

DEUTERONOMY 24

Last Wednesday, we examined the trap which the Pharisees set for Jesus concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage (**Matthew 19:3-12**). Their motives were to find fault with Jesus and alienate Him from a large part of the people, regardless of which answer He gave to their question, “*Can a man divorce his wife for every cause?*”

Jesus responded to this controversial issue the same way we should answer controversial issues. He went to God’s original plan, quoting from **Genesis 1:27** and **Genesis 2:24**. He positively affirmed what God’s will is concerning marriage. One man and one woman together for life. Man is not to separate whom God has joined together. Divorce is not God’s will, not part of His plan (see **Malachi 2:16**). This was Jesus’ answer in **Matt. 19:4-6**.

Of course, the reason marriage, divorce, and remarriage is controversial is because emotions are involved, and men’s hardness of heart has led to many variations and perversions of God’s original plan. The emotions and number of “technical” variations cause many to be confused over this subject.

The intellectually dishonest scribes were ready with their follow-up question, “*Then why did Moses command to give a document of divorce and to put her away?*” (**Matt. 19:7**). This is a reference to **Deuteronomy 24:1-4**. The phrasing of the question makes it look like they viewed Moses as ordering a man to divorce his wife with no reference to the context of the command. This question was to make it appear as though Jesus was in opposition to Moses (in spite of the fact that Jesus appealed to what Moses wrote first in **Genesis 1 & 2!**).

What does **Deuteronomy 24** say? What does it not say? What is the context and the purpose of **Deut. 24**?

“*When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man’s wife, if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.*”

This passage has only one command: the first husband is not to remarry his first wife after he divorced her and married another man. The reference to a divorce is to establish the context for this one command. Divorce was already a matter of fact. This was a law to regulate against the confusion caused by so many capricious divorces. The passage does not command divorce! It forbids a specific remarriage.

The purpose of the divorce is significant. It speaks of losing favor for the wife because *he has found some uncleanness in her*. It does not specify what kind of uncleanness. It could not be adultery (for which the word is used in **Leviticus 18**), since the result of that sexual uncleanness would be death. No could it be that she is suspected of fornication before marriage (which also resulted in death if the accusation was true—**Deut. 22:13-21**. If the accusation was false, he could never divorce her.) Sexual uncleanness was the idea of the Shammai rabbinic school of thought.

The Hebrew words *’erwat dabar* (literally “an unclean thing”) are used for other purposes in the Old Testament. In **Deut. 23:14**, the phrase refers to human refuse in the army camp sanitation laws. It refers to the parts of the body which would be a shame to expose in **Exodus 28:42**, and it refers to the shame itself in **Isaiah 20:4**. The reasoning of the rabbinic school of Hillel was that since “an unclean thing” could not be adultery or fornication and could be any number of other possibilities, then divorce could be for anything that displeases the husband (including burning the toast). They interpreted **Deut. 24** as a license for divorcing. Jesus clearly disagreed with this view!

Rather than viewing **Deut. 24** as a divine sanction for divorce, we should see how God views the divorced woman and the reason that the first husband's remarriage to her is forbidden. **Verse 4** says the woman is *defiled* after she has been married to the second husband. How can anyone read **Deuteronomy 24:4** and conclude that God approves of divorce?

Others who viewed **Deut. 24** as a license to divorce are rebuked in **Malachi 2**. God clearly says that He hates divorce. He designed marriage to bring godly offspring (**v.15**). Marriage is also a covenant that we are to keep, even if it is not pleasant for us (**Psalm 15:4**).

This is why Jesus emphasized the beautiful design of God in the very first marriage. It is a model for all marriages. A man is to leave father and mother and cleave to his wife. They are to be committed and one in heart as well as body (**Malachi 2:15**). How a man treats his wife is how God will treat him (**1 Peter 3:7, Psalm 18:24-27**). God sees and cares for the mistreated woman (**Mal. 2:13-14**).

The teaching of Jesus in **Matthew 19:9** is not the law of Moses. It is God's universal marriage law. Jesus contrasted the scribes' teaching of the law with His authoritative teaching about marriage in **Matt. 5:32**. He rebuked their idea that divorce was a license God granted selfish men. He said the remarriage is adultery (with one exception) in both passages in **Matthew** and in **Luke 16:18**. (**Mark 10:11-12** is Mark's version of the same subject in **Matthew 19:9**.)

To answer the scribes' question about **Deut. 24**, Jesus said that God **permitted** it because of the hardness of their hearts, but from the beginning, it was not so (**Matt. 19:8**). God is not the author of divorce. Selfish people are.

Marriage is a holy contract (covenant) between the man, the woman, and God. Even if there is a divorce or separation (**1 Corinthians 7:10-11**), we are still under the covenant we have made. This is why Paul said to remain unmarried or be reconciled. Ideally, we should follow through on our commitments and not put asunder what God has joined together.