

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE?

**“If your opinion about anything contradicts God’s Word, guess which one is wrong?”
Rick Warren**

**“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.”
(Proverbs 14:12 ESV)**

An Introduction and Personal Note. The topic of divorce and remarriage is both a touchy and difficult conversation to have. Many people have been hurt by divorce. Others are offended by such discussions because they perceive the teachings on such issues to be a personal attack on their identity (as a “divorcee” or “remarried”) or plans to pursue remarriage. Many godly Christians have different convictions on this issue. The below convictions are mine alone and not expressive of the convictions my church family.

As a pastor, I have a unique calling to officiate over marriages. In such a capacity I always want to ensure that I follow God’s explicit instructions for the institution He created in marriage. I want to be obedient to His commands and to offer the best counsel to those who are likewise seeking to walk in His wisdom. I have prayed over and studied the Scriptures diligently on this topic and hope that this resource is helpful to you on your own journey of obedience to the Lord.

When I speak with those who have divorced and are pursuing remarriage, I encourage them to read this article (and mainly the Scriptures at the end) and to soak their studies in prayer. May you consider the whole of Scripture on the topic and not simply seek an understanding that appeals to your past experiences, feelings, or future hopes.

If you find yourself reaching conclusions different than mine, or your own pastor, I hope you will show grace towards us. Although I think I am correct on this topic, I acknowledge that I may be wrong in my conclusions. If I encountered a vegetarian who sincerely felt divinely called to not eat meat, I would never demean them or force them to eat meat. Likewise, I hope you will not look down upon nor criticize any pastor with such biblical convictions against officiating certain weddings. May we show grace towards one another in our differences and faithfully follow the convictions that the Lord has given us on this important issue.

James 4:17 “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” (ESV)

What does the Bible say about marriage? Marriage is created by God as lifelong institution between a man and a woman, rooted in creation, with a significance that shows in its comparison to Christ’s relationship with the church (Ephesians 5:22-33). Today marriage is often defined by the emerging trends, understandings, feelings, and opinions of the culture rather than the transcendent, immutable, and eternal truth found described by the God who created it. This change in understanding and practice has led to an overwhelming amount of marriages ending in divorce and resulting in remarriage. Although many sociological, psychological, economic, emotional, and man-centered rationales may be created to explain and justify the practice of divorce and remarriage, the Christian perspective and practice must be rooted in a balanced and holistic application of biblical theology.

The overwhelming practice in today’s churches is to allow remarriage in most cases of legal divorce. This is problematic in a society that frequently allows no-fault divorce, thus eliminating most standards or requirements for divorce. In the few churches that do choose to discriminate in the practice of remarriage, it is often confusing and complex to determine accurately the circumstances surrounding the divorce as well as the guilt or innocence of each party involved. In evaluating the

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Scriptural texts in regard to marriage, divorce, and remarriage the Bible points to the marriage bond as ending only in death, not merely being severed by legal divorce, thereby prohibiting remarriage following divorce no matter the circumstance (Matthew 19:6, Romans 7:1-3, 1 Corinthians 7:10-11,39).

Does the Bible say about divorce? Jesus very clearly says that divorce is not part of God's plan for humanity (Matthew 19:3-12) but was only permitted by Moses because of the hardness of mankind's hearts. As Paul gives guidance to the Corinthians in regard to marriage, he very clearly states in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 that the Lord commands couples not to divorce or separate, but that if they do they "should remain unmarried or else be reconciled." God does share that there are occasions when divorce is permitted as the only option and that the believer is "free" from continuing to try to reconcile their marriage with their unbelieving spouse. Examples of such situations may be when an unbelieving spouse is persistent in sexual or adulterous behavior, continuing to abuse their spouse, or abandoning their spouse. Although such divorce situations are allowed for, there is never the implication or approval for remarriage even in situations of "biblical" divorces.

What the Bible say about remarriage after the death of a spouse? God clearly permits remarriage after the death of a spouse and actually encourages remarriage for younger widows (Romans 7:1-3, 1 Corinthians 7:8-9,27-28,39-40; 5:11-16). The only qualification for the remarriage of a widow is that the new spouse must be a Christian (1 Corinthians 7:39, 2 Corinthians 6:14).

What does the Bible say about remarrying the spouse you previously divorced? God clearly allows for remarrying your previously divorced spouse (1 Corinthians 7:10-11) unless either spouse had subsequently remarried someone else (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

What does the Bible say about singleness?

What about my happiness? How can I be happy if I am divorced and never remarried? How can I resist lust if I am divorced and not remarried?

God actually speaks very highly of singleness as a gift and a joy (1 Corinthians 7:1, 7-8,26-34,38). We have often idolatized our happiness and ease of life above the glory and holiness of God. We cannot justify a sin (remarriage after divorce) merely as a means towards avoiding another sin (depression, lust, etc.). God is sufficient for our needs. If we find ourselves divorced and single, we must trust in the Lord's strength, provision, and fellowship to sustain us no matter the temptations we face in our single state (1 Corinthians 10:13).

What does the Bible say about remarriage after divorce?

Is a remarried person in a continuous state of adultery?

Remarriage after divorce is always labeled by God as a sin or specifically as an act of adultery (Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Malachi 2:14-16, Matthew 5:32, Matthew 19:3-10, Mark 10:1-12, Romans 7:1-3, 1 Corinthians 7). God says clearly in Romans 7:3 that a woman "will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive," explaining that only the death of her husband releases her from the law of marriage and permits her to be remarried.

Christ came to satisfy the penalty of our law-breaking. When we confess Christ as Lord of our life, and believe that He died on the cross and rose from the grave, we know that we "have died to the law" (Romans 7:4) and thus are set free from the eternal consequences of our sin (Romans 6:23). It is important for Christians to understand that "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

Although Christians no longer bear eternal condemnation for their sin, they still recognize that God's laws are "holy" and His commandments are "righteous and good" (Romans 7:12). Christians should desire to avoid what God calls sin or "evil" and to practice what God calls righteous or "good" (Romans 7:18-25). When Christians are convicted by God for any sin, to include a past sin of an unbiblical divorce or remarriage while a previous spouse is still alive, they should confess their sin to

God and a trusted Christian friend (1 John 1:9, James 5:16). When such confession occurs, God provides healing and affirms His eternal cleansing and forgiveness. Although such sin is forgiven eternally (“now no condemnation” Romans 8:1), some of the earthly consequences of such a sin may linger. Christians should remember and obey God’s ongoing command to walk in holiness in their present marriage or singleness, and accordingly not seek an unbiblical divorce or remarry after a divorce.¹

Many God-loving Christians have justified remarriage after divorce on the basis of a flawed assumption, that “it is assumed in the Bible that wherever Scripture allows divorce, remarriage is also allowed.”² Over and over this is shown to be the backbone of their defense, but they fail to show this to be a biblical truth.³ This is dangerous territory to be in as it is an exegetical fallacy (false way to understanding the meaning of the bible) that you can make an argument from biblical silence.⁴

What if my divorce was based on biblical grounds?

What is my divorce was before I was a Christian?

Doesn’t Matthew 5:32, 19:9, or 1 Corinthians 7:15 imply that remarriage after divorce in certain circumstances isn’t sin? That when someone is “loosed” or not “bound” it implies the freedom to remarry?

Scripture never speaks positively about or encourages remarriage after divorce. Scripture does not distinguish any sorts of allowance for remarriage based on a “biblical” divorce or based on a divorce occurring before someone was a Christian. Paul recognizes that divorce may physically and legally end a marriage, but in the eyes of God’s law, the marriage bond and “one flesh union” only ends in death (Matthew 19:6, Romans 7:1-3, 1 Corinthians 7:10-11,39).

The word chosen by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:15 is *luo* in Greek or ‘free’ in English. It is important to note that this is not the same word that he uses for divorce, *chorizo*, (1 Corinthians 7:10,11,15 and Matthew 19:6) or *aphenai* (1 Corinthians 7:11,12,13). The conclusion of this differing word choice is summed up as meaning “that the Christian is not bound to fight in order to preserve togetherness.” Is it also significant to note that the “the word used for ‘bound’ (*douloo*) in verse 15 is not the same word used in verse 39...Paul consistently uses *deo* when speaking of the legal aspect of being bound to one marriage partner (Ro 7:2, 1 Co 7:39) or to one’s betrothed (1 Co 7:27).” Paul uses a different word because he is not giving them the same right to remarry.⁵ In contrast, in verse 39 Paul clearly speaks to how the marriage bond ends in death by saying “free to marry” which is a phrase

¹ This analysis is not exhaustive, but rather deals briefly with the relevant texts, not focusing on justification for or allowance of divorce, but rather on the perceived right and normalized practice of remarriage following a divorce. This also does not speak to those who are in the situation of already having divorced and remarried, but to those I would offer the conclusion of John Piper’s *Divorce & Remarriage*, Deuteronomy 24:1-4., and Heth & Wenham’s *Jesus & Divorce* page 110. If space allowed I would have spent more time just analyzing the two perceived “exception” passages (Mt 19:9 & 1 Co 7:15-16).

² Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 85.

³ Even if divorce is permitted and remarriage implied, in the case of adultery and abandonment, the divorce would be enacted and discipline upheld through the church so that there would be clarity in understanding the guilt and innocence of both parties. The reality is that in most practice within the church, there is little evaluation and consideration given to whether the initial divorce was ‘justified’ biblically and as to whom was guilty or innocent. Why would one marry within the church, divorce outside the church, and then come back to the church to be married? If one goes the route of arguing for divorce and remarriage, you soon become encumbered in many complex scenarios filled with human rationale and justifications. In addition, if one takes wedding vows stating “to death do us part” but later breaks that vow with God, it is a significant thing that should not be lightly considered (Proverbs 20:25, Ecclesiastes 5:4-5)

⁴ D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 138-139.

⁵ John Piper, “Divorce & Remarriage: A Position Paper.” (July 21, 1986), available on-line from: <http://www.desiringgod.org>.

that is noticeably absent from 1 Corinthians 7:15, Matthew 19:9 and 5:32.⁶

Is remarriage after divorce an “unforgivable” sin? *No, the only unforgivable sin is ongoing rejection of Jesus as God as revealed by His Holy Spirit (Mark 3:28-30).* Although divorce is a sin (when not biblically allowed, see 1 Corinthians 7), it is not unforgivable. However, the forgiveness of the sin of divorce does not relieve the earthly consequences of that sin and thus permit remarriage since the previous spouse is still alive. Even if someone’s divorce was “biblical” or they were the “innocent” party, Scripture still labels remarriage as a sin since the previous spouse is still alive. Regardless of the circumstances, the sin of remarriage after divorce is not “unforgivable.”

Isn’t it hypocritical to say divorced men can serve as deacons while saying remarriage after divorce is a sin?

No. Although we may want to personally exercise “grace” and say remarriage after divorce is not a sin, the Bible clearly calls remarriage after divorce a sin because marriage only ends in death, not in divorce. We cannot condone what God clearly calls sin (Romans 1:32, Isaiah 5:20).

Although we may want to uphold “righteousness” by excluding divorced and remarried men from serving as deacons, the Bible upholds God’s grace and faithfulness in the life of believer, showing that no sin is unforgivable. Christians are no longer identified by their past sin and thus do not live under condemnation (Romans 8:1, 1 Corinthians 6:11, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21). The standards and qualifications for deacons and pastors all point to present faithfulness not past sin (i.e. “Who are they now?” NOT past-tense, “Who were they?”, see Acts 6:1-7, 1 Timothy 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9).

What about _____ (example of a godly couple that is remarried after divorce), should they have not gotten married?

The ends (a godly remarried couple) does not justify or rationalize a sin (remarriage after divorce). A remarried couple is not in the ongoing state of adultery, but the sin of adultery (which Jesus explains also happens in our hearts with lust (Matthew 5:27-30)) is serious and should not be ignored, justified, or excused.

I struggle with lust. I need a father/mother for my kids. I am lonely. Isn’t remarriage a better solution to these issues than being divorced and single? Won’t Jesus forgive me?

Being divorced and single is complicated and not without its own difficulties, struggles, and temptations. Despite these challenges we cannot ignore God’s truths on divorce and remarriage. We must seek God in our weakness and seek His strength, grace, and peace to carry us and guide us (2 Corinthians 12:1-10). Although it is true that Jesus can and is willing to forgive all sin, we should not abuse His grace or ignore His truths concerning what is best for us in both singleness and marriage and His warnings of the earthly consequences of sin (Romans 6, 1 Corinthians 7).

Please do not take our word solely on this issue.

Please consider the Scriptures and resources below so that you may personally understand and seek God’s wisdom on such a delicate issue.

⁶ Romans 7:2-3, 1 Timothy 5:14, & Ephesians 5:22-33: Although briefly referenced, three other passages are helpful and to be considered. Romans 7:2-3 clearly speaks to the “law of marriage” as only ended in the death of a spouse and provides no other exceptions. In 1 Timothy 5:14, Paul speaks positively to exhorting and encouraging the practice of marriage he speaks to younger widows being encouraged to remarry, but never encourages those who have been divorced to remarry. Finally, in Ephesians 5:22-33 Paul shows “a deep and profound significance to the union of husband and wife in ‘one flesh’ as a parable of the relationship between Christ and his church.”

SCRIPTURES ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

Genesis 2:23-24

“23Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." 24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

Deuteronomy 24:1-4

"When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then 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 of his house, and she departs out of his house, 2and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, 3and the latter man hates 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 man dies, who took her to be his wife, 4then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.”

Leviticus 21:13-15

“13And he shall take a wife in her virginity. 14A widow, or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, or a prostitute, these he shall not marry. But he shall take as his wife a virgin of his own people, 15that he may not profane his offspring among his people, for I am the LORD who sanctifies him.”

Malachi 2:14-16

“14 But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was 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. 15 Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. 16"For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.”

Malachi 2:16

"For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.” (ESV)

"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.” (NIV)

"For I hate divorce," says the LORD, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the LORD of hosts. "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously." (NASB)

“ For the LORD God of Israel says That He hates divorce, For it covers one's garment with violence,” Says the LORD of hosts. “Therefore take heed to your spirit, That you do not deal treacherously.” (NKJV)

Matthew 5:32

“32 But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Matthew 19:3-12

“3And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" 4He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female,5and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? 6So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." 7They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" 8He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." 10The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." 11But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 12For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."

Mark 10:1-12

“1 And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again. And again, as was his custom, he taught them. 2And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" 3He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" 4They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away." 5And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. 6But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 7 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, 8and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. 9 What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." 10And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, 12and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Luke 16:18

18"Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery."

1 Corinthians 7

“1Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." 2But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. 3 The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. 5Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. 6Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. 7 I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

8To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am.9But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion. 10To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband 11(but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. 12To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. 13If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. 14For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 15But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not

enslaved. God has called you to peace. 16For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? 17Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. 18Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. 19 For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. 20 Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. 21Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) 22For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. 23 You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. 24So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God. 25Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. 26I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. 27Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. 28But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. 29This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none,³⁰and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, ³¹and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. 32I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. 33But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, ³⁴and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. 35I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord. 36If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. 37But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. 38So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better. 39 A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. 40Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.”

Romans 7:2-3

“For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.”

1 Timothy 5:14

“So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander”

Ephesians 5:22-33

“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. 25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,²⁶that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,²⁷so that he might present the church to himself in

splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 28In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church,30because we are members of his body. 31 "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." 32This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. 33However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband."

"Be killing sin or it will be killing you." John Owen

Recommended Resources for Further Study

Piper, John. "Divorce & Remarriage: A Position Paper." (July 21, 1986), available on-line from: <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/divorce-remarriage-a-position-paper> .

Piper, John. "On Divorce & Remarriage in the Event of Adultery." (January 1, 1986), available on-line from: <http://www.desiringgod.org/all-resources/by-topic/divorce-remarriage> .