

Position Paper: Remarriage After Divorce

The question of remarriage after divorce is significant, particularly when adultery was the cause of the divorce. Some argue that if someone was divorced because of their own adultery, they are permanently forbidden from remarrying. But does Scripture actually teach this? A careful look at Jesus' words, Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7, and the broader biblical context reveals a different picture— one where divorce is a real category, where sin has consequences, but where repentance and grace still provide a path forward.

The Context of Matthew 19: What Was Jesus Addressing?

When Jesus speaks about divorce and remarriage in Matthew 19:3–9, He is answering a specific question from the Pharisees:

“Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” (Matt. 19:3)

This was not a general inquiry but a debate over Deuteronomy 24:1–4, where Moses permitted a certificate of divorce if a man found “some indecency” in his wife. The argument centered on what “indecency” meant. The stricter school (Shammai) said it referred to sexual immorality, while the more permissive school (Hillel) allowed divorce for trivial reasons— burning a meal, losing attractiveness, or simply finding someone else.

Jesus' response was not about remarriage but about correcting the abuse of divorce. He affirms that “indecency” means sexual immorality (*porneia*), not just any excuse a man might invent.

“Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” (Matt. 19:9)

Jesus is not forbidding remarriage—He is condemning frivolous divorce and exposing how the Pharisees had turned marriage into an assembly-line process of serial monogamy. The assumption in their question was that divorce automatically permitted remarriage. Jesus challenges the legitimacy of their divorces, not remarriage itself.

The Meaning of Matthew 5:31–32

In Matthew 5:31–32, Jesus again rebukes the misuse of divorce:

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

Some take this to mean that remarriage is always adultery, but that is not what Jesus is saying. His point is that an illegitimate divorce does not dissolve the marriage in God's eyes. If a man divorces his wife for a reason other than her *porneia*, they are still married in God's eyes—so if she remarries, the new relationship is adulterous.

(Abandonment by an unbelieving spouse will be discussed below)

But if the divorce was legitimate (because of sexual immorality), then the marriage is truly dissolved. In that case, remarriage is not condemned. Again, remarriage is assumed in the discussion, not forbidden.

1 Corinthians 7 and the Reality of Divorce

Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 reinforces this point by acknowledging that divorce is a real category with real consequences.

Repentance Looks Like a Willingness to Reconcile

Paul gives clear instructions to Christians about divorce:

“To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.” (1 Cor. 7:10–11)

For those who have divorced for illegitimate reasons, repentance means being willing to reconcile. Divorce should never be taken lightly, and reconciliation should be pursued whenever possible. However, this passage assumes that reconciliation is still an option.

But what happens when reconciliation is no longer possible?

Freedom to Remarry When Reconciliation Is Impossible

Paul later makes an important statement:

“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.” (1 Cor. 7:15)

The phrase “not enslaved” (*ou dedoulōtai*) suggests a true release from marital obligations. If abandonment by an unbelieving spouse creates legitimate freedom from the marriage bond, then the same principle applies when reconciliation is permanently blocked—such as when the former spouse has remarried.

Later, Paul affirms:

“Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned.” (1 Cor. 7:27–28)

If divorce permanently barred remarriage, Paul would have said so. Instead, regarding remarriage, he does not distinguish whether someone was the “innocent” or “guilty” party in the divorce. The key question is whether they are still bound to a spouse.

- If reconciliation is possible, they should pursue it.

- If their former spouse has remarried, reconciliation is impossible.
- If reconciliation is impossible, they are free.

To claim otherwise is to go beyond the text.

What About the Charge of Ongoing Adultery?

Some argue that if a person remarries after a wrongful divorce, they are living in perpetual adultery. But Jesus never describes remarriage as an ongoing state of sin—He calls remarriage after an illegitimate divorce adultery because it violates the original marriage. But once a new marriage is formed, Scripture never commands dissolving it. (Practically, in situations like this, before remarriage, the church must uphold that they are not permitted to remarry, but if remarriage after an illegitimate divorce has already taken place, they will need to repent of their action to remarry and then humbly move forward.)

Paul, addressing those who came to Christ in complicated marital situations, simply says:

“Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.” (1 Cor. 7:20)

If remarriage itself were an ongoing act of sin, Paul would have commanded believers to leave their second marriages—but he never does. Instead, Scripture treats second marriages as real, binding, and to be honored.

Conclusion: Divorce Is Real, Grace Is Greater

The weight of biblical teaching is clear:

- Marriage is sacred, and divorce is always tragic.
- Illegitimate divorce (“for any reason”) does not dissolve a marriage in God’s eyes.
- But legitimate divorce (due to sexual immorality or abandonment) does dissolve a marriage, and, in these cases, remarriage is not sin.
- If reconciliation is possible (after divorcing for illegitimate reasons), repentance means pursuing it.
- If reconciliation is impossible (due to the former spouse’s remarriage or death), the bond is broken, and remarriage is not sin.

The idea that remarriage is permanently forbidden for the adulterer goes beyond what Scripture teaches. This idea assumes that divorce is not real, that remarriage is never valid, and that repentance can never lead to restoration. But divorce does dissolve marriages—otherwise, reconciliation would always be an option, even after remarriage. So, the person who, through their own adultery, has caused divorce needs to seek reconciliation, but if the former spouse dies or marries another, remarriage at this point is not sin.

Sin has real consequences, but grace is greater. If a person has truly repented, their past does not permanently disqualify them from experiencing the gift of marriage. The past does not define the future for those in Christ. If repentance is genuine, remarriage is not an act of rebellion but an opportunity to walk in restored faithfulness.

What matters now is not what was done—but what is done next.

