all cases when a divorce has taken place; and, therefore, if a husband should put away an adulteress, both would be laid under the necessity of remaining unmarried. As if this liberty of divorce meant only not to lie with his wife; and as if Christ did not evidently grant permission in this case to do what the Jews were wont indiscriminately to do at their pleasure. It was therefore a gross error; for, though Christ condemns as an adulterer the man *who shall marry a wife that has been divorced*, this is undoubtedly restricted to unlawful and frivolous divorces. (*Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke - Volume 2*, Matthew 19:9; cf. *Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke - Volume 1*, Matthew 5:31-32). In the 19th century, Ryle affirms that remarriage following cases of infidelity is appropriate (Ryle, *Crossway Classic Commentaries, Matthew*, 169; *Crossway Classic Commentaries, Mark*, 144). The sources in this paper, such as Carson, Garland, and Bock, are representative of the trend in 20th century scholarship to view remarriage after divorce in the case of adultery as acceptable. There are dissenting voices, to be sure, but they are a minority. This is not an exhaustive survey to be sure, either of the sources or their thoughts, but it is worth noting that the church has wrestled with this issue, and that earlier interpreters have predominantly argued against any remarriage following divorce, while later interpreters have largely allowed it in cases of adultery.

It is our firm conviction that marriage is a holy, wonderful, God exalting commitment between a man and a woman, and between that couple and God. The great joy and goodness of marriage, affording as it does a couple to image God in a unique way to one another and the world, also give it the potential to be the source

of great pain. In a culture and day where marriage is not honored and where God is actively dishonored by the state of marriage, Christians have the wonderful opportunity to show the world the love, joy, and glory of God in our marriages. Our peace, love, affection, and joy in our marriages, and the sacrificial love and submission between a husband and wife all have the opportunity to affirm the truth of the gospel in our lives as we proclaim it to the world. And so it is in this spirit that we say we believe that a husband or wife who comes to know Christ after being married should rejoice in their marriage and family, for God's presence in them makes it a wonderful thing. But if their spouse is unwilling to live with them and divorces them, they are free to remarry. And if a spouse is presented with the tragedy of learning that their partner has been unfaithful, they are under no necessity to divorce them. But where immorality has occurred, the marriage covenant has been broken and if it is unsalvageable, divorce is permissible, and remarriage will mean the forming of a new bond, not the breaking of the old. Let us not look for reasons for divorce. Let us look for reasons to stay married. Let us hold marriage in honor. Let us delight in the wife of our youth. Let us show the world Christ's faithfulness to his bride, and the bride's delight in her bridegroom. Let us know God more in our marriages and make him known as well.

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