Divorce and Remarriage

Ten Hard Questions Answered From Scripture

Series 1-10

By Paul Tackett

VerseQuest Ministries




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DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

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Written by **Pastor Paul Tackett**

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Divorce and Remarriage — Ten Hard Questions Answered From Scripture is a comprehensive Bible study examining God's institution of marriage, the Mosaic provisions concerning divorce, the teachings of Jesus Christ, the instructions of the Apostle Paul, legitimate marital release, remarriage, repentance, forgiveness, pastoral qualifications, and Christian restoration.

This work is written from a King James Bible-believing, dispensational perspective, maintaining the distinction between Israel and the Church, the Law of Moses and the present dispensation of grace, and the authority of Scripture over religious tradition.

The biblical explanations, interpretations, and conclusions presented throughout this publication are intended to encourage careful examination of the written Word of God. Readers are encouraged to search the Scriptures and test every doctrinal conclusion against the King James Bible.

This publication is intended for biblical instruction and Christian study. It does not replace individualized legal advice concerning divorce proceedings, custody, civil obligations, or matters involving personal safety.

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2 Timothy 2:15 — KJV

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Introduction — Divorce and Remarriage — Ten Hard Questions Answered From Scripture

There is something terribly wrong with a religious system that can preach salvation by grace on Sunday morning, eternal security on Sunday evening, the sufficiency of the blood of Jesus Christ on Wednesday night, and then spend the rest of the week treating divorced Christians as though Calvary encountered one sin it could not handle. A man can have a history of drunkenness, fornication, theft, idolatry, and practically everything else listed in First Corinthians 6, and the congregation will rejoice when he trusts Jesus Christ. But let somebody discover that the fellow was divorced fifteen years ago, and suddenly the machinery of religious respectability begins grinding its gears. The questions start coming, the suspicions begin circulating, and somebody reaches for a denominational rulebook as though the blood of Christ must first receive approval from headquarters. Apparently, God can redeem a murderer, justify an adulterer, forgive a thief, and save a drunkard, but a divorce decree presents an administrative difficulty too complicated for heaven to resolve. What an extraordinary gospel! The Apostle Paul declared in First Corinthians 6:11, "And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." That statement was written to people whose former lives included serious wickedness. The apostle did not attach a convenient exception declaring that everybody was washed except the people with complicated marital histories. **The blood of Jesus Christ has never needed permission from a church committee to accomplish what Almighty God declared it accomplished.**

Now understand something before anybody starts imagining that this series is an advertisement for divorce. Marriage is God's institution, not a disposable arrangement invented by mankind for temporary personal satisfaction. Genesis 2:24 declares, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." Jesus Christ reaffirmed that institution in Matthew 19:6 when He declared, "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." Those words are not suggestions. A husband has no biblical authority to abandon a faithful wife because another woman has captured his imagination. A wife has no divine permission to discard a faithful husband because another man promises a more exciting existence. The marriage covenant is not a hotel reservation that can be canceled whenever the accommodations become less entertaining than originally advertised. Adultery is sin. Deliberate abandonment is wickedness. Cruelty, dishonesty, sexual unfaithfulness, and the neglect of legitimate family responsibilities are violations of God's commandments. Nothing in this series will excuse those offenses. But there is an equally serious error on the opposite side: taking the sins that destroy marriages and automatically charging them to every person whose marriage has ended. **Defending the holiness of marriage does not require**

condemning the innocent, and defending the grace of God does not require excusing the guilty. Both extremes must answer to the same King James Bible.

One of the most disgraceful features of the modern religious controversy is the assumption that a divorce decree automatically identifies a guilty person. A man may remain faithful to his wife for years, provide for his household, love his children, and seek reconciliation while his wife deliberately pursues another man. She may eventually abandon the marriage, refuse every reasonable effort toward restoration, and establish another relationship. Yet when the resulting divorce becomes public knowledge, certain religious authorities will treat the abandoned husband as though he personally committed every offense that brought the marriage to an end. Reverse the circumstances, and the injustice remains the same. A faithful woman may suffer her husband's adultery, cruelty, abandonment, or deliberate rejection of marital responsibility, only to discover that some self-appointed religious judge considers the resulting divorce a permanent mark against her character. What remarkable justice! The offender commits the wickedness, the injured person suffers the consequences, and religion announces that everybody involved must receive the same sentence. John 7:24 commands, “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.” Righteous judgment requires knowing what actually happened. **A marriage certificate establishes that two people entered a marriage; it does not establish that both committed the same sin when one destroyed it.** The Lord knows the difference, and His people ought to care enough about truth to discover it.

Before discussing divorce, however, we must understand marriage itself. God established the institution in Eden before Moses received the Law, before Israel existed as a nation, before a courthouse issued a license, and before any religious organization developed ceremonial regulations. Genesis 2:18 records the LORD declaring, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.” God created the woman, brought her unto Adam, and established the relationship subsequently described as one flesh. Marriage did not originate in human lust, governmental invention, or religious tradition. It originated with the Creator. That fact places marriage beneath divine authority from its beginning. But notice something equally important: the first marriage was established before sin entered the world. There was no adultery in Eden, no covenant treachery, no abandonment, and no need for a bill of divorcement. The later Scriptures address circumstances arising after mankind's fall. Consequently, a serious Bible student must distinguish God's original institution from the regulations subsequently given because sinners violated it. **A law addressing a broken marriage does not establish that God designed marriage to be broken, any more than a law against murder establishes that God designed men to become murderers.** The original institution comes first; the consequences of human rebellion must be examined afterward.

That brings us to one of the passages religious people frequently handle with remarkable selectivity. Deuteronomy 24:1–4 describes a man who had married a woman, subsequently gave her a bill of divorcement, and sent her out of his house. Verse 2 declares, “And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.” The following verses identify the second man as the latter husband and the original man as her former husband. Those expressions matter. Moses recognized genuine divorcement and an intervening marriage under Israel's national Law. He also established a serious prohibition against the former husband reclaiming the woman after that subsequent marriage. Now, the passage does not make every divorce righteous, and no Christian should use Israel's civil legislation as unrestricted permission to abandon a spouse. Jesus Christ specifically explained that Moses suffered putting away because of hardness of heart. But the legal consequences Moses described were not imaginary. The woman had a former husband and a latter husband. A doctrine that insists those expressions cannot possess their ordinary meaning has encountered a problem with the actual words of Scripture. **The Bible does not become more holy when men deny what Moses wrote, and divorce does not become more respectable when men abuse what Moses permitted.** Both the institution and the regulation must remain where God placed them.

The Old Testament supplies another passage that creates considerable discomfort for those who insist that every mention of divorce must necessarily identify identical guilt in every circumstance. Jeremiah 3:8 records the LORD declaring concerning backsliding Israel, “I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce.” There stands the statement, and it belongs to the inspired Word of God. Of course, Jehovah was not describing an ordinary human marriage conducted before a magistrate. He was employing the institution of marriage to illustrate His covenant relationship with national Israel. The northern kingdom had committed spiritual adultery through idolatry and rebellion, and the LORD described His covenant judgment through the language of divorcement. Israel was the offending party; Jehovah remained righteous. That prophetic setting must not be confused with the Church or transformed into unrestricted permission for ordinary husbands and wives to divorce. Nevertheless, the distinction between the guilty party and the party executing judgment is unmistakable. Hosea likewise employs marriage imagery to expose Israel's covenant unfaithfulness and announce the LORD's future dealings with His people. **God did not become unfaithful because Israel was unfaithful, and a faithful human spouse does not automatically become guilty of betrayal because another person has betrayed the marriage.** The illustration cannot be made to answer every divorce question, but its actual testimony must not be ignored.

Then we come to the words of Jesus Christ, where religious tradition has managed to produce enough confusion to keep denominational committees occupied for centuries. In

Matthew 19:3, the Pharisees approached the Lord “tempting him” and asked whether a man could put away his wife “for every cause.” They were not humbly requesting instruction about becoming better husbands. They wanted to involve Christ in a controversy concerning the permissible grounds for divorce under Moses. Jesus answered by returning to Genesis, identifying God's original institution, and declaring that man must not put asunder what God joined together. When the Pharisees appealed to the writing of divorcement, He explained that Moses suffered the practice because of hardness of heart. Then Matthew 19:9 records these words: “Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery.” Notice the exception. Christ placed it there. Mark 10 and Luke 16 record solemn warnings against wrongful divorce and remarriage without expressly repeating that qualification, but their silence does not erase Matthew's words. **The legalist wants Christ's prohibition without Christ's exception, while the rebel wants Christ's exception without Christ's prohibition. The Bible gives neither man permission to edit the sentence.** We must believe the entire testimony.

The controversy becomes even more serious when the question turns from divorce to remarriage. Some religious authorities acknowledge that fornication may provide legitimate grounds for ending a marriage but insist that the innocent spouse must remain unmarried until the guilty former spouse dies. Others recognize that Matthew 19:9 connects putting away and marrying another within the same statement and understand the exception as qualifying the adultery judgment attached to that conduct. These questions require careful examination of the actual words, not merely the announcement of whichever interpretation sounds more severe. First Corinthians 7 introduces additional instruction concerning being bound and being loosed. Verse 27 asks, “Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife.” Verse 28 continues, “But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned.” Those words are not permission for a man to manufacture freedom by abandoning his faithful wife. But neither may they be dismissed merely because somebody insists that every second marriage must constitute adultery. **There is a difference between a man who seeks release through rebellion and one whose former marital obligation has legitimately ended.** The first needs correction. The second must be examined according to the liberty Scripture actually establishes.

The Apostle Paul also confronts the circumstances of the believer whose spouse simply walks away. First Corinthians 7:12–13 commands Christians married to willing unbelieving spouses not to abandon those marriages. Salvation does not automatically dissolve an existing marital relationship merely because one spouse has believed the gospel and the other has not. But verse 15 introduces a different circumstance: “But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace.” There is a distinction that deserves serious attention. A faithful

Christian may desire reconciliation, pray for the departing spouse, provide for legitimate responsibilities, and do everything within personal ability to preserve the marriage. But that believer cannot force another human being to remain faithful. Romans 12:18 declares, “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.” Notice those qualifications. Peace must be pursued where possible, and the Christian is responsible for what lies within personal ability. **One spouse cannot preserve a marriage by signing both names upon the covenant while the other person deliberately refuses to participate.** Biblical faithfulness does not require assuming responsibility for another person's rebellion.

We must also deal with the serious matter of violence, coercion, intimidation, and abuse within marriage. There are religious authorities who will tell an endangered woman to return immediately to a violent husband because the Bible commands wives not to depart. Some apparently believe the sanctity of marriage is best demonstrated by keeping the injured person within reach of another assault. But Ephesians 5:25 commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church. Colossians 3:19 forbids bitterness. First Peter 3:7 requires a husband to honor his wife and warns that his prayers may be hindered. Psalm 11:5 declares the LORD's hatred of those who love violence. These commandments do not disappear because the offender possesses a wedding ring. Protective separation must be distinguished from completed divorce, and neither automatically establishes liberty to enter another marriage. Those separate questions require their own biblical examination. But immediate protection from danger does not require the injured person to remain available for further harm. **The authority of a husband is not permission to terrorize his household, and the sanctity of marriage is not a shield behind which wickedness may hide.** A church that protects the offender while condemning the endangered spouse has confused submission to Scripture with submission to sin.

Another difficult question concerns people whose marriages ended before they ever received salvation. Perhaps a man spent years living in open rebellion against God, entered an ungodly marriage, committed serious wrongdoing, and eventually experienced divorce. Years later, somebody preached the gospel to him. He learned that Christ died for his sins, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. He believed the gospel and received salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. What now? Does the former marriage permanently define his spiritual standing? Does the blood of Christ forgive every sin except those associated with divorce? Second Corinthians 5:17 declares, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” Ephesians 1:7 establishes redemption through Christ's blood and the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace. That does not cancel every earthly consequence of previous wrongdoing. Children still require care, legitimate obligations

remain, and present conduct must answer to Scripture. But salvation is not made conditional upon repairing every historical circumstance. **The new birth is not another divorce proceeding, and the blood of Jesus Christ does not become insufficient because the sinner's former life embarrasses religious spectators.** Redemption must be believed without turning grace into permission for continued wickedness.

Then there is the question that has caused no small amount of division among independent Baptist churches: can a divorced and remarried man still be qualified to pastor? First Timothy 3:2 declares that a bishop must be “the husband of one wife.” Titus 1:6 repeats the requirement. Those are genuine qualifications, and every word must be honored. But the surrounding passages also require blamelessness, vigilance, sobriety, proper behavior, sound doctrine, responsible household government, and a good reputation. A preacher may possess one uninterrupted marriage while violating nearly every other qualification through dishonesty, greed, cruelty, uncontrolled anger, or habitual neglect of his household. Another man may have been abandoned by an unfaithful wife, subsequently entered a legitimate marriage, and demonstrated years of responsible Christian conduct. Those cases require biblical examination rather than automatic conclusions. Forgiveness does not qualify every man for pastoral office, and an impressive sermon cannot substitute for character. But neither does a divorce decree automatically establish the man's guilt or prove that his present marriage is unlawful. **The Holy Ghost required a bishop to be the husband of one wife; He did not write that the possession of exactly one lifetime wedding photograph establishes every qualification for office.** Churches must examine the actual man according to the complete standard, not merely count his ceremonies.

This entire controversy exposes another uncomfortable problem: religious people frequently find it easier to condemn visible failure than confront concealed wickedness. A woman who has suffered an unwanted divorce may become the subject of suspicion, while another woman remains publicly married to a husband who secretly commits adultery, mistreats his family, and violates the commandments governing his conduct. The first woman's suffering is visible through a courthouse record. The second man's wickedness remains hidden behind respectable appearances. Yet some congregations appear convinced that the absence of divorce papers automatically establishes superior righteousness. Matthew 23 exposes the hypocrisy of religious men whose outward appearance concealed inward corruption. Romans 2:1 likewise warns against judging another while practicing wickedness oneself. None of this means every divorced person is innocent or every uninterrupted marriage conceals sin. It means outward appearances cannot replace righteous judgment. **A wedding anniversary measures the passage of time, not the holiness of the people who remained married throughout it.** The Church

must confront genuine wickedness wherever it occurs without manufacturing accusations against people who have already suffered another person's betrayal.

The matter of forgiveness and restoration must also be addressed without compromise. Galatians 6:1 commands spiritual believers to restore one overtaken in a fault in the spirit of meekness, while verse 2 instructs Christians to bear one another's burdens. Ephesians 4:31–32 commands the removal of bitterness, wrath, anger, and malice, followed by kindness and forgiveness. These instructions do not require pretending that adultery, abandonment, or cruelty never occurred. Nor do they abolish the qualifications for particular offices or eliminate legitimate consequences of wrongdoing. A man who abandoned his children must still provide for them. A guilty spouse must confront the sin rather than hide behind a moving testimony. Where reconciliation is possible, lawful, and genuinely appropriate, it deserves serious consideration. But restoration cannot be manufactured by requiring the injured person to accept continued wickedness. Nor should a Christian faithfully established in a lawful subsequent marriage be commanded to destroy another household simply to satisfy a religious theory concerning the past. **God does not require a believer to repair yesterday's disobedience by committing tomorrow's disobedience.** Repentance must produce present obedience, not another collection of injured people.

There is a reason this subject requires ten substantial examinations rather than a handful of religious slogans. Marriage began in Genesis, but the Bible did not end in Genesis. Moses addressed divorcement under Israel's national Law. The prophets condemned covenant treachery and employed marriage to illustrate Jehovah's relationship with Israel. Jesus Christ confronted wrongful divorce while expressly identifying an exception concerning fornication. The Apostle Paul instructed the Church concerning marriage, separation, unbelieving spouses, legitimate release, widowhood, and the responsibilities of Christian households. His epistles also established qualifications for pastoral leadership and commanded believers to restore those overtaken in faults. These passages must not be forced into an undifferentiated collection of regulations. Israel is not the Church. The Law of Moses is not the governing covenant of the Christian under grace. A prophetic illustration concerning national Israel is not automatically an ordinary marriage statute. And an illustration concerning the believer's death to the Law in Romans 7 must not be transformed into an exhaustive divorce code that erases everything written elsewhere. **Rightly dividing the Word of truth does not mean cutting away the verses that interfere with a favorite doctrine. It means allowing every passage to speak in the setting Almighty God gave it.**

The ten questions examined throughout this series will therefore confront the matters religious tradition often avoids. Why did God regulate divorce if marriage was intended to endure? Did Moses actually recognize remarriage? What did Jesus Christ mean by His exception concerning fornication? Does that exception affect remarriage, or only the dissolution of the first marriage? What happens when an unbelieving spouse deliberately abandons a faithful Christian? Must someone remain exposed to violence merely to preserve the appearance of marriage? What does Paul mean when he distinguishes the person bound to a wife from the person loosed from a wife? How should the Church treat someone divorced before salvation? Can a divorced and remarried man genuinely satisfy the biblical qualifications for pastoral office? And finally, does the end of a marriage mean the end of a Christian's usefulness to God? These questions deserve careful exposition because real people bear the consequences of the answers. A careless interpretation can excuse an adulterer, condemn an innocent spouse, silence a faithful preacher, or place unnecessary bondage upon a believer whose marriage has legitimately ended. **The Bible is too serious to be handled through denominational shortcuts, and human lives are too important to be governed by conclusions that cannot survive an honest reading of the Book.**

The governing principle throughout this examination will be straightforward. Where Scripture condemns sin, we will condemn it. Where Scripture commands marital faithfulness, we will defend it. Where Christ establishes an exception, we will not erase it. Where Paul recognizes legitimate release, we will examine its actual meaning. Where forgiveness is commanded, we will insist upon it. Where repentance is required, no amount of religious language will substitute for genuine obedience. And where churches have invented restrictions that go beyond the written Word of God, those restrictions must surrender to biblical authority. This is not an invitation to make divorce respectable. It is a refusal to make religious prejudice authoritative. Nor is it an attempt to place every divorced believer beyond examination. Some people genuinely destroyed their marriages through serious wickedness, and they must answer for that conduct. Others faithfully endured the consequences of sins they did not commit. The difference matters. **The rebel wants permission without responsibility, and the legalist wants condemnation without investigation. The King James Bible gives neither man what he wants. It gives both men the truth they are obligated to obey.**

And now consider the Christian who has been carrying the burden of an unwanted divorce for years. Perhaps the marriage ended despite sincere efforts to preserve it. Perhaps another person committed adultery, abandoned the household, or refused every reasonable opportunity for reconciliation. Perhaps serious wrongdoing occurred before salvation, and the believer has since trusted Jesus Christ, repented, and established a

faithful life. That person does not need an invented promise that every former decision was righteous. Neither does that person need a self-appointed religious judge announcing that the remaining years of Christian life must be spent beneath permanent disgrace. Philippians 3:13–14 directs believers toward reaching forth and pressing toward the mark. That instruction does not abolish responsibility for the past, but neither does it command perpetual bondage to the memory of yesterday. **Your history must be judged by truth, your sins must be addressed through the Word of God, and your present obligations must be honored. But your former spouse is not the Savior, your divorce decree is not the gospel, and the religious committee is not the final authority over your usefulness to Jesus Christ.** The Lord who redeemed you remains the One to whom you must answer.

So bring your King James Bible and leave the religious prejudices outside. Do not be afraid to examine the passages that challenge familiar assumptions. Do not excuse the adulterer because you dislike legalism, and do not condemn the abandoned spouse because you dislike divorce. Do not make the institution of marriage less holy than God established it, and do not make the grace of God less sufficient than the Scriptures declare it to be. We are not interested in defending a religious slogan that collapses when somebody reads the next verse. We are interested in the whole counsel of God, rightly divided, believed without apology, and applied according to the actual circumstances. Marriage must be honored. Sin must be confronted. Legitimate obligations must be fulfilled. Genuine repentance must be practiced. Biblical liberty must be respected. And the blood of Jesus Christ must never be treated as though it possesses less authority than the traditions of men. **A marriage may end through circumstances nobody wanted. A faithful spouse may suffer wounds that nobody else understands. A repentant sinner may carry consequences that cannot be reversed. But none of those realities changes the sufficiency of Calvary or gives religious authorities permission to write commandments that Almighty God never wrote. The marriage may be over, but the Word of God has not failed, the blood of Christ has not lost its power, and the grace of God has not reached the end of its supply. The Bible will have the final word—not the courthouse, not the former spouse, not the denominational committee, and certainly not the religious Pharisee who believes his personal judgment outranks the written words of the living God.**

1 of 10 — Divorce and Remarriage — If God Hates Divorce, Why Did He Ever Permit It?

Primary Scriptures: Genesis 2:18–25; Malachi 2:14–16; Deuteronomy 24:1–4; Matthew 19:3–8

Introduction

There is something remarkable about a religious system that can preach for forty-five minutes about how much God hates divorce, thunder against every divorced person within hearing distance, and then close the Bible before anybody discovers that the same God actually regulated divorce under the Law of Moses. Malachi 2:16 declares, “For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away.” Those are powerful words, and they ought to be believed exactly as written. But Deuteronomy 24:1–4 describes a bill of divorcement, recognizes a woman becoming another man's wife, and identifies the original husband as her former husband. Jeremiah 3:8 goes even further, recording the LORD's declaration that He gave backsliding Israel a bill of divorce. Now, either the Bible contains a contradiction that nobody has managed to repair, or somebody has been preaching half the evidence while keeping the other half safely locked in the filing cabinet. The difficulty is not with God's Word. The difficulty begins when men decide that a doctrine must sound severe enough to satisfy their religious reputation, even if several inconvenient verses must be escorted quietly out of the building.

Before proceeding, understand that marriage is not a disposable arrangement, divorce is not an accomplishment, and adultery is not a respectable method of changing spouses. God established marriage, commanded marital faithfulness, condemned covenant treachery, and placed solemn responsibilities upon husbands and wives. The man who abandons his faithful wife because another woman has caught his eye is not exercising Christian liberty. He is practicing rebellion. The woman who deserts a faithful husband simply because she has discovered a more exciting arrangement cannot baptize her conduct by announcing that she deserves happiness. But neither can a preacher take those genuine sins and attach their guilt to every person whose marriage has ended. One spouse can commit adultery while the other remains faithful. One person can abandon a household while the other struggles desperately to preserve it. A man may stand before a congregation with his marriage certificate intact while privately violating nearly every commandment governing his treatment of his wife. A divorce record tells us that a marriage ended. It does not automatically tell us who destroyed it. Righteous judgment requires more than counting courthouse documents.

The question before us is straightforward: if God hates divorce, why did He ever permit it? The answer requires more than a convenient quotation from Malachi or a sentimental appeal to the Garden of Eden. We must begin where God began, examine what Moses actually wrote, identify the specific wickedness Malachi condemned, and listen to Jesus Christ explain why the Mosaic allowance existed. We must also distinguish Israel's national covenant from the instructions governing the New Testament Church. Genesis establishes

the institution. Deuteronomy regulates circumstances arising after sin entered the world. Malachi exposes treachery against covenant obligations. Matthew records Christ confronting the Pharisees and returning to the original arrangement. Jeremiah supplies an extraordinary prophetic illustration involving the LORD's own dealings with Israel. These passages are not enemies fighting over the same doctrine. They are inspired witnesses addressing different aspects of the matter. A man who refuses to hear all the witnesses has no business announcing that he has settled the case. The Word of God does not require an attorney to defend it from itself. It requires a Bible believer willing to read the whole Book.

1. Before There Was a Divorce, There Was a Marriage

Genesis 2:18 declares, “And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.” Notice the setting. There was no sin in the world, no courthouse issuing divorce decrees, no adulterous neighbor, no marriage counselor, and no religious committee deciding whether Adam qualified for domestic happiness. God had created the heavens and the earth, formed man from the dust of the ground, and placed him in the garden. Yet the LORD identified something He intended to complete. Adam needed a suitable companion, and God announced that He would provide one. Marriage did not originate in human lust, governmental convenience, or religious ceremony. It originated in the deliberate purpose of Almighty God. The first marriage was not an emergency repair made necessary by human wickedness. It was part of the Creator's good provision before wickedness entered the world. That distinction is foundational. If a man begins studying marriage with Deuteronomy 24 instead of Genesis 2, he has started inspecting the emergency exit before discovering what the building was constructed to accomplish.

Genesis 2:21–22 records how the LORD caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, took one of his ribs, made a woman, and brought her unto the man. Adam did not design the woman, manufacture her, or appoint himself the authority responsible for determining her human worth. God performed the work while the first husband was asleep. That ought to provide a little humility for the fellow who believes marriage exists chiefly to demonstrate how important he is. When Adam awakened, he declared, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Genesis 2:23). The woman was not an inferior species or an expendable possession. She was God's provision, sharing Adam's humanity while possessing the distinction the Creator established between male and female. God made them corresponding companions, not competing owners of one another. Marriage therefore involved a divine arrangement with responsibilities that could not be reduced to the husband's appetite or the wife's personal

convenience. The same God who established the relationship possessed authority over both persons within it.

Then comes Genesis 2:24: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” There stands the original institution. Notice the words “leave,” “cleave,” and “one flesh.” Marriage establishes a new household, a continuing attachment, and a union reaching beyond ordinary companionship. God did not say that a man should temporarily associate with a woman until somebody more attractive appeared at the garden gate. Neither did He establish marriage as a rental agreement that could be terminated whenever one party became dissatisfied with the accommodations. The word “cleave” carries the seriousness of continued attachment. The expression “one flesh” identifies the union that Jesus Christ would later reaffirm and the Apostle Paul would employ when describing Christ and His Church. Genesis gives us the foundation before human sin produces the questions surrounding divorce. But notice something equally important: Genesis 2 does not address every circumstance that would arise after the fall. The original design establishes what marriage ought to be; the later Scriptures explain what must be done when sinners violate what God established.

2. The Marriage Covenant Was Never Permission for Treachery

The entrance of sin changed the conditions under which human beings would live, but it did not abolish the institution of marriage. Genesis 3 records Adam and Eve disobeying God, attempting to cover themselves, and answering the LORD concerning their transgression. Adam promptly identified the woman God had given him when explaining his disobedience. Apparently, the habit of directing attention toward one's spouse when personal responsibility becomes uncomfortable began considerably earlier than modern marriage counseling. Nevertheless, the LORD held the guilty accountable. The man could not transfer his responsibility merely by pointing toward the woman, and the woman could not excuse her own conduct by pointing toward the serpent. That principle remains indispensable when examining broken marriages. Scripture does not permit guilt to be reassigned according to which person speaks first, cries loudest, or possesses the better reputation. Sin must be identified according to conduct. A marriage may involve two sinners, but that does not prove both committed the same offense. The fact that two people occupied the same household does not mean they were equally responsible when one person deliberately destroyed it.

Malachi 2:14 supplies an important description of marriage within Israel's covenant setting: “Yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant.” The LORD was confronting men who had dealt treacherously against the wives of their youth. Notice the accusation. God did not merely complain that their marriages had become unpleasant or

that their domestic arrangements lacked sufficient romance. He accused them of treachery. They had violated obligations witnessed by the LORD Himself. Malachi 2:11 also identifies Judah's involvement with “the daughter of a strange god,” connecting the marital wickedness with religious unfaithfulness. These were covenant people engaging in conduct that dishonored both their households and their God. Their religious ceremonies continued, but the LORD was not impressed with offerings presented by men who treated their wives shamefully. A husband cannot purchase God's approval with a religious offering while robbing his wife of the faithfulness he owes her. The altar is not a machine for converting domestic wickedness into respectable worship.

Malachi 2:16 declares that the LORD hates putting away, and the surrounding passage repeatedly warns against dealing treacherously. That context must govern the interpretation. God was exposing the betrayal of faithful wives, not issuing an exhaustive explanation of every possible circumstance involving divorce throughout biblical history. The distinction does not weaken the warning. It makes the warning more accurate. Malachi condemns the men actually committing the treachery. He does not provide permission to condemn every woman whose husband abandoned her or every man whose wife violated her vows. Consider the absurdity of using a passage against marital treachery to punish the person against whom the treachery was committed. That is like reading a commandment against stealing and then putting the robbery victim in jail because his property is missing. The LORD knows who broke the covenant, who suffered the betrayal, and who attempted to conceal wickedness beneath religious respectability. The Church ought to demonstrate enough biblical discernment to distinguish those circumstances rather than treating every broken marriage as proof of identical guilt.

3. Moses Regulated Divorce Because Sin Had Already Entered the World

Deuteronomy 24:1 begins with a man who has taken a wife and married her. The passage then describes circumstances involving “some uncleanness,” a written bill of divorcement, and the woman's departure from her husband's house. Verse 2 declares, “And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.” There is a statement that deserves attention before anybody announces that the Old Testament never recognized a marriage following divorce. Verse 3 identifies the second man as “the latter husband,” while verse 4 refers to the first as “Her former husband.” Those are not modern expressions introduced by divorce attorneys. They are words appearing in the King James Bible. Moses describes a real marriage, a real divorcement, and a subsequent marriage with legal consequences. The passage belongs to Israel's national Law, but its words must still be believed. A doctrine that requires the former husband to remain the only husband in

every possible sense has difficulty explaining why Moses distinguishes the former and latter husbands in the first place.

Nevertheless, Deuteronomy 24 is not an advertisement encouraging every dissatisfied Israelite to exchange his wife for another woman. The passage describes an existing legal situation and establishes a serious prohibition concerning what may happen afterward. The former husband could not take the woman back after she had entered another marriage, even if that later marriage ended. The law recognized that divorcement and subsequent marriage carried consequences that could not simply be reversed whenever the original husband changed his mind. Notice also that the passage does not supply a complete catalog explaining every possible meaning of "some uncleanness." A man has no authority to manufacture an exhaustive definition and demand that Scripture accept his additions. Equally, a written divorcement did not establish that every husband's motives were righteous. A legal document may record what a person has done without proving that God approves why he did it. Courthouse paperwork cannot sanctify adultery any more than a receipt for stolen merchandise can make the theft honorable. The law regulated the situation; it did not abolish moral accountability.

The purpose of such regulation becomes clearer when we recognize the historical setting. Israel was a nation under the Mosaic covenant, receiving commandments governing civil judgments, worship, inheritance, property, household obligations, and wrongdoing. The Law addressed people living in a world already damaged by sin. Exodus 21 regulated circumstances involving vulnerable women and household responsibilities. Deuteronomy 21 addressed inheritance in households containing more than one wife. Deuteronomy 24 addressed divorce and remarriage. The existence of those regulations does not mean God originally designed marriage to involve abandonment, competing wives, or broken covenants. It means the LORD established judgments governing circumstances that had arisen among fallen people. A physician who supplies instructions for treating a broken leg has not thereby announced that legs were designed to be broken. A government that prosecutes murder has not encouraged citizens to become murderers. Likewise, God's regulation of divorcement did not transform every divorce into an expression of His original purpose. Permission, regulation, and moral approval are not three names for the same thing.

4. Hardness of Heart Explains the Allowance, Not the Original Institution

Matthew 19:3 records the Pharisees approaching Jesus Christ and asking, "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" Notice that they came "tempting him." These religious authorities were not humbly requesting instruction about how to preserve their marriages. They were attempting to entangle the Lord in a controversy concerning the

permissible grounds for divorce. Their question began with the possibility of putting away a wife, not with the responsibility of remaining faithful to her. Christ answered by returning to creation. He reminded them that God made them male and female and established the one-flesh union. Then He declared in verse 6, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” That answer exposed the weakness of their approach. They wanted to discuss how easily a marriage might be dissolved. Jesus made them confront why the marriage existed. A fellow who spends more time studying how to escape his marriage than learning how to honor it has already supplied considerable evidence concerning the direction of his heart.

The Pharisees continued in Matthew 19:7, “Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?” Christ answered in verse 8, “Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so.” Observe the distinction between their word “command” and His explanation that Moses “suffered” the practice. Jesus did not deny that the Mosaic provision existed. He explained why it existed. Hardness of heart had produced circumstances requiring regulation, but those circumstances did not represent the original arrangement established in Eden. The Lord was not correcting a mistake committed by Moses. He was exposing the moral condition of men who wanted to employ a legal allowance while disregarding the divine institution behind it. The Pharisees had discovered the paperwork but had apparently forgotten the purpose of the marriage. A man may understand every technical requirement for obtaining a divorce and remain profoundly ignorant of the commandments governing how he ought to treat his wife.

Hardness of heart is a serious accusation, but it must not become a weapon employed against every person whose marriage has ended. Suppose a husband abandons his wife for another woman. Whose hardness of heart produced the destruction? Suppose a woman commits adultery, refuses repentance, and leaves her husband despite his willingness to preserve the marriage. Shall we accuse the faithful husband of the same rebellion merely because his name eventually appears upon a divorce decree? Scripture provides no authority for such careless judgment. Matthew 19 explains the historical allowance associated with human hardness, but the passage does not teach that both spouses necessarily committed identical wrongdoing in every divorce. The person who betrays a covenant must answer for the betrayal. The person who suffers the betrayal must not automatically be condemned for failing to prevent another human being from sinning. God has never required the innocent party to become guilty merely because religious people find it inconvenient to investigate the circumstances. Righteous judgment examines conduct; religious prejudice examines labels.

5. When God Himself Spoke of Giving Israel a Bill of Divorce

Jeremiah 3:8 contains one of the most extraordinary statements in the entire biblical discussion: “And I saw, when for all the causes whereby backsliding Israel committed adultery I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce.” Read those words carefully. The LORD identifies Israel's adultery, declares that He put her away, and specifically mentions a bill of divorce. Now, before somebody announces that God went through an ordinary human marriage ceremony and subsequently appeared before a magistrate, the context must be established. Jehovah is describing His covenant relationship with national Israel through the figure of marriage. Jeremiah 31:32 identifies the LORD as a husband to Israel under the covenant made when He brought the people out of Egypt. The nation repeatedly violated that covenant through idolatry and rebellion. The marriage language illustrates an actual covenant relationship, and the divorcement language illustrates the judgment resulting from covenant unfaithfulness. The figure is not meaningless merely because it is prophetic. God selected the illustration deliberately, and its doctrinal significance cannot be dismissed because it complicates somebody's favorite marriage slogan.

The historical distinction between Israel and Judah is essential. Following Solomon's reign, the nation divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom persisted in idolatry and eventually suffered judgment through Assyria, as recorded in 2 Kings 17. Jeremiah 3 uses the language of an unfaithful wife to describe Israel's rebellion and the resulting judgment. Judah witnessed what happened but continued in similar wickedness. Verse 8 declares that Judah “feared not, but went and played the harlot also.” The LORD was not describing an ordinary disagreement between two human spouses. He was exposing national spiritual adultery and the consequences of covenant violation. Nevertheless, the illustration establishes an unmistakable distinction: the party who faithfully upheld the covenant was not the party guilty of destroying it. Jehovah did not become unrighteous because Israel became unfaithful. The guilt belonged to the nation that abandoned its covenant obligations. That fact ought to disturb every religious judge who automatically treats the person who suffers abandonment as though he committed the abandonment himself.

Jeremiah's prophetic account must not be converted into unrestricted permission for Christians to divorce whenever marriage becomes difficult. God's judgment against a covenant nation does not authorize an ordinary husband to imitate divine authority over Israel. The LORD possesses rights and authority that no human being may borrow for personal convenience. Nevertheless, Jeremiah destroys the careless assertion that the very mention of divorce must always identify identical guilt in every circumstance. The passage specifically connects divorcement with the wrongdoing of the unfaithful party. It

also announces God's continued calls to repentance, reminding the reader that divine judgment does not exhaust the LORD's covenant purposes. Hosea likewise employs marriage imagery to expose Israel's spiritual adultery while announcing future restoration. These prophecies concern Israel and must not be transferred indiscriminately to the Church. But their moral distinction remains unmistakable. The LORD condemned covenant treachery without becoming guilty of treachery Himself. There is a considerable difference between breaking a covenant through rebellion and recognizing that another party has already violated it. Confusing those actions does not demonstrate holiness. It demonstrates an unwillingness to distinguish the offender from the offended.

6. Jesus Defended Marriage Without Erasing the Rest of Scripture

When Jesus Christ returned to Genesis in Matthew 19, He established the divine seriousness of marriage beyond question. Verse 5 repeats the original institution concerning leaving father and mother, cleaving to a wife, and becoming one flesh. Verse 6 declares that man must not put asunder what God joined together. These are not suggestions for people who happen to enjoy their marriages. They are the words of the Son of God concerning an institution the Creator established. Yet some interpreters handle the statement as though the Lord finished speaking at verse 6. He did not. The Pharisees continued questioning Him, and He explained the Mosaic allowance in verse 8 before proceeding to His instruction concerning fornication in verse 9. Those later statements must remain in their proper places. We cannot defend the authority of Jesus Christ by refusing to read everything Jesus Christ said. The Lord did not establish marriage so that men could casually destroy it, but neither did He authorize religious authorities to rewrite His explanation of exceptional circumstances.

Matthew 19:9 declares, “Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery.” The warning against wrongful putting away and adulterous remarriage is unmistakable. So is the exception involving fornication. That exception deserves its own careful examination because its relationship to divorce and subsequent marriage has produced substantial controversy. For the present discussion, one fact is sufficient: Christ expressly identified a circumstance that must be distinguished from the ordinary prohibition. The Lord's words therefore cannot honestly be reduced to the claim that every divorcement must involve precisely the same guilt and consequences. But the opposite abuse must also be rejected. A husband cannot manufacture a justification for leaving his faithful wife by stretching the exception until ordinary dissatisfaction becomes fornication. Nor may a wife use another person's imperfections as permission to abandon the marriage for someone she finds more attractive. Christ's exception does not

abolish Christ's condemnation. The legalist wants to erase the exception; the rebel wants to erase the warning. Scripture gives neither man permission to edit the sentence.

Mark 10:11–12 and Luke 16:18 likewise contain severe warnings concerning wrongful divorce and remarriage. These passages must be believed without weakening their force. But Mark and Luke do not possess authority to cancel the qualification expressly recorded in Matthew. The Gospel accounts are inspired testimony concerning the same Lord, not competing religious systems from which a preacher may select his favorite restrictions. Furthermore, the historical setting must remain clear. Jesus was confronting Jewish religious leaders during His earthly ministry, before His death, burial, and resurrection. Israel possessed the Mosaic covenant, and the Pharisees appealed directly to its marriage legislation. The New Testament Church subsequently received additional instructions through the Apostle Paul. Those different settings must be recognized without imagining that the moral condemnation of adultery has somehow expired. Rightly dividing Scripture does not mean making Christ contradict Moses or Paul contradict Christ. It means allowing each passage to speak according to its actual audience, circumstances, and purpose. The Bible contains enough truth to expose both careless divorce and careless condemnation without borrowing a single commandment from human tradition.

7. Under Grace, the Christian Must Neither Excuse Sin nor Invent Bondage

First Corinthians 7 supplies direct instruction concerning marriage among New Testament believers. Paul commands married Christians not to abandon their marriages and states in verses 10–11, “Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.” There is no endorsement of casual divorce. The apostle recognizes the seriousness of an existing marriage and instructs believers concerning separation and reconciliation. But notice that he also distinguishes separation from the automatic establishment of another marriage. A change of address does not necessarily produce freedom to marry somebody else. A wife cannot simply walk out of the household, announce that she has discovered her independence, and declare every previous obligation canceled. The husband likewise receives a direct prohibition against putting away his wife. Christian liberty is not a convenient religious name for irresponsibility. Paul commands faithfulness because salvation by grace does not remove the believer's obligation to obey the Lord in the home.

The same chapter also addresses circumstances that cannot be compressed into the preceding instructions without losing important distinctions. First Corinthians 7:12–15 discusses a believer married to an unbelieving spouse. If the unbeliever is pleased to remain, the believer is commanded not to abandon the marriage. But verse 15 declares, “But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in

such cases: but God hath called us to peace." That is not a command to pursue divorce. It is recognition that a believer cannot compel another person to remain in a marriage the unbeliever deliberately repudiates. The exact extent of release, particularly concerning remarriage, requires examination of Paul's further instructions in verses 27–28. Nevertheless, the difference between a willing spouse and a departing unbeliever is expressly established. A Christian cannot force another human being to continue a marriage through determination alone. One person may keep every promise within his ability and still suffer the consequences when another deliberately breaks the relationship. The Scripture recognizes the distinction rather than pretending that faithful conduct guarantees another person's obedience.

The Church must therefore apply marriage doctrine with both conviction and righteous judgment. Romans 6:14 declares that Christians are not under the Law but under grace, while verse 15 immediately rejects the suggestion that grace permits sin. Ephesians 5:25 commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church. Colossians 3:19 forbids bitterness, and 1 Peter 3:7 requires honor toward wives. These commands make domestic cruelty, intimidation, and deliberate neglect serious matters before God. A person facing violence may need physical protection, and protective separation must not automatically be confused with sinful abandonment or permission to remarry. Nor should forgiveness be employed to shield continuing abuse from accountability. The same Bible that commands marital faithfulness condemns wickedness against one's household. A church that can investigate a divorced believer's paperwork but refuses to investigate a married man's cruelty has confused administrative convenience with biblical holiness. The purpose of righteous judgment is not to discover how many wounded people can be excluded. It is to determine what Scripture actually commands and who has actually violated it.

Conclusion

The answer to our opening question is now established. God hates the treacherous putting away condemned in Malachi because marriage is His institution, established in Genesis before sin entered the world. Moses regulated divorcement under Israel's national Law because fallen human beings had produced circumstances requiring legal judgments. Jesus Christ explained that the allowance existed because of hardness of heart while reaffirming God's original intention for marriage. Jeremiah employed the language of a bill of divorce when describing Jehovah's judgment against unfaithful national Israel. Paul later instructed the Church concerning marriage, separation, unbelieving spouses, and the distinction between those bound and those legitimately loosed. These passages do not compete with one another. Each supplies information necessary to understand the whole

biblical record. God's original design was faithfulness. Human rebellion introduced circumstances that required judgment. Divine regulation of those circumstances did not make the rebellion righteous, and divine condemnation of marital treachery did not make every abandoned spouse guilty. The Bible does not contradict itself because God established marriage and subsequently addressed divorce. The contradiction appears when religious men insist that every circumstance must receive the same verdict regardless of what God actually wrote.

There are two groups that must hear this doctrine carefully. The first consists of those looking for permission to escape marriages they have no biblical justification for abandoning. If a husband is pursuing another woman, he needs repentance, not a creative interpretation of Deuteronomy 24. If a wife is deliberately destroying her marriage through adultery or calculated abandonment, she needs to forsake the wickedness, not manufacture a testimony about personal liberation. God did not establish marriage as a temporary arrangement governed by changing appetites. But the second group consists of faithful people whose marriages ended through circumstances they neither desired nor deliberately produced. They may have endured betrayal, abandonment, or serious wrongdoing while attempting to preserve the household. Such believers must not automatically be treated as spiritually inferior merely because their injuries became public through divorce proceedings. A person whose spouse committed adultery is not guilty of committing that adultery simply because the marriage subsequently ended. A woman who seeks protection from violence is not automatically rebelling against God because she refuses to remain within reach of further injury. The guilty must answer for the wrong they committed, and the innocent must not be assigned the guilt simply because their names appeared on the same marriage certificate.

Marriage remains honorable, adultery remains sin, covenant treachery remains wickedness, and the believer remains accountable to Almighty God. Nothing in the allowance concerning divorce authorizes a Christian to neglect his spouse, abandon his children, evade legitimate responsibilities, or seek another marriage without establishing biblical liberty. Where repentance is necessary, repent. Where reconciliation is genuinely possible and appropriate, pursue it. Where serious wrongdoing requires protection and accountability, confront it without allowing religious appearances to conceal the offense. And where a marriage has legitimately ended, stop pretending that the Word of God commands perpetual condemnation simply because religious tradition prefers it. First Corinthians 6:11 declares concerning sinners who had been saved, “but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.” The blood of Christ is not rendered insufficient by a divorce decree, and the divine authority of Scripture is not strengthened by adding restrictions that God never

established. The Lord who instituted marriage also gave His Word to govern the circumstances arising when sinners violate it. We have no authority to weaken His commandments or remove His provisions. Divorce is serious because marriage is serious, but divorce is not the unpardonable sin. God never authorized religious men to turn another person's broken marriage into a lifetime sentence of spiritual disgrace. The Bible is the authority, not the prejudice of the people holding it.

2 of 10 — Divorce and Remarriage — Did Moses Actually Allow a Divorced Person to Marry Again?

Primary Scriptures: Deuteronomy 24:1–4; Jeremiah 3:1–8; Matthew 19:7–8

Introduction

There is something almost comical about watching a religious man announce that the Bible never recognizes remarriage following divorce while standing three chapters away from a passage that says exactly what he insists cannot be said. Deuteronomy 24:2 declares, “And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.” There it stands, written in the King James Bible, without an apology, an explanatory committee, or a denominational permission slip attached to it. The woman has been married, has received a bill of divorcement, has departed from her husband's household, and is described as becoming another man's wife. The next verse calls that second man “the latter husband,” while verse 4 identifies the first man as “Her former husband.” Now, a fellow can disagree about the moral circumstances surrounding divorce, and he certainly ought to examine what Jesus Christ subsequently taught about it. But he cannot honestly announce that Moses never recognized a marriage following divorce. The words are sitting on the page, and they are not particularly difficult to locate.

Before somebody mistakes the argument, this is not an invitation to trade husbands and wives like used automobiles. The LORD established marriage in Genesis 2:24, where the man is instructed to leave father and mother, cleave unto his wife, and become one flesh with her. Jesus Christ reaffirmed that institution in Matthew 19:6, declaring, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” Those words establish a solemn obligation that cannot be dismissed whenever the flesh becomes dissatisfied. A husband who abandons a faithful wife because another woman appears more attractive is not following the Bible. A wife who deliberately destroys her marriage to pursue another man cannot transform adultery into righteousness by obtaining a legal document. Nevertheless, condemning wrongful divorce is not the same thing as denying that divorce

possessed genuine legal consequences under Moses. Scripture can recognize that a marriage ended without declaring that every reason for ending it was righteous. The distinction is simple, but religious tradition has managed to bury it beneath an impressive collection of restrictions.

The purpose of this examination is to follow Deuteronomy 24:1–4 exactly as Moses wrote it, identify the parties involved, establish what the bill of divorcement accomplished, and explain why the former husband could not reclaim the woman after an intervening marriage. Jeremiah 3 will then demonstrate how the LORD employed the language of divorce when describing His covenant dealings with unfaithful Israel. Finally, Matthew 19 will supply Christ's explanation concerning Moses, hardness of heart, and God's original intention for marriage. Every passage must remain in its proper setting. Moses was governing Israel under the Law, Jeremiah was addressing national covenant unfaithfulness, and Jesus Christ was confronting Pharisees who wanted to stretch the Mosaic allowance to suit their purposes. The New Testament Church must receive its instructions under grace without pretending the earlier Scriptures were never written. The question is not whether every divorce is justified or every remarriage is righteous. The question is whether Moses recognized genuine divorcement and a subsequent marriage. On that point, the written testimony is unmistakable.

1. He Had Taken a Wife and Married Her: The Case Begins with an Actual Marriage

Deuteronomy 24:1 opens with these words: “When a man hath taken a wife, and married her.” Notice the two expressions. The man has taken a wife, and he has married her. Moses is not discussing two young people considering an engagement, a romantic arrangement that never became a marriage, or a betrothal that was canceled before the couple entered the marital relationship. He identifies an established marriage before introducing the circumstances surrounding its dissolution. That distinction matters because certain interpretations attempt to make the passage concern something other than the relationship Moses plainly describes. Scripture knows the difference between betrothal and marriage. Deuteronomy 22:23 speaks of a virgin betrothed unto a husband, while Deuteronomy 24 begins with a man who has already married his wife. A doctrine that must turn a completed marriage into an uncompleted engagement has begun rearranging the evidence before the first witness finishes speaking. Moses identified the relationship. The responsible reader must begin by believing him.

The verse continues by describing a woman who finds no favor in her husband's eyes because he has discovered “some uncleanness in her.” Those words have generated centuries of argument, but the actual passage does not provide an exhaustive catalog defining every possible circumstance included in that expression. It certainly does not

announce that a husband may dismiss his wife because she burned supper, disagreed about household expenses, or acquired a wrinkle he had not previously noticed. Neither should the expression automatically be made identical to every sexual offense addressed elsewhere under the Law. Deuteronomy 22 contains specific judgments concerning adultery, accusations against a wife's virginity, betrothal, and sexual wrongdoing. Those distinct regulations must be examined before somebody announces that “some uncleanness” means whatever happens to support his preferred doctrine. The Law was not a blank check handed to dissatisfied husbands. Human preference is not divine authority, and a man's dislike of his wife does not automatically transform her conduct into a biblical offense.

The important distinction concerns what the law describes and what God morally approves. Deuteronomy 24 introduces a circumstance in which divorcement occurs within Israel's legal system. It does not declare that every man's reason for pursuing that divorcement was righteous. Genesis 2 had already established marriage before the nation of Israel existed, and Malachi 2:14 would later condemn men dealing treacherously against the wives of their covenant. The same God who regulated divorcement also condemned marital betrayal. There is no contradiction. A government may establish procedures governing a broken contract without approving the dishonesty that caused the contract to fail. A judge may recognize the legal consequences of theft without congratulating the thief for his enterprise. Likewise, Moses could regulate divorcement without announcing that every husband employing the regulation possessed a clean conscience before God. The Law addressed actual circumstances among fallen people. It did not transform the fallen heart into the standard of righteousness merely because a legal procedure existed.

2. The Bill in Her Hand: Divorcement Was More Than an Angry Declaration

Deuteronomy 24:1 identifies three actions associated with the divorcement: the husband was to write a bill of divorcement, give it into the woman's hand, and send her out of his house. Those details are not decorative. The written instrument identified the action being taken, its delivery placed the document with the woman, and her departure represented the separation from the original household. This was not merely a husband becoming irritated during an argument and announcing that he no longer wanted to be married. Moses described a recognizable legal process with consequences extending beyond the moment of disagreement. The bill mattered because the following verse addresses the woman's subsequent marital circumstances. The procedure was therefore connected to her recognized condition after leaving the household. A man could not simply dismiss his wife and then behave as though his decision carried no legal consequences whenever

acknowledging those consequences became inconvenient. The law did not exist to make the husband's temper the final court of appeal.

Consider the importance of placing the bill into the woman's hand. A wife who had been sent away could face serious difficulties concerning household standing, provision, and future marriage. The written instrument supplied recognition of what had occurred rather than leaving the entire situation dependent upon the former husband's willingness to admit that he had dismissed her. Scripture does not provide every administrative detail concerning the document, and there is no reason to manufacture an ancient courthouse ceremony that Moses never described. But the actions recorded are sufficient to establish that divorcement was not merely a private change of feelings. It involved a definite proceeding that affected the relationship of husband and wife. Religious arguments sometimes speak as though a divorce decree can accomplish absolutely nothing, while the Mosaic passage treats the writing, delivery, and departure as meaningful actions. A legal document cannot change yesterday's conduct into righteousness, but it can establish that a recognized legal change has occurred.

That distinction immediately exposes two opposite errors. One man imagines that obtaining a legal divorce automatically makes every motive and subsequent relationship righteous before God. Another insists that because God established marriage, no legal divorcement described anywhere in Scripture could have any genuine effect upon marital standing. Moses supports neither conclusion. The bill of divorcement was meaningful, but it was not a certificate of moral perfection. The man's conduct remained accountable to the LORD, while the woman's circumstances were altered under the legislation. The fact that a divorce might be wrongful does not require pretending that the act never occurred. Likewise, the fact that an act has legal consequences does not prove it was morally justified. Scripture distinguishes the action, its cause, and its consequences. Religion frequently prefers to throw all three into one enormous sack and label the contents according to whichever doctrine was decided beforehand. But a Bible believer must do better than that. The words must determine the conclusion, not the conclusion determine which words are permitted to remain.

3. Another Man's Wife: The Second Marriage Was Not Treated as Imaginary

Now comes the statement that settles the immediate historical question. Deuteronomy 24:2 declares, “And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.” The expression is unmistakable. The woman has departed following the divorcement described in verse 1, and Moses speaks of her becoming another man's wife. He does not describe her merely as an adulterous companion, a permanent concubine, or a woman forever incapable of entering another recognized marital relationship. He calls

her another man's wife. Verse 3 strengthens the language by identifying the second man as “the latter husband.” Those expressions are important because the Law is not merely acknowledging that another man might desire the woman. It is recognizing the intervening marriage as an actual relationship with legal consequences. The Holy Ghost did not accidentally allow Moses to call the second man a husband. The words belong to the inspired passage, and nobody has authority to replace them with language more convenient to a predetermined religious system.

Then observe the corresponding expression in verse 4: “Her former husband.” There is the distinction between the man who previously occupied the position and the man who subsequently became her husband. Former and latter are not complicated words requiring a lifetime of specialized education before their meaning can be understood. They identify relationships occurring at different times. The first marriage had ended through the divorcement described, and the woman had entered another marriage. Moses recognized that sequence. This does not establish that every second marriage in every dispensation must automatically receive divine approval. It establishes that the Mosaic Law acknowledged a genuine change in marital circumstances under the case being regulated. The man who says Scripture never recognizes a former husband while the woman enters another marriage must explain why Moses used precisely that designation. Apparently, the inspired vocabulary is considerably less impressed with certain religious theories than the men who invented them.

Nevertheless, the recognition of an intervening marriage must not be exaggerated into unrestricted permission for divorce and remarriage. Deuteronomy 24 concerns a particular legal situation under Israel's national covenant. It does not investigate every motive behind the first divorce, establish every legitimate ground for remarriage, or replace the subsequent teaching of Jesus Christ. Matthew 19:9 expressly condemns wrongful putting away followed by remarriage and identifies an exception concerning fornication. First Corinthians 7 subsequently addresses the Church concerning marriage, separation, desertion, and legitimate release. Those passages must be believed alongside Moses rather than discarded in favor of him. The issue before us is narrower and decisive: did Moses recognize a subsequent marriage following the divorcement described in his Law? Yes. Does that recognition mean every modern divorce grants unrestricted freedom to remarry? No. A legal provision addressing one circumstance does not authorize the invention of universal permission. The Scripture establishes actual liberty where God provides it, while refusing to bless rebellion merely because a sinner desires a different arrangement.

4. The Door Moses Shut: Why the Former Husband Could Not Take Her Back

Deuteronomy 24:3 introduces two possible developments concerning the latter husband. He might hate the woman and give her another bill of divorcement, or he might die. Those are separate circumstances, and Moses expressly includes both. The intervening marriage might end through another divorcement or through the death of the second husband. Either situation brings the reader to the prohibition in verse 4: “Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled.” Here is the actual legal restriction governing the case. The first husband cannot simply reclaim the woman after she has entered another marriage. The prohibition remains even if the latter husband has died. Moses was not permitting a man to dismiss his wife, allow her to establish another marriage, and then recover her whenever his affections changed direction. The legislation placed a serious boundary upon the original husband's conduct. Divorce and remarriage were not actions without lasting consequences.

The phrase “after that she is defiled” must be handled carefully because Moses places it within a specific legal situation. The passage describes an intervening marriage and then forbids the original husband from taking the woman back. It does not command that the woman be punished merely for entering the second marriage described in verse 2. Neither does it identify the entire intervening relationship as an imaginary marriage that never existed. The prohibition concerns returning to the former husband after that relationship has occurred. Verse 4 identifies the forbidden restoration as an abomination before the LORD and warns against causing the land to sin. Those words demonstrate the seriousness of the national legislation. Israel's land inheritance and covenant responsibilities belong to the setting, and the judgment must not be lifted out of that setting without examination. The man who insists the woman must always return to the first husband has a rather formidable problem: under these circumstances, Moses expressly forbade the return.

Jeremiah 3:1 draws upon the same principle when the LORD asks, “If a man put away his wife, and she go from him, and become another man's, shall he return unto her again? shall not that land be greatly polluted?” The question assumes the seriousness of the prohibition already established through Moses. Jeremiah then confronts Israel's spiritual adultery and declares, “but thou hast played the harlot with many lovers; yet return again to me, saith the LORD.” The prophetic appeal gains its force from the recognized restriction concerning human marriage. Jehovah's extraordinary call for Israel to return magnifies divine mercy against the background of covenant unfaithfulness. Yet the prophetic illustration does not cancel the human marriage law from which it draws its comparison. Jeremiah was addressing Israel's national relationship to the LORD, not issuing permission for private citizens to disregard Deuteronomy 24. The passages must remain distinct. Nevertheless, both recognize that a former marriage and an intervening marriage are meaningful realities.

A man cannot faithfully explain the prohibition by pretending the relationships upon which it depends never existed.

5. When the LORD Gave Israel a Bill of Divorce

Jeremiah 3:8 contains a declaration that exposes the weakness of every argument insisting the very existence of divorce must always identify identical wickedness in every party involved. The LORD declares, “And I saw, when for all the causes whereby backsliding Israel committed adultery I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce.” Notice who committed the adultery. Israel did. Notice who executed the covenant judgment. Jehovah did. The passage is not describing an ordinary human marriage, and no sensible interpretation should transform the LORD into a man appearing before a civil magistrate. God is employing the language of marriage and divorce to explain His covenant dealings with a nation. Jeremiah 31:32 identifies the LORD as an husband to Israel under the covenant associated with the Exodus. The nation had violated that covenant through idolatry and rebellion. Its unfaithfulness produced judgment. The marriage figure therefore carries meaning precisely because the responsibilities of faithfulness and the consequences of betrayal were already recognizable.

The historical setting must be preserved. Following the division of Israel's kingdom after Solomon, the northern kingdom persisted in idolatry under rulers who led the people away from Jehovah. Second Kings 17 records the Assyrian judgment against that kingdom and identifies its rebellion as the cause. Jeremiah 3 distinguishes backsliding Israel from treacherous Judah, explaining that Judah witnessed the northern kingdom's judgment and nevertheless continued in similar wickedness. The LORD describes the northern kingdom's putting away through the language of a bill of divorce. This was national covenant judgment, not a doctrine concerning the eternal salvation of every individual Israelite. Nor was it a prophecy declaring that the Church had replaced Israel and inherited every national promise. The LORD was speaking concerning His own covenant people and their historical rebellion. To turn that national account into an ordinary Christian divorce procedure would be to confuse the illustration with its subject. But to deny that the illustration teaches anything about covenant violation would make the LORD's chosen language meaningless.

The distinction between the guilty party and the party executing judgment cannot be ignored. Israel committed spiritual adultery, while Jehovah remained righteous. The LORD's covenant judgment did not make Him guilty of the nation's unfaithfulness. That principle does not automatically establish what every human spouse may do under every circumstance, for ordinary husbands and wives do not possess the LORD's authority over national covenants. Nevertheless, it destroys the careless assumption that every

termination of a relationship must assign equal guilt to both parties. One person may betray obligations that another faithfully attempted to honor. One spouse may commit adultery while the other refuses to participate in the wickedness. One may deliberately abandon the marriage while the other remains willing to preserve it. Scripture does not command the injured person to confess the offender's sin merely because both names appear upon the original marriage certificate. The person who breaks a covenant through rebellion and the person who suffers the consequences of that rebellion are not automatically guilty of the same offense.

6. Moses Suffered It: Christ Explained Why Divorce Was Regulated

Matthew 19:3 records the Pharisees approaching Jesus Christ with the question, “Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?” The passage states that they came tempting Him. Their objective was not a humble examination of God's institution of marriage. They wanted to involve the Lord in a controversy concerning permissible causes for divorce. Christ responded by returning to Genesis. He reminded them that God created male and female and established the one-flesh union. Verse 6 then declares, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” The answer placed God's original institution above the Pharisees' preferred arguments concerning its dissolution. They wanted to know how far a man could stretch the regulations. Jesus demanded that they remember what marriage was intended to accomplish. A man who begins studying marriage by calculating how little cause he needs to escape it has already demonstrated that his priorities require correction. The LORD established cleaving before Moses ever addressed putting away.

The Pharisees continued in verse 7, “Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?” Jesus answered in verse 8, “Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so.” The distinction between their expression “command” and Christ's explanation “suffered” is crucial. Moses regulated divorcement within Israel's national Law because human hardness of heart had produced circumstances requiring judgment. Christ did not deny that Moses had written the legislation. He explained why the allowance existed and refused to treat it as God's original purpose. Marriage had been established before sin entered the world, while divorce legislation addressed conditions arising among sinners afterward. The LORD could regulate an existing practice without declaring that every instance of the practice was morally righteous. A man who possesses legal permission to perform an action may still possess wicked motives for performing it. The bill of divorcement could record a separation without cleansing the heart that sought it.

Christ's explanation also prevents the Mosaic allowance from becoming an unrestricted Christian divorce policy. Matthew 19:9 subsequently identifies fornication as an exception within the Lord's warning concerning wrongful putting away and remarriage. Mark 10 and Luke 16 likewise condemn adulterous remarriage. Those statements must be examined according to their actual wording and historical setting. The Lord's ministry occurred among Israel before Calvary, while the Church subsequently received instructions through the apostles. But distinguishing those settings is not permission to make adultery respectable. The same Scripture that recognizes divorce under Moses condemns treachery against a faithful spouse. The Christian who abandons his marriage because another person has captured his affections cannot appeal to Deuteronomy 24 as though Moses provided a divine endorsement of personal rebellion. Likewise, the religious judge who insists Moses recognized no genuine marital change must answer to the words of the Law itself. The original institution, historical allowance, and moral responsibility belong together. Remove any one of them, and the doctrine becomes distorted.

7. Israel Under Moses and the Church Under Grace: The Necessary Distinction

Deuteronomy 24 belongs to the national legislation given to Israel under the Mosaic covenant. That setting governs its civil procedures, its language concerning the land, and the particular prohibition established in verse 4. Christians today are not the nation of Israel operating under the judicial system delivered at Sinai. Romans 6:14 declares, “For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.” Galatians 3:24–25 likewise explains the Law's relationship to faith and declares that believers are no longer under the schoolmaster. These statements do not make the Old Testament worthless. Second Timothy 3:16 declares that all Scripture is profitable. But profitable instruction does not authorize the wholesale transfer of Israel's civil judgments into the local church. A preacher cannot borrow Deuteronomy 24 to justify any divorce he pleases while ignoring Christ's teaching, nor may he borrow its prohibition concerning return to a former husband and declare it an exhaustive rule governing every present-day circumstance without examining its covenant setting.

The Apostle Paul supplies direct instruction concerning Christian marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. Verses 10–11 command married believers not to abandon their marriages and preserve reconciliation as an objective when separation has occurred. Verses 12–15 address believers married to unbelieving spouses, distinguishing the unbeliever willing to remain from the one determined to depart. Verse 15 declares that a brother or sister is “not under bondage in such cases.” Later, verse 27 asks, “Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife.” Verse 28 continues, “But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned.” Those statements require serious examination concerning

legitimate release and the circumstances in which remarriage is lawful. They do not command a married man to seek freedom from his wife, and they do not automatically declare every civil divorce sufficient grounds for another marriage. Nevertheless, they establish that the apostle distinguished between being bound and being loosed.

Romans 7:1–6 must also be understood within its actual doctrinal purpose. Paul employs marriage and death to illustrate the believer's deliverance from the Law through Jesus Christ. The husband's death unquestionably terminates the particular marital obligation described. But the apostle's principal subject is the Christian's death to the Law and new relationship with the risen Savior, not an exhaustive catalog addressing every divorce recorded elsewhere in Scripture. A man who uses Romans 7 to erase Deuteronomy 24, Matthew 19, and 1 Corinthians 7 has not reconciled the passages. He has appointed one illustration to silence the rest of the Bible. The genuine question concerning remarriage is whether the individual remains biblically bound or has been legitimately released. That distinction cannot be settled merely by producing a divorce decree, nor by announcing that every previous marriage remains binding under identical circumstances regardless of what Scripture says. The Bible requires fidelity where the bond continues and recognizes freedom where legitimate release has occurred.

Conclusion

The answer to the question is unmistakable: Moses recognized a divorced woman becoming another man's wife under the circumstances described in Deuteronomy 24:1–4. The original marriage was real, the divorcement had legal consequences, the intervening marriage was recognized, and the former husband was expressly forbidden from reclaiming the woman afterward. Those conclusions do not depend upon religious tradition, modern legal opinions, or the preferences of a denominational committee. They arise from the words of the King James Bible itself. Yet the historical recognition of remarriage does not establish that every divorce was righteous or that every subsequent marriage automatically receives divine approval. Jesus Christ identified hardness of heart as the reason Moses suffered divorcement, while returning His hearers to the original institution established in Genesis. The Law regulated actual circumstances among fallen people without turning every expression of human rebellion into holiness. Moses did not make marriage disposable, but neither did he pretend that a marriage which had ended through recognized divorcement remained unchanged in every legal respect.

The implications demand honesty from both sides of the controversy. A husband looking for an excuse to abandon his faithful wife cannot point to Deuteronomy 24 and announce that God approves whatever his flesh desires. The Law did not establish adultery as a respectable method of replacing a spouse. But the religious man who insists that Scripture

never recognizes a genuine second marriage following divorce must confront Moses' actual language concerning the former and latter husbands. Likewise, the person who has suffered abandonment or betrayal must not automatically be charged with the guilt of the offender merely because the marriage ended. Scripture distinguishes actions, motives, obligations, and circumstances. Righteous judgment requires knowing which party committed the wrong and whether legitimate release has occurred. A church may properly investigate the marital standing of its members and the qualifications of its leaders, but it possesses no authority to invent commandments beyond those God established. Religious severity is not the same thing as biblical accuracy, and a louder condemnation does not become a truer one merely because the preacher pounds the pulpit while delivering it.

The final verdict rests upon the whole counsel of God. Marriage originated with the Creator, divorcement was regulated under Israel's Law, Christ exposed the hardness of heart associated with the allowance, and Paul supplied further instruction governing believers under grace. Jeremiah demonstrated that the LORD Himself employed the language of divorce when describing national covenant judgment against unfaithful Israel. None of those passages authorizes careless divorce, and none permits the interpreter to deny the distinctions actually written. The Christian must honor marriage, refuse adultery, fulfill legitimate obligations, and recognize biblical liberty only where Scripture establishes it. If a person remains bound, the obligation must be honored. If legitimate release has occurred, religious tradition has no authority to manufacture a continuing bondage that the Word of God does not impose. The question is not whether man can invent an argument severe enough to satisfy his religious pride. The question is whether he will believe what God actually wrote. A marriage certificate does not make adultery righteous, a divorce decree does not automatically make remarriage lawful, and a religious rulebook cannot make a former marriage eternally binding merely by refusing to acknowledge the words of Moses. When the Bible says former husband and latter husband, the safest course is to believe the Bible.

3 of 10 — Divorce and Remarriage — Did Jesus Christ Forbid Every Divorce Without Exception?

Primary Scriptures: Matthew 5:31–32; Matthew 19:3–12; Mark 10:2–12; Luke 16:18

Introduction

There is a remarkable brand of religious scholarship that can locate Mark 10:11 with its eyes closed, quote Luke 16:18 with enough thunder to shake the windows, and then

develop a sudden inability to read four ordinary words in Matthew 19:9: “except it be for fornication.” Those words were spoken by Jesus Christ. They were not inserted by a divorce attorney, borrowed from a liberal theological institution, or manufactured by somebody searching for permission to abandon his wife. They belong to the inspired record of the Lord's own teaching. Yet certain religious authorities have constructed entire systems of marriage doctrine in which those four words are treated like an embarrassing relative who must be hidden in the back room whenever company arrives. Mark declares that a man who puts away his wife and marries another commits adultery. Luke records the same solemn warning. But Matthew expressly includes an exception, and Matthew is just as inspired as Mark and Luke. The difficulty is not that Jesus Christ contradicted Himself. The difficulty is that religious men occasionally become more devoted to defending their conclusions than believing every word the Lord actually spoke.

Now understand something before the argument proceeds. Marriage is not a temporary arrangement maintained only while husband and wife find one another entertaining. Genesis 2:24 establishes the man leaving father and mother, cleaving unto his wife, and becoming one flesh with her. Matthew 19:6 declares, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” That commandment is not a suggestion for exceptionally devoted couples. A husband has no biblical permission to discard a faithful wife because a younger woman has captured his imagination. A wife has no authority to abandon a faithful husband because another man promises a more exciting future. Divorce does not become righteous merely because the courthouse supplies the necessary paperwork, and remarriage does not become holy merely because a minister pronounces the couple husband and wife. The Lord Jesus Christ condemned wrongful divorce and adulterous remarriage in unmistakable language. But the same Lord identified an exceptional circumstance, and no preacher possesses authority to remove that qualification. The man who excuses every divorce has rejected Christ's warning; the man who erases Christ's exception has rejected Christ's wording. Neither error becomes biblical simply because its advocate quotes Scripture loudly.

Our responsibility is to examine what Jesus Christ actually taught, not what competing religious traditions have decided He ought to have taught. Matthew 5 places the divorce warning beside the Lord's exposure of lust and adultery in the heart. Matthew 19 records the Pharisees challenging Him concerning putting away a wife “for every cause,” followed by His appeal to creation, His explanation of Moses, and His exception concerning fornication. Mark 10 records the corresponding controversy and the Lord's additional instruction to His disciples concerning both husbands and wives. Luke 16 places its concise warning within a confrontation involving covetous Pharisees who justified themselves before men while God knew their hearts. These passages must be compared

without making one account the executioner of another. We must also distinguish the Lord's earthly ministry to Israel from the further instructions subsequently given to the Church through the Apostle Paul. The issue is not whether adultery is sinful. It is. The issue is whether Christ forbade every divorce without exception. The answer must come from the words of Christ Himself.

1. The Pharisees Came Looking for a Loophole, Not a Marriage Lesson

Matthew 19:3 identifies the men who introduced the controversy: “The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?” Notice the expression “tempting him.” These were not humble Bible students approaching the Lord with an earnest desire to understand their household responsibilities. They were religious opponents attempting to entangle Him in a dispute concerning the Mosaic Law. Their question was carefully worded. They did not ask whether a husband ought to love his wife, whether marital faithfulness pleased God, or whether adultery was wicked. They wanted to know whether a man could put away his wife “for every cause.” That expression reveals the controversy. How broadly could the allowance concerning divorce be interpreted? How much dissatisfaction was sufficient? How far could a husband stretch the provision before reaching its limit? Apparently, the religious experts had become so fascinated with the regulations governing the exit that they had forgotten why God established the marriage in the first place. Christ was about to correct their priorities.

The background is Deuteronomy 24:1–4, where Moses describes a man who had taken a wife and married her, subsequently issued a bill of divorcement, and sent her from his house. Verse 2 declares, “And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.” The passage then identifies the second man as the latter husband and the original man as her former husband. Moses was regulating an actual marital situation within Israel's national Law. Yet the existence of a regulation did not establish that every husband's reason for divorce was righteous. That distinction is important because the Pharisees were attempting to turn the legal allowance into the controlling question. A man may satisfy the technical requirements of a legal proceeding while remaining wicked in his motives. A thief can complete an impressive amount of paperwork without becoming honest, and a husband can obtain an official divorce without making his adulterous intentions holy. Christ therefore refused to begin with their preferred interpretation of the allowance. He went behind the regulation to the institution itself.

Matthew 19:4 records the Lord's answer: “Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female.” What a devastating question to men claiming expertise in Moses! The Son of God did not ask for their denominational position, their

preferred rabbinical opinion, or the latest ruling from the religious establishment. He asked whether they had read the Scriptures. Then He quoted Genesis 2:24 and concluded in verse 6, “Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” There stands the divine foundation. Marriage originated with Almighty God before Israel possessed a national Law or any human government regulated divorce. The Pharisees were asking how easily a marriage could be dissolved. Jesus demanded that they recognize the authority behind the union they wished to dissolve. A man who approaches marriage chiefly interested in discovering its escape clauses has already misunderstood the purpose of the covenant. The Lord established the original institution before addressing the exceptional circumstances.

2. Moses Suffered Divorce, but He Never Invented Marriage

The Pharisees immediately objected in Matthew 19:7: “Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?” Their question is revealing because they described the Mosaic provision as a command. Jesus answered in verse 8, “Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so.” Notice the distinction between “command” and “suffered.” Christ did not deny that Moses regulated divorcement. He explained why the allowance existed. Hardness of heart had produced circumstances requiring legal judgments among fallen people, but those circumstances were not God's original purpose for marriage. The first husband did not receive Eve with a bill of divorcement already tucked beneath his arm. God brought the woman unto Adam, and Adam recognized her as bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. Divorce legislation entered the biblical record because sin had already entered human history. The allowance addressed the consequences of human rebellion without making rebellion the Creator's original design.

Deuteronomy 24 must therefore remain in its proper historical setting. Moses was addressing Israel under the national covenant established at Sinai, where the LORD gave judgments concerning worship, civil conduct, inheritance, property, family relationships, and criminal offenses. The chapter describes a real divorce and an intervening marriage, but its regulation of those circumstances does not mean God encouraged husbands to seek divorces whenever their wives became inconvenient. Exodus 21 likewise regulated difficult household arrangements involving a female servant and imposed obligations upon the responsible man. Deuteronomy 21 addressed inheritance within households possessing more than one wife. Those regulations recognized circumstances existing among sinners without requiring every Israelite to reproduce them. A law concerning an injury does not establish injury as the body's intended condition. A regulation concerning theft does not establish stealing as an honorable occupation. Similarly, the Mosaic

provision concerning divorcement did not make marital betrayal righteous. God's willingness to regulate the consequences of sin is not God's approval of the sin that produced those consequences.

But do not overlook the opposite error. Some religious authorities acknowledge Christ's explanation concerning hardness of heart and immediately announce that the Mosaic divorcement must therefore have accomplished absolutely nothing. That conclusion runs directly into the actual wording of Deuteronomy 24. The woman received a bill of divorcement, departed from the household, and could become another man's wife under the circumstances described. Moses subsequently prohibited her former husband from taking her back after the intervening marriage. Those consequences were real. The original divorce was not merely a disagreement that left every legal relationship unchanged. Nevertheless, the recognition of changed marital circumstances did not automatically justify the original husband's motives. Both truths must remain visible. Jesus Christ did not erase what Moses wrote. He explained why Moses had written the provision and returned His hearers to God's original institution. The legalist wants to deny that the regulation had genuine consequences. The rebel wants to transform the regulation into universal permission. The Lord permitted neither approach to replace the Creator's purpose.

3. Matthew 5: The Lord Condemned the Adulterous Heart Before the Divorce

Matthew 5:27–28 provides the immediate moral setting for the Lord's earlier teaching concerning divorce. Christ declared, “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.” Notice where the Lord begins. He does not begin with a divorce attorney, a marriage certificate, or the outward consequences of an adulterous relationship. He exposes the lust that can precede the outward act. The man who deliberately entertains unlawful desire has already violated God's righteousness in his heart, even though his conduct may remain concealed from the congregation. That ought to trouble the religious expert who spends his Sunday condemning divorced believers while spending the remainder of the week cultivating forbidden desires. A fellow can maintain a spotless public marriage record while possessing an imagination that ought to be placed under arrest. Jesus Christ knew the difference between outward respectability and inward righteousness.

Then Matthew 5:31–32 declares, “It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.” There stands the warning, and there stands the qualification. The Lord directly addresses the writing of divorcement associated

with Moses, but He refuses to let the existence of a legal procedure replace moral accountability. A husband who wrongfully dismisses his wife may expose her to a subsequent relationship that Christ identifies with adultery. The legal document does not cleanse the husband's conduct merely because society recognizes the divorce. Yet the Lord expressly says, “saving for the cause of fornication.” Those words belong to the warning itself. The sentence cannot be explained faithfully while treating the exception as though it had accidentally wandered into the text from somebody else's conversation.

Observe also the responsibility Christ places upon the husband who improperly puts away his wife. He declares that the man “causeth her to commit adultery.” The Lord is exposing the consequences produced by wrongful dismissal, not congratulating the husband for observing the appropriate legal formalities. The offense begins with a man violating obligations established by God. Yet religious discussions sometimes perform a remarkable reversal. The husband who deliberately abandons his wife disappears from examination, while the woman who suffered the abandonment becomes the principal target of condemnation. That is not righteous judgment. Christ condemns adulterous remarriage, but He also exposes the responsibility of the man whose wrongful conduct created the situation. Proverbs 18:13 warns against answering a matter before hearing it, and John 7:24 commands righteous judgment. A church therefore has no authority to assume that every divorced woman committed the offense described merely because her marriage ended. The Bible does not authorize transferring guilt from the person who committed the betrayal to the person who suffered it.

4. Except It Be for Fornication: The Words Religion Cannot Remove

Matthew 19:9 contains the decisive statement: “And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.” The Lord connects putting away a wife with marrying another and identifies the adulterous consequence of wrongful conduct. But in the middle of that declaration He places the exception, “except it be for fornication.” Those words are not an editorial suggestion or an explanatory footnote supplied by religious authorities. They are part of the statement attributed to Jesus Christ. The prohibition remains solemn, and the exception remains genuine. An interpretation that removes either one has ceased to follow the actual sentence. Some men are so determined to establish an absolute prohibition that they treat the exception as an unfortunate obstacle to doctrinal simplicity. But the authority of Scripture is not measured by how easily a statement fits upon a denominational rule sheet. An exception spoken by the Son of God possesses more authority than an absolute prohibition invented by a thousand preachers.

The word “fornication” must also be examined according to its biblical usage rather than confined to a definition selected merely to protect a particular interpretation. Matthew 15:19 lists both “adulteries” and “fornications” among the evil things proceeding from the heart. First Corinthians 6:18 commands, “Flee fornication,” while Hebrews 13:4 warns that God will judge whoremongers and adulterers. The expressions have distinguishable applications, but fornication is not restricted in every biblical context to sexual wrongdoing between two unmarried persons. First Corinthians 5:1 provides a particularly important example. Paul declares, “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you,” and then identifies a man who “should have his father's wife.” The offense involves a relationship expressly identified through marriage, yet Paul calls it fornication. Scripture therefore will not support the careless assertion that the word can never encompass sexual immorality involving someone already married. A definition that survives only by refusing to examine another Bible passage is not a definition established by the Bible.

Nevertheless, Christ's exception must not become an excuse for manufacturing grounds that Scripture never established. The Lord did not say that a husband may put away his wife because she has become older, gained weight, disagreed with him, or failed to satisfy every personal preference. Neither did He authorize a wife to abandon her husband because another man promises greater financial comfort. Fornication is a serious biblical offense, not a convenient label attached to ordinary marital frustration. The existence of a legitimate ground does not command divorce whenever that ground appears. Repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation remain genuine considerations, and the injured spouse must not be pressured into pretending that sexual betrayal never occurred. The precise relationship between the exception and subsequent remarriage requires examining Christ's complete statement, which joins putting away and marrying another. But one conclusion is already established beyond dispute: Jesus Christ did not speak an unqualified prohibition in Matthew 19:9. He supplied a qualification, and permission for an exceptional circumstance must never be confused with permission to create that circumstance through deliberate wickedness.

5. The Betrothal Argument: Was Jesus Discussing a Marriage That Never Began?

One attempt to remove the force of the exception is to insist that fornication in Matthew 19:9 concerns only sexual misconduct discovered during betrothal before the marriage has been consummated. Matthew 1:18–20 is commonly introduced because Mary was espoused to Joseph before they came together, yet Joseph is described as her husband and Mary as his wife. Those details establish that biblical betrothal carried recognized obligations and that marriage terminology could appear before consummation. Nobody needs to deny that. But acknowledging the particular circumstances of Joseph and Mary

does not prove that every later passage concerning a husband and wife must refer exclusively to betrothal. Matthew 1 describes a particular relationship and its extraordinary circumstances surrounding the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. Matthew 19 addresses a controversy concerning putting away a wife under Moses and returns directly to the one-flesh union established in Genesis. The presence of betrothal language in one chapter does not grant the interpreter permission to replace the circumstances described in another.

Consider the actual conversation in Matthew 19. The Pharisees ask whether a man may put away his wife for every cause. Christ answers by quoting Genesis 2:24 concerning a man cleaving to his wife and the two becoming one flesh. They then appeal to Moses' writing of divorcement, whose underlying passage in Deuteronomy 24 begins, “When a man hath taken a wife, and married her.” After explaining the allowance concerning hardness of heart, the Lord identifies the exception for fornication. The discussion therefore concerns an established marriage institution, not merely the possibility of canceling an engagement. If the exception were restricted exclusively to betrothal, that limitation would need to be established from the actual context. It cannot be established by importing Joseph's circumstances into a passage where Christ and His questioners are discussing something broader. A man who begins with a married couple, encounters an inconvenient exception, and finishes by declaring that the couple was never really married has not solved the difficulty. He has changed the evidence halfway through the trial.

The disciples' reaction in Matthew 19:10 further exposes the seriousness of the discussion. They declared, “If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry.” Their response demonstrates that they understood the Lord's teaching as a substantial restriction upon marriage and its dissolution. They did not respond as though Christ had merely clarified the administrative procedure for canceling an engagement before a wedding. The Lord continued by discussing those who could receive His saying and the circumstances involving eunuchs. The subject remained marriage and the responsibilities attached to it. That does not eliminate every interpretive question concerning the exact scope of fornication, nor does it automatically settle every later circumstance involving remarriage. It does establish that the betrothal-only explanation cannot simply be announced as fact while ignoring the surrounding conversation. A doctrine that requires the reader to forget the marriage, overlook the one-flesh union, and redefine the exception has become more difficult to defend than the passage it was invented to explain.

6. Mark and Luke: Two Warnings That Do Not Erase Matthew's Exception

Mark 10:2–12 records another account of the controversy. The Pharisees ask whether it is lawful for a man to put away his wife, and Christ directs them to Moses. They acknowledge

the writing of divorcement, and the Lord explains that the precept was written because of hardness of heart. He then returns to creation, declaring that God made male and female and established the one-flesh union. Verse 9 concludes, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” But Mark supplies an additional detail concerning the disciples. Verse 10 declares, “And in the house his disciples asked him again of the same matter.” Christ then gives further instruction. Verse 11 states, “Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her.” Verse 12 adds, “And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery.” The warning reaches both husbands and wives. God did not establish one standard of marital faithfulness for men and another permitting women to practice adultery under a more respectable name.

Mark's account contains no expressly repeated exception concerning fornication. That fact must be acknowledged without attempting to insert words Mark did not record. But the absence of the qualification in Mark does not prove that Matthew's express statement is false. Mark supplies information concerning a woman putting away her husband that Matthew does not develop in precisely the same way. Shall we erase that statement because another Gospel did not repeat it? Certainly not. The inspired accounts provide complementary testimony. Matthew expressly identifies a qualification involving fornication, while Mark emphasizes the seriousness of wrongful divorce and remarriage and addresses responsibility on both sides of the marriage. Both statements belong to the teaching of Jesus Christ. A witness who supplies additional information does not automatically contradict another witness who records a shorter account. The Holy Ghost did not inspire four Gospels so that religious men could select one as their favorite and use it to silence the others. The whole testimony must be believed, whether its details strengthen a prohibition or establish a qualification.

Luke 16:18 delivers an equally severe warning: “Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery.” The immediate setting is especially revealing. Luke 16:14 identifies the Pharisees as covetous and records that they derided the Lord. Christ then declared in verse 15, “Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts.” He also affirmed the authority of the Law before addressing divorce. The warning exposes the hypocrisy of men who claimed religious righteousness while manipulating obligations for selfish purposes. Luke's statement contains no expressed exception, but Matthew records one. The shorter statement must not be used to cancel the fuller testimony. Neither may Matthew's exception be stretched until Luke's condemnation loses its meaning. The legalist wants Luke without Matthew; the rebel wants Matthew

without Luke. The Bible gives both men the same unpleasant assignment: believe everything Jesus Christ said.

7. The Church Under Grace Must Honor Christ Without Confusing the Dispensations

The historical setting of Christ's earthly ministry must be distinguished from the subsequent instructions given to the Church. Jesus was confronting Jewish religious authorities who possessed the Mosaic Law and questioned His interpretation of its divorcement provisions. His teaching occurred before His death, burial, and resurrection, while the Apostle Paul later addressed congregations living under grace. Romans 6:14 declares, “for ye are not under the law, but under grace.” That distinction does not transform adultery into righteousness or make Christ's moral warnings disposable. First Corinthians 6:18 commands believers to flee fornication, while Hebrews 13:4 declares that marriage is honorable and that God will judge whoremongers and adulterers. The moral seriousness of marriage remains. Nevertheless, the Church must not reproduce every civil judgment given to national Israel as though the congregation had become the government established at Sinai. Nor may a preacher take the Gospel accounts and ignore the additional instructions delivered through the apostle to the Gentiles. Rightly dividing Scripture means recognizing where each passage belongs without pretending that an inconvenient verse has lost its authority.

First Corinthians 7:10–11 commands married believers not to abandon their marriages and addresses separation and reconciliation. Paul does not encourage Christians to seek divorces whenever household responsibilities become uncomfortable. But verses 12–16 introduce another circumstance involving a believer married to an unbelieving spouse. If the unbeliever is willing to remain, the believer must not put that spouse away. If the unbeliever departs, verse 15 declares, “A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace.” That is an inspired distinction, and it cannot be removed merely because Christ's earlier confrontation with the Pharisees did not address the same circumstance in identical language. Later, verses 27–28 distinguish between being bound and being loosed from a wife and declare, “But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned.” These passages require careful examination concerning legitimate release. They do not provide unrestricted permission for divorce, but they prohibit the assumption that every marital circumstance must receive precisely the same answer.

Romans 7:1–6 supplies another passage that must remain within its proper doctrinal purpose. Paul employs marriage and the death of a husband to illustrate the believer's deliverance from the Law and new relationship to the risen Christ. Death unquestionably terminates the marital obligation described, but Romans 7 does not provide an exhaustive treatment of every circumstance concerning fornication, desertion, or legitimate

divorcement. The apostle's illustration must not be made to silence the other inspired passages. Equally important, legitimate biblical liberty cannot be manufactured by deliberately committing the very wrongdoing that destroys a marriage. A husband cannot abandon his family and then announce that he has become loosed through grace. A wife cannot commit adultery and claim that her own rebellion established righteousness. Nor should a faithful believer automatically receive the offender's guilt merely because the marriage ended. The Christian must honor existing obligations, recognize genuine biblical release where Scripture establishes it, and refuse both religious bondage and fleshly rebellion. Grace does not make adultery harmless, and religious severity does not make an invented commandment holy.

Conclusion

The question has now been answered from the actual words of Jesus Christ. Did the Lord forbid every divorce without exception? No. Matthew 5:32 expressly includes the qualification “saving for the cause of fornication,” and Matthew 19:9 declares, “except it be for fornication.” Those words establish a genuine exception within Christ's teaching. Mark 10 and Luke 16 record solemn warnings without expressly repeating that qualification, but their shorter statements do not possess authority to erase Matthew's testimony. The four Gospel passages must be received together. Christ returned to Genesis to establish the original institution, explained Moses' allowance concerning hardness of heart, condemned wrongful putting away and adulterous remarriage, and identified fornication as an exceptional circumstance. Every part of that teaching carries divine authority. The original institution is not disposable, the warning against adultery is not negotiable, and the exception is not optional material that religious men may remove whenever their doctrine becomes uncomfortable. The Lord Jesus Christ never required His people to choose between believing His prohibition and believing His qualification. He commanded them to believe His words.

But the existence of an exception does not transform divorce into an ordinary solution for marital inconvenience. A husband who finds another woman attractive has not discovered fornication in his wife. A woman who becomes dissatisfied with her husband's income has not established biblical grounds for abandoning him. The marriage covenant is not a temporary agreement maintained only while personal preferences remain satisfied. God commands faithfulness, and the guilty spouse must answer for violating that command. At the same time, the innocent party must not be condemned merely because another person committed adultery, abandoned the household, or refused reconciliation. Scripture commands righteous judgment, not mechanical condemnation based upon public appearances. Some marriages end because one spouse deliberately destroys what the

other attempted to preserve. A church that excuses continuing wickedness in a respected leader while condemning every abandoned believer has not demonstrated biblical holiness. It has demonstrated that religious reputation sometimes receives more protection than the people injured by actual sin. A marriage certificate can establish that two people entered a covenant; it cannot establish that both were equally guilty when one betrayed it.

The final verdict is that Jesus Christ condemned wrongful divorce without condemning every circumstance involving divorce as though no distinction existed. The Pharisees wanted a convenient allowance for putting away wives. The Lord confronted them with God's original institution and the seriousness of marital faithfulness. Religious legalists subsequently attempted the opposite error by transforming the warnings into an absolute prohibition that leaves no room for Christ's expressly stated exception. Neither crowd possesses authority over the written Word of God. The believer must preserve the sanctity of marriage, condemn adultery, recognize legitimate biblical qualifications, and obey the instructions governing the actual circumstances. Where repentance is required, repent. Where reconciliation is possible and appropriate, pursue it. Where another person's deliberate wrongdoing has produced genuine grounds for release, do not invent additional chains that Scripture never commanded. And where a question remains concerning remarriage, examine the relevant passages rather than assuming that the harshest available conclusion must automatically be the holiest. The King James Bible does not become more righteous when a preacher removes an exception, and it does not become more gracious when a sinner removes a prohibition. Jesus Christ gave both. The legalist may dislike the exception, the rebel may dislike the warning, and the religious committee may dislike having to examine the facts. But none of them has permission to correct the Son of God.

4 of 10 — Divorce and Remarriage — Does Fornication Permit Remarriage, or Only Divorce?

Primary Scriptures: Matthew 19:9; Matthew 5:32; 1 Corinthians 5:1; 1 Corinthians 6:15–20

Introduction

There is a peculiar kind of religious reasoning that will acknowledge Jesus Christ permitted divorce for fornication, admit that an innocent husband or wife may have been betrayed by a thoroughly unfaithful spouse, and then announce that the innocent person must remain unmarried for the rest of the offender's natural life. Apparently, the adulterer may destroy

the marriage, abandon the household, establish another relationship, and continue pursuing whatever wickedness the flesh desires, while the faithful spouse receives a lifetime sentence for somebody else's rebellion. And if that arrangement sounds rather strange, the religious authorities responsible for it will assure you that they are simply defending the holiness of marriage. Matthew 19:9 declares, “And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.” There is the actual statement. Christ mentions putting away, marrying another, fornication, and adultery in one connected sentence. The question is not whether divorce is serious. The question is whether the exception Christ supplied affects the condemnation attached to the subsequent marriage, or whether religious men have managed to acknowledge His exception while removing practically everything it permits.

Before examining the controversy, understand that this is not an attempt to make adultery respectable, divorce convenient, or remarriage a religious solution to ordinary marital dissatisfaction. God established marriage in Genesis 2:24, declaring that a man shall leave father and mother, cleave unto his wife, and become one flesh with her. Jesus Christ reaffirmed that institution in Matthew 19:6: “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” Those words possess divine authority. A husband cannot abandon a faithful wife merely because another woman has captured his imagination. A wife cannot dismiss her husband because another man promises greater excitement, financial security, or personal satisfaction. Marriage is not a revolving door through which sinners may pass whenever their appetites demand a change of scenery. But neither does the holiness of marriage authorize the invention of penalties that Scripture does not establish. The guilty must answer for the sin they committed, and the innocent must not automatically receive the punishment simply because they were married to the offender. Biblical righteousness requires more than finding the severest possible conclusion and attaching God's name to it.

Our investigation must therefore begin with the exact construction of Matthew 19:9, compare Christ's corresponding statement in Matthew 5:32, establish the biblical meaning of fornication, and examine the related instructions concerning marriage and legitimate release. We must distinguish what Christ explicitly declared from what follows through comparing His words with the rest of Scripture. An inference may be soundly established without pretending that the Lord spoke an additional sentence that does not appear in the passage. We must also distinguish genuine sexual unfaithfulness from accusations manufactured by a spouse looking for an escape. Forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation remain serious biblical responsibilities, but forgiveness cannot be turned into permission for continued wickedness, and reconciliation cannot be accomplished by

one person while the other refuses to abandon adultery. Finally, we must preserve the difference between Israel under the Mosaic Law, Christ's earthly ministry to Israel, and the apostolic instructions governing the Church under grace. The Scriptures do not need a committee to rescue them from contradiction. They need readers willing to believe what God actually wrote.

1. The Pharisees Asked About Divorce, but Christ Answered About Divorce and Remarriage

Matthew 19:3 records the Pharisees approaching Jesus Christ “tempting him” and asking, “Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?” Their question concerned the permissible grounds for divorcement under the Law of Moses. They were not conducting a humble investigation of how husbands ought to love their wives. They were attempting to entangle the Lord in a controversy over how broadly the Mosaic allowance could be applied. Christ answered by returning to Genesis. He reminded them that God made male and female, established the one-flesh union, and commanded that man not put asunder what God joined together. The Pharisees then appealed to Moses' writing of divorcement, and Jesus explained in verse 8 that Moses suffered putting away because of hardness of heart. Only after establishing the original institution and explaining the historical allowance did Christ deliver verse 9. That order matters. The Lord did not begin with permission. He began with obligation. The man who studies the emergency exit before examining the foundation may know how to leave a building without understanding why it was built.

Now observe the movement of Matthew 19:9. The Lord says, “Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery.” The sentence identifies a man, his action of putting away his wife, an exceptional circumstance involving fornication, the subsequent action of marrying another, and the resulting judgment of adultery. Christ did not merely declare that putting away a wife constitutes adultery and then conclude the discussion. He connected the putting away with the subsequent marriage. The adultery judgment is attached to the conduct described in the complete statement, and the exception appears within that description. This is the central question that cannot be avoided through religious enthusiasm. Does the exception qualify the entire situation Christ condemns, or does it somehow permit the first action while leaving the second under precisely the same condemnation regardless of the circumstances? The words must answer that question. A preacher's preference for a stricter conclusion is not sufficient evidence that the stricter conclusion is what Jesus Christ actually taught.

The most natural reading recognizes that Christ's exception concerns the circumstances under which putting away and marrying another receive the adultery judgment. The Lord

describes wrongful divorce followed by remarriage and expressly qualifies the statement with “except it be for fornication.” That supplies substantial biblical grounds for understanding that a genuinely justified dissolution may remove the adultery charge otherwise attached to the subsequent marriage. Nevertheless, accuracy requires a distinction. Christ does not add a separate command declaring that every person divorced because of fornication must remarry. Neither does He supply a complete procedural code identifying every circumstance in which a former marriage has legitimately ended. The conclusion concerning remarriage follows from the construction of His statement and must be tested against the other relevant passages. But the alternative interpretation has its own burden. It must explain why an exception placed within a statement concerning both divorce and remarriage should be restricted so that the remarriage judgment remains unchanged. A doctrine does not become stronger by making Christ's exception smaller than the sentence in which He placed it.

2. An Exception to the Adultery Judgment Is Not Merely Permission to Change Addresses

The interpretation permitting divorce but forbidding every subsequent marriage deserves careful examination because it is often presented as though its severity establishes its truth. Under that position, fornication may justify dissolving the household, but the innocent spouse remains obligated to lifelong singleness while the former spouse lives. The argument emphasizes God's original institution, Christ's command against putting asunder, and the warnings in Mark 10 and Luke 16. Those passages are genuine Scripture, and their authority must not be weakened. But they do not settle the question by themselves. Matthew 19:9 places the exception directly within the statement concerning putting away and marrying another. If Christ intended to allow physical separation while invariably condemning every subsequent marriage, that conclusion must be demonstrated from the actual wording. The interpreter cannot simply announce that the exception stops operating halfway through the sentence because allowing it to reach the adultery verdict would disturb a favored doctrine. A religious rule does not become biblical merely because it produces more restrictions than the passage requires.

Consider the practical distinction between a separation that leaves an existing marriage unresolved and a genuine dissolution recognized under the applicable biblical circumstances. First Corinthians 7:10–11 addresses married believers and commands that a wife not depart from her husband. It then provides that, if she departs, she should remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. The husband likewise is forbidden to put away his wife. That is direct instruction concerning separation where the continuing relationship remains significant. The passage does not introduce a completed divorce justified by the

fornication exception of Matthew 19:9. Nor does it announce that every person previously married must remain unmarried regardless of whether a legitimate dissolution has occurred. A change of residence does not automatically change marital obligation, but neither should every genuinely dissolved marriage be treated as though it were merely an unresolved separation. Paul distinguishes circumstances because circumstances matter. The man who deliberately abandons his wife cannot manufacture freedom merely by moving across town. The injured spouse who has been legitimately released must not automatically be treated as though the offender still possesses every former marital claim.

The argument becomes clearer when we consider the difference between permission and compulsion. Recognizing a legitimate ground for divorce does not mean the injured spouse must pursue divorce immediately, and recognizing a biblical basis for remarriage does not mean remarriage is required. A woman whose husband committed adultery may pursue genuine reconciliation when the wrongdoing has ceased and repentance is established. Another woman facing continued sexual betrayal and deliberate repudiation may confront circumstances in which preserving the original relationship is no longer possible. Those situations are not interchangeable. Neither should the offender receive authority to determine the innocent person's future by continuing in unrepentant wickedness. Christ did not command the faithful spouse to commit adultery, nor did He encourage the guilty spouse to destroy the marriage. His warning condemns wrongful conduct while identifying an exceptional cause. The exception is not a reward for the adulterer; it addresses a circumstance created by the adulterer's betrayal. To make the innocent person bear every consequence while the offender continues in rebellion is not automatically the biblical interpretation merely because it sounds severe.

3. Matthew's Exception Must Stand Beside Mark's and Luke's Warnings

Matthew 5:32 supplies another important witness because Christ declares, “But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.” Notice the responsibility assigned to the man who improperly dismisses his wife. He is not merely ending an inconvenient domestic arrangement. His action produces consequences affecting another person to whom he owed faithfulness. Christ expressly identifies an exception concerning fornication, preventing the condemnation from being indiscriminately applied to every circumstance. The second portion of the verse also delivers a serious warning about marrying a divorced woman. That warning must be understood together with Matthew 19:9 rather than detached from its setting and converted into an exhaustive judgment against every divorced person. The Bible must determine whether a former obligation remains. A man cannot manufacture righteousness

by discarding his wife, but a preacher cannot manufacture guilt by refusing to distinguish wrongful dismissal from legitimate release.

Mark 10:11 declares, “Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her.” Verse 12 adds that a woman who puts away her husband and marries another commits adultery. These statements establish the seriousness of marital faithfulness for both husbands and wives. Notice particularly the expression “against her.” A husband's wrongful conduct constitutes an offense against the wife he has dismissed. Christ does not describe marriage as a disposable agreement whose obligations disappear whenever a man becomes interested in somebody else. Nevertheless, Mark does not expressly repeat Matthew's exception. Does that silence cancel the qualification Matthew records? Certainly not. Mark supplies the corresponding warning concerning a woman putting away her husband, which Matthew does not develop in precisely the same manner. The accounts complement one another without requiring the reader to reject either. The Holy Ghost did not inspire multiple Gospel accounts so that one could be appointed to erase inconvenient words from another. The warning remains, and the expressed exception remains.

Luke 16:18 likewise declares, “Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery.” The verse continues by condemning the man who marries a woman put away from her husband. Its setting is revealing. Luke 16:14 identifies the Pharisees as covetous and records their derision of Christ. Verse 15 exposes their self-justification before men while God knew their hearts. The Lord was confronting religious hypocrisy, not establishing a system through which wicked conduct could be made righteous by observing legal formalities. Luke's warning therefore deserves its full force. But the passage does not expressly discuss the exceptional circumstance recorded in Matthew. The shorter statement must not be turned into a denial of the fuller testimony. Nor may Matthew's exception be stretched until Luke's condemnation becomes meaningless. One crowd wants an absolute rule without Christ's qualification; another wants a qualification without Christ's prohibition. The Book gives neither crowd permission to select which words of the Savior will remain authoritative.

4. Fornication and Adultery: Let the Bible Define the Offense

First Corinthians 5:1 provides a passage that immediately exposes the weakness of restricting fornication exclusively to premarital misconduct between unmarried people. Paul declares, “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you,” and proceeds to identify the scandal: “that one should have his father's wife.” The woman is identified through a marital relationship, yet the Apostle Paul calls the offense fornication. The passage therefore demonstrates that the biblical use of the word reaches beyond the

narrow category sometimes imposed upon Matthew 19:9. Matthew 15:19 likewise lists “adulteries” and “fornications” among the evil things proceeding from the heart. The expressions are distinguishable, but their distinction does not establish that fornication can never describe sexual wickedness involving a married person. A man who insists upon that limitation must answer the actual usage in First Corinthians 5. When a religious definition collapses upon encountering another verse of Scripture, the definition needs correction, not the verse. The Bible supplies its own testimony concerning the offense.

First Corinthians 6:15–20 adds another necessary distinction concerning sexual union and marital responsibility. Verse 16 declares, “What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh.” Paul deliberately employs the language of Genesis 2:24 while condemning fornication. The bodily union possesses genuine significance, but the apostle does not describe the harlot as the man's honorable wife. He commands, “Flee fornication” in verse 18. Therefore, physical intercourse does not automatically transform an immoral relationship into a lawful marriage. Nor is sexual unfaithfulness insignificant merely because no additional wedding ceremony has occurred. The body belongs to the Lord, and the betrayal of marital obligations involves conduct God expressly condemns. Hebrews 13:4 declares, “Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.” The marriage bed is honorable; sexual wickedness is not. Neither a private desire nor a public certificate possesses authority to reverse that judgment.

This distinction also defeats the attempt to confine Christ's exception entirely to an unconsummated betrothal. Matthew 1:18–20 establishes that Mary was espoused to Joseph before they came together, while Joseph was called her husband and Mary his wife. Those facts deserve recognition, but they do not prove that every later reference to putting away a wife concerns only betrothal. Matthew 19 begins with the Pharisees questioning divorce under Moses, proceeds to Christ's appeal to the one-flesh union, and concludes with the exception concerning fornication. The discussion concerns the actual institution of marriage. The disciples' response in verse 10—“If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry”—demonstrates that they understood the Lord to be establishing serious restrictions upon marriage and its dissolution. A betrothal-only explanation must account for those circumstances rather than merely borrowing Joseph's history. A theory that begins with a completed marriage and ends by declaring the marriage never existed has changed the evidence instead of explaining it.

5. The Innocent Spouse Must Not Be Charged with the Adulterer's Sin

The fundamental moral distinction concerns who committed the wrongdoing and who suffered its consequences. Suppose a husband deliberately commits adultery, abandons

his wife, refuses repentance, and establishes another relationship. His conduct violates the marital faithfulness established by God. But what sin has the faithful wife committed merely by suffering his betrayal? Scripture does not automatically transfer the husband's adultery to her account. Likewise, a wife who deliberately violates her marriage does not make her faithful husband an adulterer simply because the original relationship subsequently ends. John 7:24 commands, “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.” That command requires examination of established facts rather than mechanical conclusions drawn from marital status. The person whose marriage was destroyed is not necessarily the person who destroyed it. A church that cannot distinguish those circumstances has no business congratulating itself for possessing unusually strict standards of righteousness. Severity without discernment is not holiness; it is injustice dressed in religious clothing.

Neither should sympathy for an injured spouse eliminate the requirement that allegations be established truthfully. A husband cannot manufacture an accusation of fornication because he has become dissatisfied with his wife. A woman cannot label every ordinary disagreement as sexual betrayal in order to obtain the freedom she desires. Proverbs 18:13 warns, “He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.” Deuteronomy 22 demonstrates that Israel's national Law distinguished established wrongdoing from false accusations concerning a woman's sexual conduct. First Corinthians 5 requires the Church to confront genuine immorality rather than preserve a respectable appearance while serious sin continues. These passages have different governing settings, but both establish the seriousness of truth and accountability. The guilty must not be protected through silence, and the innocent must not be condemned through unsupported accusations. A divorce doctrine that requires no investigation of the facts is wonderfully convenient for the judge and potentially disastrous for the person being judged. Scripture demands more than convenience.

Deuteronomy 24:1–4 also prevents the assumption that a second marriage following divorce must always be treated as though no genuine change in marital circumstances occurred. Moses describes a woman receiving a bill of divorcement, departing from her first husband's house, and becoming another man's wife. The passage identifies the second man as the latter husband and the first man as her former husband. Those expressions establish that Israel's Law recognized actual consequences following divorcement. The legislation also forbade the former husband from reclaiming the woman after the intervening marriage. That does not establish that every divorce or remarriage today is morally justified, because Jesus Christ subsequently confronted the misuse of the Mosaic allowance. But neither may the historical record be erased. The law recognized a distinction between a former relationship and a subsequent marriage. A marriage that has

legitimately ended must not be treated as though no ending occurred merely because a religious system finds the consequences inconvenient. The grounds for legitimate release remain essential to the judgment.

6. Forgiveness, Repentance, and Reconciliation Are Not the Same as Compulsory Bondage

The recognition of fornication as an exceptional ground does not mean that divorce must follow every instance of sexual unfaithfulness. Ephesians 4:32 commands believers to forgive one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven them. Colossians 3:13 likewise instructs Christians concerning forbearance and forgiveness. A husband or wife genuinely confronted with the adultery of a spouse may choose to pursue reconciliation when repentance is real and the wrongdoing has ceased. Nothing in Matthew 19:9 commands the injured person to dissolve the marriage immediately. The exception recognizes a circumstance; it does not impose an automatic requirement to divorce. But neither should forgiveness be confused with pretending that adultery never occurred. A person may forgive a genuine offense while recognizing that the offense has produced serious consequences. Forgiveness is not a declaration that wickedness was righteousness, and reconciliation is not accomplished by ordering the injured person to forget what the guilty person refuses to forsake. The Bible commands forgiveness without making continued sin honorable.

Second Corinthians 7:10–11 provides important instruction concerning the character of genuine repentance. Paul distinguishes godly sorrow from the sorrow of the world and describes the earnest response associated with repentance. The principle is especially important when a guilty spouse announces sorrow while continuing the very conduct that destroyed the marriage. Tears alone do not constitute repentance. Religious vocabulary does not constitute repentance. A public apology followed by another secret appointment with an adulterous companion does not constitute repentance. The offender must confront the wickedness, abandon the immoral relationship, and accept the responsibilities that remain. A congregation should not mistake a moving testimony for established faithfulness. Neither should an injured spouse be pressured to declare the marriage restored simply because the offender has learned how to sound sufficiently remorseful before an audience. A man cannot continue maintaining the adultery while demanding the privileges of forgiveness as though repentance were a receipt purchased with a few tears. The Word of God demands truth, not religious theater.

First Corinthians 7:10–11 preserves reconciliation as a genuine objective when married believers have separated, but the passage must not be converted into a command requiring someone to remain exposed to serious wrongdoing or danger. The same Bible that

commands marital faithfulness condemns cruelty, bitterness, and violence. Ephesians 5:25 commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church, while Colossians 3:19 expressly forbids bitterness. A wife does not become rebellious merely because she seeks immediate protection from violence, and a husband does not become guilty of abandonment merely because he refuses to participate in another person's wickedness. Protective separation, completed divorcement, and freedom to remarry are distinct questions requiring their own examination. Reconciliation must involve actual repentance and the restoration of trustworthy conduct, not merely physical proximity. Yet where genuine reconciliation is possible and appropriate, Scripture does not forbid it. The Bible neither commands every injured spouse to obtain a divorce nor grants an unrepentant offender authority to demand restoration on his own terms. The governing standard remains obedience to what God has actually written.

7. Bound and Loosed: What Paul Adds to the Question of Remarriage

First Corinthians 7:27–28 introduces an extraordinary distinction: “Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned.” Notice the deliberate contrast between bound and loosed. Paul instructs the man presently bound to his wife not to seek release. Marriage is not presented as an inconvenience from which every dissatisfied Christian ought to escape. But the apostle also recognizes a condition in which a man is loosed from a wife, and the following verse declares that marriage in the circumstances being discussed is not sin. The surrounding chapter concerns unmarried persons, virgins, widows, married believers, and counsel connected with “the present distress” in verse 26. Therefore, verse 28 does not independently establish every possible ground for divorce. Those grounds must be examined elsewhere. Nevertheless, Paul's language supplies substantial support for the principle that legitimate release from a marital obligation can permit another marriage. The Bible commands the bound man not to seek freedom, but it does not call every marriage entered by a genuinely loosed man adultery.

Romans 7:1–6 must also be interpreted according to its actual doctrinal purpose. Paul describes a married woman bound to her husband while he lives and released from that obligation through his death. The illustration establishes the certainty of freedom following death, but the apostle's principal subject is the believer's death to the Law through Jesus Christ. Verse 4 declares, “Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead.” There is the doctrinal destination. Paul is explaining redemption and the Christian's new relationship to the risen Savior. He does not introduce every circumstance involving fornication, desertion, and divorcement into that illustration. Consequently, Romans 7

cannot be made an exhaustive divorce statute that erases Matthew 19 or the direct marriage instructions of First Corinthians 7. The apostle used a marriage illustration to explain deliverance from the Law; religion has sometimes used the illustration to manufacture additional bondage. The context must govern the application.

The distinction between legitimate release and manufactured liberty remains decisive. A person cannot destroy a faithful marriage through adultery, obtain a divorce, and then claim that every obligation has become righteous merely because a courthouse recognizes the separation. Neither may someone abandon dependent children, refuse legitimate financial responsibilities, or disregard a present lawful marriage under the excuse that everything is under grace. Romans 6:15 asks, “What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid.” Salvation by grace does not make wrongdoing harmless. Yet the opposite error must also be rejected. A believer whose former marriage legitimately ended through a circumstance recognized by Scripture should not automatically receive perpetual condemnation merely because another person committed the wrongdoing. Matthew 19 supplies an exception concerning fornication; First Corinthians 7 recognizes the distinction between the bound and the loosed. Each passage must retain its proper force. Liberty cannot be manufactured through rebellion, and bondage cannot be manufactured through religious tradition. The question is what the Bible actually establishes.

Conclusion

The central question can now be answered from the complete testimony of Scripture. Does fornication permit remarriage, or only divorce? Matthew 19:9 identifies fornication as an exception within Christ's condemnation of putting away a wife and marrying another. The sentence concerns both actions, and the exception provides substantial grounds for understanding that a divorce genuinely justified by fornication may permit subsequent marriage without the adultery judgment otherwise attached to the conduct described. That conclusion follows from the construction of the Lord's statement and is reinforced by the biblical distinction between continuing obligation and legitimate release. It does not mean that Christ commanded remarriage, supplied an exhaustive divorce code, or authorized every divorced person to enter another relationship. The interpretation must remain no broader than Scripture warrants. Mark and Luke condemn wrongful divorce and remarriage, while Matthew expressly identifies the exception. First Corinthians 7 distinguishes between the bound and the loosed. The Bible does not become more holy when a preacher removes Christ's qualification, and it does not become more gracious when a sinner removes Christ's prohibition. Both words carry divine authority.

The practical consequences are serious. The man who commits adultery must not be allowed to transform his betrayal into righteousness by obtaining another marriage certificate. The woman who abandons her faithful husband must not use grace as an excuse for deliberate wickedness. The guilty must repent, forsake sin, and fulfill every legitimate obligation that remains. But the innocent spouse must not automatically be treated as though another person's adultery establishes a permanent sentence against the injured party. A wife who remained faithful while her husband deliberately destroyed the marriage has not committed his adultery. A husband whose wife violated her vows is not guilty of her betrayal merely because he could not compel her repentance. The Church must examine the circumstances according to Scripture rather than relying upon appearances, assumptions, or denominational tradition. Forgiveness must be honored, reconciliation should be pursued where genuinely possible and appropriate, and legitimate biblical release must be respected. There is no righteousness in protecting an adulterer's freedom while using his adultery to impose a lifetime punishment upon the person he betrayed. Righteous judgment does not reverse the identity of the offender and the offended.

The final verdict rests upon the words of Jesus Christ, not the severity of religious opinion. Marriage is God's institution. Adultery is sin. Wrongful putting away followed by remarriage remains under the condemnation of the Lord. Fornication is an exceptional circumstance expressly identified in Matthew 19:9, and the conclusion that legitimate release may permit remarriage has substantial support from the complete wording and the related apostolic instructions. No Christian should seek divorce as a convenient means of escaping responsibilities. No guilty spouse should manufacture liberty through rebellion. No injured believer should be condemned for another person's wickedness without examining the actual circumstances. And no religious authority possesses permission to remove an exception simply because the resulting prohibition would be easier to administer. The Lord Jesus Christ knew exactly what He was saying when He declared, “except it be for fornication.” Those words were not an accident, an embarrassment, or a problem for heaven to correct. The legalist wants to make the exception disappear. The rebel wants to make the prohibition disappear. The faithful Bible believer must refuse both demands. Christ spoke the warning, Christ supplied the exception, and Christ remains the authority over both. The Book does not need another rule. It needs to be believed.

5 of 10 — Divorce and Remarriage — If Your Spouse Abandons You, Are You Still Bound to That Marriage?

Primary Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 7:10–16; 1 Corinthians 7:27–28; Romans 12:18

Introduction

There is a peculiar kind of religious cruelty that can look a faithful Christian squarely in the face, acknowledge that the man's wife abandoned him, admit that he did not commit adultery, recognize that he pleaded for reconciliation, and then inform him that he must spend the remainder of his natural life chained to a marriage the other person has deliberately repudiated. Apparently, the departing spouse may pack the furniture, empty the closets, abandon the household, establish another relationship, and disappear over the horizon, while the faithful Christian receives a lifetime assignment to preserve a marriage that requires two people but now possesses only one willing participant. And if the abandoned believer objects, somebody will produce a verse about marital faithfulness and announce that the matter has been settled. But the Apostle Paul wrote something that deserves considerably more attention than it usually receives. First Corinthians 7:15 declares, “But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace.” Those words were not written by a divorce attorney. They were written under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. The question is whether religious tradition will permit them to mean what the apostle actually said.

Now understand something before the argument proceeds. Marriage is God's institution, not a temporary domestic arrangement maintained only while personal satisfaction remains high. Genesis 2:24 declares that a man shall leave father and mother, cleave unto his wife, and become one flesh with her. Jesus Christ reaffirmed that institution in Matthew 19:6, commanding, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” A husband who abandons his faithful wife because another woman has captured his imagination is not exercising Christian liberty. A wife who deliberately deserts her husband because another man promises a more comfortable existence is not demonstrating spiritual independence. The Scripture condemns wrongful abandonment, adultery, selfishness, and covenant treachery. But condemning the person who walks away does not authorize condemning the person who was left behind. The man who breaks his marriage vows and the man who suffers their violation are not automatically guilty of the same offense. The Bible does not command us to distribute guilt equally merely because two names appeared on the original wedding certificate. Righteous judgment requires knowing who committed the wrong.

The difficulty becomes especially serious when the departing spouse is an unbeliever, or when somebody professing Christianity behaves as though the commandments of God are irrelevant to the household. What is a faithful husband supposed to do when his wife refuses to remain married? What responsibility rests upon a believing woman whose unbelieving husband has determined that he wants another life? Must a Christian spend decades attempting to preserve a relationship the other party has unmistakably abandoned? Does Paul's declaration that the believer is “not under bondage” establish freedom from an obligation that cannot be fulfilled, and how does that release relate to subsequent remarriage? These questions cannot be settled by shouting that God hates divorce and closing the Bible before reaching First Corinthians 7. Neither can the passage be transformed into permission for every dissatisfied spouse to manufacture a case of desertion. We must examine Paul's actual instructions, distinguish the believer willing to remain from the unbeliever determined to depart, and compare the language of bondage with the apostle's later distinction between being bound and being loosed. The Word of God must govern the conclusion, not the convenience of either religious legalism or human rebellion.

1. Unto the Married I Command: Paul Begins with Faithfulness, Not Escape

First Corinthians 7:10 declares, “And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband.” Verse 11 continues, “But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.” There stands the opening instruction, and there is nothing resembling an advertisement for casual divorce. Paul addresses people who are already married and places their conduct beneath the authority of the Lord. The wife is forbidden to abandon the marriage, and the husband receives his own prohibition against putting away his wife. The relationship is not to be discarded whenever ordinary household responsibilities become unpleasant. These are Christian instructions addressed to the Church, not merely civil regulations borrowed from Israel's national Law. The same apostle who preached salvation by grace commanded married believers to honor their marital obligations. Apparently, being delivered from the Law of Moses does not include permission to abandon one's wife whenever the flesh discovers somebody more entertaining.

Notice also Paul's expression, “yet not I, but the Lord.” He is distinguishing instruction already associated with the Lord's teaching concerning marriage from the additional circumstances he will address afterward. That does not make his subsequent apostolic instruction uninspired or less authoritative. Second Timothy 3:16 declares, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God,” and the Holy Ghost did not temporarily resign His position whenever Paul began discussing a difficult household situation. Jesus Christ had already

established the seriousness of marriage in Matthew 19, returning to the original institution and condemning wrongful putting away. Paul now applies that responsibility directly to married believers. A husband cannot use the apostle's teaching about unmarried service as permission to abandon the wife he already possesses. A woman cannot transform the advantages of singleness into grounds for escaping an established marriage. Advice about whether to enter a marriage is not permission to violate the marriage one has already entered. The vows were not decorative language attached to a pleasant afternoon.

Yet verse 11 acknowledges something important: “But and if she depart.” Paul has commanded against departure, but he recognizes that separation may nevertheless occur. He then supplies instruction concerning remaining unmarried or being reconciled. This distinction immediately prevents a change of residence from being treated as automatic freedom to enter another marriage. A wife cannot simply move across town, rent an apartment, and announce that all previous obligations disappeared when the moving truck left the driveway. Neither may a husband declare himself unmarried merely because he has established a second address. The apostle preserves the seriousness of the existing relationship while addressing the consequences of separation. But notice that he does not stop the chapter at verse 11. He proceeds to circumstances involving an unbelieving spouse and specifically identifies the situation in which that unbeliever departs. The man who uses verses 10–11 to silence verse 15 has not rightly divided the chapter. He has simply stopped reading before Paul finished speaking. Each circumstance must be examined where the apostle placed it.

2. If the Unbeliever Is Willing to Remain, the Believer Must Not Put Away

First Corinthians 7:12 introduces another category: “But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away.” Verse 13 supplies the corresponding instruction concerning a woman whose unbelieving husband is willing to remain. There stands an important distinction. The mere fact that one spouse has received salvation and the other has not does not automatically dissolve the marriage. Suppose a man becomes a Christian after years of unbelief while his wife remains unsaved. He cannot announce that his new relationship with Jesus Christ has invalidated his marital responsibilities. Likewise, a woman who trusts the gospel does not acquire permission to abandon her willing unbelieving husband simply because he has not yet believed. Paul expressly commands the continuation of those marriages when the unbelieving spouse is pleased to dwell with the believer. Salvation changes the Christian's spiritual standing; it does not automatically erase every obligation established before conversion.

This instruction becomes especially important when people misuse the warning against unequal yokes. Second Corinthians 6:14 declares, “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers.” That command must be believed and properly applied, but it does not authorize a Christian to disregard First Corinthians 7:12–13. Paul directly addresses an existing marriage between a believer and an unbeliever and commands the believer not to dissolve it merely because the other spouse remains unsaved. There is a considerable difference between deliberately entering an unequal relationship against biblical instruction and finding oneself already married when salvation occurs. The apostle recognizes that distinction. A man who gets saved on Sunday does not need to come home Monday morning carrying a Bible in one hand and divorce papers in the other. The Holy Ghost never commanded such foolishness. A conversion that produces a desire to abandon a willing spouse has misunderstood the very chapter that explains what the converted person ought to do. Christian faithfulness should make the believer more responsible, not less.

Verse 14 further declares that the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife and the unbelieving wife by the husband, adding concerning their children, “but now are they holy.” The passage does not teach that an unsaved spouse receives eternal salvation automatically through marriage to a Christian. Salvation remains personal and is received through faith in Jesus Christ. Neither does the verse make the children regenerate merely because one parent believes. Paul is explaining the recognized standing of the household within the circumstances he is discussing, not inventing salvation by family association. His conclusion reinforces the instruction to preserve the marriage when the unbeliever is willing to remain. The believer's faith does not make the household illegitimate. That is why verse 15 introduces such an important contrast. One unbeliever is pleased to dwell with the Christian; another refuses to remain. Those are different circumstances, and Paul gives different instructions. The Bible does not command divorce because a spouse is unsaved, but it does not command the impossible when that spouse deliberately refuses to remain married.

3. But If the Unbelieving Depart: Paul Recognizes a Marriage One Spouse Refuses to Preserve

Now we arrive at the decisive statement in First Corinthians 7:15: “But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace.” Notice the contrast with the preceding verses. Paul has already commanded believers to remain with unbelieving spouses who are willing to continue the marriage. But now he introduces the unbeliever who departs. The apostle does not command the Christian to pursue that person across the countryside, compel a return, or

spend the remainder of life attempting to enforce promises the unbeliever has repudiated. He says, “let him depart.” The command is remarkable because it recognizes the limits of what one spouse can accomplish. Marriage involves genuine obligations, but those obligations do not give a believer power to control another person's will. One person can keep his own vows, but he cannot obey God on behalf of somebody determined to disobey Him. Paul refuses to make the faithful spouse responsible for accomplishing the impossible.

Consider the believer whose unbelieving wife announces that she wants nothing more to do with the marriage. Perhaps she has become involved with another man, has rejected every reasonable effort toward reconciliation, and has decided to establish an entirely different household. Her husband may plead with her, pray for her, and seek to preserve the relationship. He may fulfill every responsibility within his ability while she continues moving toward abandonment. But he cannot force her to love him, honor her vows, or remain faithful. The corresponding situation may involve a believing woman whose unbelieving husband walks away, refuses his responsibilities, and rejects any genuine effort to restore the marriage. Paul addresses both sexes when he declares that “a brother or a sister” is not under bondage. The protection is not reserved exclusively for husbands. The Holy Ghost did not command a deserted wife to accomplish what an abandoned husband is excused from accomplishing. The apostle recognizes the circumstances of both, and the Church must do the same.

The expression “not under bondage in such cases” deserves particular attention. Paul does not merely say that the believer may stop pursuing the departing spouse for a few days. He identifies a release from bondage connected to the circumstances described. Those words cannot be explained away as though they contribute nothing to the instruction. Yet their precise relationship to remarriage requires comparison with the remainder of the chapter. The verse does not contain the separate declaration, “Every believer deserted by an unbeliever is hereby free to marry another.” That conclusion must be established from the relevant passages rather than inserted into the sentence. Nevertheless, the release itself is expressly stated. A Christian whose unbelieving spouse genuinely repudiates the marriage is not commanded to maintain an impossible struggle to prevent the departure. The Bible does not place the abandoned believer under an obligation to perform both sides of a covenant after the other party has refused to perform his own. The words “in such cases” establish the particular circumstances; they do not provide permission for everybody to invent a case of abandonment.

4. God Hath Called Us to Peace: What the Believer Can and Cannot Accomplish

The concluding words of First Corinthians 7:15 are just as important as the permission to let the unbeliever depart: “but God hath called us to peace.” Paul is not suggesting that peace consists of approving adultery, ignoring wickedness, or pretending that abandoned responsibilities no longer matter. Biblical peace cannot be manufactured by calling sin righteousness. The apostle is explaining why the believer must not be compelled to maintain a domestic struggle against an unbeliever determined to leave. Romans 12:18 supplies the governing principle: “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.” Notice both qualifications. Peace is to be pursued where possible, and the believer is responsible for what lies within his own ability. The command does not say that peace must be produced regardless of another person's determination to destroy it. God commands the Christian to be faithful; He does not command the Christian to possess sovereign authority over another human being's decisions. There is only one Almighty God, and the abandoned spouse is not Him.

Romans 12:18 also prevents the guilty person from hiding behind the language of peace. A husband cannot abandon his wife, refuse to provide for his children, establish another relationship, and then demand that everybody accept his conduct because God has called Christians to peace. Neither may a woman commit adultery and insist that her husband must approve the betrayal to demonstrate a peaceful spirit. The verse does not require believers to surrender truth in exchange for the appearance of harmony. Paul places responsibility upon each Christian to act peaceably insofar as it lies within that person's power. Where reconciliation can be pursued without compromising righteousness, pursue it. Where a spouse refuses to repent, refuses to remain, and rejects every appropriate effort toward restoration, the remaining believer must recognize the limits of personal responsibility. Peace cannot be established by one person pretending that two people have reached an agreement when the other person has already rejected the agreement. Scripture requires honest conduct, not a performance designed to preserve religious appearances.

First Corinthians 7:16 supplies another searching question: “For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?” Paul recognizes that the believing spouse does not possess certainty concerning the unbeliever's future response to the gospel. A Christian wife may faithfully witness to her husband, but she cannot regenerate his soul. A Christian husband may pray for his wife, proclaim the gospel, and demonstrate godly conduct, but he cannot force her to believe. First Corinthians 3:6 declares, “I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.” Salvation belongs to the work of God through the gospel, not to the domestic authority of a spouse. This distinction matters because religious people sometimes tell abandoned believers that they must preserve the marriage at any cost because the

departing person might eventually be saved. But the apostle asks what the believer knows about that outcome. A possibility is not a promise, and an unsaved spouse's possible future conversion is not permission to rewrite the instruction, “let him depart.”

5. What If the Departing Spouse Claims to Be a Christian?

A more difficult circumstance arises when the departing spouse professes salvation while behaving in deliberate rebellion against the commandments governing marriage. First Corinthians 7:15 expressly identifies “the unbelieving” spouse. That qualification must not be ignored merely because another situation appears similar. Verses 10–11 address married believers and command against wrongful departure, preserving remaining unmarried or reconciliation when separation occurs. Therefore, a professing Christian who abandons a faithful spouse cannot automatically be placed into verse 15 without examining the actual circumstances. Neither may the professing believer claim that salvation by grace provides permission to disregard marital obligations. Romans 6:15 asks, “What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid.” There stands the answer. A saved person does not acquire a divine license to live like the devil simply because eternal salvation rests upon the finished work of Jesus Christ. Grace secures the believer's standing; it does not sanctify deliberate rebellion.

First Corinthians 5 demonstrates that the Church possesses responsibilities concerning serious, established immorality among those professing Christian fellowship. Paul confronted a scandalous case of fornication and commanded the congregation to exercise discipline rather than congratulate itself upon its tolerance. Matthew 18:15–17 likewise provides instruction concerning dealing with a trespassing brother in its own historical setting. These passages establish the seriousness of correction and accountability, but neither should be carelessly transformed into an automatic divorce procedure. A church must examine actual conduct, establish the facts, confront genuine wrongdoing, and distinguish repentance from religious performance. A spouse who has deliberately abandoned the household while claiming Christian standing should not be permitted to use that profession as a shield against accountability. But neither should an unsupported accusation be accepted merely because one party speaks more confidently. A church that disciplines the abandoned believer while protecting the respectable offender has not exercised biblical judgment. It has simply discovered how to turn religious authority against the wrong person.

There is also a difference between a person's profession of salvation and the Church's ability to know that person's spiritual condition with certainty. Second Timothy 2:19 declares, “The Lord knoweth them that are his.” A person may profess Christianity while demonstrating serious disobedience, but human observers do not possess God's complete

knowledge of the soul. Consequently, prolonged abandonment by someone claiming salvation requires careful examination rather than an automatic declaration that the individual was never saved. The situation may involve an unrepentant believer requiring correction, an unbeliever possessing an empty profession, or circumstances that have not yet been established truthfully. Each must be judged according to Scripture. Protective separation from violence must not be confused with calculated desertion, and an absence caused by military service, imprisonment, illness, or unavoidable employment does not automatically constitute repudiation of marriage. A different address does not necessarily mean a rejected covenant, and a Christian profession does not automatically make abandonment righteous. The facts matter because the commandments of God govern actual conduct, not convenient labels.

6. Art Thou Loosed From a Wife? The Question of Remarriage After Desertion

First Corinthians 7:27 introduces language that must be compared with the release in verse 15: “Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife.” Verse 28 continues, “But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned.” Notice the contrast. Paul recognizes a man who is bound and another who is loosed. The first is commanded not to seek release, while the second is advised not to seek a wife. Yet the following verse declares that marriage in the circumstances being discussed is not sin. The connection is substantial. A man legitimately released from a former marital obligation occupies a different position from a man whose marriage remains binding. The reference to a virgin afterward also distinguishes categories of persons addressed within the passage. The apostle did not command married men to manufacture freedom, but neither did he declare that a legitimately loosed man necessarily commits adultery by marrying. The distinction demands attention.

Nevertheless, the exact argument must remain attached to the actual wording. First Corinthians 7:27–28 does not enumerate every circumstance producing legitimate release. The surrounding discussion includes unmarried persons, virgins, widows, the present distress, and counsel concerning remaining in one's existing condition. Verse 39 expressly recognizes a widow's liberty following her husband's death, while Matthew 19:9 supplies Christ's exception concerning fornication. The argument for remarriage following genuine desertion rests upon understanding the release from bondage in verse 15 together with Paul's distinction between being bound and being loosed in verses 27–28. That is a serious biblical argument, but it is an argument established by comparing passages, not a separate sentence in which Paul explicitly names every deserted person and declares permission to remarry. The words must carry the weight they actually bear. A strong biblical conclusion

does not become stronger when its defender pretends that an inference is a quotation. Scripture deserves accuracy as well as conviction.

Romans 7:1–6 and First Corinthians 7:39 also establish the certainty of release through death. A surviving spouse is unquestionably free to marry after the death of the other, subject to the instruction to marry "only in the Lord." But Romans 7 primarily employs marriage to explain the believer's deliverance from the Law through Jesus Christ. Paul does not introduce fornication, abandonment, or a previous bill of divorcement into that illustration. Consequently, the passage cannot honestly be made an exhaustive statute declaring that no other biblical circumstance can ever affect marital obligation. Neither does the existence of possible legitimate release authorize careless remarriage after ordinary separation. The question remains whether the person is actually free according to Scripture. A spouse cannot manufacture desertion by deliberately making the household unbearable and then claiming to have been abandoned. The person who creates the wrongdoing cannot claim the privilege intended to address the wrongdoing merely because the consequences have become convenient. Biblical liberty must be established, not invented.

7. When the Marriage Has Been Abandoned, What Must the Faithful Believer Do?

The faithful Christian must first distinguish personal responsibility from another person's deliberate choices. Romans 12:18 commands peace insofar as it lies within the believer's ability. First Corinthians 7:12–13 commands remaining with a willing unbelieving spouse, while verse 15 permits the departure of one who refuses to remain. Those instructions establish a course governed by truth rather than panic, anger, or personal preference. A believer should not hastily declare abandonment because a spouse has requested temporary distance during a serious disagreement. Neither should genuine repudiation be denied indefinitely merely because acknowledging it would make the situation uncomfortable. The circumstances must be established through conduct, not imagination. A spouse who repeatedly refuses reconciliation, openly repudiates the marriage, and deliberately establishes another household presents a substantially different situation from someone temporarily separated for protection or necessary employment. Biblical judgment requires knowing what happened before announcing what God commands about it. The Lord did not give His Word so that people could replace investigation with assumptions.

Legitimate responsibilities also remain important when a marriage has been abandoned. First Timothy 5:8 warns concerning the person who refuses to provide for his own household. A father cannot use divorce as permission to disregard his children, and a mother cannot pretend that marital conflict has erased every parental obligation. Financial

responsibilities, lawful agreements, parental care, and honest conduct must be addressed according to the circumstances. The abandoned believer should not answer wickedness with wickedness, conceal assets through dishonesty, retaliate through cruelty, or teach children to despise the other parent. Ephesians 4:31 commands the removal of bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, evil speaking, and malice. Those instructions do not require pretending the abandonment was righteous. They govern the Christian's own conduct while the wrong is being addressed. The offender's disobedience does not grant the injured person permission to establish a competing collection of sins. A believer may be genuinely wronged and still remain responsible for walking faithfully before God.

Finally, the believer must distinguish the possibility of reconciliation from an obligation to maintain an imaginary marriage indefinitely. Where genuine repentance occurs and reconciliation remains lawful, safe, and appropriate, Scripture provides substantial encouragement toward restoration. But reconciliation requires the participation of those involved. A person cannot restore a marriage by accepting responsibility for every decision the absent spouse refuses to make. Nor should churches demand that someone remain physically exposed to violence or serious danger simply to preserve the appearance of an uninterrupted household. First Corinthians 7:15 recognizes that an unbeliever may depart and commands the believer to permit that departure. The question of subsequent remarriage must then be examined according to legitimate release rather than settled through an automatic assumption. A faithful Christian may surrender the impossible task of controlling another person's rebellion without surrendering obedience to God. The believer remains accountable for personal conduct, but the departed spouse must answer for the departure. That distinction is not an excuse for divorce. It is the difference between genuine responsibility and manufactured bondage.

Conclusion

The Apostle Paul's instructions in First Corinthians 7 establish a distinction that no faithful examination of divorce and remarriage may ignore. Married believers are commanded not to abandon their marriages. Christians already married to unbelievers must remain when the unbelieving spouses are willing to continue the relationship. But when the unbeliever refuses to remain, Paul declares, “let him depart,” and adds that the brother or sister is “not under bondage in such cases.” Those words identify a real difference between continuing marital obligation and the circumstances produced by genuine desertion. They do not command Christians to pursue divorce, nor do they excuse a person who deliberately abandons a faithful spouse. The distinction concerns the individual whose unbelieving spouse has repudiated the relationship. God requires faithfulness from the believer, but He does not require the believer to possess the power to make an unwilling spouse faithful.

Marriage remains sacred, yet its sanctity does not transform another person's rebellion into the abandoned Christian's guilt. The inspired instructions must govern both the warning and the release.

The question of remarriage must be approached with the same seriousness. First Corinthians 7:15 expressly declares freedom from bondage in the circumstances described, while verses 27–28 distinguish those bound from those loosed and recognize marriage that is not sin. Together, these passages provide substantial grounds for understanding that genuine release through an unbeliever's desertion may permit remarriage. Yet the particular circumstances must be established, and the conclusion must not be expanded into universal permission for every separated or divorced person. The Church must distinguish the unbeliever who departs from the professing believer who wrongfully abandons a spouse, protective separation from calculated desertion, and genuine repentance from continued rebellion. The apostle's words cannot be made into a convenient escape hatch for the guilty. Neither may they be reduced until they provide no meaningful protection for the innocent. The man who manufactures abandonment to obtain another wife has violated the purpose of the passage; the man who denies every possibility of release to a genuinely abandoned believer has failed to reckon with what Paul actually wrote. Both must answer to Scripture.

The final verdict is that a faithful Christian is not commanded to accomplish the impossible by forcing an unbelieving spouse to preserve a marriage that person has deliberately repudiated. The LORD established marriage, commanded marital faithfulness, condemned adultery, and supplied inspired instruction for circumstances arising through human rebellion. Those commandments must stand together. Where marriage continues, honor its obligations. Where separation occurs without legitimate dissolution, do not manufacture freedom to enter another relationship. Where an unbeliever genuinely deserts the believer, recognize the release Paul expressly describes and carefully establish its consequences according to the complete biblical testimony. Where repentance and reconciliation are appropriate and possible, pursue them without pretending that one person's willingness constitutes the agreement of two. And where a believer has suffered abandonment without committing the wrongdoing that produced it, refuse the religious temptation to assign the offender's guilt to the injured party. A marriage covenant requires faithfulness, but a deserted spouse cannot sign both names upon it, fulfill both sets of promises, or repent for another person's rebellion. God has called His people to peace, not to the impossible task of controlling an unwilling sinner. The guilty must answer for the abandonment. The faithful must answer for their own conduct. And the final authority over both is the written Word of Almighty God.

6 of 10 — Divorce and Remarriage — Must a Christian Remain in an Abusive Marriage to Obey God?

Primary Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 7:10–11; Ephesians 5:25–29; Colossians 3:19; 1 Peter 3:7; Psalm 11:5

Introduction

There is something profoundly wrong with a religious system that can thunder against divorce for an entire Sunday morning, quote First Corinthians 7 until the congregation knows every word, and then send a battered woman back into a house where her husband has been using his fists to demonstrate what he imagines biblical headship means. Apparently, according to certain religious authorities, a wife must endure whatever happens beneath her husband's roof because the Bible commands her not to depart. Never mind that the same Bible commands the husband to love his wife as Christ loved the Church, forbids bitterness, requires him to give her honor, and declares that the LORD hates the man who loves violence. Those passages evidently become optional whenever somebody discovers a convenient verse about submission. But Psalm 11:5 declares, “The LORD trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth.” There stands Almighty God's opinion of violence, and it is considerably less accommodating than the opinion of the religious official determined to preserve appearances at any cost.

Let us establish the foundation immediately. Marriage is God's institution, and divorce is not the ordinary remedy for every disagreement between two sinners living under the same roof. Genesis 2:24 establishes the one-flesh union, and Matthew 19:6 declares, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” A husband and wife cannot discard their responsibilities merely because household life becomes difficult. But the sanctity of marriage does not grant either spouse permission to terrorize the other. A husband who beats his wife has not discovered a superior form of biblical leadership. A woman who threatens, assaults, or deliberately intimidates her husband is not exempt from the commandments against wickedness because she happens to be female. Children are not required to become spectators or victims of domestic violence so that adults may preserve an impressive religious reputation. God never established marriage as a private kingdom where one sinner possesses unlimited authority to injure another. The same Scriptures that defend marriage also condemn cruelty, oppression, violence, and the betrayal of solemn responsibilities.

The central question is whether a Christian must remain physically exposed to serious abuse in order to obey God's commandments concerning marriage. Answering it requires

distinctions that careless religious arguments frequently ignore. There is a difference between ordinary marital disagreement and deliberate intimidation, between a temporary protective separation and an established divorce, between forgiveness and restored trust, and between genuine repentance and a carefully rehearsed apology intended to escape consequences. We must examine what Paul actually commanded in First Corinthians 7, what Christ requires of husbands in Ephesians 5, what Peter means by giving honor to a wife, and what the Scriptures establish concerning protection from wickedness. We must also distinguish the church's responsibility to confront sin from the civil government's authority to address criminal conduct. Above all, we must refuse to turn physical safety into automatic permission for remarriage or marital permanence into permission for violence. The Bible is neither a divorce advertisement nor an abuser's protection policy. Its commandments must be believed together, and no man has authority to make one verse an accomplice in violating another.

1. Let Not the Wife Depart: What Paul Actually Commanded

First Corinthians 7:10 declares, “And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband.” Verse 11 continues, “But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.” There stands the inspired instruction, and nobody has authority to weaken it. Paul addresses married believers and commands them to preserve the marriage rather than abandon it whenever the flesh becomes dissatisfied. A husband cannot dismiss his wife because she disagrees with him about money, and a wife cannot leave her husband merely because another man appears more entertaining. But notice what the passage does not say. It does not command a threatened woman to stand motionless while her husband attacks her. It does not instruct children to remain beneath the fists of a violent father. The apostle forbids wrongful marital departure; he does not authorize criminal conduct against one's household.

The distinction becomes clearer when we examine Paul's next expression: “But and if she depart.” Although the general command prohibits departure, the apostle recognizes that separation may occur and supplies instruction concerning the resulting circumstances. He tells the woman to remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. That statement does not automatically transform every separation into a completed divorce, nor does it provide unrestricted liberty to enter another marriage. But neither does it establish that every physical departure is identical in cause or guilt. A wife who leaves because she has found another man occupies a different moral position from one who escapes because her husband has threatened her life. The outward act of leaving a building may look similar, but the reasons can be as different as theft and rescue. A man fleeing a burning house is not

guilty of setting the fire merely because he was the last person seen running through the door.

The first responsibility of the Bible student is to distinguish the marital obligation from the immediate circumstances threatening a person's safety. A married couple may remain bound by legitimate obligations even when physical separation becomes necessary. Consequently, seeking protection does not automatically dissolve the marriage, and the need for protection must not be used as an excuse to disregard every continuing responsibility. Nevertheless, the command to preserve marriage cannot be converted into an obligation to submit to violence. Scripture condemns oppression, murder, cruelty, and deliberate wickedness. These commandments do not disappear when the offender possesses a wedding ring. Paul was addressing Christians concerning marital faithfulness, not appointing violent spouses to exercise unlimited control over another person's body. A marriage covenant establishes responsibilities before God; it does not establish immunity from God's commandments. Any interpretation that makes obedience to one passage require participation in the wickedness condemned by another has already departed from the Book.

2. Husbands, Love Your Wives: Biblical Headship Is Not Domestic Tyranny

Ephesians 5:25 declares, “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.” There is the standard governing a Christian husband's conduct, and it ought to make every self-appointed domestic dictator examine himself carefully. Paul does not merely instruct the husband to maintain employment, preserve the marriage certificate, or demand compliance from his wife. He commands love measured against the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. The Savior gave Himself for the Church. He did not establish His relationship with His redeemed people through selfish exploitation. The husband is therefore commanded to exercise responsibility through conduct consistent with the pattern established by Christ. A man who quotes Ephesians 5:22 concerning wives submitting to their husbands but conveniently loses his place before reaching verse 25 has not mastered biblical marriage. He has merely discovered that selective reading can be remarkably useful to a selfish sinner.

The command becomes even more searching in Ephesians 5:28: “So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.” Verse 29 continues, “For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church.” Notice the language. Nourishing and cherishing describe care, provision, and responsibility. The wife is not portrayed as an expendable object whose suffering becomes irrelevant whenever the husband wishes to exercise authority. The one-flesh union provides another reason for honorable treatment. What sort of biblical headship is

demonstrated when a man strikes the woman he is commanded to cherish? What kind of sacrificial love is displayed when he threatens the person he is commanded to protect? A husband who uses his fists to enforce his authority has supplied evidence against his obedience, not evidence of his leadership. Ephesians 5 condemns that contradiction before any church committee begins manufacturing excuses.

Nor may the husband's responsibility be isolated from the other commandments governing Christian conduct. Ephesians 4:31 commands believers to put away “all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking,” together with malice. The following verse commands kindness and forgiveness. These instructions appear in the same epistle that establishes the husband's responsibility toward his wife. A man cannot spend Monday through Saturday cultivating wrath, threats, and intimidation and then appeal to Ephesians 5 on Sunday as though he has been exercising Christlike authority. The contradiction is not difficult to identify. Biblical headship does not mean that a husband becomes the final authority over righteousness inside his home. He remains beneath the authority of Jesus Christ and the written Word of God. The head of a household is still accountable to the Head of the Church. A man who refuses that accountability has not become exceptionally biblical. He has become exceptionally rebellious.

3. The LORD Hateth Violence: The Offender Cannot Hide Behind Marriage

Colossians 3:19 delivers a command that requires no elaborate explanation: “Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them.” Notice that the prohibition against bitterness accompanies the command to love. Paul understood that a husband might maintain the outward appearance of marriage while privately cultivating conduct contrary to his obligations. Bitterness can produce contempt, harsh speech, vindictive treatment, and deliberate cruelty. The Christian husband is commanded to reject such behavior rather than dignify it with religious terminology. A man who constantly humiliates his wife, threatens her, isolates her from legitimate assistance, or uses fear to dominate the household cannot reasonably claim that his conduct fulfills this passage. The Bible does not recognize intimidation as a superior form of affection. Neither does it permit a husband to redefine cruelty as discipline whenever somebody questions his behavior. A man may possess a marriage license, a Bible, and an impressive religious vocabulary while remaining thoroughly disobedient to all three commandments governing his conduct. Outward respectability cannot make private wickedness holy.

First Peter 3:7 strengthens the indictment: “Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.” The husband is commanded to give honor. Peter does not establish a domestic arrangement in which

greater physical strength provides permission to injure someone possessing less. Quite the opposite. The distinction concerning the weaker vessel reinforces the husband's obligation to treat his wife responsibly. The verse also warns that his prayers may be hindered. Consider that carefully. A man may maintain an impressive reputation for public prayer while the apostle warns that his treatment of his wife can affect his fellowship with God. Apparently, heaven is not nearly as impressed with religious performances as certain congregations are. A husband cannot mistreat his wife behind closed doors and expect his public prayers to serve as a certificate of domestic righteousness. The LORD sees the household after the church doors close.

Psalm 11:5 settles the moral character of violence with unmistakable force: “The LORD trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth.” The immediate psalm concerns the righteous, the wicked, and the LORD's judgment. It is not a specialized divorce statute, and it must not be misrepresented as one. Nevertheless, its condemnation of those who love violence is plain. God does not excuse wickedness because it occurs inside a marriage. Neither does He consider cruelty harmless merely because the victim and offender share a surname. Proverbs 6:16–19 likewise identifies things the LORD hates, including hands that shed innocent blood, a lying tongue, and a heart devising wicked imaginations. These condemnations remain serious when the offender is married. The wedding ring does not convert violence into virtue, and a husband's position does not turn the bruises upon his wife into evidence of biblical submission. Marriage is honorable because God established it, not because it provides a hiding place for conduct God condemns.

4. A Prudent Man Foreseeth the Evil: Protection Is Not Rebellion

Proverbs 22:3 declares, “A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished.” The proverb establishes a principle of recognizing danger and acting prudently rather than continuing blindly toward harm. It does not constitute an independent marriage law, but its wisdom is applicable when a person faces a genuine threat. Scripture never presents needless exposure to wickedness as the universal proof of obedience. David fled from Saul when the king sought his life. First Samuel 19 records Michal helping David escape through a window when Saul's servants threatened him. David did not remain in the house announcing that fleeing would demonstrate insufficient respect for the king's authority. He escaped the immediate danger. The historical circumstances were different from marriage, but the principle is unmistakable: avoiding violence is not inherently sinful. God did not command His people to stand beneath a falling tree merely to prove that they possess extraordinary confidence in His protection. Prudence recognizes the danger and acts accordingly.

The Apostle Paul's own experience supplies another illustration. Acts 9:23–25 records that enemies sought to kill him at Damascus, and the disciples let him down by the wall in a basket so he could escape. Nobody seriously argues that Paul lacked faith because he did not remain available for assassination. He recognized the threat and departed. The same principle must inform the treatment of someone facing domestic violence. A threatened spouse may need to leave immediately, obtain safe lodging, seek protection for children, and involve appropriate civil authorities. Such actions should not be condemned automatically as marital abandonment. A person does not become guilty of violence by escaping the one committing it. Neither should a church demand that a spouse remain within reach of further assault while religious leaders arrange a convenient meeting with the offender. Protection from an immediate threat does not require permission from the person creating the threat. Scripture commands righteousness; it does not require the innocent to make themselves available for continued injury.

Children make the matter even more serious. A father who endangers his wife and children cannot appeal to household authority while violating the responsibilities attached to that authority. Ephesians 6:4 commands fathers not to provoke their children to wrath but to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Colossians 3:21 warns fathers against provoking their children lest they be discouraged. These instructions do not describe a household governed through terror. A mother protecting children from violence is not automatically opposing God's institution of marriage. Likewise, a father who removes children from genuine danger presented by their mother must be judged according to established facts rather than assumptions about which sex ordinarily commits abuse. Every parent remains accountable before God for the children entrusted to that household. A child is not a religious sacrifice to be offered upon the altar of preserving a family's public reputation. The obligation to honor marriage must never become an excuse for ignoring the obligation to protect those facing serious harm.

5. The Church Must Judge Righteously, Not Protect Its Reputation

The local church possesses genuine responsibilities when accusations of abuse arise, and those responsibilities cannot be fulfilled through gossip, assumption, favoritism, or automatic dismissal. Proverbs 18:13 declares, “He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.” John 7:24 commands, “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.” The principles are straightforward. An accusation must be treated seriously, the relevant circumstances must be examined, and unsupported conclusions must not replace established facts. But righteous judgment does not require waiting until another assault occurs before taking protective action. An immediate threat requires attention to safety while the facts are examined. Nor should a

church demand independent eyewitnesses to every private act of violence before allowing a threatened person to seek protection. Scripture distinguishes an allegation from established guilt, but it does not command leaders to disregard credible danger. A church that refuses to investigate wrongdoing because the accused man has an impressive reputation has confused public admiration with evidence.

First Corinthians 5 demonstrates that the Church must confront serious immorality rather than conceal it beneath religious respectability. Paul rebuked the Corinthian assembly because scandalous fornication existed among them while the congregation had become puffed up instead of mourning the wickedness. The apostle commanded decisive ecclesiastical action. That passage concerns a specific sexual offense, not a complete procedure for every domestic abuse allegation, but its governing lesson is unmistakable: a church cannot knowingly protect serious wickedness while congratulating itself upon doctrinal purity. Neither may church discipline be confused with the civil government's responsibility concerning criminal conduct. Romans 13:1–4 recognizes the legitimate authority of civil rulers and describes the ruler as God's minister in matters of justice. A church cannot substitute private counseling for appropriate protection and lawful reporting when serious violence or criminal wrongdoing is involved. The preacher was called to preach the Word, not to establish a private courtroom where criminal conduct becomes invisible whenever the offender contributes generously to the offering plate.

The danger of favoritism becomes particularly serious when the accused person holds a respected position within the congregation. A pastor, deacon, teacher, missionary, or prominent donor must not receive immunity from examination simply because public exposure would embarrass the church. First Timothy 3 requires bishops to be blameless, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, and responsible in governing their households. Titus 1 likewise forbids violence, selfwill, uncontrolled anger, and other disqualifying conduct. These standards do not disappear because a man possesses unusual preaching ability. Yet neither should a person's reputation be destroyed through unverified accusations. The obligation is to protect those facing danger, establish the facts responsibly, respect legitimate confidentiality, and confront wrongdoing through appropriate ecclesiastical and civil means. A church that sacrifices an endangered family to preserve a preacher's reputation has forgotten whose flock it is supposed to protect. Christ purchased His Church with His own blood; He did not purchase it to become a refuge for unrepentant wickedness.

6. Separation, Divorce, and Remarriage Are Three Different Questions

One of the most important distinctions concerns the difference between leaving a dangerous environment and dissolving the marriage itself. First Corinthians 7:10–11

addresses the seriousness of separation and instructs those separated under the circumstances described to remain unmarried or be reconciled. The passage does not declare that moving to a place of safety automatically produces a completed divorce. Nor does it teach that the need for protection automatically authorizes a new marriage. A woman who leaves an abusive husband may still possess unresolved marital obligations requiring careful biblical and legal examination. The corresponding principle applies to a husband escaping violence from his wife. The immediate objective is protection from wrongdoing, not the automatic creation of another marital relationship. The door of a safe house is not a wedding chapel, and escaping danger does not by itself establish freedom to marry somebody else. The distinction protects both the injured person and the seriousness of marriage.

Matthew 19:9 supplies Christ's exception concerning fornication, while First Corinthians 7:15 addresses the departure of an unbelieving spouse and declares that the abandoned believer is not under bondage in such cases. Those passages must be examined in their own settings when determining whether a marriage has been legitimately dissolved. The fact that a spouse commits serious abuse establishes genuine wrongdoing, but it does not mean every possible instance of abuse is expressly identified in Scripture as an independent ground for divorce and remarriage. Where sexual immorality, deliberate desertion, or other relevant circumstances exist, those facts require careful examination according to the passages that address them. The Bible must not be forced to say more than it actually states. Yet uncertainty concerning the final marital status does not eliminate the immediate obligation to protect a person from danger. A church does not need to settle every future question about remarriage before recognizing that somebody should not be subjected to another assault tonight. The present danger and the future marital question require distinct judgments.

This distinction also prevents guilty spouses from exploiting the doctrine of legitimate release. A husband cannot deliberately threaten his wife until she escapes, then accuse her of abandonment and claim that her departure gives him freedom to marry another woman. A wife cannot abuse her husband, drive him from the household, and then announce that his protective departure proves he deserted her. Such reasoning rewards the person creating the wrongdoing while condemning the person seeking protection. Scripture demands righteous judgment concerning the actual cause of separation. First Corinthians 7:27 declares, “Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed.” A person cannot manufacture biblical freedom by committing the very sins that destroy the household. Neither should a genuinely injured spouse be treated as the offender merely because the resulting separation became publicly visible. The one who drives another person from safety cannot automatically claim the privileges of the abandoned party. The

facts, the continuing obligations, and the biblical grounds for dissolution must all be examined honestly.

7. Genuine Repentance Must Produce More Than Tears and Religious Promises

Second Corinthians 7:10 declares, “For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.” The following verse describes earnestness, clearing of oneself, indignation, fear, vehement desire, zeal, and revenge in connection with the Corinthians' response to correction. The immediate passage concerns their conduct following apostolic rebuke, but it establishes a serious principle concerning genuine repentance. Sorrow is not merely an impressive emotional performance. A violent spouse who apologizes publicly while continuing to threaten privately has not demonstrated that the wickedness has ceased. Neither does a brief period of acceptable behavior automatically establish lasting repentance. Real repentance must confront the offense, reject its continuation, and accept legitimate accountability. Tears may wet the church carpet without ever washing the wickedness out of a man's conduct. The question is not how convincingly the offender describes sorrow, but whether the conduct condemned by Scripture has actually been forsaken.

Reconciliation likewise requires more than demanding that the injured person return to the same circumstances immediately. Ephesians 4:32 commands forgiveness, but forgiveness must not be confused with declaring that no offense occurred. A spouse may forgive genuine wrongdoing while recognizing that trust has been damaged and that protection remains necessary. Galatians 6:1 commands spiritual believers to restore one overtaken in a fault in the spirit of meekness, but restoration does not mean concealing continued wickedness or abandoning appropriate safeguards. A man who has committed serious violence must accept responsibility for his conduct, submit to lawful consequences, and demonstrate meaningful change rather than demand immediate restoration of every former privilege. Nor may he use Scripture to threaten an injured spouse into silence. Forgiveness is not a magic eraser that removes bruises from history, cancels legitimate accountability, or obligates the injured person to surrender protection. God commands truth as well as mercy, and genuine restoration cannot be constructed upon another foundation.

There is also an important distinction between reconciliation as a biblical objective and reconciliation as an accomplished reality. Two people cannot be reconciled through the determination of one while the other continues in deliberate rebellion. Amos 3:3 asks, “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” The immediate prophetic setting concerns Israel's relationship to the LORD, but the principle of agreement is plain. A person who refuses to cease violence cannot reasonably demand that the household be declared

restored merely because the injured spouse has expressed forgiveness. Likewise, a church should not pronounce reconciliation complete while refusing to examine whether genuine safety has been established. Where repentance is authentic, circumstances permit restoration, and the parties can proceed without continued danger, reconciliation deserves serious consideration. Where wickedness remains active, religious pressure cannot manufacture righteousness. A marriage cannot be restored by ordering one spouse to trust while allowing the other to continue destroying every reason for trust. The Lord requires obedience, not the performance of reconciliation for the satisfaction of spectators.

Conclusion

The answer to the opening question is unmistakable: a Christian is not commanded to remain physically exposed to serious violence, threats, or abuse merely to preserve the appearance of an uninterrupted marriage. First Corinthians 7 establishes the seriousness of marital faithfulness and addresses the consequences of separation. Ephesians 5 commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church and to nourish and cherish them. Colossians 3:19 forbids bitterness. First Peter 3:7 commands husbands to give honor to their wives and warns concerning hindered prayers. Psalm 11:5 declares the LORD's hatred of those who love violence. These Scriptures must stand together. None authorizes an offender to inflict injury while hiding behind the command against marital departure. Neither does the need for protective separation automatically establish a completed divorce or unrestricted freedom to remarry. Those questions require separate biblical examination. God's institution of marriage must be honored, but honoring marriage never requires making the commandments against violence, cruelty, and wickedness disappear. The Bible protects the covenant without protecting every sin committed by someone who entered it.

The Church must therefore reject two dangerous extremes. One extreme treats every marital disagreement as sufficient justification for separation and divorce, reducing marriage to a temporary arrangement governed by personal satisfaction. That position contradicts the original institution established in Genesis and reaffirmed by Jesus Christ. The opposite extreme treats every act of protective separation as rebellion against God, regardless of the threats, violence, or serious wrongdoing involved. That position turns marital permanence into a weapon for protecting the offender. Neither extreme submits to the complete Word of God. A spouse who has committed abuse must be confronted with the actual commandments violated. An endangered person must not be condemned for seeking lawful protection. Children must not be sacrificed to religious appearances. Churches must investigate responsibly, protect the vulnerable, confront established wrongdoing, and recognize the legitimate authority of civil government concerning criminal

conduct. There is nothing biblical about preserving the appearance of a holy household while permitting wickedness to govern everything happening behind its doors. The LORD judges conduct, not merely public reputation.

The final verdict rests upon the distinction between marriage as God established it and the wicked conduct of sinners who violate its obligations. A husband is commanded to love, honor, nourish, and cherish his wife, not terrorize her. A wife remains accountable for her conduct toward her husband and possesses no exemption from the commandments against cruelty and violence. Both are responsible before Almighty God. Where ordinary disagreements arise, Christians should pursue obedience, patience, forgiveness, and reconciliation rather than immediately seeking divorce. Where serious danger exists, protection must not be delayed merely to satisfy a religious interpretation that ignores the rest of Scripture. Where repentance is necessary, the guilty must repent and demonstrate the fruits of that repentance. Where reconciliation is genuinely possible and safe, it should be considered according to the circumstances. And where questions concerning divorce and remarriage remain, they must be judged by the relevant biblical passages rather than settled through assumptions. The sanctity of marriage is not established by allowing a violent man to keep his victim within reach. It is established by honoring the God who instituted marriage and obeying the commandments He gave to govern it. The husband does not become the Lord merely because he is called the head. The wedding ring does not make wickedness righteous. And no preacher, church committee, or religious tradition has received authority from heaven to use the Bible as a weapon against the person it ought to protect.

7 of 10 — Divorce and Remarriage — Art Thou Loosed From a Wife? When Is Remarriage Not Sin?

Primary Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 7:17–40; Romans 7:1–6; Deuteronomy 24:1–4

Introduction

There is something almost entertaining about watching a religious man open First Corinthians 7, announce that every divorced person whose former spouse is still breathing must remain unmarried until the undertaker arrives, and then hurriedly step around verses 27 and 28 as though the Apostle Paul accidentally left a dangerous object lying in the aisle. First Corinthians 7:27 declares, “Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife.” Then verse 28 delivers a statement that ought to interrupt a considerable amount of religious thunder: “But and if thou marry, thou hast not

sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned." There stand the words of the Holy Ghost. Paul distinguishes a man who is bound from a man who is loosed, instructs each concerning his circumstances, and then declares that marriage in the situation he is addressing is not sin. Yet certain religious authorities appear determined to make every second marriage an act of adultery, regardless of whether Scripture recognizes that the former marital obligation has legitimately ended. Apparently, the apostle needed a denominational committee to explain what he should have written. Unfortunately for the committee, the apostle finished writing nearly two thousand years before its members discovered their objections.

Now understand something before the flesh begins celebrating. Paul did not command married men to seek divorce, encourage dissatisfied wives to abandon their husbands, or establish a biblical exchange program for people who have grown tired of their spouses. The very first question in First Corinthians 7:27 is followed by the command, "seek not to be loosed." A husband who has a faithful wife is commanded to remain faithful to her. A woman who has entered marriage cannot declare the covenant finished merely because another man has become more attractive. Genesis 2:24 established the original institution, and Matthew 19:6 records Jesus Christ declaring, "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." Marriage is serious because God established it. But the same Bible recognizes circumstances in which marital obligations genuinely end. Death unquestionably releases the surviving spouse. Christ identified fornication as an exceptional circumstance in Matthew 19:9. Paul addressed an unbelieving spouse's departure in First Corinthians 7:15. The Bible does not authorize a married man to manufacture freedom through rebellion, but neither does it authorize religious men to manufacture bondage after legitimate release has occurred. Both errors must answer to Scripture.

The question before us is not whether a courthouse can issue a divorce decree or whether a religious organization can conduct another wedding ceremony. The question is whether the individual is genuinely bound or legitimately loosed according to the written Word of God. That distinction requires examining Paul's actual language, the immediate circumstances of First Corinthians 7, the marriage illustration in Romans 7, and the legal recognition of divorcement and remarriage under Moses. We must also distinguish the Law governing national Israel from the apostolic instructions governing the Church under grace. A civil document may establish that a marriage has legally ended without proving that every motive behind its dissolution was righteous. Equally, a religious declaration that two people remain eternally married does not automatically establish that Scripture recognizes the continuing obligation under every conceivable circumstance. We must investigate what produced the alleged release, what responsibilities remain, and whether remarriage is

actually permitted. The strictest-sounding answer is not necessarily the biblical answer, and the easiest answer is not necessarily the gracious one. Truth is determined by what God wrote, not by how many people a preacher can condemn or excuse with his interpretation.

1. Art Thou Bound Unto a Wife? The First Command Is to Remain Faithful

First Corinthians 7:27 begins with a question that should settle the ambitions of anyone searching for a convenient exit from an honorable marriage: “Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed.” The apostle identifies a man who possesses an existing marital obligation and commands him not to seek its dissolution. Notice that Paul does not ask whether the man's wife has grown older, whether household responsibilities have become expensive, or whether married life still produces the excitement experienced during courtship. He asks whether the man is bound. If the obligation exists, the instruction is to honor it. Marriage is not a temporary agreement that expires whenever personal desire begins looking elsewhere. Ephesians 5:25 commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it. That standard leaves little room for the fellow who wants the privileges of marriage without its responsibilities. A man who spends his married life searching for grounds to become unmarried has already demonstrated that his heart is traveling in a direction his wedding vows never authorized.

The surrounding chapter establishes the seriousness of continuing obligations. First Corinthians 7:10–11 commands married believers not to depart from their spouses and addresses separation and reconciliation when departure occurs. Paul does not treat an unresolved separation as unrestricted permission to marry somebody else. Likewise, verse 17 declares, “But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk.” Verses 18–24 develop the principle of serving God faithfully in the circumstances of one's calling, including questions concerning circumcision and servitude. Those illustrations must not be stretched beyond their purpose, but they establish that conversion to Jesus Christ is not a general announcement permitting believers to discard existing responsibilities. A man who becomes a Christian does not suddenly acquire biblical permission to abandon his wife and children. Grace changes his standing before God and supplies reason for obedience. The new creature in Christ is not an old sinner carrying a newly printed permission slip to practice the same selfishness with religious approval.

The word “bound” also demands that the relationship be examined honestly. Paul is not addressing a man merely considering marriage, nor does he describe someone whose former obligation has already been lawfully terminated. He identifies an existing bond and commands the person not to seek release. That distinction protects the original marriage

against the convenient misuse of passages concerning divorce. A husband cannot produce an accusation against his wife, deliberately make the household miserable, and then claim that his own wrongdoing has established freedom. Nor may a wife abandon her husband, refuse reconciliation, and use the resulting separation as proof that she is no longer accountable for her vows. Malachi 2:14 condemned men who dealt treacherously against the wives of their covenant. The LORD did not consider treachery righteous merely because the offender wanted another arrangement. Biblical liberty cannot be obtained by committing the very sin from which a person hopes to benefit. The bound man must honor the bond, and no amount of religious vocabulary can turn calculated betrayal into legitimate release.

2. Art Thou Loosed From a Wife? Paul Recognized a Different Condition

The second question introduces a deliberate contrast: “Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife.” Paul has just addressed the man who is bound; now he addresses someone who is loosed. Those words cannot be treated as meaningless decorations. The conditions are different, and the apostle's instructions recognize that difference. The bound man should not seek release, while the loosed man should not become occupied with seeking another wife. But what does being loosed from a wife mean? The expression naturally raises the question of a previous marital relationship whose obligation has ended. Death is unquestionably one circumstance producing that result, as First Corinthians 7:39 expressly establishes. A marriage legitimately dissolved under another biblical provision raises a related question requiring examination of those provisions. The verse does not supply an exhaustive catalog of every possible ground for release. Nevertheless, the difference between a man who is bound to a wife and a man who is loosed from a wife is a difference the Holy Ghost deliberately placed in the Book. A doctrine that treats them as identical has begun contradicting the very distinction it claims to defend.

Observe that Paul does not command the loosed man to obtain another wife. He says, “seek not a wife.” That instruction belongs to the practical counsel governing the surrounding passage, where the apostle discusses the present distress and the advantages of remaining unmarried under particular circumstances. The man who is free from marital obligation need not assume that acquiring another wife is his immediate responsibility. The Christian life is not suspended until a wedding ceremony occurs. Paul himself recognized the advantages of unmarried service in First Corinthians 7:7–8, while acknowledging that different believers possess different circumstances and gifts. The distinction is important because some religious people manage to create unnecessary bondage in both directions. One group insists that every Christian ought to marry, while another treats lawful remarriage as though it were automatically a disgrace. Paul commands neither universal

marriage nor universal celibacy. The Lord never appointed a wedding ring as the measurement of salvation, and He never appointed the absence of one as the measurement of holiness. The believer must obey according to the circumstances God actually recognizes.

Verse 28 becomes especially important when the apostle distinguishes the person he has been addressing from a virgin: “But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned.” The separate mention of the virgin provides a genuine reason to consider whether the first statement includes someone previously married. Paul does not simply repeat the identical category in identical language. The distinction deserves attention, although it cannot independently establish the complete marital history of every person described as loosed. The chapter also discusses persons who have never married and widows whose former marriages ended through death. Therefore, an honest interpretation must preserve the range of circumstances under discussion. But the wording certainly does not justify an automatic conclusion that Paul has forbidden every marriage involving a previously married person. When the apostle deliberately distinguishes the loosed from the bound and then distinguishes the person marrying from the virgin, the interpreter had better investigate those differences before announcing that everybody occupies the same condition. Scripture deserves something more substantial than a predetermined verdict.

3. But and If Thou Marry, Thou Hast Not Sinned: The Statement That Must Be Believed

First Corinthians 7:28 declares, “But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned.” Those words should receive their proper force. Paul has advised the loosed man not to seek a wife, but he immediately recognizes that marriage may nevertheless occur without constituting sin. The distinction between counsel and prohibition is essential. An apostle may advise a believer to remain unmarried because of particular circumstances without declaring that marriage itself would be wicked. Verse 26 identifies “the present distress,” providing the setting for much of the counsel. The apostle was not announcing that the marriage bed had become unholy or that every Christian must avoid entering marriage. Hebrews 13:4 declares, “Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled.” The difficulty arises when religious men take counsel given under particular circumstances and transform it into an absolute prohibition that Paul did not establish. There is a considerable difference between saying a man would be wise not to marry and declaring that he commits adultery if he does. The apostle understood the distinction; his interpreters ought to learn it.

The statement also cannot be detached from the preceding question about being loosed. Paul does not first command a married man to seek freedom and then authorize him to marry another woman. He commands the bound man not to seek release. The declaration

that marriage is not sin follows his discussion of a different condition. That sequence provides substantial support for recognizing lawful remarriage when a former marital obligation has genuinely ended. Yet the word “loosed” must not become a magical expression capable of making every divorce righteous. A person may possess a civil decree while remaining accountable before God for violating existing obligations. Another may have been legitimately released through circumstances Scripture recognizes. Those situations cannot be settled merely by announcing that both individuals are legally divorced. A courthouse can record that a marriage ended; it cannot issue a divine certificate declaring that every action leading to its destruction was righteous. The biblical question concerns the legitimacy of the release, not merely the existence of official paperwork.

Paul concludes verse 28 by observing that those who marry “shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you.” The apostle is not presenting marriage as an effortless arrangement in which every difficulty disappears once the wedding ceremony has concluded. Marriage carries responsibilities, concerns, expenses, and the ordinary difficulties experienced by sinners living in a fallen world. The surrounding passage explains why remaining unmarried may have practical advantages during the present distress. Yet Paul refuses to transform those advantages into a declaration that marriage is sinful. He recognizes the distinction between what is lawful and what may be advisable under particular circumstances. This matters tremendously when discussing remarriage. A person may possess genuine biblical liberty to marry without being commanded to exercise that liberty immediately. Wisdom may recommend remaining unmarried for a time, especially where children, unresolved responsibilities, or serious practical difficulties are involved. Liberty is not a command to use every available permission, and caution is not authority to condemn what God has not condemned. The believer must govern both freedom and restraint by the written Word.

4. Romans 7: The Marriage Illustration Has a Doctrinal Destination

Romans 7:1 begins, “Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth?” There is the subject before Paul ever introduces a husband or wife. He is explaining the dominion of the Law and the principle that death terminates its authority over the person who has died. To illustrate that truth, he describes a marriage relationship. Verse 2 declares, “For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband.” Notice that Paul begins with a woman who presently has a husband. He does not introduce a previous bill of divorcement, an unbelieving spouse's departure, or the fornication exception of Matthew 19. A man who inserts three divorces and two deserted spouses into an illustration containing none of

them has not explained Romans 7. He has furnished the apostle's illustration with imaginary relatives. The stated subject must govern the interpretation.

Romans 7:3 continues, “So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress.” That is a serious warning against entering another marriage while the existing marital obligation remains. Paul then explains that the husband's death releases the woman from that obligation, so that she is no adulteress if she marries another man. Death unquestionably ends the marriage bond described. First Corinthians 7:39 expressly confirms the surviving spouse's liberty to marry following death, with the qualification “only in the Lord.” No honest Bible student needs to weaken those statements. But neither may he expand them into a declaration that death is the only circumstance anywhere in Scripture capable of affecting marital obligation. Romans 7 does not expressly examine the other circumstances. There is a difference between proving that death releases a spouse and proving that no other biblical circumstance can ever produce legitimate release. The first is written. The second requires an argument from passages addressing the additional circumstances.

The doctrinal destination appears in Romans 7:4: “Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God.” There is the purpose of the illustration. Paul is explaining the believer's death to the Law through Jesus Christ and the new relationship established with the risen Savior. Verse 6 continues that believers are delivered from the Law and should serve “in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter.” The apostle was preaching deliverance through Christ, not constructing an exhaustive divorce code. That does not make his marriage illustration untrue. It establishes why he selected it. An illustration must serve the doctrine being taught; it must not be appointed dictator over every other passage discussing the subject. Romans 7 confirms the seriousness of continuing marriage and freedom following death without erasing the separate instructions concerning fornication, desertion, and legitimate release.

5. Moses Recognized a Former Husband and a Latter Husband

Deuteronomy 24:1–4 introduces a legal situation that cannot honestly be ignored when discussing whether a previous marriage may genuinely end. Moses describes a man who has taken a wife and married her, subsequently gives her a bill of divorcement, and sends her out of his house. Verse 2 declares, “And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.” There stands an actual divorcement followed by a subsequent marriage within Israel's national legislation. The passage does not describe a woman whose first husband has died. It specifically mentions a written bill of divorcement.

Nor does it discuss an engagement that never became marriage. Moses begins with a man who has taken a wife and married her. The original marriage was real, the divorcement was recognized, and the subsequent marriage was not treated as an imaginary relationship. A doctrine that insists no genuine change occurred must explain why Moses wrote the passage in precisely those terms.

The third verse identifies the second man as “the latter husband,” while verse 4 describes the original man as “Her former husband.” Those expressions deserve attention because they identify successive marital relationships with legal consequences. The former husband cannot simply reclaim the woman whenever he changes his mind. Moses expressly forbids taking her back after the intervening marriage, even if the latter husband has died. That prohibition establishes that the original divorce and subsequent marriage produced consequences which could not simply be reversed. But the passage must remain within its proper dispensation. Moses was administering national legislation to Israel under the Law, not issuing unrestricted permission for every Christian divorce under grace. Jesus Christ explained in Matthew 19:8 that Moses suffered putting away because of hardness of heart. A legal regulation recognizing a broken marriage does not make every reason for breaking it righteous. The former and latter husbands are real distinctions, but their existence does not transform marital treachery into obedience.

There is another important implication concerning people already established in subsequent marriages. Some religious arguments demand that every divorced and remarried person abandon the present spouse and return to the first spouse whenever that person remains alive. But Deuteronomy 24:4 expressly forbade return to the former husband after the intervening marriage under the circumstances Moses described. That historical prohibition cannot simply be transferred unchanged into the Church Age, but neither may its significance be dismissed. Scripture recognizes that a subsequent marriage creates genuine responsibilities, and deliberately destroying another household is not automatically repentance for whatever wrongdoing may have occurred previously. First Corinthians 7:27 commands a man bound to a wife not to seek release. Ephesians 5:25 commands husbands to love their wives sacrificially. The person presently married must honor legitimate obligations rather than treat another spouse as disposable merchandise. Two broken households do not automatically become righteousness merely because somebody arranges the wreckage in chronological order. Past wrongdoing requires honest repentance; present responsibilities require faithful obedience.

6. Fornication, Desertion, and Death: Establishing Genuine Biblical Release

Matthew 19:9 supplies Christ's express qualification concerning fornication: “Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth

adultery." The exception appears within the Lord's condemnation of putting away a wife and marrying another. That construction provides substantial grounds for understanding that genuinely justified divorcement because of fornication may permit subsequent marriage without the adultery judgment otherwise attached to the conduct described. Yet the exception must not be transformed into an invitation to manufacture sexual accusations against a faithful spouse. Nor does it command immediate divorce whenever fornication occurs. Repentance and reconciliation may remain genuine possibilities. The Lord's statement must be believed in its entirety, preserving both the condemnation and the qualification. The legalist wants the warning without the exception, while the rebel wants the exception without the warning. Neither man has received permission to edit the words of Jesus Christ. Biblical liberty must arise from a legitimate circumstance, not from an invented excuse.

First Corinthians 7:12–16 introduces another circumstance involving a believer married to an unbelieving spouse. If the unbeliever is pleased to dwell with the believer, Paul commands that the marriage continue. But verse 15 declares, "But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace." Notice that the unbeliever's departure produces a condition different from that of a willing spouse. The believer cannot compel another person to remain married. The statement concerning bondage supplies meaningful grounds for recognizing release when an unbeliever genuinely repudiates the marriage. Connecting that release with the bound-and-loosed distinction in verses 27–28 provides a substantial biblical argument for permitting remarriage after legitimate desertion. Nevertheless, verse 15 does not expressly repeat the word "marry," so the remarriage conclusion must be defended through comparison rather than presented as an additional sentence Paul wrote. A sound argument does not become stronger by pretending that an inference is a quotation. The Scripture must carry its actual weight.

Death supplies the clearest expressly stated release. First Corinthians 7:39 declares that when a woman's husband dies, "she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord." Romans 7 confirms the same principle. Fornication and desertion introduce additional circumstances requiring examination of their respective passages. These distinctions prevent two opposite abuses. The first declares that every civil divorce automatically grants freedom to marry again, regardless of adultery, desertion, or continuing obligations. The second declares that every divorced person must remain bound to a former spouse until death, regardless of any other circumstance addressed by Scripture. Neither position adequately respects the complete biblical testimony. A guilty husband cannot commit adultery, obtain a divorce, and then announce that his own rebellion has established legitimate liberty. A faithful wife whose former marriage has

genuinely ended should not automatically receive perpetual condemnation for another person's wickedness. The Bible recognizes binding obligations and legitimate release. The Christian's responsibility is to discover which condition actually exists, not manufacture whichever condition personal preference demands.

7. The Present Distress: Why Paul's Counsel Was Not a Universal Marriage Prohibition

First Corinthians 7:25 introduces the apostle's instruction concerning virgins, and verse 26 identifies the circumstances influencing his counsel: “I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress, I say, that it is good for a man so to be.” That expression must not be ignored. Paul is considering the practical difficulties associated with marriage during a particular period of distress. He recognizes that remaining unmarried may permit undivided service without the additional responsibilities of a household. Verses 29–31 emphasize the brevity of the present time and the passing nature of worldly circumstances. Verse 32 expresses the apostle's desire that believers be “without carefulness.” These instructions concern wise conduct in light of present conditions, not a declaration that marriage itself has become wicked. The apostle was advising believers concerning practical burdens, while religious interpreters sometimes transform his counsel into a lifetime sentence against people he never specifically condemned. The difference between advice and prohibition must remain visible.

Verses 32–35 explain that the unmarried person may devote attention to the things of the Lord, while married believers possess legitimate responsibilities toward their spouses. Paul does not condemn those responsibilities as sinful. He recognizes that marriage involves obligations requiring time, attention, and care. Verse 35 is especially important because the apostle declares that he speaks for their profit, “not that I may cast a snare upon you.” There stands a warning against converting useful counsel into unnecessary bondage. Paul desired faithful service, not the creation of restrictions beyond what God commanded. Verses 36–38 continue the discussion concerning marriage and virgins, recognizing that marriage may occur without sin while unmarried life may be advantageous under the circumstances. The distinction is deliberate. A preacher who takes an apostolic instruction intended to avoid unnecessary burdens and turns it into another religious snare has managed to accomplish the opposite of Paul's stated purpose. The Church must distinguish genuine commandments from practical counsel.

The chapter concludes with another unmistakable statement concerning widowhood. First Corinthians 7:39 declares that a wife is bound while her husband lives, but if he dies, she is free to marry, “only in the Lord.” Verse 40 then adds that she may be happier if she remains unmarried according to Paul's judgment. Notice how liberty and counsel operate together. The widow possesses permission to marry, yet the apostle recognizes possible advantages

in remaining unmarried. He does not declare that her freedom disappears because he advises restraint. Nor does he suggest that every person possessing liberty must exercise it immediately. These distinctions are essential when considering legitimate remarriage after other circumstances of release. A person may be biblically free to marry while wisdom recommends patience because of children, financial obligations, unresolved difficulties, or opportunities for undivided service. Permission is not compulsion, and wise restraint is not condemnation. The believer should exercise legitimate liberty faithfully rather than treating every available freedom as an obligation to act.

Conclusion

The answer to our central question must be established from the actual language of Scripture. First Corinthians 7:27 distinguishes a man bound to a wife from one loosed from a wife, while verse 28 declares, “But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned.” The apostle does not command the married man to seek release, nor does he establish unrestricted permission for every divorced person to marry again. He recognizes differing conditions and provides instruction appropriate to each. Romans 7 unquestionably establishes the release produced by death, but its principal doctrinal purpose concerns the believer's deliverance from the Law through Jesus Christ. Deuteronomy 24 recognizes an actual divorce and intervening marriage under Israel's national legislation. Matthew 19 supplies Christ's exception concerning fornication, and First Corinthians 7:15 addresses an unbelieving spouse's departure. These passages must be received together without forcing them to answer questions they were not written to address. The question is not whether a person has ever been married. The question is whether a legitimate marital obligation remains binding according to the Word of God. That distinction determines the doctrine.

The practical consequences require serious examination rather than mechanical judgments based upon marital history. A man who abandoned his faithful wife for another woman cannot manufacture righteousness through a civil divorce. A woman who deliberately destroys her marriage must not pretend that a subsequent wedding ceremony automatically sanctifies her wrongdoing. Where repentance is necessary, repentance must be genuine, and legitimate responsibilities toward former spouses, children, and present households must be honored. But a believer who has suffered another person's adultery or abandonment must not automatically be charged with the offender's guilt. Nor should a person legitimately released from a former marriage be condemned merely because religious tradition refuses to recognize any circumstance other than death. Churches must examine the actual facts, distinguish separation from completed divorcement, and apply the relevant Scriptures without adding qualifications God never established. A marriage certificate does not prove righteousness, a divorce decree does not automatically prove

guilt, and a denominational rulebook does not possess authority to rewrite the apostle's distinction between bound and loosed. Biblical judgment demands more than counting wedding ceremonies.

The final verdict is that remarriage is not inherently sinful merely because an individual has previously been married. Scripture expressly permits remarriage following the death of a spouse and supplies substantial grounds for recognizing legitimate release under the exceptional circumstances concerning fornication and desertion. Yet freedom must actually exist. A person cannot manufacture biblical liberty through adultery, calculated abandonment, dishonest accusations, or convenient interpretations that ignore continuing obligations. Equally, religious authorities cannot manufacture permanent bondage by selecting Romans 7 while refusing to examine Matthew 19, Deuteronomy 24, and First Corinthians 7. The believer must honor marriage where the bond remains, recognize legitimate release where Scripture establishes it, and govern every subsequent relationship through faithfulness to Jesus Christ. Paul's words must receive their full doctrinal weight: “Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned.” The bound man has no permission to seek an escape through rebellion. The legitimately loosed man must not be condemned for exercising liberty God permits. The guilty must answer for their wickedness, and the innocent must not be sentenced for another person's sin. The courthouse cannot manufacture holiness, the church committee cannot manufacture bondage, and religious tradition cannot overrule the Holy Ghost. When God says, “thou hast not sinned,” no preacher possesses authority to pronounce the person guilty merely because the answer does not fit his rulebook.

8 of 10 — Divorce and Remarriage — What If You Were Divorced Before You Ever Got Saved?

Primary Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 6:9–11; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 1:7; Ephesians 2:8–9; 1 Corinthians 7:17–24

Introduction

There is a rather extraordinary gospel being preached in certain religious circles, and apparently the Apostle Paul never received a copy of it. According to this peculiar arrangement, the blood of Jesus Christ can cleanse a murderer, forgive a thief, justify a drunkard, redeem a fornicator, and save a man who spent forty years worshipping idols. But let somebody discover that the sinner was divorced before salvation, and suddenly

Calvary encounters a difficulty that heaven apparently failed to anticipate. The man may have trusted Jesus Christ, believed the gospel, received eternal life, and become a new creature, but the religious authorities have discovered a divorce decree in his former life, and evidently that document possesses greater staying power than the blood of the Son of God. First Corinthians 6:11 declares, “And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.” Those words ought to interrupt a considerable amount of religious nonsense. Paul did not announce that the Corinthians were washed of everything except their previous marital failures. He declared what God had accomplished through Jesus Christ.

Now understand something before the careless crowd begins celebrating. Salvation does not make yesterday's wickedness righteous, cancel every legitimate responsibility, or grant a newly converted sinner permission to continue the same rebellion under a Christian label. If a man abandoned his wife and children before salvation, getting saved does not authorize him to continue withholding their support. If a woman committed adultery, destroyed her household, and subsequently trusted Christ, salvation does not transform the original adultery into an honorable act. The blood of Jesus Christ forgives sin; it does not rewrite history to make sin something other than sin. Likewise, a person who receives salvation while already married does not automatically become unmarried because his previous relationship began under ungodly circumstances. Scripture distinguishes spiritual redemption from continuing earthly obligations. The new birth changes a sinner's standing before Almighty God, but it does not give him permission to commit a fresh collection of sins while claiming the old collection has disappeared. Grace is not a religious eraser for responsibility. It is God's glorious provision for sinners who could never save themselves.

The question before us concerns the man or woman whose marriage ended before conversion. Perhaps the individual lived for decades without understanding the gospel, entered a marriage in unbelief, suffered adultery or abandonment, obtained a divorce, and eventually heard the truth concerning Jesus Christ. Perhaps the person was guilty of serious marital wrongdoing and afterward genuinely repented. Perhaps another marriage had already been established before salvation occurred. What does the Bible command now? Must the convert spend the remainder of life beneath permanent condemnation? Does the original divorce continue defining the person's spiritual standing after justification? What obligations survive conversion, and what freedom does salvation actually establish? These questions demand more than a sentimental speech about second chances or a legalistic declaration that the past can never be forgiven. We must examine the Corinthians' former condition, the cleansing accomplished through Christ, the meaning of becoming a new creature, and Paul's instructions concerning remaining in one's calling. The answer must preserve both the sufficiency of redemption and the

seriousness of present obedience. Neither religious legalism nor careless rebellion possesses authority to rewrite the gospel.

1. Such Were Some of You: The Sinners Who Became Saints

First Corinthians 6:9–10 contains a list that ought to make every self-righteous religious judge examine the foundation of his confidence. Paul declares, “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived,” and then identifies fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, thieves, covetous persons, drunkards, revilers, extortioners, and others whose conduct demonstrates unrighteousness. The apostle is not describing an imaginary collection of sinners invented to frighten respectable church members. He is identifying actual wickedness. Sexual immorality appears alongside idolatry, dishonesty, greed, and destructive conduct. The list does not suggest that one class of sinners possesses a special exemption from condemnation because their particular sins are socially acceptable. Nor does it declare that a sinner's outward reputation determines his spiritual standing. The man who boasts that he has never been divorced may still be covetous, dishonest, adulterous in heart, or guilty of offenses appearing in the same passage. A clean marriage certificate has never been sufficient evidence of a clean soul. The standard is God's righteousness, not the sinner's favorite comparison.

Then comes the extraordinary declaration in verse 11: “And such were some of you.” Notice the past tense. Paul was writing to people whose previous lives included the very sins he had just condemned. Some had been fornicators. Some had been idolaters. Some had been adulterers. Others had practiced dishonesty, drunkenness, greed, or additional wickedness. Yet these people were now members of the Christian assembly at Corinth. How did they get there? Did the apostle require them to establish that their entire personal history had been respectable before permitting them to hear the gospel? Did he announce that salvation could be offered only to sinners whose previous conduct would not embarrass the congregation? Certainly not. He preached Jesus Christ. First Corinthians 15:3–4 identifies the gospel: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. The gospel was never intended as a reward for people who successfully avoided needing it. It is God's power unto salvation for sinners who believe.

The expression “such were some of you” does not mean that a saved person becomes incapable of committing serious sin. The Corinthian epistles themselves destroy that notion. Paul rebuked divisions, carnality, fornication, lawsuits among brethren, disorder concerning spiritual gifts, and abuses surrounding the Lord's supper. These were genuine problems among people addressed as Christians. Yet their former identity and present

standing were not established by pretending that their past had never occurred. God had intervened through the gospel. Romans 3:23 declares, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” That includes the divorced man, the never-divorced man, the abandoned woman, the respected preacher, and the religious committee examining everybody else's history. All require redemption. Some sinners carry their disgrace in public records; others carry theirs beneath freshly pressed Sunday clothing. Neither condition makes the sinner righteous before God. The difference between condemnation and justification is not social respectability. It is Jesus Christ.

2. Ye Are Washed, Sanctified, Justified: What Salvation Actually Accomplishes

The second half of First Corinthians 6:11 contains three declarations that deserve careful attention: “but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified.” These are not uncertain promises dependent upon the Corinthians successfully maintaining an impressive public reputation. Paul identifies what God had accomplished through the Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God. The believers had been washed from their former condition, sanctified in their standing, and justified before God. These expressions must not be reduced to membership in a denomination, participation in a religious ceremony, or the successful completion of a moral rehabilitation program. The verse identifies the divine work associated with salvation. Romans 5:1 declares, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” There is the foundation. Justification is not the church declaring that a sinner's history has become sufficiently respectable. It is God declaring the believer righteous through faith in Jesus Christ. The distinction reaches all the way to the judgment seat of human opinion.

Consider the implication for someone whose divorce occurred before salvation. The individual may have committed actual sin in the former marriage, and that sin must not be defended. But if the person subsequently trusted Jesus Christ, the question of eternal justification is settled by the gospel rather than by the marital record. Ephesians 1:7 declares, “In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.” Notice the expression “through his blood.” Redemption is not obtained through an ecclesiastical investigation of former wedding ceremonies. Forgiveness does not depend upon a committee deciding that the sinner has been embarrassed sufficiently. The price was paid by the Lord Jesus Christ. The riches of His grace are not measured according to the number of mistakes a religious organization finds convenient to overlook. If Christ's blood cannot forgive a particular sin, then the problem is not merely with the sinner's history; the entire doctrine of redemption has been brought into question. Scripture establishes the sufficiency of the Savior, not the sufficiency of religious approval.

Ephesians 2:8–9 removes every remaining foundation for spiritual boasting: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.” Salvation is not obtained by remaining married, becoming divorced, avoiding remarriage, or successfully satisfying a denominational regulation concerning one's past. It is received through faith in Jesus Christ. The divorced sinner requires precisely the same Savior as the sinner who has never entered marriage. Neither possesses personal righteousness sufficient for justification. Yet grace must not be confused with permission to continue wrongdoing. Romans 6:1 asks, “Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?” Verse 2 answers, “God forbid.” The saved person must now honor the commandments governing present conduct. Grace is not God's declaration that sin never mattered. Grace is God's provision for dealing with sin through the finished work of His Son. The distinction protects both salvation and holiness from the foolishness of those who would sacrifice one to preserve their preferred interpretation of the other.

3. A New Creature in Christ: The Past Is Not the Christian's Master

Second Corinthians 5:17 declares, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” There is one of the most magnificent declarations concerning salvation in the entire New Testament. Notice the condition: “if any man be in Christ.” Paul does not say that every person who joins a church, adopts respectable behavior, or expresses regret over past mistakes becomes a new creature. The new creation belongs to the individual who is in Jesus Christ. The surrounding passage explains the believer's changed relationship to the Savior who died and rose again. Verse 15 declares that Christ died for all, “that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.” Salvation establishes a new spiritual relationship and a new obligation to live for the Redeemer. The new creature is not the old sinner wearing a religious costume. God has accomplished something that no courthouse, counselor, or church membership committee possesses power to manufacture.

But the expression “old things are passed away” must not be twisted into the claim that every earthly consequence of previous conduct has vanished. A man may have committed theft before salvation and still owe restitution afterward. A father may have neglected his children before conversion and still possess responsibilities toward them. A person may have accumulated lawful financial obligations that remain payable after trusting Christ. The spiritual change is real, but salvation does not make history cease to exist. Paul himself had persecuted Christians before conversion. Acts 9 records his encounter with the risen Lord, while First Timothy 1:13 acknowledges that he had previously been “a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious.” His former conduct did not remain the basis of his

standing before God, yet he did not pretend those events never occurred. Forgiveness removes the condemnation of sin through Christ; it does not require the Christian to lie about what happened before he was forgiven. Truth and grace belong together.

This distinction is especially important when a person entered another marriage before salvation. Suppose a man was divorced during his unbelieving years and subsequently married another woman. Years later, both hear the gospel and trust Jesus Christ. Does becoming a new creature automatically dissolve their present marriage? Scripture gives no universal command requiring such a conclusion. First Corinthians 7 directs believers to honor existing marital obligations, and Ephesians 5 commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church. The actual legitimacy and circumstances of the former divorce may require examination, but salvation itself is not a command to destroy the present household. Neither does conversion automatically establish that every previous remarriage was righteous. Those are different questions. The new birth is not another divorce proceeding, and repentance is not automatically accomplished by manufacturing a fresh broken marriage. The Christian must now determine what God commands concerning the actual relationships and responsibilities that remain.

4. Redemption Through His Blood Does Not Cancel Earthly Responsibility

Ephesians 1:7 identifies redemption and forgiveness as possessions of the believer through the blood of Jesus Christ. That doctrine must remain separate from the question of continuing earthly accountability. Suppose a man committed adultery before salvation, abandoned his wife, and refused to provide for his children. If he later trusts Christ, the original adultery is not placed beyond the reach of divine forgiveness. But neither may he announce that his former family should now bear every financial and practical consequence because he has become a Christian. First Timothy 5:8 declares, “But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.” The passage establishes the seriousness of provision, and its application cannot be dismissed through religious enthusiasm. A man who claims to have been washed in the blood while refusing to support the children he brought into the world has confused forgiveness with irresponsibility. The gospel does not appoint the innocent to finance the unrepentant offender's convenience.

Restitution likewise deserves consideration. Luke 19 records Zacchaeus responding to the Lord with a declaration concerning giving to the poor and restoring what he had wrongfully taken. His circumstances do not establish a universal formula governing every marital situation, but they demonstrate that genuine repentance may involve addressing the consequences of previous wrongdoing. A Christian who deliberately concealed property, committed financial fraud, or violated lawful obligations during a divorce cannot

automatically declare those matters irrelevant because salvation occurred afterward. Where restitution is possible and legitimately required, the believer should act honestly. Where a previous spouse has suffered actual wrongdoing, truth must not be sacrificed to preserve a flattering testimony. Yet restoration must also recognize what is lawful and possible. Not every former relationship can be reestablished, and an apology does not create authority to disrupt another person's existing household. Repentance means turning from sin, not inventing additional sin in an attempt to repair the first offense. God commands righteousness in present conduct.

There is another distinction that must not be overlooked: forgiveness and qualification for a particular responsibility are not identical. A man may be genuinely saved while still needing to demonstrate maturity, faithfulness, and a good reputation before being entrusted with church leadership. First Timothy 3 establishes qualifications for bishops, including blamelessness, proper household government, and a good report. Those requirements cannot be abolished simply because the man possesses a moving testimony of conversion. But neither should church authorities invent a permanent disqualification merely because his former marriage ended before salvation. The circumstances, present conduct, and actual biblical qualifications must be examined. A man who was once guilty of adultery may be genuinely forgiven without automatically becoming qualified to pastor the following morning. Likewise, an innocent man whose unbelieving wife abandoned him should not automatically be condemned as though he committed her offense. The blood of Christ can save a sinner without appointing him to every office, and a church can examine qualifications without pretending that the blood failed to cleanse him. Biblical judgment requires both distinctions.

5. Let Every Man Abide in His Calling: What Paul Told New Converts

First Corinthians 7:17 declares, “But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches.” Notice that Paul establishes a principle intended for Christian assemblies generally. He is addressing believers whose circumstances at conversion varied considerably. Some were Jews, others Gentiles. Some were circumcised, others uncircumcised. Some were servants, while others possessed freedom. The apostle does not command every convert to reconstruct his entire earthly history before beginning to obey Jesus Christ. He instructs believers to walk faithfully according to their calling. Verse 20 continues, “Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called.” That principle must be handled according to the actual illustrations Paul supplies, but its application to existing responsibilities is important. Salvation does not require a Christian to spend the rest of his life attempting to

reverse every historical circumstance before he can begin serving God today. Present obedience matters tremendously.

The apostle immediately clarifies that remaining in one's calling does not require preserving every undesirable circumstance when lawful freedom becomes available. First Corinthians 7:21 declares, “Art thou called being a servant? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather.” Here Paul recognizes both contentment in one's present circumstances and the legitimate exercise of available freedom. The instruction does not establish an absolute prohibition against changes occurring after conversion. A servant who could lawfully obtain freedom was not required to refuse it in order to demonstrate extraordinary submission. Likewise, the principle of remaining in one's calling must not be transformed into a command that every person remain forever within every circumstance existing at salvation. The surrounding chapter contains specific instructions governing marriage, separation, widowhood, and legitimate release. Those instructions must determine the application. The Christian's calling is not a prison sentence imposed upon every earthly circumstance that existed before conversion. Paul commands faithful conduct, not the worship of an unchangeable personal history.

Verse 24 summarizes the instruction: “Brethren, let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God.” The final expression is essential: “with God.” The believer is not commanded to continue wickedness merely because wickedness characterized life before salvation. A fornicator must forsake fornication. A thief must cease stealing. A drunkard must abandon drunkenness. A husband who has been cruel must repent and begin obeying the commandments governing his treatment of his wife. But an existing lawful marriage does not automatically become something to abandon merely because the parties entered it before becoming Christians. Indeed, First Corinthians 7:12–13 expressly instructs believers with willing unbelieving spouses not to put those spouses away. The difference between continuing legitimate obligations and continuing sin must remain clear. The apostle did not tell converts to preserve their wickedness; he told them to serve God faithfully in the circumstances where obedience could be practiced. The new creature must live according to the Word, not according to whatever revision of the past religious spectators find most impressive.

6. The Former Marriage, the Present Marriage, and the Obligations That Remain

Deuteronomy 24:1–4 provides important historical background concerning the consequences of divorce and remarriage under Israel's national Law. Moses describes a man who had taken a wife and married her, subsequently gave her a bill of divorcement, and sent her out of his house. Verse 2 declares, “And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.” The following verses identify the second

man as the latter husband and the original man as her former husband. The law then forbids the original husband from taking the woman back after the intervening marriage. That was legislation governing national Israel, not an unrestricted divorce policy for the Church. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that Scripture recognized actual changes in marital standing and serious consequences arising from subsequent marriage. Moses did not pretend that the second marriage was an imaginary relationship merely because a previous marriage had existed. The law treated the intervening marriage as significant.

Jesus Christ subsequently confronted the misuse of the Mosaic allowance in Matthew 19, returning to the original institution of marriage and identifying fornication as an exceptional circumstance. First Corinthians 7:15 addresses another situation involving the departure of an unbelieving spouse, while verses 27–28 distinguish between being bound and being loosed. These passages are necessary when examining whether a former marriage legitimately ended and whether remarriage is biblically permissible. Salvation does not eliminate the need for those distinctions. A man who becomes a Christian after divorce cannot assume that every proposed remarriage is automatically righteous merely because his previous sins have been forgiven. Neither may religious authorities declare that every person whose former spouse remains alive is perpetually guilty without examining the relevant circumstances. The question concerns whether legitimate marital obligations remain. A courthouse can recognize a divorce without proving every motive righteous, and a religious committee can condemn a remarriage without proving that its condemnation rests upon Scripture. Neither institution possesses authority to replace the written Word.

Consider the person already established in a subsequent marriage when conversion occurs. The Christian must now honor the responsibilities belonging to that present relationship, including faithfulness, provision, care for children, and obedience to the Lord. Ephesians 5:25 commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church. Colossians 3:19 forbids bitterness, and First Peter 3:7 requires honor. Those commands are not suspended because the couple possesses a complicated history. If earlier conduct involved genuine sin, the believer should acknowledge it and pursue appropriate repentance and restitution. But deliberately destroying another household simply to satisfy a theory concerning the first marriage may introduce additional wrongdoing rather than establish righteousness. Nor should someone use this principle to remain in a relationship that Scripture actually forbids. The circumstances must be examined honestly. God does not command Christians to repair yesterday's disobedience by committing tomorrow's disobedience. The past must be judged truthfully, while present obligations must be fulfilled according to the actual commandments of Scripture.

7. Grace Restores the Sinner Without Making Sin Respectable

The final difficulty concerns the attitude of the local church toward people whose lives before salvation contained serious marital failure. Galatians 6:1 declares, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” That instruction concerns restoration among believers and must not be confused with an automatic declaration that every previous action was righteous. Nevertheless, its governing principle exposes the spirit in which correction should occur. The objective is restoration, not the indefinite humiliation of someone who has repented. A church may properly confront adultery, abandonment, dishonesty, and continuing wickedness. But it should not appoint itself a permanent museum curator of sins that Jesus Christ has forgiven. The congregation was established to preach the gospel and teach obedience, not to operate a historical exhibit where redeemed sinners are continually reminded of the exhibits they once supplied. Scripture commands correction with spiritual purpose.

Second Timothy 2:21 declares that a man who purges himself from dishonorable things may become “a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work.” Notice the emphasis upon purification and usefulness. The believer's past does not automatically determine every opportunity for future service. A person who was divorced before salvation may now possess an honorable testimony, a faithful marriage, genuine knowledge of Scripture, and a desire to serve Jesus Christ. Such a Christian should be examined according to the actual requirements governing the service under consideration. Teaching children, evangelizing, helping the needy, distributing Scripture, and holding particular offices do not all carry identical qualifications. First Timothy 3 establishes specific standards for bishops and deacons, and those standards must not be weakened. But neither may a church invent a universal prohibition preventing every previously divorced convert from performing any meaningful work. The Lord never commanded every Christian to possess an uncomplicated biography before becoming useful in His service. He commanded His people to obey the Word.

The opposite danger must receive equal attention. Some people invoke forgiveness whenever serious questions arise concerning their conduct, hoping that grace will eliminate every requirement for repentance or accountability. That argument cannot survive Romans 6:1–2, where Paul emphatically rejects continuing in sin because grace abounds. A man who refuses to provide for his children cannot silence correction by announcing that everything is under the blood. A woman continuing an adulterous relationship cannot demand that the church congratulate her for being a new creature. The gospel does not make present rebellion holy. Yet a faithful believer who suffered divorce before salvation should not be required to confess sins committed by another person merely to satisfy the expectations of religious authorities. There is a difference between

correcting a sinner and inventing guilt for someone already injured by another person's wickedness. The Church must preserve holiness without substituting permanent condemnation for the restoration Scripture commands.

Conclusion

The answer to the opening question rests upon the finished work of Jesus Christ. If a person was divorced before salvation and subsequently believed the gospel, that individual receives justification through faith in the Savior, not through the successful reconstruction of a former marriage. First Corinthians 6:11 declares that believers whose previous lives included serious wickedness had been washed, sanctified, and justified. Second Corinthians 5:17 identifies the believer as a new creature in Christ. Ephesians 1:7 establishes redemption through His blood and the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace. Ephesians 2:8–9 declares that salvation is by grace through faith, not of works. Those passages leave no room for the notion that divorce constitutes some extraordinary offense permanently beyond the reach of Calvary. The same blood that cleanses the fornicator is sufficient for the repentant adulterer, and the same grace that saves the thief is sufficient for the sinner whose history contains a broken marriage. Salvation rests upon Christ, not the religious respectability of the sinner's former life.

Nevertheless, redemption does not make every previous decision righteous or cancel legitimate responsibilities that remain. A father must still care for his children. A person who committed wrongdoing should acknowledge the offense, forsake the sin, and make appropriate restitution where possible. A believer presently established in a lawful marriage must honor that marriage rather than use conversion as an excuse to abandon another spouse. A person contemplating remarriage must establish legitimate liberty according to the relevant Scriptures rather than assume that forgiveness automatically dissolves every former obligation. Likewise, the church must distinguish salvation from qualification for particular offices. A person may be genuinely forgiven while still needing to demonstrate maturity, faithfulness, and a good reputation. But those requirements cannot be replaced with invented restrictions that permanently condemn every divorced convert regardless of the circumstances. Grace does not abolish responsibility, and responsibility does not diminish grace. The Word of God establishes both truths, and the believer must obey both without allowing religious tradition to silence either.

The final verdict is that a Christian's previous divorce does not determine whether the blood of Jesus Christ is sufficient to save him, whether justification by faith is genuine, or whether the new birth has actually occurred. Those matters are settled by the gospel. The former marriage may have ended through personal wickedness, another person's betrayal, or circumstances requiring careful examination. The past must be judged according to

truth, but the believer's present standing rests upon the Savior who died for sins and rose again. Where repentance is required, repent. Where restitution is possible and legitimate, pursue it. Where existing marital obligations remain, honor them. Where biblical liberty has genuinely been established, refuse to surrender that liberty to commandments invented by men. And where religious authorities insist that a divorced believer must live beneath permanent condemnation despite genuine salvation, open First Corinthians 6:11 and let the Apostle Paul answer them. The religious committee may still possess a copy of the divorce decree, but Almighty God possesses the record of redemption through His Son. The courthouse can tell you what happened to the marriage; it cannot determine what Christ accomplished at Calvary. The church may examine a man's present conduct; it cannot declare the blood insufficient because his past embarrasses its traditions. Such were some of you. But ye are washed. But ye are sanctified. But ye are justified. That is not a religious suggestion. That is the Word of Almighty God.

9 of 10 — Divorce and Remarriage — Can a Divorced and Remarried Man Still Be a Pastor?

Primary Scriptures: 1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Corinthians 7:27–28; 2 Timothy 2:21

Introduction

There is a peculiar brand of Baptist arithmetic that can count a man's wedding ceremonies with remarkable accuracy while remaining unable to count the commandments he has violated in his own household. First Timothy 3:2 declares that a bishop must be “the husband of one wife,” and immediately a religious tribunal assembles to announce that any man who has ever been divorced and remarried is permanently disqualified from pastoral ministry, regardless of the circumstances. His former wife may have committed adultery, abandoned the marriage, rejected reconciliation, and established another household. He may have remained faithful, fulfilled his responsibilities, subsequently entered a legitimate marriage, and demonstrated years of honorable Christian conduct. None of that matters to the committee. Somebody has discovered two wedding ceremonies, and apparently the Holy Ghost forgot to specify that this particular number automatically settles the entire question. Meanwhile, another preacher may possess one uninterrupted marriage while treating his wife shamefully, neglecting his children, and behaving like a tyrant. But his paperwork is immaculate, so everybody can relax. The Bible says a bishop must be blameless. It does not say a marriage certificate makes him blameless.

Now understand something before the careless crowd begins celebrating. This is not an attempt to remove the biblical qualifications for pastoral ministry, excuse adultery among preachers, or promote men whose conduct demonstrates that they have no business overseeing a congregation. First Timothy 3 and Titus 1 establish genuine requirements, and every one of them carries divine authority. A preacher who is violent, dishonest, sexually unfaithful, greedy, selfwilled, unable to govern his household, or doctrinally unsound cannot simply announce that God called him and expect the congregation to overlook his wickedness. The office of bishop is not awarded for preaching ability, popularity, financial contributions, or an impressive testimony concerning past failures. But neither does Scripture authorize churches to add permanent disqualifications that the inspired words do not establish. The qualifications belong to the Holy Ghost, not to the denominational committee that happens to own the building. The church has a responsibility to examine the man, investigate his conduct, and obey the written requirements without adding restrictions or manufacturing exemptions according to personal preference.

The central question is whether a divorced and remarried man can genuinely satisfy the biblical requirements for pastoral office. That question cannot be answered by examining one phrase while ignoring everything surrounding it. We must establish what “the husband of one wife” actually requires, consider the meaning of blamelessness, examine the man's present household, investigate his reputation, and distinguish legitimate marital release from wrongful abandonment. We must also understand the difference between forgiveness, restoration to Christian fellowship, usefulness in ministry, and qualification for the particular office of bishop. A man may be saved without being qualified to pastor. He may possess a genuine calling to preach while lacking the present qualifications required to oversee a congregation. Conversely, a faithful Christian whose marriage ended through another person's wickedness must not automatically be treated as though he committed that wickedness himself. God never commanded the church to abandon discernment in favor of arithmetic. He commanded His people to examine the qualifications He actually wrote.

1. If a Man Desire the Office of a Bishop: The Work Comes Before the Reputation

First Timothy 3:1 declares, “This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.” Notice the expression “good work.” Paul does not describe the office as a religious prize awarded to the man who collects the most impressive titles, develops the largest following, or learns how to deliver a sermon that makes the congregation shout. The bishop has responsibilities toward the flock of God. Acts 20:28 commands overseers to feed the church of God, “which he hath purchased with his own blood.” That is an extraordinary responsibility. The congregation belongs to Jesus Christ, not to the pastor's

personal ambitions. A man who desires pastoral office must therefore understand that he is seeking responsibility, accountability, and labor. The pulpit is not a throne, the congregation is not a private kingdom, and the office of bishop is not a religious trophy presented for surviving a ministerial popularity contest. The first qualification is recognizing whose work the office actually represents.

Paul proceeds immediately from the desirability of the office to the qualifications of the man who would occupy it. Verse 2 begins, “A bishop then must be blameless.” The word “must” deserves attention. These are not optional recommendations to be considered whenever circumstances make obedience convenient. The apostle establishes requirements concerning marriage, vigilance, sobriety, behavior, hospitality, teaching ability, temperament, household government, maturity, and public reputation. Titus 1 supplies a corresponding examination. The complete picture is considerably larger than the number of wedding ceremonies in a candidate's history. Yet some religious authorities behave as though the Holy Ghost wrote an entire chapter merely to provide decorative material surrounding their favorite phrase. They can locate “the husband of one wife” without difficulty, but the remaining requirements seem to disappear whenever the candidate happens to be their friend. A preacher who cannot control his temper is not rescued by possessing one wedding photograph. The apostle requires a qualified man, not merely a qualified-looking marriage record.

The office also differs from the broader responsibilities of Christian service. Second Timothy 4:2 commands, “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season,” while First Timothy 3 establishes requirements for a particular office of oversight. A man may possess biblical knowledge, evangelistic ability, and a sincere desire to proclaim Jesus Christ without automatically satisfying every qualification for pastoral leadership. Likewise, a believer who cannot properly occupy the office of bishop is not thereby forbidden from every legitimate opportunity to serve the Lord. The Church contains responsibilities involving evangelism, teaching, hospitality, giving, helping, and numerous forms of faithful labor. These must be exercised according to their own biblical requirements. Salvation is not a ministerial appointment, and an ability to preach is not a certificate declaring that every pastoral qualification has been satisfied. The distinction must remain clear before the controversy concerning divorce is examined.

2. The Husband of One Wife: Read What the Holy Ghost Actually Wrote

First Timothy 3:2 declares, “A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach.” Titus 1:6 repeats the requirement concerning the husband of one wife. Notice what the passages expressly say. They identify a man whose marital standing and conduct must satisfy the requirement of

one wife. They do not contain the separate statement that every man who has experienced more than one wedding ceremony is permanently forbidden from pastoral office under every conceivable circumstance. That additional conclusion must be established through Scripture if it is to possess biblical authority. Neither does the expression mean that a man may collect successive wives through adulterous divorces merely because he possesses only one at a time. The Holy Ghost did not give the church a license for serial adultery, and He did not issue a universal lifetime wedding-certificate limit in the words under examination. The actual condition of the man and the legitimacy of his marital relationships must be considered.

Consider the widower whose wife has died and who subsequently marries another woman. First Corinthians 7:39 expressly recognizes that the surviving spouse is at liberty to marry following death, subject to the instruction “only in the Lord.” Romans 7:2–3 establishes the same freedom through the illustration of a woman whose husband dies. If the phrase “husband of one wife” automatically meant that a bishop could never have participated in more than one wedding ceremony during his entire lifetime, a lawfully remarried widower would be disqualified merely because he had buried his first wife. Yet Scripture expressly recognizes the termination of marital obligation through death. The man is not presently married to two women. His former wife has died, and his subsequent marriage is lawful. A wedding ceremony does not continue producing an earthly wife after death has ended the marriage. The Bible distinguishes present obligation from previous marital history, and the qualifications for pastoral office must be examined without erasing that distinction.

The more difficult circumstance concerns a man whose former marriage ended through fornication, genuine desertion, or another circumstance that must be examined according to the relevant Scriptures. Matthew 19:9 expressly identifies an exception concerning fornication, while First Corinthians 7:15 addresses an unbelieving spouse's departure and declares that the abandoned believer is not under bondage in such cases. First Corinthians 7:27–28 then distinguishes being bound from being loosed and recognizes marriage that is not sin. Those passages must not be expanded into unrestricted permission for every divorce. But neither may a church pretend that they do not exist when investigating whether a candidate's previous marriage legitimately ended. A man who commits adultery to obtain another wife is not in the same biblical position as a man whose wife committed adultery against him. The first requires accountability for his wickedness. The second requires examination of the circumstances without automatically assigning him the guilt of the offender.

3. Blameless Does Not Mean Sinless, but It Certainly Means Accountable

The first requirement in First Timothy 3:2 is that a bishop must be “blameless.” Titus 1:6 likewise begins with that requirement, and verse 7 repeats it while describing the bishop as “the steward of God.” Now, if blameless means a man who has never committed a sin, no pastor has ever qualified for the office, and every pulpit in the country ought to be vacant before next Sunday. Romans 3:23 declares, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” First John 1:8 warns against claiming to have no sin. But blamelessness cannot be dismissed merely because absolute sinlessness is impossible. The requirement concerns a man's established character and the absence of disqualifying reproach. His conduct must withstand honest examination. A bishop does not have to possess a history without sin, but he must possess a life that does not contradict the office he claims to occupy. Forgiveness is glorious; qualification remains serious.

Suppose a preacher committed adultery, abandoned his wife, refused to support his children, and married another woman while concealing his conduct from the congregation. His problem is considerably greater than possessing two marriage certificates. He has demonstrated sexual unfaithfulness, dishonesty, and disregard for the responsibilities God established. If he continues defending his wickedness, he cannot reasonably claim blamelessness merely because he delivers powerful sermons. Titus 1:7 forbids selfwill and uncontrolled anger, while First Timothy 3:3 prohibits violence, brawling, and covetousness. These are genuine qualifications, not decorations attached to a religious résumé. Yet the opposite circumstance must be distinguished. A man whose former wife abandoned him despite his faithfulness has not automatically demonstrated the same character defects. The abandoned husband is not guilty of adultery merely because his wife committed it, and the faithful man is not guilty of desertion merely because somebody deserted him. Righteous judgment investigates conduct rather than assuming that visible consequences identify the offender.

Blamelessness also requires attention to a man's present life rather than reducing his entire standing to one historical event. A person may have committed serious wrongdoing before salvation, genuinely repented, and subsequently demonstrated years of faithful Christian conduct. That history cannot be erased, and certain consequences may remain relevant to qualification. But neither does the requirement automatically mean that no evidence of repentance or subsequent faithfulness can ever matter. First Corinthians 6:11 describes believers whose former lives included grave wickedness and declares that they had been washed, sanctified, and justified through Jesus Christ. That passage establishes salvation, not automatic pastoral appointment, but it prevents treating a forgiven past as though redemption accomplished nothing. A man's history deserves examination, but it must not be permitted to replace the investigation of the man standing before the church

today. The congregation must consider established wrongdoing, genuine repentance, present character, and every qualification Scripture actually requires.

4. One That Ruleth Well His Own House: Examine the Household, Not Merely the Certificate

First Timothy 3:4 declares that a bishop must be "One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity." Verse 5 immediately asks, "For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" There is an examination that reaches considerably deeper than the number of ceremonies in a man's past. The apostle connects household government with the capacity to care for God's congregation. A man who cannot exercise responsible leadership in his own home has supplied reason to question whether he can oversee the spiritual welfare of others. But notice that household government is not merely the ability to issue commands and demand obedience. The bishop must rule well. His conduct must agree with the commandments governing husbands, fathers, and Christians generally. A man who rules his household through fear has not necessarily demonstrated biblical government; he may simply have discovered that intimidation produces silence. Silence and righteousness are not interchangeable.

Ephesians 5:25 commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it. Colossians 3:19 commands, "Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them." First Peter 3:7 requires a husband to give honor to his wife and warns that his prayers may be hindered. Those passages belong in the examination of a prospective pastor. A man whose wife lives beneath constant intimidation, whose children fear his uncontrolled temper, and whose household remains outwardly intact only because nobody dares challenge him has not automatically demonstrated the qualifications of First Timothy 3. Yet some congregations will investigate a divorced preacher's former wedding date while never asking how their preferred candidate presently treats his wife. Evidently, the filing cabinet has become more authoritative than Ephesians. A marriage anniversary measures how long two people have remained legally married; it does not automatically measure how faithfully either person has obeyed God. The bishop must be examined according to conduct, not appearances.

Titus 1:6 adds that the candidate should have "faithful children not accused of riot or unruly." That requirement must be considered alongside the responsibilities of fatherhood and household government. A man who deliberately abandons his children, refuses instruction, or neglects their welfare cannot claim that he rules his house well merely because his present marriage looks respectable. But neither should a father whose wife abandoned the family automatically be charged with her decision. The circumstances

must be examined. A child may suffer consequences through another person's wrongdoing without those consequences proving that the faithful parent committed the wrongdoing. Likewise, a candidate cannot excuse his own household failures by blaming every problem upon somebody else. The biblical examination must establish what the man actually governed, how he governed it, and whether his conduct demonstrates the character required for pastoral responsibility. The church is not commanded to guess. It is commanded to exercise judgment according to truth.

5. A Good Report of Them Which Are Without: Reputation Must Answer to Reality

First Timothy 3:7 declares, “Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.” The bishop's reputation matters because pastoral conduct affects the testimony of the congregation before the surrounding community. A man known for dishonesty, violence, sexual exploitation, or deliberate neglect of his family cannot dismiss those matters by insisting that his preaching ability compensates for his character. The apostle does not command churches to ignore public conduct merely because the candidate can quote Scripture fluently. Nevertheless, reputation must be distinguished from rumor. A divorced man may possess an unfavorable reputation among people who know nothing about why the marriage ended. Another man may enjoy tremendous admiration while concealing serious wickedness from nearly everyone around him. A good report is not produced by making sure nobody discovers the truth; it is produced by living in a manner that can withstand truthful examination. Public admiration is not a substitute for righteousness.

The Church must therefore distinguish established accusations from gossip, and personal prejudice from genuine evidence. Proverbs 18:13 declares, “He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.” John 7:24 commands, “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.” Those principles apply directly when evaluating a man's former marriage. Did he commit adultery, or did his wife commit adultery against him? Did he abandon his household, or was he abandoned despite faithful efforts to preserve it? Did the former marriage legitimately end, or did he manufacture grounds for another relationship? These questions cannot be answered by discovering that a divorce occurred and refusing to investigate further. A divorce decree may establish that a marriage ended, but it does not automatically establish which person violated the covenant. The church must examine the evidence without allowing either personal friendship or religious prejudice to determine the verdict beforehand.

Titus 1:9 adds another indispensable qualification: “Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.” A bishop must be doctrinally sound. He must understand the Word of God,

teach it faithfully, and answer those who oppose sound doctrine. First Timothy 3:2 likewise requires that he be “apt to teach.” Yet a man may possess substantial biblical knowledge while lacking the moral qualifications necessary for office. Another may demonstrate admirable personal conduct while remaining doctrinally incompetent. The church must examine both. A preacher who can explain every detail of Daniel's seventieth week but cannot govern his own temper has not satisfied First Timothy 3 merely because his prophetic charts are impressive. Likewise, a faithful marriage does not compensate for false doctrine. The qualifications form a complete biblical standard, not a collection of optional features from which a congregation may select its favorites.

6. Legitimately Loosed or Wrongfully Divorced? The Distinction the Church Must Make

First Corinthians 7:27 declares, “Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife.” Verse 28 continues, “But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned.” Those expressions must be examined when considering a previously married pastoral candidate. Paul distinguishes the man presently bound from the man who is loosed. The first is commanded not to seek release, while the second occupies a different condition. The following verse recognizes marriage that is not sin. This does not establish that every civil divorce automatically produces biblical freedom, nor does it appoint every remarried man to pastoral office. But it supplies a significant distinction concerning legitimate release. If Scripture recognizes a man as genuinely loosed and his subsequent marriage as lawful, the church must establish its additional claim of permanent disqualification from the actual requirements governing bishops. A conclusion cannot become inspired merely because a particular religious fellowship has repeated it for several generations.

Matthew 19:9 expressly includes Christ's exception concerning fornication, while First Corinthians 7:15 addresses the unbelieving spouse who departs and declares that the abandoned brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases. First Corinthians 7:39 establishes the surviving spouse's liberty following death. These circumstances must be interpreted in their respective settings. Christ's exception does not command divorce, and Paul's instruction concerning desertion does not permit a person to manufacture abandonment. Nevertheless, legitimate release and wrongful dissolution are not identical. Suppose a preacher's former wife committed adultery, rejected repentance, and abandoned the marriage. After a genuine dissolution, he subsequently entered a faithful marriage. That situation requires examination according to Scripture rather than automatic condemnation. A man who destroys his marriage to obtain another wife has not followed the same biblical course as a man whose marriage was destroyed by another person's rebellion. The offender and the injured must not be treated as interchangeable.

At the same time, a legitimate remarriage does not independently establish every qualification for pastoral office. First Timothy 3 requires blamelessness, vigilance, sobriety, responsible household government, and a good report. Titus 1 demands holiness, temperance, hospitality, and sound doctrine. The man must satisfy those requirements regardless of the circumstances surrounding his previous marriage. Conversely, a man who committed serious marital wrongdoing cannot avoid examination by announcing that his sins are forgiven. Forgiveness is a glorious possession through Jesus Christ, but it does not automatically remove every consequence affecting a person's qualification to lead others. A lawful marriage does not make an unqualified man qualified, and a complicated marital history does not automatically make a faithful man unqualified. The decisive obligation is to examine the candidate according to the complete standard established by the Holy Ghost, neither manufacturing liberty for the guilty nor inventing bondage for the innocent.

7. A Vessel Unto Honour: Restoration Is Real, but the Office Is Not Automatic

Second Timothy 2:20 declares, “But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour.” Verse 21 continues, “If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work.” The passage concerns the servant's responsibility to separate from dishonorable things and become useful to the Master. Notice that usefulness is connected to purification rather than merely the possession of a religious title. A man who refuses to forsake wickedness cannot demand honorable service while continuing dishonorable conduct. Yet the passage also provides encouragement concerning restoration and preparation. God does not command His people to worship the memory of yesterday's failures when present obedience is required. The man who genuinely repents must walk faithfully; the church must judge him by Scripture rather than permanent prejudice.

But restoration to usefulness and qualification for the office of bishop remain distinct questions. A Christian who has committed serious wrongdoing may be restored to fellowship without immediately possessing the maturity necessary to oversee a congregation. First Timothy 3:6 expressly forbids appointing a novice, “lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil.” Spiritual maturity must be demonstrated, not merely claimed. The passage establishes that enthusiasm, preaching ability, and an impressive testimony cannot replace proven character. A man who has recently repented of adultery may need substantial time to demonstrate genuine faithfulness and rebuild an honorable reputation. The same principle applies to dishonesty, violence, greed, and other serious failures. A church should not turn repentance into an automatic pastoral appointment any more than it should turn repentance into a

meaningless event that can never affect its judgment. The candidate must satisfy the actual requirements, and those requirements include tested character.

The other extreme is equally dangerous. Some congregations establish a permanent category of Christians who may attend worship, contribute financially, distribute tracts, support missionaries, and perform ordinary service but may never be seriously examined for leadership because they experienced a previous divorce. No investigation is required; the verdict has already been written. That approach mistakes a denominational policy for the complete biblical standard. The church certainly may require evidence of a candidate's qualification, and it must refuse men whose conduct violates Scripture. But when an automatic exclusion rests upon an interpretation that goes beyond what the passages expressly establish, that interpretation must answer to the entire biblical record. A church has every responsibility to keep an unqualified man out of the pulpit, but it has no authority to invent a permanent disqualification merely because investigating the truth would require more work than checking a box. The flock belongs to Jesus Christ, and its oversight must be governed by His Word.

Conclusion

The answer to the central question is that a divorced and remarried man is not automatically disqualified from pastoral office merely because he has experienced more than one wedding ceremony. First Timothy 3:2 requires a bishop to be “the husband of one wife,” while Titus 1:6 repeats that requirement. Both passages establish additional qualifications concerning blamelessness, household government, character, reputation, and doctrine. Those requirements must be examined together. Scripture expressly recognizes lawful remarriage following death and supplies serious grounds for recognizing legitimate release under exceptional circumstances involving fornication and desertion. A man whose former marriage genuinely ended through circumstances recognized by Scripture must therefore be examined according to his actual present standing and conduct. But the conclusion must not be expanded into universal permission for divorced men to occupy pastoral office regardless of their actions. The question is not simply how many times a man stood before a minister at a wedding. The question is whether his life satisfies the qualifications God established for the office. That distinction protects both the holiness of the ministry and the authority of Scripture.

The consequences reach both the innocent and the guilty. A preacher who deliberately abandoned his wife, committed adultery, mistreated his family, or continues in unrepentant wickedness cannot demand pastoral recognition merely because he claims forgiveness or possesses an impressive following. He must answer to the commandments he violated and the qualifications he presently fails to satisfy. But a faithful man whose

former wife committed adultery or abandoned him must not automatically receive the guilt belonging to her conduct. His subsequent marriage, household government, reputation, doctrinal soundness, and character deserve examination under the actual biblical standard. A man with one uninterrupted marriage may remain unqualified because he is violent, greedy, dishonest, selfwilled, or unable to govern his household. The Holy Ghost did not establish marriage paperwork as a substitute for biblical character, and He did not establish a preacher's calling as a substitute for biblical qualification. Both questions must be answered honestly, without favoritism, invented restrictions, or convenient exemptions.

The final verdict is that the office of bishop belongs under the authority of the written Word of Almighty God. The church must neither weaken the qualifications to accommodate a popular preacher nor enlarge them to condemn a faithful man for circumstances the Scriptures do not identify as disqualifying. Examine the marriage. Examine the household. Examine the character. Examine the reputation. Examine the doctrine. Establish whether the former marriage legitimately ended, whether the present marriage is honorable, and whether the candidate demonstrates every qualification required for oversight. Where genuine wickedness exists, confront it. Where repentance is necessary, demand it. Where qualification has not been demonstrated, refuse appointment. But where religious tradition has manufactured an automatic prohibition that cannot be established from Scripture, refuse to place that tradition above the Book. A man can possess one wedding certificate and be entirely unfit to pastor, while another can possess a complicated marital history and deserve honest examination according to every qualification God wrote. The church was not commanded to appoint every divorced preacher, and it was not commanded to condemn every remarried preacher. It was commanded to obey the Holy Ghost. The pulpit belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ, the qualifications belong to His Word, and no denominational committee has received permission from heaven to rewrite either one.

10 of 10 — Divorce and Remarriage — Is Your Marriage Over, or Is Your Christian Life Over?

Primary Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 7:10–11; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Galatians 6:1–2; Ephesians 4:31–32; Philippians 3:13–14

Introduction

There is a peculiar kind of religious justice that can forgive a murderer, restore a thief, welcome a former drunkard, celebrate the conversion of an adulterer, and then spend the next twenty years reminding a divorced Christian that his marriage failed. Apparently, the

blood of Jesus Christ is powerful enough to cleanse every sin listed in First Corinthians 6, but when somebody discovers a divorce decree in the filing cabinet, the machinery of redemption suddenly encounters an administrative difficulty. A man may have been abandoned by his wife, remained faithful through the entire ordeal, raised his children, paid his obligations, and subsequently entered a lawful marriage, yet certain religious authorities will still regard him as permanently damaged merchandise. Meanwhile, a fellow who has never been divorced may spend forty years mistreating his wife, neglecting his household, and secretly practicing the very wickedness he condemns from the pulpit. But his original marriage certificate remains intact, so evidently heaven ought to be impressed. The courthouse records whether a marriage ended. It does not determine whether the person whose name appears on the document has become spiritually useless to Almighty God.

Before proceeding, understand that marriage is God's institution, not a temporary arrangement maintained only while two people find one another entertaining. Genesis 2:24 establishes the man leaving father and mother, cleaving unto his wife, and becoming one flesh with her. Jesus Christ reaffirmed that institution in Matthew 19:6, declaring, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” Adultery remains sin. Deliberate abandonment remains wickedness. A husband who discards his faithful wife because another woman has captured his imagination cannot appeal to grace as permission for rebellion. A wife who destroys her marriage through deliberate unfaithfulness cannot transform her conduct into righteousness by announcing that she deserves another opportunity at happiness. But neither may the Church take those genuine offenses and automatically assign their guilt to everyone whose marriage has ended. There is a difference between the person who destroys a marriage and the person who suffers its destruction. Righteous judgment requires knowing the difference, and religious tradition has no authority to erase it merely because investigating the circumstances would require more effort than checking a box marked divorced.

The question before us is not whether divorce is serious. It is. The question is whether a broken marriage automatically means a broken Christian life, a permanently ruined testimony, and the forfeiture of every opportunity to serve Jesus Christ. First Corinthians 7 establishes the seriousness of marital obligations while addressing circumstances involving separation and legitimate release. First Corinthians 6 declares the cleansing accomplished through the Savior. Galatians 6 commands spiritual believers to restore those overtaken in a fault and to bear one another's burdens. Ephesians 4 commands forgiveness while condemning bitterness and malice. Philippians 3 directs believers toward continued pursuit of the calling of God rather than permanent imprisonment beneath yesterday's failures. We must also examine the duty to honor a present lawful marriage, the

responsibilities that survive divorce, and the difference between restoration to fellowship and qualification for particular church offices. The Bible does not make divorce respectable merely because sinners desire another marriage, but neither does it make religious cruelty righteous merely because the person practicing it happens to be holding a Bible. The final authority must remain the written Word of God.

1. Let Not the Wife Depart: Marriage Must Be Honored Before Its Ending Is Examined

First Corinthians 7:10 declares, “And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband.” Verse 11 continues, “But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.” There stands the inspired instruction, and nobody has permission to weaken it. Paul addresses married believers and commands them not to abandon their marital obligations. The wife is forbidden to depart, and the husband receives his own prohibition against putting away his wife. The apostle does not describe marriage as an experiment that may be discontinued whenever ordinary difficulties appear. Two sinners living under one roof will encounter disagreements, disappointments, responsibilities, and trials. Those circumstances do not automatically establish biblical grounds for dissolving the relationship. A marriage covenant is not a hotel reservation that can be canceled whenever the accommodations become less comfortable than the advertising promised. God established a serious union, and Christians must approach it with serious obedience.

Notice, however, that Paul recognizes separation may occur when he declares, “But and if she depart.” He then instructs the separated woman to remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. Those words establish that separation does not automatically create freedom to enter another marriage. A change of address is not necessarily a change of marital standing before God. But the passage must not be expanded into a universal verdict concerning every circumstance involving legitimate divorcement. First Corinthians 7:15 subsequently addresses the unbelieving spouse who departs and declares that the abandoned brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases. Matthew 19:9 contains Christ's exception concerning fornication. Those passages must be examined in their respective settings rather than erased through a careless application of verses 10–11. The man who uses one statement of Scripture to silence another has not rightly divided the Word of truth. He has merely divided the Bible into the verses he intends to obey and the verses he would prefer nobody noticed. Every circumstance must receive the judgment the actual text establishes.

The seriousness of marriage also places responsibility upon the person whose conduct threatens its preservation. Ephesians 5:25 commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it. Colossians 3:19 forbids bitterness. First

Peter 3:7 requires husbands to give honor to their wives. A man cannot ignore those commandments for twenty years, drive his wife into misery through cruelty, and then announce that his biblical convictions have been violated because the marriage has collapsed. Nor may a wife practice adultery, reject her responsibilities, and claim that the resulting separation proves her husband's spiritual failure. The parties must answer for their actual conduct. Protecting oneself from serious danger must not be confused with abandoning a faithful spouse for another relationship. A wedding certificate measures the existence of a recognized marriage; it does not automatically measure the faithfulness of the people inside it. The Church must defend the institution without excusing the wickedness that violates its obligations.

2. Such Were Some of You: The Blood of Christ Is Not Defeated by Divorce

First Corinthians 6:9–10 identifies a collection of sinners whose conduct included fornication, idolatry, adultery, theft, covetousness, drunkenness, reviling, and extortion. Paul does not describe these offenses as harmless personal preferences or unfortunate misunderstandings. He warns concerning unrighteousness and the kingdom of God. But verse 11 delivers the glorious declaration: “And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.” Notice the words “such were.” These Corinthians had not always lived respectable lives. Their histories included genuine wickedness, yet the apostle identifies the saving work of God rather than announcing that their past permanently excluded them from every opportunity for Christian obedience. The gospel is not a reward distributed to sinners whose histories are sufficiently attractive to the membership committee. It is the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.

Ephesians 1:7 declares, “In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.” There stands the foundation of forgiveness. Redemption was purchased through the blood of Jesus Christ, not through a church's willingness to overlook a particular category of personal failure. Ephesians 2:8–9 declares salvation by grace through faith, not of works. Romans 5:1 announces justification by faith and peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. None of these passages establishes a special exception declaring that the blood cleanses adultery but cannot cleanse wrongdoing associated with divorce. If a person committed genuine marital sin before salvation and later trusted the Savior, that sin is not beyond the reach of redemption. If the person suffered another's betrayal without committing the wrongdoing, there is no reason to manufacture a confession for somebody else's sin. The blood of Christ does not require authorization from a denominational committee before it can cleanse the sinner who

believes the gospel. The finished work of Calvary is not awaiting a second signature from religious headquarters.

Nevertheless, the apostle's declaration concerning cleansing must not be turned into permission to continue wickedness. Romans 6:1 asks, “Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?” The following verse answers, “God forbid.” A husband who abandoned his children cannot announce that everything is under the blood and therefore refuse to provide for them. A woman who continues an adulterous relationship cannot demand that the congregation call her conduct righteous because she professes salvation. Genuine repentance must confront genuine sin. But neither should a faithful believer remain beneath endless public condemnation after Christ has forgiven previous wrongdoing. First John 1:9 establishes God's faithfulness and justice in forgiving confessed sins, while the believer's justification rests upon Christ rather than personal perfection. Grace does not make sin acceptable, but neither does religious condemnation make the Savior insufficient. The Church must preach both truths without weakening one to satisfy the other. The redeemed sinner belongs to Jesus Christ, not to the permanent custody of yesterday's failures.

3. Restore Such an One: The Church Was Not Established to Preserve Permanent Disgrace

Galatians 6:1 declares, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” There stands an inspired commandment concerning restoration, and notice who receives the responsibility. Those who are spiritual are instructed to restore, not to organize a lifelong campaign of humiliation. The word “restore” possesses a meaning considerably different from reject, disgrace, ostracize, and permanently condemn. Paul is addressing believers and requiring a godly response when another Christian has been overtaken in a fault. The offense must be confronted rather than excused, but the objective includes restoring the person to faithful obedience. A church that knows how to expose a fallen Christian but has no interest in restoring a repentant one has mastered only half the assignment. Apparently, certain religious organizations have become experts at identifying failures while remaining remarkably inexperienced in obeying the commandment that follows.

Notice also the instruction concerning meekness and self-examination. Paul declares, “considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” That warning ought to interrupt the confidence of every religious judge who imagines himself permanently beyond the possibility of serious failure. The man examining another Christian's broken marriage remains a sinner dependent upon the same Savior. He may possess an uninterrupted

marriage while struggling with pride, covetousness, lust, bitterness, or dishonesty. None of those sins becomes righteous because they are less publicly visible. Verse 2 continues, “Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.” A divorced believer may be carrying substantial responsibilities involving children, financial obligations, an abandoned household, or the consequences of another person's rebellion. The congregation should not automatically add unnecessary condemnation to those burdens. There is a tremendous difference between helping a wounded Christian carry a burden and climbing onto his back while congratulating yourself for defending holiness. The Church must know the difference.

Restoration, however, must not become another convenient word for ignoring wrongdoing. Galatians 6:7 declares, “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” The person who committed adultery cannot demand that every consequence disappear merely because he has confessed the offense. A father who abandoned his children must still accept his responsibilities. A husband who exercised violence or cruelty cannot insist that forgiveness requires his wife to surrender protection immediately. Second Corinthians 7:10–11 distinguishes godly sorrow from worldly sorrow and describes the earnest response associated with repentance. Tears alone do not establish restoration. The offense must be forsaken, legitimate obligations honored, and genuine faithfulness demonstrated. Repentance is not a theatrical performance designed to make the congregation forget what the offender refuses to stop doing. But where repentance is genuine, the Church must not invent perpetual penalties that Scripture never established. Correction and restoration are both biblical responsibilities, and neither may be sacrificed to the other.

4. Forgive One Another: Biblical Mercy Does Not Require Calling Wickedness Righteous

Ephesians 4:31 declares, “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice.” Verse 32 continues, “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.” There stands a commandment directed to believers whose conduct must reflect the grace they have received through Jesus Christ. Forgiveness is not an optional ornament attached to Christianity. But neither is it a declaration that the offense being forgiven was imaginary. A person cannot forgive a real wrong while pretending no wrong ever occurred. The Christian whose spouse committed adultery may forgive that betrayal without announcing that adultery has become righteous. The abandoned husband may refuse bitterness without accepting responsibility for his wife's desertion. Forgiveness removes the Christian's claim to personal vengeance; it does not transfer the offender's

guilt to the person who suffered the offense. Scripture commands mercy without requiring the abandonment of truth.

The distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation is especially important. Reconciliation concerns the restoration of a relationship, and a relationship cannot be restored through the determination of one person while the other continues deliberately violating its obligations. A man who maintains an adulterous relationship cannot demand that his wife declare their marriage restored merely because he has expressed sorrow. A woman who refuses to abandon wicked conduct cannot require her husband to announce that everything has been settled. Where repentance is genuine, reconciliation remains lawful, and the circumstances permit restoration, the biblical objective deserves serious consideration. But where violence, threats, or continuing serious wrongdoing exist, an injured person must not be pressured into danger merely to satisfy a religious demand for outward harmony. A man cannot continue setting the house on fire while ordering his wife to demonstrate forgiveness by moving back into the flames. The Scriptures require both repentance and righteousness, not a religious performance that conceals the continued offense.

There is also the matter of bitterness among Christians who were never parties to the broken marriage. Some believers develop an astonishing enthusiasm for condemning situations about which they possess little reliable knowledge. They hear that a woman has been divorced and immediately begin constructing a history of imaginary wrongdoing. They discover that a man has remarried and assume he must have abandoned his first wife. Yet Proverbs 18:13 warns against answering a matter before hearing it, while John 7:24 commands righteous judgment rather than judgment according to appearance. Matthew 23 exposes religious hypocrisy among those who appeared righteous outwardly while concealing serious wickedness. These warnings ought to trouble the church member who mistakes suspicion for discernment. A visible divorce is not automatically evidence of greater wickedness than the hidden adultery occurring inside a marriage that has never appeared in court. The LORD knows the truth, and His people should care enough about righteousness to establish the facts before distributing condemnation.

5. The Former Husband and the Present Marriage: Repentance Must Not Destroy Another Household

Deuteronomy 24:1–4 contains a legal situation that must be examined before anybody announces that every remarried believer should abandon the present spouse and return to the first. Moses describes a man who had married a woman, subsequently given her a bill of divorcement, and sent her from his house. Verse 2 declares, “And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.” The subsequent verses identify

the second man as the latter husband and the first man as her former husband. Then verse 4 establishes a prohibition: the original husband may not take the woman again after the intervening marriage. The Law recognized that divorcement and subsequent marriage produced genuine consequences. Moses did not regard the second husband as an imaginary visitor who accidentally remained long enough to complicate the family records. The intervening marriage mattered, and the former husband could not simply reclaim the woman whenever his preferences changed.

That legislation belonged to national Israel under the Mosaic covenant, and it cannot be transferred mechanically into the New Testament Church as though Christians were still governed by Israel's civil administration. Romans 6:14 declares, “for ye are not under the law, but under grace.” Jesus Christ also explained in Matthew 19:8 that Moses suffered divorcement because of hardness of heart, although the original institution established in Genesis was different. Nevertheless, recognizing the dispensational setting does not make Deuteronomy 24 meaningless. It establishes that the Bible recognized genuine divorcement, subsequent marriage, and obligations that could not simply be reversed. Therefore, a blanket demand that every remarried person abandon a present spouse and return to a former spouse requires substantial biblical justification rather than religious enthusiasm. A doctrine does not become righteous merely because it destroys another household in an effort to reverse the destruction of the first. The Christian must honor what Scripture actually commands concerning present obligations.

Suppose a man committed genuine wrongdoing years earlier, subsequently repented, and is now faithfully established in a lawful marriage with children depending upon him. He must not defend the former sin. Where confession, restitution, or continuing obligations are appropriate, those responsibilities deserve attention. But repentance does not automatically mean abandoning his present wife, neglecting his children, or creating another household of injured people. First Corinthians 7:27 commands a man bound to a wife not to seek release, while Ephesians 5:25 commands husbands to love their wives sacrificially. First Timothy 5:8 establishes the seriousness of providing for one's own. These instructions do not disappear because a former marriage existed. Equally, the presence of a current marriage does not automatically make every previous decision righteous; the legitimacy of the relationships must be examined honestly. God does not command a Christian to repair yesterday's disobedience by committing tomorrow's disobedience. The past must be addressed truthfully, and present lawful responsibilities must be fulfilled faithfully.

6. Bound or Loosed: The Church Must Recognize the Difference Between Guilt and Legitimate Release

Matthew 19:9 records Jesus Christ declaring, “Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery.” The warning against wrongful divorce and adulterous remarriage is unmistakable, but the exception concerning fornication is equally real. The Lord did not establish unrestricted permission for dissatisfied spouses to abandon their marriages. Neither did He deliver a statement without any qualification. Mark 10 and Luke 16 preserve solemn warnings that must be believed alongside Matthew rather than used to erase Matthew's expressed exception. A husband who commits adultery to obtain another wife cannot claim that he has discovered biblical liberty. But a faithful spouse whose marriage was destroyed through sexual betrayal must not automatically be treated as though the offender's conduct belonged to the injured party. The man who commits the adultery and the man who suffers the adultery have not committed the same offense merely because their marriages subsequently end. The Scripture distinguishes circumstances that religious prejudice often combines.

First Corinthians 7:12–15 introduces another distinction involving a believer married to an unbelieving spouse. If the unbeliever is willing to remain, Paul commands the believer not to abandon the marriage. But verse 15 declares, “But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace.” The release from bondage is expressly stated, although its precise relationship to remarriage must be established through comparison with the chapter's further instructions. Genuine desertion differs from ordinary disagreement, temporary separation, or calculated abandonment manufactured by the person seeking freedom. A believer cannot force an unwilling unbeliever to remain married, and the apostle does not command the impossible. One spouse cannot preserve a marriage by signing both names upon the covenant while the other person deliberately refuses to participate. The abandoned Christian remains responsible for personal faithfulness, but the departing spouse must answer for the departure.

First Corinthians 7:27–28 completes the necessary distinction: “Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned.” Paul distinguishes a continuing marital obligation from a condition of genuine release. He does not provide a universal declaration that every divorce automatically establishes freedom, but neither does he condemn every subsequent marriage involving someone legitimately loosed. Death unquestionably ends the marital bond, while the biblical arguments concerning fornication and desertion must be established from their respective passages. A church examining a divorced believer must therefore determine whether the person wrongfully destroyed a marriage or suffered circumstances producing legitimate release. A civil divorce decree cannot automatically establish righteousness, but neither can a religious committee automatically establish

guilt by refusing to examine why the marriage ended. The standard must remain the complete biblical testimony, not the convenience of an indiscriminate rule.

7. Forgetting Those Things Which Are Behind: Your Christian Service Is Not Finished

Philippians 3:13–14 declares, “Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” Paul was discussing his spiritual pursuit in light of his former confidence in the flesh and the surpassing importance of knowing Jesus Christ. He was not issuing permission to disregard legitimate obligations or pretend that previous wrongdoing never occurred. Nevertheless, the principle of pressing forward deserves application. A Christian cannot faithfully serve the Lord while making yesterday's failures the permanent center of every remaining day. Where repentance is required, repent. Where responsibilities remain, fulfill them. But once those matters are addressed, the believer must continue walking according to the Word of God. The Christian life is not a museum in which the redeemed sinner is commanded to spend eternity staring at the exhibits of his former failures. There is work to accomplish while life remains.

Second Timothy 2:21 declares that a man who purges himself from dishonorable things shall be “a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work.” Notice the relationship between purification and usefulness. The believer is not encouraged to preserve wickedness, but neither is he instructed to surrender every possibility of future service because his past contains serious failure. John 4 supplies an instructive example. Jesus Christ confronted the Samaritan woman concerning her marital history, declaring that she had possessed five husbands and that the man she presently had was not her husband. The passage does not explain how those marriages ended, and nobody has authority to invent the missing details. Nevertheless, her subsequent testimony directed others toward Christ, and many believed. The account does not appoint her to an office Scripture never mentions, but it demonstrates that a complicated history does not automatically make truthful testimony useless. The Lord who knows a person's past also knows whether that person is telling the truth about the Savior. Religious spectators should remember both facts.

Restoration to Christian usefulness must nevertheless be distinguished from qualification for particular offices. First Timothy 3 and Titus 1 establish requirements concerning bishops, including blamelessness, marital faithfulness, household government, reputation, and doctrine. Those requirements must not be weakened merely because a man possesses a moving testimony. Forgiveness does not automatically appoint someone to pastoral office. But neither should a divorced believer be excluded from every form of

Christian service because religious tradition has decided that his history is permanently embarrassing. The Church contains responsibilities involving evangelism, teaching, giving, hospitality, prayer, and helping the saints. Each must be exercised according to Scripture and the qualifications appropriate to the work. A man may be unqualified for a particular office without being disqualified from every opportunity to serve Jesus Christ. Likewise, a faithful believer who suffered an unwanted divorce must not automatically be treated as spiritually inferior to someone whose uninterrupted marriage conceals serious disobedience. The Lord requires faithful service, not an immaculate collection of personal records.

Conclusion

The answer to our final question is unmistakable: the end of a marriage does not automatically mean the end of a Christian's salvation, usefulness, testimony, or opportunity to serve Almighty God. Marriage is sacred because God established it, and its obligations must never be treated as disposable. Adultery must be condemned, abandonment confronted, violence rejected, and genuine wrongdoing brought beneath the authority of Scripture. But the person whose spouse committed those offenses must not automatically be assigned the offender's guilt. First Corinthians 7 distinguishes continuing obligations from circumstances involving separation and release. First Corinthians 6 declares the cleansing accomplished through Jesus Christ. Galatians 6 commands restoration and burden-bearing. Ephesians 4 demands forgiveness while condemning bitterness. Philippians 3 directs believers toward continued faithfulness in the calling of God. These are not competing doctrines. They are inspired instructions that must be believed together. A divorce decree may establish that a marriage ended, but it does not establish that Calvary failed, that grace has expired, or that the Lord has surrendered every remaining opportunity for Christian obedience to the judgment of a religious committee.

There is a warning here for the guilty and another for the self-righteous. If you destroyed your marriage through adultery, dishonesty, cruelty, or calculated abandonment, repent of the wickedness and fulfill every legitimate responsibility that remains. Do not hide behind grace while continuing the sin from which you claim to have turned. Do not make your children pay for your selfishness or demand that an injured former spouse declare your conduct righteous. But if you have made another person's broken marriage the centerpiece of your religious superiority, examine your own conduct beneath the same Word of God. Romans 2:1 warns the man who judges another while practicing the same wickedness. John 7:24 requires righteous judgment rather than appearances. A respectable marriage record does not excuse hidden adultery, bitterness, cruelty, covetousness, or dishonesty. The Lord never appointed the never-divorced Christian to a superior class of redeemed

humanity, and He never commanded the faithful divorced believer to live permanently beneath the contempt of people who know only part of the story. Everyone stands accountable to the same righteous God.

The final verdict rests upon the authority of Jesus Christ and the sufficiency of His finished work. Where marriage continues, honor it. Where wrongdoing has occurred, confront it. Where repentance is necessary, repent. Where forgiveness is commanded, forgive. Where reconciliation remains lawful, safe, and genuinely possible, pursue it. Where biblical release has occurred, recognize it without manufacturing additional bondage. Where a present lawful marriage exists, honor the spouse and children whose welfare has been entrusted to you. Where particular offices require demonstrated qualifications, obey every requirement without inventing exemptions or additional prohibitions. And where a redeemed believer has suffered another person's betrayal, stop treating the victim as though the injury itself were proof of personal guilt. Marriage is God's institution, but marriage is not the Savior. A wedding certificate cannot redeem a sinner, a divorce decree cannot cancel the blood of Christ, and a religious committee cannot overrule the written Word of Almighty God. Your marriage may have ended. Your former plans may have collapsed. Your history may contain chapters you never wanted written. But if you belong to Jesus Christ, your life is not finished merely because somebody else walked away or because religious men have decided to stop reading the Book. The Savior remains faithful, His grace remains sufficient, His commandments remain authoritative, and your responsibility is to obey Him with the life that remains. The marriage may be over, but God's grace is not.

Conclusion — Divorce and Remarriage — The Marriage May Be Over, but God's Grace Is Not

After examining ten of the hardest questions concerning divorce and remarriage, one truth ought to be firmly established: **the King James Bible does not give religious men authority to condemn what God has not condemned, excuse what God has forbidden, or manufacture permanent bondage where Scripture recognizes legitimate release.** Marriage is God's institution, adultery is sin, abandonment is serious, covenant treachery is wickedness, and the responsibilities of husbands and wives are not optional suggestions. But neither is divorce the unpardonable sin, nor does a divorce decree automatically identify the guilty party. There is something profoundly wrong with a religious system that can spend an entire afternoon condemning a man whose wife abandoned him while

scarcely examining the conduct of the woman who destroyed the marriage. There is something equally wrong with treating a faithful woman as spiritually inferior because her husband committed adultery and walked away. Apparently, in certain religious circles, the person who suffers the injury must also accept the blame for the knife that inflicted it. What remarkable justice! But the Lord Jesus Christ never commanded His people to practice that kind of foolishness. John 7:24 declares, “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.” That commandment remains in force whether the congregation finds it convenient or not. Righteous judgment requires examining the actual circumstances, identifying the actual wrongdoing, and refusing to transfer guilt from the offender to the offended simply because religious tradition prefers an easier verdict.

We began with the institution of marriage itself, and that is where every honest examination must begin. Genesis 2:24 declares, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” God established that union before Moses received the Law, before Israel existed as a nation, before human government developed marriage regulations, and before sin entered the world. The first marriage was not created as an experiment in human happiness or a convenient arrangement between two independent people who reserved the right to leave whenever their personal preferences changed. It was established by Almighty God. Jesus Christ reaffirmed that institution in Matthew 19:6 when He declared, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” Those words carry divine authority. The husband is commanded to love his wife, not exploit her. The wife possesses obligations of faithfulness, not permission to abandon the relationship whenever another man appears more desirable. The marriage covenant is not a contract that becomes meaningless when one party discovers that obedience requires sacrifice. **Marriage is not made sacred by the courthouse, maintained by romantic excitement, or perfected by an expensive ceremony. It is sacred because God established it, and its responsibilities remain serious because God commanded them.** No doctrine of divorce can be sound if it begins by weakening the institution that divorce brings to an end.

But we also discovered that the Bible does not end in Genesis 2. After sin entered the world, the Scriptures began addressing circumstances that had not existed in Eden. Adultery, abandonment, false accusations, household neglect, covenant treachery, and the consequences of human rebellion required judgment. Deuteronomy 24:1–4 describes a man who had married a woman, given her a bill of divorcement, and sent her from his house. Verse 2 declares, “And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.” The passage then identifies the second man as the latter husband and the original man as her former husband. Those expressions are not inventions of modern divorce attorneys. They appear in the inspired Word of God. Moses recognized genuine

divorcement and an intervening marriage under Israel's national Law, while also establishing a serious prohibition against returning to the original husband after that subsequent marriage. None of this means that every divorce was morally righteous or that the Law encouraged husbands to discard faithful wives. Jesus Christ explained that Moses suffered divorcement because of hardness of heart. But the legal consequences were real. **God's regulation of a broken marriage did not mean He intended marriage to be broken, and His condemnation of marital treachery did not mean every person whose marriage ended was guilty of treachery.** The distinction is not complicated. It becomes complicated only when men insist that their religious conclusions must control the wording of Scripture.

Then we examined the words of Jesus Christ, where religious tradition has managed to manufacture enough controversy to keep denominational committees employed for generations. Matthew 19:9 declares, “Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery.” There stands the warning, and there stands the exception. Both came from the mouth of the same Lord. Mark 10 and Luke 16 record solemn condemnations of wrongful divorce and remarriage without expressly repeating Matthew's qualification, but their shorter testimony does not cancel the additional words recorded in Matthew. The Lord who condemned adultery also identified fornication as an exceptional circumstance. The religious legalist wants Christ's prohibition without Christ's exception. The rebellious spouse wants Christ's exception without Christ's prohibition. Neither man possesses authority to rewrite the sentence. We also examined the relationship between that exception and the subsequent marriage mentioned in the same statement. The wording provides substantial biblical grounds for understanding that a genuinely justified dissolution involving fornication may permit remarriage without the adultery judgment otherwise attached to the conduct Christ condemned. But the exception does not command divorce, encourage retaliation, or make reconciliation sinful where genuine repentance and appropriate circumstances permit it. **An exception established by Jesus Christ cannot be erased by religious severity, and a prohibition established by Jesus Christ cannot be canceled by personal desire.** The Bible believer must honor both without apology.

The matter becomes especially serious when one spouse deliberately abandons the other. First Corinthians 7:15 declares, “But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace.” There is an inspired distinction that cannot be dismissed merely because it interferes with an absolute prohibition somebody learned years ago. Paul commands believers to remain with unbelieving spouses who are willing to continue the marriage. But he also recognizes the unbeliever who refuses to remain. A faithful husband may desire reconciliation, provide for

his children, and fulfill every responsibility within his ability while his wife deliberately rejects the marriage. A believing woman may faithfully honor her vows while her unbelieving husband walks away and establishes another household. Neither possesses authority to compel the other person to remain faithful. Romans 12:18 declares, “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.” Notice the qualifications. Peace is to be pursued where possible, and the believer is responsible for what lies within personal ability. **God commands a Christian to remain faithful, but He does not command a Christian to become sovereign over another human being's decisions. One spouse cannot preserve a marriage by signing both names upon the covenant while the other person refuses to participate.** Genuine desertion must be distinguished from ordinary separation, but the abandoned believer must not automatically be condemned for the departure.

We also confronted a subject that some religious authorities would apparently prefer to avoid: violence, cruelty, intimidation, and serious abuse within marriage. There are churches that will preach against divorce with tremendous enthusiasm while treating domestic wickedness as an unfortunate private disagreement that ought to remain hidden behind closed doors. But Ephesians 5:25 commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it. Colossians 3:19 forbids bitterness. First Peter 3:7 commands husbands to give honor to their wives and warns that their prayers may be hindered. Psalm 11:5 declares the LORD's hatred of those who love violence. Those commandments do not disappear merely because the offender possesses a wedding ring. Protective separation from serious danger is not automatically the same thing as wrongful marital abandonment, nor does seeking protection automatically establish freedom to enter another marriage. Those questions require separate biblical examination. But the person facing violence must not be ordered to remain available for another assault merely because a religious leader is afraid that the congregation might discover something unpleasant about the household. **The authority of a husband is not permission to terrorize his family, and the sanctity of marriage is not a curtain behind which wickedness may conduct its business without accountability.** The Church must protect the endangered, confront established wrongdoing, and recognize lawful authority rather than shelter the offender beneath religious appearances.

Then came the Apostle Paul's extraordinary distinction concerning those who are bound and those who are loosed. First Corinthians 7:27 declares, “Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife.” Verse 28 continues, “But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned.” Those words deserve their full biblical weight. Paul did not command married men to manufacture freedom through adultery, deliberate abandonment, or calculated mistreatment. The man bound to his wife is instructed not to

seek release. But the apostle also recognizes a condition in which a person is loosed from a wife, and he declares that marriage in the circumstances being discussed is not sin. Romans 7 unquestionably establishes release through death, but its principal doctrinal purpose concerns the believer's deliverance from the Law through Jesus Christ. It is not an exhaustive divorce statute addressing every circumstance involving fornication, desertion, and legitimate release. Those matters must be examined where Scripture discusses them. Neither does every civil divorce automatically establish freedom to remarry. The grounds must be legitimate, and continuing obligations must be honored. **The courthouse cannot manufacture biblical liberty merely by issuing a decree, but the religious committee cannot manufacture permanent bondage merely by refusing to recognize a legitimate release.** The question is whether the person is actually bound or loosed according to the Word of God.

Another question carried us directly to the foundation of the gospel: what happens when a person was divorced before ever receiving salvation? Perhaps the individual lived for years in rebellion against God, entered an ungodly marriage, committed serious wrongdoing, suffered abandonment, or experienced divorce long before understanding the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Years later, that sinner hears the gospel, believes upon the Lord Jesus Christ, and receives eternal life. What now? Does the former marriage remain the controlling fact of the person's spiritual standing? First Corinthians 6:11 declares, “And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.” Second Corinthians 5:17 identifies the believer as a new creature in Christ. Ephesians 1:7 establishes redemption through His blood and the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace. Ephesians 2:8–9 declares salvation by grace through faith, not of works. There is no special exception announcing that divorce has placed the sinner beyond Calvary. **The blood of Jesus Christ is sufficient to cleanse the adulterer, forgive the fornicator, redeem the thief, and justify the sinner whose past includes a broken marriage.** Salvation is not obtained by presenting an impressive marital history to heaven. It is received through faith in the finished work of the Savior.

Nevertheless, forgiveness does not make previous wickedness righteous or cancel every responsibility that remains. A father who abandoned his children must still provide for them. A person who committed financial dishonesty during a divorce cannot announce that salvation makes restitution unnecessary. Someone who practiced adultery must acknowledge the wrongdoing rather than manufacture a religious explanation that makes the betrayal respectable. Nor does becoming a new creature automatically dissolve a present lawful marriage simply because another relationship existed before conversion. First Corinthians 7 instructs believers to honor existing marital obligations, and Ephesians

5 commands husbands to love their wives sacrificially. The Christian's new spiritual standing does not authorize the destruction of another household. But neither must a forgiven sinner spend the remainder of life beneath an invented sentence of permanent disgrace. Where wrongdoing occurred, repent. Where restitution is possible and appropriate, pursue it. Where legitimate obligations remain, fulfill them. Where a lawful present marriage exists, honor it. **Grace does not erase responsibility, and responsibility does not cancel grace. God does not command a Christian to repair yesterday's disobedience by committing tomorrow's disobedience.** The believer must confront the past truthfully while walking faithfully in the present.

The question of pastoral qualification exposed another serious weakness in the way some churches handle divorce. First Timothy 3:2 requires a bishop to be “the husband of one wife,” while Titus 1:6 repeats the requirement. Those words carry divine authority. But the same passages also require blamelessness, vigilance, sobriety, good behavior, responsible household government, sound doctrine, and a good reputation. A man may possess one uninterrupted marriage while violating nearly every other qualification through dishonesty, greed, cruelty, uncontrolled anger, or deliberate neglect of his family. Another man may have been abandoned by an unfaithful wife, subsequently entered a legitimate marriage, and demonstrated years of honorable Christian conduct. The two cases cannot be settled by counting wedding ceremonies without examining the circumstances. Forgiveness does not automatically qualify a man for the office of bishop, and an impressive preaching ability cannot substitute for biblical character. But neither does a previous divorce automatically establish the man's guilt or prove that his present marriage is unlawful. **A man can possess one wedding certificate and be thoroughly unfit to pastor, while another can possess a complicated marital history and deserve examination according to every qualification God actually wrote.** The Holy Ghost established the requirements for bishops. The local church must obey them without manufacturing exemptions for popular preachers or additional restrictions against men it finds inconvenient.

Throughout these examinations, another principle repeatedly demanded attention: visible marital failure is not automatically a greater sin than hidden domestic wickedness. A woman whose husband abandoned her may carry the public record of a divorce, while another woman remains married to a man who secretly commits adultery, mistreats his family, and violates the commandments governing his conduct. A faithful man may suffer an unwanted divorce while a respected church member maintains an uninterrupted marriage through intimidation, dishonesty, and selfishness. Yet certain religious people appear convinced that the presence or absence of a divorce decree supplies sufficient evidence to judge the entire spiritual condition of the household. What remarkable discernment! Apparently, the courthouse has become the final measuring instrument of

Christian righteousness. But Matthew 23 exposes the hypocrisy of men who appeared righteous outwardly while remaining inwardly corrupt. Romans 2:1 warns against judging others while practicing the same wickedness. None of this establishes that every divorced Christian is innocent or every married Christian is secretly guilty. It establishes that appearances are insufficient. **A wedding anniversary measures how long a marriage has existed; it does not automatically measure how faithfully the people inside that marriage have obeyed Almighty God.** The LORD judges according to truth, and His people must refuse the temptation to substitute visible records for righteous judgment.

There is also a difference between restoration to Christian fellowship and qualification for a particular church office. Galatians 6:1 declares, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” Verse 2 commands believers to bear one another's burdens. That instruction does not make the original offense righteous, abolish legitimate consequences, or appoint the restored believer to every position of responsibility. But neither does it permit the Church to transform correction into a permanent campaign of humiliation. A man who has repented of serious wrongdoing may need time to demonstrate renewed faithfulness and establish a trustworthy reputation. Certain offices require specific qualifications that must be honored. Yet the believer's usefulness to God is not limited to one office or one kind of service. Evangelism, teaching where qualified, hospitality, giving, helping, prayer, and numerous responsibilities within the body of Christ remain serious opportunities for faithful service. **A Christian may be unqualified for a particular office without being disqualified from every opportunity to serve Jesus Christ.** A church that knows how to expose failure but has no interest in restoring the repentant has mastered only the accusing half of a responsibility God intended to include restoration.

The matter of forgiveness must also be distinguished from pretending that another person's wickedness never occurred. Ephesians 4:31–32 commands believers to put away bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, evil speaking, and malice, and to forgive one another as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven them. Those are genuine commandments. A husband whose wife committed adultery may forgive her without announcing that adultery has become righteous. A woman whose husband abandoned her may refuse bitterness without accepting responsibility for his desertion. Forgiveness does not require an injured person to surrender protection from continuing violence, nor does it automatically establish that reconciliation has occurred. Reconciliation requires more than one person expressing a willingness to restore the relationship while the offender continues deliberately violating its obligations. Second Corinthians 7:10–11 distinguishes godly sorrow from worldly sorrow and describes the earnest response associated with genuine repentance. Tears alone do

not establish righteousness. A carefully rehearsed apology does not cancel continued wickedness. **A person cannot continue setting the house on fire while demanding that everybody else demonstrate forgiveness by moving back into the flames.** Where genuine repentance exists and reconciliation remains lawful, safe, and appropriate, it deserves serious consideration. Where rebellion continues, religious pressure cannot manufacture a restored marriage.

Consider also the responsibilities that remain when a lawful subsequent marriage has already been established. Some religious arguments demand that every divorced and remarried believer abandon the present spouse and return to the former spouse whenever that person remains alive. But Deuteronomy 24:4 expressly prohibited return to the original husband after an intervening marriage under the circumstances governed by Israel's Law. That historical legislation cannot be transferred unchanged into the Church Age, yet it demonstrates that Scripture recognizes genuine consequences arising from successive marriages. First Corinthians 7:27 commands a man presently bound to a wife not to seek release. Ephesians 5:25 requires sacrificial love, while First Timothy 5:8 establishes the seriousness of providing for one's own household. A person already established in a lawful marriage must not casually discard the present spouse, abandon dependent children, or manufacture another household of injured people merely to satisfy a religious theory concerning yesterday. That does not make every past divorce righteous or every remarriage automatically legitimate. The circumstances must be examined according to Scripture. But **two broken households do not become righteousness merely because a religious authority arranges the wreckage in chronological order.** Repentance requires truth, present obedience, and the fulfillment of legitimate responsibilities, not the creation of additional wrongdoing under the banner of correcting the past.

That brings us to the responsibility of the local church, where these doctrines cease being abstract arguments and begin affecting actual human beings. A church must preach against adultery without apology. It must confront deliberate abandonment, expose genuine dishonesty, condemn cruelty, and refuse to appoint unqualified men to positions of spiritual oversight. But the same church must care for the innocent, protect those facing serious danger, restore the repentant, and refuse to place invented restrictions upon believers whom Scripture recognizes as legitimately free. Proverbs 18:13 warns against answering a matter before hearing it, while John 7:24 commands righteous judgment. Those instructions require more than a hurried glance at a divorce certificate. The elders must examine the facts, distinguish accusation from established wrongdoing, and refuse favoritism toward wealthy members, influential families, respected preachers, or popular personalities. **The Church was not purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ so that religious men could establish a private court in which reputation receives more**

protection than righteousness. The flock belongs to the Savior. Its doctrine must come from His Word, and its treatment of people must agree with the commandments it professes to defend.

There is another warning that must be delivered to those who approach this subject looking for convenient permission. If you are presently married to a faithful husband or wife, honor that marriage. Stop searching for a biblical loophole through which you can escape obligations you voluntarily entered. If your affections have wandered toward another person, repent before your desires become actions that destroy a household. If you have been cultivating bitterness, cruelty, dishonesty, or deliberate neglect, confront those sins instead of searching for reasons to blame your spouse. If your marriage is experiencing ordinary disagreements, pursue the patience, kindness, forgiveness, and obedience commanded in Scripture. Do not manufacture accusations of fornication, exaggerate ordinary difficulties into desertion, or treat the exceptional provisions of God's Word as advertisements for divorce. **The Bible did not provide exceptions so that rebellious people could manufacture the circumstances necessary to use them.** A man who creates the very wickedness from which he intends to benefit has not discovered biblical liberty. He has discovered another method of rebellion. The Lord who established marriage will judge the conduct of those who despise its responsibilities.

But an equally serious warning belongs to the self-righteous religious judge who treats every divorced believer as morally inferior. Before pronouncing a lifetime sentence upon somebody whose circumstances you do not know, open the Bible and examine what actually happened. Was the person guilty of adultery, or did another commit adultery against that person? Did the Christian abandon a faithful spouse, or did an unbelieving spouse deliberately depart? Was the separation produced by ordinary dissatisfaction, or did serious danger require protection? Did the former marriage legitimately end, and what obligations remain? Has genuine repentance occurred where wrongdoing was established? Does the person's present conduct satisfy the requirements governing the particular service under consideration? These questions matter because Scripture distinguishes circumstances that religious prejudice often combines. **There is no biblical virtue in permanently humiliating somebody for a sin another person committed.** Nor does a faithful believer become spiritually inferior merely because the wounds of an unwanted divorce are visible while another person's wickedness remains concealed behind the doors of an uninterrupted marriage. The Lord knows the difference, and His people had better care enough about righteousness to discover it.

And now consider the believer who has reached the end of this series carrying a history that cannot be changed. Perhaps you fought to preserve a marriage that another person

was determined to destroy. Perhaps you committed genuine wrongdoing, subsequently repented, and have spent years attempting to fulfill the responsibilities that remain. Perhaps the marriage ended before you ever trusted Jesus Christ, and you have since discovered the glorious truth of salvation by grace through faith. Perhaps you are now faithfully established in a lawful marriage, raising children, honoring your spouse, and seeking to serve the Lord while religious spectators continue reminding you that your history is complicated. The Bible does not command you to invent innocence where you were guilty. Neither does it command you to confess another person's sin as though it belonged to you. Philippians 3:13–14 directs believers toward reaching forth and pressing toward the mark. That instruction does not abolish accountability for the past, but neither does it require perpetual imprisonment beneath yesterday's failures. **Your former spouse is not the Savior, your divorce decree is not the gospel, and your history is not the final authority over your standing in Jesus Christ.** Where the Lord has established forgiveness, believe Him. Where He commands obedience, obey Him. Where legitimate service remains, serve Him.

So let the final word be the Word of God rather than the traditions of men. Marriage originated with the Creator, and its obligations remain sacred. Adultery is wickedness, abandonment is serious, cruelty is condemned, and the guilty must answer for their conduct. The Scriptures recognize legitimate distinctions concerning divorcement, separation, death, fornication, desertion, reconciliation, and lawful remarriage. Those distinctions must not be erased merely because a simpler rule would be easier for religious authorities to administer. The blood of Jesus Christ remains sufficient to redeem the sinner who believes the gospel, and the Church remains responsible to restore the repentant while honoring every qualification God established for particular offices. A faithful believer's usefulness does not automatically disappear because a marriage ended. **The courthouse may record the dissolution of a marriage, but it cannot pronounce the end of God's grace. A former spouse may walk away, but that person cannot cancel the finished work of Calvary. A religious committee may close its doors, but it cannot close every door of obedience the Lord has left open.** The final authority belongs to Almighty God, and the believer must answer according to what He has actually written.

After ten substantial examinations, the verdict is clear. Do not make marriage less holy than God established it, and do not make redemption less sufficient than the Scriptures declare it to be. Do not excuse the adulterer, and do not condemn the abandoned spouse. Do not use grace to avoid repentance, and do not use righteousness as an excuse for religious cruelty. Do not make the Bible say less than it says merely because its commandments interfere with human desire, and do not make it say more than it says merely because additional restrictions satisfy a denominational tradition. Where the

marriage continues, honor it. Where sin has occurred, confront it. Where repentance is required, repent. Where forgiveness is commanded, forgive. Where legitimate release has occurred, recognize it. Where present lawful obligations remain, fulfill them. And where the believer has been washed, sanctified, and justified through Jesus Christ, stop treating that person as though a divorce decree possesses greater authority than the blood of the Savior. **The marriage may be over, but God's grace is not. The former household may be gone, but the Lord has not surrendered His authority over the life that remains. The past may contain failures that cannot be reversed, but the future still demands obedience to the living God. Jesus Christ is the Savior. His blood is sufficient. His Word is the final authority. And no religious Pharisee, no denominational committee, no former spouse, and no courthouse document has received permission from heaven to overrule what Almighty God has written. Stand upon the Book, honor the truth, fulfill your responsibilities, and press toward the mark. Your marriage may have ended. Your Christian life has not.**

