

What does Jesus teach about Divorce and Remarriage?

A Biblical exegesis of Matthew 19:3-9

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Abstract

The high divorce rate in South Africa today is having a devastating effect on society in general, and on the Church in particular. In view of this serious situation and the great diversity in contemporary views regarding the divorce and remarriage, the question arises: What does Jesus teach about Divorce and Remarriage? In this paper an attempt is made to answer this question by means of a Biblical exegesis of Matthew 19:3-9, taking the context of Jesus' teachings into consideration, such as the positions of the Jewish schools of Shammai and Hillel regarding the issue of divorce.

*Special attention is given to the following aspects of Jesus' teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage: (1) Jesus' reference to Genesis 2:24 as God's original intention for marriage; (2) An analysis of the Greek words used by Jesus in Matthew 19:9 regarding the grounds for divorce: *porneia* (sexual immorality) and the consequences of divorce, when remarriage is involved: *moichao* (adultery); (3) Jesus' usage of the exception clause, by which He allows divorce under special circumstances, as a concession, because of the hardness of their hearts; and (4) Jesus teaches that, if either of the two parties were to remarry after divorce, it would be considered as adultery.*

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2. Introduction

The high rate of divorce is an alarming phenomenon in today's society, especially amongst the South African population, and especially in view of its devastating effect upon the family and the moral fibre of our communities.

In their weekly newsletter posted on the 8 September 2005, Stats SA reveals the following alarming statistics on marriage and divorce for 2002:

There was a total number of 177 202 marriages registered in 2002 compared to the total of 134 581 in 2001. For divorces there was a total of 31 370 in 2002 compared to 34 045 in 2001 (StatsOnline 2005).

Although there was a recorded drop in divorces between 2001 and 2002, the divorce figures were still alarming. For example, one could consider these statistics from another perspective, namely, that 31 370 dysfunctional homes were formed through divorce in 2002.

With these statistics in mind, the question arises: What are the *three* main contemporary views amongst Protestant Churches regarding divorce and remarriage?

The *first* view can be summarised as: *No divorce, no remarriage*. According to this view, there are no legitimate grounds for divorce and only death dissolves the marriage bond. Hence, in the event of a person getting divorced, it would have the following consequences: In God's eyes a divorced person is still married to the former spouse. Thus remarriage following divorce for any reason constitutes adultery. The only option for a divorced person is to be reconciled or to remain single (PCA Digest 1992:24).

The *second* position is not as rigid as the first and can be stated as: *Strictly limited grounds for divorce and remarriage*. In terms of this view the Bible neither condones nor commands divorce, but rather permits and regulates divorce due to sin. More specifically, a person is permitted to divorce only for adultery and separation of an unbelieving spouse (PCA Digest 1992:25).

The *third* view is the most lenient position and can be described as: *Broader grounds for divorce and remarriage*. According to this view, the two major Scriptures dealing with divorce, Matthew 19 and I Corinthians 7 should be interpreted with more latitude (PCA Digest 1992:25). For example, David Atkinson argues that other sins, which are just as serious and persistent in breaking the marriage covenant as fornication, should also be grounds for divorce (Atkinson 1979:134ff).

It should be noted that the above-mentioned three views differ from the liberal Protestant view of "no fault" divorce, or divorce on merely humanistic grounds such as "incompatibility."

In view of the high rate of divorce today and the great diversity in contemporary views regarding the divorce and remarriage, the question arises: What does

Jesus teach about Divorce and Remarriage? In this paper an attempt will be made to answer this question by means of a Biblical exegesis of Matthew 19:3-9, taking the context of Jesus' teachings into consideration.

2. The Pharisees' first question and the Lord's response

(Matthew 19:3-6)

Matthew 19:1-2 explains how Jesus left Galilee to begin His Perea ministry. Verse 2 describes very briefly a journey from Galilee into the district of Judaea beyond Jordan, which must have taken a considerable time. Jesus' fateful journey into Jerusalem was in close proximity to the time of His death. The next time He would return to Galilee would be at His resurrection (Matt 28:16). At this time Jesus was constantly re-educating His disciples and preparing them for what was to come (cf. France 1994:929).

2.1 The Pharisees' first question (Matthew 19:3)

As soon as Jesus arrives at His destination, the Pharisees confront Him. Seeking to trap Him, they pose the following controversial question to Him: *Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?* (Matt 19:3, NIV).

The question posed by the Pharisees stems from the Jewish tradition that was still accepted in those days. In Jewish law a man had the right to "divorce his wife" by a simple declaration; there was no trial and no appeal (cf. France 1994:929). It could, therefore, be deduced that the intention of this question was based on the Pharisees' awareness of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which was still a commonly practised principle in those days.

According to Mounce (1991:181), "the Pharisees permitted divorce, but differed on the appropriate terms." For example, the term *something indecent* - appearing in Deuteronomy 24:1 - that was given as grounds for divorce was a highly debated issue. Some teachers restricted *something indecent* to adultery or other gross sexual behaviour. However, in common practice, supported by some rabbis, divorce was virtually a matter of the husband's whim, *for any and every reason* (cf. France 1994:929).

It is clear that, by posing the question as to whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife *for just any reason*, the Pharisees were attempting to trap Jesus and by this they were trying to force Him into taking sides. Was Jesus going to be too lax or too strict in His views on divorce?

During the New Testament period there were two Jewish schools of thought (Shammai and Hillel) that were in opposition to one another. So when the question was asked, it came in the form of a test. Clark (2004:265) conveys this position of the schools of Shammai and Hillel regarding the issue of divorce:

The school of Shammai maintained that a man could not legally put away his wife, except for whoredom ...The school of Hillel taught that a man might put away his wife for a multitude of other

causes, and when she did not find grace in his sight, i.e. when he saw any other woman that pleased him better.

It is clear that the Pharisees were enticing Jesus into taking sides and having preference for one or other of the two Jewish schools of thought, but Jesus was alert to their crafty schemes. The question here was, would Jesus oppose the liberal view of the Hillel or adopt the conservative view of the Shammai? By opposing the liberal view of Hillel, Jesus would be condemning the marriage of Herod Antipas, thus endangering His own life. This was precisely what the Pharisees wanted (cf. Laney 1990:32).

2.2 The Lord's response: God's original plan for Marriage

(Matthew 19:4-6)

Jesus responds to the Pharisees' first question as follows:

Haven't you read," He replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate (Matt 19:4-6, NIV).

Jesus handled the first question posed by the Pharisees in the same manner as He dealt with the question that was raised in Matthew 5:31-32. Rather than entering this debate, Jesus again declared that divorce, for whatever reason, was incompatible with God's purpose for marriage (cf. France 1994:929).

Jesus (v. 4) points to the original ordinance of the covenant agreement of marriage found in Genesis 2:24. Jesus places Genesis 2:24 above Deuteronomy 24:1-4, because He knew that the passage in Deuteronomy was not intended as a *command*, but given as *permission*, "*because your hearts were hard.*" Jesus was saying in a non-direct way that the divorce regulations were a concession in order to deal with the result of sin. This permission was not to be regarded as an expression of the way God intended things to be (cf. France 1994:929).

Laney (1990:32) describes Jesus' response to the Pharisees' first question as follows: "Jesus rejects both the liberal and conservative views on divorce that were held by the rabbis of His day." Jesus' reply also shows that He regarded marriage to be permanent as God intended. Jesus directs their attention to God's original plan for marriage, as revealed in Genesis 2:24. This text is quoted twice: in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. It is also quoted in the book of Ephesians (Eph 5:22-33). Laney (1990:32) points out that, by quoting from Genesis 2:24, Jesus is making three important statements regarding God's intention for marriage:

2. He appeals to the original plan for marriage found in Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. More specifically, He appeals to the fact that God made them

male and female. The female was physically taken from the man and through this act, they became one.

3. Genesis 2:24 shows that in a marriage two people actually become united together in a *one-flesh* relationship.
4. Jesus clearly points out that God is the One that joins the couple together in marriage. He is present at the ceremony and is the third Person sealing His original intent. For this reason Jesus said to the Pharisees, "*Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate*" (Matt 19:6, NIV). In other words, He was saying, "Stop severing marriage unions which God has permanently bound together."

Laney (1990:33) provides further insight into the teaching found in Genesis 2:24, when he divides the passage into the following three sections, each of which contains a key element that is essential to marriage:

2. A public act of *leaving* one's family with a view to establishing a new home;
3. A permanent bond, *cleaving* or being permanently bound in a partnership as husband and wife; and
4. A physical embrace, *becoming one flesh* physically through a sexual union.

Jesus highlights God's original plan for marriage by stressing the permanence and priority of marriage (v 5) (Gen 2: 24). As a permanent institution, marriage should be seen as an exclusive and intimate union between a man and a woman that is established through a covenant of *leaving, cleaving* and *becoming one flesh*. Through the act of marriage, therefore, a man and a woman form a new family unit, which God sees as a pure and holy union that is similar to that eternal union between Jesus Christ and His Church (cf. Eldredge 2002:15).

When considering the permanence of marriage one should consider the following:

2. The marriage bond is sacred in God's eyes and this is why He officiates at the event. God joins the male and the female, so that the two become an entire man. If, therefore, a man divorces his wife, something is torn from Him, as if it were *the half of himself* (cf. Calvin 2004:264).
3. Marriage is a lifetime commitment; annulments are then to be viewed as unscriptural. Once the marriage covenant has been confirmed through the exchanging of vows, man cannot annul it (cf. Eldredge 2002:17).

In Malachi 2:14 (NIV) God indicates the seriousness of breaking the marriage covenant:

You ask, "Why?" It is because the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

This passage shows that every divorce breaks the covenant (promise) made at the time of marriage, and remarriage violates the pattern God established at creation when He made only one wife for Adam (cf. Ryrie 1986:1291).

Furthermore, Malachi 2:14 and Proverbs 2:17 clearly indicate that God sees marriage as a blood covenant, which is made permanent when the groom and bride come together as husband and wife. The blood covenant is then consummated when the hymen is broken. For this reason God condemns pre- and extra-marital sexual unions (cf. Booker 1981:27).

There is little doubt that the Pharisees clearly understood that Jesus was indicating a "no divorce" message, not even for the most bizarre circumstances. They then turn their debate to the Mosaic reference found

3. The follow-up question and the Lord's response (Matthew 19:7-9)

3.1 The Pharisees' second question (Matthew 19:7)

In reply to Jesus' response, the Pharisees pose a further question:

Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away? (Matt 19:7, NIV).

The question was designed as a test to elicit some sort of radical pronouncement. The Pharisees in their corrupt minds thought that the trap was set and that they had Jesus in a corner. The following reasons behind the Pharisees' follow-up question have been put forward:

1. The Pharisees were implying another more fundamental question: If divorce runs counter to the divine intention, then why did Moses give the law allowing a man to give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away? (cf. Mounce 1991:181).
2. The Pharisees were countering Matthew 19:3-6 with Scripture of their own; this time the legislation providing for divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (cf. Gardner 1940:289).
3. The Pharisees were implying that Jesus had just repudiated what Moses commanded. However, Deuteronomy 24:1-4 does not, in fact, explicitly command or even approve divorce, but it certainly accepts it as a real possibility. The Pharisees interpreted the passage as divine sanction for the practice for divorce (cf. France 1985:281).

The only difference between Mark's and Matthew's account, is the following: In Matthew's narrative, Jesus allows them to ask the question and in the Markian account Jesus asks them the same question they were subscribing to.

In the book of Mark, Jesus reminds the Pharisees of their own belief system by asking them the question, “*What did Moses command you?*” (Mk 10:3). In His wisdom, Jesus draws them into the conversation by using specific words. Jesus brings finality to their question when He says, “*It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law*” (Mk 10:5). They could have still continued arguing, but before they could do so, Jesus gives them God’s ideal law for marriage (Mk 10:6-9; Matt 19:4-6).

Harper (1996:25) proposes the following possible scenarios:

If Mark has copied Matthew, he has omitted a very significant confession found in Matthew 19:9, and if Matthew has copied Mark, he has omitted the case of a wife divorcing her husband found in Mark 10:12.

It is clear that there are minor differences between the two accounts found in Matthew and Mark, and that they have significance for a proper understanding of Jesus’ teaching on divorce and remarriage. However, the differences between the two writers should not be seen as devious, but as minor differences of interpretation.

2.2 The Lord’s response: The Mosaic Law and the *Exception Clause* (Matthew 19:8-9)

Jesus responds to the Pharisees’ second question as follows:

Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery” (Matt 19:8-9, NIV).

3.2.1 The Mosaic Law: Divorce is a *concession* and not a *command* (v. 8)

Jesus rectifies the Pharisees’ mistake concerning the Law of Moses (v. 8). The Pharisees in their ignorance felt that the mere certificate of divorce was sufficient to dissolve the marriage relationship. However, Jesus points out that because of the corruption of sin and the hardness of their hearts (Matt 9:8), the Israelites were permitted to divorce their wives (Deut 24:1). Nevertheless, this was actually contrary to God’s original intention (cf. De Bruyn 1993:167).

Gardner (1940:289) contends that in response to the Pharisees’ question, Jesus’ answer came as a complete surprise to them:

Jesus has the last word, subordinating Moses’ law to God’s ultimate intent as set forth on Genesis ... Moses allowed divorce, Jesus tells His opponents, because resistance to God’s will had made such provision necessary.

Rather than entering this debate, Jesus once again (as in Matt 5:32) declares that divorce, for whatever reason, is incompatible with God’s original purpose for marriage. Jesus keeps on placing Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 (God’s original

purpose for marriage) above that of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (Moses' concession given because of the *hardness of your hearts*). In other words, Jesus implies that the divorce regulations were a concession to deal with the result of sin, not an expression of the way God intended things to be (cf. France 1994:929).

According to Jesus' response, the norm for marriage remains the vision embodied from the outset of creation (Gen 2:24) and divorce should rather be seen as a later concession made because of human failure. Harper (1996:34) elaborates:

Jesus builds His ethic on marriage and divorce, not upon Deuteronomy 24:1-4, but upon God's ideal from the beginning (Gen 1:27; 2:24).

It is clear that Jesus' teaching in verse 8a emphasizes that divorce is a *concession* not a *command*. In the light of Deuteronomy 24, Moses gave a concession for Israel at that time, because of the *hardness of their hearts*. The Pharisees obviously misinterpreted it to mean a *command*, as this is why the question was asked. In an attempt to solve this ongoing debate, Jesus keeps making reference to *God's original plan* for marriage (v 4, 8b). In His wisdom and with the original plan of marriage in mind, Jesus then declares to His enquirers the only valid reason and legal grounds for divorce, as well as the consequences, if the marriage union is violated because of divorce (cf. France 1994:221).

3.2.2 Jesus' teaching on Divorce and Remarriage (v. 9)

Verse 9 forms the conclusion and key to the entire debate. Much time will be spent on this verse, since a clear understanding of this will help to provide all-important answers to many burning questions regarding divorce and remarriage. Jesus' teaching here should be considered as what God really had in mind when it comes to divorce and remarriage.

Jesus now introduces something new that has never been taught before:

Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery (Matt 19: 9, NIV).

An analysis of the key words used by Jesus in this verse, would certainly help to clarify His teaching on divorce.

3.2.2.1 An analysis of key words used in verse 9: *Porneia* and *moichao*

Laney (1990:34) explains that, "The word '*porneia*' does not normally mean 'adultery.' The usual word for adultery is '*moichao*.'" Matthew recognises a distinction between the two terms" (Matt 15:19). The word *porneia* is often used in Scripture within the context of marriage, for example:

Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral (porneia) (Heb 13:4, NIV).

An analysis of the two key words used in verse 9: *porneia* (fornication or marital unfaithfulness) and *moicheia* (adultery) provides greater clarity regarding what Jesus taught and why Jesus used these particular words in His response to the Pharisees' questions.

When translating the word *porneia*, the King James Version uses the word, *fornication*; The New King James Version uses the term, *immorality* and The New International Version, *marital unfaithfulness*. Whichever English word one uses, it is derived from the same Greek word, *porneia*. In this regard Geisler (2002:284) states that, "The Greek word, *porneia* is used to mean illicit sexual relations of married as well as unmarried people" (Acts 15:20; Rom 1:29).

It should be noted that the meaning of the word 'porneia' is not nearly as clear-cut as 'moichao.' It has a wider range of connotations throughout the area of sexual sin and impropriety, including the act of adultery (cf. Instone-Brewer 2002:156).

Many people interpret the words, *porneia* (fornication) and *moichao* (adultery) to be the same, but, if it were the case, then why would Jesus not have used the same word? Either He would have leaned toward adultery or more toward fornication. It is clear that Jesus chose to use these two words specifically to indicate a concrete and valid reason for divorce. The order in which Jesus placed the words within the sentence is important: Fornication would be the cause of divorce. If, however, either of the two parties were to remarry after the divorce, it would be considered as adultery. Harper (1996:35) explains why Jesus called the second marriage adultery:

When a man 'leaves his father and mother' in order to be joined to his wife, there is a union formed. To marry another after divorcing the first wife substitutes another union for the union that God intended should not be broken.

It can be concluded, according to the words uttered by Jesus in verse 9, that *marital unfaithfulness* is the only valid reason for divorce. *Adultery* is, therefore, the consequence of divorce, which has occurred on the grounds of fornication. The act of *marital unfaithfulness* does not necessarily point towards the man or the woman, since either party could be guilty of this act.

3.2.2.2 The *exception clause*: "except for fornication"

Jesus' statement in verse 9 (KJV) refers to the *exception clause*, "except for fornication." Some have claimed that the *exception clause* covers a much wider area, including physical abuse and even mental torture, so that Jesus specifically allowed divorce on these grounds too (cf. Instone-Brewer 2002:156).

However, Jesus uses the word, *porneia* in verse 9 to indicate the *exception clause*: the only legal grounds for divorce. According to the *exception clause*, Jesus allows divorce on the grounds of fornication (*porneia*). Now the Shammai would probably have left out the term, *fornication* and concentrated on the word

adultery. However, Jesus said that, "... anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery" (Matt 19:9, NIV). This would then represent a significant advance on the teaching of the Shammai (cf. Harper 1996:45).

In the light of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19:9, sexual immorality (fornication) is the only valid grounds for divorce, because it nullifies the couple's marriage contract. Verse 9 further implies that, when a divorce is based on sexual immorality, any subsequent marriage of the divorced person would involve the sin of adultery.

In this regard, Eldredge (2002:93) explains how engaging in sexual immorality constitutes a *breach of the marriage contract*:

Marriage is also a legally binding contract and is subject by law of secular government. When seen from a purely legal and technical sense, any engagement in extramarital sexual relations is a "breach of contract." It breaks the once mutually agreed upon terms of the marriage contract.

On the other hand, Laney (1990:33) asserts that, "According to Jesus, mere formal or legal divorce does not dissolve the actual marriage that was made permanent by God." It could, therefore, be argued from Jesus' *exception clause* that God does not recognise divorce at all. This might sound like a contradiction since God divorced the nation of Israel. However, what needs to be remembered is that Israel committed spiritual "immorality" by serving other gods. It should also be noted that *porneia* (immorality) is the same Greek word from which the English word, *fornication* is derived.

Harper argues that, "The '*exception clause*' is very much in harmony with verses three to eight, and lines up with what Jesus taught on the marriage relationship." Matthew 19:3-8 clearly communicates that man is not to separate what God has joined together in marriage. The question arises: Why would Jesus backtrack by allowing remarriage in cases involving fornication? Could this be seen as a contradiction? It can be said conclusively that no such a contradiction exists (cf. Harper 1996:66).

It can be concluded, firstly, that the word *divorce* is identified as the intended act. Secondly, that the only reason for a legal, Biblical divorce is *marital unfaithfulness (fornication)*. Thirdly, that there are consequences if there is unfaithfulness in the marriage (cf. Harper 1996:39).

3.2.2.3 Objections to the *exception clause*

Many questions have, however, been asked as to "why the account of what Jesus taught, is only found in Matthew's narrative?" Harper (1996:39-41) presents the following four objections to the *exception clause* in Matthew 19:9:

2. It is argued that, since the Markian account was written first, preference should be given to the earliest gospel.

3. It is suggested that, “Mark is the ‘harder’ of the two accounts.” If this were the case, it would then make sense why Matthew included it into his narrative. It could then be argued that Matthew included it into his writings in order to explain what Jesus actually meant.
3. Jesus’ disciples were surprised at the prohibition against divorce, as this was a similar stand to that of the Shammai. In Matthew 5:21-24, 28 Jesus taught that men should return to the divine law. The Shammai taught that adultery is an acceptable ground for divorce, and so did Jesus. However, to say that Jesus purposefully sided with the Shammai would obviously be open to debate (cf. Instone-Brewer 2002:98-99,111-112,277).
4. Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 quotes from the “oral tradition” of what Jesus taught. However, Paul does not include Jesus’ *exception clause*. It could then be argued that it was unknown to him. Some scholars claim that Paul only knew the “absolute form” of the prohibition.

5. Conclusion

The issue of divorce within the ranks of the Church has become a major concern. Does Jesus approve of divorce and remarriage? A Biblical exegesis of Matthew 19:3-9 reveals the following:

- In response to the first question posed by the Pharisees regarding divorce, Jesus uses Genesis 2:24 to indicate *God’s original intention for marriage*: that God intended marriage to be permanent.
- Genesis 2:24 shows that marriage is a covenant relationship, in which two people are united together in a *one-flesh* relationship.
- Genesis 2:24 brings to light that the strength of the marriage is based on three principles: *leave*, *cleave* and *become one flesh*, with God at the centre; these principles serve as the cement that holds the relationship together; marriage is a *monogamous* union, which is characterised by purity and holiness.
- In response to the first question posed by the Pharisees regarding divorce in Matthew 19:8, Jesus emphasizes that divorce is a *concession* not a *command*. He states that Moses gave the Israelites a certificate of divorce as a concession, because of the *hardness of their hearts*.
- In the light of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19:9, sexual immorality is the only valid grounds for divorce, because it nullifies the couple’s marriage contract. The original Greek word used in verse 9 for sexual immorality is *porneia*, which is defined as “illicit sexual relations of married as well as unmarried people,” and variously translated as marital unfaithfulness, fornication, and sexual immorality.
- Jesus’ usage of the Greek word *moichao* (adultery) in Matthew 19:9 discloses that, if *sexual immorality* is the cause of divorce, then *adultery*

is the consequence of divorce on these grounds. It also implies that if either of the two parties were to remarry another partner, after the divorce, it would constitute adultery.

- From the above it is clear that Jesus does not approve of divorce and remarriage, but that He does allow divorce as a *concession*, under exceptional circumstances: “*except for marital unfaithfulness*” (the *exception clause*), because of the “*hardness of their hearts*”.

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