



# Does God Approve Of Divorce For Any Cause?

DISCOVERING GOD'S WORD BIBLE STUDY SERIES

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Does God approve of divorce for any cause? Certainly, there are many different reasons husbands and wives divorce one another today. But, are these many different reasons acceptable to God? Let's investigate.

## **Bound By The Law**

As we begin our search for God's answer to this question, we must recognize that does have a law about marriage, divorce, and remarriage. It is not up to mankind to determine what God approves or does not approve. He has already revealed His word of truth on the subject.

Listen, for instance, to Romans 7:2-3. "For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man."

First, recognize that there is a "law" that is identified in this passage. Now, this is *not* the law of man. Man's laws (even at that time) often permitted divorce for different reasons. Therefore, the passage surely references the law of God.

Second, husbands and wives are bound to one another by this law of God. So, whenever two people enter a Scriptural marriage (one that has God's approval), God binds those two people together.

Third, this bond lasts a lifetime. Again, Paul states, "the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives." The passage continues to demonstrate that even if a marriage is ended without God's approval ("while her husband lives"), the bond remains intact. Therefore, even though she may marry another man, she will be an adulteress because she remains bound to her original spouse. So, even though God *recognizes* the divorce and the second

marriage, He does not *approve* of the divorce and calls the subsequent marriage adulterous. It is not until the spouse dies that the surviving mate is released from this bond and is free to marry another.

Therefore, as we search for the answer to the question, “Does God approve of divorce for any cause?,” we recognize that God has a law, that husbands and wives are bound to one another by this law of God, and that this bond lasts a lifetime. Therefore, this passage answers the question: “No, God does not approve of divorce for any cause.”

### **From The Beginning, It Was Not So**

In Matthew 19:1-12, Jesus is asked and answers a question about divorce. Verse 3 records the situation and the question He was asked. “The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?’” This is the same question we are investigating during the course of this study. Even when Jesus lived, this was a question that folks debated – as there were a few prominent schools of thought about this question within the Jewish faith. But, let’s see how Jesus answers their question.

First, Jesus goes back to the beginning of the marriage relationship to answer this question. He said to them, “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’” (verses 4-5). Recognize that the institution of marriage was created by God. He created “male and female” and intended for men and women to be joined together as husbands and wives. Prior to this, God recognized that it was “not good that man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). Therefore, God created a suitable helper for the man and she was called “woman.” So, this question must recognize that it was God who created the relationship in the very beginning and He is the one who can make this relationship subject to His laws.

Second, the nature of this relationship should help you recognize that God does *not* approve of divorce for just any reason. After stating that the man and the woman leave their parents in order to cleave to one another, saying that the two become one flesh, Jesus says, “So then, they are no longer two but one flesh” (verse 6). Consider the nature of this relationship – in contrast to the nature of what happens in a divorce. This relationship is one in which husband and wife are joined together as one and are functioning as one unit rather than two people who are pursuing different goals. However, in a divorce, that which should be functioning as one now functions as two! Husbands and wives, in a divorce, no longer fulfill their God-given responsibilities to one another and work together in unison. In addition, those who were instructed to leave father and mother to cleave to their spouses often reverse this upon divorce – leaving their spouses to cling again to their parents.

Third, Jesus commands that “what God has joined together, let not man separate” (verse 6). Recall that God’s marriage law binds two individuals (who are Scripturally eligible to be married to one another) upon their marriage. However, man often attempts to separate what God

has joined together by divorcing. Yet, even though they may divorce their original spouse, Romans 7:2-3 continues to demonstrate that they are still bound by God's law. Even still, this instruction of Jesus is a clear indication that God does *not* approve of divorce for just any reason.

Fourth, Jesus demonstrates that divorce was not God's plan from the very beginning of the marriage relationship. In verse 7, Jesus is asked the question, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" The people Jesus had been addressing questioned that if what Jesus was saying was true, then why did Moses permit people to divorce? Jesus responded by saying, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (verse 8). So, this permission for husbands and wives to divorce for just any cause was not God's will – even though Moses had permitted it. This demonstrates that it is absolutely *not* God's desire for husbands and wives to divorce one another for just any reason today!

Take a moment to reflect over what we have seen through this point in this passage. Jesus has answered their question about whether God approves of divorce for just any cause with an absolute "No"! This is the same answer we saw in Romans 7:2-3 – and it is the same answer given in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11.

1 Corinthians 7:10-11 says, "Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife." Notice that twice in this one passage, the command of the Lord is that a "wife is not to depart from [divorce] her husband" and "a husband is not to divorce his wife." However, some want to suggest that God approves of divorce for multiple causes based on the middle part of this passage regarding the scenario in which a wife does divorce. Yet, God has already commanded her not to depart. Therefore, He does *not* approve of the divorce. Instead, He simply identifies that the person who fails to listen to God and divorces contrary to His command must either remain unmarried or be reconciled to his/her original spouse. Still, God never approves of the divorce!

### **Except For Fornication**

Let's come now to the final part of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19:1-12. After demonstrating that God does *not* approve of divorce for just any reason, Jesus states, "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery" (verse 9).

Here is Jesus' law on the matter. Jesus only permits one cause for divorce. That cause is fornication (translated "sexual immorality" in the *New King James Version*). Fornication refers to any unlawful sexual intercourse. Only when a spouse commits fornication can the innocent spouse (the one free of the fornication) choose to lawfully divorce his/her mate. Then, that innocent spouse is free to remarry and not be guilty of adultery. Please note, however, that the order of this text demonstrates that the fornication must occur *prior* to the divorce in order for the innocent spouse

to have the right to remarry. Finally, it is also worth noting that Jesus condemns the remarriage of one “who is divorced.” The Scriptures do not give authority for the put-away person (divorced person) to remarry (see also Luke 16:18).

Please note that this one cause for divorce is the *only* cause approved by any passage in the New Testament. Jesus teaches the same thing in Matthew 5:31-32. “Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.”

Finally, let’s consider the reaction to Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19:10. This reaction and Jesus’ subsequent response further demonstrates that He was *not* permitting divorce for just any cause. After hearing Jesus’ teaching, His disciples said to Him, “If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” They concluded that Jesus’ marriage law would be difficult to follow – and their judgment said that people would be better off just not to marry. However, in verses 11-12, Jesus says that not all people can remain celibate throughout their lives and they need to marry. Yet, those who are able to remain celibate throughout their lives can certainly choose to do so if they so desire for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

## **Conclusion**

God has a law concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage. The Scriptures clearly demonstrate that God does *not* approve of divorce for just any cause. Jesus has only given approval for a single cause of divorce. That is fornication. Therefore, even though man often chooses to divorce and remarry for reasons other than fornication, those divorces and remarriages are sinful and condemned by God, resulting in the sin of adultery. Those who are married must evaluate their own marriages in order to make sure that they have God’s approval – and must determine to live within God’s marriage law. Then, those contemplating marriage must recognize God’s marriage law and exercise great care in selecting a spouse. God certainly does *not* approve of divorce for just any cause!

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