

The Sermon on the Mount

DEVOTIONAL STUDIES FROM THE
MEN'S MORNING FELLOWSHIP

Matthew 5:31 "Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'

Matthew 5:32 But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.

Under OT law, divorce was regulated by Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

Deuteronomy 24:1 "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts *it* in her hand, and sends her out of his house,

Deuteronomy 24:2 when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's *wife*,

Deuteronomy 24:3 if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts *it* in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife,

Deuteronomy 24:4 *then* her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that *is* an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God is giving you *as* an inheritance.

These four verses are one long sentence in the original language.

The word **uncleanness** does not signify adultery, or any of the various "uncleannesses" forbidden in Leviticus, because that was punishable with death, when it could be proved; and where there was only a suspicion of it, the husband might make use of a bizarre bitter water ritual by which the cheating wife cursed herself if she was lying (Numbers five).

This was *not* permission to divorce; it was to regulate divorce. In Matthew 19:8 Jesus will say,

Matthew 19:8 He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

God intended marriage to last for your lifetime. The Jews preferred to follow the customs of the surrounding cultures, and the hardness of their own hearts, and made divorce somewhat commonplace. They were finding reasons other than adultery, called **uncleanness**. So Moses instituted a law requiring the husband to provide the wife he was divorcing with a certificate.

In other words, you had to go to court, before the rulers, and eventually before witnesses, and state your case. It made it a little harder to divorce and gave the husband opportunity to think twice about his actions. If the divorce went through, it freed the woman to be able to remarry.

The further prohibition, that you not remarry your former spouse after a remarriage to someone else, was also intended to cause a pause. *Women were not property you could merely exchange at will!*

Deuteronomy 24:4 says of the divorced wife, **after she has been defiled**. I don't think it means that her remarriage to another man was adultery, defiling her. It means that, if the first husband declared her **unclean**, how can he now suddenly want her back? Is she not still **defiled** to him?

The Lord's complete commentary on this is in Matthew 19:4-9,

Matthew 19:4 And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made *them* at the beginning 'MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE,'

Matthew 19:5 and said, 'FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH' ?

Matthew 19:6 So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

Matthew 19:7 They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?"

Matthew 19:8 He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

Matthew 19:9 And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."

Jesus said, both in Matthew 5:32 and in 19:9, that the woman who remarries after a Deuteronomy-divorce commits **adultery**, as does her new husband. He was stating with absolute authority that the past leniency on divorce, allowed by Moses, was henceforth discontinued. Hereafter there would be only one valid ground for divorce - **adultery**. If a person was divorced for any other reason and remarried, he was guilty of **adultery**.

As an aside to the subject matter... It is remarkable that Jesus, an itinerant preacher from Nazareth, was taking authority over God's Law! No wonder the people marveled and the leaders grinded their teeth.

The real intent, then, of these verses in the Sermon on the Mount is to return us to a pure and original interpretation and obedience to God's Law, and to marriage.

The model is in Genesis. Marriage is to be one man, to one woman, to last a lifetime.

Adultery is the only cause Jesus gave for divorce. He was talking about physical adultery – not lust, or pornography. Those are awful; and many wives struggle with husbands caught-up in them. But we can't expand the **adultery** that gives you grounds for divorce to include them.

I want to add that adultery is only the *grounds* for divorce. The offended party can choose to forgive and remain married. But he or she is also free to choose divorce.

Thus we talk about whether or not divorce is Scriptural and biblical. Just because God hates divorce, it doesn't mean it is always wrong. For example: God says of Himself that He divorces Israel. Divorce on the grounds of physical adultery is Scriptural and biblical.

If you are divorced, and it was biblical, you are biblically-free to remarry. Only it must be “in the Lord” – to another believer... Of the opposite sex!

The apostle Paul would come a little later and add something else to our understanding of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. It's found in First Corinthians chapter seven. He presents several scenarios:

1. What if you get saved while married to an unbeliever? Should you divorce? Paul says, No. If the unbeliever is pleased to remain married to you, then you are to stay married.
2. What if they abandon you? Then you are no longer obligated to that marriage. You are free to divorce and remarry.

Marriage, divorce, and remarriage are simple **on paper!** You are to get married and stay married for life. You can remarry if your spouse dies.

Physical adultery shatters marriages. The offended party may divorce; or they may choose to not divorce. They are free, and neither option is more 'spiritual.'

Abandonment or divorce by an unbelieving spouse ends that marriage. You are free to remarry.

Within those simple parameters, there are all kinds of personal variables! Through study; prayer; and with good counsel; the Lord's will for your shattered life can be discerned.

If your divorce was unbiblical, then we usually do a little exploring to see exactly what condition all parties are in. Has your previous spouse remarried? Were either of you believers at the time of the divorce? Answers to those kinds of questions help us arrive at God's will for you. We still deal with the hardness of the human heart. Sometimes the issues are intense; we look at the spirit of the Law, and Jesus' teaching, and give our best advice, usually from the point of view that God doesn't want to punish you if you're the one who has been wronged or abandoned.

Divorce hurts; Jesus heals.