

# MAY A SPOUSE SCRIPTURALLY DIVORCE HIS/HER MATE FOR A CAUSE OTHER THAN FORNICATION?

*Matthew 19:3-12*

## I. Introduction

- A. I am very thankful to Jim for all the work he does to put these opportunities together.
- B. These sorts of discussions need to be had on this and many other subjects and Jim has been such a good host of these conferences and I know I have gained much from them.
- C. I feel considerably inadequate to be speaking to this audience and surrounded by significantly more capable speakers. But Jim has wisely set this lecture at the beginning, giving ample opportunity for those capable speakers to clean up any potential messes that I leave up here on the floor.
- D. Now let's dive into our subject at hand.

## II. The Premise Firmly Stated

- A. We are beginning with a simple premise and a somewhat less simple rebuttal of that premise.
- B. The premise that I will strive to defend is that God allows only one cause for divorce among men and women today (Matt. 19:3-12).
- C. To go one step further, I would say that before we even get to the exception, we should firmly state the rule - God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16; Matt. 19:3-9).
  - 1. This is an important point.
  - 2. The question is not about remarriage but about divorce.
  - 3. They answer to the question of divorcing for any cause is a resounding no.
- D. In his efforts to rebut this simple premise, I think one brother stated it quite well: "[He] does not believe that one can divorce his mate for any reason except fornication. Should a divorce occur for any other reason, the one initiating that divorce is guilty of sin, regardless of how abhorrent that mate's conduct might be" (Bible Causes of Divorce and the Role of Government in Divorce - pg. 22).
  - 1. On another page, the same brother calls it the "fornication is the only cause for divorce position." (*Ibid* pg. 31).
  - 2. I believe both of those description to be pretty accurate of what I believe.
- E. The rebuttal premise goes something like this: "The scriptures allow for situations where one might have to divorce his mate in order to live for Christ." (*Ibid* pg. 21)
  - 1. Our goal here is not to single out one brother or even several brothers to bash.
  - 2. But our goal is to address a particular idea that has been and is being taught.
  - 3. I want to be fair in presenting those ideas and so we can do no better than use their own words where they are available.

## III. Divorcing for the Lord?

- A. "If one must leave his marriage in order to be faithful to Christ, he has the God-given right and obligation to do so." - *Ibid.* pg. 23
1. The question arises, what sort of circumstance would require a Christian to leave their spouse in order to be faithful to Christ.
  2. I can think of a circumstance but I don't believe it is the one these brethren have in mind.
- B. There are two basic foundations of the idea that we can scripturally divorce for causes other than adultery:
1. I Corinthians 7:10-15 is used to suggest that there is an additional exception.
  2. Passages such as Matt. 10:34-38, 19:28-29, Lk. 14:26, and 18:29-30 are added to show the kind of circumstances in which such a divorce might be necessary.
  3. One brother wrote, "The basic law is that one is not to leave his spouse whether he is married to a believer or unbeliever. However, the *exception* to that basic law is that God comes before a wife or husband *just like* any other relationship. Any departure *must be* 'for the kingdom of God's sake.'" *Ibid.* pg. 29
- C. Let us first consider these passages that speak of forsaking all others for the sake of Christ.
- D. In Luke 14:26, the Lord commands hatred of various family members. Are we to understand that this is literal and we must each of us hate our family members?
1. Consider the balance of our Lord on this very topic.
  2. He puts the Father above first and yet continues to submit to the authority of his parents (Lk. 2:48-51).
  3. He puts the relationship with his family in perspective and yet continues to fulfill his responsibility to honor his mother at the most difficult time (Mk. 3:31-35; Jn. 19:26-27).
  4. It is the very premise of a wife showing honor to an ungodly man that Peter says will win him over (1 Pet. 3:1-2).
- E. This argument is all too similar to what the Pharisees had done with God's laws concerning family (Matt. 15:3-6).
- F. But what sorts of situations would mean you *must* leave your spouse for the kingdom:
1. From a published outline found at <http://www.plainbibleteaching.com/pdf/willisdivorce.pdf>:
    - a) A person may have to divorce his mate to break an unscriptural marriage (Matt. 19:9). In this case, one is divorcing for the kingdom of heaven's sake.
      - *I agree. But this marriage was not legitimate in God's eyes to begin with (sdr)*
    - b) A person may have to leave his mate to become or remain a Christian (Luke 18:29-30; 1 Cor. 7: 15; Matt. 10:34-48; Luke 14:26). In this case, one is divorcing for the kingdom of heaven's sake.
    - c) A person may be in a marriage relationship in which his mate runs up bills which he has no intention of paying. In this case, one's responsibility to God to pay one's bills would demand that he not be supportive of his mate's ungodly behavior (Rom. 13:8).
    - d) A mate may be abusive to the children (beating). A person has a responsibility to bring up his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:1-4). To fulfill that responsibility, may require him to leave his mate to provide for the children.

- e) There are some cases in which one must leave to have physical and emotional health. One's obligation to serve God would require him to preserve his physical and emotional well being.
- f) Sometimes a couple becomes so alienated from each other, the hostilities have reached such a point, that they must live apart.
  - (1) Cf. Prov. 21:9; 25:24; 1 Cor. 7:15-16.
  - (2) We cannot force them to stay together.
  - (3) The Scriptures do not teach a person that he must become a doormat to his partner to keep the marriage together. A person who becomes another's doormat will do more to destroy his mate's love and respect for him than about anything else he can do. A person has to maintain his own self-esteem to have proper Bible love. One is to love his neighbor "as himself" and the husband is to love his wife "as his own body" (Matt. 22:39; Eph. 5:33).
- 2. Was Jesus unaware of these sorts of problems when he answered in Matthew 19?
- 3. Are abusive husbands a modern invention?
- 4. We can and should talk about what the best steps are to take in each of these circumstances but we must keep that discussion within the boundaries of the words of Christ.
  - a) Elderships need to be willing to get involved in these situations.
  - b) The church needs to offer protection to women just like they would their own family.
  - c) The law may need to be involved.
  - d) But do you see how quickly we move from the extreme of a wife and children being beaten to someone running up bills and low self-esteem?
  - e) This is much like the arguments that are used to justify abortion - rape and incest are horrible things but the answer isn't to commit murder.
- G. This argument is founded on the idea that circumstances are such that a spouse *must* divorce to maintain faithfulness to God. Yet God has not said that a divorce *must* take place even in the case of the one exception (Matt. 19:9; Hosea 1-3).

#### **IV. "But If She Does Leave"**

- A. Start with the affirmative instruction (1 Cor. 7:10-11).
  - 1. "The wife should not leave her husband."
  - 2. "The husband should not divorce his wife."
- B. Between these two statements we have a message about what the wife should do if she hasn't followed this instruction.
  - 1. God often tells us what to do if we don't follow His instructions (Deut. 22:28-29).
  - 2. Does this give us permission to ignore the instruction previously given?
- C. But what if a spouse won't consent to stay?
  - 1. One brother has this to say, "Paul says that if the unbeliever is content to dwell with the believer, the Christian is not to leave. *That implies* that if the unbeliever is not content to dwell with the Christian, then the Christian *can* leave. (It may be that, though not agreeing on an amiable relationship with the believer, the unbeliever decides to stay in the house to try to destroy the Christian's faith, or generally make things miserable for the believer.) If the believer departs *at that*

point verse 11 comes into effect. That means she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to the husband.” (*Gospel Anchor*, February 1993)

2. This requires a few leaps of logic:
  - a) You first have to define “consents to dwell” as “consents to dwell amiably.”
  - b) Then from there, you must infer permission from v. 11.
  - c) The bottom line here is, if they stay, you stay. If they go, well there is nothing you can do about that.
- D. “But isn’t that the same as saying it’s ok to divorce so long as you don’t remarry?”
  1. No, it certainly is not the same (see above).
  2. If someone murders their spouse, do they have a right to remarry?
  3. What we are saying is that sin can be repented of, but it is still sin.
- E. The question has been raised:

“[He] has no doubt attended congregations in which there were those who had divorced for a cause other than fornication and had never remarried (as 1 Cor 7:10-11 describes). I would ask [him], ‘Did you require them to repent of their sin of divorcing for a cause other than fornication?’ If so, did you ask them to bring the fruit of their repentance by being reconciled to their mate?” (*Bible Causes of Divorce and the Role of Government in Divorce* - pg. 30)

  1. YES! We should always seek repentance from those who have sinned.
  2. YES! Repentance does involve seeking reconciliation.
  3. YES! If one spouse seeks to reconcile and the other refuses such efforts they ARE in sin and refusing to repent.
  4. If we have been inconsistent in applying the truth to these circumstances, that does not change the truth.

## **V. Conclusion**

- A. The question here has nothing whatever to do with whether or not we recognize the hardship of people who are married to ungodly spouses.
- B. Jesus recognized that hardship more than anyone in this room and had the power to release such from their miserable circumstances. He did not do so. Neither can we.
- C. The drift on this subject is following right along with the drift of the world around us.
  1. “No divorce, except for adultery, shall be regarded by the Church as lawful; and no Minister shall solemnize marriage in any case where there is a divorced wife or husband living; but this rule shall not be applied to the innocent party to a divorce for the cause of adultery, nor to divorced parties seeking to be reunited in marriage.” (*The Doctrines And Discipline Of The Methodist Episcopal Church – 1896*)
  2. “The Ministers of our Church shall be prohibited from solemnizing the rites of matrimony between divorced persons, except in case of innocent parties who have been divorced for the one scriptural cause.” (*The Doctrines And Discipline Of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South – 1914*)
  3. “No Minister shall solemnize the marriage of a divorced person whose wife or husband is living and unmarried; but this rule shall not apply (1) To the innocent person when it is clearly established by competent testimony that the true cause for divorce was adultery or other vicious conditions which through mental or physical cruelty or physical peril invalidated the marriage vow, nor (2) To the

divorced persons seeking to be reunited in marriage.” - (The Doctrines And Discipline Of The Methodist Church – 1940)

4. “In view of the seriousness with which the Scriptures and the Church regard divorce, a minister may solemnize the marriage of a divorced person only when he has satisfied himself by careful counseling that (a) The divorced person is sufficiently aware of the factors leading to the failure of the previous marriage, (b) The divorced person is sincerely preparing to make the proposed marriage truly Christian, and (c) Sufficient time has elapsed for adequate preparation and counseling.” (The Doctrines And Discipline Of The Methodist Church – 1960)
  5. “Where marriage partners, even after thoughtful consideration and counsel, are estranged beyond reconciliation, we recognize divorce as regrettable but recognize the right of divorced persons to remarry ... We encourage an active, accepting and enabling commitment of the Church and our society to minister to the members of divorced families.” (The Discipline Of The United Methodist Church – 1984)
- D. Some of our brethren have only drifted more slowly than the religious world around us.