

Does God Permit Divorce? Part 1

I. Introduction

- A. The Nature of Divorce & Biblical Grounds for Divorce (i.e. the dissolution of a marriage covenant)
Divorce separates that which God has joined. This is not part of God’s design for marriages. . . . “The marriage covenant makes the two into one, but it is possible for sin to break them apart.” Divorce is biblically permitted (though not required) when a spouse sins in a way that breaks the core of the marriage covenant (i.e., the one-flesh union).¹
- B. There are ditches on each side of God’s Word
 1. Ditch 1: Lowering God’s requirements (autonomy).
 2. Ditch 2: Adding to God’s requirements (legalism).
 3. “While it is a serious error to permit what God forbids, it is also wrong to forbid what God permits.”²
- C. Two categories of marriage-covenant breaking
 1. Sexual immorality (Matt 19)
 2. Abandonment (1 Cor. 7)

II. The Bible Permits Divorce for Sexual Immorality (Matthew 19:3-9)

- A. The main question: *Is it lawful to divorce your wife for any reason?* (v. 3)
 1. Is it legal before God to divorce one’s wife for any and every cause?
 2. There were two major schools of Jewish interpretation of Deut. 24:1-4³
- B. Jesus’s response (v. 4-6)
 1. Where does he go? (v. 4-5; Genesis 1:28, 2:24)
 2. He says, “*You are asking ‘Can I divorce for any reason?’...but you should ask, ‘What was God’s design?’*”
- C. Follow-up question and answer (v. 7-8)
 1. Rather than, “Can I get a divorce,” we should want to preserve marital unions.
 2. As DA Carson notes, “The fundamental attitude of the Pharisees to the question was wrong.”⁴
- D. The exception clause: divorce permitted for sexual immorality (19:8-9)
 1. The Greek word *porneia* means “sexual immorality”
 - a. It is “the broadest term to describe sexual sin.”⁵
 - b. Includes all violations of God’s morality concerning sexuality such as adultery, homosexuality, incest, prostitution, etc.
 2. So, divorcing a spouse for sexual immorality is *permitted* (not required). Why?
 - a. Such unfaithfulness strikes at the core of the one-flesh union of marriage.
 - b. The innocent party has the protection, the justice, of being able to divorce.

¹ From GCOT’s *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* paper (2026). Quote from Jim Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage: Critical Questions and Answers*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2017), 209.

² Andy Naselli “What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage” (Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal, 24, 2019: 3-44), 44.

³ Ibid., 10. Hillel’s school was the majority view at the time. This promoted divorce for any and every cause.

⁴ D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 413.

⁵ Naselli, “What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage,” 15. See also Carson, *Matthew*, 414. It is not limited to adultery by the context here either, for he uses the word adultery (*moichao*) in the same verse.

E. Briefly address the “no divorce” view

1. The exception is not mentioned in Luke (16:18) or Mark (10:2-12)
 - a. They don’t mention it because it was not a debated question.
 - b. The exception being commonly understood, they didn’t mention it. (Ex. “you can’t drive less than 50mph on the interstate.” The obvious, unwritten, “except when traffic is at a standstill due to an accident.”)
2. Some argue that this exception is just for what Jews knew of as the betrothal time.
 - a. The problem is, Jesus is not addressing that question here.
 - b. Their question is about marriage.

III. Sorting Out Complicated Situations

A. Does this include transgenderism?

B. Does a lustful look at another person (which would fall under the word *porneia* at the heart level) allow for divorce?

1. This is sin, and all sin must be taken seriously, especially in regards to one’s walk with God.
2. But, a lustful look doesn’t automatically qualify as the same foundational break at the horizontal level. Thus, the horizontal consequences are different.⁶

C. What about pornography usage?

1. Andy Naselli notes, *porneia* “can also refer to sexual sins that do not involve intercourse. For example, although the NT authors who use the word *porneia* obviously were not thinking of being addicted to internet pornography, by implication *porneia* can apply to that—similar to how ‘Do not get drunk with wine’ (Eph 5:18) also implies that you should not get drunk ‘with beer, whiskey, rum, vodka, or champagne’”⁷
2. While one act of physical adultery does allow the innocent spouse to seek a divorce, Naselli argues, “For the consequences of non-physical (metaphorical) adultery [e.g., pornography] to be equal to the consequences of physical adultery, the non-physical adultery must be egregious. That is where qualifiers like repeated and unrepentant are fitting. For example, a church treats an angry man differently than a convicted murderer. A church is more likely to excommunicate an angry man only after multiple unrepentant expressions of anger.”⁸

D. The Christian life requires wisely applying biblical principles

1. As time goes on, humans invent new forms of old evils (Ecc. 1:9, Rom. 1:30), and we must apply the unchanging Word of God to those (Heb. 4:12) and trust in the Lord (Prov. 3:5-6).
2. We need to involve the elders of the church rather than go it alone (Prov. 12:15, Heb. 13:17-18).

IV. Conclusion

A. The principles we have so far

1. Marriage is the God-ordained, covenantal union of one man and one woman designed to last until death.
2. Every divorce is due to sin, but not every divorce is sinful.
3. Divorce is biblically permitted, though not required, in cases of sexual immorality.
4. Divorce should generally not be pursued without the wisdom and authority of elders.

B. When a marriage is in trouble, our first question is not “are there grounds for divorce?” but “what can be done to heal the marriage?”

⁶ See Jim Newheiser’s story comparing sinful anger and lustful looks in [Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage](#), 240-41.

⁷ Nasalli, “What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce,” 15. See also Thomas Schreiner, “Is Pornography Grounds for Divorce?” accessed at [9marks.org](#) on 1/30/26.

⁸ Nasalli, 18.