

# The Sermon on the Mount

## Divorce and Remarriage (Matthew 5:31-32)

### INTRODUCTION:

- I. Some of the most divisive teachings among brethren today are teachings concerning divorce and remarriage.
  - A. There are several different views on this subject that are held by members of the Lord's church today.
    1. Essentially, all these differing views can be reduced to three basic positions.
      - a. One position says NO ONE has a right to remarry following divorce.
        - (1). Very few hold this position.
        - (2). But those who DO hold this view believe that only those whose husband or wife has died have a right to remarry.
      - b. Another position says ONLY those who have divorced an UNFAITHFUL husband or wife may marry again – meaning only those who have divorced a husband or wife who was guilty of committing adultery.

- c. And finally, another position essentially allows EVERYONE to marry again – including those who have been guilty of committing adultery.
2. Unfortunately, many have allowed their views on divorce and remarriage to become a divisive issue, splitting churches and resulting in some brethren refusing to have any kind of fellowship with those with whom they disagree.
3. I don't intend to allow that to happen here.
  - a. I fully understand that the position I personally hold on divorce and remarriage is very conservative.
  - b. And I also understand that there are those within this congregation that hold views different from my own.
4. In this lesson, and in some lessons I plan to bring in the near future, we're going to examine this very sensitive issue.
  - a. My responsibility as a gospel preacher is to preach the gospel as purely and simply as I know how – including topics that are highly controversial and potentially explosive.
  - b. However, I believe that if I preach my convictions as honestly and lovingly as I know how, and allow you to then study this issue on your own and come to your own conclusions – I will have done the job the Lord expects of me.

- c. I do NOT expect everyone to agree with what I have to say, NOR will I think any less of you if you DON'T agree.
  - d. All I ask is that we examine this subject with open hearts and then live out the truth in our own lives – however we see that truth.
- II. Some of you may actually be surprised to know that the debate over divorce and remarriage has been going on since the days of Moses, and was even a matter of contention among the Jews in the days of Jesus.
- A. During Old Testament times, wives were seen as a husband's most valuable possession.
    - 1. This meant wives were viewed more as property, and therefore had few, if any, legal rights, including in matters concerning divorce.
      - a. A wife could demand that her husband divorce HER, but the final decision regarding divorce was THE HUSBAND'S and the husband's ALONE to make.
    - 2. Since women had few legal rights, it was not uncommon for men to divorce their wives for any number of reasons.
      - a. This was a problem among the children of Israel even as far back as the days of Moses.

B. Therefore, to address the growing abuse of rampant acts of divorce, God established specific requirements for those who wished to put away their wives.

1. **Deuteronomy 24:1-4** – *"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."*

2. The procedure was simple.

- a. First, the husband must find some UNCLEANNESS in her – a word signifying some MORAL UNCLEANNESS.
- b. Second, if a husband HAS found some uncleanness in his wife, he must give her a CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE or

WRITING OF DIVORCE – a legal document that would state the specific reasons for the divorce, and the legal basis from which the woman's guilt or innocence could be judged.

c. Third, the husband was required to place the CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE in the hands of his wife, and if the divorce was granted, she was required to vacate the home of her former husband.

d. Fourth, if she then goes and becomes another man's wife, and that man detests her and gives her a CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE, or if her second husband dies, the first husband may NEVER take her back again.

(1). And, the reason WHY a man may never take his divorced wife back if she remarries is simply because she has become DEFILED – a word that refers to her being MORALLY UNCLEAN due to the fact that she has had sexual relations with a man who is not her husband.

3. The Law of Moses had a very good reason for imposing this restriction.

a. Since a divorced woman who married another man could NEVER be taken back again under ANY circumstances,

HOPEFULLY this would cause a husband to THINK TWICE before putting away or divorcing his wife.

- C. Unfortunately, over time this legislation was interpreted completely different from the way God intended.
1. Men began seeing **Deuteronomy 24:1-4** as a law that COMMANDED or ENCOURAGED divorce rather than a law that was intended to CURTAIL the abuses of hasty or unwarranted divorce.
  2. The focus changed from making certain there was some irredeemable MORAL UNCLEANNES in the wife, to making certain the wife was given a CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE.
  3. Even the understanding that the divorce MUST BE BASED ON some MORAL uncleanness was given a more liberal interpretation.
    - a. The word here in **Deuteronomy 24:1** that is translated UNCLEANNES was eventually interpreted to mean anything that would be disgraceful or that would be a blemish in her character – such as not pleasing her husband for some frivolous reason.
  4. And this became the basis of the debate in the days of Jesus.

5. One school of thought said a man can divorce his wife and remarry for ANY reason, and the other school of thought said a man can divorce his wife and remarry ONLY if he put away his wife for moral uncleanness on her part (adultery).
  6. This is why the Pharisees in Jesus' day challenged Him by asking:  
**Matthew 19:3** – *"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?"*
- D. So, what WAS Jesus' position on divorce and remarriage?
1. Did the Lord allow divorce for ANY reason?
  2. Did the Lord allow EVERYONE who divorced to remarry?
  3. To find the answer to these questions, we need to turn to the place where Jesus first addressed the issue of divorce and remarriage – the Sermon on the Mount in **Matthew chapter 5**.

**BODY:**

- I. As we have seen in previous lessons, in **Matthew 5: 21 through 48**, the Lord is not only clarifying the TRUE INTENT behind various commands in the Law of Moses, but also making known the STANDARDS OF GODLINESS AND RIGHTEOUSNESS that would be required of those who would be His disciples and citizens of His kingdom.

- A. Therefore, the Lord's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount are JUST AS applicable to us today as they were to His disciples more than two-thousand years ago.
  - 1. These are KINGDOM PRINCIPLES – timeless moral principles that go back to the beginning of time and even predate the Law of Moses.
  - 2. And these KINGDOM PRINCIPLES are the standards by which WE must live, and by which we will be judged.
  
- B. Thus far, we've seen that we cannot harbor any hatred or bitterness in our heart toward another without being guilty of murder in the heart, nor can we look upon someone (with that lingering look of lust) without being guilty of having committed adultery in our heart toward another.
  - 1. But now Jesus goes one step further in **Matthew 5:31-32** to address the subject of DIVORCE.
    - a. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus reveals the ONE AND ONLY acceptable reason for divorce, and the HARSH CONSEQUENCES that follow when divorce is NOT for the right reason.
  - 2. Later, in **Matthew chapter 19**, Jesus will ALSO deal with this subject when being challenged by the Pharisees.
    - a. At that time Jesus will specifically address three things:

- (1). He will address the SANCTITY of the marriage relationship.
- (2). He will reaffirm the ONE AND ONLY scriptural reason for divorce.
- (3). And He will clarify any confusion on the subject of REMARRIAGE.

b. We'll deal with the subject of remarriage in GREATER DETAIL in another lesson.

C. So, let's turn our attention to the statements of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

1. **Matthew 5:31-32** – *"Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 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."*

II. As we've seen from previous lessons, there are two parts to the teaching of Jesus in this section of the Sermon on the Mount – what the LAW said, and what JESUS said.

A. So... what did the LAW say about DIVORCE?

1. Let's look at **Deuteronomy 24** again.

- a. **Deuteronomy 24:1-4** – *"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."*
2. As we mentioned earlier, the biggest mistake many made in the days of Jesus was to assume God was actually COMMANDING or ENCOURAGING DIVORCE in **Deuteronomy 24**.
3. Nothing could be further from the truth.
  - a. God isn't COMMANDING or ENCOURAGING divorce in **Deuteronomy 24** He ALLOWED divorce under certain VERY SPECIFIC CONDITIONS.

- b. **Malachi 2:16** – *"For the Lord God of Israel says that He hates divorce..."*
  - c. Therefore, God isn't trying to ENCOURAGE something He HATES!
4. **Deuteronomy 24** is what we might call CONTINGENT LEGISLATION – it is what God LEGISLATES or ALLOWS under certain CONTINGENCIES.
- a. A contingency is an event that might occur in the future, or that might arise unexpectedly and therefore must be prepared for, or a provision made against future unseen events.
5. Therefore, in **Deuteronomy 24** God said this is what you MUST do ***IF*** SOMEDAY IN THE FUTURE you discover your wife is morally UNCLEAN and you DIVORCE her.
- a. You MUST give her a certificate of divorce.
  - b. You MUST NOT marry her again if she remarries.
6. That's what the LAW OF MOSES taught. And that's very simple to understand, isn't it?
- B. Now, let's take a closer look at what JESUS taught.
- 1. **Matthew 5:32** – *"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."*

2. Jesus does THREE THINGS here:
  - a. First, He clarifies the true intent BEHIND the law allowing divorce – namely that divorce is to be granted ONLY in cases of sexual immorality.
  - b. Second, He reveals the SIN involved in divorcing a wife who has NOT been guilty of sexual immorality.
  - c. Finally, He explains the SIN involved in MARRYING a divorced woman.

III. Let's take each of these three points Jesus is teaching and examine them more closely.

A. First, Jesus made it crystal clear that there is ONLY ONE acceptable reason that would allow divorce – ADULTERY, or as some translations render it, FORNICATION!

1. What is ADULTERY or FORNICATION? How do we properly use these words, and are they the same thing?
  - a. The word ADULTERY or FORNICATION that Jesus used in **Matthew 5:32** is from the Greek word *PORNEIA* – from which we get our English word PORNOGRAPHY.

- b. Simply defined, the word means **SEXUAL IMMORALITY**, and encompasses **ALL FORMS** of sexual immorality, including having sexual relations with someone you are **NOT** married to – whether you're married to **SOMEONE ELSE**, or whether you **SINGLE** and having sexual relations outside of marriage – **IT'S ALL PORNEIA** (sexual immorality).
2. So, Jesus said **DIVORCE** is allowed **ONLY** in cases of sexual immorality.
3. God does **NOT** sanction or allow divorce for **ANY OTHER REASON**. He does **NOT** allow divorce for:
- a. Incompatibility.
  - b. Irreconcilable differences.
  - c. Cruel or abusive treatment – including mental or physical abuse.
  - d. Desertion or abandonment.
  - e. Incarceration in a penal institution.
  - f. Excessive use of alcohol or the use of illegal drugs.
  - g. Neglect to provide suitable support and maintenance for the other spouse.
  - h. Mental illness.
  - i. Physical disabilities.

- j. Inability to produce or bear natural children.
- k. Impotency.
- l. And CERTAINLY NOT just to find someone else you think will make you happier.
  - (1). Last year (2007) a billboard advertising a Chicago law firm featured these words: "Life's short. Get a divorce."
  - (2). The billboard featured just the torsos of a buff and bare-chested man and a well-endowed, scantily clad woman along with contact information for the law firm.
  - (3). The message was clear – if you're unhappy in your marriage do something about it! Divorce your husband or wife and find someone else who will make you happier.
  - (4). After the billboard went up the law firm was swamped with new clients.
- 4. However, Jesus made it clear that the ONLY acceptable reason to divorce your husband or wife is when they have been guilty of SEXUAL IMMORALITY – namely, having sexual relations with another.
- B. Second, Jesus said if a man divorces his wife when sexual immorality is NOT involved, he *"causes her to commit adultery."*

1. What did Jesus mean by this? How does a man CAUSE his wife to commit adultery if he divorces her for some reason OTHER THAN sexual immorality?
2. The answer goes back to **Deuteronomy 24**.
  - a. In **Deuteronomy 24** God told the people of Israel through Moses that when a divorced woman MARRIES ANOTHER she becomes "DEFILED." (cf. **Deuteronomy 24:4**)
  - b. Therefore, Jesus said when a man divorces his wife who is NOT guilty of sexual immorality he is GUILTY of placing her in a position where she is likely to remarry.
  - c. And, if that divorced woman marries, she becomes "DEFILED."
3. How does she become "DEFILED?" Simply because her husband didn't have a BIBLICAL right to put her away in the first place! That's the HUSBAND'S SIN, and God will hold him accountable.
  - a. As far as God is concerned, they are still BIBLICALLY and LEGALLY married to each other.
  - b. But if she is UNBIBLICALLY put away, and through weakness of the flesh she EITHER HAS SEXUAL

- RELATIONS with another man OR MARRIES another man, she becomes "DEFILED" by committing ADULTERY!
- c. She CANNOT REMARRY without committing ADULTERY!
  - d. This is why **Deuteronomy 24** says the first husband could NEVER take her back – EVEN IF her second husband DIED!
  - e. Why? Because she is "DEFILED!"
4. Listen to these comments by KEIL & DELITZSCH: *"The second marriage of a woman who had been divorced is designated by Moses a defilement of the woman... a moral defilement, i.e., blemishing, desecration of the sexual communion which was sanctified by marriage..."*
5. So what does all this mean?
- a. Jesus was simply making very clear what the Law itself implied: to divorce a woman EXCEPT FOR SEXUAL IMMORALITY would lead her to COMMIT ADULTERY, and would cause her to become DEFILED if she remarried!
6. This interpretation and application of the Law by Jesus is also in complete harmony with Paul's understanding of the Law.
- a. **Romans 7:2-3** – *"For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her*

*husband. 3 So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man."*

- b. In other words, a woman was bound by the Law to her husband as long he lived.
  - c. If she married another while her first husband was still living (implying a certificate of divorce was given), she became an adulteress (i.e., defiled)!
- C. Now let's consider the final part of what Jesus taught about divorce in Matthew 5:32.
- 1. Notice that Jesus goes on to say that **WHOEVER** marries a woman who has been divorced (lit., "put away") **ALSO** commits adultery!
    - a. Not only does the **DIVORCED** woman commit adultery or become defiled when she marries again, **SO DOES ANYONE WHO MARRIES HER!**
    - b. When a woman is divorced (or is given a certificate of divorce from her husband), **ANYONE WHO MARRIES HER** is **ALSO** guilty of committing **ADULTERY** or **SEXUAL IMMORALITY!**

2. This teaching of Jesus is SO IMPORTANT to understand.
  - a. Jesus is referring here to ANY "put away" person!
  - b. Therefore, I understand this to mean NO DIVORCED PERSON (a person who has been "put away" by their mate) can scripturally remarry – regardless of whether they were divorced SCRIPTURALLY or UNSCRIPTUALLY.
  - c. A person "put away" for some reason OTHER THAN sexual immorality cannot remarry because such would "cause them to commit adultery," or to put it in Old Testament terms "become defiled."
  - d. Neither can a person who has been "put away" BECAUSE OF sexual immorality remarry because such a person is an "adulteress" or "adulterer" – they are "defiled" and would cause anyone who married them to commit adultery!
3. God did not approve of an "adulteress" or "adulterer" remarrying (in fact, under the Old Law, most were put to death)

- IV. I want to conclude this teaching of Jesus on the subject of divorce by saying there are three exceptions that are either taught or implied in Scripture.
  - A. First, Jesus will make it clear in **Matthew chapter 19** that the so-called "INNOCENT" person DOES have a right to remarry.

1. The "INNOCENT" person is the husband or wife who has discovered that their mate is guilty of sexual immorality, and then DIVORCES their mate for the cause of sexual immorality.
  2. However, it is IMPLIED that this person must be truly "INNOCENT" – meaning they have done NOTHING to intentionally or deliberately cause their mate to commit sexual immorality.
- B. Second, the Scriptures imply that civil divorce courts have NO AUTHORITY over the Law of God.
1. Even though a divorce may be LEGAL, it may not always be SCRIPTURAL.
  2. God is NOT obligated to honor the decision of a civil divorce court, ESPECIALLY when the court LEGALLY grants a divorce to someone who UNSCRIPTURALLY divorces their mate.
    - a. To the LORD, they are STILL MARRIED and NEITHER has the right to remarry until ONE OR THE OTHER has committed adultery and has been formally and scripturally put away!
    - b. I'm not advocating the so-called "WAITING GAME" here. However, before the INNOCENT party can remarry, the other

party **MUST** be guilty of committing adultery, and **MUST** be **SCRIPTURALLY** put away or divorced.

- C. Finally, a **SCRIPTURAL DIVORCE** can take place **ONLY WHEN** the parties involved were **SCRIPTURALLY MARRIED** in the first place.
  - 1. In other words, if a man and a woman are **NOT SCRIPTURALLY MARRIED** – if they did **NOT** have a Biblical right to marry – then as far as God is concerned **THEY ARE NOT MARRIED**.
  - 2. And since they are **NOT MARRIED** as far as God is concerned then they are committing sexual immorality every time they come together in a sexual union.
  - 3. Therefore, since they are **NOT MARRIED** as far as God is concerned, they need to **STOP** committing sexual immorality and go their separate ways.

**CONCLUSION:**

- I. It's vitally important that we understand the teaching of Jesus on the subject of marriage, divorce and remarriage because our souls are at stake.
  - A. The Lord made it crystal clear that:
    - 1. The only reason a man can lawfully put away his wife and be free to remarry is if his wife has committed adultery.

2. A man who divorces his wife for some reason other than adultery causes her to commit adultery if she remarries.
  3. Whoever marries a divorced woman (a woman who has been “put away”) commits adultery.
- B. And just in case you’re wondering, what Jesus said about a man divorcing his wife is also true about a woman divorcing her husband.
- II. This lesson is NOT intended to suggest ways to resolve what might be an unscriptural marriage.
- A. This is how I understand this subject.
1. But, others will disagree with my conclusions. However, I believe I can adequately defend this position BIBLICALLY, just as it’s been defended in debate after debate among brethren all over the country.
  2. Therefore you need to investigate this subject fully on your own and come to your own conclusions and do what your conscience requires you to do.
  3. As I said, I’m not here to judge your marital situation – that’s none of my business.

5. But, this is what I believe the Bible teaches, these are the principles by which I live, and this is what I must in all good conscience preach and teach.

III. However, the reason for this lesson is actually TWO-FOLD.

A. First, the MAIN REASON for this lesson is to WARN those of you who ARE married to THINK TWICE before you EVER consider divorce.

1. If you ignore the teachings of Jesus here, you will not only be putting YOUR soul in jeopardy, you will ALSO be putting the soul of your MATE in jeopardy, and the soul of WHOEVER they may marry in the future.

2. And God WILL hold you accountable!

B. And second, as difficult as the teachings of Jesus on divorce might seem, those who respect the authority of Jesus Christ will abide by His teaching to the best of their ability and understanding, knowing all the while:

1. That the LORD provides FORGIVENESS for any failures to live by His teachings in the past!
2. That the LORD provides whatever STRENGTH we may need to live by His teachings in the future!

- C. Therefore, if there ARE failures in your past:
  - 1. Come to Jesus Christ confessing and repenting of those failures, and receive the FORGIVENESS He promises.
  
- D. And if you've never given your life to Christ by obeying the gospel and being baptized into Christ for the remission of your past sins:
  - 1. You ALSO need to come to Jesus Christ in complete faith and obedience to receive the FORGIVENESS He promises.