

Marriage Home Family

Divorce, the Wreck of Marriage

An extract from the book *The Home* by John Rice (1946)

Matthew 19:3-9 and 1 Corinthians 7:10-16

Fornication Breaks the Marriage, Allows Divorce

When Jesus said there should be no divorce “Except it be for fornication,” the word for fornication is the Greek word *porneia*, the term for whoredom. This word, in the Greek, has the same root as does the word for whoremonger and the word for harlot. So what Jesus meant to say was that unless the wife played the harlot, or unless the husband were a whoremonger, divorce should not be sought nor granted.

Adultery and fornication are the same act. Some people have thought that adultery was a sin of married people, and fornication the sin of single or unmarried people. But that is not an accurate classification. Adultery, to be sure, is a term usually used about married people, but not always. For example, in the Ten Commandments, “Thou shalt not commit adultery” covers all sexual sins. No intelligent person would say that the Ten Commandments forbid immorality on the part of married people, but do not rebuke the same sin by unmarried people.

In the Bible the word adultery is used for a single act of illegitimate intercourse, while the word fornication is used for a course of whoredom or harlotry. Hence, it seems to me that the Saviour means that if a wife has gone into a course of harlotry and cannot be reclaimed to purity and fidelity to her husband, the husband has a right to divorce. Naturally, I believe that the same principle would hold about a wife’s divorcing her husband who is a fornicator, that is, a whoremonger, a habitual sinner in this matter.

I believe the inference is that if a woman fell into adultery, the husband, should, if he can, forgive and reclaim his wife. The inference is, I think, that if a husband fell into one act of adultery, a temptation, the wife ought to forgive him, win back his love and devotion, if possible, and his fidelity to the marriage vows, and keep him as a husband.

In fact, though the Lord Jesus permits a divorce for fornication, He does not require it. The Lord Jesus never commanded, nor is there any statement in the Bible, that a marriage necessarily ought to be broken for any sin or any cause. The Lord *permits* divorce for fornication, that is, whoredom by one of the mates, but He does not demand it.

I think it is obvious that a persistent course of harlotry on the part of a wife and of whoremongering on the part of a husband robs marriage of its essential meaning and beauty. Sad and tragic as a divorce always is, a child of God is permitted to seek a divorce if the mate is definitely committed to a course of immorality and sexual sin.

But what is a Christian to do if his mate departs and will not live with him? That is answered in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11:

And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.

Let a wife not leave her husband. Let the husband not leave his wife. But if the two are estranged for other reasons than fornication, the Christian should remain unmarried, hoping to restore the home with the mate.

Sometimes when one mate is converted and becomes an ardent Christian, the ungodly companion rebels. The Christian finds his marriage threatened by his ungodly companion's leaving. What should the Christian do in such a case? The answer is given that he should remain unmarried, or the wife who has an unsaved husband should remain unmarried, hoping to have the marriage restored.

1 Corinthians 7:12-16 says,

But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace. For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?

Thus it is clear that while a Christian ought not to marry an unsaved person, if they are already married, the marriage ought not to be broken. The Christian wife ought to remain with his unsaved wife,

For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?

One must not break his marriage because the companion is not a Christian. And as long as there is hope, the Christian must remain ready to be reconciled. The children of such a marriage are legitimate children. God's blessing is upon the home in which a Christian stays with his unsaved mate for Jesus' sake.

But what if the parted mate marries someone else? Often this question arises when a marriage has been broken and when the divorce was not based upon fornication. Suppose a husband has left his wife. Or suppose that years ago they quarrelled, with either or both to blame, and broke up their home. They got a divorce, though it was not on Scriptural grounds. Now suppose the husband has married another woman. What should his former wife do? Is she free? Should she count herself divorced?

The answer is yes. When a man marries again, and lives with another woman, that in itself is adultery, is fornication, enough to break the former marriage. In such a case the wife should count herself divorced and count her marriage broken by fornication, since he who was her husband is now the husband of another. And Jesus said,

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

So the husband, on taking a second wife when the first marriage was not broken by fornication, committed adultery. That, of course, would break the former marriage. If the first marriage was not broken before one mate remarried, it would be broken as soon as one mate remarried and started living with another companion. Fornication is the only Bible ground for divorce, but one has a right to divorce on Bible grounds.

Do Not Break a Second Marriage

Divorced people who have married again should not break the second marriage. The second marriage has broken the first marriage. God Himself holds the second marriage binding. To break it would do no good, but would do great harm. Many people, even Christians have the tragedy of divorce in their past. Many people, like a Christian woman who wrote to me recently, either married a divorced person, or were themselves divorced and married again, before their conversion. Should the second home be broken? Is it a sin for a wife or husband to be true to a second marriage? Can God be pleased as long as the second marriage is maintained?

These are very serious questions. The answer, according to God's Word is this: DO NOT BREAK THE SECOND MARRIAGE! Two wrongs never make a right. It would usually be impossible to restore the first marriage, and the Bible does not command it, even if it were possible. Confess the sins of the past, but do not sin again by another divorce or separation!

Here is a letter I wrote in answer to the inquiry of a troubled Christian woman:

"You married a divorced man, you say, seventeen years ago. Five years ago you were saved and have been earnestly living for Christ ever since. Now some preachers say that if you continue as the wife of this man you should not take the Lord's Supper. You ask my counsel.

"I will answer your problem prayerfully, the best I can. It is the same problem many others have.

"My conclusion, backed up by the Bible, is this: you should continue as the wife of your husband. The past is gone and cannot be undone. It would be an additional sin for you to quit your husband, or to refuse to live with him as his wife. Your husband likewise is married to you and has no other wife. The past is gone. He cannot change it. His former wife is not now his wife. To break the present marriage would be a sin. If you are now living for God the best you know, then you have a perfect right to go on and serve the Lord, take the Lord's Supper, and do any Christian work proper for a devout and consecrated woman, for which you may be prepared and equipped.

"Here is what Jesus said in Matthew 19:9,

And I say unto you, 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.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 says,

When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife. And if the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house; or if the latter husband die, which took her to be his wife; Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that is abomination before the LORD: and thou shalt not cause the land to sin, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.

“Note the following facts from the above Scripture:

1. Divorce meant exactly the same in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. But in the New Testament Christ gives the clear law that divorce is wrong for any cause except for fornication (or continued adultery). Comparing these two passages, then, fornication breaks the vows of marriage and gives a right for divorce. When divorce has taken place on this Bible ground, the first marriage is broken entirely, and the parties are free to marry again. In such a case, a woman who has been divorced and is remarried does not have two husbands, as people sometimes say. The husband of a second marriage is her husband, and the husband of the first marriage is her ‘former husband,’ the Bible says.

2. It is equally clear, specially from Deut 24:4, that when a marriage has been broken, and one of the parties has married again and lived with another mate, the wife may not go back to the husband of her first marriage, or the husband could not go back to the wife of his first marriage, ‘for that is abomination before the Lord,’ we are told.

3. One who gets a divorce on any other ground besides fornication, and marries again, commits adultery, said Jesus in Matthew 19:9. If your husband got his divorce not because of fornication, then when he married you and started living with you as your husband, he was guilty of fornication. If his first marriage was not broken before, then it was broken after he married you and lived with you. In either case, he is not bound to his first wife. God forbids that he should go back and marry her again.

“It would do no good for you to leave your husband. It would simply bring more reproach on the cause of Christ and cause more unhappiness.

“In conclusion, you have only one husband, the man you are living with, and he has only one wife, yourself. You should live together according to the clear scriptural rule of 1 Corinthians 7:3-5. Note in verses 5 and 6 that even to be apart, one from the other, for a season of fasting and prayer is not commanded. Paul spoke what he did by permission, not as a command. God does not require husband and wife to live apart, and no preacher should give any such instructions.

“Divorce is a terrible thing. It brings always much heartbreak. Sin always brings trouble. Some sins we cannot undo. We can only confess them to God and have them forgiven. If your husband had a scriptural right for divorce before he married you, then he should not be blamed. If he did not have a scriptural right for divorce, he did wrong and he should confess his sin to God and have it forgiven. But he cannot undo it, and he should not break his present home and marriage.”

Should Divorced People Marry Again?

It is certain that when possible, divorce should be prevented. There should never be a divorce except for the cause of fornication. When the erring mate can be won back to faithfulness, the home should remain intact, even though there has been the scarlet sin. Divorce is a terrible thing and should be avoided. Our principle aim is to prevent divorce and keep the home intact. But we ought to answer honestly from the Scripture the oft-repeated question as to whether it is sometimes right or always right for divorced people to remarry. Several facts are taught by the Scripture:

1. *Scriptural divorce gives a right to remarry; one who has a right to divorce has a right to remarry.*

The modern idea of some Christians that one has a right to a divorce, but should remain single thereafter and never remarry, has no warrant in the Scriptures. In the Bible it is everywhere taken for granted that a right to a divorce means a right to remarry. A divorce, on Bible grounds, means that the former marriage is

no longer binding. The former husband is no longer a husband. The former wife is no longer a wife. Those who are divorced on Bible grounds are really divorced, are single, unmarried, unbound.

In the Old Testament, Moses, because of the hardness of the people's heart, permitted divorce on other grounds than that required for divorce by the Saviour Himself in the New Testament. Nevertheless, divorce meant the same thing in the Old Testament that it means in the New. In Deuteronomy 24:1-2 is this plain statement:

When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.

Here it is clear that divorce meant the right to remarry. A divorce, if it be scriptural, breaks a marriage, breaks the ties between husband and wife and frees them from one another.

2. No person should marry a second time if his former marriage has not been broken by fornication (continued adultery).

Those who are divorced on other than scriptural grounds are still married in God's sight, as we have shown above. Of course, when the marriage was broken by fornication, they are free and the divorce is scriptural. Or if one of the parties to a divorce has remarried, then that second marriage, by its adultery, breaks the former marriage. But one whose former marriage has not been broken by fornication certainly should not marry again. In such cases 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 says:

And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.

If a home is broken, with husband and wife separated or divorced, but has not been broken by fornication, then let the woman remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. Let the husband remain unmarried or be reconciled to his wife. One has no right to remarry if the former marriage has not been broken by fornication.

3. Those scripturally divorced have a right to remarry.

This was necessarily involved in the first point above. When a person's former marriage was broken by fornication, and he gets a divorce, then he has a right to remarry. Or when a divorce has been secured and one of the mates has remarried, thus being guilty of adultery or fornication and breaking the marriage, the remaining mate has a right to remarry.

Some people feel that the innocent party has a right to remarry but that the guilty party ought to be barred from remarriage. But what they have in mind is punishment of the guilty one, and they are not basing that contention upon the Scripture. It is true that one who breaks a marriage is guilty of great sin, particularly one who is guilty of fornication, thus violating the marriage vows and all the decencies of love and marriage and the home. He has grievously dishonoured himself and sinned against God. But there is no law that a murderer cannot marry, or that a drunkard cannot marry, or that a blasphemer or a thief cannot marry.

Men have no right to put a law where God did not put one, and to say that even though a marriage is broken completely, broken in the scriptural sense because there has been fornication, the one who sins should not marry. Certainly, one who was guilty of fornication and broke a former marriage would be a very poor

marriage risk. If the first wife found him untrustworthy, the second would not likely find him faithful. But when the marriage is broken, it is broken for both parties; and the divorce is in effect. The Scriptures do not require those who are now unmarried to remain single.

If the fornicator had no respect for the law of God while he was married before, who would expect him to remain single now in deference to the Word of God? But God has no command for one to remain single after a marriage is broken by fornication.

4. *Divorced people are not good marriage risks, and should go slow about remarrying.*

Anybody should be slow to marry, should weigh well the responsibilities of marriage and the dangers involved. A divorced person should be doubly slow to marry. In nearly every case where a home is broken, both mates are partially responsible. It is rare, if ever, that a marriage fails when one party did all that he or she ought to have done to keep the marriage intact and to make the home happy and successful. So every divorced person may as well accept it as a fact that he has failed to prove himself adequate to hold the respect and love and loyalty of a mate. He took a solemn vow "until death do us part," but in some fashion failed to live up to that vow. He had love and happiness in his grasp and let them slip through his fingers.

One who is divorced ought to realise, and anyone who thinks of marrying a divorced person ought to realise that one who has failed once in the marriage relationship is a poor risk. Those who have had one divorce are likely to have another. The woman who fails to make one man happy is likely to fail to make another man happy. The man who fails to be the head of his home, to earn the respect and loyalty of one wife, is likely to fail with a second wife. Any woman who marries a divorced man, or any man, who marries a divorced woman, enters a marriage that is definitely handicapped. Only after prayer and resolution, and perhaps repentance, should a divorced person enter marriage.

There are other problems to consider in the marriage of a person who has been divorced. First, there is often the problem of children of a former marriage. Such children are a source of strife and unhappiness in many homes. Second, there is necessarily, and even properly, shame connected with divorce. Do not think you can flaunt the opinions of a civilised world and not feel it. Do not think that you can discard your mate and appear guiltless before the world after having made solemn vows to take that mate for better or for worse until death do you part. Even the so-called "innocent party" to a divorce necessarily inherits part of the blame. People properly feel that if the wife had honourably loved and obeyed her husband and made him happy, he would not have gone after other women. If among Christian people, there is no such thing as having a divorce and not feeling some odium attached to it.

Particularly is this true in the churches. In many, many denominations preachers feel that a divorced person has no right to active participation in church affairs. Some preachers who earnestly contend against divorce, but who do not think through the problem from the scriptural viewpoint perhaps, may say that those who have married divorced persons are "living in adultery," though the Scripture does not say that. So let anyone who is divorced and is thinking of remarrying, or anyone who plans to marry a divorced person, seriously consider the odium and the dangers involved in such a marriage. One had better go slow and prayerfully consider. In many cases one would be much happier to remain single and find God's blessing wonderfully adequate to fill the heart and mind with love and joy and service, without entering again the bonds of marriage wherein one had once suffered failure and shame.

Those who have married the second time should not break the marriage, but those who consider marrying the second time should go slow and make sure they have evidence of God's blessing and that they are not going contrary to His will.