

# DIVORCE

MARK 10:1-12 STUDY NOTES

**CP**

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Church Project,

We love Jesus. And, we love the Scriptures. As John 1:1 says, “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Jesus is the Word of God. And, the Scriptures reveal the Word of God, they are the words of God, from the Word of God Himself.

The Scriptures are given to us by God, for our good. They guide us into knowing the heart of God, and the best path for living in ways that please Him, and provide the best for us.

So, as followers of Jesus, we care deeply about what the Scriptures teach us. And, the Spirit of God living within us causes us to long to know and live out the Word of God.

The Scriptures speak to us about so many life situations. They give us counsel on the very difficult topic of marriage and divorce.

We are spending a couple of weeks studying what the Gospel of Mark says about marriage and divorce. We want to know what the Bible says, so that we can make sure we are honoring God in our decisions. And, in doing so, we ensure that we are living in the best possible scenario for God to do His work in us, and through us.

God’s principles, brought together from the Old and New Testament, give us guidance in singleness and marital and divorce situations. Though the Scriptures give us God’s guidance and principles on marriage and divorce, there are many things we have to make sure we understand more clearly.

In order to more clearly and comprehensively discuss what the Bible says about these topics, one of our elders has written a more thorough examination of the Word than we can enjoy in these sermons. We want to know what we believe, why we believe it, and be able to help others also understand what God teaches about these things.

Trace Howard, who writes commentary on all of our sermon passages, has written these thoughts. They express the heart of the Scriptures, as Scripture is used to help us understand other Scriptures.

Additionally, this document prepared by Trace will help you understand what your church teaches. All of our elders approve of this document, and Trace writes representing the leadership of our church on this topic of divorce.

I’m grateful for his knowledge and research and writing on this topic, on behalf of the leaders here at Church Project. And, I’m thankful for your desire to know more fully what the Bible says, and to live it out in a way that pleases Jesus. Let’s all pray that God will speak to us, as we explore His Words, and that we’ll follow what He teaches.

You are loved!

Jason Shepperd  
Lead Pastor | Church Project

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## CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

Marriage is hard but divorce is awful. In fact, divorce may be more traumatic than losing a spouse or parent. John Piper is correct when he says, “Death is usually clean pain. Divorce is usually dirty pain” (“What God Has Joined Together,” message delivered June 24, 2007). There is nothing good about it and in a real sense everyone loses. Contrary to modern culture, divorce is not an easy answer to the problem of a fractured or broken marriage. Yet, these issues are not new or unique to our society. The question of divorce was one of particular interest in the time of Jesus due to the recent and very public divorces of Herod Antipas and Herodias in order to marry one another (cf. 6:17-18) (Brooks, p. 155). There also were extensive debates between the rabbinical schools of Hillel and Shammai, and perhaps others, about what constituted a permitted basis for getting a divorce.

In many ways, things haven’t changed. The subject of divorce, and especially remarriage, remain controversial and the issues are emotionally charged – few of us have not been affected directly or indirectly by these matters. What complicates the situation even more is that, because these experiences are often so personal, most people have strong opinions about the appropriateness of divorce and remarriage, irrespective of what Scripture actually teaches about them. Moreover, because the biblical texts are less than clear on these subjects, numerous questions exist, such as, “Are there biblical grounds for divorce?” “Can I remarry if I have gone through a divorce?” “What if I was divorced and remarried for unbiblical reasons?” and “Can I serve in ministry if I have gone through a divorce?” These are just a few of the complexities that surround this area of the Christian life.

A discussion about divorce and remarriage might seem out of place at this point in Mark’s narrative. Yet, the passage continues the theme of the difficult challenge of discipleship and the radical demands of the kingdom within the context of the marital union. Authentic discipleship, Jesus says, is not about self-gratification but about what it means to be a humble servant and giving up one’s rights within the framework of marriage. Jesus, therefore, goes back to first principles that were established at creation and which entail a life-long covenantal commitment to one another, growing out of a “union of two” that God makes “one.” Jesus’ teaching in Mark 10 is radical, even shocking. He says that to break this sacred union and covenant, whether sought by either the man or the woman, constitutes adultery.

In short, Jesus emphasizes the point that God’s ideal and will is the “permanence” of marriage. While he recognizes at least one legitimate exception to an absolute prohibition against divorce and remarriage, he does so *only as a concession* to life in a fallen world and as a way of regulating the practice – importantly, Jesus *never condones divorce and remarriage for any reason*, even those that, from our sinful perspective, would seem to create a situation in which forgiveness and reconciliation could never happen; Jesus would say to the true disciple that *nothing is impossible with God*. As we will see, Jesus’ feeling about divorce is consistent with God’s attitude toward divorce reflected in Malachi 2:16, flowing from his understanding of God’s original design for marriage in Genesis 2.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus’ countercultural teaching highlights what the central question should be for the Christ follower – it is not “On what basis will God allow me to get out of this marriage?” but instead “What should I do as a disciple and kingdom citizen that will ultimately glorify God?” The answer to that question, Jesus says, is “Stay in the marriage and make it work,” irrespective of what the other spouse has done – in short, “be reconciled.” Ultimately, God has not called us to “happiness” but to “obedience” (cf. Thomas, *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?* 2015). It is inappropriate, therefore, as a disciple, to make a decision whether to remain married that is motivated by what we think ultimately will make us happy or what we “feel” is fair. Obedience to God’s word is what brings us true, genuine, soul satisfaction.

At the outset of our discussion of this difficult passage, it is critical that we not derive our conclusions about these topics by reading the text through the lens of personal experience, irrespective of whether those experiences are good or bad; instead we must be humble enough to allow the text to dictate our practice, despite how challenging that might seem. Remember that the life of a disciple may mean that we must walk an unpopular and sometimes lonely path.

Having said this, the subjects of divorce and remarriage admittedly are treacherous and contain thorny, difficult questions from which clear solutions and resolutions often flee. Therefore, as we discuss these issues with one another, we always must do so with a spirit of gentleness, love, and certainly humility, recognizing that God is merciful and forgiving and that he is in the business not only of resurrecting marriages but restoring those who have experienced the trauma of divorce.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the translation of Malachi 2:16 as “I (God) hates divorce” has been disputed, there is little question that the passage expresses God’s negative attitude toward the sin of divorce – see discussion of verse 9 below and accompanying note.

# INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

The issues of divorce and remarriage in the Bible are confusing, because there is less than consensus (not conflict) in terms of how the writers present the subjects. Much of this is due to the different concerns of the biblical writers and the particular contexts in which they addressed these matters. Remember that the Gospel writers were reporting incidents and statements of Jesus that occurred in settings that were different from and earlier than those of their own audiences (e.g. Mark wrote to Gentiles in Rome some thirty years after the events of Mark 10).

The following chart contains verses to which we will refer throughout the textual notes and commentary. The version used is the ESV, which is a more “formally equivalent” (or “literal”) translation than the NIV (a “dynamic equivalent” version):

## **MATTHEW**

**5:32** – “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.”

**19:6; 9** – “So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” . . . “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, *except* for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

**(note the exception in verse 9)**

## **MARK**

**10:8-9; 11-12** – “So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” . . . And 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.”

**(verse 12 is unique to Mark; also note that there is no exception)**

## **LUKE**

**16:18** “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

**(note that there is no exception)**

## **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 CORINTHIANS**

**7:10-12; 15** To the married I give this charge (not I but the Lord); the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. . . . To the rest I say . . . But 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.

**7:39** 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.

**The following summarizes the central principles of these New Testament passages:**

1. God intends marriage to be a permanent, sacred covenant union between husband and wife that ideally is dissolved only by death (Matt. 19:9; Mark 10:9; 1 Cor. 7:39; Rom. 7:2-3).
2. Divorce followed by remarriage, absent a legitimate exception or basis, constitutes adultery (Matt. 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18). There is less-than-convincing evidence that the NT writers drew a hard line between the acts of divorce and remarriage as modern interpreters sometimes do – attempting to make a distinction between them has led some to argue that grounds might exist for divorce but not for remarriage; this conceptually is difficult to support both grammatically and culturally. As discussed below, divorce without remarriage, both within Judaism at the time of Jesus and in the culture of the NT generally, was unthinkable; thus, in Jesus’ mind, if a legitimate basis existed for divorce, it also likely applied to remarriage, despite his desire that reconciliation occur – if so, justifiable grounds for both divorce and remarriage would be applicable today as well.
3. Jesus acknowledged that the covenant of marriage *could be broken* due to the *unrepentant act of “sexual immorality”* and that a person presumably could remarry if such inappropriate sexual behavior occurred (importantly, this is the *only ground* for divorce and remarriage *of believers* expressly stated in the NT [Matt. 5:32; 19:9]; also, the word translated “sexual immorality” [*porneia*] in these Matthean texts is broader than the word translated “adultery” [*moichaō* and related words] and could have included “adultery” as well as other sexual misconduct [BDAG, p. 854]).<sup>2</sup>  
**Note:** no additional basis for the divorce and remarriage *of believers is expressly permitted* in the Bible other than “unrepentant sexual immorality” – whether additional exceptions or grounds exist, due to some act that materially breaches the marital covenant, will be addressed below under “Frequently Asked Questions.”

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of “unrepentant sexual immorality” contemplates someone who has determined to practice a promiscuous relationship outside the marital union, is unwilling to repent, and has thus breached the covenant of marital faithfulness. As our discussion will indicate, although the faithful spouse has the *option* to leave, such is not mandatory. In fact, God’s desire is for the couple to avoid divorce and be reconciled (cf. 1 Cor. 7:10-11). Recall the book of Hosea, chapters 1-3, in which the prophet Hosea pursued his unfaithful wife, seeking reconciliation, even as Yahweh pursued unfaithful Israel, seeking the same result.

4. Following a divorce of believers, God's intention for the husband and wife is to remain single or be reconciled, absent a legitimate basis for the divorce (1 Cor. 7:10-12); even if a legitimate reason exists, such as the "unrepentant sexual immorality" of one of the spouses, God always desires the "obedient or innocent spouse" to forgive the one guilty of the offense and then seek restoration and reconciliation – permanency is still God's ideal, despite how hard it might seem.<sup>3</sup>
5. The believer is permitted to divorce and remarry if an *unbelieving spouse* "leaves" the marriage (1 Cor. 7:15).
6. A believer is free to remarry if their spouse dies, *yet only "in the Lord,"* i.e. a Christian (1 Cor. 7:39).

In summary, it is evident that the issues of divorce and remarriage present a complex web of facts that are troubling and difficult, though not impossible, to harmonize. A large part of our problem, as noted above, is that culture's position on these matters is quite permissive and such attitudes have infiltrated the church – too often we have failed to teach the strong emphasis in Scripture on covenant faithfulness and God's ideal of permanency. Our principal concern must always be focused on what God has said in his Word and then pursue his plan and purpose relentlessly despite the difficulties such a pursuit might present.

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<sup>3</sup> The phrase "obedient or innocent spouse" is used throughout these notes to describe the spouse who has not engaged in behavior that is expressly proscribed by the ethical mandates of the NT and for which marital dissolution is permitted, i.e. illicit sexual immorality – it denotes a "legal" concept only and in no way is intended to suggest that this person never bears some responsibility for the fracturing of the marriage relationship. Yet, consider the following important observation by Lenski: "In all of his utterances on the subject, Jesus blames only the one who disrupts the marital union and not the one whose marriage is disrupted" (p. 423).



## OUTLINE

(Jesus' instruction concerning divorce and remarriage—Mark 10:1-12; cf. see “chart of NT texts” above for parallels in Matthew and Luke)

1. Jesus departs into Judea and across the Jordan to Perea (10:1)
2. Jesus is tested by the Pharisees on the issue of divorce (10:2-9)
  - a. The Pharisees' first question (v. 2)
  - b. Jesus' question (v. 3)
  - c. The Pharisees' answer (v. 4)
  - d. Jesus' teaching on divorce (vv. 5-9)
    - (1) Jesus focuses on the hardness of human hearts (v. 5)
    - (2) God's ideal and will for marriage goes back to the beginning in Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 (vv. 6-8)
    - (3) God's ideal for marriage is a “permanent” marital covenant (v. 9)
  - e. Private instruction for the disciples (vv. 10-12)
    - (1) The disciples' question (v. 10)
    - (2) Jesus' response: divorce and remarriage is tantamount to adultery (vv. 11-12)

## DISCUSSION

- Read carefully the questions;
  - Then read the verses with the questions in mind;
  - The textual/commentary notes are supplemental and designed to help you with the meaning of the passage.
1. How has the world changed in the past 25 years with respect to marital relationships and divorce? What were the social trends that motivated those changes? What motivates current trends and attitudes about marriage? What are the dangers this environment creates for the church at large and for Christians individually? What are the challenges this situation poses for pastoral counseling?
  2. What does Genesis 2:18-25 tell us about God's blueprint for marriage?

3. What is the definition of *marriage*? What is the purpose of marriage? How should this affect our legal definition of marriage?
4. Why are marriage vows important in a wedding ceremony? How do you feel about a covenant renewal ceremony? What would be its value to an existing marriage? How frequently should couples do this?
5. Discuss the following statement: “Though the Bible never condones divorce, it does recognize the reality of divorce” (Akin, p. 203). Do you agree, disagree, and why?
6. Why is it difficult not to let feelings enter into the determination of what the Bible teaches about divorce? What is the danger of approaching the subject of divorce and remarriage from the standpoint of personal experience and what seems “fair”? Has God ultimately called us to personal “happiness”?
7. How has the fall impacted God’s ideal for marriage? How does this affect the way in which we counsel couples who are struggling in their marriage?
8. How would you respond to someone who says, “I’ll just get divorced and remarried; then I will ask God to forgive me”?
9. Why are there so many different Christian opinions on divorce and remarriage? Despite this reality, what are basic truths about divorce and remarriage that we know for certain?
10. What can the church do to help prevent divorce before it happens? What can individuals do to keep their marriages “healthy”?

## TEXTUAL NOTES & COMMENTARY

**Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them (v. 1)** – The phrase “left that place” is a reference either to Galilee generally or Capernaum specifically (9:33). Following Jesus’ departure, he traveled to Judea and beyond the Jordan River into the area of Perea. Some might consider this route odd, expecting him instead to have gone along the east side of the Jordan (presumably to avoid Samaria) and then crossing the Jordan back into Judea (cf. Bock who argues that this is what Jesus did and that Mark’s description is a condensed reference to the route, *Cambridge*, p. 266). Perea, however, was an area over which Herod Antipas governed and the Pharisees (who appear in v. 2) may have chosen this location to incite political opposition to Jesus by Herod (Strauss, p. 422).

Obviously, Jesus’ popularity had not diminished as evidenced by the crowds that came to him. Thus, he resumed his public ministry by teaching them, which he *customarily* would do (*eiōtha* denotes “to maintain a custom or tradition,” BDAG, p. 295 – cf. 1:21-22, 27; 2:13; 4:1-2; 6:2, 6, 34; 11:18). Although Mark does not say specifically what Jesus “was teaching,” the setting provided a context for the following incident with the Pharisees.

**Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” (v. 2)** – Mark tells us in advance that the Pharisees’ question was not designed to engage in a good faith discussion about the issue of divorce. Rather their inquiry was designed to “test” Jesus. The use of the verb “tested” (*peirazontes*) is similar to its occurrence in 8:11 (see Study Notes at 8:11 for a more complete discussion). If these religious leaders were attempting to pit Jesus against Herod Antipas, who had married his half-niece Herodias despite the decrees of Leviticus 18 (cf. 6:14-29), the nuance might more accurately be, “they attempted to ensnare or trap him” (NLT, GNB; cf. Hurtado, p. 160; Bock, *Cambridge*, 267; Witherington, p. 274; Brooks, p. 156; Evans, pp. 85-86). In short, they wanted Jesus to give them an incriminating answer to their question about whether there were circumstances in which a man could divorce his wife (i.e. “is it lawful, authorized, or permitted,” *exestin*, BDAG, p. 349).

The question on its face is slightly unusual since the right to a divorce was generally assumed within Judaism based on Deuteronomy 24:1-4 – perhaps the Pharisees thought, and hoped, that Jesus would contradict this OT passage (cf. 10:4). Some commentators read the question here too narrowly as though these religious leaders were asking Jesus whether

he allowed for divorce *at all* (Collins, p. 465). Instead, what the rabbis debated were *the grounds* on which a divorce could occur.<sup>4</sup> This appears to be the focus of their question, given that the parallel text in Matthew 19:3 describes the question as being whether divorce was allowed “for any and every reason” – thus, Mark presents the reader a shorthanded version of the same question (Strauss, p. 423).

The stricter school of Shammai allowed divorce only in the case of adultery, while the more liberal teaching of rabbi Hillel permitted divorce for almost any reason (even burning a meal); rabbi Akiba extended this by saying that divorce was allowed if a man “found another fairer than she” (*m. Git.* 9:10). Hooker notes there is evidence from this era of an even stricter attitude than Shammai (p. 235; cf. Witherington, p. 275). Importantly, within Judaism at the time of Jesus, *only a man* could initiate divorce, although there are indications that powerful upper-class women occasionally did (Josephus, *Ant.* 15.7.10 §259; cf. Strauss, p. 423). Also significant for understanding the context of the Pharisees’ question, was the commonly held belief that the right to remarry was an integral part of divorce: “You are free to marry whomever you wish” (*m. Git.* 9:3).

The issue of the “grounds” for divorce would have been important for Mark’s readers since the Greco-Roman legal system made it easy to acquire a divorce – both men *and* women could initiate divorce by giving to the other spouse certificates of divorce, i.e. “divorce papers” (cf. E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1993, p. 69; also Black, p. 178).

**“What did Moses command you?” he replied. They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.” “It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Jesus replied (vv. 4-5)** – Rather than responding directly to their question, Jesus posed a counter-question to the Pharisees that clearly alluded to Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Although the NIV renders the verb *entellō* as “command,” its use here is more akin to “instructed” (cf. BDAG, p. 339) – Jesus is not granting that Moses “instruction” was God’s ideal but, as we will see, viewed it as *more concessionary* (cf. parallel in Matthew 19:7 where it is the Pharisees who call it a “command”).

The Pharisees here summarize Deuteronomy 24:1-4 as the basis for their divorce practices. They believed that Moses “permitted” (*epitrepō*) a husband to divorce his wife if she became “displeasing to him” because

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<sup>4</sup> For an extensive discussion of the OT and Jewish background on divorce and remarriage, see the following extremely helpful resources: Craig S. Keener, . . . *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament*, 1991; W. A. Heth and G. J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce: Toward an Evangelical Understanding of the New Testament Teaching*, 2002; also David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context*, 2002, esp. ch. 5.

he found “something indecent about her” (for a discussion of the phrase “something indecent” in Deut. 24:1, see Heth, “Remarriage for Adultery and Desertion,” in *Remarriage after Divorce in Today’s Church: Three Views*, p. 65 – he notes that the phrase was shorthand legal jargon for “some socially recognized misconduct – either the mishandling of her financial or household duties or sexual misconduct *short of adultery*” [emphasis added]; adultery, not divorce, was punishable by death in the OT [Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22]). Yet, contrary to how the Pharisees used this OT passage, the text neither mandates divorce nor sets out legitimate grounds for divorce (Strauss, p. 424); in fact, technically – and this is important for understanding how Jesus thought about the passage – the text *does not even permit divorce but instead regulates it* (France, pp. 390-91; Bock, *Cambridge*, p. 267). Thus, the error of the Pharisees was thinking God *approved* divorce (Cranfield, p. 319) – nothing could be further from the truth. The purpose of this text was principally to forbid a husband from remarrying his wife after he divorced her and she remarried.

The specific reasons are uncertain, but most believe the intent was to protect the former wife in some manner. Some scholars, for example, suggest that it prevented the first husband from exploiting her for financial gain by remarrying her to reclaim a dowry or to obtain an inheritance from her second husband (cf. Heth, *Remarriage*, p. 65). Others argue that it emphasized the finality of the divorce and thus protected the woman from accusations of adultery or perhaps even from the first husband’s capricious and unwarranted efforts to ruin her second marriage (Strauss, p. 424; Grassmick, p. 148; Painter, p. 140; Kent, p. 144). Whatever the reason, the woman was protected through the writing of a “certificate of divorce” (*biblion apostasiou*) – the word translated “of divorce” was a legal term that designated the legal relinquishment of property and in Jewish use came to be used as the technical term for “divorce” (BDAG, p. 120; Decker, 2.41).

So, in Jesus’ dialogue with the Pharisees, he initially answered their question of “is divorce lawful?” in the affirmative. Yet, what he then says is that the lawful provision took into account the actualities of the fallen, human condition that involved the “hardness of human hearts.” Jesus explains in verse 6 that the OT provision on which the Pharisees relied was *never intended as God’s ideal*; it was never designed to provide a basis for “divorce loopholes” as these religious leaders taught and practiced; Jesus instead says that it was a “temporary accommodation” (Brooks, p. 157) – it was provided as a reflection not of the will of God but a *concession* due to the *stubbornness* of the Israelites (Hurtado, p. 160; note Osborne’s observation that in Jesus’ eyes, the

current Jewish practice of divorce was in effect a *rebellion against God's will* set forth in Genesis 1 and 2, p. 171).

The phrase “hearts were hard” actually translates a single word *sklērokardia* which denotes “an unyielding frame of mind, hardness of heart, coldness, obstinacy, stubbornness,” BDAG, p. 930 (one writer has said that these were people with “sclerosis of the heart,” Painter, p. 141); also in this verse, the word is thrown forward in the sentence for emphasis (Bock, *Cambridge*, p. 268); the grammatical construction means “in reference to hard-heartedness (i.e. because of) your perversity” (BDAG, p. 875.3; Decker, 2.42). Thus, Jesus’ answer avoids the “snare” of his opponents’ trap since he neither affirms divorce nor points to it as the right thing to do. What he will now say is that marriage was never designed to be entered into with the hope that one could ultimately get out of it.

***But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and [be united to his wife]<sup>5</sup> and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh (vv. 6-8)*** – Notice the little word *de* that begins verse 6 (“but”). Jesus now moves the discussion to a higher plane by going beyond Moses back to the beginning (lit. “from the beginning,” *apo archēs*) during the pre-fall period when God created the institution of marriage. He does so by quoting Genesis 1:27 (v. 6) and 2:24 (v.7), both of which refer to God’s original intent. Genesis 1:27 states that God made the man and woman distinctly “male” and “female” (*arsen kai thēly*) yet fully “complementary” to each other – thus, according to Jesus, the creation account establishes a “heterosexual, lifelong, monogamous” marital relationship; this is God’s created order as each person *completes* the other by working “side by side as one” (Bock, p. 485). Brooks’ comment regarding the significance of Genesis 1:27 is striking: “Just as God is inseparably one being, so he intended for a male and female in marriage to become one being who would not be divided” (p. 157) – thus, by becoming a “unit of one,” man and woman together in marriage reflect the *imago dei*, i.e. the “image of God.”

The critical words of Genesis 2:24 are “united,” “one flesh,” and “one.” The idea of a “one flesh” relationship evokes a powerful image; it describes an entirely new entity that takes priority over all previous allegiances, especially parents (“for this reason a man will leave his father and mother” – in effect, the leaving of one’s father and mother meant *to abandon one loyalty and begin another* [v. 7; Heth, *Remarriage*, p. 60]). Further, the unity created by the relationship between husband and wife involves completely giving up

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<sup>5</sup> The earliest witnesses lack the rest of the quotation from Gen. 2:24, “and will be united with his wife” – thus, the phrase is absent in some versions (NASB, NET); although, see the NIV, NLT, ESV, and HCSB which include it.

one's individual rights, indicated by the phrase, "united to his wife." The word in verse 8 translated "united" is *proskollaō* which denotes "to adhere to closely, be faithfully devoted to, to join" (BDAG, p. 881); the underlying Hebrew word *dābaq* conveys the notion of "to cling or keep close" and was especially prominent as a technical term in the covenant terminology of Deuteronomy (Gen. 34:3; Deut. 10:20; 11:22; 13:4; 30:20; Josh. 22:5; 23:8; 1 Kgs. 11:2; cf. BDB, p. 179).

God's ultimate purpose, therefore, is that no longer would man and woman be two separate individuals "but one flesh" (*sarka mian*) (v. 8a). This "one-flesh" union reflects both the sacred covenant established by God when he "joins" man and woman together as well as the consummation of that covenant through the sexual union of a husband and wife. Thus, any other sexual union is outside of God's purpose and will for human sexuality (Strauss, p. 424) – to engage in such misconduct is an assault on the marital covenant of faithfulness. Interestingly, Paul uses this OT passage almost prophetically arguing that the intimacy God originally intended in marriage is a picture of the relationship and oneness that exists between Christ and his Church (cf. Ephesians 5:30-32).

The last part of verse 8 expresses Jesus' own conclusion drawn from the OT passages he has cited which he does in a brief, succinct fashion (Decker, 2.43). The word "so" translates a word *hōste* that here denotes "result" – the mystical yet real *consequence* of entering into marriage is that no longer are the man and woman separate, independent people; rather they are a "one-flesh" unit that God intends to remain permanent. Witherington says, "The implication is that the one flesh union becomes more constitutive of a man and a woman's being than their uniqueness" (p. 276).

***Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate" (v. 9) -*** Clearly, Jesus' reference to God's original ideal of permanency, oneness, and unity in marriage leaves no room, for those sensitive to the will and purpose of God, to approach marriage as something that is lightly entered into and easily broken (Painter, p. 141). The inference ("therefore") is drawn by Jesus through a negative prohibition "not to separate" what "God has joined together." The first clause of verse 9 literally describes God "yoking" (*syzeugnymi*, BDAG, p. 954) two people together in a sacred act, not merely one of human choice (Bock, p. 486). The verb "to separate" (*chōrizō*) is a word used in the Greek papyri to mean "divorce" (BDAG, p. 1095; cf. Bock, *Cambridge*, p. 277; Strauss, p. 425).

Jesus says in effect that even if this “separation or divorce” were to happen, God still desires permanence, not a broken bond.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus statement of God’s ideal, however, should not be taken to say that a marriage can never be broken by a third party – a marriage is a covenant which is *not inherently unbreakable* (Heth, *Remarriage*, p. 61).<sup>7</sup> This means that the marriage covenant *could be violated and dissolved*. Not only were marriage covenants in biblical times established through vows, they also included covenant obligations, one of which was sexual faithfulness (*Id.*, p. 62). Thus, marital infidelity was a grave breach of the covenant of faithfulness that a husband and wife pledged to one another – this is why Jesus acknowledges (*not condones*) this act as a basis for divorce and remarriage, as we see in the Matthean texts on the subject (see chart above under “Introductory Comments”). Having said this, it is important to remember that while Jesus is not absolutely prohibiting divorce *by way of a binding legal enactment*, he is absolutely elevating marriage, not as some remote ideal, but as a gift of God’s grace to be pursued and preserved at all cost (Anderson, p. 243).

***When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery” (vv. 10-12)*** – Although Mark does not record the disciples’ reaction to Jesus’ assertion, as does Matthew (19:10), clearly they needed private instruction to understand the implications of what the Savior had just uttered. If the words of Jesus in verse 9 surprised the disciples, the words he was about to pronounce in verses 11-12 would have been downright “shocking,” given the current feelings about divorce and remarriage within Judaism. While recognizing the reality of divorce, Jesus now will say that if the original couple were joined together by God, then the implications of being “one” and what it means to follow Jesus in

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<sup>6</sup> The OT passage of Malachi 2:16 is often thought to capture and reinforce God’s ideal of the “permanency” of the marriage bond: “‘For I hate divorce,’” says the Lord, the God of Israel” (NASB, NET, NIV 1984); yet, the Hebrew construction of the text is difficult and has been translated in several versions as, “‘The man who hates and divorces his wife,’ says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘does violence to the one he should protect,’” says the Lord Almighty” (NIV 2011; cf. ESV, HCSB); despite the variation in translation, the concluding phrase of the Malachi passage still indicates God’s negative attitude toward the act of divorce.

<sup>7</sup> This point is important in light of the view of some that the marriage “union” is indissoluble and can never be undone. From this principle, it is often reasoned that even if there are possible grounds for divorce, remarriage is never permitted on the theory that the original union is never dissolved. While this might seem to be a reasonable and logical inference from Jesus’ statement in verse 9, the biblical evidence seems to permit divorce (the “breaking” of the marriage covenant) and thus remarriage under certain circumstances. This would render the principle of “indissolubility” extremely problematic; moreover, if marriage is *ontologically indissoluble*, then the command “not to separate it” makes little sense (see answer to question no. 1 below under “Frequently Asked Questions”).



discipleship do not legitimize the act of remarriage – after all, “permanency” remains God’s ideal (cf. Witherington, *Cambridge*, p. 277; Painter, p. 142). Stated differently, not only does Jesus say divorce is contrary to God’s purpose, he goes even further to argue that it results in adultery when the divorced spouse remarries – this is because to remarry and join someone else was in effect to breach the original bond of covenant faithfulness to one’s spouse and thus commit adultery. In short, the seventh commandment of Exodus 20:14 is violated.<sup>8</sup>

Strauss explains the logic of verse 11, which Jesus draws from his teaching in verses 6-9, namely, the permanency and “oneness” of the marriage: “If the first marriage is permanent in God’s eyes, then remarriage after divorce is equivalent to adultery against the former wife” (p. 426). While it is argued by some<sup>9</sup> that the phrase translated “against her” at the end of verse 11 could be translated “with her,” thus being a reference to committing adultery “with” the second wife, most conclude that the natural reading of the grammar supports the translation “against her,” and thus is a reference to the first wife (France, p. 394; Gundry, pp. 533, 541-42; Witherington, pp. 277-78; Collins, p. 469; Strauss, p. 426). The phrase “against her” actually was a staggering pronouncement as Jesus sought to protect the “lowly” in a cultural environment where women often were viewed like property.<sup>10</sup> Keener remarks that such divorce “is not a victimless crime; Jesus declares that this action is wrong because it wrongs an innocent party. In his culture, a wife could be divorced for almost any reason, and she had little economic recourse once divorced. This compounded the offense of the divorce. Yet the heart of the offense would be true in any culture: to break faith with one’s spouse is wrong” (*Remarriage*, p. 105).

It is difficult, however, to argue that Jesus rejected *all* justifiable grounds for divorce and remarriage, because the divorce texts in Matthew indicate

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<sup>8</sup> Both occurrences of the verb *moichaō*, translated “commits adultery” in verses 11-12, are in the present tense. This fact, along with the concept of the indissolubility of marriage (an idea we have already questioned above), has been used to argue that the second marriage necessarily involves “continual adultery.” Yet, to insist that the use of the tense carries with it this connotation is to press the grammar beyond what it can bear (Decker, 2.45).

<sup>9</sup> N. Turner, “The Translation of *Moichatai ep’ autēn* in Mark 10.11,” *BT 7* (1956):151-52; B. Schaller, “Commits Adultery with Her’ Not ‘against Her,’ Mark 10.11,” *ET 83*, no. 4 (1972):107-08.

<sup>10</sup> To this point, consider D. Juel’s insightful comment: “[Jesus] forbidding divorce is clearly a statement about the status of women in society. They are to be safeguarded as vulnerable members of society . . . Crucial to their survival has always been economic support. Easy divorce of women with young children means abrogating responsibility for caring for the most important members of society at a time of maximum vulnerability” (pp. 131-32; cf. Witherington, p. 278).

otherwise (see chart above under “Introductory Comments”).<sup>11</sup> Yet, having said this, Jesus saw the marriage relationship as far more binding than did his contemporaries which is evident from the shock his disciples exhibited in Matthew 19:10 (“If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry”). As we have seen, Jesus (and Paul for that matter) indicates that God’s ideal is “permanency,” even in the face of a covenantal breach that, under certain, narrow circumstances, might permit one to leave the marriage.

Some have argued from Jesus’ teaching in Mark 10 that while divorce may be permitted (v. 5), remarriage is always prohibited (vv. 11-12). This, however, misses the point of the passage in at least two ways: (1) divorce without the right to remarriage was inconceivable in first-century Judaism – divorce meant the right to remarry (see discussion of v. 2 above); in short, the argument of separating the concepts of “divorce” and “remarriage” in such a way imposes an idea that would have been foreign to how people, including Mark’s readers, thought at the time<sup>12</sup>; (2) Jesus never condones divorce and in fact views it as contrary to God’s plan and will (cf. Strauss, p. 426).

Regarding remarriage following divorce, it should be emphasized that Jesus is against divorce because it fundamentally is a breach of a covenant made in the presence of God; it can wound the innocent and is bad for society, especially spouses, children, and even ourselves – how could such a situation ever be condoned? Yet, importantly, Jesus is *not against those who have suffered divorce* and in Mark 10 he is specifically defending those who have been divorced *against their will* (Keener, *Remarriage*, p. 105). It is not unreasonable to argue therefore that while Jesus uses a graphic rhetorical statement to make his point<sup>13</sup> – a prohibition against breaking one’s marriage – his declaration does not require permanent singleness for those already divorced (see W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 1.532).

Verse 12, which mentions women divorcing their husbands, finds no parallels in the other Gospels. Some commentators suggest that this verse is Mark’s adaptation of Jesus’ radical teaching applied to women in

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<sup>11</sup> For a thorough discussion of the grammatical basis for the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 as qualifying both divorce and remarriage, see John Murray, *Divorce*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing (1978), pp. 33-43.

<sup>12</sup> It should be cautioned that the basis for Jesus’ point was not simply an accommodation to the cultural expectations of the time; yet, without further qualification by Jesus or response to the contrary by the audience, the interpretive point set forth here merely recognizes the cultural setting in which Jesus’ statement was made and what his audience would have understood by his statement.

<sup>13</sup> See Keener, *Remarriage*, for an excellent discussion of the hyperbolic nature (i.e. rhetorical overstatement) of Jesus’ teaching in many areas and five reasons why Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18 likely are relevant examples (p. 106-107).

a Greco-Roman setting since Jewish women, as a general rule, did not have the power or legal permission to divorce their husbands in Jesus' locale and era (Gundry, p. 533; Lane, pp. 352, 358; Witherington, p. 278). There is evidence, however, that some Jewish women of high rank could write a bill of divorce – cf. Herodias who divorced her husband Philip to marry Herod Antipas; there is also some indication from later Judaism that a woman might be permitted to acquire a divorce under certain circumstances (see Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament: Aus Talmud und Midrash*, vol. II. 23-24). This may suggest that verses 11-12 were Jesus' own comment on this famous case, although this is somewhat speculative (cf. Witherington, p. 278). In any event, the inclusion of women in this injunction would have been a significant warning for Mark's Roman readers since under Roman law a wife could initiate a divorce (Grassmick, p. 149; cf. Lenski, p. 421).

## **PRINCIPLES FROM MARK 10:1-12<sup>14</sup>**

1. Marriage is a gift and work of God that derives its meaning and significance from him and his Word.
2. God's design for marriage is exclusively heterosexual and unique among all human relationships (10:6-7).
3. God's plan from the beginning is that the marriage union is permanent (10:9).
4. Jesus acknowledges that because we live in a fallen world, and thus have hard hearts, divorce will occur (10:3-4).
5. To divorce one's spouse (without a legitimate cause) and remarry someone else constitutes the sin of adultery (10:11-12).

## **RELATED INTERPRETIVE MATTERS**

### **Why Is There No "Exception Clause" in Mark and Luke?**

As pointed out earlier, while Matthew's parallels (5:32 and 19:9) contain an exception ("except for sexual immorality") to an absolute prohibition on divorce, neither Mark nor Luke (16:18) include this phrase. An important question, therefore, is "Why doesn't Mark or Luke include an exception to Jesus' absolute prohibition against divorce and remarriage, as does Matthew?" The answer is not entirely clear, and the scope of these notes simply does not permit an extensive discussion (the literature on this issue

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<sup>14</sup> These principles have been adapted with some modification from Akin, p. 208.

is vast). Yet, a few suggestions are presented, all of which make related points and are reasonable and suitable to the Mark and Luke contexts:

- As noted in our discussion of Mark 10:11 above, it is quite possible that Jesus deliberately used *hyperbole or overstatement* in his private discussion with his disciples to drive home the idea of permanency in marriage; thus, “his omission of any qualification may be understandable” (Stein, “Divorce,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, IVP, 1992, p. 194). Mark intends to highlight for his own Gentile audience the rigors of what it means to be a true “disciple” of Jesus and to do so he chooses not to include the exception clause found in the Matthew’s texts (recall that within the Greco-Roman culture, divorce and remarriage were permitted for virtually any reason; for other examples of hyperbole in Jesus’ teaching, see Matt. 5:29-30).
- Mark and Luke’s absolute sayings might very well have been a “*generalization* which admits of certain exceptions” (Blomberg, “Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3-12,” *Trinity Journal* 11 NS [1990]:161-96); a number of NT scholars point out that elsewhere in the Gospels, we don’t attempt to turn Jesus’ statements into absolutes without exception, so why would we do so in Mark 10:11-12, particularly in light of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 where explicit exception clauses occur? (cf. Matt. 9:15; 19:21; esp. 13:57) (*Id.*); see C. Keener, “Remarriage for Adultery, Desertion, or Abuse,” in *Remarriage*, who provides a number of examples where refusing to “qualify general propositions” by other principles would make what he calls “nonsense” out of many texts of Scripture (p. 110).
- Perhaps Mark (and Luke) omitted the exception clause related to “sexual immorality” because this type of behavior was *obvious and well known* to the original audience as a basis for divorce and remarriage (Heth, *Remarriage*, p. 73 – he calls this a “mental exception”). An example of how a “mental exception” might happen is to consider Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:28 where he says, “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart”; we would of course mentally add, “except for his wife.” Accordingly, when it comes to the core idea of Jesus’ divorce sayings, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery,” the natural assumption a first-century reader would make would be “unless the divorce is not valid” – Matthew’s texts make this assumption explicit, while Mark and

Luke don't, leaving the reader to make it (*Id.*, p. 74; see chart above for the various texts).<sup>15</sup>

## Paul's Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage

Paul's principal teaching on the subjects of divorce and remarriage occurs in 1 Corinthians 7, a passage that from a chronological and canonical standpoint, actually was the first statement on divorce in the NT (Paul likely wrote 1 Corinthians prior to Mark's Gospel, and Matthew and Luke likely followed Mark). Paul's teaching to believers is clear. He states in 7:10-12 that if the husband or wife divorces the other spouse, they have two choices: either to remain single or be reconciled.

With respect to Paul's teaching in 7:12-14, he was forced to deal with a situation that Jesus didn't have to address in his earthly ministry, namely, where one of the spouses converted to Christianity, thus resulting in a believer and unbeliever living together in a marriage. Paul says that the believer should remain in the marriage, meaning that their conversion is no excuse for "leaving" or "divorcing" their unbelieving spouse. Yet, in the event the unbelieving partner decides to leave the marriage, Paul says the believer is not "bound" (lit. "enslaved," *douloō*, BDAG, p. 260) to their obligations of the marital covenant (7:15). In short, this points to a valid or legitimate basis for divorce, and in such a case, the believer is free to consider remarriage (Heth, *Remarriage*, p. 75).

So what is the point of Paul's teaching? He assumes that victims of valid divorces have the right to remarry. The fact that Paul sanctions the remarriage of a deserted believer by an unbelieving spouse confirms the point that Matthew's exception clauses function in a similar way (Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the NT*, p. 361 – he says that it is unlikely Paul would categorically prohibit remarriage for the believers described in verses 12-16; rather, he would invite them to engage in a process of discerning how best to serve God with the time that remains). In summary, Paul understood that Jesus' divorce sayings, especially in Mark and Luke, were never intended to be taken as absolute prohibitions that admit of no exception and this is evident by Paul's qualification of the general proscription against divorce in this situation (Heth, Keener, *Remarriage*, pp. 76, 109).

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<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that there are some very good NT scholars, godly men and women alike, who hold that the exceptions in the Matthew texts were uniquely Jewish in nature and thus germane only to Matthew's predominantly Jewish audience. Thus, because Mark and Luke wrote to Gentile audiences, it is reasoned that such exceptions would not have been meaningful and thus were excluded. The upshot of this, according to these writers, is that Jesus did not advocate any grounds for divorce or remarriage, or if there were legitimate bases for divorce, these never permitted remarriage – a view that William Heth once held and has since rejected (see the references to his article on *Remarriage* cited above; for an excellent treatment of Heth's previously held "no grounds" position, see his and G. Wenham's, *Jesus and Divorce*, 2002).

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE

The following questions are challenging, given that the NT passages on these subjects are at places unclear. Yet, suggested answers are provided, recognizing that some might have differences of opinion on certain specific matters. That is expected. The subject is fraught with difficulties, and we should always be willing to continue a dialogue in our efforts to seek the truth (cf. Acts 17:11) – since my days in seminary, I hopefully have gained new insight, more perspective, and have become less dogmatic in a number of these areas; I have dramatically shifted from a position I once held and trust that in my search for truth I have become more gracious, and frankly, more accurate in my understanding of Scripture on these important issues.

It has been my experience that ultimately the real question on believers' minds is, "Are there any biblical grounds for remarriage." The following responses will reflect this awareness and in doing so will assume the principles set forth above from Mark 10 (for an excellent discussion of these issues from a practical, pastoral perspective, see Charles Swindoll's, *Strike the Original Match*, pp. 139-149).

1. ***Can a marriage covenant be broken?*** The answer to this question is "yes." As discussed above under verse 9, the marriage union was a covenant that *could be broken* like any other covenant. Because we live in a fallen world, there are some acts so severe and which strike at the heart of covenant faithfulness, that they breach the covenant obligations and provide a basis for dissolution – certainly God's ideal and plan are permanency and reconciliation even when there is such a breach; moreover, Jesus' attitude regarding the permanent nature of the marital relationship explains why the number of grounds for divorce and remarriage in the NT is extremely small and why one must be overly cautious in any effort to add to the list. With this being said, a reading of Mark 10:9 as teaching the "indissolubility" of the marriage bond for which no exceptions to divorce and remarriage exist, is too strict, given the covenantal nature of the marriage union. Regarding Mark 10:9, Jesus recognizes that marriage is *ontologically dissoluble*, i.e. that even in the eyes of God, it can be broken or, in Jesus' words, "be separated." Keener perceptively observes, "There is little point in forbidding a separation that *cannot occur* in any case. Jesus forbids it because it *can* but *should not occur*" (*Remarriage*, p. 107). This being said, an affirmative answer to question 1, as has

been proposed, is a prerequisite for maintaining any legitimate basis for divorce and remarriage.

2. ***Are there any biblical exceptions or grounds for divorce and remarriage?*** The response here in some measure is based on the answer to the previous question, because if the marital union is not “dissoluble,” then arguably there would be no basis on which the union could ever be separated (i.e. divorce) and if there were no ground for divorce, then remarriage also would not be a biblical option (if such were the case, we would be forced to explain away the exception clauses in Matthew’s texts as being culturally conditioned and as uniquely targeting only Jews at that time). As we noted above, however, the marital covenant *could be broken* and with this in mind, there appear to be *only two clear and legitimate grounds* on which a believer can divorce and remarry: (1) when one party to the marriage has committed sexual immorality and remains unrepentant (see “Introductory Comments” above, especially principle no. 3); and (2) when an unbelieving spouse chooses to break the marriage covenant through divorce.
3. ***Are there additional grounds for divorce and remarriage other than “sexual immorality” and the desertion by an unbelieving spouse?*** This is a difficult question, and I am less than confident in providing a definitive answer, given that little guidance is provided in the NT. If there is an additional basis for divorce and remarriage, it would have to be grounded in some act on the part of one of the spouses against the other, “obedient or innocent spouse” that, like the other bases cited in the NT, would constitute a *material breach* of the marriage covenant of faithfulness. This is the principle that is present in the other explicit exceptions to Jesus’ absolute prohibition against divorce and remarriage. Stated differently, with respect to the biblical bases for divorce and remarriage, the obedient or innocent partner in the marriage is not free to break up the marriage but only to “accept that the unrepentant partner has irrevocably broken it” (*Id.* at p. 112). For this reason, one would *not be permitted* to divorce simply because there were *irreconcilable differences* in their relationship, regardless of how difficult or unhappy the circumstances might be – Paul’s admonition perhaps would be “get counseling, express forgiveness, and then be reconciled,” because that is what disciples, who are citizens of heaven, do.

*The one possible additional basis that comes to mind is some type of “physical abuse of a spouse” that constitutes a fundamental assault on the meaning of the marriage covenant – for an excellent discussion of this point, see C. Keener, *Remarriage*, at pp. 111-115 (he also discusses the sexual abuse of children, the withholding of sexual intimacy, and other difficult questions). Ultimately, these issues are extremely hard in terms of where to draw the line and Jesus likely did not intend to provide all the answers to such matters so much as to make us faithful to our marital bond. In any event, taking the step to divorce and/or remarry on the basis of circumstances not expressly provided in Scripture as legitimate reasons for doing so, should be considered carefully and only after prayer, a serious reading of God’s word, and counsel by pastoral leadership and other godly Christian friends.*

4. ***What if I was divorced or divorced and remarried prior to my salvation for reasons that don’t constitute a legitimate basis for such actions – where does that leave me spiritually?*** In these situations, 2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us that if a person is now “in Christ,” old things, including failed marriages, have passed away and all things have become new – in short, they would be free to remarry. If, however, a person becomes a Christian and is now married to an unbeliever, Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians 7:12-14 are applicable. He says that if the “unbelieving” spouse desires to stay married, then the Christian also must remain in the marriage.<sup>16</sup>
  
6. ***What if I was divorced or divorced and remarried after I became a Christian? Can I remarry?*** It depends. As we have discussed, the question would be whether the divorce was based on legitimate grounds – an express biblical basis or grounds derived from clear principles set forth in Scripture (see discussion above at question 3). The difficult and hard answer is that unless a biblically permitted basis exists for the divorce, the act of remarriage would constitute an act of adultery *against the former spouse* (cf. Mark 10:11-12). Having said this, if there are no legitimate grounds and a Christian goes through a divorce and

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<sup>16</sup> The word translated “new” in this verse is *kainos* which means something that is new in *quality*; it stands in contrast to the “old” which has become obsolete and thus should be replaced by what is new. In such a case, “the new is, as a rule, superior in kind to the old” (BDAG, p. 497; LN, p. 594 §58.71). Regarding spiritual matters, the writers of the New Testament frequently talk about the Christian life in terms of “newness” – everything from being given a new identity in Christ, participating in a new covenant and new community, eventually acquiring a new body, and ultimately living in a place called the new heaven and new earth.



remarriage, these sins, like any others, can still be forgiven through God's mercy and grace – no sin is beyond the scope of God's love and forgiveness. He forgives broken marriages and restores believers back into a vibrant relationship with himself and the Christian community (1 John 1:9).

7. ***What if I was divorced and remarried, as a Christian, for unbiblical reasons? Do I live in a state of continual adultery?*** The Bible simply does not address this question directly, but the following are reasons why I do not believe a “continual or perpetual” adultery interpretation is accurate. As noted above, the phrase “commits adultery” (present tense) in Mark 10:11-12 *does not require the sense of “ongoing”* (see Decker’s comment above regarding the meaning of this verb in verses 11-12 and why reading the present tense in a “perpetual” sense is improper). Rather, it is preferable to take the tense as an *instantaneous* present and that Jesus is simply making the point that to divorce and remarry, assuming no legitimate grounds exist, is an “act” of unfaithfulness to the other spouse and thus constitutes an “act” of adultery – this is all the text permits us to say (cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 517). Additionally, the pastoral implications of the “continued adultery” view would be daunting, to say the least, especially for those remarried years earlier and now raising children. While, the truth of any view cannot be determined based merely on how painful its demands are, the trauma of insisting that someone breach another covenant by divorcing the second spouse and possibly then leaving children seems inexplicable on its face. As discussed above in the response to question 5, God forgives *all sin* and his forgiveness extends to clean the slate for any sin that may have occurred due to an unbiblical divorce and remarriage. Once remarriage occurs, a new covenant exists, the obligations of which should be obeyed by each party as they seek to remain faithful to the covenant vows of that marital union.
8. ***Can a person serve as a leader in the church – pastor, elder, overseer, deacon, deaconess, or any other ministry leader – if they have been divorced or divorced and remarried?*** This question arises out of what Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6 where he addresses the qualifications of “elder” and “deacon.” In these texts, he says that they should be “the husband of one wife” (ESV; the phrase is literally, “a one woman man,” *mias gynaikos andra*). Some have taken this to mean that a pastor or senior leader in the church cannot have been divorced

or divorced and remarried. Yet, many recent studies of the phrase have persuasively shown that this expression is a way of saying, “faithful to one’s marriage.”<sup>17</sup> There are several reasons why I support this view: (1) the context of the requirements of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 focus on character traits (“faithfulness to one’s spouse”) rather than issues of “status,” i.e. divorced and remarried; this would be the only criterion in the entire list that would be “status-based” rather than “character-based”; (2) it is likely that the first criterion in the list, “above reproach,” sets the tone for the entire discussion of what constitutes an elder, namely, an elder possesses certain “characteristics or spiritual qualities” that render that person above reproach, one of which is “faithfulness to one’s spouse”; (3) had Paul meant “one wife for a lifetime,” he could have said, “having one wife only” which he surely knew how to do; moreover, if Paul meant “no divorced persons,” he could have said, “not divorced” (*mē apolelumenon*); he was capable of using this expression but he chose not to do so. Paul’s focus in this passage is on one who is a “one-woman kind of man,” i.e. faithful to his wife and exhibiting marital fidelity at the time he is considered for either elder or deacon.

The issue, therefore, is not whether a person has been divorced but whether the individual’s life and marriage *now exemplify* the type of maturity necessary for the role of a “leader” within the body. In short, *one is not disqualified from a position of pastor or senior leadership because they have been divorced or divorced and remarried.*

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Keener, . . . *And Marries Another*, ch. 7 (“Can Ministers Be Remarried? – 1 Timothy 3:2”); S. Page, “Marital Expectations of Church Leaders in the Pastoral Epistles,” *JSNT* 50 (1993):105-20; Jay E. Smith, “Can Fallen Leaders Be Restored to Leadership?” *BibSac* 151 (1994):455-80 – Smith concludes that the Pastoral Epistles’ leadership qualifications are concerned with current, not the past, spiritual qualities of a leader. Some scholars have taken a different approach, arguing that the focus of the phrase may have been on the issue of “polygamy”; there is little, however, to suggest that this was a problem either in the Greco-Roman world or within Judaism at the time Paul wrote 1 Timothy (yet, see *Justin Martyr Dialogue with Trypho*, from which some attempt to draw such an inference). Even if this had been the meaning of the phrase, “husband of one wife,” such an interpretation would preclude any notion that Paul was advocating a “no divorce and remarriage” qualification for leadership.

## A CONCLUDING REMARK

As we contemplate and wrestle with these issues, let us heed the warning of John Stott:<sup>18</sup>

“[Divorce was] a divine concession to human weakness. No Christian should aggressively seek the dissolution of his or her marriage bond. Some of the very best things God has to teach His children are learned while working through marital difficulties. Endless stories could be told of how God honored the perseverance of abused and ignored partners as they refused to give up. But in certain extreme cases, against the wishes and efforts of the committed mate, the marriage bond is destroyed beyond any human ability to restore it. Scripture teaches that God’s *divine concession to human weakness* is occasionally justified, allowing the Christian divorced person the right and freedom to remarry in the Lord. . . . [Yet], unless we consciously guard against it, when we experience marital difficulties, we’ll begin to search for a way *out* instead of a way *through*. . . . I warn all of us against such thought and actions. To carry out that carnal procedure is to short-circuit the better plan God has arranged for His people and, worse than that, is to twist the glorious grace of God into a guilt relieving excuse for giving us what we have devised instead of accepting what He has designed. Where God permits divorce and remarriage, humbly let us accept it without fear or guilt. Let us not call “unclean” what He now calls clean. But neither let us put words in His mouth and make Him say what He, in fact, has not said. No matter how miserable we may be. There is something much worse than living with a mate in disharmony. It’s living with God in disobedience.”

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<sup>18</sup> *Christian Counter Culture*, p. 95.

