

## WHAT DOES JESUS SAY ABOUT DIVORCE?

**Series Title:** What Does Jesus Say About Divorce?

**Topic:** Divorce

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### Message #1: WHAT DOES JESUS SAY ABOUT DIVORCE?

Topic: Divorce and Remarriage

Message theme: Anyone who divorces his or her spouse in order to marry another person is committing adultery.

Bible Verses: Matthew 19:1-9

### INTRODUCTION:

The breakdown of marriages is a very serious problem in most countries today. Divorce rates are rising. People are not as committed to staying married to the same person for the duration of their lives as they used to be. Why is that? There are many causes.

- First, people are becoming more concerned about their individual happiness and less concerned about honoring their commitments to other people.
- Second, more people are **marrying on the basis of their romantic feelings** that quickly change.
- Third, **as more and more people turn away from religion**, their marriages are not held together by the authority of religious teachings or the support of the religious community and extended families.
- Finally, **materialism and mass media** have contributed to the increase in sexual activity outside marriage. Materialism is a philosophy that rejects spiritual explanations of life. It says there is no God and that people are little more than advanced animals. Many people now view sexual activity as an appropriate and natural way of satisfying their

### Explanatory Notes:

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#### An Outline of Matthew 19:1-9 :

1. Jesus tells the Pharisees that God does not want marriages to be broken (19:1-6).
    - A. The Pharisees try to trick Jesus with a question (19:1-3).
    - B. Jesus quotes Genesis 2 to show them God's original plan for marriage (19:4-5).
    - C. Jesus answers the Pharisees' question (19:6).
  2. Jesus tells the Pharisees that divorce violates the law of God (19:7-9).
    - A. The Pharisees claim that the law of God permits divorce in Deuteronomy 24 (19:7).
    - B. Jesus explains that this was God's way of showing his patience with peoples' stubborn wills (19:8).
    - C. Jesus says that using divorce in order to leave a spouse and marry another person breaks God's law because it is adultery (19:9).
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#### A Summary of other related Bible passages about divorce:

**Malachi 2:13-16:** God tells Israel that he hates divorce.

physical and emotional impulses. Much of what appears in TV shows, movies, videos, music and advertising encourages them to think this way. Many people no longer view sex as part of an intimate, spiritual, and binding covenant between two people and God.

**What does the Bible say about divorce?** We have Jesus' own words about divorce. Listen to Jesus' words about this important subject from **Matthew 19:1-9**:

*After Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went southward to the region of Judea and into the area east of the Jordan River. Vast crowds followed him there, and he healed their sick.*

*Some Pharisees came and tried to trap him with this question: "Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife for any reason?"*

*"Haven't you read the Scriptures?" Jesus replied. "They record that from the beginning 'God made them male and female.' And he said, 'This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.' Since they are no longer two but one, let no one separate them, for God has joined them together."*

*"Then why did Moses say a man could merely write an official letter of divorce and send her away?" they asked.*

*Jesus replied, "Moses permitted divorce as a concession to your hard-hearted wickedness, but it was not what God had originally intended. And I tell you this, a man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery—unless his wife has been unfaithful.*

Matthew 19:1-9, NLT

## WHAT THE VERSES MEAN

**Divorce was a popular topic of discussion in Jesus' day.** Everyone wanted to know whether the law of God allowed men to divorce their wives.

**In Deuteronomy 24:1-4** God allowed a husband to divorce

**Matthew 5:31-32:** Jesus permits divorce only for people whose spouse has committed adultery. When a man divorces his wife for any other reason, he causes her to 'become an adulteress', and whoever marries her also commits adultery.

Jesus' words must be understood in light of the situation women faced in Bible times. In Jesus' day, women were financially dependent upon men in order to survive. A single woman could hardly survive on her own, except through prostitution. So when a man divorced his wife, he forced her against her wishes to immediately seek to marry a man other than her husband. And he made any man willing to marry her guilty of taking another man's wife. Thus they would appear guilty of adultery while he would appear innocent because he obeyed the law and wrote a certificate.

Jesus says this is not true. The man who divorces his wife for frivolous reasons should be held morally responsible rather than the helpless woman and any man kind and loving enough to marry her.

**Mark 10:2-12:** Similar to Matthew 19. But in this passage Jesus seems to say that divorce and remarriage are automatically adultery. No exception is given.

**Luke 16:18:** Another instance in which the Gospels portray divorce and remarriage as adultery.

his wife if he found ‘something indecent’ about her. In Jesus’ day, **two famous Rabbis (teachers)** of the law debated what the words ‘something indecent’ meant. **Rabbi Hillel** said a man could divorce his wife for any reason (even if he did not like her cooking!). **Rabbi Shammai** said that adultery was the only legitimate reason for divorce.

**The Pharisees** were a group of very religious Jews. They were jealous of Jesus’ popularity. **They asked him about divorce in order to trick him into saying something against God’s law.** If he agreed with Hillel, people would criticize him for being too lenient because he permitted divorce. But if he agreed with Shammai, they would criticize him for contradicting the law from Deuteronomy, because that law allows divorce.

**Jesus agreed with Shammai by rejecting divorce. But he upheld the authority of the law.** Jesus knew that men\*\*\* were misusing divorce as a legal way to leave their wives in order to marry other women. In other words, they were using divorce certificates as a way of committing adultery without openly breaking the Law of Moses. **Jesus wanted to prevent men from misusing the law and from mistreating their wives in this way.** He wanted to keep them from divorcing their wives for frivolous, selfish reasons.

**Jesus explained that God allowed divorce in his law only because people are very stubborn and sinful.** Every parent knows that children cannot learn everything at once. They learn in stages, and parents are patient with their children as they learn. For example, parents do not expect their children to talk perfectly all at once. So it was with God. God wanted to teach Israel right and wrong. But they could not learn everything at once. They were too stubborn to learn perfect obedience. So God patiently allowed them to divorce one another even though divorce was not what he wanted them to do.

**Now, Jesus says, it is time to grow up!** God allowed divorce in the past. But now he expects believers to treat

**Romans 7:2-3:** Paul uses an illustration from marriage, adultery and remarriage to explain the law of Moses to believers. He says that a woman who ‘lives with another man’ while her husband is still living commits adultery.

**1 Corinthians 7:12-16:** Paul counsels Christians who are married to unbelievers. If an unbeliever abandons his or her marriage to a believer (which is called “desertion”), the believer is not ‘bound’ by his or her marriage vow (promise).

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\*\*\* In Jesus’ day, **women had fewer rights and freedoms** than they do in many countries today. In Bible times husbands divorced their wives. Wives were not normally expected to divorce their husbands. That is why Jesus and the Pharisees spoke only of husbands divorcing their wives.

But in our day, women have more freedom to divorce their husbands. We must keep in mind the differences between our time and Jesus’ time. Your message should not give listeners the impression that divorce is wrong for husbands but not for wives.

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marriage as a permanent relationship that should not be ended in this life.

Jesus explained from Genesis 2:24 that **marriage is more than just an agreement between two people. Marriage is a sacred union blessed by God.** God has joined two people together and made them one. Anyone who breaks that sacred bond is guilty of adultery even though they try to make themselves appear innocent. The only legitimate reason for a man to divorce a wife is if she is unfaithful and has committed adultery.

### APPLICATION

People are sneaky and subtle. They want to do evil. But they want to avoid the appearance of doing evil. They want to enjoy sin, but they do not want people to know they are sinning. They want to be respected in their community. They do not want to get in trouble with the law. So they look for 'loopholes'—ways of breaking laws that make them look as though they are keeping the law.

But God can't be mocked (Galatians 6:7). He knows our hearts. We cannot deceive him by following the letter of his law while violating the spirit of the law. If someone wishes to leave their husband or wife in order to marry another person, this is an act of adultery.\* **A divorce certificate can never make adultery acceptable in God's eyes.**

\*In English when a person divorces and remarries numerous times we call this 'serial adultery.'

**When believers marry, they are committing themselves to each other and to God.** God expects them to promise to love their spouse and be faithful to him or her. And God blesses their marriage union. He joins them together and *he sees them as one person*. They are no longer two individuals. They are one. They are as closely united in God's sight as if they were one person.

Adultery is a betrayal of our faithfulness to God and to our marriage partner. Adultery harms our spouse, robs us of our integrity and most of all, it offends God. That is why God says in **Malachi 2:16** , "I hate divorce! ....So guard yourself; always remain loyal to your wife." And of course this is true for wives as well. God expects you to be loyal to

your husbands.

**If you are thinking of leaving your mate**, I challenge you to take Jesus' words with great seriousness. Be faithful to your husband or wife. Treat your marriage as a sacred covenant which God himself has joined together. Honor God's law. And know that God views you and your spouse as one person. Become one with your husband or wife. We recommend that you seek the help of your pastor and the help of Christian counselors immediately if you are seriously considering divorce. They can help you and your spouse to bring healing and renewal to your marriage.

Through marriage God richly blesses us. I encourage you not to miss out on these blessings by following the path of unfaithfulness.

**If you have already left your husband or wife**, you need to seek to repair the relationships you have broken as much as you are able.

1. Humbly confess your unfaithfulness to God in prayer. The Bible says that "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9).

2. Ask for your spouse to forgive you. If you have not married another person, seek to be fully reconciled in marriage to your husband or wife. But you must be patient. It will probably be very difficult for your spouse to forgive you. You will both need pastors and Christian counselors to help you bring healing to your marriage.

3. If you have remarried, it will not be possible to be reconciled in marriage to your former husband or wife. You must still ask forgiveness of your former spouse. But now you will need to be faithful to God by honoring your new marriage commitment and then be faithful to your new spouse. By divorcing you were guilty of adultery but you sought God's forgiveness and repented of your sin. Now you are forgiven. You are no longer an adulterer. God

**Christians have taken four different views on how to understand the Bible's teaching on divorce:**

1. Some appeal to Mark 10 and say that no divorce is ever legitimate and no remarriage is ever permitted by the Bible.
2. Some say that the Bible permits divorce in cases of adultery (Matthew 19) or desertion (1 Cor. 7) but never permits remarriage. They say remarriage while the spouse is alive is always adultery.
3. Some say that in cases where adultery or desertion are involved, a Christian is free to divorce and remarry. They are "not bound" (1 Cor. 7:15).
4. Some say there may be other valid reasons for divorce, including instances of abuse in which a wife or her children are in physical or spiritual danger. Some who hold this view believe they may remarry, others do not.

**I hold to the fourth view** because Jesus' words in Matthew 19 were meant to protect wives from mistreatment by their husbands. If we do not

expects you to be faithful to him in the new relationship in which you find yourself.

4. Ask forgiveness of your church. Submit to the authority of Jesus and to the leaders of your church. Be patient and forgiving even when your fellow believers criticize you. They will need time to regain their trust in you.

allow divorce on the grounds of abuse, then we contradict part of Jesus' purpose in condemning divorce. We force a wife to remain in a situation in which she is mistreated and abused by her husband.

**You will need to look at the various Bible verses for yourself** and decide what they mean and how they apply to the different divorce cases. Your answers will determine the shape of your message. Your church may have rules and teachings on this matter that you should consider before giving your messages.

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## **Message #2: HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH RESPOND TO DIVORCE?**

**Topic:** Divorce and Remarriage

**Message theme:** Christians need to help husbands and wives by emphasizing the importance of marriage, the importance of repentance, and the importance of forgiveness.

**Bible Verses:** Matthew 19:3-6, 18:21-22

### **Introduction:**

In our last message we discovered that Jesus said that divorce is adultery. People should never mistreat their husbands or wives by leaving them in order to marry another person. In marriage God joins a man and a woman together. No one should separate people whom God has joined together and blessed.

But those words sound too strict to many people. **Many people in the world today suffer deep conflicts or other hurts in their marriages.** They may think that Jesus is telling them that they are trapped and that there is no way out of their problem. For example, what if a woman is married to an abusive, adulterous, unrepentant husband? If we say divorce is always adultery, she might come to believe that she has no legitimate way to escape the pain and suffering her marriage causes her.

**What is a Christian's response to people who desire a divorce?** Each divorce is different. Most are very complicated and messy! Believers will need to treat each

case separately with consideration for its unique details.

**Divorce may in extreme cases be considered necessary** for the emotional or physical well-being of one or both of the marriage partners. Jesus said that divorce may be permissible if one's spouse has committed adultery (Matthew 5:32, 19:9). The Apostle Paul said that believing spouses are not under any moral obligation if an unbelieving spouse chooses to leave (1 Corinthians 7:15). So there is hope for people who suffer in extreme situations. There is a way out for people whose marriage puts them in danger. **But a strong and prayerful effort should be made to save every Christian marriage.**

**In Matthew 18 and 19 the Bible gives us THREE HELPFUL PRINCIPLES\*\*\*** that help us understand the complicated issue of divorce and the church.

**1. First, we should do everything we can to save the marriages of our fellow believers.** We saw this in Matthew 19. Let's read verses 3-6 again:

*Some Pharisees came and tried to trap Jesus with this question: "Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife for any reason?"*

*"Haven't you read the Scriptures?" Jesus replied. "They record that from the beginning 'God made them male and female.' And he said, 'This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.' Since they are no longer two but one, let no one separate them, for God has joined them together."*

**Even though divorce may at times be necessary in extreme cases, it is never the ideal which God desires** for married believers. He sees them as if they were one person. He wants them to be one. Even in the extreme case of adultery the church should expend great efforts to bring about reconciliation before accepting the option of divorce.

Believers should stress that **an instance of unfaithfulness**

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**\*\*\* Producers:** You may need to make each of these three principles into a separate message, depending on the length of your broadcast.

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**Producers:** How can you make your message be WORDS OF HOPE for broken people with broken marriages? What can you say to encourage them to turn to God and to his church for comfort and strength to face difficult moments in their marriages? In your desire to speak strongly against sin, do not forget that the gospel is Good News for hurt, broken sinners. Word your message in ways that avoid rejecting the people you wish to help.

**does not necessarily mean the end of a marriage.** If one marriage partner commits adultery and then repents, the other partner should not rush to end the marriage and marry someone else. He or she should first try to forgive the unfaithful spouse and work to renew the marriage.

**The church also should do everything it can to help its members' marriages succeed BEFORE they run into problems.** Churches should give pre-marital counseling to people getting ready to marry. Older couples should give wise, loving counsel to young married couples. Preachers should explain what the Bible teaches about marriage.

God sees a husband and wife as one person. He himself has brought them together. Husbands, wives and their fellow believers should do everything possible to keep them united in the Lord.

## **2. The second principle the Bible gives us is that the church is to hold people accountable for their sins.**

We see this in **Matthew 18:15-17:**

*“If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the fault. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If that person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. If the church decides you are right, but the other person won't accept it, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector.”*

**Christians who have been harmed or wronged by someone should turn to the church for help** if they find that the person is unwilling to listen to them. The church has a responsibility to help fellow believers resolve their conflicts and differences **in an impartial\*\* manner.** This includes the problems that arise between husbands and wives.

**\*\*In an impartial manner:** in a way that is fair to both people and does not show preference for one or the other.

In most divorce cases, there are no innocent victims. In the past many churches tried to determine who was the guilty party and who was the innocent victim. But now churches are beginning to see that **both marriage partners usually share the blame for the breakdown of their marriage.** For example, they may have harmed each other with their words or actions. One or both of them might not give the other partner the proper love and support needed to make marriage work well. One partner may give too much freedom to the other partner, not holding him or her responsible.

It is important for both partners to see clearly how each has contributed to the problems in their marriage. It is also very important that marriage partners practice forgiving one another. **For these reasons, the church needs to hold both partners accountable. Both partners should be expected to do everything possible to try to make their marriage work and continue even when there has been an act of adultery.**

**Another important area in which marriage partners need to be held accountable is how they treat their children.** Children often suffer most from divorces.\*\*\* Many children think they are the reason for their parents' conflicts and divorce. Parents need to reassure them that this is not true. Many parents try to convince their children to hate the other parent. They try to force the children to 'take sides' in the conflict both before and after a divorce. It is cruel to teach children to hate in this way. The church needs to encourage parents to be very sensitive to their children's feelings when parents experience conflict in their marriages.

When we appeal for people to recognize their failures and sins, we know that they might refuse to do so. Church discipline may be necessary if one or both marriage partners refuse to obey God or recognize the authority of the church. **Church discipline\*** is an urgent appeal made by church leaders. It pleads with stubborn people and says, "If you truly believe in God's Word, turn from your sin and do what is right. Otherwise we must assume that you do not

\*\*\* I know this because my non-Christian parents divorced when I was nine years old. I am thankful that my parents did what they could do to help me understand why they divorced. They explained that I was not to blame for their divorce. My mother did not try to get me to hate my father. My father did not try to get me to hate my mother. But many parents are not as careful as my parents were to consider their children's needs.

\*See below for more about church discipline.

believe God, and that you are not one with us. We must treat you as though you are an unbeliever because you deliberately reject God's Word. We are not rejecting you. This is a severe and firm way to treat you, but it arises from our love for you. We believe it will be beneficial for you and for us if we treat you in this way." The goal of church discipline is always restoration and not punishment. Discipline must always be done with prayer, love and humility.

None of us wishes to treat our fellow believers this way. We love them and truly desire for them to be blessed by God. We want them to be faithful to God and to each other. That is why it is important for church leaders to challenge people to humbly recognize their faults and do what is right.

### **3. The third principle the Bible gives us is that, even if believers divorce, we must offer them forgiveness.**

**We see this clearly in Matthew 18:21-22:**

*Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?"*

*"No!" Jesus replied, "seventy times seven!"*

God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), but he doesn't hate divorced people. Divorce is a sin because marriage is special and because people are special. God doesn't want the people he loves to be harmed by divorce. Divorce is a traumatic separation and conflict that hurts and wounds people seriously. It causes emotional and relational cuts and bruises that often last for a lifetime.

**Too often Christians add to the pain of divorced people by condemning them or by rejecting them.** They treat divorced people as inferior. They think of divorce as an unforgivable sin. They withhold love and forgiveness from divorced people unless they completely reconcile and re-marry.

**But as followers of Jesus Christ we must communicate God's offer of healing and forgiveness to these hurting people.** We must show compassion to them rather than condemn or reject them. The church has a responsibility to forgive and welcome everyone who comes with a humble, repentant heart. This should not be an open, public meeting unless the scandal is well-known and requires the defense of the believer whose marriage failed.

**Church discipline should be applied with great caution and wisdom. The process of church discipline is not meant to judge who is guilty and who is innocent, but to call people to repentance.**\*\*\* Discipline is an urgent appeal from the leaders of the church. It urges sinful, unrepentant members to obey the authority of Jesus Christ and return to the way that leads to life. *The church never disciplines people for divorce, adultery or any other sin. The church disciplines people for hard-heartedness and lack of repentance.* No matter what people have done wrong, they should not be placed under church discipline if they are truly sorry and genuinely desire to follow the church's guidance. When sinners of all kinds turn back to God's ways, the goal of discipline has been achieved. The church can now rejoice that a sinner has been successfully brought back to full fellowship.

**The church does not require people to re-marry their original marriage partner in order to show they are fully repentant.** Jesus said that divorce is adultery, but divorced people do not live in a continual state of adultery. People who sin cannot undo the damage that was done. They can only ask God for forgiveness and ask what God wants them to do now that the damage is done.

**For many persons, full reconciliation and re-marriage to their partner is the best thing to do. But for some people it would not be wise.** And for those who have already remarried, it is impossible.

We must always have great respect for marriage and clearly state that divorce is wrong. But we must also have great

\*\*\* **Repentance:** to repent is to confess that we have sinned, to turn away from our sin, and to humbly and obediently return to God.

**What about remarriage?** Here is one church's solution: In the Reformed Church in America, a denomination closely affiliated with Words of Hope, the General Synod adopted the recommendation that "a pastor may with good conscience officiate in the remarriage of divorced persons if in his judgement, and the judgement of the congregation's board of elders, the persons have met the following requirements:

- recognition of personal responsibility for the failure of the former marriage,
- penitence and an effort to overcome limitations and failures,
- forgiveness of the former partner,
- fulfillment of obligations involved in the former marriage,
- and a willingness to make the

respect for Christian forgiveness. We must not tell truly repentant people that until they re-marry their former spouse they are locked in a state of continual adultery.

new marriage a Christian one by dependence upon Christ and participation in his church."

### **CONCLUSION:**

In summary, when we discover that married believers are considering divorce, we who follow Jesus Christ have

#### **three important responsibilities:**

- First, we need to do everything possible to keep these two people together whom God has joined. We should give them the support and encouragement that they need in order to stay together.
- Second, we need to challenge both husbands and wives to see how they have contributed to the breakdown of their marriage. We need to lovingly urge them to do what they can to change, so their marriage can be saved.
- And third, we need to model Christian forgiveness at all times, even if a husband and wife get a divorce.