

GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE

Matthew 5:31 (NKJV)

31 “Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’

It sounds strange to us but in the Jewish system in the OT it was the men who did the divorcing. As we move into the NT we find that either the man or the woman might initiate a divorce as seen in 1 Cor. 7. But in the OT it was the men that initiated the divorce. And when they did so they did it on the basis of Deut. 24:1-4.

Deuteronomy 24:1–4 (NKJV)

1 “When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house,

2 when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man’s wife,

3 if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife,

4 then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.

In the days of Christ there were two schools of thought regarding the grounds for divorce and remarriage based on Deut. 24. The “**uncleanness**” (sometimes translated as “**something indecent**”) in view had to be something short of full-blown adultery because that required the death penalty as seen in Deut. 22:22. Perhaps the husband accused her of being flirtatious or immodest or something like that which stopped short of actual adultery. It remains a mystery as to exactly what this was as it is not specifically clarified.

Footnote: Interestingly Jesus referred to the certificate of divorce in Matt. 19 and said Moses because of the hardness of their hearts permitted it. So clearly what they demanded as “grounds for divorce” was not in keeping with God’s intention (see Matt. 19:7-9).

And note this: While it is true that looking with lust on a woman is the equivalent of adultery in the heart as seen in verse 28; yet that is still

distinct from the actual act which alone is grounds for divorce as brought out by Jesus in verse 32. “Uncleanness” which comes short of actual adultery is not grounds for divorce as Jesus goes on to emphasize both here in verse 32 and also in chapter 19.

“Jesus is not saying that lustful desires are identical to lustful deeds, and therefore a person might just as well go ahead and commit adultery [or that on that basis they have grounds for divorce]. The desire and the deed are not identical, but spiritually speaking, they are equivalent.” – **Warren Wiersbe**

God ALONE is the Judge of the heart – what we hold people accountable for are actual actions. We are not the “thought patrol”. That is God’s domain. Jesus here clarifies that divorce before God is justified on the basis of actual sexual immorality alone.

The liberal school of thought which followed Rabbi Hillel held that a man could divorce his wife for almost any reason. For example, if she burned his food, or if she was not as pretty as she use to be – she could be divorced. If the man wanted out of the marriage all he had to do is write up a **“certificate of divorce”** for some level of **“indecentcy”** and move on.

The other school of thought was more conservative, and it followed Rabbi Shammai which said that the only grounds for divorce was adultery. Both schools of thought were based on their respective interpretations of Deut. 24 but Jesus in this case agreed with the conservative school of thought.

Matthew 5:32 (NKJV)

32 But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.

Understand what Jesus was saying. He was saying that before God there are no grounds for divorce other than the grounds of sexual immorality. That’s it! We know from 1 Cor. 7:10-11 that the Lord gave instruction regarding the marriage of two believers. He didn’t address a mixed marriage in which one is a believer, and one is an unbeliever – which Paul then went on to address. Jesus was addressing the marriage of two believers and said that there is no out. There is no biblical grounds for divorce other than immorality (cf. Matt. 19:1-9; Mk. 10:2-12; Lk. 16:18). Paul affirmed this in 1 Cor. 7:10-11.

1 Corinthians 7:10–11 (NKJV)

10 Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband.

11 But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife.

God does not allow two believers to get divorced and even if they do divorce (which is not God's ideal will) then they can either live single or be reconciled. Biblically, they have no other options. Before God, for two believer's marriage is "till death do us part". You are locked in.

Now Paul does go on in 1 Cor. 7:12-15 to address a mixed marriage of a believer and an unbeliever and says if the unbeliever leaves the marriage then the believer is not under bondage. And I would agree with the view that says when the Bible allows for divorce biblically then it also allows for remarriage.

One other thing. You can't change the past. When you get saved you go from there. If anyone is in Christ "old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." (2 Cor. 5:17). You go from where you are as Paul indicates in 1 Cor. 7:7-9.

But again, Christ in the gospels is addressing the marriage of two believers in the covenant community. He says divorce for any reason other than sexual immorality is not permitted.

The Greek word translated here as "**sexual immorality**" is the word "**porneia**" from which we get our English word "**pornography**". This is a broad word which can refer to any form of sexual immorality that is a violation of the marriage covenant.

In the case of sexual immorality divorce and remarriage is permitted, but not commanded. The best-case scenario is that there would be repentance and forgiveness and that the marriage could be saved. But still, sexual immorality is grounds divorce as so stated by Christ.

But if a man would divorce his wife anyway without the grounds of sexual immorality then he would be accountable for causing her to commit adultery. Note that up to this point she is not guilty of adultery – that only happens after she is forced out by the husband and becomes sexually involved with another man.

The thought is that the woman is forced out - and remember in this culture she really had little or no recourse. Even to survive she would be pressured to find a man to take care of her which inevitably would probably result in adultery. That seems to be the sense of what Jesus is saying.

In this case the man is liable for putting her into this position that results in her committing adultery. Note God still saw them as married in His eyes and therefore this is called adultery. But because of the action of the man in divorcing his wife without biblical cause he is shown to be the one essentially accountable. He forced this issue. He is the cause for her committing adultery.

And in this case Jesus says, “***and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.***” Again, this is a situation where an unbiblical divorce took place. There was no biblical grounds. In God’s eyes they are still married and to marry this woman is to commit adultery.

“This points out that [a] certificate of divorce does not necessarily end the marriage, but improper sexual conduct does justify the dissolution of the union.” – ***Ed Glasscock***

Christ made it very strong. For two believers there is no way out of the marriage – other than the grounds of immorality. Kingdom ethics sets a very high standard and the marriage bond in God’s eyes is unbreakable for two believers apart from sexual unfaithfulness.

If we are truly Christ’s disciples and kingdom citizens, the expectation is that we will maintain a high view - a biblical view of sexual purity and covenant marriage as ordained by God.

The Bible still says...

Hebrews 13:4 (NKJV)

4 Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.