

The Clear New Testament Passages On Divorce And Remarriage

Daniel R. Jennings, M.A.

Everywhere we turn it seems that marriages are falling apart. There was a time when those in the church were the least likely to divorce but today, with the law allowing one spouse to divorce the other for no reason at all, both Christian and non-Christian alike have become susceptible to the heartbreak of divorce. With the increase in the American *divorce rate* has also come an increase in the *remarriage rate*. Does it matter if one remarries after a divorce? Most will tell you that it doesn't and even encourage people who have experienced a failed marriage to seek another one in order to fill the void that came with the first break-up. With so many people choosing to remarry and so many encouraging remarriage it could not hurt at all to see what the New Testament says about this subject.

There are many passages in the New Testament which discuss divorce and remarriage and these fall into either one of two categories—*Clear-cut, straight to the point passages* and *unclear, ambiguous passages*. Strangely, when individuals are seeking to discover what the Bible teaches about remarriage after a divorce, the *clear passages* are usually ignored in favor of discussions upon the *unclear passages* in an attempt to see if they allow remarriage after divorce or not and if so under what conditions. This heavy emphasis upon the *unclear passages* as opposed to the *clear teachings* of the New Testament should lead us to ask two fundamental questions—1.) *What is the purpose of the clear passages?* and 2.) *Is it safe to base a moral decision upon an unclear passage when you have a clear passage which tells you the heart of God on a particular issue?*

We will now look at the clear New Testament passages on divorce and remarriage.

In the Gospel of Mark we read that:

And he said unto them, 'Whoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, commits adultery against her.' Mk 10:11

According to Jesus' teaching in Mark, if a man divorces his wife and enters into a marriage with another woman he commits the sin of adultery against his first wife.

And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she commits adultery. Mk 10:12

He continues by indicating that if a woman divorces her husband and enters into a marriage with another man she also commits the sin of adultery against her first husband.

In the Gospel of Luke we read that:

Whoever puts away his wife, and marries another, commits adultery... Lk 16:18a

According to Jesus' teachings in Luke if a man divorces his wife and marries another he commits the sin of adultery against his first wife.

...and whoever marries her that is put away from her husband commits adultery. Lk 16:18b

Jesus continues his teaching upon divorce and remarriage by reminding his listeners that if a man decides to marry a woman who has been divorced by her husband then he commits the sin of adultery by doing so.

Reading these passages we are faced with an interesting question. Jesus says that in each of these instances if a person enters into one of the above unions that he or she "commits adultery". The question is do they "commit" adultery once (at the time when they first enter into the new marriage) or do they "commit" adultery *continuously* so long as they are in the new marriage? Looking at the Greek in these passages gives us the answer to this question. In each of these passages the Greek verb for "commits adultery" is in the *present tense*. The present tense in Greek generally indicates that something happens continuously in an on-going manner. When a Greek verb is written in the present tense it implies that it has continued from the moment that it began up until the present and is still continuing. This understanding of how the Greek present tense normally operates is well attested to by Greek scholars:

"The present tense refers to what is usually described as ***continuous action***, sometimes called linear or ***ongoing action***. It is action that began at some point in the undefined past

and has not ended. It is "present" in the sense that it **continues into the present**. The picture that the present tense provides is of **something occurring now**. It designates action that is right now **continuing** as it began." (Joseph Webb, Robert Kysar, *Greek For Preachers*, Chalice Press: 2002, p.46)

"The present tense is basically linear or durative, **ongoing** in its kind of action. The durative notion may be expressed graphically by an unbroken line (--), since the action is simply **continuous**." (James Hewitt, *New Testament Greek*, Hendrickson Publishers: 1986, p.13)

"The present tense always has imperfective aspect and is interpreted as describing either a **continuous-progressive action** or state, or a **repetitive-habitual one**..." (David Holton, Peter Mackridge, Irene Philippaki-Warburton, *Greek*, Routledge: 1997, p.223)

"The Greek Present corresponds more closely in meaning to the English Present **Continuous** than to the Present Simple." (John William Wenham, Henry Preston Vaughan Nunn, *The Elements of New Testament Greek*, Cambridge Univ. Press: 1991, p.27)

"The Present Tense Stem expresses **continuous** (or **durative**) action..." (John Thompson, *A Greek Grammar: Accidence and Syntax For Schools and Colleges*, John Murray: 1902, p.314)

"The present tense is used of present time and has a **continuous** type of action in view." (J. Lyle Story, Cullen I. K. Story, Peter Allen Miller, *Greek To Me*, Xulon Press: 2002, p.14)

"The present expresses **repetition, habit, continuance**; the aorist, a single irrevocable act of surrender." (William Webster, *The Syntax And Synonyms Of The Greek Testament*, Gilbert and Rivington: 1864, p.89)

"The Present marks **continuity**; the Aorist, *a single act*; the Future (very rare in the New Testament), *intention or futurity*; and the Perfect, *a completed act*." (Samuel Gosnell Green, *Handbook To The Grammar Of The Greek Testament: Together With A Complete Vocabulary*, Fleming H. Revell: 1886, p.324)

“The present tense usually denotes ***continuous*** kind of action. It shows ‘action ***in progress***’ or ‘***a state of persistence***.’ When used in the indicative mood, the present tense denotes action taking place or going on in the present time. (*Greek Verbs (Shorter Definitions*, www.ntgreek.org)¹

The implication of Jesus’ words, as attested to by the above Greek scholars, is that if two individuals enter into a marriage as described above they ***continuously*** commit adultery ***every time*** that they have intercourse.

Looking at the Greek tense in another part of Luke’s passage above points out something else *very interesting*. When Luke wrote of the individual who “marries another” after putting away his first wife and of the man who “marries her” that has been put away he also uses the Greek verb for “to marry” in the *present tense*. In other words Luke is really saying that:

“Whoever puts away his wife, and enters into a continuous and ongoing state of marriage with another, commits adultery continuously: and whoever enters into a continuous and ongoing state of marriage with her that is put away from her husband commits adultery continuously.”

We note above that the action of committing adultery is directly linked to the action of continuing in the new married state. In other words, so long as one *continues* to be married to the new partner they *continue* to commit adultery in an ongoing and continuous manner.

There are those who have tried to maintain that the adultery is not continuous for those who enter into the above unions but the Greek will not allow this position. To my knowledge this new teaching of denying a continual state of adultery is a 20th century invention that was created in response to the large number of divorces and remarriages. In all of my studies upon this subject all commentators upon this subject before the 20th century maintained that those who entered into unscriptural remarriages that the Bible said were adulterous were in a state of *continuous* and *perpetual* adultery.

¹ http://www.ntgreek.org/learn_nt_greek/verbs1.htm#INDICATIVE

Jesus' words above are not the only clear passages of the New Testament upon the issue of divorce and remarriage. The Apostle Paul also discusses this issue in his first letter to the Corinthians.

In 1Corinthians we read that:

And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, 'Let not the wife depart from her husband (but if she does depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband)...' 1Co 7:10-11a

Paul here instructs the Corinthian Christians that a wife is not to leave or divorce her husband but if this does happen then she is to either *remain single* for the rest of her life or *be reconciled* back to her husband.

...and let not the husband put away his wife. 1Co 7:11b

Paul continues by instructing his male readers that they have been commanded by Jesus to *not* divorce their wives.

Further on this chapter Paul instructs that:

The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord. 1Co 7:39

Paul concludes his instructions to the Corinthian Christians by telling them that a wife is "bound" to her first husband until he dies and that it is only after his death that a woman is free to get married for a second time.

So, to sum up the *clear* New Testament teachings on divorce and remarriage we see that:

- 1.) Men are commanded not to divorce their wives (1Co 7:11b)
- 2.) Women are commanded not to divorce their husbands (1Co 7:10)
- 3.) A man who divorces his wife and marries another becomes an adulterer (Mk 10:11, Lk 16:18a)
- 4.) The man who marries a woman who has been divorced becomes an adulterer (Lk 16:18b)
- 5.) The woman who divorces her husband and marries another man becomes an adulterer (Mk 10:12)
- 6.) A woman who divorces her husband is commanded to either remain single for the rest of her life or be reconciled to her husband (1Co 7:10-11a)

7.) Only the death of the husband gives a woman the right to enter into a second marriage (1Co 7:39)

These are the *clear teachings* of the New Testament upon the issue of divorce and remarriage. They are very plain and extremely direct. As I mentioned at the beginning of this article there are a few other passages that are *unclear* yet receive the most attention and are oftentimes given the most priority by persons who are making a decision as to whether to remarry after experiencing a divorce. It was not the purpose of this paper to discuss the unclear passages it was merely to ask two fundamental questions:

1.) What is the purpose of the clear passages? In other words, were they put there for a reason? Does God expect us to ignore His *clear* teachings to us regarding divorce and remarriage in favor of *unclear* passages? Why did God put these passages here in such a clear-cut and direct way if He intended to reverse them in other passages?

2.) Is it safe to base a moral decision upon an *unclear* passage when you have a *clear* passage which tells you the heart of God on a particular issue? In other words, is it wise to make a decision that could determine where one will spend all of eternity based upon an unclear verse when one has a clear verse telling us how God wants us to behave in a particular situation?