

CHRISTIAN ETHICS: LESSON 5
DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

I. INTRODUCTION:

- A. Let's say Gretchen met the man of her dreams who has all of the qualities which she could ever hope for in a future spouse. He is godly, involved in church, and rather attractive. However, Gretchen finds out that he has had a divorce. What concerns should she have at this point?

- B. What would be the consequences of proceeding into a marriage with a person who has engaged in an unbiblical divorce?

II. BACKGROUND:

One of the most troublesome trends of our day is the increase in divorce, remarriage and broken homes. In the mid-1970s the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that approximately a third of first marriages end in divorce. Second and even third marriages fare worse, for two-thirds are unsuccessful. Within recent years in the U.S. the divorce rate is approaching 50 percent, and in some states it is even higher.

In 1983 statisticians claimed that one in every four British marriages ends in divorce, and one in every three new marriages involves a divorced person. In both the U.S. and the United Kingdom about 80 percent of those divorced remarry. The sheer number of divorces in a given year is staggering. In the U.S., for example, typically more than one million marriages a year end in a legal divorce. If one adds the number terminated through desertion (though not necessarily legally severed), figures go much higher.¹

According to enrichment journal on the divorce rate in America:

The divorce rate in America for first marriage is 41%

The divorce rate in America for second marriage is 60%

The divorce rate in America for third marriage is 73%²

About sixty percent of all marriages that eventually end in divorce do so within the first 10 years.³

III. PROPOSITION:

¹Feinberg, John S. ; Feinberg, Paul D. ; Huxley, Aldous: *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, 1996, c1993, S. 299

² <http://www.divorcerate.org/> download on November 6, 2008.

³ <http://www.divorcereform.org/nyt05.html> download on November 6, 2008.

With such a high divorce rate it is inevitable that some Christian singles will be confronted with the possibility of marrying an individual with a divorce in their background. Additionally, many of you may be in or in contact with someone “trapped” in an unhappy marriage seeking a way out. Thus, this study will focus on whether or not divorce is allowable and under what conditions.

IV. Matthew 19:3-9

Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?”⁴ And He answered and said, “Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE,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’?⁶ “So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.”⁷ They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND her AWAY?”⁸ He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.⁹ “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

1. What issue did the Pharisees raise with Jesus (v. 3)?

Note: Deut. 24:1-4 served as the center of a national debate regarding divorce and remarriage. Members of the Hillel school of thought believed that a man could justify a divorce for any reason, including poor meal preparation. On the other hand, the Shammai school of thought restricted divorce to case of adultery.

To understand this issue, we will take an in depth look at *Deuteronomy 24:1-4*:

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 indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house,² and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man’s wife,³ and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife,⁴ then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since 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 gives you as an inheritance.

- a. What is the central command of this passage (v. 4)?

- b. In what case was divorce permitted? Was it solely restricted to adultery (cf. *Lev. 20:10*)?

Leviticus 20:10 *'If there is a man who commits adultery with another man's wife, one who commits adultery with his friend's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.*

Note: The indecency was any lewd, immoral behavior, sometimes including, but not restricted to, adultery--e.g. lesbianism or sexual misconduct that fell short of intercourse.⁴ In any case, this passage does not sanction the divorce so much as prohibit remarriage after a second marriage.

- c. If a man sent the woman away without a certificate of divorce, what hope would a woman have of remarriage? Why?
- d. Why couldn't the former husband take her back (v. 4)?

Note: Why, then, is the remarriage an abomination? Once the reason for the woman's defilement is understood, the answer becomes clear. The reason the remarriage mentioned in *Deut 24:4* is abominable is that it is abominable to marry an adulteress! Under normal circumstances she should be executed. But OT law made this exception because she was "pushed" into adultery by a first husband who divorced her for indecency and put her on the street with nowhere to turn in that society but to another man. Yet, when she loses her second husband she is permanently off-limits as even her first husband cannot take her back since she is defiled.⁵

2. In *Matthew 19:4-6* what does Jesus lay down as God's standard and on what basis?
3. What question do the Pharisees fire back (v. 7)?
4. Why did God allow divorce (v. 8)? For instance, what would happen to the divorced wife if her husband forsook her?

⁴ D. A. Carson EBC CD-ROM.

⁵Feinberg, John S. ; Feinberg, Paul D. ; Huxley, Aldous: *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, 1996, c1993, S. 315

5. What does Jesus label divorce and remarriage in *verse 9*?
6. What exception does Jesus make? And what kinds of activities does this imply (*v. 9*)?

Note: 'Immorality' and 'fornication' come from the same Greek word. Fornication is a much broader term than "adultery" as it encompasses premarital sex, homosexuality, incest, etc.

7. According to this passage when is divorce permissible?
8. How does *Leviticus 20:10* support the notion that both divorce and remarriage are acceptable (*Rom. 7:2*)?

Note: Had sin not entered our world, it is dubious that anyone would ever have grounds for divorce. Mankind would have lived in accord with the creator's original design for marriage. However, ours is a fallen world. From our study we conclude that when certain select sins are committed, divorce and remarriage are morally permissible. How can God allow divorce and remarriage once a marriage bond is constituted? As argued, it is possible to break that bond. Death breaks it. Moreover, when *porneia* occurs, it contradicts the commitment to remain faithful to ("cleave to") one's spouse and thereby breaks the bond.⁶

V. 1 Corinthians 7:12-16

¹² But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³ And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. ¹⁵ Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called

⁶Ibid. . 342

us to peace. ¹⁶ *For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?*

Note: *Chapter 7* focuses on issues pertaining to marriage. Paul addresses such topics as conjugal rights, divorce, marriage to an unbeliever, and singleness.

In *verses 1 through 7*, Paul calls upon the “Eschatological Women”⁷ to stop depriving their husbands of their conjugal rights, in order to protect them from temptations to fornicate. Then, in *verses 9-11*, Paul upholds marriage as not only a sacred institution, but also a means of protecting two Christians from sexual immorality. Now, in *verses 12 through 16*, Paul answers the Corinthians’ question regarding mixed marriages.

A. The Command (vs. 12-13):

1. Whom does Paul address when he says “*the rest*” (vs. 12)? What is the status of the individuals he is addressing and how does it compare with *7:8 and 7:10*?

2. When Paul says, “I, not the Lord” does this necessarily lessen the force of his command?
 - a. Who is meant by the Lord?

 - b. What command did the Lord issue (vs. 10)?

 - c. What might this imply about Jesus’ teaching on mixed marriages?

 - d. Under whose authority does Paul give these commands? And how does this compare with Jesus’?

3. What set of commands does Paul issue in *verses 12 and 13*? And under what conditions?

B. The Blessing (vs. 14):

⁷ These are women who believed that Christ has already returned, therefore they are like the angels who neither marry nor are given in marriage (cf. Matt. 22:30).

1. What rationale does Paul provide for keeping the marriage together?

2. How does a marriage to a believer sanctify an unbeliever and their children?
 - a. Does this imply that the unbeliever and the children are saved? Why or why not?

 - b. What does the fact that an unbeliever is willing to stay married to a believer suggest about his/her openness (*John 3:19*)?

 - c. What kind of impact can a believing spouse have on the unbelievers in the family (*1 Peter 3:1-6*)?

C. The Concession (vs. 15):

1. What concession does Paul make and under what conditions?

2. Does the term “not under bondage” imply that the abandoned spouse is free to remarry? Why or why not?
 - a. Compare this verse with *1 Cor. 7:39* and *Rom. 7:2*. Under what conditions is the bond of marriage broken?

 - b. How does the difference between the Greek word for ‘bond’ in *1 Cor. 7:39* and the word for ‘bondage’ in *1 Cor. 7:15* inform our understanding of ‘bondage’?

 - c. In a similar text (*7:10-11*), does Paul allow for remarriage?

- d. Under what conditions does Paul allow for remarriage in *1 Cor. 7:39*?
 - e. What obligations does Paul place on the believing spouse in mixed marriages (i.e. what does it take to maintain a marriage, cf. *7:3*)?
3. Why should the believer let the husband go (*vs. 7:15*)?

D. The Hope (*vs. 16*):

1. Why does Paul desire the marriage to stay together?
2. What kind of relationship might win the spouse to the Lord?
3. Does this passage allow for the forsaken spouse to marry someone else?

Note: As Paul instructs the Corinthian church, he upholds the high standard of marriage. Such a bond unites men and women and makes them one flesh. Thus, to sever that bond would be akin to amputating a leg. When a believer is united to an unbeliever and a dispute occurs between them, God's will is for reconciliation and peace between the partners. Such a bond is holy in the eyes of the Lord and might be instrumental in leading the unsaved party to the Lord.

If an unbeliever *does* leave, God does not require that the Christian spouse maintain the marriage. Yet, that does not mean that the Bible permits remarriage in this case. Rather, the original bond of marriage is severed only by death or sexual immorality.

VI. THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

- A. Hansel and Greta have been married for several years, when one day through the testimony of a friend, Greta comes to know the Lord. As Greta grows and changes, Hansel seems to be more repulsed by his "Jesus freak" wife, until he discovers that as a submissive wife, she has to be subject to him. Delighted, he starts ordering her to

get a job, make all of his meals, clean the house, and entertain his friends, while he sits at home and watches sports all day. Frustrated and discontent, Greta comes to you asking if it would be okay to seek a divorce. What counsel would you give her?

- B. Going back to Hansel and Greta, let's say Hansel begins to abuse Greta. What counsel would you give her?

1 Peter 2:18-20 Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable.¹⁹ For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.²⁰ For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.

1 Peter 3:1-6 In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives,² as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior.³ Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses;⁴ but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God.⁵ For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands;⁶ just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear.

- C. Let's say Hansel left Greta, and filed for a divorce. What would you encourage Greta to do? At what point would you say it's okay for her to remarry?
- D. Let's say Dale and Irma got a divorce when they were unbelievers. A few years later Dale gave his life to Christ. Upon reading the Bible he realizes that he had committed a sin by divorcing his wife. What counsel would you give him to make this right?
1. Does God recognize non-Christian marriages (**1 Cor. 7:13**)?
 2. What breaks the bond of marriage?
 3. If Irma has been celibate what should Dale do?

4. Let's say Irma tells Dale that she does not want to see him again, what should he do?
 5. Would it be okay for Dale to remarry an unconverted Irma? Why or why not?
 6. At what point would it be okay for Dale to marry someone else?
- E. Let's say that you and your fiancée have been perpetually fighting and he has shown some abusive tendencies. How might the strict standards of divorce impact your decision whether or not to marry him?

VII. HARD QUESTIONS:

A. WHAT ABOUT DOMESTIC ABUSE?

Domestic abuse is terrible and tragic, and when it occurs in the United States the victim has every right to seek legal protection, and or separation. But as it stands spousal abuse does not dissolve the matrimonial bond. A woman or a man in this situation should seek legal protection when possible. In addition, the victim of spousal abuse must make sure that they are not provoking their spouse to rage. Though there is not an exact parallel, Peter's advice to slaves is extremely compelling:

1 Peter 2:18-20 Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable.¹⁹ For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.²⁰ For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.

B. WHEN SHOULD I SEEK A DIVORCE?

Forgiveness and reconciliation serves as the center of the Christian life. All of us have fallen short of the glory of God and are guilty of betraying our Lord. Yet, God in His mercy has bestowed forgiveness and reconciliation to all the repentant. When an unfaithful spouse truly repents of their sin and seeks to make all wrongs right, Scripture (cf. *Matt. 18:21-35; Eph. 4:32*) strongly teaches that the innocent spouse must extend forgiveness. Naturally, there is a subjective element of gauging the

authenticity of the repentance. Grace should prevail in such cases, but if it is clear that the guilty party is not repentant the spouse is free to protect himself or herself.

C. WHEN I AM FREE TO REMARRY?

If your spouse is in unrepentant adultery, then you are free to remarry at any time. However, if you have been abandoned by your spouse remember that the marriage bond has not been severed until the actual act of adultery has taken place. Therefore, wait until there is clear evidence that the departing party has engaged in sexual activity outside your marriage.

VIII. CONCLUSION:

It has been said that it's better to be single wishing that you were married than married wishing you were single. The strict standards of divorce and remarriage should cause Christians to consider long and hard the one whom they will be bound together with in marriage. Will Smith, the actor and singer gives us some sage advice in an interview with Reader's Digest:

RD: You and Jada have been married nine years and, by all accounts, are very happy. What's the key?

Smith: Communication. And divorce cannot be an option.

RD: Your first marriage ended in divorce.

Smith: That is probably the most painful loss of my life. I quit. I could have fixed it. It really was not that bad.

RD: Some would say there's no reason to stay if a marriage isn't good.

Smith: Once you say that, you've lost. With Jada, I stood up in front of God and my family and friends and said, "Till death do us part." So there are two possible outcomes: We are going to be together till death, or I am dead.

RD: But people do have problems in marriage.

Smith: Jada and I have problems; everybody has problems. People ask, "What happens if you made a mistake?" Well, you should be a little more careful before you stand up in front of God and your family and friends and say, "Till death do us part."⁸

⁸ <http://www.rd.com/content/openContent.do?contentId=31133&pageIndex=3>