

I. Read Luke 16:18

- A. There is perhaps no more serious matter in this world for a Christian than the consideration of marriage and divorce. In verse 18, Jesus is responding to the sinfulness of a culture that allowed men to divorce their wives easily. In our day, divorce for *slight cause* has also become common. Jesus alludes to God's higher purposes in marriage by warning those who opt for divorce of the gravity and seriousness of such a decision. The basis for His warning was the Father's view of marriage. It is as follows:

“Marriage is an exclusive relationship in which a man and a woman commit themselves to each other in covenant for life, and on the basis of this solemn vow become one flesh! (Genesis 2:24; Malachi 2:14; Matthew 19:4-6)...God's ideal for marriage is that the men and the women should complete each other (Genesis 2:23) and share in the creative work of making new people.” (*New Geneva Study Bible*)

There are two fundamental truths concerning marriage and divorce that many had forgotten in Jesus' day. This is true in our day as well. What are they? (See Genesis 2:24 and Malachi 2:16.)

- B. Given the two truths expressed in Genesis 2:24 and Malachi 2:16, what sort of points/conditions should we satisfy before entering into marriage?
- C. Give some practical advice to a young couple about to be married.

- D. Scripture does provide us with some principles regarding divorce. Before identifying them, read the following “Note” from a *Study Paper* presented at the 20th General Assembly of the PCA.

Note: Alternative Views of Divorce and Remarriage*

1. **No divorce, no remarriage:** Some believers argue that there are no legitimate divorces at all, and only death dissolves the marriage bond. For these folks, the exception clause in Matthew 19:3-8 is characteristically interpreted in one of two ways.

View #1: It (the exception cited above) refers to premarital unchastity during betrothal. If the betrothed proved unfaithful during that period or was discovered on the first night of marriage not to be a virgin, then the contract could be broken. (Cf. J. Dwight Pentecost, J. M. Boice).⁴

View #2: It (the exception cited above) refers to unlawful incestuous marriages, i.e., marriages within the prohibited degrees as proscribed in Leviticus 18:6-18. (Cf. Laney, C. C. Ryrie).⁵

Gordon Wenham holds a slight variation of this view. Jesus’ exception clause permitted divorce in the sense of separation, but marriage is a permanent relationship whether we get a divorce or not. 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.⁶ Common to all these views is the assumption that remarriage after divorce is not allowed.

2. **Strictly limited grounds for divorce, and for remarriage:** Closer to the general consensus among Reformed believers is the view that the Bible neither condones nor commands divorce, but rather permits and regulates divorce due to sin. However, a person can divorce only for adultery and separation of an unbelieving spouse. In the words of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*: “...nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage.”(24:6)⁷

John Stott and John Murray are among those who insist that such permission be given only in negative and reluctant terms. According to Stott:

“Only if a person divorces his partner on the ground of marital unfaithfulness is his remarriage not adulterous. Only if the unbeliever insists on leaving is the believer ‘not bound.’”

Common to all those who hold this view is the idea that these same limited grounds would be legitimate for remarriage too.

3. **Broader ground for divorce, and for remarriage:** Still other believers hold the view that the major verses under question, Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7, should be interpreted with more latitude.
- a. David Atkinson holds that there are sins other than fornication which may, by their gross and persistent nature, break the marriage covenant just as much as fornication, and are therefore grounds for divorce.⁹
 - b. Greg Bahnsen argues that porneia (fornication) in Matthew 19 involves more than sexual immorality; it should be interpreted as including any violations of the essential commitments of the marriage covenant, including spousal abuse or the refusal to provide protection and sustenance necessary for daily living.¹⁰

- c. **David Clowney believes that the New Testament writers were not intending to give us an exhaustive list of exceptions for divorce; we should view the texts on divorce as examples of breaking the marriage covenant and seek to apply the examples to particular situations such as persistent physical abuse, attempts on the life of a spouse, and so forth.¹¹**

These views differ from the liberal Protestant view of “no fault” divorce, or divorce on merely humanistic grounds such as “incompatibility.” As Clowney writes: “To seek to multiply such exceptions would be perverse, and precisely contrary to the intention of the Lord and His apostles.”¹²

- E. The Bible does allow divorce in *at least* two instances. Read Matthew 5:32, 19:9; 1 Corinth. 7:15 and identify them.
- F. What should all Christians keep in mind when considering how to deal with adultery or desertion?
- G. In spite of God’s ideal for marriage, divorce does occur, even in Christian marriages. In those instances, what course of action should the parties follow?
- H. In an instance in which a Christian has been divorced and is now remarried, what should he/she do?
- I. Should a divorced person be regarded as a second class citizen in regard to participating in the church?

J. No marriage will survive long without humility and the willingness to forgive. If a husband or wife has violated his/her vows and stumbled into sin, how many times should he/she be forgiven? (See Luke 17:3-4; Matthew 18:21-22.)

K. Close this lesson with all making renewed commitments to their marriages and with prayer for the strengthening of our marriages. Each person should thank God for his/her spouse, knowing that, regardless of what problems they have had, their present mate is God's perfect mate for them!

*Footnotes from “**Note: Alternative Views of Divorce and Remarriage:** (Question “D”)

⁴ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, Grand Rapids, 1981, pp.354-358. J.M. Boice, “The Biblical View of Divorce,” *Eternity*, Dec. 1970, pp.19-21.

⁵ J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth: A Biblical Examination of Divorce and Remarriage*, Minneapolis, 1981, pp.71-78. C.C. Ryrie, *The Place of Women in the Church*, New York, 1958, pp.43-48. See also William A. Heth and Gordon J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce: The Problem with the Evangelical Consensus*, Nashville, 1984, pp.154-160.

⁶ Gordon Wenham, The Biblical View of Marriage and Divorce, No.3, New Testament Teaching, *Third Way*, London, Nov.17,1977,pp.7-9.

⁷ *The Confession of Faith*, Brevard, North Carolina, 1983, p.69. (Chapter 24.6).

⁸ John Stott, *Involvement, Vol. 2, Social and Sexual Relationships in the Modern World*, Old Tappan, NJ, 1985, p.177, Cf. John Murray, *Divorce*, Philadelphia, 1961, pp.20-21.

⁹ David Atkinson, *To Have and To Hold*, Grand Rapids, 1979, Chapter 5, pp.134 ff.

¹⁰ Greg Bahnsen, “Theses of Divorce and Spousal Abuse,” Unpublished paper.

¹¹ David Clowney, “An argument for the conclusion that abuse could provide biblical legitimate grounds for divorce,” Unpublished paper.

¹² Ibid.