

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

11 Never Again?

Scripture Reading

1 Corinthians 7:17 – 40

So Far

Last week we attempted to get an overview of what the Bible has to say about divorce; this week we are going to consider what it has to say on remarriage.

The conclusion we came to last week is that it is overwhelmingly clear that God hates divorce. When a couple enter into a marriage covenant they make a commitment for life which God expects them to honour, however difficult that might prove to be. However, it appears there are two scenarios in which divorce can be acceptable: both accommodations to the realities of a sinful world.

- When an unbelieving husband or wife divorces a believer it is acceptable for the believer to go along with the divorce.
- Divorce is acceptable, though not required, when one partner has committed an act of sexual immorality.

Is Remarriage Possible?

Before we consider the possibility of remarriage after divorce it will be worthwhile to note some other points to do with remarriage in general.

Remarriage after the death of a husband or wife is acceptable, but, as is always the case when a believer is considering marriage, to marry an unbeliever is not on.

“A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.”

1 Corinthians 7:39

Remarriage after the death of a husband or wife is actually encouraged for some people, and it is worth noting why.

“Therefore I desire that the younger widows marry, bear children, manage the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully.”

1 Timothy 5:14

Remarriage to a husband or wife you have previously divorced and who has in the intervening time married someone else is forbidden.

“...when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man’s wife, 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, 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”

Deuteronomy 24:2 – 4

Can Divorced People Remarry?

In Matthew 5:31 – 32 and in the parallel passages of Matthew 19:1 – 9 and Mark 10:1 – 12 Jesus says

- Whoever divorces his wife causes her to commit adultery (Matthew 5:32)¹
- Whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery (Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9)
- Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery (Matthew 19:9 and Mark 10:11)
- If a woman divorces her husband and marries another she commits adultery (Mark 10:12)

¹ Although it is not said specifically in Matthew 5 that it is when the divorced wife remarries that adultery is committed, it is implied and Matthew 19 and Mark 10 say so clearly.

So it seems that when someone a divorcee remarries the seventh commandment is broken and by equating remarriage with adultery Jesus implies that even after a divorce has taken place the obligation of the marriage covenant still stands. That is not to say that the couple remain married in God's sight and the marriage still exists. When divorce takes place the marriage is ended but God still expects the couple to do all they can to honour the covenant they have entered into. But are there any exceptions?

Are There Any Exceptions?

Well there is that clause in Jesus' teaching, recorded by Matthew, which establishes that if a man divorces his wife because of sexual immorality he will not be committing adultery or causing her to commit adultery in remarrying.

Presumably this is because the marriage has been ended for a reason that is acceptable to God and His expectation that the marriage covenant should be honoured is removed.² In other words there is no adultery in remarriage because the first marriage was properly ended.

Would the same reasoning apply to the other acceptable kind of divorce, where a believer is divorced by an unbeliever? To find an answer to that question we have to return to 1 Corinthians 7.

In favour of the view that remarriage is acceptable in these circumstances there are those who point out that Paul says a believer who has been divorced by an unbeliever is not bound (verse 15) and, they say, the most natural reading of this is to take it to mean that he or she is free of all the obligations of marriage. They would also point to verses 27 and 28.

“Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But even if you do marry, you have not sinned.”

1 Corinthians 7:27 – 28

Who are the people who have been loosed from a wife? Well, they say, it cannot be widowers or widows unless the first part of the verse is saying, “don't kill your wife.” They must be those who have been properly freed from the obligations of their marriage: those who are not bound (verse 15); those who have been divorced for an acceptable reason. If such people remarry, Paul says, “They have not sinned.”

The Other Side

Of course, there are others who look at the same passages and take a different view. They would say that the exception clause of Matthew 19:9 allows for divorce but says nothing conclusive about whether remarriage is permissible — and the original sentence structure is such that that conclusion is possible. They would say that some doubt is left and in fact, in 1 Corinthians 7:10 – 11 Paul is clarifying the matter by saying, “no remarriage at all.” By drawing a parallel between those verses and Jesus teaching they say the one who “does depart” must in fact be someone who has divorced her husband because of sexual sin.

They would argue that the words, “not in bondage” in 1 Corinthians 7:15 merely mean that a believer may accept a divorce that has been thrust upon him or her by an unbeliever and they would say that those who are loosed from a wife, in verse 27, are people whose partners have died.

In addition, those who take the “no remarriage” line tend to support it with the belief we considered last week that those who are divorced do in fact remain married in the sight of God.

What Do You Conclude?

My conclusion from all this is that when a marriage has been properly ended in a way that is acceptable to God, for reasons such that restoration of the marriage is no longer possible or allowable, divorced people are free to remarry³ — subject, of course, to the restrictions placed on every believer in the choice of a partner.

It seems to me that this is the more natural reading of the passages we have looked at and how they would have been understood by their original readers.

In practice I would advise any couple considering remarriage after a divorce to exercise great care. Each must be convinced beyond doubt that he or she is doing what is right before the Lord. They must also

² It could be argued that this is the case because having been divorced because of adultery the adulterous partner has, in terms of Deuteronomy 24:4, been defiled and therefore could not be remarried: therefore there is, so far as God is concerned, no longer an obligation for either partner to fulfil any commitment to the marriage.

³ Note that it is whether or not the marriage has been properly ended that determines whether or not remarriage is acceptable. Who the guilty partner was is not relevant though it may well be relevant to whether or not remarriage would be advisable.

consider honestly why their first marriages failed to see if there are lessons that must be learned. After all the fact that there was a divorce means someone was getting it seriously wrong.

Given the many pressures and practical difficulties that often come with second or subsequent marriages the advice must always be, "If you have any doubt do not do it."

It's A Messy World

In view of the strength of the teaching we have against divorce, situations where remarriage is a possibility should not arise often, but because we live in a sinful world they do. And because we live in a sinful world the scenarios that are presented to us are often complex and messy.

How would you advise the following people?

- George divorced his unsaved wife because he could not stand her laziness but now he has become a Christian. What should he do?
- Philip and Angela both profess to be believers but, against the advice of their friends and their pastor they have gone ahead with a divorce on grounds of unreasonable conduct. Both have continued to attend the same church. How should the congregation react to them?
- Rachel, who professed to be a believer, committed adultery with Brian who was an elder in the church. When she became pregnant with Brian's child she divorced her husband and married Brian. Now they have both repented of their sin and want to become actively involved in the life of the church.