

When & Why God Permits Divorce

The gospels tell us that Jesus taught about divorce and adultery on three different occasions. The first time occurred early in A.D. 31 while Jesus was teaching the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-7:29). On that occasion, He briefly taught that divorce was not permitted except for one reason — adultery (Matthew 5:31-32). In the fall of A.D. 32, He forgave a woman caught in adultery and then added, “Go and sin no more!” (John 8:11). The only other time we are told Jesus taught about adultery, divorce or marriage was in the winter of A.D. 33, just months before He was crucified (Matthew 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18). The apostle Paul also taught about divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16. Of all the passages about divorce in the New Testament, Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19:1-12 (Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18) is the longest and most complete. This occasion is the subject of our study. You will learn why God permits divorce and when God does not permit divorce.

BACKGROUND. The opening verses of our study are Matthew 19:1-2 and Mark 10:1.

When Jesus had finished these words, He departed from Galilee and came into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan; and large crowds followed Him, and He healed them there. Matthew 19:1-2 (NASB)

Getting up, He went from there to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan; crowds gathered around Him again, and, according to His custom, He once more began to teach them. Mark 10:1 (NASB)

There is a time gap between the last verse of Matthew 18 and

the first verse of chapter 19 of about nine months. In this gap, Jesus left the city of Jerusalem and traveled to the northern region called Galilee and the northeast region of Perea. The gospels of Luke and John record the events that occurred

during the gap time (Luke 9:51-18:1-14; John 7:2-11:54). We have already studied those events in our series of the Life of Christ. Matthew 19:1 and Mark 10:1 reveal that Jesus has left the region of Galilee and is now traveling south through the northern region of Judea on the east side of the Jordan River. He is traveling to Jerusalem. It is usually estimated that it is about one week before Jesus will ride into Jerusalem and be hailed as King. This is commonly called the Triumphal Entry.

Previously in John 11:54, we were told that Jesus had

left Jerusalem because He knew the Pharisees and chief priests wanted to kill Him. But now it was time for Him to die according to the prophecy of Daniel 9:24-26. So He was moving toward Jerusalem, even though the disciples did not



think that was wise.

But for now, Matthew tells us there is a large crowd following Jesus. Mark adds that a large crowd had surrounded Him *again*. His popularity was at a pinnacle. It was the perfect time

to enter Jerusalem because His popularity will help to motivate the religious leaders to kill Him. At this point it was very likely that almost everyone knew about Him. People were seeking Him for a touch of healing. They were seeking Him because of the signs He had performed, healing and His teachings. They were the fickle crowd that sought Him for what He could do for them, and not because they cared about Him. They would desert Him just as quickly as they gathered around Him. This is also true for many pastors today! People are quick to abandon their spiritual leaders. They loved Jesus because He could provide for them. It must have been thrilling to watch Him heal people. We can imagine the exciting comments and the “oohs.” Today He also deserves our love and devotion because He is our Creator God.

PHARISEES ASK ABOUT THE REASONS FOR DIVORCE. So with the crowd around Him, the Pharisees decided to challenge Him with a theological question. It was an opportunity to embarrass Him and make themselves look great, if they could.

Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?” Matthew 19:3 (NASB)

Some Pharisees came up to Jesus, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife. Mark 10:2 (NASB)

They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?” The question they asked is almost identical to what we hear today. The vast majority of people in the United States divorce their spouses for a long list of reasons, as is revealed in a wide range of research studies. It is amazing to review the studies. Few of them agree about what is the most common reason for divorce. One soon learns that the studies also disagree with each other as to the top five reasons for divorce. The traditional claims have been that people divorce because of a “lack of communication,” “falling out of love,” “no intimacy,” “no longer partners,” and “we’re not ready for marriage.”¹ Cindy Holbrook cites a Pennsylvania State University

study that lists the top five reasons that motivate women to initiate divorce as: “infidelity,” “incompatible,” “drinking,” “drug use,” “grew apart,” and “personality problems.”² Some studies put lack of communication at the top. That seems to fit the need that most women do have.

Divorce statistics say that two-thirds of all divorces are initiated by women. But what about the remaining one-third who file for divorce—the men? Brittany Wong cites Reddit’s lists of the top five reasons for men initiate divorce as: “he got tired of her outbursts,” “the trust was gone,” “wife became a glorified roommate” (no or little sex), “math didn’t add up” (i.e. the wife cheated on him), and “he was suffering from depression and she laughed it off.”³ It is obvious from these lists that the five reasons for divorce vary greatly. While Tango and Reddit are hardly quality sources to be trusted, the other studies are not much better. Just about every list disagrees in order of priority and reason. The lists are so scrambled because the couples divorce for any and every reason. Essentially, if someone is unhappy for *any reason* in a marriage, then they justify the divorce with that reason. The mantra is, “I must be happy!” Pleasing self is spelled d-i-v-o-r-c-e. Jesus will soon tell us there is only one God-approved-reason for divorce.

Sadly, some church leaders have abandoned the teaching of Scripture in order to please those in their churches. They sympathize with unhappy married couples in the church and as a result find a creative explanation to justify a divorce, even if it is a second, third, or maybe a fourth divorce.

Historical records reveal that the Jewish leaders disagreed about the basis for divorce too! The followers of Shammai believed that sexual unfaithfulness was the only legal reason for divorce. But the followers of Hillel said that divorce was allowed for any reason.⁴ That is the question the Pharisees asked Jesus. “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?” If they decided they no longer liked their wife, then they married another woman.

To The Experts” Women’s Health. April 14, 2020.

2. Cindy Holbrook. “10 Surprising Reasons Women Turn To Divorce.” Tango. 11/19/2017.

3. Brittany Wong. “11 Reasons Men Leave Their Marriages.” HuffPost. March 8, 2016.

4. Gittin 9:10. Jacob Neusner. The Mishnah. Yale University Press. 1988. p. 487.

1. Yalyssa Girdwain. “12 Of The Most Common Reasons For Divorce, According

MEANING OF TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH.

Therefore, the Pharisees must have been surprised when Jesus responded with,

... Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, and said, 'FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND HIS MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH'? Matthew 19:4-5 (NASB)

Jesus quotes a passage of Scripture that is very familiar to Christians. The passage is Genesis 1:27-28. Here is Genesis 1:27.

God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Genesis 1:27 (NASB)

This is truly an amazing statement. Jesus states that God made only two sexes. This should help believers understand the truth about what types of people God created. He created only males and females. Jesus quoted what has been accepted by humanity for many millennia. There are only males and females. In Genesis 1:28, God gave us a practical definition or a working definition of male and female.

God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth..." Genesis 1:28 (NASB)

God revealed that males and females together are those who can reproduce. A male and female in union are those who can be fruitful or reproduce. Adam and Eve were to do this many times so as to fill the earth. That is a working definition of males and females. Only a biological male and female together can procreate. The proof that someone is a male or a female is that they have the biological genitals necessary for procreation. Further, God started with only two humans called Adam and Eve. They were the first male and female.

But Jesus' purpose in quoting Genesis 1:27 was not to give His audience a working definition of male and female, but to establish the fact that God also created marriage. Then Jesus

quoted from Genesis 2:24.

For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. Genesis 2:24 (NASB)

At this point Jesus had established the foundational truth that a male and female would become one flesh in marriage. He had created their genitals for this very purpose. They fit together and the result would be children.

Then Jesus was ready for His concluding point.

So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no person is to separate. Matthew 19:6 (NASB)

The male and female should never ever break their oneness. Now we could look up the meaning of the Greek word for "one," and we will soon. But frankly, we do not need to do that because Jesus gave us the meaning of "one" when He says no one should separate this "one flesh." The point is simple. When a male and female marry and have sexual intercourse they become "one flesh." The act of becoming one flesh occurs when 1) a couple has sexual intercourse and 2) as a result of God joining them together. Now the meaning of the Greek word that is translated as "one" is *eis*. It literally means "one." For example, in Matthew 5:36 Jesus uses *eis* to refer to one hair on someone's head. In Matthew 5:41 He uses the word to refer to walking one additional mile.

This helps us understand 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 when it tells us that a husband's body is owned by his wife, and her body is owned by her husband. That is why Paul said,

The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise the wife also to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise the husband also does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time so that you may devote yourselves to prayer... 1 Corinthians 7:3-5a (NASB)

The point is the husband and wife are "one flesh." As a result,

Life and Heart of Jesus

Ministry In Perea - Winter of A.D. 33

	Ten Lepers Healed	Second Coming Prophesied	Parables On Prayer	Jesus On Divorce	Children In The Kingdom	Riches and The Kingdom	Owner & Laborers	3rd Prophecy Death & Resurrection	Pride of Disciples	Blind Man Healed
Matthew				19:1-12	19:13-15	19:16-30	20:1-16	20:17-19	20:20-28	20:29-34
Mark				10:1-12	10:13-16	10:17-31		10:32-34	10:35-45	10:46-52
Luke	17:11-19	17:20-37	18:1-14		18:15-17	18:18-30		18:31-34		18:35-43
John										

a wife has the right to her husband's body and he has the right to her body. They are one flesh. Their own each other's body.

Now we need to address two common misunderstandings involving sexual intercourse. First, it is common for people to ask if a male and female can become one as the result of having sex. The answer is clearly, "Yes." 1 Corinthians 6:16 makes that clear. Notice what Paul said.

Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For He says, "THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH." 1 Corinthians 6:16. (NASB)

Here Paul reveals that a male can also be "joined" to a prostitute — a woman who is not his wife. That is, a man became "one body" with a prostitute.

Second, people have asked if sexual intercourse makes a male and female married. If so, then the sin of fornication could never be committed. Because as soon as the sexual intercourse occurs, the male and female would be married. This helps us understand that the biblical definition of fornication is a sexual sin that occurs before marriage (Hebrews 13:4).

Adultery refers to sexual sin in marriage.

In summary, sexual intercourse before marriage is a sin called fornication. It results in the male and female becoming one flesh. Sexual intercourse between any male and female results in them becoming one flesh. So, sexual activity alone does not result in marriage.

Malachi 2:14 helps us understand that God considers a male and female to be married when they enter into a formal contract. Matthew 19:4-6 teaches us that when they have sexual intercourse, they become one flesh. Verse 6 reveals that God designed us to remain married as long as both spouses live. Jesus said in verse 6, "What God has joined together, no person is to separate." The point is that God designed marriage to be forever.

WHY GOD PERMITS DIVORCE. Then the Pharisees responded with a challenging question.

They said to Him, "Why, then, did Moses command to GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND HER AWAY?" Matthew 19:7 (NASB)

They referred to Deuteronomy 24:1. Then Jesus replied with,

... Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. Matthew 19:8 (NASB)

Jesus' reply is softened in most English Bibles. The Greek word that He used for hardness is *sklerokardia*. It means "rough," "dried up," "tough," or "stiff." But the idiom "hardness of heart" literally means "uncircumcised in heart and ears."⁵ Jesus' point is that God has permitted divorce because some individuals have stiff hearts. They do not have spiritually sensitive hearts. Their hearts are stiff.

It is amazing that Jesus did not say that divorce is permitted because of lack of communication, or because one does not say, "I love you," emotional abuse, little or no sex, poor financial support, incompatibility, or some other issue. He said that divorce was permitted because of stiff hearts. Notice Jesus said that the husband who divorces his wife has the stiff heart, even though the wife created the offense. In truth the wife also has a stiff heart because she sinned against God. She willingly violated her relationship with her husband. From Mark 10:11 it is obvious that the reverse is also true. God permits wives who have a stiff heart to divorce their husband when he has created the offense. In this verse, Jesus revealed that divorce occurs because of an unforgiving heart. The sad truth is that a person with a hard or stiff heart should actually forgive rather than divorce.

When Jesus added, "from the beginning it has not been this way," He clearly communicated that God does not want one spouse to divorce the other spouse. So, when does God permit divorce? It is found in the next verse.

WHEN GOD PERMITS DIVORCE. Matthew 19:9 tells us that God allows a husband to divorce his wife *if and when* she commits adultery. This is the first reason that is given in the New Testament for divorce. Jesus said,

And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery. Matthew 19:9

(NASB)

The apostle Paul gives us a second reason when divorce is allowed by God in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. In that passage Paul states that divorce is allowed when an unbelieving spouse wants to divorce a believing spouse. The unbeliever files for the divorce. Some have claimed the passage is about desertion, but that is not what Paul taught. A previous study, "Biblical Divorce and Remarriage" explains the meaning of 1 Corinthians 7:12-16.

Now let us look closer at Matthew 19:8-9. Here Jesus says that divorce is permitted if your spouse commits immorality. The Greek word for "immorality" is *porneia*. This Greek word has a broad meaning ranging from sex with animals, family members (incest), children (paedophilia), homosexuality, and other forms of sex with someone to whom a person is not married. When a spouse has sex with someone other than their husband or wife, then they have violated the "one flesh" principle and committed *porneia*.

Mark 10:8 teaches that when sexual intercourse between a husband and wife occurs, they are *no longer two, but one flesh*.

... AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH; so they are no longer two, but one flesh. Mark 10:8 (NASB)

This helps us understand why 1 Corinthians 7:4 teaches that in marriage a wife has authority or control over her husband's body, and the husband has authority or control over his wife's body.

The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. 1 Corinthians 7:4 (NASB)

His body belongs to her and her body belongs to him. God reveals an amazing divine principle in this verse and the next one. That is, in the sexual area, a wife has control over what her husband does with his body, and the husband has control over what his wife does with her body. Both have the right to decide what their spouse does with his or her body.

1 Corinthians 7:5 gives us an application of this principle.

5. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 765.

Both spouses are commanded to willingly agree to sexual activity when the other spouse wants it.

Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. 1 Corinthians 7:5 (NASB)

Here we learn that a husband and wife are only allowed to delay having sexual activity for a brief time. Why? They are one flesh and God has designed husbands and wives to regularly engage in sexual activity. To do otherwise is a sin against God. A second principle is that both spouses are not free to give their bodies to someone else. Why? They are not in control of their own bodies in the sexual area. In Ephesians 5:31-32, Paul uses this principle of ownership as a spiritual picture of the body of Christ. A third reason is that Satan will tempt husbands and wives in the sexual area when sexual activity is not regular.

CONCLUSION. In summary, Jesus' point is that God never designed marriage to be a temporary relationship. God designed marriage to a permanent relationship. The spouse that violates the "one flesh" principle has sinned against God and their spouse. No excuses can justify violating God's command and sinning against one's spouse. So when a spouse violates the "one flesh" relationship, God allows divorce to occur when and if the "offended" spouse is so hurt that they want to leave their spouse permanently.

So in Matthew 19:9 Jesus states that if divorce occurs for any other reason, the spouse who files for the divorce is not free to marry someone else. If they do marry someone else, they commit adultery. Jesus said, "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

Sadly, fornication (sex before marriage), immorality (sex during marriage), and adultery are so common today. We could say fornication and adultery are as common as eating ice cream on a warm summer day. It happens that casually.

We have missed the warning of 1 Corinthians 6:18,

Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside

the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. 1 Corinthians 6:18 (NASB)

God gives us another important principle here. When sexual sin occurs, we also sin against ourselves. Paul does not explain what he means. But surely it must at least include sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), emotional trauma, and memories that will haunt the sinning person in their old age.

So how can a believer who recognizes the seriousness of their sexual sins obtain relief? First, they should confess their sins (1 John 1:9). This restores the relationship with God. Second, confess their sin to their spouse and to the person with whom they had the sexual affair. Third, they should remember God has forgiven them according to Micah 7:18-19.

**Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity
And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession?
He does not retain His anger forever,
Because He delights in unchanging love.
He will again have compassion on us;
He will tread our iniquities under foot.
Yes, You will cast all their sins
Into the depths of the sea.
Micah 7:18-19 (NASB)**

Fourth, they should forget about their sins and not let Satan discourage them.

Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead . . . Philipians 3:13 (NASB)

For those who are married, it is God's desire that we remain married. It is a picture of the body of Christ. As the years go by, you will learn the meaning of "one flesh." The relationship is like nothing else available in this life. May God bless you.