

Divorce & Remarriage

(An Every-Verse Method Study)

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(All Bible quotes from the NRSV, unless otherwise noted)

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When I moved from my home town of Bechtelsville, Pennsylvania to Nashville, Tennessee to attend Belmont University in the fall of 1990, I experienced unanticipated culture shock as my life in the land of nominal Christianity gave way to life in the Bible Belt. Thrilled to be among other Christians my age, I immersed myself in conservative Protestant doctrine and lifestyle, and I learned the verses upon which they were based. One of those verses was, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery [Luke 16:18].”

As a young man looking for a wife, these verses convinced me that marrying a divorced woman was the worst thing I could do, because every time I made love to her, adultery would result. I feared that marrying a divorced woman would force me to live in sin for the rest of my life and risk eternal hellfire.

Nonetheless, most conservative Protestant churches allowed remarriage of the divorced. Their only defense of this practice was to say that mercy allowed those who committed the sin of divorce to remarry. Like many Bible-believing Christians, I disagreed with them, because Luke 16:18 didn't label the divorce as sin, but the remarriage. So I believed that churches intentionally sinned by performing second marriages in the name of grace, because **Romans 6:1** says, “Should we continue in sin in

order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?”

This thinking dominated my pursuit of women for many years and forced me to leave divorced women to their loneliness. But thanks to my study of this issue by applying the Every-Verse Method to it, the Bible has since changed my beliefs.

Leviticus 21:7, “They [priests] shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled; neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband. For they are holy to their God...”

Leviticus 21:13-14, “He [the priest] shall marry only a woman who is a virgin. A widow, or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, a prostitute, these he shall not marry. He shall marry a virgin of his own kin.”

Context: Chapter 21 contains various laws that apply only to priests.

Analysis: These commands only apply to priests. They do not apply to Protestant Christians, because Jesus is our eternal high priest. Priests had the job of seeking atonement for the sins of their people, and Jesus now does that for us. None of us are seen as priests in God’s eyes—saints maybe, but not priests.

We could look at these verses and argue that the holiest marriage is to a virgin, and we Christians need to strive for that, because the New Testament tells Christians to be holy. But to be holy is to obey the law (in **Leviticus 19:2**, God presents the law to the Israelites with the reasoning, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”) And no statement in the law declares that it’s a sin for any non-priest (that would be all of us) to marry someone who is divorced, widowed, or defiled by prostitution.

The difference between God’s laws for the priests and His laws for the common people demonstrates that God sees a difference between sin and imperfection. A sin occurs any time we break God’s laws. Sins invoke God’s wrath, and the wages of sin is death. Imperfections, on the other hand, fall short of God’s original design. They are not sins, and there exists no punishment for them. By these verses, we can determine that it’s God’s design for everyone to be virgins until married, but that it’s okay to marry anyone who is divorced, widowed, or defiled by prostitution.

Some Christians might oppose this point by quoting **Matthew 5:48**, which says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.” However, if we apply the Every-Verse Method to this argument, we find that no other verse in the Bible tells us to be perfect as God is, but that many tell us to avoid sin. Since being as perfect as God is impossible, we must conclude that Jesus made this statement to convince His listeners that they could not hope to please God through their own efforts; their only hope for justification was the grace that would ultimately come through Jesus.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4, “Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her [‘indecency’ in the NASB], and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who marries her dies); her first husband who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord...”

Context: Chapter 24 is another collection of miscellaneous laws.

Analysis: This passage is the one that Jesus’ opponents reference in **Matthew 19:7**. Jesus’ response of, “whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery,” is consistent with this verse referring to a man divorcing his wife “because he finds something objectionable about her [‘indecency’ in the NASB].” This verse allows a man to divorce his wife only if she has done something indecent, not for any reason whatsoever.

This verse does, however, allow for remarriage of women who have been divorced. If remarriage were a sin, a severe punishment would be required for it (for example, adultery was punishable by death), but that is not the case here. What is a sin, according to this verse, is when a twice-divorced woman returns to her original husband for re-marriage. It’s uncertain why this is a sin. Perhaps it’s because going from one man to another and back again is similar to a woman committing adultery and returning to her husband.

Ezra 10:10-11, “Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, ‘You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now make confession to the Lord the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.’”

Context: The princes of Israel approached Ezra, informing him of how so many of the Israelites had been sinning by marrying non-Israelites.

Analysis: The princes’ concern was “that the holy race had intermingled with the people of the lands.” While we cannot find any verses in which God opposes inter-marrying due to racial objectives, we do know that He opposed inter-marrying with other faiths.

Surprisingly, people were told to separate from their wives—the equivalent of divorce. We cannot be sure, however, whether or not God was speaking through Ezra at this point in time. We know that Ezra was His prophet, but we cannot assume that every word proceeding from Ezra’s mouth was God’s word. Ezra didn’t say that God gave this command.

Jeremiah 3:1, “‘If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man’s wife, will he return to her? Would not such a land be greatly polluted? You have played the whore with many lovers; and would you return to me?’ says the Lord.”

Context: Through the prophet Jeremiah, God compares the unfaithful Israelites to a woman who leaves her husband, marries another man, and then returns to her first husband. This verse is not intended to be about an individual’s sexual conduct, but is one of many prophetic verses comparing the unfaithfulness of the Israelites to the sexual unfaithfulness of an individual.

Analysis: This quote lends support to Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

Malachi 2:14-16, “Because the Lord was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did not one God make her? Both flesh and spirit are his. And what does the one God desire? Godly offspring. So look to yourselves; and do not let anyone

be faithless to the wife of his youth. For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel, and covering one's garment with violence, say the Lord of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless."

Context: God's explains why He looks upon the sacrifices of the Jews with disfavor.

Analysis: Even though this is the first verse of the Bible in which God says that He hates divorce, that doesn't mean He didn't hate it all along. He only allowed it in Deuteronomy when the wife did something indecent. God never allowed no-fault divorce.

Matthew 5:31-32, "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

Context: Sermon on the Mount. In chapter five, Jesus applies well-known sayings, some of which were based on Old Testament laws, to daily life.

Analysis: Jesus' statement here is consistent with the law given in Deuteronomy 24. Divorce was not to be done casually, but was to occur only under severe circumstances. Notice, however, how Jesus says that a man who divorces his wife "causes her to commit adultery." While I hesitate to build a theology from one little word or phrase, this statement implies that the woman has no choice but to remarry. Jesus says nothing of the woman having the choice to stay single after the divorce.

Matthew 19:3-9, "Some Pharisees came to him, to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?' He answered, 'Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning "made them male and female," 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?" So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together let no one separate.' They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?' He said to them, 'It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but

from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.””

Context: This is one of many unrelated stories appearing in this part of Matthew.

With this story, there may be a backdrop that we tend to miss but can piece together by looking elsewhere in the Gospels. We see in verse 3 that the Pharisees, Jesus’ opponents, are testing Him as they ask about divorce. They ask not because of their curiosity, but because they are up to no good. By asking Jesus about divorce, they may have hoped to get Him in trouble.

If we read Luke, chapter 14, it tells us how King Herod the Tetrarch (the son of Herod the Great, who reigned at the time of Jesus’ birth) had John the Baptist thrown into prison and later beheaded, because he had told King Herod that it was wrong for him to have divorced his wife in order to marry his brother’s wife. The Pharisees would have loved to see Jesus suffer the same fate as John the Baptist. Whichever answer Jesus could have given them presented danger for Him. If He had supported divorce for any cause, He would have been in conflict with the Old Testament law He claimed to support. If He had opposed divorce, the King might have imprisoned or killed Him.

Analysis: Never one to shy away from the truth just to avoid danger, Jesus explained that He opposed no-fault divorce. Jesus’ first answer raises few eyebrows. However, His second answer (regarding Moses) stirs debate. Was Moses wrong to allow divorce? If so, was Moses giving his own law rather than God’s law? If he was, is the book of Deuteronomy wrong for claiming that the law came from God and not from Moses’ own thoughts?

As we see in Matthew 5:17-18, Jesus fully supported the Old Testament, so He could not have been disagreeing with Moses when responding to the Pharisees. Divorce under severe circumstances is still permissible, and so is remarriage. God did not intend for marriages to be broken, but the “hard-hearted” nature of humans sometimes leaves us no choice but to divorce. We incorrectly assume that this “hard-hearted” nature refers to our willingness to divorce, when, in reality, it refers to our sin nature which inspires us to sin in ways that destroy marriages. That’s why Moses permitted divorce.

Mark 10:2-12, “Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ He answered them, ‘What did Moses command you?’ They said, ‘Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.’ But Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, “God made them male and female.” For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.’ Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.’”

Context: This encounter with the Pharisees is likely to be the same one recorded in Matthew 19. The order of the events in Mark parallel those in Matthew. And this story is again followed by the story of the rich, young ruler.

Analysis: The wording of this version of the story differs slightly from the Matthew 19 account. The main difference is that Mark includes an account of a later discussion between Jesus and His disciples. Here, Jesus places the sin of the divorce on the divorcer and not the divorcee, regardless of whether the divorce is initiated by the man or the woman.

The other major difference between this account and the accounts in Matthew is the lack of the phrase, “except for unchastity.” This divorce quote in Mark indicates that the divorcer is always the one acting in sin, whereas the Matthew quotes let the divorcer off the hook if the divorcee has committed adultery. This difference is yet another example of why the Every-Verse Method is so important. By examining the quote in Mark alone, we would draw the wrong conclusion about divorce resulting from adultery. But by examining all the quotes in the Bible which address divorce, we get a clearer picture of God’s will.

Luke 16:18, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

Context: The last few verses in Luke 16 seem to be unrelated and thrown together in no particular order. It's unlikely that Jesus spoke these lines in the order in which they appear in the text.

Analysis: Luke may have chosen not to record Jesus' divorce quotes as thoroughly as Matthew and Mark did, if he was already aware of the existence of one of those books.

While verses like this one may have been directed toward situations like King Herod's, there's another possible interpretation—that sex equals marriage. We see this particularly in Genesis, where the marriages of Adam and Eve, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah, Jacob and Rachel, and Jacob and Bilhah consisted not of a ceremony led by a pastor, but of the groom having sex with the wife to start the marriage. We also see in **Exodus 22:16-17** that “if a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged, and lies with her, he must pay a dowry for her to be his wife.” Why? Because in God's eyes, they were already married when they first had sex.

So if this theology is accurate, then divorce and remarriage, as well as promiscuity, would be equivalent to adultery, because a person's first sexual partner is effectively their spouse; while pre-marital sex would count as marriage and not as sin as long as the couple stayed together for life.

So does this make remarriage a sin? Did Jesus “raise the bar” and make the law way tougher than it had been in the Old Testament?

Not necessarily. Since God's law allowed for divorce, as we saw in Deuteronomy, divorce and remarriage were never sins. Jesus' main point here may be that God never intended for marriages to be split. Jesus may have made difficult statements like this one to drive people to humility and grace by showing them that, even when they obeyed the law, they still fell short of impressing God.

Your view on this issue ultimately comes down to whether or not you believe that Jesus came to greatly change, and even contradict, the Old Testament law, or whether you think He came to support it and help others to better understand it. I think He came to do the latter.

Romans 7:2-3, “Thus a married woman is bound to the law by her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning her husband.”

Context: Paul uses these facts to set up an analogy of how Christians are free from the law (our dead husband) and are now joined to Christ (our new husband).

Analysis: These verses lend support the idea that widows are free to remarry.

1 Corinthians 7:10-11, “To the married I give this command—not I, but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.”

Context: Paul addresses sex and marriage issues throughout this chapter.

Analysis: Despite the existence of Old Testament laws that allow for remarriage, churches have used this verse to imprison people in terrible marriages for centuries. If churches have been correct in believing this quote to be a universal command from God, then the Old Testament laws allowing re-marriage are in error. But since Paul was well-trained in the Old Testament and wrote in II Timothy, chapter 3, that he fully supported it, this quote cannot be an override of the Old Testament law. For the Bible to be consistent, Paul must have been addressing a specific incident within the Corinthian church in which a woman left her husband without proper cause. In such cases, God forbids divorce, and marrying another counts as adultery.

1 Corinthians 7:12-14, “To the rest I say this—I, and not the Lord—that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy [‘sanctified’ in the NASB] through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.”

Analysis: Paul begins by making it clear that these are his personal instructions and not the word of God. Yet, his advice is consistent with the word of God. God opposes

divorce, so Christians should remain united with their non-Christian spouses. For the non-believer to be “sanctified” is not to say that they are saved. To be sanctified is to become more like Christ. It is not the same as being justified in God’s sight as a result of Christ’s sacrifice.

1 Corinthians 7:15-16, “But if an unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you. Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.”

Analysis: As we learned in the Gospels, the sin of divorce falls on the divorcer (if the reasons for divorce are illegitimate), not the divorcee. Paul tells Christians to stay with their spouses in verses 12-14. But in verses 15-16, he removes all responsibility from Christians in the event that their non-Christian spouses initiate divorce. By being “not bound,” the divorcees are free to remarry once their spouses divorce them.

This Every-Verse analysis of divorce has given us an excellent example of how we need to examine the whole Bible when establishing our beliefs and not just the New Testament. As Christians, we have a tendency to dwell on the New Testament and ignore the Old, because we believe that we are to model ourselves after the early church. We fail to realize that the New Testament writings apply the Old Testament law to daily life in the times and places in which the New Testament was written. They do not override the Old Testament.