

THE QUESTION ABOUT DIVORCE

By Allon Maxwell

In Jesus' day there was great debate amongst the Jews about what Moses meant when he gave licence for divorce on the grounds of "*some indecency*". ([Deuteronomy 24:1 RSV](#))

The "liberals" argued that it might mean anything at all which displeased a husband. The "narrow" school limited it to adultery alone.

This was the background to the question about divorce, in which the Pharisees tried to draw Jesus into the debate, on one side or the other. ([Matthew 19:3](#))

Jesus gave an answer which amounted to an absolute prohibition against divorce. To support this conclusion he quoted Moses not from [Deuteronomy 24:1](#) but from [Genesis 2:18-24](#). Marriage, Jesus said, is a union in which the two partners are joined, not by men, but by God. AND "*They are no longer two but one*".

Just as surely as God's "yes" means "yes", His "no longer" means that **one cannot be two again!**

That is why men may not take it upon themselves to separate again what God has made one.

This answer took them completely by surprise. It favoured neither the "liberals" nor the "narrow"!

That led to another question. If Jesus meant that divorce was not possible AT ALL, then what did Moses mean by commanding the giving of a certificate of divorce?
([Matthew 19:7](#))

This time the answer from Jesus was even more challenging.

Divorce, He said, was the work of hard hearted men, insensitive to God, who took their permission for divorce from what Moses said in Deuteronomy. However, if they listened to ALL that God (and Moses) had said about marriage, "from the beginning", with hearts that loved God, they would see it quite differently.

Even in defining what Moses meant by allowing divorce for "indecency", their hard hearts had misunderstood completely. For Jesus, the only possible meaning of the "indecency" mentioned by Moses was limited to "fornication" alone. It did not extend to any of the many other causes commonly accepted by men insensitive to God.

For Jesus the next conclusion is inescapable.

When God regards a marriage as still joined, regardless of what men have done to separate it, then a second marriage, by either partner, is adultery!

On this last point, the meaning of what Jesus says cannot be mistaken.

In the several Gospel records, He covers the subject from every conceivable angle.

- * A man who divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery.
([Matthew 19:9](#), [Mark 10:11](#), [Luke 16:18](#))
- * A woman who divorces her husband and marries another, commits adultery.
([Mark 10:12](#))

- * A man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.
([Matthew 5:32](#), [Luke 16:18](#))
- * A man who divorces his wife (thus wrongly declaring her "free" to remarry) is held responsible for her adultery (if she does actually marry again).
([Matthew 5:32](#))

The society in which we live has written laws which make it "legal" to ignore the words of Jesus. However "legality" is not the issue. The real issue is whether or not our hearts are hard, and whether God recognises what is done in hardness of heart.

If we take Jesus as literally as I believe He wants us to, manmade "legal" divorces do not really dissolve a marriage which God has joined. Otherwise Jesus would not teach that "legal" remarriage is adultery!

This teaching by Jesus has extended still further, His already larger definition of adultery.

For Jesus, adultery is not simply the deed itself. It also includes the lustful fantasy which mentally assents to the deed, whether consummated or not.

And now, in His teaching about divorce, Jesus says that adultery extends to the "legal" remarriages of those who take a another wife in breach of their first marriage covenant.

For this present paper we will not allow the definition of "fornication" (KJV) or "unchastity" (RSV) to become a side issue.

Our major purpose in this paper is to establish that, beyond question, Jesus does not condone divorce for any of the other causes allowed by hard hearted men in the church of our time.

Divorce is not recognised by Jesus for such causes as desertion, prolonged separation by mutual consent, failure to get along with each other, sexual or emotional incompatibility, physical or mental cruelty, drunkenness, mental illness, etc. For all of these the Gospel has a far different answer which requires men and women to honour their word, keeping covenant without change, ("till death do us part"), to their own hurt if necessary.

([Matthew 5:37](#), [James 5:12](#), [Psalm 15:1](#), [Psalm 15:4-5](#))

When men and women respond to the Gospel and begin to live by these Kingdom precepts, loving and forgiving sacrificially, the door is opened, for nothing less than a lifetime, and even in the most seriously broken relationships, for the same total reconciliation that we ourselves have found with God.

For some that reconciliation may never take place, just as some never come to salvation. However our marriage covenant does commit us all to the love which will never cease to offer reconciliation and forgiveness to an erring partner, with as much patience and longsuffering as that already extended to us by our divinely betrothed redeemer.

While there is life there is hope, however unlikely that may seem in human terms.

It is not impossible. I have known of one case where reconciliation waited for 25 years until the couple concerned were close to the end of life. The miracle did happen! But the cost was very high for the faithful wife who waited all those long, lonely years for her adulterous husband to return, forgave him and then ministered to him with loving care in his final long drawn out illness.

For all broken relationships, including marriage, that couple's story reflects the real meaning of the cross. That is grace at work in the life and witness of the newborn children of God.

This teaching is, to say the least, as challenging for the hard hearted today, as it was in the time of both Moses and Jesus. For Jesus, there is ONE exception, and ONLY ONE, (which it is not our intention to discuss here).

What we must focus on, clearly and without compromise, is that in all other cases not covered by that exception, there are no innocent parties exempt from the rule, no loopholes left for any who may be seeking an "acceptable" cause for divorce, no easy justification of the situation of any who have already entered a forbidden second marriage.