

God's Pattern for Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

"Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery" (Matthew 19:9).

Jack H. Williams

In our series of lessons this week, each lesson is founded upon a text which contains the word "except." In our text in Matthew 19:9 the import of this word is very strong. Notice these definitions for the word "except":

- "if not, except" (*Thayer's Greek English Lexicon*)
- "unless, except" (*The Analytical Greek Lexicon*)
- "other than" (*Webster's Dictionary*)

In addition, the use of the same Greek word (ἐιμή - EIME) in verse 17 of this same chapter: "there is none good but one, that is, God." Also, the intensive nature of the word is seen in John 14:6 when the Lord proclaimed, "...no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."

In Matthew 5:32 the Lord sets forth the same teaching, saying, "But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery" (emphasis mine - jhw). The phrase "saving for" is from another Greek term (παρεκτός - PAREKTOS) which is defined with similar emphasis:

- "except; with the exception of..." (*Thayer's Greek English Lexicon*)
- "with the exception of; except..." (*Webster's Dictionary*)

Again, we can also see the strength of the word as it is used in other passages. For example in Acts 26:29 Paul wishes others were "altogether such as I am, except these bonds." Clearly this concept of "except" is one which ought to demand our attention!

One other matter though is worthy of mention before we advance further in this study. Any time we study the subject of God's pattern for marriage, divorce and remarriage we must take care not to overemphasize the divinely given *exception*. The very fact that there is an exception should emphasize that there is something preferable in God's eyes. Any serious Bible student will realize God has said a marriage may end for the reason of fornication. He did not say that the marriage *must* end when fornication occurs. God desires that the marriage be saved if at all possible. It is a union which is joined by His will (vs 6). It is a union designed to be the strongest earthly union mankind may have (vs 5). It is a union designed for the good of mankind since the very beginning of creation (vs 4). Perhaps if we would teach our children as they grow the Lord's will on this matter and instill a respect for God within their hearts, such lessons as this today would not be needed!

With these thoughts in mind, let us look further to God's pattern as revealed in His Word.

God's Exception

As noted above, both Matthew 19:9 and 5:32 make it clear that there is an exception to the divine ideal that one man and one woman marry for as long as they live. (Mark 10:2-12 and Luke 16:18

deal with the marriage law, but do not deal with the exception, as does Romans 7:1-3). But in our society many have lost touch with what the sin of fornication entails. Perhaps it would be beneficial then to define this sin which is the sole reason for which one can put away their spouse and, if they are innocent, be eligible to remarry. Thayer defines this as "illicit sexual intercourse in general." Vine, in his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* says the word denotes "illicit sexual intercourse ... it stands for or includes adultery." *The New Testament Greek Lexicon* says the word deals with "illicit sexual intercourse ... adultery, fornication, homosexuality, lesbianism, intercourse with animals etc." With such definitions in mind doesn't it seem odd to hear how such actions are deemed acceptable by describing fornication as "making love," "sleeping together" and other such bland phrases. If mankind would learn to be appalled at the seriousness of sin instead of giving it pet names, perhaps our moral climate would be going upward instead of downward.

Having seen the import of "except" (or "saving for" in Matthew 5:32), and also the meaning of fornication, what then is the significance of this passage?

- First and foremost, it is clear God desires that mankind see the sanctity and seriousness of the marriage bond and strive to keep that bond intact.
- It is likewise just as clear from our study that if one is married and puts away (divorces) his/her spouse and marries again, he/she commits adultery.
- This applies to any and all situations for which one may put his or her spouse away, "except, with the exception of; other than" when one puts away his/her spouse for "fornication, illicit sexual intercourse in general."

Is this really a serious matter? Given the prominence of easy divorce, no fault divorce, do-it-yourself divorces and the like, it is clear that the world, and some in the church, do not consider it a serious matter at all. It would do us all well to note the reaction of the Lord's disciples in the very next verse in Matthew 19 when they realized what the Lord has just taught. They said, "*If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry*" (10). These people had been taught the popular concept of that day (which was involved in the attempt in our text to "tempt" Jesus (vs 3)), that a man could put away his wife for "any cause" and yet retain the right of remarriage. Again, a notion not far from the degraded society in which we live today. But notice that when they recognized the seriousness of the marriage bond and the severe limitations upon which it could be put asunder, they thought it would be better to never marry rather than to risk entering into a bond so strong that only death or fornication could break it in the eyes of God. How sad that so many today enter into marriage with hardly any forethought or consideration of the true sanctity and seriousness of the union. We need to begin teaching our children the seriousness of this matter so that they will have a bit of godly fear in their dating and marriage considerations!

Even though this passages is so clear that, as many have said through the years, "you have to have help to misunderstand it," there are numerous attempts by those in the world as well as in the church of our Lord to discount or disregard what the Lord has taught. Lets look now to some of them.

Man's "Excuses" For Denying The Teaching Of This Passage

"No Remarriage For Any Reason." There are those who strive to bind that which God has not bound in the realm of divorce and remarriage by teaching that even fornication is not a reason for which one can put away a spouse and rightfully remarry. To teach this, one must remove "except

for fornication" from the Bible - which they willingly do! Such people try to pit passage against passage saying that since only Matthew recorded the exception it is not valid. The only basis for such an arbitrary handling of God's Word is that Matthew 19:9 and 5:32 do not agree with what they believe! Despite their objections, it is clear that the inspired writer DID pen the exception and any who dare to take it away ought to stand in fear of the judgment of God (cf. Deuteronomy 4:2; Galatians 1:6-9; Revelation 22:18-19).

"The Guilty Party Can Remarry If The Innocent Party Does." Paul gives great counsel when he commands, "preach the word" (2 Timothy 4:2). Our question to those who teach that the guilty party can remarry is simply "Where does the text so read?" Try as they might, the proponents of this idea cannot find a passage which so teaches.

"Non-Christians Are Not Amenable [Responsible To] God's Laws." If this is the case, and Matthew 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:9-12; Luke 16:18 not applicable to non-Christians, *where is the passage authorizing/regulating marriage for them?* Are they unmarried until they become Christians? Does baptism act also as a marriage ceremony, or do they need then to obey the laws of the land and be married?! Do we then "take back" all we have said about the sinful practices of the denominationalists? After all, if they are not amenable to God's laws on marriage, divorce and remarriage, how can we profess them to be amenable to His laws on any other matters?! (ie. organization of the church, worship, *plan of salvation!*). Actually this position would result in universal damnation, for how could a non-Christian obey laws that do not apply to him in order to become a Christian?

Actually Jesus made clear that this teaching is false with His words in Matthew 19. Note the terms "whosoever ... whoso" (9) ... "from the beginning" (4). Was Jesus simply not able to communicate His true intent that what he was saying was not applicable even to those listening to Him, or was He deliberately deceiving the Jews present? The fact is that this teaching denies ...

- The **authority of Christ** (Matthew 28:18-20) [Jesus claimed His authority was over the whole world, all nations, not just the church.
- The **application of the gospel** (Matthew 28:18-20) [Jesus commanded that ALL NATIONS be taught and observe ALL THINGS He commanded.]
- The **actual teaching of Matthew 19:4-9** [Jesus made it clear the teaching was for all "from the beginning"... "whosoever"]
- The **accounts of amenable aliens** (1 Corinthians 6:9-11) [Paul teaches that before baptism some were guilty of adultery and fornication. How so if this teaching did not apply to them?]

"Let's Wait Each Other Out." Another popular teaching is that if a marriage is ended for reasons other than fornication, there is really no putting away at that point and the partner who outwaits his partner on committing fornication is then free to remarry! One need only read the passage to see that there are two kinds of putting away under consideration – one "for fornication" and the other without the fornication involved. The very existence of the "except" emphasizes that there can be putting away for a reason other than fornication. Those who teach this have to take the position that there cannot actually be a "putting away" without fornication, something the Lord explicitly stated in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 could occur.

"Baptism Sanctifies An Otherwise Adulterous Relationship." But if this is the case, one would wonder why John demanded that Herod and Herodias to separate (Mark 6:16-18) instead of simply telling him to be baptized "for remission of sins" (Mark 1:4)? Consider this, John's preaching to Herod was clearly a call to repent (Matthew 3:1-2; Mark 6:18). If that is the case, what would have been expected of Herod and Herodius if they had been present to hear the command of Peter at Pentecost: "Repent, and be baptized..."? Did the meaning of repentance change from John's teaching to that of Peter? Also, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 denies such a false teaching. If one is to take the position that baptism makes an adulterous union acceptable they would logically have to make the same application to all other sins listed with adultery ... "...fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners...." Who is willing to act with consistency in this regard?! Further, what if only one is baptized? Is the marriage now "half sanctified?!" Can we have an adulterer and a righteous individual within the same union?

"Adultery Is An Act ... You Cannot Live In Adultery, Just Repent Of The Action." Some try to distort the continuous action emphasized in the "eth" ending of the word "committeth" in Matthew 19:9. This ending in the King James Version is a result of the Greek present tense, denoting a continuous action. While one could do a comprehensive study of the Greek in Matthew 19:9, it is not really necessary to find the failure of their contentions. Paul's words in Colossians 3:5-7 help us to understand the futility of such. In this passage Paul speaks of several sins, including fornication, and says, "in the which ye also walked sometime, when ye lived in them." How could the inspired Word be any clearer as to the fact that adultery is a way of life, not just a single act.

"1 Corinthians 7:15 Gives An Additional Reason For Which One May Remarry - Desertion By An Unbeliever." This teaching is sometimes referred to as the "Pauline Privilege," the contention being that Paul gave "supplementary revelation" to that revealed by Jesus in Matthew 19. Such an idea fails when we consider such a use of God Word in other areas. For example, if we can change or disregard the "except" in Matthew 19 for the sake of "supplementary" revelation, why not also in John 3:3-5 where Jesus taught that "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Are we at liberty to take Paul's words in Romans 5:1 that we are "justified by faith" and claim them for "supplementary revelation" and thus discard the necessity of baptism? In both cases such teaching would be CONTRADICTIONARY to that which has been clearly taught elsewhere, not supplementary!

"The phrase 'not Under bondage' in 1 Corinthians 7:15 means that a person whose spouse deserts him or her is free to remarry." As noted earlier, the problem with such assertions is the text nowhere says such. An honest study of the chapter reveals that in verse 27 and 39 where "bound" is clearly of the marriage bond, Paul uses a different word than in verse 15. The word in verse 15 refers to the lowest form of servitude. The word in verse 15 is also in the Greek perfect tense, which indicates a past action with results that continue into the present. That being the case, whatever the bondage is that is discussed, they (and we) never were, nor are now under such bondage. Were they then never married?! Clearly the bondage here cannot refer to the marriage bond.

Others, using this same section of scripture, teach that verse 10-11 refer to a Christian/Christian marriage, thus referring to Matthew 19:9 ("not I, but the Lord"); while verses 12-15 deal with a

Christian/non Christian marriage ("I, not the Lord")." Of course this is a direct contradiction to the truth we have already seen that Matthew 19:9 is UNIVERSAL! But further examination shows that the situation in 1 Corinthians *is not parallel to Matthew 19:9*. Another problem arises in that if this is true, a Christian whose Christian spouse committed fornication could put that one away, (Matthew 19:9); while a Christian whose non-Christian spouse committed fornication COULD NOT, for Matthew 19 does not apply!

"No Example Of Separation Is Found In The Scriptures, So We Have No Right To Tell People To Separate!" In response we would first ask, where is the example of homosexuals separating? incestuous relationships? polygamous relationships? Would the lack of an example of people living a sinful situation condone remaining in that situation? Or would the command by the Lord to repent in Luke 13:3 and a multitude of other passage demand that people turn from the sin, whatever it may be? The reality is though that there are 2 examples of separation found in God's Word.

- In Mark 6:17-20 - John (who was preaching repentance (Matthew 3:2) told Herod it was not lawful for him to have his brother's wife. What would have been required of Herod if he had been present on the day of Pentecost and heard Peter proclaim, "repent, and be baptized?"
- In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 it is said of fornicators and adulterers - "such were some of you" This is obviously a case of some who ceased walking and living in the sin of adultery when they became Christians. If not, what of the other sins listed (including idolatry, homosexuality, thievery, reviling, etc.) would they have to cease these sins?

"That Teaching Is Too Hard ... What About Children ... " It seems that when all other arguments fail, many seek to bolster their position with emotional arguments rather than the Word of God. At the outset we need to recognize that this argument is in itself an admission that God teaches separation should occur. It then becomes a matter of who I love and respect more – God or man? The argument also sounds much like the events of John 6:60-66 when many of Jesus' disciples followed Him no more because of "hard sayings." But Jesus did not change them then to suit man, and neither can we now! Another consideration is of the children of such unions who one day will have to live with the choice of believing the Bible or "rationalizing" God's word away when they see their parent's or others in a sinful situation. ***When will the chain be broken?***

"Well, I See All Of That, But With My Situation, I Guess I Will Just Have To Trust In The Grace Of God." If emotionalism fails, the next stop is a reworking of God's grace. We should ask, "Where is such a definition of grace found?" The closest one can come to it is Romans 6:1 when Paul addressed the question of "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" and to such an idea Paul said, **"God forbid!"** God's grace is partially seen in His revealed Word (Titus 2:11-14); if we will trust in God's grace, let us trust in (and thus abide by) His word!

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, there are those who try to complicate and befuddle the situation with many arguments. No doubt many have heard a discussion about brother and sister A who marry B and C. But even if such illustrations and arguments go through Z, we need to realize that while someone may confuse you and I, they are not going to confuse God!

Remember what we said at the outset of this lesson: Any time we study such a subject, perhaps it is good to emphasize that when we deal with the divinely given exception, we realize God has said a marriage *may* end for this reason -- not *must* end. God desires that the marriage be saved if at all possible. Likewise we need to realize that if one DOES avail him or herself of this "exceptive clause" that *fornication is the sole reason that the Lord gave for which a person may put away his or her spouse and then be eligible to remarry without sin.*

God said, "*Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery*" (Matthew 19:9). For those who love and respect God, that settles it! (John 14:15; Matthew 7:21-23; Luke 6:46; etc.)