The divorce dilemma
God’s Last Word on Lasting Commitment
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The many confusing and conflicting ideas in our day about Scripture’s teaching on divorce are not caused by any lack of clarity or any other deficiency in God’s revelation, but by the fact that sin has clouded men’s minds to the straightforward simplicity of what God has said. When people read the Bible with the biases of their own preconceptions or fleshly appetites, a perplexing picture is the only possible outcome. The cause of so much confusion lies not with God but with the fallen sinfulness of the human race.

This book’s title, The Divorce Dilemma, is a realistic description of our human confusion. The subtitle, God’s Last Word on Lasting Commitment, is meant to underscore my confidence that God’s Word is clear, and that He gives wisdom and understanding to those who humbly consider His Word.

We will systematically examine three key passages in the New Testament that directly address the topics of divorce, remarriage, and God’s attainable ideal for marriage. Two of those passages are found in the Gospel of Matthew (chapters 5 and 19) and consist of words from our Lord’s own lips; the third is direct revelation from God through the pen of the Apostle Paul in his first epistle to the Corinthians (chapter 7). We’ll examine those texts and their contexts, and allow Scripture to shape our perspective on this difficult topic.

It’s important to turn to Scripture for answers to our questions about divorce. Neither sentiment nor personal experience is a safe guide.

**Churches are culpable**

Unfortunately, many Christians have never really examined the issues of marriage, divorce, and remarriage *biblically*. Churches today often give few or wrong guidelines for marriage and divorce—or none at all. As a result, confusion abounds regarding these issues in the Christian
community. Sometimes even the most basic biblical guidelines are ignored or overlooked.

I’ve seen this many times, firsthand. As a matter of fact, the first crisis I experienced in my ministry was when a leading family in the church where I was a young pastor asked me to officiate at the wedding of the daughter, a Christian, to a non-Christian man. I told them I couldn’t do it. Believers are not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14), and if I married the couple I would be affirming and validating an act of disobedience to the clear teaching of Scripture. I would not knowingly do that.

At the time, our elders seemed uncertain of what to do, so we met to discuss it. Someone offered this suggestion: ‘You don’t have to do it if it’s against your conscience, but the family wants the wedding to take place in their church. We can get someone else to perform the ceremony.’

I responded, ‘This is not just a private matter of conscience. The Scriptures say it is wrong for a Christian to marry a non-Christian. It’s wrong no matter who performs the ceremony. I can neither participate actively by performing the ceremony, nor give my consent passively by allowing someone else to officiate in my place.’ Then I reminded the elders, ‘This is Christ’s church, not our church. We cannot consent to an act that dishonors Him while pretending to give our blessing as undershepherds charged with guarding the flock of God.’ Looking at it that way, the elders of the church agreed. The decision was controversial for a brief time, but ever since that incident, our church has had a reputation for being a place where the Word of God is taken seriously.

Not all churches are willing to take a stand like that, however. Some churches and pastors will marry anybody to anybody under any circumstances. The topics of sex and relationships are often treated flippantly and casually from the pulpit, without the restraint and dignity seen in God’s Word. Over the past half-century, Western society has become increasingly materialistic, selfish, and carnal—and so have many churches. As a consequence, faithful church leaders have to deal daily with a never-ending stream of problems associated with divorce because their people do not know how to sustain right relationships. The way for anyone to learn how is in the Word of God.
Four views on divorce

The Bible clearly teaches what God thinks about divorce: He hates it (Malachi 2:16), and so should we. The problem is that people are tempted to ignore the Bible’s clear teaching because they want to justify what they want to do, so they try to find something in the Scriptures or elsewhere to support their desires. The diversity of opinions about marriage and remarriage, the growing tolerance of easy divorce, and the abundance of broken families in our culture are inevitable fruits of that attitude. Whenever people form their beliefs based on convenience and personal preference rather than listening to (and submitting to) what God’s Word actually says, confusion reigns.

Still, there are fundamentally only four dominant views about divorce: First, secular society (and, sadly, even many professing Christians) would allow divorce and remarriage anytime, for anybody, for anything. In the historic evangelical mainstream (that community of Christians who profess to believe the Bible implicitly, take its standards seriously, and look to Christ alone for salvation), that view has never been the dominant one.

Instead, conservative pastors, Bible commentators, and theologians are generally divided among three other views: Second, some would insist that, biblically, there is to be no divorce at all for anybody, not for any reason, or under any circumstances. Third, others teach that divorce under certain circumstances is permissible but no remarriage is allowed—ever—at any time, for anybody, for any reason. And fourth, others say that, biblically, both divorce and remarriage are possible, but only under certain circumstances.

Which option is truly biblical? We find the answer in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

The Pharisees of Jesus’ day

Like many people today, the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day, typified by the Pharisees, had developed their own standards for divorce and remarriage, but they presented them to the people as God’s standards. In Matthew 5:31–32 we find Jesus setting the record straight: ‘It was said, “Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce”; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of
unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.’

Here is the context: Jesus was confronting the sins of the Pharisees, and He was unmasking their hypocrisy. He was showing how they exchanged God’s standards for their own because they could not keep His. They dragged God down to their own level and invented their own code of ethics. Making matters worse, they misinterpreted the Bible to fit their own views. A majority of the Pharisees decided that any husband ought to be able to shed his wife whenever he wanted, so they twisted a Scripture passage to fit that wicked notion.

The passage they twisted was Deuteronomy 24:1–4, so that is where Jesus began His teaching on divorce and remarriage in order to lift the people out of the mud and onto God’s high ground.

Our text in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:31–32, begins, ‘It was said …’ That does not refer to the Old Testament Law, but to what people had been wrongly taught by the rabbis. It is similar to verse 21, where we read that Jesus said, ‘You have heard that the ancients were told …’ In both cases He answered with, ‘But I say to you …’ He was declaring with authority, ‘What you have heard is wrong, but what I am telling you is right.’ In fact, when Jesus finished the Sermon on the Mount, ‘The crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority [in and of Himself], and not as their scribes,’ who quoted other people’s authority (Matthew 7:28–29). Our Lord gave precise biblical teaching to correct the traditional misinterpretation that led to the people’s misunderstanding about divorce.

The people, guided by their leaders, tolerated divorce and remarriage for any reason. Jesus’ response in verse 32 is that God does not permit divorce, except for one very specific reason.

The exception clause is important. Notice that while Jesus was plainly confronting the Pharisees’ too-lax attitude toward divorce, He expressly recognized an exception: ‘except for the reason of unchastity.’ As we shall see in an upcoming chapter, He was speaking of the kind of serious, unrepentant sexual sin that represents a full-on assault against the sanctity of the marriage union and irreparably fractures every vestige of trust and intimacy. In other words, it was supposed to be an uncommon exclusion...
to the prevailing rule, and always informed by the reality that God hates divorce.

Some Christians, with the good motive of wanting to halt the social ills of divorce, would prefer to ignore or explain away the exception clause and insist that divorce is never permissible, period. But we can’t outthink Jesus and must not make the Law more rigid than He did. We need to deal honestly with everything He taught, and not add to or subtract from His Word. Let’s explore further to see exactly what He said about divorce and why.

The certificate of divorce

The rabbinic justification for such easy divorce was based on an erroneous interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1–4, the Bible’s earliest mention of a certificate of divorce:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man’s wife, and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.

The focus of that passage is not whether divorce is permitted. It does not provide any explicit guidelines for when divorce might be allowable or not, much less command divorce in any instance. The point is that improper divorce leads to adultery, which results in defilement. Through Moses, God recognized and permitted divorce under certain circumstances, when it was accompanied by a certificate, but He did not thereby condone or command divorce. God’s permission for divorce was an accommodation of His grace to human sin. ‘Because of your hardness of heart,’ Jesus explained to the Pharisees on another occasion, ‘Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way’ (Matthew 19:8).