

Truth and Spirit Ministries

DIVORCE

By Denise Bostic

Fact or Fiction? In Matthew 19:9, is Jesus teaching that adultery is the only reason that married couples may divorce with no other exceptions?

Fiction. This passage of scripture has oftentimes been viewed from a legalistic and narrow-minded point of view. When studying the scriptures however, one must read with understanding from the mind of Christ and rightly dividing the Word of God. Here, we quote the scripture in two different translations:

“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.”
(Matthew 19:9 KJV)

“I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.” *(Matthew 19:9 NIV)*

When studying these scriptures in the King James Version, we find that the word fornication in the Greek is *porneia* and covers a variety of sexual sins including, harlotry, incest, unlawful lust (of either sex), adultery and the practice of idolatry-fornication. [4202, Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible] This is also translated in some other Bible translations, including the New International Version, as *marital unfaithfulness*. Just by studying this one Greek word then, we find that the term marital unfaithfulness can include much more than we may realize.

In order to understand this scripture, we must also understand the context and flow of what is leading up to Jesus' teaching on divorce in this passage. We must also understand the attitude, intent and background behind the question being posed to Jesus by the Pharisees of that day. The question that the Pharisees asked Jesus in verse 7 was actually based on the Law of Moses. To understand their attitude behind their intent however, we must take a look at the first question that they asked in verse 3: **“Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife for any reason?”** The way that this question was posed was a reflection of the wrong attitudes that was within their hearts towards their wives and ultimately, how they viewed themselves. According to the Law of Moses, a man could write an official bill of divorce if he was displeased with his wife because he found something indecent (shameful) about her. *(Deuteronomy 24:1-4)* In other words if a man married his wife and found out later that she had done something indecent or shameful before or after marriage, provision was made within the law for her husband to divorce her.

If a woman had in fact done something indecent or sinful, this made her unclean in the eyes of the Lord and her husband according to the Law of Moses. Provision was made in the law for a man to divorce his wife should this be the case. By the time of Jesus' day however, Jewish men were taking advantage of this law and turning it into something it was not intended to be, using it an excuse to divorce their wives for even very trivial matters even though some had not been unfaithful. The Pharisees were self-righteous and hypocritical. Their question to Jesus was cloaked under a religious mask with the feigned appearance of righteousness. In their pride and hypocrisy, they were judging their wives harshly, even though they were sinners themselves. In other words they did not apply the same measure of judgment towards themselves as they did towards their wives. Jesus saw through their hypocrisy and exposed it for what it was and then gave the spirit and intent in which God created marriage to be from the very beginning.

According to Jesus, marriage is a powerful bond between a man and woman sanctioned by God that should not be so easily separated by man. (*Matthew 19:4-6*) The Pharisees took this beautiful institution of marriage and belittled its God-ordained value by divorcing their wives over insignificant matters. In belittling their marriage vows, these men also devalued their wives and the high honor that was to be placed upon their marriages. Jesus' answer exposed their injustices towards their wives and teaches us the sacredness (respect and worthiness) of marriage in God's eyes. It was only because of man's sinful hard heartedness that Moses made provision for men to divorce their wives under the law and not because God gave commandment for it. *Hard heartedness means destitute of spiritual perception. (4641, Greek)

We find this attitude prevailing in the world today among many who get divorced. Because of sin hardening the hearts of husbands and wives towards each other and the lack of value place on the sanctity of marriage, mates are divorcing one another over "every reason" without trying to work through their problems and trying to reconcile. For the unconverted, this is not so surprising, but for those who have the Spirit of Christ it is a travesty that can be avoided. God desires that husbands and wives truly love and respect each other. If we look to the Lord for guidance and obey His instructions, He can give us the spiritual perception and insight through His Spirit to recognize and overcome our problems.

In the Old Testament, the divine purpose of marriage was a hidden mystery to God's people that could only be revealed with the coming of Christ and the New Covenant. The husband-wife relationship is really a picture of Christ and the Church. We find in the New Testament a much higher purpose and meaning of marriage and how we are to relate to each other in the Spirit. If we say we are Christians, we are to be subject to the Lord first, then to one another in the spirit of love, humility and respect. If we allow Jesus to be Lord over our lives, we will be submissive to Him and will receive guidance from the Holy Spirit when we are having marital problems. When the Spirit leads us, we are not under the law. In other words, we are to let the Spirit direct our lives, not the law. The law of Christ is higher than the Law of Moses and is what followers of Christ are to adhere to today.

Looking at *Matthew 19:7-8* once again, we can learn much from this passage as it is compared in the light of other New Testament scriptures and in the original Greek. In the King James Version we are given the word fornication for a term of unfaithfulness. In the Greek this means not only sexual sins in various forms but also fornication in the form of *idolatry*. [4202, Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible] So we can understand that the term unfaithfulness can mean more than sexual sin but also for reasons of idolatry.

A scriptural example of this is when Paul counseled the Church that if an unbelieving wife or husband was not pleased to dwell with the believer, that they should let them depart. (*1 Corinthians 7:15*) In these types of cases, this is when an unbelieving husband or wife has in effect put something before God or their mate and is more devoted to someone or something other than their mate. A brother or sister would not be bound to their spouse in such cases and are free to remarry. Also according to Paul, if both spouses are believers and if they separate because of marital troubles, they should work out their problems, forgive one another, be reconciled and not divorce. It is the will of God that we be reconciled to one another and not be estranged. Love, forgiveness and reconciliation should be the course of action that Christians should follow.

Note in verses 10-11 that it is not the will of the Lord that husbands and wives divorce. If one has an unbelieving mate and they are pleased to dwell with the believing one, they should not leave him or her without just cause. What else can we learn about marriage and divorce from these passages in the Bible? There is provision for divorce but in the Lord's eyes it would be: 1. For marital unfaithfulness whether it be sexual sin or the sin of idolatry. Or 2. If an unbelieving mate is not pleased to dwell with their spouse any longer the believing spouse should let them depart.

It should be noted that marital unfaithfulness covers more than we might realize. In cases of physical abuse where someone is being harmed by domestic violence or their personal life endangered, this can also apply to the sin of marital unfaithfulness. When a person does not love, honor and protect their mate, they are unfaithful in keeping their wedding vows. This could break the bonds of matrimony as well. In addition, domestic violence is a crime according to the laws of the land and is legal grounds for divorce. As Christians, we are to abide by the laws of the land as long as they do not conflict with God's Word. Most importantly, we should live a godly life in Christ as an example to others.

Can a mate choose to forgive such sins as domestic violence and adultery and remain married? This is a decision that is a personal one between the individual, their mate and God. If an individual is truly repentant, God forgives such sins by His grace. As Christians we should forgive our mates whether we decide to remain married or get divorced.