

The Divorce Question

“for every cause?” (Matthew 19:3)

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Introduction

During the earthly ministry of Jesus the Pharisees tried to test Him by asking Him the same question that many people are asking today: “Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?” They were referring to the matter of divorce. We want to answer this important and controversial question in our present study. Is there any ground for divorce, and if so, for what cause or causes can divorce and remarriage be permitted? Few topics were more contested in the day of Jesus than the subject of divorce. This was a heated debate in our Lord’s day, while He was upon the earth, and it still remains a heated question in our own day and time, even within the ranks of the Church.

Matthew 19:3-4

“The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female.”

The nation was divided over this issue of divorce. They followed two famous rabbis. Followers of Hillel (liberal school) felt that a man could divorce his wife for almost any reason, but others, following Shammai (conservative school), thought one could not divorce his wife unless she was guilty of adultery (marital unfaithfulness). Under Jewish culture the man was the one who could legally divorce a wife. It never would happen the other way around. It was unacceptable for a wife to ask for a bill of divorcement. The questions that were asked revolved around the issue of the man’s right to divorce. When was it proper and acceptable for the man to divorce? When did he have the right to divorce his wife? There was a wide range of answers.

The Jewish Mishnah, which contains the oral traditions of Judaism, records the rabbinic debate for us: The school of Shammai said: "A man may not divorce his wife unless he has discovered something unchaste about her, for it is written; Because he has found some unseemly thing in her" (Deut. 24:1). But the school of Hillel said: "He may divorce her even if she spoiled a dish for him, for it is written, Because he has found some unseemly thing in her." Rabbi Akiba, who was on the Hillel side, added the words "Even if he found another woman fairer than her." He then goes on and tries to support this position on divorce from Scripture. So the liberal persuasion gave the right for a man to divorce his wife for just about any reason, from burning the toast, to finding a prettier looking woman.

The Pharisees wanted to know what side of the controversy Jesus was on. They were trying to stump Jesus with a theological test or question. In this way they could get the people divided over Him, and get them to place their attention on other side issues, instead of His messianic claims. Also, they wanted to get Jesus in trouble with Herod, who had divorced his wife and committed incest (marriage within a family) in his remarriage. Herod Antipas had two brothers named Philip. The one Matthew referred to here was Herod Philip I. Philip was Herod Antipas' half-brother. Therefore, Antipas' marriage to Philip's wife Herodias, his sister-in-law, was an incestuous relationship based upon the near kin Mosaic moral law (Lev. 18:16; 20:21), which refers to prohibited marriages based upon the Mosaic Law of near kin marriages. People were not to marry within the family relationships. John the Baptist lost his head over this issue one or two years prior to this meeting with the Pharisees (Matt. 14:1-8). Maybe the same fate would happen to Jesus. This was the plot of the Pharisees.

This whole ordeal might sound like a soap opera but it's true. Josephus, the first century historian, recorded this love affair and case of incest. What did John the Baptist say to Herod, "It is not lawful for thee to have her?" (Matt. 14:4). Herod, you can't divorce your own wife and marry your sister-in-law. That is speaking out against divorce and remarriage. If John the Baptist had accepted the popular and present day teaching on divorce and remarriage, he might not have lost his head!

Herodias was not content to leave John in prison for speaking out against her marriage relationship with Herod. When she had the opportunity she arranged for John's execution. The daughter of Herodias seductively danced before Herod and this fleshly dance pleased him. In response to this dance, he made the promise to give anything to her that she requested (Matt. 14:6-7). Previously being instructed by her mother, Salome requested that the head of John the Baptist would be presented on a platter, at Herod's birthday banquet. So John was executed and his head was served up on a silver platter. Everybody knew this. So the Pharisees put Jesus to the theological test to see if His theology matched John the Baptist's theology and if He would be brave enough to speak out against Herod. The Pharisees wanted to see the same thing happen to Jesus. If they could get Jesus to speak out against divorce and remarriage like John did, perhaps Jesus could have his head served up on a silver platter as well.

Without getting involved in the Hillel-Shammai controversy or Herod's marriage with Herodias, Jesus reminded the religious leaders of God's original purpose in establishing the marriage bond. Jesus says that marriage is for life! Both schools of thought were wrong! The people had misunderstood the purpose behind the Mosaic legislation on divorce and lost sight of God's original purpose and design. There are no grounds for divorce or remarriage. What a shock this was to all the Jews in Palestine who believed that divorce was acceptable to God under the Mosaic regulations. Jesus had a different story. He took them back to Genesis.

God's Original Plan For Marriage

Genesis 2:24 records God's unchanging mind on this matter:
"Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh."

The Hebrew word for "cleave" suggests the idea of something being glued together (Job 38:38). An interesting characteristic about glue is its permanence. Marriage is to be permanent – for life. If Jesus would have wanted Adam to marry other wives or have a succession of wives throughout his lifetime He would have created Ellen, Sandra, Martha, etc. Because God created only one wife for Adam using only

one of his ribs. If God had wanted Adam to have a succession of wives, He would have taken two or three ribs from Adam and created not only Eve, but Ellen, Sandra, and Joan. “And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man” (Genesis 2:21-22).

There is no allowance made in Genesis 2:24 for multiple marriages. Jesus verifies in the gospel accounts. This tells us that the progressive revelation of the New Testament Scripture has not changed God’s original design for the permanence of marriage.

In answering the divorce question, Jesus said in Matthew 19:4-5: “Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?”

Matthew 5:31-32 also gives to us some important information that surrounds this divorce question. It informs us that Jesus placed His own words and authority above any Jewish authority or any misunderstanding and misconception about the Jewish Mosaic Law that legislated divorce. In response to the divorce question Jesus made a point to establish the authority of His Word above any other authority or school of interpretation concerning the Mosaic Law on divorce.

Matthew 5:31-32 reads:

“It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: **But I say unto you**, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.”

This is an important text in dealing with the divorce question. Jesus says, “But I say...” This means that what Jesus is going to say goes above the sanctions of the Mosaic Law, which tried to regulate (not endorse) the problem of divorce, due to the hardness of the people’s hearts. What Jesus was about to say goes beyond what Hillel,

Shammai, the Talmud, and Mishnah say about divorce. What “I say” is a higher authority than your personal view on divorce or what some divorce manual says about divorce. In essence, what Jesus is saying is this. What I say stands! I’m telling you the way it is! My Word is above everything else that you have heard or have misunderstood about the Mosaic Law on divorce. Here is the final word, “But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.” With these words Jesus replaced the Jewish law and any other law with God’s ideal state as announced before the fall of man.

Mark 10:9 adds:

“ What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”

The term “joined together” means to be yoked together. What God joins or yokes together man is not to separate by his own fleshly pursuits, by some legal divorce bill, or by manipulative teaching that promotes divorce. A good paraphrase of this verse might be: “Stop severing marriage unions which God has permanently bound together.” Whenever we try to undo what God has deemed undoable we violate His perfect design, plan, and purpose for marriage.

God’s Attitude Toward Divorce

Malachi 2:16

“For the Lord, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away (divorce). For the Lord, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the Lord of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously.”

God hates divorce. In this chapter, the men were divorcing and ditching their Jewish wives with the intent of marrying heathen wives (mixed marriages), which the Law clearly forbade (Ex. 34:14-16; Deut. 7:1-4). Malachi rebukes their sin. The evil of divorce is clearly seen in this Bible passage. God was telling His own people that they had sinned by divorcing their wives. Because of this God would no longer accept their worship (Malachi 2:13 – “he regardeth not the offering any more”). The people needed to repent over these sinful

acts. Divorce is clearly seen as a violation of the covenant of marriage that a man makes with the wife of his youth and before the Lord Almighty.

Malachi 2:14

“Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant.”

God sees marriage as a covenant relationship between two parties, (“the wife of thy covenant”) which binds two partners together in a permanent relationship before God. In addition, during a marriage ceremony an agreement and pledge of faithfulness is also made before God. A couple pledges that they will remain faithful to one another and also to God (“the Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth”). The couple pledges that they will follow God’s design for marriage, which is marriage for life (Gen. 2:24). Marriage is not only a covenant to one another but also a covenant with God that a couple will honor the Lord’s holy marriage institution instead of profaning “the holiness of the LORD” (Malachi 2:11). Marriage is a covenant promise before God where two are joined together under the witness of God (Gen. 2:21-24; 31:50). You can be sure that when a person breaks this covenant, it does not meet with God’s approval!

Please notice again that the Bible says God hates divorce in Malachi 2:16 (“he hateth putting away”). It does not say He hates the divorcee. Believers should be very gracious in their dealings with those who have had a marital disaster, even as Jesus was gracious with the woman at the well, who had been married five times (John 4:6-26). Nevertheless, God sees divorce as something that is treacherous (Malachi 2:14, 15, 16), or something that is deceitful. This is because the promise of a life commitment with another person and a promise made before were broken. Divorce is a treachery! The Bible teaches that God hates divorce. Divorce is not an option. Malachi’s intention is to encourage husbands to remain true to their first wives. The epidemic of divorce had to stop. It was threatening the very foundation of the divine institution of marriage.

Malachi also reveals that marriage is a covenant (“the wife of thy covenant” - Malachi 2:14). The Bible reveals that God does not break covenants (Lev. 26:40-45) and since divorce breaks the marriage covenant made before God, it does not meet with God’s approval! God sees marriage as a covenant, which has been made before Him, and a covenant that should never be broken (Prov. 21:17). God has an unbreakable attitude toward covenants. “And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I *am* the LORD their God (Lev. 26:44).

God’s New Testament Revelation on Divorce

1 Corinthians 7:39 clearly states:

“The wife is bound by the law (law of marriage established in Genesis) as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord.”

This is an unquestionable and unalterable conclusion drawn by the apostle. Paul clearly teaches that marriage was designed to be permanent and that the wife was bound to her husband for life. In spite of what many try to teach there are no exceptions for divorce presented in this chapter. To conclude that divorce is permissible is to extrapolate something from First Corinthians chapter seven that is not conveyed by apostolic authority.

1 Corinthians 7:10-13 adds more conclusive evidence for no divorce:

“And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, **Let not** the wife depart (chorizo – used of divorce) from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and **let not** the husband put away (aphiemi – used of divorce) his wife. But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, **let him not** put her away (aphiemi). And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, **let her not** leave (aphiemi) him.”

Paul clearly states that divorce was not allowable by any spouse. To be sure we understand Paul mentions the words “let not” four times. If separation by divorce occurs there should be an attempt at

reconciliation. The Scriptures could not make it any clearer. In fact, Paul gives one good reason why divorce is not permissible in 1 Corinthians 7:14-16.

“For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace. For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife? But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches.”

Paul is saying in these verses that divorce is not recommended for the simple reason that the believing partner can have a spiritual impact on other family members, whether it is their spouse or children. The presence of a believer in the home sanctifies that home in the sense that it gives a Christian influence it would otherwise not have. The testimony of a believer may be used by God to bring the children and unbelieving partner to Christ. This is a good reason to remain married and not divorce. Many fail to see the simplicity of what Paul is teaching in this verse. Divorce was to be avoided because the Christian spouse was a channel of God’s grace in the marriage. Of course, there are those who interpret 1 Corinthians 7:15 to mean a person can divorce in the interest of peace, but contextually this interpretation does not fit what Paul is saying throughout the entire chapter (1 Cor. 7:10-11, 16, 39). There is absolutely no warrant to interpret this verse in this way. It goes against all that Paul ever said about marriage. Those who insist this is what the verse means are trying to find a needle in a haystack. Pauline Theology does not allow for divorce.

Many were teaching that an unbelieving partner (unsaved partner), who was married to a saved partner in a mixed marriage, did not make the marriage as important to maintain. But Paul clearly says that this marriage is valid and holy (“sanctified”) and should be maintained at all costs. The marriage relationship is sanctified by God even in the case of a mixed marriage. *Marriage is a divine institution for the whole human race, not just Christians.* However, if an

unbeliever demands a divorce (the initiative for divorce should come from the unbeliever), then it is not necessary for a brother or sister to contest the divorce action, or engage in legal maneuvers to prevent it. The believer is free from doing any legal obligation to preserve the marriage and free from experiencing the strife and turmoil with the unbeliever in the marriage relationship. This seems to be the understanding of the words “no longer under bondage” (doulou - vs. 15).

Paul is probably teaching here that the believer is not in “bondage” (vs. 15) to keep the marriage together by compromising his own convictions and following the sinful patterns of the unbelieving spouse. In other words, a person does not have to become a slave to the sinful actions and lifestyle of the unbeliever in order to maintain the marriage at any cost. There is a certain amount of bondage that a believer might experience, at the hands of an unbeliever, if they try to maintain a legal marriage without the unsaved partner’s approval. So Paul says they are no longer bound to keep the marriage together. They are no longer obligated to keep the marriage intact within the Corinthian society. This is because God has called believers to experience peace or live peaceably with others (Rom. 12:18).

Instead of possessing bitterness and strife toward our mate in legal battle by contesting the divorce, or experiencing strife in the marriage relationship by refusing divorcement, we should peaceably accept his or her request for divorce. The point is this. If an unbeliever decides to divorce their mate the partner is no longer under any obligation to that marriage partner and can be freed from their jurisdiction and the obligation to seek reconciliation. *However, the freedom of a deserted believer is not the freedom to remarry.* It simply means that they are no longer enslaved to any responsibilities with the previous partner and are no longer committed to keep the marriage intact. They are free from any obligation and legal authority in the former marriage relationship. The two alternatives that this deserted person has are either reconciliation (1 Cor. 7:16) with the husband or wife, or to remain single for the rest of one’s life (1 Cor. 7:11).

You will notice that Paul says nothing about a second marriage for the deserted spouse. Some argue by this text that the deserted spouse has the right to remarry. This is an argument from silence!

How can this be true when Paul does not even talk about remarriage of the deserted spouse and when he has already clearly spoken about committing adultery in the act of remarriage?

Romans 7:2-3

“For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man.”

Paul is using this marriage illustration in the context of the believer’s release from the law’s bondage. Please note that the jurisdiction of the Law is limited to living individuals. However, the believer’s death in Christ releases them from any further obligation to the Mosaic code. Using the illustration of the permanency of marriage, Paul illustrates this wonderful spiritual truth. Nevertheless, the concept of the permanency of marriage (until the death of a spouse) is clearly set in the backdrop. *Marriage is permanent until a death has occurred.* God has put a padlock on wedlock! Death and death alone gives release from the bond of marriage. If you believe the clear and uncontradictory statements of God’s Word, then you will arrive at the conclusion that *there are no grounds for divorce and remarriage.* Remarriage is not offered as a viable option. Divorce is a sin that wrecks families and the lives of people. The truth is this. You sin when you get a divorce because you break God’s command regarding the permanency of marriage (1 John 3:4). You also sin when remarrying another partner. Jesus and the Mosaic Law linked remarriage after divorce with adultery.

God’s View on Divorce Explained by Jesus

Matthew 19:9

“And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except *it be* for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away (another divorced woman) doth commit adultery.”

Matthew 5:32

“But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery (by her remarriage): and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced (another divorced woman) committeth adultery (with her - causing her to also commit adultery as well)”

In these verses, Jesus clearly says that a person commits adultery when they divorce and remarry and causes others to commit adultery (see also Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18). This is reason enough not to divorce and remarry. You can't get around it. The summary of Jesus can't be overturned or overruled by the alleged Pauline loopholes and marital grounds for remarriage. In essence, Jesus was saying: “Whether you file for a divorce and remarry, or whether you marry another divorced person, adultery takes place in the act of remarriage.” Divorce is wrong because it attempts to separate what God has joined together (Mark 10:9). However, remarriage, which normally occurs after divorce, compounds the sin. This is because adultery takes place in the act of remarriage. Since God does not recognize divorce the next marriage of a divorced person would involve committing the sin of adultery with someone other than their original spouse.

There are several scenarios to consider. **1)** The man remarrying (“shall marry another” – Matt. 19:9) would commit adultery no matter who he remarries, since the original marriage bond is permanent in God's eyes. **2)** In marrying another divorced woman (“marry her that is divorced”) he would also commit adultery with her, even though he was not responsible for legally dissolving her marriage. At the same time, he would cause her to commit adultery with him since she was previously divorced. Any remarriage after divorce causes one or both partners to commit adultery depending on their previous marital status. **3)** The man's remarriage would also become an act of adultery against the rejected or divorced spouse and a sin before the holy eyes of God (Hab. 1:13). Both the wife and God Himself would be violated because of a promised covenant that was broken. **4)** In addition, the sin of remarriage and adultery would cause the rejected spouse to sin (“causeth her to commit adultery”) in that she would probably end up remarrying and committing adultery herself. One of the old worldly soap operas was called, “These are the days of our

lives!” Actually, they should not be the days of our lives if we want to be God-fearing, Bible believing, and God-honoring in our marriage relationship.

Deuteronomy 24:4 also states:

“Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled (through divorce, remarriage, and adultery with another man); for that *is* abomination (detestable) before the LORD: and thou shalt not cause the land to sin (by divorce, remarriage, and adultery), which the LORD thy God giveth thee *for* an inheritance.”

Leviticus 21:7 adds this concerning the priests:

“They shall not take a wife *that is* a whore, or profane; neither shall they take a woman put away from her husband (divorced): for he *is* holy unto his God.”

Leviticus 21:14 also says:

“A widow, or a divorced woman, or profane, *or* an harlot, these shall he not take: but he shall take a virgin (non-divorced, non-adulteress) of his own people to wife.”

The Scriptures teach elsewhere that a pastor and deacon must be the “husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6). This also demonstrates God’s disapproval of the practice of divorce and conveys His desire to maintain a high and holy standard for church leaders and officers (elders and deacons). They were not to be divorced men who had committed adultery. They must have the record of keeping their marriage intact (no divorce) and also maintaining marital faithfulness to the one wife that God has given them. From the very beginning God has looked down upon adultery.

Exodus 20:14

“Thou shalt not commit adultery.”

Deuteronomy 5:18

“Neither shalt thou commit adultery.”

When a person is “married to another” (Rom. 7:3) in a new legal marriage relationship that person commits adultery. These are the

clear and unmistakable claims of Scripture. An alien bond occurs that God never intended for the original marriage unit.

Jesus said in Luke 16:18:

“Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery.”

We must face this issue without apology or shame. We must cut through all the rhetoric. We must hit the nail on the head and face the clear facts. *Divorce and remarriage results in the act of adultery since in God’s eyes there is still a bond to the previous partner.* Divorce does not dissolve the previous marriage bond otherwise Jesus would have not taught that remarriage results in adultery. The original marriage union is violated by the intrusion of another person. Mere legal divorce does not dissolve the one-flesh marriage relationship in God’s eyes otherwise there would be no reason to prohibit the first marriage. God does not recognize divorce as a righteous action in His holy eyes.

God’s Word on Divorce Misconstrued

There are some who suggest that 1 Corinthians 7:27-28 teaches the right to divorce and remarry. In doing this they misconstrue what God’s Word is actually teaching.

“Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned. Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you.”

The argument suggests that if we are loosed by our marriage partner, through a legal divorce, then we are no longer obligated to remain single since Paul states, “But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned” (1 Cor. 7:27). Of course, this interpretive conclusion is totally self-imposed since Paul within this context is talking about young unmarried virgins (vs. 25 – “Now concerning virgins”) and also widows and widowers (see 7:39). So the sense of these verses is like this: “**Art thou bound (knit, tied together) unto a wife? (this speaks of the permanency of marriage) seek not to be loosed (no divorce).**”

Art thou loosed from a wife? (in the sense of becoming a widow or widower – released from the matrimonial ties through death – vs. 39) **seek not a wife** (because of the unique difficulty of the times [vs. 26], the imminency of Christ's return, and less time you will be able to give to serving the Lord – vv. 32-33). **But and if thou marry** (as a widow or widower), **thou hast not sinned** (since you have the option of remarriage); **and if a virgin marry** (one who has never married before), **she hath not sinned** (since she has the option to marry for the first time)." In essence, Paul is saying that whether you are married or single - stay that way! It may very well be in your best interest to remain single. There is absolutely no ground for divorce and remarriage given in these texts. It takes interpretive gymnastics to miss what Paul is trying to clearly teach.

Those who condone divorce for today also use the illustration of what happened in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. The decision was made to dissolve the marriages, which God's people had with the surrounding heathen people (Ezra 10:2-3). This was done on the basis of the Mosaic Law of divorce (Deut. 24:1-4). These marriages, which under God's Law were clearly forbidden (Deut. 7:1-4; Mal. 2:11), were being used by Satan to try and destroy the arrival of the true Seed (Christ). It must be understood that this was a unique situation that occurred among God's people in their restoration period to the land. It was a *unique situation* and *unique attempt* to destroy Israel's national identity and the messianic line of purity.

These marriages violated the clear commands under God's law and may not even have been regarded as legitimate marriages before God. Even if they were regarded as legitimate marriages in God's sight. In any event, this setting and situation has absolutely no application to present day marriages and gives no warrant for divorce on any ground. Certainly Jesus was not referring to this practice (unlawful marriage with heathen idolaters) when using the word "fornication" in Matthew's accounts as some suggest. How can there be a "Messianic ground" for divorce today if the Messiah has already come?

This unique happening in Ezra's day (Ezra 10:1-19, 44) and Nehemiah's day (Nehemiah 13:23-31) does not change God's mind on divorce. Once again we must remember that *this action was*

neither condoned nor condemned. But in light of the desperate need to purify the people, God simply allowed it to take place in order to fulfill His purposes in the midst of a fallen and sinful world. Let's repeat something. This divorce procedure is not being promoted as God's choice for any marriage. The problem of divorce was simply being regulated in light of unusual circumstances. To use this account as grounds for divorce is to bypass the clear commands of Scripture on this subject (1 Cor. 7:39) and misapply abnormal and unusual regulations for divorce in Nehemiah's day to today's society.

We must also remember that God divorced Israel (Jer. 3:8) but this cannot be construed as His sanction or approval of divorce (Malachi 2:16). First, one must remember that the allowance for divorce under the Mosaic Law (Deut. 24:1-5) was for regulation of the problem and not the promotion or endorsement of divorce. The statement takes this into account. Second, it's rather obvious that God was speaking in metaphorical terms (not a literal fashion) to try and convey His sore displeasure with national Israel because of her adulterous spiritual sins. Divorce is God's expression of His anger toward Israel. God's divorce of His people was used as a metaphor to present a spiritual relationship He had with His people. However, God was not conveying any teaching regarding the actual subject of divorce.

Israel is personified as an adulteress woman (Jer. 3:1, 3-10; 4:30). Hosea says this apostasy has severed Israel's relationship with God (Hos. 2:2). One must understand that divorce imagery is used to describe how His relationship with His people has been corrupted by spiritual apostasy – her spiritual adultery. God put her away into captivity. In these verses divorce is being used in a metaphorical sense to describe God's relationship to Israel. It is not being used to teach God's sanction and legal grounds for divorce in a true marriage. One important interpretive rule for studying the Bible is this. We must distinguish between *historical* and *teaching* passages of the Bible. We must also make the distinction between passages that are designed to teach spiritual lessons and not actual facts regarding a specific subject. God may use an illustration to teach a spiritual lesson without condoning the particular practice or action within the illustration (Matt. 13:24-25).

We know that God was speaking in a metaphorical way concerning His divorce with Israel to illustrate His displeasure with His national people. This is because God promises elsewhere that He will never sever His relationship with Israel (Gen. 12:2-3; 15:7-21; 17:7). God has unconditionally and unilaterally bound himself to Israel. However, a metaphorical illustration of divorce is appropriate to describe His displeasure toward His people. It becomes an exegetical fallacy to build a theology for divorce on metaphorical illustrations. God Himself is a divorcee since he divorced Israel. However, this would be an insecure foundation to build a case for legitimate divorce. Poetical and metaphorical language should never be viewed in the same light as clear teaching passages on any subject (Gen. 2:24; Matthew 19:6; 1 Cor. 7:39).

God's Warning Concerning Divorce

The truth of the matter is this. God's attitude toward divorce has never changed and divorce, remarriage, and committing adultery is still a grievous sin in God's sight (Gal. 5:19). David found this to be true (study Psalm 51:1-12). The pleasures of sin are only for a season (Heb. 11:25). Those who divorce and commit adultery with another partner pierce themselves through with many sorrows and heartaches that can never be fully repaired.

Proverbs 6:32-33

“But whoso committeth adultery with a woman lacketh understanding: he that doeth it destroyeth his own soul. A wound and dishonour shall he get; and his reproach shall not be wiped away.”

There is a price to pay for divorce with resulting heartache and unpleasant circumstances and experiences (Isa. 54:6 – “a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit”). Those who were divorced carry with them a certain social and moral stigma, which they can never detach from themselves (“dishonour” and “reproach”). The words speak for themselves: “wounds,” “dishonor,” “reproach” and “grief” to name just a few. There is always a certain price to pay when you become divorced. There are certain things that cannot be removed from your life when you pass through a divorce. Sin always has its price tag.

We must also remember that it's wrong to sin with a high hand (open rebellion or defiance) against God's will and expect God's best for our lives (Ex. 21:14; Numb. 15:30). James 4:17 says, "Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin." If you don't want to sin against a holy God then you must surrender to God (Rom. 12:2), love Him, and be obedient (1 Peter 1:15). This means that you will not seek to be divorced and remarried. You will want to do what is right. In addition, we must also remember that God also disciplines sinning believers (Heb. 12:6-11).

There are temporal consequences to willful sin that we cannot overlook. This was true under the Old Testament Law where adultery was actually punishable by death ("he that doeth it destroyeth his own soul" – Prov. 6:32). In the case of adultery today, some of these temporal punishments may reside in the very resulting circumstances that surround the act of adultery, which we have already mentioned above (wounds, sorrow, shame, grief). God and His holiness are offended when we choose to go our own way and refuse to follow His pattern for human sexuality. Furthermore, God is not pleased with our lives when we choose to break His natural design for marriage. We should want to please the Lord in all that we do (2 Tim. 2:4; John 8:29; Heb. 13:16). We must always remember that obedience will bring the highest dividends, eternal rewards, and the most satisfaction in this life (2 Tim. 4:7-8; Gal. 6:8). Isaiah 1:19, "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land." The lesson is this. If we follow God's will and plan for marriage will bring God's richest blessing to our lives ("this man shall be blessed in his deed" - James 1:25).

God's Picture of Marriage

Ephesians 5:30-32 states:

"For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church."

Paul's statement reminds us about the permanency of the marriage union. The church is pictured as being spiritually united to Christ as His body. *Since the church cannot be severed from Christ the same*

should be true in the marriage. The wife is not to be severed from her husband. Christ will never be divorced or separated from the believer (Rom. 8:35-39; John 10:28). The same should be true with the marriage relationship. The marriage union is a picture of a permanent relationship. Marriage is always seen to be a picture of indissolubility from God's perspective. This is God's mind and will for all marriage. The very picture of Christ and the church illustrates to us the permanency of marriage. Friend, the divorce among God's people must stop! If God were to speak in an audible voice today He would send down this message to the church and say, "Stop it!" Divorce is against God's creative design for marriage.

Genesis 2:24 once again reads:

"Therefore shall a man **leave** his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be **one flesh**."

Why do so many marriages end in divorce today? One great barrier to successful marriages is the failure of one or both couples to "leave" their parents. This simply means that a new family unit begins with the marriage and the couple's relationship of authority and responsibility to their parents has been severed. Parents are not to control the lives of their children once they leave the nest. Little Johnny has now become big Johnny and can no longer "hang on to mother's apron strings." The two form a new relationship whereby they "cleave" or are cemented to each other in a new family relationship, which is unattached to the previous one. The idea of being glued together in a new relationship speaks of an ongoing loving bond, a love that is to be unbreakable and lasting. It speaks of permanency. If we want to see God's mind on the subject of marriage we must go back to the beginning. Both Paul and Jesus always went back to the beginning when people began to question them about marriage and divorce.

The idea behind "one flesh" suggests the mystical and spiritual unity that takes place through the sexual bond of marriage. The one-flesh relationship is sealed by sexual relations. The very meaning of one flesh connotes something that is never designed to be separated. The birth of children illustrates this "one flesh" union in that the children partake of the flesh of both the father and mother, which are together inseparable. This is a very beautiful illustration. Marriage

between two partners establishes kingship relationships with a new family. We can no more break the kingship marriage relationship than we can blood-family relationships. In some sense there is a spiritual bond that occurs between a family because of this one flesh union. The same is true within a marriage partnership. We can be certain of one thing. Any other flesh relationship that occurs outside the marriage bond is an alien or intruding bond (1 Cor. 6:16). When sex outside of marriage occurs there is an intrusion upon the unique “one flesh” relationship shared by a married couple. This sexual intrusion is a violation of God’s marriage law. Sex in the marriage relationship, or outside the marriage relationship, affects the inner spiritual part of a person’s existence, in that sex bonds two people together spiritually. There is a lasting spiritual link that occurs between two sexual partners, which can never be undone. Perhaps this is why the idea of “soul mates” was developed. The spiritual tie that occurs between lovers is also true concerning the spiritual link between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:31-32). There is a spiritual bond that exists which can never be undone.

God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). But God does not say He hates the divorcee! This is important to note. Nevertheless divorce destroys what God has ordained to be unbreakable and lasting. It was to be a picture of the lasting relationship that Christ has with the church. God intends for the marriage unit to remain glued or cemented together in an unbreakable union of love and devotion to one another. God has not changed His mind on divorce. Society and the church today have tried to reinterpret what Jesus said on this subject but God has not changed His mind on the matter of divorce. God hates the putting away. Whenever someone talked to Jesus about divorce He always brought them back to the beginning!

God’s Regulation of Divorce

Matthew 19:1-6

“And it came to pass, that when Jesus had finished these sayings, he departed from Galilee, and came into the coasts of Judaea beyond Jordan; And great multitudes followed him; and he healed them there. “The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which

made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”

The Pharisees understood that Jesus was teaching the permanency of marriage. That is why they immediately started to question Him about the bill of divorcement under the Mosaic Law. Like today, the Pharisees were preoccupied with establishing grounds for divorce while our Lord was concerned about the indissolubility of marriage. Many believers today are similar to the Pharisees because they miss the real purpose for the Mosaic regulations. In fact, the Pharisees were more concerned about the *concession* of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 than with the *command* recorded in Genesis 2:24. In no way did the legislation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 institute divorce. As we will explain, the intent of the Mosaic Law was to regulate divorce and protect the rights of the rejected wife. But the Pharisees viewed this legislation as the actual desire and will of God for the people.

Matthew 19:7-8

“They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so.”

Moses was told to offer divorce as an option for the people of Israel because their hearts were already hardened toward God’s design for marriage (the permanency of marriage). The people had become calloused toward God’s design for marriage and rejected God’s original plan for marriage. They were going to divorce anyway! One must understand that God never directly stated that it was His original design and plan to allow His people to divorce under the Mosaic regulations. God never gave Moses a direct command for the people to divorce. God would not say, “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Ex. 20:14) and then turn around and say, “Thou shalt divorce and commit adultery.” God speaks His own mind on this matter (Matt. 19:5-6).

Matthew 19:10

“His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with *his* wife, it is not good to marry.”

The disciples understood that Jesus, even within the framework of Matthew’s gospel, was teaching the permanency and indissolubility of marriage. This is why they suggest it might be wiser not to marry at all. They realized the solemn nature of this union and that it should not be entered into lightly or unadvisedly.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 brings us to the divorce legislation: “When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife. And if the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house; or if the latter husband die, which took her to be his wife; Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that is abomination before the Lord: and thou shalt not cause the land to sin, which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.”

The phrase “some uncleanness in her” does not refer to adultery or premarital intercourse since these sexual sins were punishable by death (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22-24). The Mosaic regulations also taught that divorce was not allowable for a man who morally defiled his wife before marriage (Deut. 22:28-29) nor was it permitted in the case of a man who falsely accused his new wife of not being a virgin (Deut. 22:13-19). So none of these scenarios can explain what the “uncleanness” was in the woman, which gave a man the right, under Mosaic regulation, to divorce his wife. This reference to “some uncleanness” (lit. – nakedness of a thing” – naked matter) might have reference to some shameful act of indecency other than illicit sexual intercourse. It may point to some kind of shameful exposure and indecent or improper behavior that is linked with nudity. The precise action is unknown. Some suggest it might have been some physical deficiency such as her inability to bear children but this is highly unlikely even though this was seen in some old Assyrian marriage

contracts. Perhaps the best way to understand what the “uncleanness in her” might be is to identify this “naked thing” with some shameful and repulsive act, which would demean her dignity and womanhood. It was probably an act other than illicit sexual intercourse since the sexual sins such as adultery and homosexuality were punishable by death.

In any event, we must understand that allowance of divorce under the Law does not institute, give sanction for divorce, or approve of divorce in any way. Rather, it is merely treating divorce as a practice already known and existing. Divorce is not encouraged or commanded in this text. Moses did not command divorce; he simply permitted it. Divorce was regulated so that it would not run rampant and produce severe disobedience to God’s original command for marriage. *The problem facing Moses was that the absence of any divorce regulations actually encouraged rampant divorce.* There needed to be some checklist put on the situation at hand to slow down the epidemic and get the people to understand God’s mind on this practice. They were beginning to divorce their wives for a “weekend fling” and then get them back again, through the process of remarriage, when the laundry was piling up and the house became dirty! **Through Moses, God regulated divorce, and through Paul God regulated slavery (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1). Both of these practices are unfavorable events that take place in a fallen world.**

Deuteronomy 24 does not institute divorce. Divorce is actually “man made” and reflects man’s sinful rejection of God’s original plan for marriage. Divorce is not a God-ordained practice. This particular text in Deuteronomy 24 is trying to put a curb on divorce since divorce is opposite of God’s original design for marriage. In actuality, this section is given to **discourage divorce - not condone it** or advocate it. The Lord was not giving the people the right to divorce and commit adultery through remarriage. Rather, He was trying to put some kind of control mechanism on a problem that was already running rampant. **Moses was trying to legislate divorce – not give license for divorce.** This prohibition seems to guard against divorce becoming a “legal” way to commit adultery. The fact that a former wife could not go back to her original mate (Deut. 22:4) acts as a moderating influence on divorce, remarriage, adultery and multitudes

of other marital complications. In giving this divorce legislation the Lord also protected the rights of the women who were put away. It provided legal protection for the wife when God's original plan was violated. She would no more be recognized as the wife of her first husband and bear no responsibility to him. She would have no further domestic obligations toward him and no interference from any former husband if a remarriage took place. Normally a rejected wife returned to her home with nothing but her clothing on her back (Lev. 22:13). However, she was free to remarry, but not to a priest (Lev. 21:7). Since the priests were to be the spiritual leaders and figures in the nation they could never be seen to defile themselves spiritually through marrying a divorced women (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6).

The Mosaic legislation provided a legal divorce transaction that would give the woman certain rights and freedom from her former relationship. But God still saw a divorced and remarried woman as being "defiled" in the act of remarriage and adultery (Deut. 24:4; Matt. 5:32; 19:9; Mk. 10:11-12) and did not want the swapping back and forth of previous mates since this would in one sense legalize adultery. You will notice that verse four (Deut 24:4) suggests that the sin of adultery still would take place when an individual is remarried ("after that she is defiled," "thou shalt not cause the land to sin"). Spiritual pollution does occur when these remarriages take place. A casual reading of these texts will verify that this is true. Since there is still a one-flesh relationship that exists adultery occurs when a previously divorced person remarries. You can't get around what the Bible clearly teaches.

Jeremiah 3:1 states:

"They say, If a man put away his wife, and she go from him, and become another man's, shall he return unto her again? shall not that land be greatly polluted? but thou hast played the harlot with many lovers; yet return again to me, saith the LORD.

The wife is still said to commit adultery and be spiritually polluted after she is remarried. This is why the divorce regulations were given. They were not given to aid divorce but to discourage people from getting multiple divorces. If the people would understand that they are sinning against God and His holiness (Malachi 2:11) they just might stop doing it. If the people's hearts would cease from being hardened

toward God's moral code and what He expects from their lives, they might begin to confide in His holy ways for marriage. *The Mosaic perspective is certainly consistent with Jesus' teaching about divorce and remarriage and how a previously divorced person commits the act of adultery if they are remarried.* They do not move into a new relationship without sinning.

Mark 10:11-12

"And he saith unto them, Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery."

Many people still wonder why God just did not slam the door on divorce and remarriage under the Old Testament Mosaic Law. The answer lies in Matt. 19:8, "Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so." **Although God permitted polygamy and divorce in the Old Testament, He never approved of it.** The same is true about slavery in the New Testament. God permits these things to take place in a fallen world. God permits divorce by His permissive will (not direct will) in a fallen world of sin, where man confuses God's original design, and at the same time God grants forgiveness for this sin like any other sin (John 1:7, 9; John 8:10-11; 1 Cor. 6:9-11). Jesus will forgive those who have broken their marriages and sinned, by forming new unions, while their former partners are still living. The sin of adultery can be forgiven and a new marital bond formed according to the Deuteronomy code (Deut. 24:1-4). However, the spiritual ties with the old relationship and the sorrows that accompany adultery can never fully be erased (Prov. 6:32-33).

The permanency of marriage is God's design, which He has established from the beginning of creation (Gen. 2:24). That design has not been changed. Both Moses and Jesus were only trying to control or legislate the problem of divorce within the Jewish nation in the statements, which they made (Matthew 19:8-9). ***Divorce and remarriage was recognized by the people of Israel but it was not designed by the God of Israel.*** Because people's hearts are so bent on going against God's design, there was to be some kind of control factor placed on the matter of divorce, to keep the problem from

spreading, running ramped, and becoming more complex than it already was. God never approved or sanctioned divorce. It was simply permitted by God and regulated. This is because the people were going to do it anyway. Furthermore, as already stated, the Lord wanted to give some protective laws for women and governing laws about not returning to former husbands after another marriage bond has been established (Deut. 24:1-4). These actions would only complicate the divorce situation.

The whole point is this. God, in a sin cursed world, does permit divorce, even when two are legally married in God's eyes. This is clearly seen under the regulations of the Levitical code. In God's permissive will He allows divorce to take place. God grants to people what they want in this matter, but there is always a certain leanness of soul that takes place when a person steps outside God's primary will and direction for their lives, into His permissive will (see Proverbs 6:32-33). Stepping outside the primary will of God for your life into His permissive will results in reaping a harvest of sorrow and regret.

This whole issue of divorce is a matter dealing with the *permissive* will of God for people – not His *primary* will and direction for people. Because of the hardness of people's hearts God allowed Moses to record in His law that the people could divorce. But we must remember that God only allowed it because the people were going to do it anyway. So God tried to *regulate* or *control* a problem that already existed. As previously stated, God placed stipulations on divorce and remarriage in the Levitical code to try and protect women from being mistreated by a former husband and protecting another marriage from interference with a former husband. A legal transaction occurred that would give the woman certain rights and freedom from her former relationship. But God still saw a divorced and remarried woman as being "defiled" in the act of remarriage and adultery (Deut. 24:4; Matt. 5:32; 19:9; Mk. 10:11-12). Furthermore, God did not want the swapping back and forth of previous mates, since this would in one sense legalize adultery.

God never said it's permissible to divorce for *any* cause! The Pharisees assumed that it was permissible to divorce for *every* cause (Matt. 19:3) but Jesus says that it is wrong to divorce for any cause except "fornication" (Matt. 5:32; 19:9).

God's Exception

Matthew 19:9

“And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away (divorce) his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.”

In Matthew 5:32 Jesus echoed the same truth:

“But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away (divorce) his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.”

Many of us would feel much more comfortable if Jesus had not put the exception clause in this text of Scripture. But He did. Now what did He mean by it? We do know that Jesus was not trying to condone divorce in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. This is because Jesus went back to the original design of marriage every time He was questioned about this matter. Marriage is to be permanent. It is an assumption read into these divorce texts to conclude that there is legitimate ground for divorce and remarriage. What Jesus was doing was actually speaking for the permanence of marriage. The mention of divorce was to correct a particular marital problem that had arisen among the Jews. Some suggest that Mark and Luke stated the general rule (permanence of marriage) while Matthew added the exception clause (divorce for marital unfaithfulness).

The Adultery View

It's assumed by many that the word “fornication” actually means adultery and that Jesus was giving permission for the people to divorce a partner who commits adultery. It's then concluded that marital unfaithfulness, or repeated acts of marital unfaithfulness, is the only Scriptural ground for divorce.

It's interesting that the intended Roman readers of Mark's Gospel (Mark 10:11-12) and the Greek-Gentiles readers of Luke's Gospel (Luke 16:18) would not have known of this exception clause that was recorded only in Matthew's Gospel for Jewish readers. Therefore,

Jesus makes a clear affirmation of the permanency of marriage in all the Gospel records. Matthew's record does not overturn Mark's and Luke's record on divorce. Many evangelicals miss the main teaching of Jesus, even in Matthew's record to the Jews, which is the permanency of the marriage relationship (no divorce). Surely Jesus would not undo this binding covenant of marriage with an exception clause in Matthew's Gospel record, which no others would read, and invalidate His clear claims recorded by Mark and Luke. Twenty-first century Christian readers can see all three Synoptic Gospels and harmonize the passages, but in this day and even in the early days of the church, the people did not have this privilege or benefit. Therefore, Jesus made the same clear and unmistakable affirmations in all three Gospel records. No divorce! Period. This unifying purpose can be seen in all the Gospel records, even Matthew's account. Jesus was unified and consistent in His teaching concerning divorce and remarriage.

This conclusion that Jesus was referring to adultery when using the term "fornication" is very misleading and almost comical.

James Montgomery Boice said:

"It cannot refer to adultery because adultery was punishable by death, and in that case there would be no need for a divorce."

He is right. Matthew's Jewish context rules out the adultery exception. If Jesus were telling the Jews under the law that they could divorce for adultery it would be meaningless. Their partner would be dead! Furthermore, if Jesus was teaching that adultery or marital unfaithfulness was the exception for divorce then His teaching did not rise above that of the Shammai school of interpretation concerning divorce and that of the Pharisees. This conclusion would be contrary to Jesus' usual pattern when speaking to the Jews about spiritual issues (Matt. 5:21-48 – "I say unto you"). Christ's teachings were always elevated above the present day teachings of the Jews. In addition, this teaching contradicts the teaching of Mark and Luke. If Jesus did give the adultery exception in Matthew, then both the Roman readers of Mark (Mk. 10:11-12) and the Greek-Gentile readers of Luke (Luke 16:18) would not be able to know of this ground for divorce recorded only in Matthew's Gospel written for the

Jews. This is significant for what Jesus said would not be seen as a contradiction between the authors.

Jesus makes a clear affirmation of the permanency of marriage in all the Gospel records. Matthew's record does not overturn the record of Mark and Luke on divorce. The pressing crime of many evangelicals today is that they miss the main teaching of Jesus, even in Matthew's record to the Jews, which is the permanency of the marriage relationship (no divorce). Surely Jesus would not undo this binding covenant of marriage with an exception clause in Matthew's Gospel record, which no others would read, and invalidate His clear claims recorded by Mark and Luke. Twenty-first century Christian readers can see all three Synoptic Gospels and harmonize the passages, but in this day and even in the early days of the church, the people did not have this privilege or benefit. Therefore, Jesus made the same clear and unmistakable affirmations in all three Gospel records. No divorce! Period. This unifying purpose can be seen in all the Gospel records, even Matthew's account. Jesus was unified and consistent in His teaching concerning divorce and remarriage.

Matthew 19:6

“Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”

Whatever the exception is in verse nine it would not overturn the clear affirmation that Jesus had just made in Matthew 19:6 concerning the permanency of marriage. Jesus would not argue for permanency in marriage and then immediately contradict His clear command to stop severing marriage unions, which God has permanently bound together. No passage, when correctly interpreted, will teach something contradictory to the rest of Scripture. We must remember the important interpretive principle of always examining the clear teachings of Scripture in light of the less clear. This will keep us from error and divergent views that Jesus or the Bible never intended to convey to its readers.

So what was Jesus saying in Matthew 19:9? Since husbands were divorcing their wives for every little matter, Jesus was simply saying to a husband that he could not divorce his wife unless he found out that she had committed “fornication” (porneia – illicit sexual

intercourse or sexual immorality of some specific kind). This is a Greek word that can encompass all types of sexual immorality. Sometimes the contextual setting of the word demands that it is focusing on specific sexual relations between unmarried people (Gal. 5:19), incest (1 Cor. 5:1; Acts 15:20, 29), and even homosexuality (Rom. 1:29). It would seem that this particular word (porneia) is an appropriate generic word used for many kinds of deviant sexual acts. However, within the appropriate context this word can also refer to a broad spectrum of sexual sins (adultery, fornication, unbridled lust) covering sexual sins of all kind without specifying or singling out any particular sexual sin (1 Cor. 6:13; 2 Cor. 12:21). This is significant. *Whenever the term is used in a generic way it does not specifically refer to adultery.*

It's also interesting that Matthew seems to make a distinction between the two words, fornication and adultery (Matt. 5:32; 15:19), as do other lists in Scripture. In addition, the word "porneia" is never *specifically* or *directly* used of adultery in the Scripture. Therefore, to interpret this term (porneia) as strictly referring to adultery is misleading and lacks Biblical support. This word "porneia" is never identified in Scripture as referring specifically to the act of adultery. Many attempt to interpret the passage "except it be for adultery" or "except it be for sexual immorality" (referring to adultery) to support their supposed theory that adultery is grounds for divorce. Therefore, they conclude divorce, in the case of adultery, or any other kind of sexual sin, dissolves the marriage union, and makes remarriage permissible. However, if Jesus were intending to allow for divorce, in the case of the specific sin of adultery, He would have obviously given the definite term - adultery. Furthermore, fornication (porneia) is a different word than adultery (moicheia) and is often contrasted with adultery, side by side, and in the same verses (Gal. 5:19; Mat. 15:19; Mark 7:22; 1 Cor. 6:9; Heb.13:4). This gives us a significant clue that Jesus is talking about *some other specific sexually relationship*, other than adultery, when using the word "fornication." Lexical evidence does not require the meaning of adultery in the divorce texts unless it can be proven (which it cannot) that the word always means adultery. Everything points to the exception clause as being something uncommon, certainly nothing as common as adultery.

Although adultery can be included in the broad understanding of this word (porneia) in certain contexts, pointing to the broad spectrum or general overview of sexual sins, many times there is a more exact meaning attached to this word within its setting or context. As mentioned above, it's also interesting to note that the word "porneia" is never used specifically of adultery. Therefore, it's obvious that Jesus has another specific sin in mind in this Jewish setting and context that only the Jews would understand. Why didn't Jesus use the word for adultery (moicheia) if He wanted to specifically convey that adultery was the ground for divorce? Why wouldn't Jesus use the specific term for adultery if He intended to convey that adultery or marital unfaithfulness was grounds for divorce as so many translations suggest. Why would Jesus choose to use a vague or generic term to point to adultery or marital unfaithfulness? It is safe to conclude that another *specific type of sexual sin* is being referred to by this word (porneia) and this sin is accurately labeled as "fornication."

As we will verify later, Jesus is addressing the Jews, in Matthew's gospel, about a *special type of sexual sin* that occurs during a forbidden marriage relationship under Mosaic Law. Thus, the way in which "porneia" is being used in Matthew is in a *specialized sense* instead of its broader more general sense, when referring to all kinds of "sexual immorality," as so many Bible translations state. *Since the Greek word "porneia" can contextually relate to various types of sexual sin, we will conclude by this study that Jesus is referring to the specific sin of incest among relatives, which was forbidden under the Mosaic Law.*

Since Jesus uses the word "except" to introduce the only exception to what He had just said about the permanency of marriage, it would be understandable to conclude that Jesus was using the term "porneia" in a specialized sense, and not in a generic way, so as to refer to all kinds of sexual sins. Granted, it is understood that adultery may be involved with the sexual practice (incest) that takes place between relatives if one person was previously married, divorced, and now having relations with another person. For instance, if a mother would marry her son she would be committing adultery. But we must remember that Jesus is not focusing on adultery. Rather, Jesus is focusing on the unlawful marriage relationships, under the Law,

where the specific sin of sexual incest between relatives would occur. Porneia must then refer to the sin of incest, which takes place between near kin relatives. This conclusion will be borne out in a few moments.

Betrothal View

Some conclude that the meaning of “fornication” suggests that Jesus was giving a Jewish man grounds for divorce only during the betrothal stage and therefore no legitimate marriage had occurred between the partners (unfaithfulness during the Jewish betrothal). In this case “fornication” was committed and not adultery because no legal marriage had actually occurred in God’s sight. It is presumed that the consummation of the marriage, through physical relations, is what seals the marriage bond. Only when physical relations took place after the betrothal period was the marriage actually sealed, and from that point onward, the marriage could only be broken by death. The suggestion is made that Jesus was allowing the legal marriage to be dissolved because that’s all it was, a legal marriage from society’s standpoint, but not a true marriage in God’s eyes. Therefore, the term fornication is used to indicate the nature of the sin. It was the sin of fornication, which only can be committed by an unmarried person.

However, we must recognize that during their engagement or betrothal period, the couple was covenanted together in marriage and were considered to be man and wife (Deut. 20:7, 28:30, 22:7). The marriage was not yet consummated by physical relations but they were considered to be man and wife. The Jewish betrothal was more than just a legal formality. God has always designed that marriage was by contract and not sexual relations or else prostitutes would be marrying several men every day. Since God has given man the authority to govern (Rom. 13:1-7) the laws concerning legal marriage and legal divorce are to be determined by the state. Marriage is by contract and covenant (Gen. 31:50; Prov. 2:17; Malachi 2:14) and the betrothal period was a time of official marriage in God’s eyes where two would covenant together in marriage before witnesses and God. The two were married in God’s eyes even before they came together physically. Betrothal was as binding as our marriage today and under the Mosaic Law the betrothal contract of marriage could only be broken by a formal divorce or by death.

Some conclude that Jesus was teaching that this is the only exception for divorce. A man could divorce his wife during the betrothal period, if he found out that she was unfaithful during betrothal stage, prior to their consummation of the marriage. The argument is further illustrated by the case between Joseph and Mary. Joseph was contemplating divorcing Mary during the betrothal period before they came together physically and actually consummated the actual marriage (Matt. 1:18-19). Joseph was simply acting out his divorce rights under the Jewish law and culture which developed over the years.

Those who espouse the Jewish betrothal view conclude that this Jewish betrothal custom does not apply to the day in which we live, nor should we try to use this statement of Jesus as a proof text for divorce, when the entire argument of Jesus is really focusing on the permanency of marriage and not the dissolution of marriage (Matt. 19:4-6). Therefore, divorce is not valid under any grounds except in this unique betrothal period, prior to the actual marriage, where an unmarried person could commit the sin of fornication. From the legal standpoint of society, a divorce could be written out, even though in God's eyes no divorce actually occurred.

The betrothal view of the exception clause is appealing to many. However, the weakness of the view is that Jesus was not talking about the betrothal period. The very passages which Jesus and the Pharisees referred to (Gen. 2:24; Deut. 24:1-4) speak of marriage relationships - not betrothal. Second, Jesus spoke of a consummated marriage in 19:5-6 (one flesh), but the marriage was not consummated during betrothal.

Marriage to Gentile Heathen View

Others have suggested that the word "fornication" (porneia) refers to unlawful marriage between Gentile idolaters. There were several occasions of these kinds of marriages in the Old Testament with subsequent divorce. Ezra required certain Jews to divorce their Gentile wives in order to keep the Jewish line pure and free from idolatry (Ezra 9:10). Later the prophet Malachi rebuked the Jews who had married idolatrous foreign women during Nehemiah's absence

(Mal. 2:11). When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem he purges the people of their heathen Gentile relationships in order to keep the Jews from idolatry and apostasy (Neh. 13:23-31). It's suggested that this was the kind of illegal marriage relationship that Jesus was referring to when speaking of "fornication" in the exception clause.

This view seems weak for several reasons. First, this was a unique situation that took place in the restoration community under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah to insure the continued existence of the nation (Deut. 7:3-4), their faith, and preserve the line through which the Messiah would come. This was a special protective action that would ensure the purity of the nation's bloodline and the entrance of the Messiah or Savior into the world. Since the nation had grown in size and since the Messiah had already come into the world this severe restriction would no longer apply. In Jesus' day the command to divorce heathen Gentile partners would no longer be relevant or enforced as it was in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Of course, the same would be true today in connection with the Church. Second, there is no lexical or Biblical support that the word *porneia* ever refers to marriages between Jews and heathen Gentile idolaters. Third, the best argument against this view of the exception clause is an appeal to the writings of the apostle Paul who taught Jesus' same view on divorce (no divorce and the permanency of marriage). In Paul's teachings on divorce he clearly commanded that a believing partner should never send away (divorce) an unbelieving spouse (1 Cor. 7:10, 12-13). Scripture is its own best interpreter and therefore Paul's conclusion would not contradict what Jesus was teaching. Paul's conclusions, who strictly followed the teachings of Jesus, seem to rule out that our Lord was referring to believers divorcing their unbelieving spouses.

Marriage to Near Kin View

Another possible and more probable teaching about this word "fornication" (*porneia*) and the exception clause, in this Jewish context, has to do with illegitimate marriages between close relatives. These were marriages that never occurred in God's eyes and therefore do not apply to the subject of true marriage and divorce. ***In other words, Jesus gave the Jews the right to legally divorce a***

person who was a near kin relative, since under Jewish Law these relationships were forbidden and not considered a genuine one-flesh marriage relationship in God's eyes. After spending many hours of study on this view it seems to be a preferable view and understanding of what Jesus is saying here. In short, it is the Biblical view in light of the Jewish setting of Mathew's gospel.

First, the setting seems to lend itself to this interpretation. Jesus was being interrogated by the Pharisees from Perea (Matt. 19:1-3) which was under the jurisdiction of Herod. You will remember that Herod married his niece or sister-in-law (Matt. 14:3-4) and John the Baptist was killed for speaking out against this incestuous relationship several years earlier (Matt. 14:1-8). The Pharisees wanted the same fate for Jesus. Thus, the Pharisees wanted Jesus to speak out against Herod for entering into this illegal and forbidden relationship under the Law and end the earthly ministry of Jesus. Second, marriage within the prohibited relationships of Leviticus was apparently a live issue that was even looked down upon by the later church (1 Cor. 5:1). The continuance of these practices by Gentiles would be immoral and have a serious offense to the Jews (Acts 15:29). There would be no question in the Jewish mind regarding these illegal marriages and the illicit sexual intercourse being condemned by Jesus.

The Jewish audience would be very familiar with the Leviticus laws about near kind marriages (Lev. 18:6-18). Furthermore, incestuous marriages were rather popular among the political leaders of Palestine in the first century. The Herod of Jesus' day married his niece (Matt. 14:3-4). Josephus records how Archelaus, who ruled Judea from 4 B.C. to A.D. 6 also entered into an incestuous relationship when marrying the former wife (Glaphyra) of his brother. The later Herod Agrippa 11 (A.D 50-100) was also involved in an incestuous relationship with his sister Berniece. The point is this. Marriages to near kin or relatives was a timely and hot issue among Jews and Jewish leaders. Thus, the exception clause would contextually fit into the Jewish scene and was a current issue in the Jewish world. Third, we must remember that Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience familiar with the prohibitions against near kin marriages (Lev. 18:6-18). The Jewish readers would be acquainted

with the Old Testament Law about this sin between close kin or relatives. The absence of this exception clause (“except it be for fornication”) in the gospels of Mark and Luke is an important point, since these gospels are primarily addressed to Gentile readers, who had no understanding about Old Testament Law.

This Jewish uniqueness of Matthew’s gospel gives us a clue to what Jesus was referring to when using the word “porneia” in the context of the Jewish people. Jesus was referring to something that only the Jews would understand in relationship to their Jewish Law and background. The exception clause is omitted from the other gospel accounts, by inspiration, since the Gentile believers would not understand the true significance of what Jesus was saying. Those early Romans and Gentile Christians, who were reading the accounts of Mark and Luke, would have a clear understanding that Jesus was referring to *no divorce* and that remarriage was adultery. It’s also interesting that when Jesus spoke of divorce in Mark 10:12 He referenced a wife divorcing her husband. This was unknown to Jews since the provision of Jewish law only allowed men to divorce their wives.

This once again proves the Jewish audience that Matthew’s gospel was intended to reach. In the case of the Jews, who knew the Law and who were living under the Law in Jesus’ day, there was given an exception clause within Matthews’s gospel, which gave a person the right to divorce on the grounds of forbidden Jewish marriages under the Law. Jesus was saying that marriages within the prohibited relationships, under Jewish Law, could be dissolved, since these marriages were forbidden and since they were not viewed as legitimate marriages in God’s sight. Thus, the word “fornication” points to these types of incestuous marriages between relatives where the specific sin of sexual incest would occur in these spurious (non-genuine) marriage relationships. *Since the Greek word “porneia” can contextually refer to various types of sexual sin, we can conclude that Jesus is referring to the specific sin of incest among relatives, which was forbidden under the Mosaic Law.*

Leviticus 18:6-18 says:

“None of you shall approach to **any that is near of kin** to him, to uncover their nakedness: I am the Lord. The nakedness of thy father,

or the nakedness of thy mother, shalt thou not uncover: she is thy mother; thou shalt not uncover her nakedness. The nakedness of thy father's wife shalt thou not uncover: it is thy father's nakedness. The nakedness of thy sister, the daughter of thy father, or daughter of thy mother, whether she be born at home, or born abroad, even their nakedness thou shalt not uncover. The nakedness of thy son's daughter, or of thy daughter's daughter, even their nakedness thou shalt not uncover: for theirs is thine own nakedness. The nakedness of thy father's wife's daughter, begotten of thy father, she is thy sister, thou shalt not uncover her nakedness.

“Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy father's sister: she is thy father's near kinswoman. Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy mother's sister: for she is thy mother's near kinswoman. Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy father's brother, thou shalt not approach to his wife: she is thine aunt. Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy daughter in law: she is thy son's wife; thou shalt not uncover her nakedness. Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother's wife: it is thy brother's nakedness. Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of a woman and her daughter, neither shalt thou take (take in marriage) her son's daughter, or her daughter's daughter, to uncover her nakedness; for **they are her near kinswomen**: it is wickedness. Neither shalt thou **take a wife** (expression of marriage) to her sister, to vex her, to uncover her nakedness, beside the other in her life time.”

To “uncover nakedness” was a Hebrew euphemism for sexual intercourse, which in this case would take place in a marriage relationship. The words “take a wife” would indicate that a marriage contract had been made and established between these near kin relatives (Gen. 24:3, 4, 7; 4:38; 28:6; Lev. 20:14, 21; 21:7, 13, 14). These verses clearly forbid marriages between near relatives or close blood relation. The Old Testament Law was very clear on this. The Jews that Jesus spoke with in Matthew's gospel account, on the “except it be for fornication” clause, would know exactly what He was referring to since they were familiar with Jewish Law. They knew that near kin marriages were forbidden under Old Testament Law and were considered a travesty of God's Law.

Webster defines “incest” as the type of sexual sin (near relative marriages) that we have been talking about. Incest: 1. sexual relations between persons so closely related that they are forbidden by law or religion to marry. 2. the crime of sexual relations, cohabitation, or marriage between such persons.

It’s interesting that in 1 Corinthians 5:1 Paul uses the word “porneia” in connection with an incestuous marriage relationship that a man had with his mother-in-law. This is a clear violation of Leviticus 18. He married his own mother-in-law and committed incest with her becoming guilty of the sin of marrying near kin relatives. James also used the word “porneia” when speaking at the Jerusalem council and was referring to the incestuous marriage situation under Old Testament Law (Acts 15:20, 29). It was suggested that the Gentiles, who lived without the Law, would refuse to practice any kind of marriages with near kin relatives. They were to steer away from the practice of marrying distant relatives, which would involve the sexual act of “fornication” due to intermarriage with family ties. Of course, this would offend the Jews who had been instructed for so long to not marry any close relatives. But this may also be understood as meaning that the very practice of “fornication” (marriage to relatives) was still a moral issue before God even while living in the grace dispensation.

It’s my opinion that these directives given to Gentiles believers were not “gray areas” of liberty but moral and pagan issues that the newly converted Gentile believers must correct in their lives. Pagans sacrificed meat to idols (1 Cor. 10:20), strangled animals in a cruel manner, and then ate the animal meat raw and drank the animal’s blood. They also committed fornication among near kin relatives. If this evaluation of these prohibitions is true then “fornication” (porneia) may have surfaced as an actual sin that must be avoided and not be tolerated by either party. In any event, the parallels between things sacrificed to idols (Lev. 17:8-9), things strangled (Lev. 17:13-14), blood (Lev. 17:10-12), and porneia (fornication – Lev. 18:6-18) all fit into the same Old Testament Jewish setting. So it’s very clear that this is another instance where “fornication” is used as a reference to illegal near kin marriages and the sexual incest that occurs between relatives.

F.F. Bruce speaks to the possibility of this view:

“But fornication could bear a more technical sense of marital union within the prohibited degrees of consanguinity or affinity laid down by the Hebrew ‘law of holiness’ (Leviticus 18:6-18). There are one or two other places in the New Testament where fornication may have this technical sense – e.g. the concession “except on the ground of fornication” added in the Matthaean version of Jesus’ prohibition of divorce for his follower (Matthew 5:32, 19:9).”

If porneia (fornication) is understood in this specialized sense in the Jewish texts of Matthew, to mean these types of illegal relationships of near kin (blood relationships), then Jesus is simply saying that the whole matter of dissolving a one-flesh relationship does not apply under the grounds of “incestuous marriages.” Perhaps this is because these two people were already of the same household or blood family and could not be considered to possess another one-flesh relationship in God’s eyes. Therefore, the legal writing of a divorcement bill was allowable in the case of these near kin marriages. *This is because these marriages were forbidden and not recognized as genuine marriages under God’s Law.* To reiterate, the word “fornication” (porneia) points to a specialized incestuous marriage that takes place between relatives and where the specific sexual sin of incest occurs in what is really a spurious (non-genuine) marriage relationship. **Thus, the word “fornication” in the Jewish setting takes on the meaning of sexual incest, which takes place in illegal and non-recognized marriages between relatives.**

The exception clause is simply that – an exception. It is *not* an exception to what Jesus said about divorce, remarriage, and committing adultery but an exception concerning the actual state of a marriage before God, which was absolutely forbidden under Jewish Law. The whole point is this. Matthew 19:6 says, What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” **But since God has not put a marriage together between near kin relatives there is no severing of a legitimate marriage relationship in God’s eyes.** The exception then becomes a unique exceptional case of severing a marriage from a legal standpoint, which God never considered to be a one-flesh union. *God puts all marriages together except when two people commit incest.* In this case an exception can be made where the two sever their marriage from a legal standpoint and no longer

live together in incest. We must simply understand that God does not ordain or unite these types of people in marriage. Another case would be homosexual marriages between two parties of the same sex. God does not recognize certain marriages as being one-flesh unions. The best thing that one could do with these illegitimate marriages is to legally dissolve them with a bill of divorcement.

Matthew 19:9

“And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication (an illegitimate and non-recognized marriage between kin or relatives), and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.”

In summary, Jesus is saying that God’s plan for marriage does not include legal divorce under any situation or circumstance except for fornication, the marriage between near kin or relatives, which was forbidden under Old Testament Law, and which could not legitimately occur because of some previous physical ties that were already existing between the family members.

The apparent reason behind these prohibitions against marriage to in-law relations was because in some sense they were already “one flesh” as a family unit (Gen. 2:24), within their blood ties or relations. Therefore, they were already regarded as being linked together in a family unit, possessing some fleshly or spiritual tie. For this reason, a near kin marriage did not and could not create another bond in God’s eyes. Thus, to marry a relative would not constitute a marriage and adultery could not be an issue since God had not officially joined these two relatives together in a “one flesh” marriage union. *In God’s mind, these marriages never occurred in the prohibited context of Leviticus 18:6-18.* For this reason, Jesus gave the Jews the right to legally dissolve a marriage and divorce a person who was married to a near kin relative. Under Jewish Law these relationships were forbidden and not considered a genuine marriage relationship in God’s eyes. They were illegitimate and illegal in God’s eyes, much like a homosexual marriage today.

Jesus was simply saying that there could be no divorce and remarriage except in the case of these illegal marriages, which were deemed by God as spurious, since in some sense there was already

a one-flesh bond or relationship between the relatives. Marriage is uniting two different people into a one-flesh union (Gen. 2:24). This one-flesh union is something that could not occur between close relatives since there was some kind of fleshly tie or bond that already existed between them in God's eyes. In the case of illegal marriages, forbidden under Jewish Law, a formal and legal divorcement could be made to eliminate any further ties in society. However, this was merely an outward legal action. It was not a legitimate divorce in God's eyes, since no one-flesh union had actually occurred, and since a previous one-flesh union cannot be dissolved in the act of remarriage. This is why adultery occurs between those who remarry non-kin relatives.

Jesus was then saying to the Pharisees that this Old Testament prohibition, under Jewish Law (the marriage of close relatives), would not constitute a true marriage, since they were already in some sense meshed together through blood ties. Thus, the marriage did not create another bond and was never genuine in God's eyes. So a man could legally divorce and leave a woman only for the case of fornication (porneia) or when a near kin marriage has taken place. **In the case of porneia (fornication), she was not his wife, since the two were already related kin, and were in some sense tied together as a family unit. Thus, the exception cause is not an exception cause for adultery, since the two were in some sense already "one flesh" (possessing family ties) and were not considered married from God's perspective.** The word "fornication" must then deal with a specialized immorality of sexual incest that occurred between Jewish relatives. They were Jews that had entered a forbidden zone of immorality and an unrecognized marriage relationship before God.

We must remember that it's God who actually joins people together in marriage (Mark 10:9) and if He fails to join them together they will not be joined together in a one-flesh union. Such is the case with the incestuous marriages among relatives. God did not recognize these as true, viable, and working marriages. Therefore, public and legal divorce was allowable, since God had not officially joined these two kin together in a one-flesh marriage.

Let's reiterate what we have learned. Once again, Herod married his niece, the former wife of his brother Philip, and what did John the Baptist say in Matthew 14:4, "It is not lawful for thee to have her." What Jewish Law had Herod violated?

Leviticus 18:6

"None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him, to uncover their nakedness: I am the Lord."

Leviticus 20:21

"And if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing: he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless."

John the Baptist condemned Herod Antipas for not only divorcing his wife but also for marrying another woman (his sister-in-law) in violation of Leviticus, 18:16 and 20:21. Jesus was being interrogated by the Pharisees in Perea (Matt. 19:1-3; Mark 10:1) which was the territory under the jurisdiction of Herod. The Pharisees were obviously trying to put Jesus to the test and see if He would defend the Old Testament Scriptures about near kin marriages (porneia) and use these Scriptures to speak out against Herod's illegal incestuous marriage with his niece, the former wife of his brother Philip 1 (Matt. 14:3-4).

Apparently these Jewish religious leaders were trying to get Jesus to say something against the marriage of Herod so that Jesus might get into trouble with Herod and the local authorities. John the Baptist lost his head over this issue one or two years prior to this meeting with the Pharisees (Matt. 14:1-8). What would Jesus do? Instead of condemning this marriage like John ("It is not lawful") Jesus tactfully avoided a confrontation with Herod (since it was not time for the cross) by simply stating that all divorce and remarriage is wrong except in the case of fornication (porneia), which occurred in the unlawful marriage or near kin relationships. This was one way to tactfully condemn Herod for his incestuous and unlawful relationship, under Jewish Law, without causing a confrontation with Him and a premature ending of His earthly ministry.

Jesus did not back down. He called Herod a fox during His earthly ministry (Luke 13:32) and the fox had sinned by marrying his sister-

in-law. This was an immoral act, which was expressly forbidden under Jewish Law. It was “fornication” (porneia) or this incestuous sexual immorality that occurs between relatives. *It’s very clear that Jesus used the situation at hand to answer the Pharisees and they fully comprehended the significance of Jesus’ words regarding fornication or porneia.* They were expecting Jesus to defend the Scriptures about this marital sin. After all, the Pharisees, unlike the Sadducees, were the conservative religious leaders and would expect Jesus to defend the Old Testament Scriptures in regards to the sinfulness of near kin marriages and incestuous relationships in these marriages. But the Pharisees got more than they bargained for when Jesus condemned all divorce and remarriage and labeled remarriage as adultery. In short, they were probably stunned at what Jesus taught about divorce (“no divorce”) since the Jewish nation for centuries believed that divorce and remarriage was permissible in God’s eyes under the Mosaic Code. They had developed a hard heart toward God’s original marital design.

Matthew 19:9

“And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except *it be* for **fornication**, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit **adultery**.”

Divorce for unlawful unions between kin (relatives) cannot be used as a license to justify divorce for sexual immorality. There is no parallel to this unique situation among the Jews. The *exception clause* is not an exception clause for adultery. Jesus contrasts the word “fornication” with adultery in this text. Many fail to see this. Rather, the word “fornication” must deal with the *specialized sexual immorality of incest* that occurs between relatives under Jewish Law. The Jews fully understood what Jesus was saying because of their Jewish Law and heritage and that is why Matthew is the only gospel record that included the exception clause (“except it be for fornication”).

Matthews gospel was primarily directed to a Jewish audience who would understand the near kin marriage rule under law. Jesus is then saying that divorce and remarriage is wrong and always results in adultery except in the case of marriage with relatives, which is forbidden under the Mosaic decree (Lev. 18:6-18). It would be better for a couple to separate and end an illegal marriage than to continue

on in an illicit, forbidden sexual relationship, where the sexual immorality of incest would continually occur between these two people, due to their unlawful and unrecognized marriage.

Divorce was never in God's plan for marriage (Gen. 2:24). The original command was that there was to be a bond in marriage until the death of one of the marriage partners. God has not altered this original command (1 Cor. 7:39). God has not changed His mind on the matter of divorce in spite of the so-called grounds for divorce being spread among Christian circles today. Jesus took the religious people back to the beginning so that they could remember God's design for marriage.

God's Beginning Plan for Marriage

Matthew 19:3-6

"The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder."

If we would just go back to the beginning, we would stop trying to justify divorce today. If people would go back to the beginning marriages would stop ending! God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). If we want to be obedient to God's laws and please Him, we will not divorce and remarry. The issue of "porneia" was simply a side issue that Jesus was dealing with in response to the Pharisees' attempt to see if Jesus would remain faithful to the Scriptures, speak out against Herod, and ultimately invoke the wrath of Herod and Herodias. The real issue at hand and the core teaching that Jesus was conveying was that all divorce is wrong. All divorce that intends to dissolve genuine marital unions is wrong and remarriage results in adultery. Marriage is "till death do us part."

1 Corinthians 7:39

“The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord.”

No exceptions! My friend, there are no loopholes for divorce! Jesus takes us back to the beginning so we can get things ironed out! We must go back to Genesis, as Jesus did, to see God’s mind on divorce. God’s attitude about divorce has never changed. Divorce is never an option in God’s eyes. The supposed “adultery” and “Pauline” grounds for divorce is a myth not found in the Bible.

Since God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16), and Jesus commanded that it be stopped on the basis of the Genesis pattern (Matt. 19:6; Mark 10:9), and since Paul declares four times that there should be no divorce (1 Cor. 7:10-13), I would have to conclude that there are no legitimate, Biblical, grounds for divorce in the context of true marriages.

Mental cruelty, wife beating, desertion, innocent party, guilty party, and such like do not give the right to actually divorce a mate. There may be need for separation at times but not divorce.

Charles Ryrie stated:

“Doctrine must never be compromised by cases; cases should always conform to doctrine.”

God’s moral code has not changed. He has never openly endorsed divorce. God’s creative design never allowed it to be so. God merely permitted it to take place and tried to regulate the practice in some measure in the days of Moses, so that people might recognize its exceeding sinfulness and degradation. There is a vast difference between God’s *prescribed* will and His *permissive* will because of the hardness of hearts. Today people will debate, “Is it right for divorced people to remarry?” We should deal with this issue by asking the question in another way, “Is it right for married people to divorce?” Jesus is very clear on this issue. It is always wrong to divorce and remarry because when a person decides to take this action they will commit adultery. Jesus is saying to us today – “Don’t divorce! It is a

sin to divorce. You commit adultery when you remarry. Marriage is for life. You must value your marriage!”

God’s Character and the Divorce - Remarriage Issue

Some people question God’s conclusion and purpose regarding the absolute permanency of marriage. However, we know that God is just in establishing the law of permanency in relationship to marriage (Gen. 18:25; Psalm 115:3; Isa. 14:27; Rev. 15:3). The outcries of the innocent parties which say, “But that’s not fair” or more specifically, “God would not be fair if He set down a rule like this” or “You can’t expect somebody to suffer for another person’s sin” all point their finger directly at God. “Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed *it*, Why hast thou made me thus?” (Rom. 9:20). God made the marriage manual (Gen. 2:24) and He can set down the rules and limitations according to His perfect sovereignty, plan, and purpose. Isaiah 14:27, “For the LORD of hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul *it*? and his hand *is* stretched out, and who shall turn it back?” “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25). The Bible says, “just and true are thy ways” (Rev. 15:3) and concludes that “he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him” (Ecc. 8:3). “But our God *is* in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased.” (Psalm 115:3).

God’s Conclusion

The Scriptures do not deal with the cases that will arise but it does give us the restriction, prescriptions, and goals of every marriage. Gathering all the Biblical texts together we can conclude that marriage is to be indissoluble by divine institution (Mark 10:6 – “from the beginning”), by the strength of the relationship (Mark 10:7 – “cleave”), by the two becoming one flesh (Mark 10:8 – “they twain shall be one flesh”), by the clear command of Scripture (Mark 10:9 – “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder”), and by the evil adulterous consequences that result from divorce and remarriage (Mark 10:11-12 – “committeth adultery”).

The teaching of Jesus in Mark 10:11-12, Luke 16:18, Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is simply this. Divorce that followed by remarriage, by either the husband or the wife, causes them to commit adultery. Jesus

couldn't have made it any clearer than He did. Why do we miss it today? Why do so many try to look for some kind of Pauline loophole or right for divorce and remarriage based upon desertion or sexual immorality? Could it be that the pressing culture of our day is causing us to miss the main and plain teachings of what Jesus has said on divorce and remarriage? Could it be that our modern culture, like the culture in the days of Moses and Jesus, is still trying to bend what God has said from the beginning (Gen. 2:24)?

The sacredness of this institution must once again be taught to our young people, so that they might know what God expects of them and their marriages, and so they might have the fear of God in their hearts. We need to raise a generation of young people who will see God's nonnegotiable viewpoint on marriage and who will know that they are entering into a lifetime contract with another person that is indissoluble until death. Many are beginning to recognize the profound social and psychological implications of the divorce issue. Divorce leaves a devastating aftermath to families and creates ruinous or tragic complications. Most times divorce does not solve problems; it evades them. Divorce often creates more difficulties of its own. God's people must build a captivating vision of God's will for marriage. We must return to the sacredness of the marriage unit and place this divine institution on the highest level and begin to view it through God's eyes. Marriage is still "for better or for worse." It is for life!

Mark 10:9

"What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder."

A 104-year-old California man and his 96-year-old wife recently celebrated 80 years of marriage. She had been a 16-year-old "child bride" in a marriage the families had arranged. They had no dating period - no chance to "fall in love" by today's standards. So many things were against them. Yet they raised five children, survived the Great Depression, and lived to see a day when nearly half of all marriages end in divorce. How in the world did they do it? They did it the same way other members of their generation did it. They stayed together on the basis of values that are different from those shared by most newlyweds today. For them, love meant commitment "till death us do part."

What happened to those old values? Have we found better ideals, better principles of relationships, deeper insights, and better understanding? If so, why do so many people live with the regret of broken marriages, broken homes, broken families, and broken promises?