

Becoming Catholic #33: Family Matters, Part 1—Christ and the Apostles Forbade Divorce and Remarriage

Making Wisdom Popular

The “Becoming Catholic” blog series is a multi-part, multi-year, bite-size, fact-focused attempt at describing the journey of a lifelong protestant to the Catholic Church. You can read all the individual articles [here](#).

Many protestant denominations, and some Eastern Orthodox (EO) churches, permit divorce and remarriage (though EO recognize marriage as a sacrament, and allow remarriage in a more limited set of circumstances). They no doubt believed divorce to be a tragedy, but one that is allowed in a limited set of circumstances. Once divorced, these protestants and EO churches likewise teach that each spouse is free to re-marry (though, again, the EO are typically more restrictive on remarriage). We’ll call this the non-Catholic position on divorce and remarriage.

The Catholic Church, on the other hand, has always taught that Jesus and the Apostles forbade divorce and remarriage. It is possible to legally separate from a spouse for valid reasons (abuse, sexual immorality, etc.). But a valid marriage can never be dissolved. The spouses have only two options while the other lives: reconcile, or remain single.

Before addressing Jesus’ teaching on divorce and remarriage, it is important to be clear how we are defining “divorce” as affirmed by the non-Catholic position. “Divorce,” for this position, means the following: a legal act by which a marriage is *dissolved*, leaving the two former spouses *free to re-marry* (while either of them is still alive).

Therefore, Jesus’ teaching can only be said to permit this non-Catholic notion of divorce if He permits *both* of these things: (1) dissolution of the marriage; and (2) freedom to re-marry. Even if the first is allowed, it would not be a “divorce” in the sense affirmed by the non-Catholic position if the second is not allowed. Thus, *both* elements must be present if the non-Catholic position that Christ permits divorce and remarriage is correct.

Accordingly, we will first analyze Christ’s teaching on divorce and remarriage; then address an apparent “exception” He made; and conclude by analyzing St. Paul’s teaching on the same.

Jesus’ Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage

The first time Jesus speaks about divorce comes from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew ([Matt. 5:31-32](#)):

³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, *except on the ground of unchastity*, makes her an adulteress; and *whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery*.”

Jesus addresses the issue of divorce once more in Matthew 19, with very similar language ([Matt. 19:3-9](#)):

³ And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” ⁴ He answered, “Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ 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*’? ⁶ *So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.*” ⁷ They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?” ⁸ He said to them, “*For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.*” ⁹ And I say to you: *whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery; and he who marries a divorced woman, commits adultery.*”

Before unpacking Christ’s words, let’s first recall the legal provision of the Torah to which He is referring, and contrasting against His own teaching on marriage ([Deut. 24:1-4](#)):

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and *he writes her a bill of divorce* and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, ² and *if she goes and becomes another man’s wife*, ³ and *the latter husband dislikes her and writes her a bill of divorce* and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies, who took her to be his wife, ⁴ *then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled*; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt upon the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance.

In other words, the Torah allowed for divorce in a wide range of circumstances. However, note that it prohibits remarriage between a wife and a previous husband if the wife has been married a second (or more) times. And as Catholic biblical scholar Dr. Scott Hahn [has observed](#), this provision in Deuteronomy (which literally means “second law”) was written by Moses at the end of his life, summing up the law. Originally, the law of Moses (i.e. the Ten Commandments) delivered at Sinai simply prohibited adultery. ([Ex. 20:14](#); [Deut. 5:18](#)) But after forty years with the Israelites, he made a concession to their hardness of heart, as Jesus says.

A higher standard was reserved for the High Priest of the Old Covenant ([Lev. 21:13-15](#)):

¹³ And he [the High Priest] shall take a wife *in her virginity*. ¹⁴ *A widow, or one divorced, or a woman who has been defiled, or a harlot, these he shall not marry;* but he shall take to wife *a virgin of his own people*, ¹⁵ *that he may not profane his children among his people*; for I am the Lord who sanctify him.”

In other words, the Israelite High Priest could never marry a woman who had been previously married or engaged in adultery, whereas both options remained theoretically open to most Israelites. But hypothetically, according to the provisions of Deuteronomy, the High Priest could still divorce his first wife, and marry a second, so long as she too was a virgin and had never been married, or engaged in fornication.

Thus, that Jesus was imposing a higher standard of some kind is obvious. Indeed, even if we accept the non-Catholic position that divorce is allowed only in the case of sexual immorality, this too is a higher standard than was imposed even on the High Priest of Israel.

Jesus likewise speaks about divorce in the Gospels of Mark and Luke. However, in each of those examples, Jesus does not include an “exception” that is only mentioned in Matthew, namely the apparent allowance of divorce for unchastity.

Therefore, whether or not Christ teaches the Catholic or the non-Catholic position on divorce and remarriage hinges on the issue of the apparent exception mentioned by Jesus with regard to unchastity in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9.

An “Exception” for Sexuality Immorality? (Matthew 5:32 and 19:9)

First, it is important to recognize that neither Mark nor Luke contain the “unchastity” exception found in Matthew.

In Mark, Jesus’ teaching is as follows ([Mark 10:11-12](#)):

¹⁰ And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹ And he said to them, “*Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her*; ¹² and *if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.*”

Likewise, in Luke, Jesus’ teaching contains no exception ([Luke 16:18](#)):

¹⁸ “*Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery...*”

In both places, Jesus’ teaching on remarriage is absolute: it is forbidden. Luke also provides an additional detail. There, Jesus says that anyone who marries a woman who has been “divorced” commits adultery. Thus, even someone who is getting married for the first time cannot do so with a woman who has been “divorced.” Even this person, says Jesus, would be committing adultery.

These teachings alone show that whatever Jesus is speaking of when He uses the word “divorce,” it is not the same thing that those who hold the non-Catholic position mean when they say “divorce,” since what they mean necessarily includes the “right” to remarry. In both Mark and Luke, Jesus has definitively forbidden remarriage—not only for the divorcee, but for those who would dare to marry them, even if they themselves were never married before.

That alone means the Catholic position is strongly favored to win the argument.

And yet, we still have the apparent “exception” for unchastity found in Matthew.

However, there is a small but very important detail in both the Mark and Luke passages that actually clarifies the apparent and ambiguous “exception” found in Matthew. That detail can be seen by asking whether or not Jesus forbids “divorce” in either of these passages? Technically, no,

He doesn't. In both cases, He speaks of two actions—"divorce" and remarriage—which He connects with the word "and." In other words, He's not speaking about someone who simply "divorces" their spouse. He is speaking about someone who "divorces" their spouse *and* remarries another.

This shows that while Christ forbids remarriage, there is a sense in which He may allow for what is translated as "divorce" in particular circumstances. What may those circumstances be?

Let's return to Matthew and analyze if its exception for "unchastity" is in fact the exception implied in Mark and Luke.

Jesus' teaching on divorce in the Sermon on the Mount is, once again, as follows ([Matt. 5:31-32](#)):

³¹ "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' ³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, ***except on the ground of unchastity***, makes her an adulteress; and ***whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery***."

With Mark and Luke in mind, we now see a similar pattern. Even in Matthew, Jesus still teaches that remarriage is forbidden. How do we know this? Because He says, "whoever marries a *divorced woman* commits adultery." This makes the non-Catholic position impossible, as it not only permits divorce, but remarriage as well. But Jesus says that *even the divorced* cannot be remarried, and anyone who does marry them is committing adultery. Therefore, when Jesus uses the word "divorce," it must mean something that *excludes the possibility of remarriage*. This conclusion flows apodictically. It also perfectly accords with Mark and Luke, who record Jesus' words as referring to someone who divorced *and* remarried, thus leaving open the possibility of simply "divorce." Jesus' words in Matthew reinforce this point by similarly forbidding remarriage, and showing that what He calls "divorce" is unacceptable in all cases *except* unchastity.

This necessarily means that what Jesus is referring to by the word "divorce" is not at all what is argued by the non-Catholic position—namely, a *dissolution* of a marriage that leaves the spouses *free to remarry*—but rather a form of legal *separation* from a spouse for a *narrowly defined cause*, namely unchastity. This separation does not dissolve the marriage, because if it did, then it would be *impossible* for Jesus to forbid the *divorced* spouse from remarrying, and calling such a thing "adultery," as this presupposes the existence of a marriage.

Let's proceed to the final passage in Matthew with the same "exception." It reads almost exactly the same as Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, but with an extra detail about the disciples' reaction ([Matt. 19:9-10](#)):

⁹ And I say to you: ***whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery; and he who marries a divorced woman, commits adultery.***"

¹⁰ The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, ***it is not expedient to marry.***"

The incredulous reaction of the disciples is revealing as to what Jesus is teaching. He does not contradict them, but instead, in subsequent verses, uses it to show the superiority of celibacy to marriage. But that is for another post.

Recall that throughout the Old Testament—particularly in the wisdom literature of Proverbs, Wisdom, and Sirach—there are many warnings about the dangers of a vicious wife. These warnings extend to many other things than unchastity, and they could have theoretically served as grounds for divorce under the Torah. But Christ foreclosed all those possibilities except in the case of unchastity. And even then, the “divorce” He permits is only a separation, as even the “divorced” are forbidden from remarrying, under pain of committing adultery.

This standard is far higher than the standard applied to all Israelites in [Deuteronomy 24:1-4](#) (which was itself a concession), and even to the High Priest in [Leviticus 21:13-15](#). Hence the disciples’ reaction. Given such a standard, they perceive that celibacy is preferable, and Jesus affirms this judgment.

Summary of Jesus’ Teaching

We can therefore summarize Jesus’ teaching on divorce and remarriage as follows:

- (1) When a man and a woman marry, “the two shall become one” ([Matt. 19:5](#)); as such
- (2) They are not permitted to “divorce” (separate), except on the grounds of unchastity ([Matt. 5:32](#); [19:9](#)); even if “divorced” (separated)
- (3) Neither spouse is permitted to remarry; and if they do, both they and their new “spouse” are guilty of adultery, precisely because their marriage has not been dissolved (verses from Matthew above; [Mark 10:12](#); [Luke 16:18](#)); therefore
- (4) The only form of “divorce” permitted by Christ is not a *dissolution* of the marriage that frees the spouses to remarry (the non-Catholic position), but rather a narrowly defined legal *separation* of the spouses, neither of whom is free to remarry.

Hence the Catholic position—which is the same as Christ’s—denies there is any such thing as Christian “divorce.”

The falling away from this teaching of Christ by so many non-Catholics has indeed been a civilizational catastrophe, to say nothing of its impact on eternity. The Catholic may rightly rejoice, and the non-Catholic ought to pensively contemplate, the solemn words of Our Lord when He said: “What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.” ([Matt. 19:6](#); cf. [Mark 10:9](#))

The Apostle Paul’s Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage

We find further support for each of these points in the teaching of the Apostle Paul.

For example, in his first epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul writes as follows ([1 Cor. 7:10-11](#)):

¹⁰To the married I give charge, *not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband* ¹¹ (*but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband*)—and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

In several places throughout his letters, St. Paul identifies what he is saying as advice, rather than a command from the Lord. However, here, he specifically says this is a command from the Lord Himself. The language of divorce is not used by St. Paul, but rather “separation.” When he says the wife “should not *separate* from her husband,” he is using the same Greek word (χωρίζω, *chorizo*) used by Christ in Matthew 19:6 when He said, “What therefore God has joined together, let no man *put asunder*.” And yet, St. Paul necessarily allows for an exception (“but if she does”), just as Jesus did in cases of unchastity. But even in such cases, St. Paul is crystal clear that there are only two options remaining to the separated spouse: reconcile, or remain single. Remarriage is not an option.

This is perfectly consistent with Christ’s teaching on divorce and remarriage.

In the same chapter, St. Paul adds further detail to this teaching, asserting that the spouses are bound to one another until one of them dies ([1 Cor. 7:39](#)):

³⁹ *A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives.* If the husband *dies*, she is *free to be married* to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.

He uses very similar language in his epistle to the Romans ([Rom. 7:1-3](#)):

Do you not know, brethren—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person *only during his life*? ² Thus *a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives*; but *if her husband dies* she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. ³ Accordingly, *she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive.* But *if her husband dies* she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

Once again, we see St. Paul explicitly affirm every aspect of Jesus’ teaching. There is no such thing as Christian “divorce.” There may be separation under limited circumstances. But in such an eventuality, the only two options are reconciliation, or remaining single.

The voice of God in Scripture is perfectly consistent on each and every point of Catholic teaching.

In his epistle to the Ephesians, St. Paul provides us a fully *theological* and *sacramental* reason for why divorce and remarriage are not permitted to husband and wife. In short, the reason why is because marriage is a sign of the bond between Christ and His Church—a bond which is unbreakable ([Eph. 5:21-33](#)):

²¹ Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. ²² Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of *the church, his body*, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ As the church is subject

to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, *having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,* ²⁷ *that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.* ²⁸ Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, *as Christ does the church,* ³⁰ *because we are members of his body.* ³¹ “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³² *This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the church;* ³³ however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Indeed, this sacramental sign of marriage points to the eternal and unbreakable union of Christ with His Church, to which all our hopes of eternity aspire ([Apoc. 21:2-4](#)):

² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, *prepared as a bride adorned for her husband;* ³ and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; ⁴ he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.”