

Matthew 19:3-9

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-19/matthew-193-9/>

The Pharisees come to Jesus and test Him about what Moses said about divorce. They were trying to trap Him. Jesus begins His answer by focusing on what Moses said about marriage before rebuking their hard-heartedness and answering their question.

The parallel gospel account of this event is found in Mark 10:2-9.

When *Jesus* was in the region known as Judea beyond the Jordan, healing and being followed by large crowds, *some Pharisees came* to test *Him*. Their test concerned the topic of *divorce*, and therefore the topic of marriage. *Jesus* had previously taught about both topics. The *Pharisees* were likely at least partially aware of what *He* had previously said.

In the Sermon on the Mount, *Jesus* taught that the only acceptable grounds for divorcing one's *wife* was unfaithfulness. And even then, *a man must give her a certificate of divorce* so that she can legally remarry if she can find a husband.

“It was said, ‘Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce’; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”
(Matthew 5:31-32)

On another occasion *Jesus* brought up the topic of *divorce* during a rebuke to the *Pharisees*. He possibly did so because *some Pharisees* may have been sending their *wives away* whenever *they* found a more desirable woman or grew weary of their wives. That would mean they had found a loophole that allowed them to live with as many women as they wanted to and bypass the true meaning of marriage. This is inferred in the following passage from Luke's gospel:

“Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at Him. And He said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.’

‘Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery.’”
(Luke 16:14-15, 18)

Given the placement of events in the gospel accounts, it seems it would have been some time after *Jesus's* Sermon on the Mount and *Jesus's* rebuke to the Pharisees in Luke 16 that this episode in Matthew 19 occurred. Matthew records that *some Pharisees came to Him* with this test concerning *divorce*. *They asked Jesus: is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?* Their question arose from *Moses's* teaching in Deuteronomy regarding *divorce*.

Moses's commandment said when a man finds out or discovers that his *wife* is behaving in a way that is unacceptable for marriage and he no longer wishes to be married to *her*, he is to write her *a certificate of divorce* notifying *her* and society at large that she is no longer a married woman (Deuteronomy 24:1-2).

In Jewish society it was important for *her* to have *a certificate of divorce* before being sent away, because without it she would be unable to remarry. Throughout the ancient world, family was often the only way a woman could be protected and provided for. Women had few legal rights and could not own property. Without *a certificate of divorce* allowing *her* to remarry, a woman would need a male relative willing to take *her* into his house or she would be forced to live on the street.

Biblically, the only acceptable grounds for *divorce* is marital unfaithfulness.

The *Pharisees* probably knew *Jesus* had taught this. The text says that *some Pharisees came to Him testing Him and asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all? We are not told the nature of the test. But the goal of the various tests given Jesus by the Jewish leaders was to set Him up in some way. In this case, it seems a plausible explanation that the goal was to alienate Jesus from the sect of Pharisees that held to a liberal view of marriage laws, that allowed them to "trade in" for a new model based on their own whim.*

We saw the sensitivity of one leader when criticized by John the Baptist for his lack of marital morals. When John confronted Herod for unlawfully taking his brother's wife, it cost him his head (Matthew 14:1-11). Perhaps they had this in mind, counting on *Jesus* to offend this powerful group of *Pharisees*, hoping it would help sway them against *Jesus* when they accused him before the council (the Sanhedrin). Or even better, perhaps they could provoke *Jesus* to say something that would denounce Herod and let Herod dispose of Him as He did John the Baptist. If Herod got rid of *Jesus*, it would save *the Pharisees* the cultural mess of having eliminated of an increasingly popular Rabbi.

Jesus did not mention Herod. And *He* refused to accept the *Pharisees's* problematic framing of *divorce* and address the question as framed. Instead, *Jesus* pivoted to His own framing, and discussed the divinely ordained institution of marriage. It might be expressed as asking the *Pharisees*, "Do you want to fulfill God's original design for marriage?" If *they* say "no" it exposes them, and if *they* say "yes" *they* violate their stated position. It is, therefore, a devastatingly shrewd response.

Jesus began His response to *the Pharisees's* inquiry by swatting aside their framing with a bit of stinging sarcasm. He asked them *have you not read* what *Moses* taught?

His reply accomplished several things. First, it grounded what *He* was about to say in *Moses*. This would protect Him from accusations that *He* was teaching counter to the lawgiver of Israel. Second, it embarrassed the *Pharisees*, who prided themselves as being experts of the Mosaic law. Third, it shifted and reoriented the argument away from the question of divorce and toward marriage and the normative standard for what was good and true. Instead of accepting the

Pharisees' problematic framing of divorce, Jesus reframed the conversation to focus on marriage—God's original and perfect design for a man and his wife.

Jesus summarized what God had said through Moses about marriage in Genesis 2:21-25: He who created them from 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'.

Jesus continued to explain that a man and wife in many important aspects are no longer considered two separate people but a single God-united creation in body. The two people are one flesh.

Jesus then stated His point: what therefore God has joined together, let no man separate. Divorce was never part of God's design. It always entailed pain and was a deviation from God's intent. Divorce should not be considered a desirable outcome to be sought. Jesus's answer had the effect of asking them, "why are you fixating on the evils of divorce instead of focusing on the good of marriage?"

The Pharisees then replied, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Their response was "Well if God did not intend for people to get divorced, then why did Moses instruct men of the proper way to divorce their wives?" They were contending with Jesus to wrestle the framing back to their original construction, and focus on divorce. The language of their question suggests that divorce was a commandment on par with marriage. It appears as though the Pharisees were so obsessed with opposing Jesus that they began to argue for divorce rather than for marriage.

Jesus answered their question, the reason Moses permitted you to divorce your wives was because of the hardness of your heart. God and Moses do not command divorce as the Pharisees just said. But because of human sinfulness and the death it brings, they permit it. Moses's instructions permitting divorce was a way to inflict the least amount of pain and misery and to be as fair as possible to women given the awful circumstances when it was necessary.

Jesus made it clear that divorce was never part of God's original plan for marriage or family when He said, but from the beginning it has not been this way.

Then Jesus directly answered the Pharisees' original question of whether or not it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all. But He prefaced His answer with the phrase, And I say to you. This was a bold thing to say. Jesus did not couch or qualify His response in what some other Rabbi had taught. He did not even appeal to the authority of Moses. He appealed to His own personal authority. Because Jesus was both the Messiah and God, He was the highest authority in Judea and the cosmos. In prefacing His answer this way, He was also notifying the Pharisees that they could quote Him on what He was about to tell them.

Whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.

This was clear answer to their question. It was not lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all. The only permissible reason for divorce according to Jesus was adultery.

Mark records that after these things, when they were in the house, *the disciples* began questioning *Him* about these things again (Mark 10:10). *Jesus* clarified His response, as shown in this passage from the gospel of Mark.

“And He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery.’”

(Mark 10:11-12)

Jesus’s clarification may be better understood by looking at the words that the synoptic gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) used for *divorce*.

The Greek word predominately used for *divorce* is “*Apoluo*.” It means to send away. The Greek word for *divorce* that Luke used in *Jesus*’s rebuke, and that Matthew used within the *Pharisees*’ question was this term, “*Apoluo*,” meaning “to send away.”

Technically ‘*apoluo-divorce*’ was not legally recognized *divorce*. Another Greek word was used to refer to legally recognized *divorce*, and that was the word “*apostasion*.” This is the word that is used to describe the *certificate of divorce* that *Moses* said *a man* should *give his wife* when he sent *her away*.

In His clarification to His *disciples*, *Jesus* seemed be condemning the practice that the *Pharisees* and other men in Jewish society were doing by ‘*apoluo-divorcing*’ their wives and sending them out of their house without a certificate of ‘*apostasion-divorce*.’ *Jesus* implied in Luke’s gospel account that the reason *the Pharisees* dismissed their wives (‘*apoluo-divorce*’) without a *certificate of divorce* (“*apoluo*”) was because they wanted to justify themselves when they did this and married a new *wife* (Luke 16:14-15, 18). It was an abusive and hypocritical loophole. The *Pharisees* could send their wives a way (“*apoluo*”) and then technically (and hypocritically) claim that they had never been divorced (“*apostasion*”). This put their wives in a lurch, while allowing them to have whatever women they desired.

Whenever a man ‘*apoluo-divorced*’ *his wife* and *sent her* out of his house and did *not give* her an ‘*apostasion-divorce*’ *certificate* he was condemning her to excessive hardship. Throughout the ancient world, women were almost entirely dependent upon men. Women had few rights and could own no property. Fathers and husbands were their primary providers and protectors. When a husband divorced *his wife*, she had few options. She could potentially remarry. She could seek to live with her father or another male relative. But if these havens were unavailable, then she would be forced to live on the street. And without an ‘*apostasion-divorce*’ *certificate* she could not legally be remarried, because she was still legally bound to the husband that kicked her out (“*apoluo*”) of *his* home.

Essentially, *Jesus* told the disciples in Mark 10:11-12 that anyone who married *a woman* who had been ‘*apoluo-divorced*’ without an ‘*apostasion-divorce*’ *certificate* was committing *adultery*. And any *woman* who was in this situation and married another man also committed *adultery*.

This gospel of Matthew began by noting women of faith as being part of *Jesus's* lineage (Matthew 1:1-17). This included women with a Gentile background (Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth) as well as women with a Jewish background (Mary). *Jesus's* primary financial supporters were women (Luke 8:2-3). Mary Magdalene, the first mentioned of these supporters, was granted the privilege of being first to see Jesus after His resurrection (Mark 16:9). This passage where *Jesus* stands up for women is consistent with *Jesus's* elevation of those whom society tended to downgrade, including children, women, the poor, and the infirm. This is consistent with *Jesus's* teaching that greatness in the kingdom of God is measured completely differently than greatness in the world system ([see our commentary on Matthew 18:1-5](#)).

Biblical Text

³ **Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, “Is it lawful *for a man* to divorce his wife for any reason at all?”** ⁴ **And He answered and said, “Have you not read that He who created *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 flesh’?** ⁶ **So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.”** ⁷ **They *said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send *her* away?”** ⁸ **He *said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.** ⁹ **And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”**