

The Law of Marriage: What God Says About Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

For the married woman was bound by law to the living husband; but if the husband dies, she is set free from the law of the husband. So then, [if] the husband [is] living, she will be called an adulteress if she becomes another man's. But if the husband dies, she is free from the law, [so as for] her not to be an adulteress [by] becoming another man's. (Romans 7:2-3)

Marriage is a serious, sacred undertaking. It is not to be taken lightly like the world takes it. What makes it so serious? It is a picture of Christ and the Church: *“Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present it to Himself [as] the glorious church, without spot or wrinkle or any such things, but that it should be holy and without blemish. So men ought to love their wives as their [own] bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever yet hated his [own] flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, even as the Lord loves the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones. For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two of them shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. But also let everyone of you in particular so love his wife even as himself, and the wife that she defers to her husband” (Ephesians 5:25-33).*

To defile marriage is to defile the picture of Christ and the Church. It is to blaspheme the name of Christ. For example, a couple in an adulterous relationship are putting forth a picture of a Christ who is adulterous, who has become one flesh with the Great Whore. In the Old Testament, adultery was to be punished by the death of the adulterer and the adulteress (Leviticus 20:10). The New Testament equivalent of the death penalty is excommunication (1 Corinthians 5:11-13). This is because all adulterers are unsaved (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

The one-flesh relationship between husband and wife that is mentioned in Ephesians 5 was established in the Garden of Eden: *“And Adam said, This [is] now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. [She] shall be called Woman because [she] was taken out of man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife and they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:23-24).*

Jesus Christ used the Genesis passage establishing marriage to say that the man and the woman who have become one flesh have been joined by God are not to be separated by man: *“But answering, He said to them, Have you not read that He who created [them] from the beginning created them male and female? And He said, For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So that they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matthew 19:4-6).*

Paul even used the Genesis passage establishing marriage to describe the sexual relationship between a man and a harlot: *“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Then taking the members of Christ, shall I make [them] members of a harlot? Let it not be! Or do you not know that he being joined to a harlot is one body? For He says, The two [shall be] into one flesh” (1 Corinthians 6:15-16).*

The marriage union - that sexual union between a man and a woman - is much more than something physical. The two are no longer two; they have become one spiritually. They have been united for life. God makes it perfectly clear in His Word that this binding is for life: *“Or are you ignorant, brothers, (for I speak to those knowing Law), that the Law lords it over the man for as long a time as he lives? For the married woman was bound by Law to the living husband; but if the husband dies, she is set free from the Law of the husband. So then, [if] the husband [is] living, she will be called an adulteress if she becomes another man's. But if the husband dies, she is free from the Law, [so as for] her not to be an adulteress [by] becoming another man's” (Romans 7:1-3). “A wife is bound by law for as long a time as her husband lives; but if her husband sleeps, she is free to be married to whomever she desires, only in [the] Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:39).*

It is important to note that divorce does not dissolve the bond of marriage. The bond of marriage continues to be a lifelong bond, no matter if the spouses have divorced. “Divorce” merely means separation. The actual “bill of divorce” to “put her away” was allowed by Moses because of Israel’s hardheartedness (Matthew 19:7-8).

The passages in Romans 7 and 1 Corinthians 7 are not the only places in the New Testament that state that the marriage bond is a lifelong bond. Jesus Christ stated this plainly: *“It was also said, Whoever puts away his wife, let him give her a bill of divorce. But I say to you, Whoever puts away his wife, apart from a matter of fornication, causes her to commit adultery. And whoever shall marry the one put away commits adultery” (Matthew 5:31-32). “And I say to you, Whoever shall put away his wife, if not for fornication, and shall marry another, [that one] commits adultery. And the one who marries her [who was] put away commits adultery” (Matthew 19:9). “And He said to them, Whoever may dismiss his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman puts away her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mark 10:11-12). “Everyone putting away his wife, and marrying another, commits adultery. And everyone marrying her who has been put away from a husband commits adultery” (Luke 16:18).*

Professing Christians who condone certain kinds of adultery are quick to go to the passages in Matthew in their attempt to show that at least the so-called “innocent party” in a divorce is allowed to remarry. Their reasoning is along the following lines: If a man puts away (divorces) his wife because his wife committed fornication, then he is free to remarry, since he was not the one who committed the fornication, and the fornication of the wife dissolved the marriage bond. They use the so-called “exception clauses” in Matthew 5 and 19 to defend their position: *“... apart from a matter of fornication ...” and “... if not for fornication ...”.*

But is this what Jesus Christ was teaching? If so, then marriage is really not a lifelong bond in all instances, and the Bible contradicts itself - even Jesus Christ contradicts His own teachings

elsewhere! Romans 7:1-3, 1 Corinthians 7:39, Mark 10:11-12, and Luke 16:18 have no “exception clause.”

Those who wrote the Westminster Confession of Faith realized that the “exception clause” alone would not hold up in light of the passages that stated that death was the only thing that dissolved a marriage. So what did they do? Did they admit that the “exception clause” did not give the “innocent party” a legitimate, lawful reason to remarry? Of course not, since this would have been tantamount to saying that many in the “church” (and in the government) were adulterers! Instead, the Westminster Assembly chose to make an incredible unbiblical leap, while at the same time proving what they denied! They wrote, “In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce, and after the divorce to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.” In adding “as if the offending party were dead,” the Westminster Assembly admitted that only death dissolves the marriage bond! And to get around this plain truth, they used “as if” - a pretend, imaginary, make-believe, fake, fabricated “death” to justify remarriage of the “innocent party” while the original spouse was still alive! They had to equate it somehow with some kind of “death” of a spouse, because they knew that the Bible says that the death of a spouse was the only way that a marriage bond is dissolved! (The Bible, of course, was not talking about an imaginary or hypothetical death; it was talking about a real death.) What a clever yet damnable way to justify adultery and to call adulterers their brothers and sisters in Christ!

In addition, allowing the remarriage of the “innocent party” on the basis of the reasoning that fornication dissolves the marriage bond necessarily allows the remarriage of the “guilty party”! Consider: A man and a woman are married. The woman commits fornication, and the man and the woman divorce. If this act of fornication dissolves the marriage bond, then the man (the “innocent party”) is no longer bound to the wife for life. And what of the wife? Is she bound to the man for life? Not if her act of fornication dissolves the marriage bond! She, as the “guilty party,” is in the same position as the man; since the marriage bond has been dissolved, she is free to remarry, and this would not be adultery! The whole point of the “innocent party” being allowed to remarry is moot!

A very important question is this: Why is remarriage after divorce called “adultery” rather than some other sexual sin? After all, the people had already divorced! How can it be adultery if they had already divorced? Think about it. Adultery is solely a violation of the marriage bond. Didn’t these people go through a proper divorce so as to dissolve the marriage bond? Yet Jesus Christ calls a remarriage after divorce adultery! Why? The only reasonable answer is that marriage is a lifelong bond that is not dissolved by adultery, divorce, or anything else except for the death of a spouse.

What, then, does the “exception clause” really mean? Let us look at Matthew 19:9 again: *“And I say to you, Whoever shall put away his wife, if not for fornication, and shall marry another, [that one] commits adultery. And the one who marries her [who was] put away commits adultery.”*

The answer is clear. The “exception clause” is referring to the “putting away” - the divorce. Divorcing a wife for any reason other than fornication is unlawful. The “exception clause” does not

refer to the remarrying.

There is something else in this “exception clause” that most will either not touch or will advocate disobedience to: Jesus Christ is here confirming that it is commanded that a man discontinue marital relations with (divorce) his wife if his wife commits fornication! For example, once a wife commits adultery with another man, the original husband is not to take her back into a marital relationship! The passage in Romans 7 that was mentioned earlier in this article confirms that the Law of Marriage that was established in the Old Testament continues to be the Law of Marriage today. Thus, we can see what is lawful and what is not when it comes to marriage, divorce, remarriage, and adultery, by looking at the Old Testament Law of Marriage.

A significant passage that has to do with a husband taking an adulterous wife back is found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4: *“When a man has taken a wife and married her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found a thing of uncleanness in her, and he writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; and if she goes out from his house and goes and becomes another man’s [wife], and the latter husband hates her, and writes her a bill of divorce, and puts [it] in her hand, and sends her out of his house or if the latter husband who took her to be his wife dies; her former husband who sent her away [is] not to take her again to be his wife, after she is defiled. For it [is] a hateful thing before Jehovah, and you shall not cause the land to sin which Jehovah your God is giving to you as an inheritance.”*

This is a stunning passage. If a man divorces his wife, and this wife then marries another man, and if the second husband divorces her, the first husband is not to take his original wife back! The woman has become defiled, and she is never to marry again. Not even the death of the second husband wipes away the defilement! If the second husband dies, the first husband is still not to take his original wife back! This second marriage has changed the relationship with the first husband for good. The defiled wife is not to remarry, and the first husband is also not to remarry while his original wife is still alive, because he is still bound to his original wife. Any more marriage for either person would be an abomination - whether it is remarriage of the two original spouses, the remarriage of the wife to another husband, or the remarriage of the husband to another wife! And when Jesus Christ said, *“apart from a matter of fornication,”* He confirmed that this part of the Law of Marriage is still in effect!

In light of this, some might ask, “What about the reconciliation passage in 1 Corinthians 7: 10-11?” The passage says this: *“But I command the ones being married (not I, but the Lord), a woman not to be separated from her husband; but if indeed she is separated, remain unmarried, or be reconciled to the husband; and a husband not to leave [his] wife.”*

This passage is not talking about reconciliation after adultery at all. In fact, it shows just the opposite: the woman who is separated from her husband is to remain unmarried! And the other lawful option for a woman who is separated from her husband (who has not married another - thus, who has not had sex with another) is to be reconciled to her husband. Reconciliation can happen if there has been no adultery.

Let us go back to the last part of Matthew 19:9: “*And the one who marries her [who was] put away commits adultery.*” Jesus ends the scenario by quashing any notion of the “innocent party” being allowed to remarry. The one who was put away in this scenario is the one who was divorced for a reason other than fornication - she was the “innocent party” who was unlawfully divorced! And yet, even though she did nothing wrong, if someone else marries her after her husband divorces her, that person who marries her commits adultery!

Another question might arise about 1 Corinthians 7:25-28: “*But about virgins, I have no command of [the] Lord. But I give judgment, as having received mercy by [the] Lord to be faithful. Then I think this to be good, because of the present necessity: that [it is] good for a man to be thus. Have you been bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Have you been released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you also marry, you do not sin. And if the virgin marries, she does not sin. But such will have trouble in the flesh. But I am sparing you.*”

Some might say that this shows that if someone has been divorced from a wife, he does not sin if he remarries. This, of course, would contradict other Scripture passages. But if one looks at the context, this passage is easily explained. Note that the paragraph starts with “*But about virgins.*” This means that what follows in this paragraph is talking about virgins; everything needs to be interpreted in this light. Thus, the question, “*Have you been bound to a wife?*” is addressed to virgins. “*Have you been released from a wife?*” is addressed to virgins. All instances of “*you*” (including “*But if you also marry, you do not sin*”) refer to virgins. Specifically, the “*you*” is talking about male virgins, since the questions are about one’s wife. Then, in verse 28, “*you*” still refers to the male virgin, while “*virgin*” refers to the female virgin, as evidenced by the use of the word “*she.*”

What do “*bound to*” and “*released from*” mean? Since Paul is talking about virgins, it certainly does not mean “*married to*” and “*divorced from after being married to.*” It is talking about betrothal. A man is “*bound to*” his wife in betrothal. Betrothed men and women are called husbands and wives, even though they have not been married.

“*Released from*” can either mean someone who has never been betrothed or someone whose betrothal has been broken off. In either case, the person is still a virgin. It is not sinful for bound or released virgins to marry.

We have seen thus far that marriage is a lifelong bond initiated by a “one-flesh” relationship that is only dissolved by the death of a spouse. We have seen that if a wife (husband) becomes another’s while the original husband (wife) is still alive, this is adultery, with no exceptions, no matter who the “innocent party” or the “guilty party” is. We have seen that an adulterous wife (husband) is never to be taken back into a marital relationship by the husband (wife).

There is a difference between a one-time act of adultery and being called an “adulterer” or an “adulteress.” One who is an “adulterer” or an “adulteress” is a person whose life is characterized by the sin of repeated adultery. Romans 7:1-3 says that someone who is in an ongoing marital relationship with someone other than his/her original spouse while the original spouse is still alive

is someone whose life is characterized by the sin of repeated adultery (called an “adulteress” in the case of a woman). And 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 says that such people are unregenerate. Thus, everyone whose life is characterized by the sin of a marital relationship with someone other than the original spouse while the original spouse is still alive is unregenerate.

What should people do who have become Christians after engaging in such damnable behavior that is indicative of lostness? Let us consider some scenarios.

Scenario 1: Man A and Woman A are unregenerate and are in a marital relationship. Woman A then commits adultery with Man B. Woman A then divorces Man A and marries Man B. Woman A is then regenerated. What is Woman A to do? She is to cease from all marital relations with Man B. She is not to return to a marital relationship with Man A. She is to remain celibate.

Scenario 2: Man A and Woman A are unregenerate and are in a marital relationship. Man A and Woman A then divorce. Man A then marries Woman B. Man A and Woman B are then regenerated. What are Man A and Woman B to do? They are both to cease from all marital relations with each other. Man A is not to return to a marital relationship with Woman A. Man A and Woman B are to remain celibate.

Scenario 3: Man A and Woman A are unregenerate and are in a marital relationship. Man A and Woman A then divorce. Woman A then marries Man B. Man B and Woman A then divorce, and Woman A returns to Man A (her original spouse), and they have a marital relationship. Woman A is then regenerated. What is Woman A to do? She is to cease from all marital relations with Man A. She is to remain celibate. If both Man A and Woman A are regenerated, then they are to cease all marital relations with each other and remain celibate.

Scenario 4: Man A and Woman A are unregenerate and are in a marital relationship. (This is assuming that Man A and Woman A were never married to anyone before this; i.e., they were virgins.) Man A and Woman A then divorce but do not remarry anyone else. Woman A is then regenerated. What is Woman A to do? She has the choice to either remain divorced or be reconciled to Man A and engage in marital relations with Man A. She may not marry anyone other than her original spouse.

It is not a surprising thing that the Bible speaks about marriage often and has specific rules about marriage. When God has made something that is a picture of Christ and the Church, He shows that He takes this picture seriously, including showing that any perversion of this picture is akin to blasphemy. May all God’s people take it just as seriously and obey God’s Law of Marriage.

by Marc D. Carpenter
www.outsidethecamp.org