

BEADS AND CHAINS REVISITED

-MESSY (BUT BEAUTIFUL) CHRISTIANITY, WEEK 23-

1 Corinthians 7:10-16 (NIV)

I. NO DIVORCE IN CHRISTIAN MARRIAGES (YET SOME EXCEPTIONS APPLY FOR LEGITIMATE DIVORCE)

¹⁰To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord):
A wife must not separate from her husband.

¹¹ But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband.

And a husband must not divorce his wife.

II. NO DIVORCE IN MIXED-MARRIAGES (YET THE BELIEVER IS FREE IF DIVORCED BY THE OTHER SPOUSE)

¹²To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord):
If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him,
he must not divorce her.

¹³ And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her,
she must not divorce him.

¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife,
and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband.

Otherwise your children would be unclean,
but as it is, they are holy.

¹⁵ But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so.

The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances;
God has called us to live in peace.

¹⁶ How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband?

Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

THE BOTTOM LINE

****Hold to a biblical (but balanced), view of life-long, faithful marriage.****

...by recognizing that divorce is not God's will for Christian marriages or mixed marriages (no beads).

...by recognizing that divorce can be legitimate if the marriage covenant is broken without true repentance (no chains).

...by repenting of your own relationship sins and seeking to grow in godly character.

FURTHER INFO: BROADER NT TEACHING ON MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Please see my messages “Between the Beads and Chains: Parts One and Two” from our series in Fall 2017. These messages represent a fuller treatment of divorce and remarriage based on Jesus’ teaching in Mark. The notes below are from Part Two of that message, though slightly modified at points. The videos may be found here:

Part One: <https://vimeo.com/showcase/4947944/video/230445933>

Part Two: <https://vimeo.com/showcase/4947944/video/231379300>

AN ORGANIZATION OF NEW TESTAMENT PRINCIPLES

Jesus’ General Statement on Divorce and Remarriage (Mark 10:11-12)

¹¹ And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

Jesus’ Exception for Legitimate Divorce and Remarriage (Matt 19:9)

⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, **except for sexual immorality**, and marries another, commits adultery.”

Paul’s General Statement on Divorce and Remarriage (1 Cor 7:10-11)

¹⁰ To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

Paul’s Exception for Legitimate Remarriage after Divorce (1 Cor 7:12-15)

¹² To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³ If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵ **But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.**

On this passage: “Paul grants an exception to Jesus’ general principle against divorce and remarriage, and the exception allows that a believer might be divorced or deserted by a spouse against his or her will. These circumstances are not the believer’s choice, and the believer is therefore “not under bondage” (v. 15). An innocent party unable to preserve the marriage against the spouse’s will is not held responsible for the divorce or forbidden to remarry. For our churches to hold the innocent party responsible and forbid remarriage is to deny Paul’s teaching and to oppress the broken” (Keener, *...and Marries Another*, 55).

WHAT ABOUT OTHER EXCEPTIONS FOR LEGITIMATE DIVORCE? TWO POSSIBLE ROUTES:

Route One: Jesus’ Statement is General and Hyperbolic and Does Not Apply Without Exception in Every Case (Argued by Keener [1991])

1. Both Matthew and Paul add exceptions to Jesus’ general statement; this shows that both felt free to qualify Jesus’ general statement in light of certain situations.
2. This is similar to how both proverbial wisdom statements (e.g., various statements in the Book of Proverbs or by Jesus) and general legal statements (e.g., various commandments in law-codes or teachings of Jesus) need to be qualified and adjusted to various degrees to make them work in various specific circumstances.
 - a. Example from the Teachings of Jesus in the same Gospel: Jesus says calling someone “fool” is wrong (Matt 5:33-37) but calls someone a “fool” later (Matt 23:17).
 - b. Example from Greco-Roman law, where the rhetorician Quintilian discusses a law: “‘Children shall support their parents under penalty of imprisonment.’ It is clear, in the first place, that this

cannot apply to an infant. At this point we turn to other possible exceptions and distinguish as follows” (Quint 7.6.5).

3. This implies that other legitimate exceptions can exist, such as abuse, neglect, or other violations of a marriage covenant.
4. This seems in keeping with the spirit of the teachings of Jesus, which resist legalism and emphasize mercy to the oppressed (e.g., Luke 4:18-19; Matt 12:7; 18:6; 23:4).

“If a wife (or, in few cases, a husband) is being physically or sexually abused by the spouse, my own pastoral counsel would be for her to get out of the situation. In my opinion, if reconciliation and restoration of the marriage are subsequently impossible (and the innocent partner has tried), the abused person is free to remarry. The fact that the New Testament does not explicitly make an exception for this does not demonstrate that no exception could be made. I do not suppose that spousal abuse never occurred in New Testament times, but I cannot honestly think of any references to it in the ancient literature; and the New Testament writers apparently thus had no immediate need to address it. Can we honestly maintain that a valid marriage exists when one spouse is treated only as an object for venting the other’s repressed, violent rage? Is this not infidelity in some sense? And does not Paul’s ad hoc exception, addressing a specific situation, point us to the kind of exceptions we must make in analogous situations?” (Keener, *Marries Another*, 106).

Route Two: Both Jesus and Paul would Assume the Validity of Additional Old Testament Grounds for Divorce (Argued by Instone-Brewer [2002, 2003])

1. Deuteronomy 24 did not contain the only Old Testament grounds for divorce; Exodus 21:7-11 gave three requirements that a husband was supposed to give a slave wife, which in Judaism was extended to all wives:
 - a. “...¹⁰ If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish **her food, her clothing, or her marital rights**. ¹¹ And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money.”
 - b. These requirements, food, clothing, and love, were written in Jewish marriage contracts and breaches of these requirements from either spouse could serve as grounds for divorce.
 - c. Here is a Jewish marriage contract from the early second century AD: ...[you will be] my wife [according to the la]w of Moses and the Judaeans and I will [**feed** you] and [**clothe**] you and I will bring you (into my **house**) by means of your *ketubah*, and I owe you the sum of four hundred denarii (*zuzin*) which equal one hundred tetradrachms (*sorin*) whichever you wish to take and to [...] ... together with the due amount of your **food** and your **clothes** and your **bed** (?). (printed in Instone-Brewer [2002], 215)
2. Instone-Brewer (a rabbinics scholar) argues that all Jewish groups allowed divorce on the grounds of Exodus 21, even the conservative Shammaites (see *m. Ketub* 5:5-8). So when the Mishnah says the Shammaites only allowed divorce on the basis of sexual immorality, and when Jesus says he allowed divorce only on the basis of sexual immorality, this is because *they are focusing their debate on Deuteronomy 24, the debated passage that contains sexual immorality as grounds for divorce*. They do not mention the other biblical grounds for divorce because those grounds are not mentioned in that passage. They would probably assume these other biblical grounds as legitimate.
3. This means that Jesus plausibly would also accept divorce on the basis of the other biblical grounds for divorce.
4. Instone-Brewer argues that Paul has the same understanding, because in the passage where Paul allows divorce and remarriage after abandonment (1 Cor 7:10-15), he includes instructions for marriage that draw on the biblical requirement for sexual love (1 Cor 7:1-5) and material support (1 Cor 7:32-35).
5. This all means that the biblical grounds for legitimate divorce and remarriage would be sexual immorality (adultery in various forms) and neglect (lack of food, clothes, or love, which would include abandonment or abuse).

“The message of the NT is that divorce is allowed but should be avoided whenever possible. Divorce is allowed only on the grounds of broken marriage vows, and the decision to divorce can be made only by the injured party. A believer should never break the marriage vows, and should try to forgive a repentant partner who has done so. If divorce does happen, remarriage is permitted. All this would be obvious to a first-century believer, but the meaning of the text was obscured at a very early date due to ignorance about the Jewish

background after 70 CE. Modern Church practice can be easily adapted to this insight because our marriage services still preserve the four biblical grounds for divorce in the marriage vows. The Church should now be humble and admit that a great mistake has been made. Too many generations of husbands and wives have been forced to remain with their abusing or neglectful partners and have not been allowed to divorce even after suffering repeated unfaithfulness. The Church should not continue in a false teaching because Church tradition should not be regarded as superior to the teaching of Jesus and Paul” (Instone-Brewer [2002], 314).

NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

Organized by Perceived Level of Confidence

***Please do not take these as hard and fast rules.** We all must struggle to determine what is truly God’s will in these matters. These principles are only true to the degree they match scriptural passages and principles. The worst thing we could do would be to apply a system of rules legalistically, or to seek a loop-hole to selfishly avoid commitments before God.*

Very Confident (The evidence is explicit)

- Marriage should be monogamous; someone can be married to only one person at a time.
- Marriage should be lifelong; it is against God’s will to break up a marriage.
- Divorce for “any matter” is invalid: and so remarriage after this divorce is adulterous.
- Divorce is legitimate in cases of adultery.
- Divorce is legitimate in cases where an *unbelieving* spouse leaves the believing spouse.
- Divorce is not compulsory, even in these cases. Repentance, forgiveness and restoration is better.
- Neither divorce, adultery, or any other failure related to marriage is an unforgivable sin—forgiveness, grace, and restoration is available and should be sought from God.

Confident (The evidence is somewhat implicit, but probable)

- Remarriage is allowed for the innocent party after a valid divorce.
- Divorce and remarriage is legitimate in cases where an unbeliever *or a believer* leaves their spouse.
- Divorce and remarriage are legitimate for the victim of abuse.
- The innocent spouse who initiates legitimate divorce should not be judged or looked down on. He or she is merely recognizing that the offending spouse has broken the marriage and refuses to repent.
- Divorce and/or remarriage does not automatically disqualify someone from leadership in the church (being the “husband of one wife” in 1 Tim 3:2 doesn’t necessarily mean this).

Somewhat Confident (The evidence is suggestive, but plausible)

- Divorce and remarriage are legitimate for the victims of material or emotional neglect.
- Illegitimate remarriages that took place after illegitimate divorces should not be broken, but rather we should ask for forgiveness from God and from others, and then not break these further commitments.
- In terms of remarriage, failed marriages before a person is a Christian should not prohibit the believer from later marrying again. All things are new in Christ.

Uncertain (The evidence is unclear, and a decision is difficult)

- Is the guilty spouse in a divorce free to remarry someone else if reconciliation is not possible with their offended spouse?

Helpful Resources

For a good (though *very* technical) book on this subject, see: *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context*, by David Instone-Brewer (Eerdmans, 2002). Or see his more approachable, popular-level book, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church: Biblical Solutions for Pastoral Realities* (2003). You can also explore this author’s website to pick up much of the same material: <http://www.divorce-remarriage.com/> Or read his 2007 *Christianity Today* cover story here: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/october/20.26.html?start=1>

For another, more approachable book that ends in positions I think are correct, see: *...And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teachings of the New Testament*, by Craig S. Keener (Hendrickson, 1991).

For explorations of domestic abuse within the evangelical church, see: <https://cryingoutforjustice.com/>

Local help for domestic abuse: <http://stopdomesticabuse.org/>, 218-326-0388