

# THE REAL MEANING OF DIVORCE

## MATHEW 05:31–32

### *Introduction: Divorce*

Throughout history there have always been two schools of thought when interpreting the laws of society — the strict, conservative interpreters and the broad, liberal interpreters. In Jesus' day, the strict interpreters were known as the school of Shammai; the broad interpreters were known as the school of Hillel. In dealing with the subject of divorce, Shammai said the words “something indecent” found in Deu. 24:1 allowed for divorce, but the words meant adultery and adultery only. Hillel said “something indecent” meant that anything that destroyed unity was a justified reason for divorce; that perfect unity had to be maintained in the marriage state. Such allowance had disintegrated into the position that anything displeasing to a man was reason enough for divorce.

A person can easily see which school was followed by human nature and most societies. Divorce had become so common that society itself was threatened. All a man had to do to divorce his wife was to have a Rabbi write out a bill of divorcement and hand it to his wife in the presence of two witnesses. The divorce was immediate and final (Deu. 24:1-4).

- I. The law: anyone who divorces must give a certificate of divorce (v. 31).
- II. The real meaning: divorce disallowed (v. 32).
- III. The exception: immorality (v. 32).
- IV. The guilty parties (v. 32).

### **I. *Mathew 05:31 Purpose of the Law of Divorce***

The law against divorce was given for three reasons.

1. To protect the family.

**Mark 10: 6-9** “*But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.*”

**Eph 5:31** “*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.*”

2. To protect the land or nation, preventing national disintegration.

**Prov 11:11** *Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed.*

**Prov 14:34** *Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people.*

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3. To prevent a person from becoming an adulterer.

**Mat 19:9** “I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.” (see Luke 16:18)

**Mark 10:12** “And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.”

**Eph 5:22** Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.

## II. **Mathew 05:32 Meaning of the Law of Divorce**

The real meaning of the law is that divorce is disallowed. Enormous protection is seen in this pronouncement. There is protection of the family, including the wife, husband and children. There is emotional, physical, mental and spiritual protection — protection against a family’s being ripped apart and having to undergo all the strain and disruption that follows. Divorce is one of the most traumatic experiences of human life. For many, it is the most traumatic experience.

Divorce *touches* so many. It *touches*...

- husbands
- parents
- wives
- friends
- children
- employers and employees

Divorce *affects* each person it touches, affects them ever so deeply. It *affects*...

- mind
- emotions
- spirit
- love
- behaviour
- possessions
- joy
- control
- security
- purpose
- hopes
- plans
- peace
- faith

Divorce drastically *changes* each person’s life. It *changes*...

- personal life
- recreational life
- private life
- social life
- home life
- dream life
- parental life

Because divorce affects human life so much, it is of critical concern to Christ. When anyone hurts, Christ hurts. And because divorce hurts so much and hurts so many, Christ sets out to correct man’s corrupt concept of marriage and easy divorce. (See *Marriage and Divorce: Shammai and Hillel*, Mt. 19:1-12)

**Thought 1.** Teaching, preaching, and living by strict principles takes enormous courage. Christ demonstrated enormous courage by going against the grain of society and demanding strictness in marriage.

**Thought 2.** There are four attitudes to marriage, three of which are *loose attitudes* that often lead to divorce.

- 1) *A back-door marriage*: “If it works, OK; if it doesn’t work, OK.”
- 2) *A cheap, sensual marriage*: based upon some reason other than love, some reason such as attractiveness, sex, or finances.
- 3) *An adventuresome marriage*: the marriage is entered into for the experience and the adventure of being married.
- 4) *A marriage of commitment*: the full conviction of both spouses that they should fulfill the solemn vows taken — a conviction before God.

**Thought 3.** There is only one basis for marriage that can absolutely prevent divorce; a true union, both a spiritual and physical union (see Mt. 19:5; Eph. 5:22-33; 1 Cor. 7:12-16).

**Mark 10:9** “Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

**Eph 5:22, 29** *Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord...After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church.*

**Eph 5:31** “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.

## MATHEW 19:01–12

### MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE: SHAMMAI AND HILLEL SCHOOLS

The Pharisees came to Jesus tempting Him and saying, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

There is a background to this question. The society of Jesus’ day was very lax in its morals. Marriage was considered nothing more than a piece of paper: if it worked, fine; if it did not work, fine. One could always divorce.

There were two positions or schools of thought on divorce. Moses had said that any man could divorce his wife if “she becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her” (Deu. 24:1).

1. The school of Shammai said that the words *some uncleanness* meant adultery only. A wife could be as loose and mean as Jezebel, but she was not to be divorced unless she committed adultery.
2. The school of Hillel said that the words *some uncleanness* meant anything that was not pleasing to the man. One should remember that women were counted as nothing but *property* to be possessed by men. They had no rights whatsoever except as a man might wish to give. Of course, this was the position followed by society, for it was the position that allowed human nature to run loose. Women were abused: used and discarded, neglected and violated. They were nothing but

chattel property of men and were often considered of less value than property, whether animals or things. Therefore, divorce ran rampant in Christ's day.

The Pharisees wished to embroil Jesus in the controversy between the conservative (Shammai) and liberal view (Hillel). They were simply asking Jesus if He agreed with the school of Hillel: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and *every* reason?" (v. 3). No matter which position He took, He would offend and stir up a large number of people, becoming embroiled in a mean controversy. □

### **III. *Mathew 05:32 Adultery – Sexual Immorality***

The exception for divorce is the sin of marital unfaithfulness being committed by one of the spouses. The great tragedy of sexual immorality or adultery is that it breaks the union and attachment between husband and wife. The union and attachment and all that goes with it — faith, hope, love, trust, assurance, confidence and strength — are broken. If the husband and wife are not believers, then the physical union and the mental union of the marriage are broken. If they are believers, then all three unions are broken: the physical, mental and spiritual. (see Mt. 19:5-6). Two facts should be noted in the brief words of Christ here and elsewhere in the gospels. ((see Mt. 19:1-12).

1. Christ does not stand with either the conservative or the liberal school. He does not mention either school or either position.
2. Christ says two things about divorce.
  - a. Divorce is not the purpose of God. This is silent, but clearly understood.
  - b. Divorce is allowed only if one of the spouses has committed adultery.

What Christ is trying to prevent is what history shows. Societies have tragically ignored the command of God. They have planted the seed of national disintegration, that is, broken homes (see Eph. 5:22-33; Mt. 19:9; Mk. 10:12; Lk. 16:18; 1 Cor. 7:12-16). This brief statement on divorce shows the great need to protect men, women, children and the home. It points to the immense value of all three (Mt. 5:32; Mt. 19:1-12).

***1 Cor 6:18 Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. (see 1 Cor 7:12)***

***Eph 5:3 But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.***

***Col 3:5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. (see 1 Th 4:3)***

***Thought 1.*** It should always be remembered that adultery is not the only sin that can break the union of a marriage. Faith, hope, love, trust, assurance, confidence, strength

— all can be dashed upon the rocks of selfishness and meanness (see *Marital Unfaithfulness*, Mt. 19:9)

**MATHEW 19:09 MARITAL UNFAITHFULNESS:  
SEXUAL IMMORALITY, ADULTERY**

*“I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.” Mat 19:09*

A person, especially a Christian believer, needs to think of the meaning of adultery here. Adultery is the turning away from a spouse to another person. Many a person would never think of turning away from their spouse to a third person, yet they readily and willingly turn toward self and toward other things. As God said of the nation Israel. “I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries” (Jer. 3:8). Many a person has done just as Israel did. They refused to surrender to God. They lived in a backslidden state, and day by day they turned more and more away from their spouse and, in many cases, from their children.

Day by day a person can take a spouse and children and...

- be mean and ugly
- be nagging and mentally cruel
- be neglectful and unthoughtful
- be physically abusive and life-threatening
- be deliberately withdrawn and separated

And the truth of the matter is that many live selfishly that way.

=> Some are cruel; others sadistic.

=> Some are critical: others sarcastic; still others *demonic and hellish*.

=> Some are mentally abusive; others physically abusive, *even* to the point of murdering spouse and children — the unthinkable.

The truth of a marriage is known only to God. A husband or a wife can use his or her personality to present a front to the world. Yet within the heart, there can be such a hardness toward a spouse, such an unwillingness to be truly united together, that God just cannot join them together as one flesh. Hardness, very simply, wrecks a marriage. It wrecks a marriage by causing a person to turn away and separate from his or her spouse. If a spouse is not with the other spouse, then the two are separate, not truly united and joined together. There can be no true union if there are not *two* persons together; and as pointed out earlier, being united is the blessing and gift of God. Being united is only possible as each allows God to “join them together.” □

#### IV. *Mathew 05:32 Guilty Parties in Divorce*

The guilty parties in divorce (see Mt.19:5; 19:8; *Marital Unfaithfulness*, Mt. 19:9; *Essentials of Marriage*, Mt. 19:11). ■

#### MATHEW 19:11 ESSENTIALS OF MARRIAGE

*Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given." Mathew 19:11*

"Not everyone can accept this word." What word?

1. The word that a man and wife are "to be united to one another." They are to be totally united together as *one flesh* "So they are no longer two, but one" (vv. 5-6).
2. The word that it is God and God alone who can *join together* a man and a wife (v. 6; see *Unite, Cleave*, Mt. 19:5).

These two things, being united together and God Himself, are the two essentials for a true marriage. Many are living together who refuse *to be united* and refuse to let God join them together. They are not willing to be united, nor are they willing to let God make them as *one flesh*. They are not willing to let God join them together.

(Note: man and woman can only unite and join themselves together physically. God is not needed for a purely physical union. If a married couple wishes more than a physical union, they must turn to God. He alone can "join together" a couple spiritually.) □