

Marriage – Divorce – Remarriage

Mt. 5:32

The Bible has a great deal to say about this subject. I'd like to begin with what I know we will all agree as being absolute truth:

1. The Bible has **NO** contradictions.
2. God is infallible and His word inerrant.
3. God determined that *“it is not good for man to be alone.”*
4. God therefore instituted marriage.
5. God wants a marriage to be a life long relationship with only death causing a marriage to cease.
6. Because of the Israelites *“hardness of heart”* God “allowed” divorce for them with stipulations.
7. Paul teaches *“Nevertheless, to avoid fornication let EVERY man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.”*
1 Cor. 7:2.
8. Because of much erroneous teaching there is division amongst brethren on this matter of MDR.

I would love to tell you that I have all the answers to this rather difficult subject, but I do not. However, if we allow these truths that we agree on to guide us, even if we disagree about something in the subject we should be able to disagree amicably. I personally know dozens of preachers who are in total disagreement over this issue. They see all “sides” but have made the determination that their view is the correct view. I take the position on MDR that while we may “think” we have all the answers – we are wrong. I've studied the MDR issue for 40 years and I can tell you I hold a view, but it seems to be constantly changing.

I stand here today in humility wanting you to know that I am determined to preach what I believe to be the truth with the full knowledge that some may disagree. I wish it were not so, but the nature of this topic will always do this. I want to talk first about Marriage and Divorce in the 1st Century. Ray Summers, in his book *Worthy is the Lamb*, describes the conditions of the Roman Empire around the end of the first century:

“Crimes were multiplied; vice made no attempt to hide; a monstrous contest of lust and wickedness was carried on. Marriage came to be a commercial transaction easily affected and as easily dissolved. Seneca said there were women who counted their years not by the number of consuls but by the number of their husbands. Marriage was held in such contempt that laws against celibacy had to be passed.”

When Jesus began His ministry, this is the environment in which He began. There was more pandering than there was edification. So, Jesus begins His ministry with the Jews to show them how perverted the Pharisees and others had made the Law of Moses. The teaching that they had received on divorce was way off and Jesus simply corrected it.

Brother Hugo McCord (in Firm Foundation article, December 1998) refers to Matthew 5:32 and says the phrase "commit adultery" is not properly translated. He refers to Thayer who shows that Jesus here used the passive tense of the word (moicheuthenai) meaning: **“to suffer adultery, to be debauched.”** McCord says, “The innocent woman has been victimized, used, and exposed. She has not committed adultery, but she has been left as though she had done so.” This would also be the case in Matthew 19:9 in the marginal reading. This is about a stigma that has been created upon the woman by the one putting her away.

Deuteronomy 22 talked about making accusations and the seriousness of creating a stigma that is untrue; v19 ***“and they shall fine him a hundred shekels of silver, and give them unto the father of the damsel, because he hath brought up an evil name upon a virgin of Israel: and she shall be his wife; he may not put her away all his days.”***

Here in Matthew 5, Jesus used the **passive** tense to refer to the stigma placed on her. And thus, it is not true to His original words to render them in the **active** tense as is common in most translations. It also appears that many may have made numerous conclusions and laws emanating from the erroneous translation of Jesus' words, thus likely making the conclusions and laws themselves erroneous.

McCord believed that much of this was due to the schools of Hillel and Shammai and the debate that raged continually between them over divorce. One school believed in divorce for any cause the other for sexual immorality. Both taught that a writ of divorcement must be given. However, some were ignoring that and had begun using an obscure Babylonian Law that was being circulated amongst the Jews from about 100 BC to Jesus' time. This law allowed divorce but did not require a writ of any kind. This evidently appealed to many Rabbis of the time and it had been adopted and taught widely amongst the Jewish world. They had found a way to enhance the divorce under the Law of Moses and send their wife away with no writ, no financial obligation, no worries.

While this may have been good for the man, this of course put that woman in a horrible position not having any means of support. Historians suggest that many Jewish women forced into this situation turned to harlotry to support themselves. Many times, they had daughters that were sent away with them which compounded their circumstances. Without a writ of divorcement, she could not legally marry but if she did she was seen as an adulteress by all Jewish taught people. The man that she married would also be seen as an adulterer by the populace. So this was the stigma attached to many situations in the NT world in which Jesus labors.

Also remember that Jesus came to fulfill the Law – not change it. Jesus did not come to make new law, He came to fulfill the Law that had been written. Along with this is the knowledge that if Jesus did change the law He would have in effect destroyed the Law. This Jesus said He did **NOT** come to do. ***“¹⁷Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”*** Matt 5:17-18

So, what did Jesus say in this passage? Using the passive tense (in regard to both the woman and the man who marries her), various Greek scholars have suggested something like the following summarization of this text in Mt 5:32:

"But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her stigmatized as if she had committed adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman is stigmatized as if he had committed adultery." (Stigmatized means "set a mark of disgrace upon") Neither the discarded woman nor the man who marries her have committed sin, but they have been wronged by the one who unjustly thrust the divorce upon his wife.

Jesus gave only one reason to instigate divorce: fornication. Does this principle still apply to us today? Some say that it does **not** because the true context of the passage is simply Jesus answering a question about the Law asked by some Pharisees trying to trap Him into siding with the school of Hillel or the school of Shammai. The Pharisees had apparently asked for Jesus' interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 concerning the grounds for divorce and Jesus gave it. If, in fact, that is all He is doing, then it would not truly be applicable to us today (since we are not under the Jewish Law; our civil law recognizes other reasons for a valid divorce). It may be, however, that Jesus also intended that it would continue to be God's law on the matter. Three reasons are given to support this:

1. Jesus referred to God's eternal intent for marriage in spite of man's common failure to live up to it. Thus His teaching regarding the one reason to instigate divorce would likely be intended for all time.
2. His response is very similar to that used many times in His sermon on the mount (Matthew 5-7). There Jesus often referred to the common understanding of OT teaching, but He would then say, "But I say to you..." Jesus would thus clarify the true intent of the OT teaching as well as introduce teachings that would also be applicable in the new covenant.
3. Later, in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, Paul teaches about marriage and divorce and says concerning his teaching, "Not I, but the Lord." Most scholars agree that Paul means he is teaching about a subject that Jesus Himself had already addressed.

4. Thus, apparently indicating that Jesus' command on the subject was to be applicable in the Christian age (not just under Mosaic Law).

We must also factor in what the Apostle Paul says in 1 Cor. 7. We must rightly divide God's word in a way where there is harmony between what Jesus says and what Paul says. Brother Wayne Jackson, in an article for Christian Courier entitled, "**Divorce and the Guilty Party**," says: "The notion that the "guilty party" may remarry contemplates a union that is without scriptural authority. The New Testament grants the right of marriage to: the never-married-before person (1 Cor. 7:2); the widowed (Rom. 7:3; 1 Corinthians 7:39); and the innocent victim in marriage breached by adultery (Mt. 5:32; 19:9). Where is the authorization for the guilty adulterer to remarry? There is none. Divorce and remarriage are allowed only within the scope of divine authorization. All other sexual unions are prohibited. While this generally is viewed as a "hard saying," it is a necessary restriction for the ultimate benefit of society.

It must be noted that 1 Cor 7:2 Paul says: "***But because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.***" Paul did not say this was referring to the "never-married-before person" as Brother Jackson suggests. In fact, according to 1 Corinthians 6:9, Paul wrote this statement **to people who had previously committed fornication and adultery**, and he gave no clarification that excludes such people from having a wife or husband.

I'm convinced that we have made this issue far more hurtful than God ever intended. We punish those who divorce and appeal to scriptures that very well may not say what we try to make them say. All will agree that husbands and wives ought to diligently work to stay together. And when they strive first to be what God intends for them to be, surely, they will have successful marriages. But what does God require of people who wrongly divorce and or marry? Not everyone agrees on this. God may indeed at times make some difficult demands on people, but we need to make sure that we don't demand more than He does. Thank God for His wonderful love and grace and mercy given to those who honestly and sincerely seek to obey Him.