

Matthew 5:31-32: The Kingdom Law for Marriage and Divorce

Attention

- 1) It wasn't long ago that divorce in our society was fairly unusual and generally thought of as shameful.
 - a. Times have changed; now it is uncommon not to find divorced persons in churches much less in society.
 - b. The problem of divorce is an ancient one; since the earliest written revelation, the Lord has dealt with it.
- 2) Jesus addressed the law of His kingdom on divorce and remarriage in His sermon on the mount. **Mt. 5:31-32**

I. Analyzing the Passage

A. *“Furthermore, it has been said...”*

- i. Two Old Testament passages are under consideration: Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and Exodus 20:14.
 - a) Jesus associated the subject of DIVORCE with the subject of ADULTERY.
 - b) The two are clearly connected in His law, but are only rarely so in the law and practice of men.
- ii. The divorce law given through Moses was intended to regulate and restrain divorce among the Jews.
 - a) The Mosaic law did not assign ADULTERY as either a CAUSE or CONSEQUENCE of DIVORCE.
 - b) Thus Jesus' coupling of these ideas in this sermon is characteristic of NT rather than OT teaching.

B. *“But I say to you...”*

- i. This sermon is an example of how Jesus taught as He went “preaching the gospel of the kingdom.” **4:23**
 - a) Pharisaic perversions are mentioned (5:20; 6:2, 5, 16), but that is not the emphasis of Jesus' lesson.
 - b) Jesus is teaching men about His kingdom, not merely correcting interpretation of the OT law.
- ii. A study of this and related passages indicates Jesus' marriage law is:
 - a) In CONTRAST to the law given through Moses **19:7-9**
 - b) In HARMONY with God's original intent for marriage **19:4-6**
 - c) An EXPANSION of God's previous revelation concerning marriage and divorce **Ge. 2:24; Ma. 2:16**

C. *“whoever...”*

- i. Jesus' marriage law is for all men, not a specific race, nation, or class.
 - a) Some have sought to limit Jesus' teaching in the gospels to the Old Covenant.
 - b) Others have sought to limit application of Jesus' teaching to Christians.
- ii. But Jesus' law is for all men; He taught in anticipation of the cross and the New Covenant. **Jn. 12:48**
 - a) Jesus criticized the adulterous marital practices of a non-Jew during His ministry. (cf. Jn. 4:17-18)
 - b) Clearly Jesus' words are not to be discarded at the cross or applied only to Christians.

D. *“divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality...”*

- i. Every remarriage after divorce is adultery except one: the one who put away his spouse for fornication.
 - a) No exception is made for abuse, neglect, financial irresponsibility, spiritual disorder, or addiction.
 - b) These reasons are given by men to justify divorce, but they do not justify it before God.
- ii. Jesus' language admits only one exception to the general rule forbidding divorce and remarriage.
 - a) God hates divorce, so we should not expect to find an easy way for marriage to be dissolved.
 - b) There is no divorce without sin and only one cause for divorce that frees one party from guilt of sin.

E. *“causes her to commit adultery...”*

- i. This is a woman who was put away without scriptural cause, yet she is not permitted to marry another.
 - a) She may be innocent and her husband a cruel heathen who wants out of the marriage.
 - b) Nevertheless, any subsequent marriage on her part is considered adultery by the Lord.
- ii. A divorced person cannot scripturally marry another unless he/she put his/her spouse away for adultery.
 - a) It does not matter whether the individual was put away or did the putting away without cause. **19:9**
 - b) There is no Bible authority for a divorced person to marry another under any other circumstances.

F. *“and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.”*

- i. If a divorced person remarries, they are guilty of adultery, and so too is their partner in that adultery.
 - a) A person who is put away, whether innocent or not, has no authority to remarry.
 - b) Even if put away unlawfully and the former spouse remarries, any remarriage is adultery. **Lk. 16:18**
- ii. Both parties in a marriage are guilty of adultery if either partner is without divine authority to marry.
 - a) If two people are guilty of adultery, may one of them divorce the other and scripturally remarry?
 - b) Though two may be in adultery and not “bound” by God, it does not free them for another marriage.

II. Applying the Principles

A. Who Has Scriptural Authorization to Marry?

I. ONE WHO HAS NEVER BEEN MARRIED.

- a) Marriage was created to bless man; without it Adam was considered incomplete. **Ge. 2:18, 24**
 - Those who have never been married are free to do so, though they should choose a mate wisely.
 - Circumstances may make marriage difficult sometimes, but it is never sinful to do so. **1Co. 7:28**
- b) While there are some advantages to celibacy, it is only for those who are able to accept it. **1Co. 7:7-9**
 - Some are obligated to remain celibate by physical or spiritual necessity. **19:10-12; 1Co. 7:10-11**
 - The general rule, however, is for men and women to marry and in their marriage to glorify God.

II. ONE WHOSE SPOUSE HAS DIED.

- a) Scripture plainly authorizes a widow or widower to marry again. **1Co. 7:39; Ro. 7:2-3; 1Ti. 5:14**
 - Marital obligations to your spouse only last as long as he/she is alive.
 - The widow/widower has the same right to marry as a person who has never been married.
- b) Would a divorced person whose former spouse died have the same right to marry again?
 - The issue is not their obligation to any former spouse but their obligation under the law of God.
 - By what authority may a divorced person who did not divorce for fornication marry another?
- c) The issue in this case is not the presence or absence of any “bond” associated with marriage.
 - Clearly there is a spiritual bond associated with the legal union of marriage. **19:6**
 - When two people divorce without scriptural cause, that covenant obligation still exists. **Ro. 7:2-3**
- d) Nevertheless, the issue post-divorce in terms of remarriage is not the bond but the law. (5:32; 19:9)
 - One who divorces his spouse for fornication is no longer bound to her, nor apparently she to him.
 - But the put away person, though not bound to the former spouse, can't scripturally marry another.
 - Therefore the death of a former spouse changes nothing; he/she still is not authorized to marry.
- e) No party to divorce can marry another unless he/she divorced the spouse for adultery. **5:32; 19:9**

III. ONE WHO HAS PUT HIS/HER SPOUSE AWAY FOR FORNICATION.

- a) The exception in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 permits remarriage to such a person. **5:32; 19:9**
 - *Mark* and *Luke* do not record this exception, but it is not relevant to the main point in those texts.
 - In *Matthew* Jesus is asked specifically about the lawful reasons for divorce. **19:3; cf. Mk. 10:2**
- b) In these passages there is a difference between the one who puts away and the one who is put away.
 - One performs the action whereas the other receives the action.
 - Only the one who performs the action (for the lawful cause) is permitted to remarry by the Lord.

B. Who Has Scriptural Authorization to Divorce?

I. ONE WHOSE MATE IS GUILTY OF ADULTERY.

- a) Our society has made it very easy to get a divorce so long as both parties consent to it.
 - Thus you no longer have one divorcing the other from a legal standpoint – both are divorced.
 - This makes it easy for one involved in divorce to claim grounds without having to establish it.
- b) Perhaps the divorce paper does not have to read “for adultery,” but we must be cautious if it doesn't.
 - If one has a lawful reason for divorce, why not sue for divorce on that basis?
 - Why leave in question something so serious and potentially damning to the soul?
- c) Churches are not courts or investigators, but we have a duty to ask questions and expect answers.
 - We cannot accept into fellowship those who are living in adultery. (cf. 1Co. 5:11)
 - Jesus permitted one to divorce their spouse for fornication, not for the mere suspicion of it.

II. ONE WHO IS IN AN UNSCRIPTURAL MARRIAGE.

- a) God's law against divorce does not allow one to stay in an unscriptural relationship. **Mk. 6:17-18**
 - Divorce is not lawful for those whom God has joined together. **19:6**
 - Those who marry without divine authority are married but living in adultery. (5:32; 19:9)
- b) Adultery can be forgiven, but if one remains in an adulterous marriage, their sin continues as well.
 - I can be forgiven for stealing a car, but I cannot keep that car after I repent.
 - Repentance does not make something lawful and holy that God condemned as sinful and unholy.

Action

- 1) There are aspects of this issue I misunderstood and taught incorrectly, at least privately, for several years.
- 2) These matters must be resolved by appealing to what is written. The question is one of divine authority.