

Ten Questions About Divorce

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“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” Mt. 19:9.

There are six main passages of scripture which deal with the subject of divorce; Dt. 24:1-4, Mt. 5:31-32, Mt. 19:3-9, Mk. 10:2-12, Lk. 16:18, and Ro. 7:1-3. Mt. 19:3-9 is the pivotal passage.

The topic of divorce is a very controversial one indeed. There are many extremes and many unscriptural positions and ideas about divorce. Our responsibility is to search the scriptures and find out what God’s word actually says about this matter. In this message we want to ask and try to answer from the scriptures ten questions about divorce.

Question One: Why Should a Preacher Preach on Divorce?

There are at least four reasons as to why a preacher should deal with this subject. First God’s preacher should preach on divorce because the scriptures deal with this subject and God’s preacher is responsible for declaring the whole counsel of God. This is what Paul says in Acts 20:27 that he did.

Second, a preacher should preach on divorce because of the tremendous tidal wave of divorce which is sweeping our land today. Men and women boys and girls need to be informed and be warned as to God’s will concerning this very serious matter. Oh, if just one marriage could be spared, if just one young person could avoid the sin and heartache of a broken home through the means of this message!

God’s preacher should preach on divorce thirdly because men and women are always looking for loopholes in the matter of divorce in order to salve their guilty consciences and to enable them to carry out the wickedness in their hearts. For this reason God’s revealed will concerning this matter must continually be made known.

Finally, the preacher should preach on divorce because some people are experiencing a needless burden of nagging guilt and anxiety over divorce in their own lives or in those in their families. I’m convinced that many people labor needlessly under burdens of guilt because of certain mistaken, man-made restrictions concerning this matter. Using the scriptures God’s preacher must clear up those mistaken ideas and wrongful burdens of guilt.

Question Two: What is Marriage?

In considering any matter and especially one as controversial as divorce we need to begin by defining our terms. Before we can understand the meaning of such terms as fornication and adultery and divorce we need to understand just what marriage is.

What is marriage? What is it that actually makes a couple man and wife? Is it the ceremony at the church? It is that little piece of paper with the preacher's signature on it that the county requires? Are these things what make a man and woman one in the sight of God? What is marriage?

The thing which makes a couple man and wife in the sight of God, the thing that brings a couple together as one flesh is the physical union, their living together as man and wife. The Lord Jesus defines marriage this way when he says in Matthew 19:5-6 "...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.

Question Three: What is Divorce?

Divorce is "the legal dissolution of the marriage relation" says Webster's Dictionary. Divorce is a public declaration that the marriage union between a man and his wife has been severed. When a man divorces his wife, he publicly declares through the courts of law or by means of a written bill that he and his wife are no longer married. The most used biblical term for divorce is putting away. The Lord says in our text "Whosoever shall put away his wife..." etc.

Question Four: What is God's Revealed Will Concerning Divorce?

In marriage God joins together a man and his wife as we read in verse 6 of Matthew nineteen. "...what therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." The word *joined* literally means yoked together with a yoke.

The Lord says in Mt. 19:6 that the ordinance of God yokes husband and wife together and since the ordinance of God yokes husband and wife together, the ordinance of man is not to put them asunder and the ordinance of man is not to unyoke or put asunder a man and his wife whether that ordinance be drawn up by the marriage partner himself or by the state or by the church or by anyone else. The revealed will of God is that man and wife are not to divorce! Mt. 19:3-9, reveals God's will concerning divorce and it clearly and unmistakably commands man and wife not to divorce, not to put asunder their marriage.

Mal. 2:16 speaks of the view God takes of divorce. The scripture tells us there that God hates divorce. "For the Lord, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away..."

Question Five: What is the Relationship Between Fornication and Adultery?

The reason for this question may not at first be apparent. However it is very relevant to the subject of divorce as will presently become apparent.

Some people teach that the term fornication refers only to sexual sins before marriage or by unmarried persons and that adultery refers only to sexual unfaithfulness after marriage. The Bible does not bear this out.

It is true that adultery refers to sexual unfaithfulness after marriage but it is not true that fornication speaks only of sexual sins before marriage or by unmarried persons. Fornication is a broad term used in the Bible for all kinds of sexual uncleanness including but not limited to adultery.

Anyone committing any kind of sexual sin at any time is guilty of fornication. We might put it like this; all Fords are automobiles but not all automobiles are Fords. All adultery is fornication but not all fornication is adultery.

Fornication is used in the scriptures to describe all kinds of sexual sins. I Cor. 5:1 uses it to describe the sin of incest, I Cor. 7:2 to describe premarital sex, Jude 7 to describe sodomy, and Re. 21:8 uses the word to describe whoremongering.

Sometimes fornication and adultery are listed separately as being two different things such as in Gal. 5:19 where both are listed as works of the flesh. But the important thing here is the fact that fornication and adultery are also used interchangeably in the scripture to refer to the same sin.

The seventh commandment is **Thou Shall Not Commit Adultery**. Obviously this commandment forbids immorality on the part of unmarried persons as well as by married persons and so adultery and fornication share the same meaning here.

Ez. 16:26-29 refers to Israel the wife of God as committing fornication., “Thou hast also committed fornication with the Egyptians thy neighbors, great of flesh; and hast increased thy whoredoms, to provoke me to anger. Behold, therefore I have stretched out my hand over thee, and have diminished thine ordinary food, and delivered thee unto the will of them that hate thee, the daughters of the Philistines, which are ashamed of thy lewd way. Thou hast played the whore also with the Assyrians, because thou was unsatiable; yea, thou hast played the harlot with them, and yet couldest not be satisfied. Thou hast moreover multiplied thy fornication in the land of Canaan unto Chaldea and yet thou wast not satisfied herewith.” Certainly fornication as used here cannot be limited to premarital sexual sin.

A wife can be guilty of fornication because Paul says in I Cor. 5:1 that the man who committed incest with his father’s wife was guilty of fornication. “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife.”

The Lord Jesus in Re. 2:20-22 uses the terms fornication and adultery interchangeably. He speaks of the same sins with both terms. He is speaking to the church at Thyatira and He says “Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds.”

**Question Six:
Is There Any Scriptural Ground Whatsoever for a
Married Person to Divorce His Mate?**

The background of the statement on divorce which our Lord makes in Mt. 19:9 is seen in verse 3 of the same chapter. “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?” The Pharisees thought they had the Lord in a trap because of this question.

If he said “Yes,” the Lord would contradict what he had already said in Mt. 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: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.”

If on the other hand the Lord said “No,” he would contradict what Moses had said in Dt. 24:1. At least he would contradict their interpretation of it. “When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favor 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.” The Pharisees had given such a broad interpretation to the phrase “that she find no favor in his eyes” that they would allow divorce for almost any reason no matter how frivolous.

Our text is the main part of the Lord’s answer to the Pharisee’s question. “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.”

The Lord says that divorce or putting away one’s wife is not lawful for any reason but one. The Lord says there is one and only one reason because of which a married person may rightly divorce his mate.

There are many grounds for divorce today in the eyes of men. There is cruelty and wife-beating and drunkenness and lack of support and going to prison and hospitalization and insanity and a wife or husband becoming a slob and a marriage just not working out, irreconcilable differences, incompatibility, etc., etc., etc. The Roman Church will dissolve a marriage when one partner decides to become a monk or nun.

But none of these is grounds for divorce according to the Son of God. According to the Lord there is only one scriptural and legitimate ground for divorce and that is fornication or adultery on the part of one of the partners. “And I say unto you, whosoever shall put away his wife,

committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.” The Lord Jesus explicitly states both here and in Mt. 5:32 that divorce is permissible on the grounds of adultery by one of the partners of a marriage.

Yet there are those who argue that there are NO scriptural grounds for divorce including adultery. One example of this is the late Theodore Epp of the Back to the Bible Broadcast. In his booklet “God and Divorce” on pages 38-39, he is speaking of the incident involved in our text and he says “...Jesus...gave then absolutely no permission whatsoever for divorce.” Another example is seen in Romanism which says in question 1194 of its Baltimore Catechism that “The marriage of two baptized persons who afterward lived together as husband and wife can never be dissolved except by the death of one of the parties.” It is difficult to understand such positions as these in light of our Lord’s explicit statements to the contrary.

It’s interesting at this point to note that in Jeremiah 3:8-9 God pictures Himself as divorcing Israel for her spiritual adultery against him. He put her away and gave her a bill of divorce. “And I saw, when for all the causes whereby backsliding Israel committed adultery I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah feared not, but went and played the harlot also. And it came to pass through the lightness of her whoredom, that she defiled the land, and committed adultery with stones and stocks.”

There are those who teach that fornication in Matthew 19:9 means premarital unchastity only and therefore that premarital unchastity when discovered by the partner after marriage is the only scriptural reason for divorce. But as we have seen in answering question five the scriptures do not bear out such a definition.

The one biblical ground for divorce is fornication which includes adultery. Let’s think for a moment about why adultery justifies a divorce. Adultery actually dissolves a marriage. It destroys the very essence of marriage, the one flesh relationship which the Lord describes in Mt. 19:5-9. “...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.”

Fornication or adultery dissolves a marriage because the partners after adultery are no longer one flesh in the mysterious sense in which the Bible declares a man and his wife to be. Paul says in I Cor. 6:16, “What? Know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? For two, saith he, shall be one flesh.” If a man becomes one flesh with a harlot it is difficult to see how he can still be one flesh with his wife.

It is not the action of some court or church, it is not what is written on some piece of paper, and it is not the signature of some judge which dissolves a marriage. The sin of adultery dissolves a marriage. The court or the state in declaring a divorce simply recognizes what has already taken place. The Lord allows divorce on the grounds of adultery then because adultery breaks the one flesh relationship of marriage.

Question Seven:
Does a Divorced Person Who Remarries Commit Adultery When He Remarries?

Yes, if he divorced for any other reason than the one scriptural reason. Remarriage is one of the things the Lord is dealing with specifically in Mt. 19:9, when he uses the words “and shall marry another.” The Lord plainly says here that “Whosoever shall put away his wife” for other reason than for adultery “and shall marry another, committeth adultery...”

Whenever a couple divorces for any unscriptural reason and one of them remarries, the one who remarries commits adultery. Why? Because even though they may have a divorce recognized by the state or by some church their marriage bond has not been broken until their union with another person and that union is therefore adultery. Unscriptural divorce leaves the door open for adultery when either party remarries.

Does a divorced person who remarries commit adultery when he remarries? No, not if he is divorced for the one scriptural reason! As we have already seen adultery ends the marriage relationship as God instituted it. If a man may scripturally divorce his wife for adultery then the marriage bond is obviously dissolved and the parties are no longer man and wife. And if the bond is thus dissolved then the innocent party is certainly free to marry again without being guilty of adultery. A marriage which has been morally and legally dissolved has ceased to exist and the innocent party is therefore as free to remarry as if the offending party were dead! When adultery is committed the guilty party has become joined to someone else and so the innocent party is unjoined or free.

The fact that scripturally divorced persons who remarry are not guilty of adultery is also borne out by the exception which our Lord makes in Mt. 19:9. The exception here applies to both divorce and remarriage. “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.” The adultery is committed by the unscripturally divorced person who marries another.

Mark is reporting this same incident quotes the Lord in Mk. 10:11 as saying, “...Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her.” But the exception to the remarriage of a divorced person being adultery is if the divorce was because of fornication or adultery.

We must also remember here that God doesn't punish an innocent person for the sins of the guilty. In Ez. 18:20, God says, “The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.” Every man must pay for his own sins. God will not punish an innocent wife for the rest of her life for sins committed by her husband and vice versa.

It is important to note here that eminent men of God have understood the scriptures this way. Spurgeon in his commentary on Mt. 19 said, “Fornication makes the guilty person a fit subject

for just and lawful divorce: for it is a virtual disannulling of the marriage bond...persons once married are, in the sight of God married for life, with the one exception of proven fornication.”

**Question Eight:
Is a Divorced Person Who is Remarried “Living in Adultery?”**

The teaching of the Protestant Reformed Church is that he is. I have a pamphlet entitled “The Unbreakable Bond of Marriage” by Herman Hoeksema. Hoeksema was the former pastor of the First Protestant Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan and the leading light in that movement for years. In this pamphlet Mr. Hoeksema states the position of the PRC when he says “A man living apart for his first wife even though divorced and remarried lives in continued adultery and if he would make things right he must divorce his second wife...even after adultery the marriage is not broken, if is never broken and can never be broken until death.”

But this is certainly not the teaching of the word of God! Infidelity or adultery puts asunder what God has joined together. Infidelity on the part of either partner ends the marriage relationship. The man and wife are no longer one flesh. One of them has been adulterously united to another.

A woman who is thus divorced and remarried does not have two husbands. She has been married twice but she does not have two husbands. The husband of the second marriage is her husband. The husband of her first marriage is her former husband.

Dt. 24:4 even calls the first husband of a divorced woman “her former husband” in so many words. “Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife...”

A divorce on biblical grounds means that the former marriage is no longer binding, that the former husband is no longer a husband, and the former wife is no longer a wife. When God divorced Israel for her spiritual adultery he said concerning Israel in Hosea 2:2, “She is not my wife, neither am I her husband...”

**Question Nine:
Why Do Preachers Often Refuse to Perform Marriage Ceremonies for
Couples When One or Both Have Been Divorced?**

Two brief reasons: first because to do so would necessitate the preacher becoming a judge of the guilt or innocence of the parties involved and this is an unfair burden for him to bear. And second because in cases when unscriptural divorce is involved the preacher in performing the ceremony would be aiding the couple in committing what God’s word says is sin.

**Question Ten:
What Should Be Done About the Sin of Those
Unscripturally Divorced and Remarried?**

Some people carry their guilt for such sins with them for years and never really find complete relief. Tragically Christians sometimes will hold the divorces of their fellow Christians against

them as if that sin made those Christians second class Christians in some way. What should an individual do about such a sin?

First, he should face this matter honestly and frankly and most of all he should face it in light of what the scripture has to say about it. He needs to quit avoiding the matter in his thinking and face up to it fully.

Second, when he finds out from the Bible where he has sinned he must bring his sins to God. He must confess those sins and beg God's cleansing and forgiveness. I Jn. 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

What does God do with our sins when we bring them to him? He cleanses them and forgives them. Some people think the scarlet sin of adultery is too evil for God to forgive but the Lord says in Mt. 12:31 that all manner of sin shall be forgiven men. The Lord forgave the woman at the well who had been married and divorced five times and was living with a man to whom she was not married. When a sinner brings his adultery to God, God forgives that sin and forgets it. In Je. 31:34 the Lord says, "...for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." We may not be able to forget our sins but God does.

Thirdly, a person must start today and live for the Lord from this day forward in full obedience and fellowship with him. He needs to thank the Lord for his cleansing and forgiveness and then go forward and not look back.