

Marriage and Adultery Under Christ

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Introduction

For centuries now, Christians have largely agreed that while divorce is regrettable, remarriage is sometimes permissible. Pastors reassure those who have been divorced that God does not desire them to be alone. Biblical scholars argue that the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 allows for remarriage in cases of sexual immorality. Even the most conservative Christian voices rarely challenge the assumption that once a marriage has effectively broken up, another may begin.

And yet, Jesus' words contradict all of this.

This paper defends a vanishing doctrinal position: that second marriages are adulterous under the law of Christ and that repentance requires their dissolution. In order to obey Jesus' teaching, anyone separated from an original spouse has only two options: lifelong celibacy or reconciliation, as long as their original spouse lives.

The argument rests on a detailed exegesis of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. In contrast to modern treatments that stitch together only marginally relevant verses, this paper will demonstrate that Matthew 5, when taken seriously, leaves little unresolved. It establishes that Jesus forbade remarriage by ending its accommodative provision under the law of Moses while still commanding marital separation in rare cases involving sexual immorality. The first half of this paper is sufficient to defend the teaching that original marriages endure under the New Covenant, and likewise that husbands and wives who marry again while their first spouse lives are actively committing adultery.

The second half of the paper engages with Matthew 19:9 and the so-called exception clause. While it has been made the centerpiece of debates on remarriage, this paper proves why it cannot

bear that weight. Through a detailed analysis of the underlying Greek and a systematic evaluation of four interpretations, it exposes the fatal flaws of the one that permits remarriage. The others, though differing in their approach and explanations of Matthew 19:9, each maintain the same core doctrine established in Matthew 5.

This paper does not entertain situational ethics or worst-case scenario trials. The permissibility of remarriage cannot be settled by appealing to the weight of personal grievances or emotional suffering. Deep pain cannot override the longing Christians must have to know what is good and true by Jesus Christ, even in the midst of an evil world.

Discussions on divorce and remarriage often veer into a barrage of secondary questions or circumstantial issues. But nothing consequential may be determined until a person has truly fixed their interpretation of Jesus' core sayings on the matter. Arguments rooted in ignorance, church tradition, pastoral accommodation, or societal shifts can hold no doctrinal authority. This paper follows a straight course through the major texts, prioritizing Jesus' words as the interpretive foundation. Even later scriptures, such as those of Paul and Peter, must be read through the lens of Christ's teaching—not the reverse. Those seeking practical guidance or a reference manual on topics like abandonment or abuse will not find it here. Besides, by focusing intently on what Jesus actually taught, they can and should transform passive reliance on secondhand answers into self-assured, independent reasoning and collaboration with others.

Some may perceive the conclusions of this paper to be unfeeling or unduly rigid. This is, in part, a function of the theological framework in which it operates. The apostles prioritized perseverance in the truth over wealth, sexual fulfillment, or family-building. Their hope was not in securing happiness in this age, but in the promises of Christ's coming reign. The Christian life is not about maximizing our own satisfaction but our selfless devotion to others in obedience to the truth.

On Framing

The question of divorce and remarriage is often framed as a single issue: “Is divorce and remarriage permissible?” But this phrasing conflates two distinct actions, each requiring separate evaluation. A yes-or-no answer obscures the fact that while divorce may be allowed in some circumstances, remarriage may never be permitted.

To address this, a common framework emerged, categorizing views as permanent, semi-permanent, or permissive.¹ However, this taxonomy is misleading. The semi-permanence view is arguably, and ironically, more permanent than the first. It holds that even if original spouses are allowed to separate—with miles between them and not a word spoken—God still views them as married. What could be more permanent than a union that endures in spite of such conditions?

Additionally, “divorce” is often misused and defined not by what it is, but by what it supposedly enables—namely, remarriage. Few define it with enough precision before engaging in debate, leading to equivocation and backtracking.

Rather than succumbing to flawed frameworks, this paper means to pursue a simple inquiry:

Does Jesus ever permit the members of an original marriage to marry other people while both are still alive?

This question bypasses convoluted taxonomies and gets to the heart of the matter. Answering it resolves the issue of remarriage—arguably the most provocative aspect—while also clarifying what divorce can and cannot accomplish under the New Covenant.

A plain question cannot guarantee a plainly worded answer, much less a correct one. But when an exacting question is worded plainly, it is fair to seek an answer that is similarly construed. The more elaborate and tangled answers become, the more reason there is to doubt their reliability.

¹ See article Brandon Pahl’s article, “Three Views on marriage and Divorce” www.christisthecure.org/2021/07/26/three-views-of-marriage-and-divorce for an example of this semi-popular framework online.

Summary Remarks

This paper offers a unique contribution to the discourse on divorce and remarriage by walking a straight course back to a simple and defensible position. **Does Jesus ever allow the members of an original marriage to marry other people while both are still alive?** A thorough scriptural analysis will show how this question is answered in the negative from the Sermon on the Mount. Later encounters with the Pharisees can be shown to cast no doubts on it. Instead, they reinforce the moral standard he had set forth openly.

If this analysis is correct, it may explain why the New Testament does not give exhaustive, scenario-based marital legislation—leading some to withhold obedience on the grounds of its simplicity, as if it were a flaw. But this is no new pattern. Jesus’ teaching was as clear as it was provocative, eliciting both strong and, at times, irrational responses. Religious leaders resisted him, seeing blasphemy in his words, while the disciples marveled at their obvious implications.

Some will insist that an Edenic view of marriage modeled off of Adam and Eve is unrealistic. But no argument rooted in practicality, pastoral sympathy, or personal anguish can alter what Jesus said. The call to follow him has always demanded sacrifice, not negotiated settlement.

Before turning to Matthew 5, several key terms must be defined to promote clarity and consistency throughout the ensuing analysis.

Defining Key Terms

Defining key terms is essential to avoid equivocation and ensure clarity throughout this paper. The following definitions, adapted from academic literature and other insightful resources, form a foundation for our analysis.

While these definitions are outlined here for reference, their consistent use is ultimately what matters. Where needed, modifiers (e.g., original marriage) will be applied to prevent ambiguity.

- **Marriage** (variants: *marital union*) – A covenantal union between one man and one woman, entered intentionally before God and public witnesses, in which they commit to lifelong fidelity, exclusive sexual relations, and mutual dependence.
 - This foundational definition captures its basic essence. However, the complexity of real-world relationships demands modifiers to address unique characteristics, especially when legal or theological legitimacy comes into question. For example, a first-time marriage does not typically need a modifier. But a union involving previously married individuals benefits from qualifications such as “second marriage” even though they are referred to simply as “married” in casual settings.
- **Divorce** (variants: *put away, separate, cut off*) – The act of putting away or separating from a spouse, often involving legal or formal recognition, which dissolves key elements of marriage. In Israel, under the law of Moses, divorce included the physical act of separating (i.e., the end of cohabitation) and the issuance of a bill (or certificate) recording the fact. Deuteronomy 24:2 describes how new marriages would typically ensue after this process was followed. However, divorce (or “putting away”) is a term that can stand on its own, independent of the bills. As an adjective, it denotes one of only two possible states for spouses—married or divorced.²
 - In ancient Israel, a man would not assume permission to marry a woman who had been previously married simply because she was no longer living with her former husband. A man would need to verify that a bill of divorce had been issued to avoid future charges of adultery. The bill is what essentially enabled subsequent marriages—not merely separation. This ordinance was contingent on the prohibition of spouses returning to one another in marriage and

² See article, “Separation and Divorce in the Law of Moses” <https://biblestudying.net/remarriage2.html>

provided Jews (specifically women) with a unique—albeit controversial—tolerance for second marriages. However, a Christian must not look to Moses or certificates, but to Jesus to discern whether remarriage is tolerated now.

- **Fornication** (variants: *sexual immorality, illicit sex, premarital sex, extra-marital sex*) – A broad term encompassing any sexual activity outside the covenantal bounds of a lawful marriage. Biblically, fornication refers to various forms of sexual impurity or immorality, including but not limited to pre-marital sex, extra-marital affairs, adultery, incest, prostitution, and other lewd sexual behaviors. The term is often used to denote a general rejection of God’s design for sexual relations within marriage, encompassing both specific acts and broader patterns of sexual sin.
- **Adultery** (variants: *extra-marital sex, cheating, infidelity, betrayal*) – A specific form of sexual immorality involving a married person engaging in sexual activity with someone other than their lawful spouse. While technically falling under the broader category of fornication, adultery is distinguished by its direct betrayal of marital commitments. Because of its gravity, the act is typically referred to using the stronger term of adultery, rather than fornication. The occurrence of adultery always depends on the identification of a rightful spouse. If a woman has sex with a man other than her husband, it is adultery because of the covenant with her husband. If not repeated, it may be viewed as a one-time offense requiring penitent confession. However, if she continues the relationship and engages in further contact, each instance further substantiates an ongoing state of adultery against the rightful spouse.

Preliminary Analysis of Matthew 5

The notion that all second marriages could be adulterous surfaces with Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5 first. There are only three other accounts where he discusses it at any length. Each of

them exists in a context involving dialogues with the Pharisees, two of which were explicit responses to direct questions they asked about the legality of divorce. They are found in Mark 10, Luke 16, and Matthew 19. Other references to adultery or fornication, such as John the Baptist's censure of Herod's marriage or Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman carry less weight. Thus, our study starts with Matthew 5 as the foundational text which precedes and informs all other mentions by New Testament authors.

The exegetical reasons Matthew 5 should be prioritized before all other passages are two-fold. First, it contains the earliest references to all key concepts and terms which concern us: adultery, marriage, divorce, fornication, remarriage, and standards under the law of Moses. Second, the passage is comprehensive and doctrinally robust; it is sizeable in scope, specific in its legal and moral directives, and was delivered to a wide audience with authority. Only after Jesus' fame grew do we find the Pharisees testing him semi-privately on bills of divorce, presumably in reaction to his sayings which were gaining traction. Any interpretation of these encounters will only be as strong as one's grasp of the pericope in Matthew 5 which serves as the foundation for Christian doctrine on marriage and divorce.

A proper handling of Matthew 5 must start with an appreciation of the significance of the Sermon on the Mount by way of its context. Scholars regard it as the apogee, or fulfillment, of what Moses wrote concerning the "Prophet like unto me" in Deuteronomy 18:18.³ This identification carries profound implications. According to verse 19, followers of Moses must hearken to the words of this coming prophet and lawgiver, even in supersession of the original. The authority of the "Prophet like unto me" requires transcendent obedience. This challenges anyone who suggests that previously established laws or ordinances—including marital ones—cannot change.

Deuteronomy 18:15 The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken; 16 According to all that thou desiredst of the LORD thy God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, neither let me see this great fire any

³ See www.tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2018/12/prophet-like-moses; www.biblehub.com/commentaries/deuteronomy/18-18.htm; and www.catholic.com/qa/who-fulfills-the-prophecy-joshua-or-jesus as examples.

more, that I die not. 17 And the LORD said unto me, **They have well spoken** that which they have spoken. 18 **I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.** 19 And it shall come to pass, that **whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him.**

Just as Moses delivered a covenant with divine authority, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount inaugurated a covenant requiring surpassing righteousness, fulfilling the expectation of this Prophet who would speak God's words to the people. Both figures (Moses and Jesus) confirmed their divine mission with miracles, proclaimed liberty to captives, and established covenants sealed in blood. Each covenant required obedience from those entering it—under Moses, as a condition for inheriting the land of Canaan; and under Christ, as a condition for inheriting the greater promise of an everlasting kingdom extending over the entire world. Jesus' own disclaimer, delivered from a mountaintop, directly affirms his role as the foretold prophet.

Matthew 5:1 And seeing the multitudes, **he went up into a mountain:** and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: 2 And **he opened his mouth, and taught them...** 17 **Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets:** I am not come to destroy, **but** [I am come] **to fulfil.** 18 For verily I say unto you, **Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.**

Setting aside headier debates between dispensationalism and covenant theology, let's simply acknowledge the conventional Christian view on the relationship between the Old and New Covenants. The Old Covenant, having been fulfilled, is no longer binding on God's people today; it has been superseded with the one established by Jesus—meaning Christians (whether Jewish or Gentile) are no longer subject to the specific laws and regulations of the Old Covenant. Moral principles found in it are still esteemed for their instructional value, many of which have even been carried through to the New Covenant; but all relevant commandments to which the promises of God are now attached are given through Jesus, not Moses.

Apart from the Deuteronomy 18 connection, what other aspects of the sermon would have led listeners to believe he was altering or abolishing the law of Moses? First, Jesus established higher moral standards than those previously set forth—no less than six times:

Matthew 5:21 Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: 22 But I say unto you...

Matthew 5:27 Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: 28 But I say unto you...

Matthew 5:31 It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: 32 But I say unto you...

Matthew 5:33 Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: 34 But I say unto you...

Matthew 5:38 Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: 39 But I say unto you...

Matthew 5:43 Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. 44 But I say unto you...

A close examination confirms that each of these represents an elevation from a previous standard. Jesus commanded heart-level vigilance as a means to avoid sinful behavior, warning against anger (inhibiting escalations of violence and killing), against lust (curbing the desire that leads to physical adultery), against divorce (replacing Moses' concessions for remarriage with uncompromising fidelity), against dishonest speech (promoting truthfulness beyond just avoiding perjury), against retaliation (transcending legal limits on restitution by calling for nonresistance and mercy), and against preferential kindness (replacing allowances for hatred with a command to love all people). Those who follow these commandments cannot help but reach higher levels of righteous behavior compared to the most scrupulous followers of Moses. Jesus expected this very thing:

Matthew 5:19 Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 **For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.**

Beyond these distinctions between Jesus' and Moses' commandments—which are suggestive of change in their own right—the contrast is even starker when coupled with the virtues extolled in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-16): humility, mourning, meekness, mercy, and peace. To ignore their incompatibility with theocratic nationalism gained by the sword is almost impossible to do. How could this kind of leader inspire a revolution in a world dominated by the ironclad empire of

Rome? Jesus' ethic shattered the hopes of those anticipating an immediate national deliverance after the likeness of Moses and Joshua.

Ultimately, we have three options for how to understand Jesus' impact on the law of Moses.

1. **He abolished it** leaving no divinely sanctioned system in its place.
2. **He reaffirmed it** for the purposes of clarification and renewal.
3. **He fulfilled it**, superseding it with something new.

If Jesus explicitly denied destroying the law (Matt. 5:17), then the first option is ruled out. But by this same logic, the second option must also be dismissed—for if Jesus meant to communicate no substantial change, how could his words be mistaken for abolishment without implying he was a poor communicator? While the New Covenant may bear similarities with the Old, that cannot mean they are the same. As already shown, the transformative nature of Jesus' teaching both amends and elevates previous standards, consistent with his mission to inaugurate a *new* covenant.

This leaves only the third option, whereby fulfillment of the law of Moses necessarily resulted in higher standards which, in some cases, contrast sharply with previous ones.

How does this conclusion shape our interpretation of Jesus' teaching on adultery from the Sermon on the Mount? It provides the essential context for managing biases shaped by cultural traditions and civic sensibilities toward marriage—biases and sensibilities that Jesus clearly challenged. Fulfillment makes it impossible to assume that Jesus' requirements need to mirror what was normative under Moses. Christians must examine and consult New Testament instruction as their primary way of knowing what God expects of all men and how to obey him. They should not be surprised or distressed when they discover differences.

A Tripartite Reading of Matthew 5:27-32

Matthew 5:27 Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, **Thou shalt not commit adultery (G3431):** 28 But I say unto you, **That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery (G3431) with her already in his heart.** 29 And if thy right eye offend (G4624) thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. 30 And if thy right hand offend (G4624) thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. 31 It hath been said, **Whosoever shall put away (G630) his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement (G647):** 32 But I say unto you, **That whosoever shall put away (G630) his wife, saving for the cause of fornication (G4202), causeth her to commit adultery (G3429): and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced (G630) committeth adultery (G3429).**

■ **G3431** - moicheuō *moy-khyoo'-o* From G3432; to commit adultery: - commit adultery.

■ **G4624** - skandalizō *skan-dal-id'-zo* To scandalize from G4625; to entrap, that is trip up (figuratively stumble or entice to sin, apostasy or displeasure): - (make to) offend.

■ **G630** - apoluō *ap-ol-oo'-o* From G575 and G3089; to free fully, that is, (literally) relieve, release, dismiss (reflexively depart), or (figuratively) let die, pardon, or (specifically) divorce: (let) depart, dismiss, forgive, let go, loose, put (send) away, release, set at liberty.

■ **G647** - apostasion *ap-os-tas'-ee-on* Neuter of a (presumed) adjective from a derivative of G868; properly something separative, that is, (specifically) divorce: - (writing of) divorcement.

■ **G4202** - porneia *por-ni'-ah* From G4203; harlotry (including adultery and incest); figuratively idolatry: - fornication.

Given its length, how it starts, and how it ends—and notwithstanding the metaphorical language in the middle—this pericope is best understood as a unified teaching composed of three interwoven parts or elements:

1. Jesus' uncompromising standard against adultery.
2. Figurative guidance which needs to be unpacked.
3. A standard on divorce that controverts Moses' bills of divorce.

27 Ye have heard that it has been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery:

28 But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.

Part 1
Standard on
Adultery

29 And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

30 And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

Part 2
Figurative
Guidance

31 It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement:

32 But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.

Part 3
Standard on
Divorce

Part 1: The Heart as a Symbol (Matthew 5:27-28)

Matthew 5:27 Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery (G3431): **28** But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery (G3431) with her already in his heart.

■ **G3431** - *moicheuō moy-khyoo'-o* From G3432; to commit adultery.

Part 1 does not present major interpretive challenges. The Old Testament universally portrays adultery as a grave sin against God and man, with clear recognition of the fact even before the law of Moses came to be (Gen. 20:9; 39:9).

However, two key exegetical points do emerge. First, adultery (*moicheuō* in Greek, *nâ'aph* in Hebrew) is defined by extra-marital sexual intercourse. In the ancient world, it was leveled against a married woman cheating on her husband, or a male paramour taking another man's wife. While some might use this passage to admonish virgins lusting after virgins, this is not strictly what Jesus

had in view. (This does not mean youthful lust is harmless—only that Jesus was clearly addressing the kind of lust that leads to adultery in this instruction.)

Verse 28 marks the first reference to the “heart” in Matthew 5, introducing its symbolic connection to sin. Here, Jesus presents the heart as the invisible source from which impure impulses originate (i.e., adultery). Lexicons unanimously define the Greek term *kardía* as the seat of thoughts, passions, purposes, and sensibilities.

Given adultery’s universal recognition as sin, it is a short but powerful step to advise curbing adulterous thoughts or imaginations as the means to prevent its actualization. This is the simplest lesson to draw, dispelling overstatements like “adulterous thoughts are just as bad as the real thing”—or worse, “are the same.” Jesus trained followers to recognize sin at its incipient stages and to exercise mastery over their bodies through mindfulness.

Note that later in his ministry, Jesus expanded on the heart as a symbol, further reinforcing its role in moral corruption. This will be relevant to our analysis of the figurative guidance in Part 2.

Matthew 15:17 Do no ye yet understand, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly, and is cast into the draught? **18 But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man.** **19 For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies:** **20 These are the things which defile a man:** but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man.

Part 2: The Eyes and Hands (Matthew 5:29-30)

Matthew 5:29 And if thy right eye offend (G4624) thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. **30** And if thy right hand offend (G4624) thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

■ **G4624** - skandalizō *skan-dal-id'-zo* To scandalize from G4625; to entrap, that is trip up (figuratively stumble or entice to sin, apostasy or displeasure): - (make to) offend.

Building on the subject of adultery, Jesus transitions into an unmistakable use of figurative language to describe how someone should respond when faced with an offense—or a moral predicament which may lead to sin. We must apply sound exegetical reasoning to uncover the

practical meaning behind the metaphor. Christians primarily interpret this in two ways. The first way provides no new guidance on marriage or adultery per se—but a cautionary warning about the general need to remove sinful enticements in order to avoid sin.

The second way identifies this passage as a central component of Christ’s teaching on marriage and interprets the symbols of the hyperbole within its greater context. If Part 1 taught how *you* must prevent scandalizing with adultery—using the heart as a symbol—then Part 2 teaches how to respond when *someone else* offends, continuing the use of physiological symbols, such as the right hand, the right eye, and the whole body. This shift matters because responses change drastically depending on whether you are the cause of scandal, or someone else.

This also answers the predictable complaint: “The measures I take to avoid adultery won’t prevent the disorderly behavior of another.” As such, verses 29-30 provide the only direct support within Jesus’ core teaching of Matthew 5 for the green light on separating from spouses who scandalize a marriage through sexual immorality.

Let’s analyze the first interpretation (the general view) which relies on an unstructured approach to deciphering the figurative elements of the text.

Hyperbole and Unstructured Symbolism

The most common reading of Matthew 5:29-30 treats Jesus’ words as a general warning against sin, where the “right eye” and the “right hand” function as fluid symbols for anything that might lead to moral failure. This approach correctly identifies the hyperbole but fails to establish what the symbols represent based on their clear textual anchors—leaving its interpretation largely up to the reader. Under this view, the passage serves as a sweeping exhortation to remove sinful enticements at all costs, with the symbols acting as floating placeholders for whatever influences an individual wishes to target.

Hyperbole is a common rhetorical tool used in biblical moral instruction. Jesus used it frequently throughout his ministry—for example, in describing a camel passing through the eye of a needle, or in urging one to remove the log from his own eye before judging a speck in another.

The question, however, is not whether this passage contains hyperbole, but whether the symbols are meant to be open or closed to adlib interpretation.

Some interpreters try to reasonably constrain the symbols to lust and adultery (based on verses 27-28). To support this, they can also appeal to Old Testament wisdom literature, where hands, feet, and eyes serve as motifs depicting men going astray into sexual sin (Prov. 6-7; Job 31). However, following this approach to its full conclusion presents a serious theological problem. If the right eye and the right hand represent external enticements to sin, then the implied solution is to remove access to temptation—suggesting that sin is best avoided through environmental control. This interpretation veers dangerously close to asceticism.

The ascetics stand in direct opposition to biblical wisdom. Scripture consistently presents the solution to sin as an internal transformation, not external restriction. Proverbs warns against following the path of the adulteress, but its solution is not to become a hermit, or a mutilator of one's own body—but to reflect on choice and consequence. Likewise, Jesus later expands on how sin originates in the heart (Matt. 15:17-20)—not in the eye which happens to see, or the hand which happens to touch. To interpret Jesus' words as advocating for the removal of external temptations is to misunderstand his entire ethic. He calls for self-discipline, not self-destruction.

This untethered approach to the symbols in Matthew 5 also creates practical inconsistencies. For example, if Jesus meant to warn about sensory temptation, why call for the removal of only one eye? If his lesson was simply “remove what causes temptation” then why not eliminate both eyes and both hands? This would be a clearer and more effective way to communicate the urgent need to limit sensory inputs. (Yet, if these symbols were structured with a specific purpose in mind—not an undefined one—even a detail like this might hold significance.)

Apart from these logical issues, the most glaring problem with the unstructured reading is its placement within the pericope. The symbols of the right eye and right hand appear directly between explicit references to adultery (verses 27-28) and divorce (verses 31-32). If Jesus intended only to provide a general warning against sin, why was it placed in the middle of the most profound

statements on marriage ever? Rather than a broad warning on temptation, could these symbols actually relate to marriage—and the removal of unfaithful spouses?

This is precisely where the unstructured hyperbolic interpretation falls short. Not because it opposes moral impurity, but because in so doing it sidesteps the most natural question: Is Jesus' figurative language in middle of this passage dealing with marriage? To be clear, he is using hyperbole—but is it being properly understood?

For hyperbole to function correctly, the figures must correspond to real subjects. If they are misidentified, the exaggeration loses its effect and all meaning is lost. A sound exegesis will always favor defining terms according to the text over the reader's imagination. If Jesus provided a progressive, structured framework in which to interpret the symbols, then treating them as floating placeholders spoils the intended meaning.

Taking this passage as a general warning against lust is understandable for young and impressionable believers. But for mature believers tasked with upholding biblical truth, the significance of this figurative guidance toward marriage cannot be ignored.

Hyperbole and Structured Symbolism

A structured approach to the symbolism in Matthew 5:29-30 demands that Jesus' language be resolved within its appropriate context. Since these verses are framed by direct references to adultery (verses 27-28) and divorce (verses 31-32), we must consider whether the imagery in verses 29-30 also pertains to marriage.

In Part 1 (verses 27-28), Jesus employs a fitting biblical symbol—the heart—a bodily organ whose literal function does not correspond directly with its symbolically implied meaning. The heart represents a person's thoughts, desires, and will—not pressurized circulation of blood. This sets a clear precedent: bodily figures in Matthew 5 need not tie to their physiological function for proper understanding of the metaphor. Therefore, we can safely infer that the meanings of right eye, right hand, and whole body need not primarily correspond to their physiological functions.

It is noteworthy that Jesus uses the heart—a singular, asymmetric organ—to represent internal thought and desire. This contrasts with the body parts mentioned next, which are bilateral and symmetrical. While their ultimate meaning may not derive directly from physical characteristics, those anatomical features may still help illuminate or reinforce the symbolism.

That each “member” has a counterpart is clear from the text (two eyes and two hands form complete sets). In fact, “whole body” is defined by whether or not it possesses two members, indicating that wholeness and division are central to understanding the passage. Thus, if wholeness and division are key structuring principles in Jesus’ language, then determining what these two members represent in marriage is a critical step in letting the text guide us. A natural starting question is: what can “whole body” symbolize in the context of this pericope? Where in the Bible is the concept of a “whole body” depicted clearly and comparably? The answer is found in Genesis, where a husband and wife become “one flesh”—a unified body.

Despite modern tendencies to treat marriage as a voidable contract, Genesis presents a far more permanent picture of God’s design where “they shall be one flesh.”

This first appears in Genesis 2:20-24:

Genesis 2:20 And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him. **21** And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh (H1320) instead thereof; **22** And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. **23** **And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh (H1320) of my flesh (H1320):** she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. **24** **Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave (H1692) unto his wife: and they shall be one (H259) flesh (H1320).**

■ **H1320** - bašâr *baw-sawr'* From H1319; *flesh* (from its freshness); **by extension** *body, person*; also (by euphemism) *the pudenda* of a man: - **body**, [fat, lean] flesh [ed], kin, [man-] kind, + nakedness, self, skin.

■ **H259** - 'echâd *ekh-awd'* A numeral from H258; **properly *united***, that is, **one**; or (as an ordinal) first: - a, alike, alone, altogether, and, any (-thing), apiece, a certain [dai-] ly, each (one), + eleven, every, few, first, + highway, a man, once, one, only, other, some, **together**.

■ **H1692** - dābaq *daw-bak'* A primitive root; properly to *impinge*, that is, ***cling* or *adhere***; figuratively to *catch* by pursuit: - abide, fast, cleave (**fast together**), follow

close (hard, after), **be joined (together)**, keep (fast), overtake, pursue hard, **stick**, take.

Jesus appeals to this precedent when responding to religious leaders testing him on divorce later in multiple Gospel accounts:

Mark 10:6 But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female. 7 For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife; 8 And they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh.

This Genesis-based view of marriage provides a strong interpretive key for Matthew 5:29-30, where Jesus describes the “whole body” as composed of “members”—specifying that it is preferable for one member to perish than for the whole body (both members) to be cast into hell.

Since the whole body represents the marital union, the specific members of that body must symbolize roles within it. Given that only one member is removed after it causes offense, the passage is suggestive of a pair—husband and wife.

Matthew 5:29 And if thy **right eye** offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that **one of thy members** should perish, and not that thy **whole body** should be cast into hell.

Matthew 5:30 And if thy **right hand** offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that **one of thy members** should perish, and not that thy **whole body** should be cast into hell.

That each body part (or member) corresponds to a spouse in marriage is the simplest interpretation using the text as the key. Both a husband and a wife possess the capacity to betray and offend, meaning the “right eye” can symbolize a man’s wife, and the “right hand” can symbolize the woman’s husband—or vice versa.

Rather than attempting to prove that the eye is feminine, or the hand is masculine, the simplest validation of this model (that they are spouses) stems from how certain parts of the body develop greater favor, particularly right-handed ones. Given the intimacy and provision inherent in marriage, it is entirely reasonable—and compelling—that a spouse would be referred to as the “right eye” (in terms of beauty or fineness) or the “right hand” (in terms of strength or utility).

Notably, this interpretation may establish the original basis of Jesus' teaching that a married man can be guilty of adultery against his own wife—something less readily apparent under the law of Moses.

Finally, in contrast to the one-time instruction on the heart (a person's thoughts) in Part 1, the instruction in Part 2 is stated twice—once for the eye, and once for the hand. The repetition reinforces the notion that Jesus intended for the teaching to apply to a pair of individuals.

Unlike Part 1, which instructs on the private moral ordering of one's mind, Part 2 instructs on moral responsibilities within the framework of a relationship. After substituting the symbolic figures with what they represent, the interpretation becomes clear:

- 29 Husband, if your wife scandalously offends, it is better to separate from her than to risk guilt by association.
- 30 Wife, if your husband scandalously offends, it is better to separate from him than to risk guilt by association.

Reassuringly, once the symbolic figures are properly understood, any intended hyperbole in Jesus' teaching can take full effect. If the marriage bed is being defiled by a scandalous wife, the hyperbole is not just rhetorical—it's prescriptive. Through this symbolic teaching, Jesus expects decisive action to be taken in the relationship (i.e., the offending spouse must be cut off). Figurative speech translates to real action.

Summary of Jesus' Teaching on Adultery and Divorce So Far

- Adultery is absolutely prohibited, and Jesus teaches that mastery of the body begins with the mind.
- However, when a spouse is offended by the scandalizing behavior of an unfaithful partner, separation is divinely sanctioned to avoid tacit consent or sinful entanglement.

As we approach the third and final part of Jesus' teaching on adultery, marriage, and divorce in Matthew 5, several key questions arise:

1. Beyond the contextual link to adultery in verse 27, is there any other evidence that the "offense" in verses 29-30 refers to sexual immorality?
2. If separation from an offending spouse is instructed in the figurative guidance of Part 2, does the Jewish practice of issuing bills of divorce provide a lawful and effective means for Christians to achieve this?
3. Under Moses there were two tolerable paths to remarriage: one where adulterers were put to death (freeing innocent spouses to marry again) and another through bills of divorce. But if Jesus removed the provision of these bills, would that mean death is now the only path to remarriage?

Part 3: What About the Bills? (Matthew 5:31-32)

Matthew 5:31 It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away (G630) his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement (G647): **32** But I say unto you, that whosoever shall put away (G630) his wife, saving for the cause of fornication (G4202), causeth her to commit adultery (G3429): and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced (G630) committeth adultery (G3429).

This is the second time Jesus directly cites a specific portion of the Old Testament in his teaching on marriage and adultery. The first was "Thou shalt not commit adultery," a direct recitation from the decalogue (Exo. 20:14; Deut. 5:18). Now we read Jesus' paraphrasing Deuteronomy 24, stating that "whosoever shall put away his wife let him give her a writing of divorcement."

To understand the significance of Jesus' words, we must first examine the function of these writings, or bills, within Jewish society at that time and before.

Deuteronomy 24:1 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 (H6172) in her, and he writes her a certificate (H5612) of divorce (H3748), puts it in her hand, and sends (H7971) her out of his house, **2** when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's wife, **3** if the latter husband detests her, and writes her a

certificate (H5612) of divorce (H3748), puts it in her hand, **and sends her out of his house**, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, ⁴ 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. (NKJV)

- **H6172** - 'ervāh *er-vaw*' From H6168; nudity, literally (especially the pudenda) or figuratively (disgrace, blemish): - nakedness, shame, unclean (-ness).
- **H5612** - sêpher siphrah *say'-fer, sif-raw*' From H5608; properly **writing** (the art or a document); by implication a book: **-bill**, book, evidence, X learned [-ed] (-ing), letter, register, scroll.
- **H3748** - kerîythûth *ker-ee-thooth*' From **H3772**; a **cutting** (of the matrimonial bond), that is, divorce: - divorce (-ment).
 - **H3772** - kârath *kaw-rath*' A primitive root; **to cut (off)**, down or asunder); by implication **to destroy** or consume; specifically to covenant (that is, make an alliance or bargain, **originally by cutting flesh and passing between the pieces**): - be chewed, be con- [feder-] ate, covenant, cut (down, off), destroy, fail, feller, be freed, hew (down), make a league (covenant), X lose, perish, X utterly, X want.
 - **H7971** - shalach *shaw-lakh*' A primitive root; **to send away**, for, **or out** (in a great variety of applications): - X any wise, appoint, bring (on the way), **cast (away, out)**, conduct, X earnestly, forsake, **give (up)**, grow long, lay, **leave, let depart** (down, go, loose), **push away, put (away, forth, in, out)** reach forth, send (away, forth, out), set, shoot (forth, out), sow, spread, stretch forth (out).

Without a bill of divorce, a Jewish woman who was put away (separated from her husband) had no legal right to remarry, leaving her without the material support or companionship otherwise needed. The purpose of these bills was clear: they provided a lawful means for a woman to remarry.⁴

It is important to note that within this text, putting away is treated as distinct from the issuance of the bill. The law recognizes them as distinct but conjoined actions in the legal process regulating remarriage. They are not the same even if they happen to coincide under the law. In other words, putting away *by itself* did not grant the right to remarry in Israel.

Deuteronomy 24 also identifies two categorical reasons why a husband might be found putting away his wife and giving a bill of divorcement. The first is if she no longer found favor in his eyes

⁴ While speculative, Abraham's distress in Gen. 21:11 may reflect a pre-Mosaic lack of legal recourse for Hagar to remarry after separating; neither Jewish nor Islamic tradition affirms she did, and some identify her as Keturah.

because of some uncleanness (H6172 - *ʿervâh*)—an interesting turn of phrase given the use of right eye in Matthew 5:29. The phrase “some uncleanness” has been widely debated by many who argue it implies sexual indecency and by others who contend it refers to a very broad range of defects in personality, ability, or physique.

However, the second reason a man might divorce (verse 3) presents a serious challenge to the claim that sexual indecency was the only reason men put away wives in Israel. Here a latter husband divorces simply because he detests or hates her with no explicit connection to uncleanness or moral failing. If divorce were strictly limited to cases of sexual misconduct, even vague or subjectively defined kinds, then we might expect a clarifying phrase justifying the man’s hatred. But the text is silent, leaving those who insist it must be based on sexual misconduct with the difficult task of proving it. This ambiguity fueled rabbinic debate both before and after Jesus (e.g., between rabbis Shammai and Hillel).

From a New Testament perspective, the clearest indication that divorce for virtually any reason was truly the norm comes from Jesus’ very own paraphrasing in verse 31—“Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement.” He presents the law without any nuanced clarification or qualification, suggesting that this broad and rather chauvinistic regulation was, at the very least, an operative reality in Israel.

Thus, in Part 3 Jesus calls the crowd’s attention to a well-known component of the law of Moses—bills of divorce and their role in remarriage for men and women alike. He then declares that whoever puts away his wife causes her to commit adultery. *How can this be?* Under the law of Moses, a woman who received a bill of divorce was free to remarry without being called an adulteress. Yet here, Jesus removes that facility altogether.

Under the law of Moses, if a husband puts away his wife and gives her a bill of divorce, she could remarry without being called an adulteress. If he puts her away without a bill, she cannot lawfully remarry; if she did, she would be considered an adulteress. But here we have Jesus stating

unequivocally that regardless of whether she receives a bill of divorce, whoever puts her away causes her to commit adultery.

Jesus dismantled the legal apparatus given by Moses which governed divorce and remarriage. He stripped the provisioning power of the bills in verse 32—because now, if a man puts away his wife and she remarries, she is called an adulteress. Full stop.

Furthermore, Jesus holds original husbands accountable for causing adultery (assuming their wives remarry)—unless they put away due to fornication. This exemption directly follows the figurative guidance from Part 2 prescribing the cutting off of an offending member of the body. If a wife is already guilty of sexual immorality, her present or future exploits cannot be placed on the prudent man who cuts her off in accordance with Jesus' teaching.

After addressing the rules concerning original husbands and wives, Jesus turns to subsequent husbands, just as Deuteronomy 24 does. But unlike Moses in Deuteronomy, Jesus leaves them no legal standing in the second half of verse 32: "Whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery." This final statement dispels all uncertainty about whether a woman who is put away can remarry. Under the Old Covenant, bills of divorce bore remarriages; but Jesus terminated their fecund capacity under the New Covenant, rendering all remarriage adultery.

Anyone can cherry-pick isolated verses in their attempt to defend remarriage, but every position must eventually answer to Matthew 5—the fountainhead of Christ's teaching on marriage—if it hopes to withstand scrutiny. Jesus gives no hint of tolerance for remarriage. His entire thrust is the reinforcement of first marriages, with thinly veiled references to Adam and Eve that become unmistakable by chapter 19.

Efforts to interpret Part 3 in a way that permits second marriages fail in two primary ways. Some argue that Jesus was not changing the law of Moses and its tolerances, but merely correcting misinterpretations. This would mean that he was restoring its original intent, implying that the divorce laws were already in perfect alignment with God's ultimate standard through Christ. But this collapses under the weight of Jesus' own words in Matthew 19:8. When the Pharisees inquire

about bills of divorce, he does not defend the system—he indicts it: “Moses because of the hardness of your hearts, suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so.”

If this part of the law was a concession for human stubbornness, how could Jesus support it? The idea that fulfilling the law means returning to it sets Jesus’ words in conflict with himself.

Others attempt to relegate Jesus’ sovereign judgment to a debate between the rabbinic schools of Shammai and Hillel over “uncleanness” (*ervâh*) in Deuteronomy 24. But this undermines the nature of Jesus’ authority and teaching.

As already shown, Deuteronomy 24 itself refutes the idea that sexual immorality justified men divorcing their wives in Israel (i.e., Hillel was technically more correct). But Jesus was not siding with one rabbinic school over another—he was exposing the fundamental weakness of the entire legal apparatus regulating divorce.

This becomes even clearer when we recognize that verse 32 follows the repeated structure seen throughout the Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard it said from old time... but I say unto you.” In every instance, this structure marks a moral elevation beyond the law—not an affirmation of one side of a transient debate.

To suggest that Jesus was championing Shammai’s interpretation is to miss the point of this structure entirely (much less the technically correct answer). It implies Jesus consigned his own authority by appealing to one rabbi’s opinion over another, rather than revolutionizing Israel’s concept of what is good altogether. Shammai wasn’t raising any standard—he was only trying to interpret and defend whatever he thought Moses meant. It is question-begging and demeaning to assume Jesus’ weighed in on a rabbinic debate, reducing him to a mere commentator.

The bills of divorce in Israel facilitated and regulated remarriage while original spouses remained alive. But Jesus’ final statement in verse 32 leaves no room for second marriages under the paradigm that governs our present reality: “Whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.” The only caveat concerns husbands dealing with fornication. Therefore, any

practice (whether Jewish or Gentile) of issuing paperwork for the purposes of remarriage has no bearing on Christians seeking to obey the teachings of Christ.

Now that we have fully examined Parts 1-3, we can answer the foundational questions previously asked:

1. Beyond the contextual link to adultery in verse 27, is there any other evidence that the “offense” in verses 29-30 refers to sexual immorality?

Yes. Jesus’ use of “fornication” as the sole exceptive clause in verse 32 confirms that sexual immorality was the offense in the figurative instruction from verses 29-30. Since a husband who puts away (cuts off) his wife for fornication is not guilty of causing adultery, it follows that fornication is grounds for cutting off and plucking out. No interpretation aligns better than this.

2. If separation from an offending spouse is instructed in the figurative guidance of Part 2, does the Jewish practice of issuing bills of divorce provide a lawful and effective means for Christians to achieve this?

No. The bills of divorce in Israel facilitated remarriages while original spouses remained alive. But Jesus terminated this in verse 32: “Whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.” This statement is absolute. Thus, any Christian who appeals to legal paperwork to defend remarriage fundamentally misses the point. Jesus’ teaching only permits separation.

3. Under Moses there were two tolerable paths to remarriage: one where adulterers were put to death (freeing innocent spouses to marry again) and another through bills of divorce. But if Jesus removed the provision of these bills, would that mean death is now the only path to remarriage?

Yes. Under Moses, spouses convicted of adultery were to be killed, after which a surviving spouse could remarry. But under Jesus, capital punishment is indefinitely suspended—meaning that all prospects of remarriage are invariably tied to the life of an

offender. This is consistent with Jesus' Beatitudes, which signaled a shift away from harsh penalties, and the manner in which he handled the woman caught in adultery. Second marriages still remain possible, but only after the death of a spouse (which aligns with Romans 7:2-3 and 1 Corinthians 7:39).

27 Ye have heard that it has been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery:

28 But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.

Part 1

Adultery is sinful; to avoid it, a person must govern their heart.

29 And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

30 And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

Part 2

If a marriage is defiled through sexual immorality, the offending spouse must be cut off.

31 It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement:

32 But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.

Part 3

The legal provisioning of divorce and remarriage in Israel ends with Christ.

Among all of Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, the words spoken by him in Matthew 5:31-32 would have been the most astonishing to those who were paying close attention.

For a Jewish man who had divorced his wife for less than sexual immorality or married a divorced woman—or for a remarried woman herself—they would have been devastating.

John the Baptist was beheaded for condemning one unlawful marriage. What could that portend for a man condemning all second marriages?

With such radical implications, it's no surprise that Jesus' fiercest clashes with the Pharisees centered around marriage and adultery—which undoubtedly contributed in no small part to his death.

For anyone opening up to the possibility they are in an adulterous marriage, Matthew 5:27-32 offers unapologetic instruction on the New Covenant standard. It has superseded the law of Moses, teaching that adultery begins in the heart, marriage is one whole body comprised of two members, and that Israel's practice and provision for remarriage reached a terminus in Christ.

The “Exception Clause” of Matthew 19:9

Matthew 19:3 The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, **Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?** **4** And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that **he which made them at the beginning made them male and female,** **5** And said, **For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?** **6** Wherefore **they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.** **7** They say unto him, **Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?** **8** He saith unto them, **Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so.** **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.** **10** His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry. **11** But he said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying...

This passage is the most frequently cited text in defense of second marriages by Christians worldwide. Given what we have already established in Matthew 5 regarding adultery, marriage, divorce, and remarriage, we must read it carefully—especially since many seize upon a singular phrase to create a major allowance for remarriage not otherwise drawn from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The brief exchange is paraphrased below.

The Pharisees: You seem to oppose Moses' law on divorce and remarriage.

Jesus: Wouldn't you agree Adam and Eve followed a different standard?

The Pharisees: Then why did Moses permit divorce?

Jesus: Because of your hard hearts. But I say that whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

The Apostles: If that's the case, it's better not to marry.

This faithfully reflects the exchange—minus one key phrase owing to Matthew’s account. The omission is intentional, because even without it, nothing contradicts Jesus’ earlier teaching in Matthew 5. And whoever protests its omission must first acknowledge its complete absence in the parallel records of Mark and Luke:

Mark 10:11 And he saith unto them, **Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her.** 12 And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery.

Luke 16:18 Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery.

Before going any further, let’s first show how Matthew 19:9 is typically interpreted by those who believe Jesus permitted second marriages.

Matthew 19:9 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.

The common view claims that if a spouse commits fornication—or sexual immorality—then all commitments are off, and divorce and remarriage is excused or permitted by the exception clause. The non-offending spouse is free to marry someone else without committing adultery.

Matthew 19 is often framed as if it were the centerpiece of a historic dispute over Deuteronomy 24, where we are led to believe Jesus was settling a legal debate between two Pharisaic factions originating from the 1st century BC and the turn of the century:

- **The restrained view of Shammai:** Divorce and remarriage were only ever lawful in cases of sexual immorality or suspected sexual impropriety.
- **The liberal view of Hillel:** A man in Israel could divorce and remarry for virtually any reason.

Modern interpreters are enthralled by the hypothesis that Matthew 19:3 was meant to force Jesus to take a side in the rabbinic debate. They understand Jesus to be siding with Shammai by their interpretation of his response, affirming a restrained interpretation of Deuteronomy 24.

Thus, many people view Jesus' exception clause in terms of a simple reaffirmation of Moses. Accordingly, the appeal to Adam and Eve as "one flesh" (verses 5-6) is paid lip service as an ideal—but Jesus did nothing to actually make the law comport with it. He only repudiated the indulgent liberties of Hillel.

As a result, most Christians today operate as if nothing has really changed with regard to marriage law under Moses. If a spouse cheats, then the marriage can be voided, and the innocent party is free to remarry. The only censure is that divorce should not be done frivolously.

When readers encounter the phrase "except it be for fornication" in Matthew 19:9, they automatically assume it functions the same way as the clause in Matthew 5:32.

In Matthew 5:32, Jesus states that if a man puts away his wife, he causes her to commit adultery—unless he put her away for the cause of fornication.

Categorically, this functions as an exemption from guilt—meaning that if a wife commits fornication, then her husband is not guilty of causing her to commit adultery if he puts her away, contrary to the general rule which says otherwise.

Because of this, it's thought that Matthew 19:9 operates the same way:

- Matthew 5:32 allows for divorce (putting away) under exceptional circumstances.
- Matthew 19:9 contains the language of exception.
- Therefore, it must also be excusing or exempting something otherwise forbidden by a rule—in this case, the condemnation of remarriage following divorce.

This reasoning will be examined later, along with several other flaws. But for now, it is important to articulate the opposition's view accurately before critiquing it.

How Proponents of Remarriage Read Matthew 19:9

Whoever puts away his wife and marries another commits adultery, unless the reason for the divorce was fornication (then the divorce and remarriage are permitted).

- Divorce is generally not permitted, but Jesus allows one exception—fornication.

- Couples may divorce due to fornication, after which they may also remarry.
- Jesus did not change the law of Moses, but clarified that remarriages could only flow from valid divorces.
- The “exception clause” applies to both actions—divorce and remarriage—making them morally permissible in cases involving fornication.
- Jesus’ teaching only prohibits frivolous divorce.

This interpretation frames fornication as a “divorce trigger” that simultaneously unlocks rights to remarriage.

Before we properly exegete the so-called exception clause, we must recognize an unavoidable fact: if it were meant to justify remarriage, it must do so despite appearing only once—within a reactionary exchange with hostile questioners—and even then, not at all in the parallel accounts. These realities don’t invalidate the claim outright, but they raise a critical question: Can the exception clause of Matthew 19:9 truly bear the immense doctrinal weight being placed on it?

An Examination of the Original Greek

Before assuming that Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 are equivalent in their key phrasing, it’s necessary to examine the manuscript traditions supporting them in our English Bibles. By the 20th century translators had two primary sources from which to translate the New Testament:

- Greek New Testaments produced from the Byzantine Text family (also called the Traditional text) which comprises the largest number of surviving handwritten Greek manuscripts—over 4,000. Since the Majority Text methodology for determining proper readings of problematic passages prefers solutions that rely on a preponderance of agreement among extant manuscripts, the Byzantine manuscript family holds great favor. The *Textus Receptus* and the *Patriarchal Text* are famous examples of Greek New Testaments based on this text-type and methodology. The former has informed almost every English Bible translation since—especially the King James Version.

- Greek New Testaments produced from the Critical Text methodology developed later through textual criticism in the 19th century.⁵ This scholastic methodology prioritized cues from older manuscripts to resolve problematic passages, even if they belonged to less prevalent text types (e.g., Alexandrian and Caesarean). This has produced modern compilations like *Westcott & Hort* and *Nestle-Aland* which have informed English Bible translations such as the New International Version and English Standard Version.

Why bring this up? While the vast majority of English Bibles are translated from Greek New Testaments that align perfectly, approximately 5% of sentences contain minor differences due to variations in the manuscripts from which they are translated. These “disagreements” typically involve omitted, added, or reworded phrases—rarely leading to disputes over meaning. Given the low incidence of divergence, most differences are inconsequential. But when an entire doctrine hinges on a single sentence, it’s prudent to check whether the Greek stands on universally accepted ground or not. In this case, the infamous “exception clause” in Matthew 19:9 does not.

Nearly all English translations of Matthew 19:9 are based on a single source—the *Textus Receptus*. Unlike the vast majority of manuscripts spanning all textual traditions which align on this verse, the *Textus Receptus* does not due to its inclusion of the Greek word εἰ (if) before μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ (not for fornication).⁶ This word appears in only 20 out of 1,634 publicly available manuscripts scanned online—an inclusion rate of just 1.22%, the first of which does not surface until the 12th century. Researcher Robert Crawford has meticulously documented these occurrences and argues persuasively that εἰ in Matthew 19:9 is a scribal mistake. Its inclusion in the *Textus Receptus* traces back to a Greek compilation of the New Testament by a scholar named Desiderius Erasmus titled *Novum Instrumentum Omne* in the early Reformation era.

⁵ See www.britannica.com/topic/biblical-criticism and www.britannica.com/topic/biblical-literature/critical-methods

⁶ See the late Dr. Leslie McFall, “The Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage” www.wisereaction.org/wp-content/uploads/leslie-mcfall-the-biblical-teaching-on-divorce-and-remarriage.pdf and corollary research published by Robert Norvin Crawford, “A Word-Frequency Study of Matthew 19:9” (Second Edition) www.archive.org/search?query=creator%3A%22Robert+Norvin+Crawford%22

Thus, most modern readers unknowingly study and interpret Matthew 19:9 through a textual anomaly that draws no substantial support from any manuscript tradition whatsoever.

Matthew 19:9 – Anomalous Underpinnings

Matthew 19:9

- Byzantine Majority & Critical Texts Read** ➤ ἀπολύση τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ **μὴ ἐπὶ** πορνείᾳ (**mē epi**)
- Sense for sense rendering ➤ “shall put away his wife **apart from** fornication”
- Word for word rendering ➤ “shall put away his wife **not for** fornication”
- The Textus Receptus Reads** ➤ ἀπολύση τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ **εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ** πορνείᾳ (**ei mē epi**)
- Sense for sense rendering ➤ “put away his wife **except it be for** fornication”
- Word for word rendering ➤ “put away his wife **if not for** fornication”

This paper does not attempt to resolve textual critical disputes or argue the merits of one Greek New Testament compilation over another, nor does it care to venture into debates on scriptural inerrancy.⁷ Moreover, the point isn’t even to suggest that scholars who prefer “except” as an English translation based on the *Textus Receptus* should renounce it.

The takeaway is simply that the Greek in Matthew 19:9 is less settled than most assume, allowing more alternative readings than typically acknowledged if these facts were not true.

What follows shows that the Greek phrase behind “except it be for fornication” in Matthew 19:9 (shown above) is completely different from the Greek behind “except for the reason of sexual immorality” in Matthew 5:32 (shown below).

Matthew 5:32

- All Texts Read** ➤ ἀπολύση τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ **παρεκτὸς λόγου** πορνείας (**parektos logou**)
- Sense for sense rendering ➤ “shall put away his wife **saving for the cause of** fornication”
- Word for word rendering ➤ “shall put away his wife **except for the reason of** sexual immorality”

⁷ See article, “Are Translations Unreliable” www.biblestudying.net/translation1.html

This grammatical distinction matters. If Matthew 5:32 allows for a negative exception (i.e., an exception to the standard rule prohibiting divorce) we can't reflexively assert that Matthew 19:9 functions the same way—because, at the very least, the Greek is different.

All the same, just because Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 differ in the Greek does not permit us to conclude they *must* have different meanings. An author could write in one place “voyaged over water,” and in another, “sailed across the sea” without intending any distinction.

But in this case, two key factors warrant sensitivity to the difference:

- **The legal context** – We are exegeting one of Jesus' most definitive statements on marriage. Given the weight of that topic, it's safer to assume intentionality with word choice over casual equivalence. When dealing with legal instructions, especially those which constrain social behavior, precision matters.
- **Bias from English translations** – Most readers inherit a translator-imposed uniformity between Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 because English Bibles render them nearly the same. But this masks real differences in the Greek. A critical approach offsets biases inherited from English backgrounds.

We cannot say there is no exception in Matthew 19:9 because the Greek is different than Matthew 5:32. Instead, it simply shows that Matthew 19:9 is even further removed from being the airtight proof-text for remarriage that many assume it to be. The linguistic connection between Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 is weaker than it appears in English, and this should cause everyone to hesitate before building entire doctrines upon assumptions to the contrary.

At this point in the analysis, we have a choice.

We could continue pressing deeper into textual and grammatical considerations, investigating why these differences exist between the *Textus Receptus* and all other manuscript traditions. This would lead us into the realm of textual criticism, requiring us to wrestle with Reformation era manuscript preferences, the role of Erasmus, and translation methodologies that have shaped the

texts we have received. While such an inquiry might provide insights into transmission and translation, it would not necessarily clarify how Jesus' words should be understood in practice.

Or we could take these top-level textual and grammatical findings and evaluate the major interpretations of Matthew 19:9 in light of them—perhaps with more flexibility than first expected. Instead of venturing deeper into Bible translation history, let's outline the major views and evaluate them using logic and precedents from the biblical narratives—both of which are essential for determining which one comports with Jesus' teachings best.

The Four Major Views

The "Exception Clause" of Matthew 19 has led to four major Christian interpretations, each carrying some grammatical backing, yet none decisive enough to settle the debate on grammar alone. They are briefly defined as follows:

1. **THE EXCLUSION VIEW.** Jesus was not granting exceptions from the rule for husbands who put away their wives for fornication but merely excluding them from consideration in the statement. This view interprets the modifying phrase ("not for fornication") as restricting the scope of the subject group in the first relative clause ("whosoever shall put away his wife"). Advocates of this view object to εἰ in the modifying clause of the *Textus Receptus* on account of its astonishingly low inclusion rate in all extant manuscripts. Because of this, advocates oppose the claim that παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνεία (in Matthew 5:32) and μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ (in Matthew 19:9) are semantically equivalent. Questions of permissibility to either divorce or remarry on the basis of fornication cannot be resolved by Matthew 19:9 alone.
2. **THE ECHOED EXCEPTION VIEW.** Jesus was repeating his teaching from Matthew 5:32, where he permitted divorce (but not remarriage) in cases of fornication. The English translation "except for sexual immorality" in Matthew 19:9, despite its anomalous underpinnings, acts as a nod to the original teaching and is semantically equivalent to "saving for the cause of fornication" in Matthew 5:32. According to this view, Jesus is not

introducing a new allowance for remarriage but reinforcing that only divorce is allowed in cases of sexual immorality. Matthew 19:9 does not expand or modify Matthew 5:32 but simply restates the same doctrinal principle in response to the Pharisees.

3. **THE NON-STARTING EXCEPTION VIEW.** This view limits the meaning of fornication in Matthew 19:9 to unions that were never valid to begin with (sometimes referred to as diriment impediments or exceptives in Roman Catholic circles). Biblical examples include Herod's unlawful marriage to Herodias or the incestuous relationship of the man in 1 Corinthians 5—marriages that were never legitimate in God's eyes from the start. You might also find cases of betrothal in this camp. In all of these, the idea is that divorce is not just permissible, but necessary. And depending on their backgrounds, Jesus meant to highlight that one or both parties may be able to marry "again."
4. **THE REMARRIAGE EXCEPTION VIEW.** This majority Protestant view, formalized during the Reformation (sometimes called the Erasmian View) holds that sexual immorality dissolves the marital bond, voiding the covenant in the same way physical death would. The exception clause in Matthew 19:9 is understood to mean that fornication entirely severs extant marital obligations, making remarriage permissible.

Why The Remarriage Exception View Fails

The first three views comport with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5, in which he stripped Moses' bills of divorce of their legal power to grant remarriage—leaving no basis for second marriages under the New Covenant. The Remarriage Exception View challenges this conclusion, only to collapse under the weight of many contradictions and spiraling absurdity. Let's evaluate.

Those who believe that Matthew 19:9 gives an exception for remarriage are forced into a position of accepting all second marriages (or current marriages) as valid, regardless of their contextual factors. While rarely admitted so overtly, the doctrine demands it. Under their framework, second marriages can never be adulterous because adultery nullifies original marriages

and their obligations. By definition, all subsequent marriages involve sexual intercourse which, according to this view, serves as the very grounds for their justification.

This creates an irreconcilable problem. Consider two perspectives on the exact same scenario:

Perspective 1 – Susan as the Adulteress

1. Susan marries Bob.
2. Susan detests Bob and wants to leave him.
3. Susan embraces another man and goes to live with him.
4. Susan is guilty of adultery.⁸ Why? Because she cheated with another man.

Perspective 2 – Bob as the Faithful Husband

1. Bob loves Susan and wants the marriage to work.
2. Susan is unfaithful and joins herself to another man.
3. Bob is counseled that he is free to remarry per the exception clause of Matt. 19:9.
4. Bob is not guilty of adultery if he remarries. Why? Because Susan cheated.

The Remarriage Exception View does not just allow Bob to remarry someday in the distant future. Instead, it grants him the immediate and perpetual option the moment Susan commits adultery. When she does, Bob gains unrestricted license to take another wife. But if Bob can freely remarry at any time, then in what sense is Susan still bound to him? What does it even mean to call her an adulteress if Bob was no longer required to be faithful to her the moment she betrayed him?

Adultery, by definition, presupposes a marital obligation. If Susan is an adulteress, then she is still obligated to Bob. But if Bob is free to remarry, then Susan is not obligated to Bob (as much as he is no longer obligated to her). When Susan sinned, she was both Bob's wife (because we call her an adulteress) and she was not Bob's wife (because he can remarry). This is incoherent.

⁸ Mark 10:12 affirms that a woman—just like a man—can commit adultery by divorcing and remarrying.

The fatal collapse of the Remarriage Exception View:

1. If Bob desires reconciliation, how can Susan's adultery be said to have ended?
2. But if Bob *can* remarry—even if he chooses not to—how can Susan be an adulteress?
3. Under this view, Susan's adultery is the very thing that gives Bob the right to remarry.
4. Therefore, Susan's adultery simultaneously generates and eliminates her own guilt.

Thus, the Remarriage Exception View is self-defeating and absurd. The premise negates itself—if adultery nullifies the marriage bond, then adultery ceases to exist categorically, rendering Jesus' prohibition of adultery meaningless. If adultery erases itself, then there are no adulterers. And if there are no adulterers, every biblical condemnation of them becomes nonsense.

By treating adultery as self-nullifying, this view creates an ethical free-for-all wherein spouses can relieve themselves of marital obligation simply by cheating. What begins as doctrinal error devolves into theological antinomianism—an outright contradiction to biblical ethics and moral intelligibility.

The following thought experiment further demonstrates how the Remarriage Exception View creates irreconcilable contradictions in Jesus' teachings. Note that the first two premises are identical in both scenarios—but the conclusions perfectly oppose one another.

Scenario 1 – Jesus Condemns Remarriage (according to Luke 16:18)

Premise 1: A husband divorces his wife—*not for fornication*—and marries another woman.

Premise 2: The first wife, after being put away, eventually marries another man.

Premise 3: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whosoever marries her that is divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

Conclusion: According to Jesus, all parties are guilty of adultery.

Scenario 2 – Jesus Permits Remarriage (according to Matthew 19:9)

Premise 1: A husband divorces his wife—*not for fornication*—and marries another woman.

Premise 2: The first wife, after being put away, eventually marries another man.

Premise 3: “Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

Conclusion: According to the Remarriage Exception View, none are guilty of adultery.

Why such a different conclusion in Scenario 2? It’s brought to us by the Remarriage Exception View because the first wife found herself separated from her husband after he committed adultery. That triggered the “exception” whereby she became free to remarry without being called an adulteress.⁹

- The husband’s adulterous remarriage justifies his first wife’s remarriage.
- If the first wife can remarry without guilt, then the original marriage was null the moment the husband granted her this exception by his misconduct.
- If the original marriage was void, then the husband’s new marriage cannot be adultery.
- Jesus (at least according to Luke) forgot that adultery is its own escape clause.

A consistent application of this view’s reasoning demonstrates that Luke 16:18 can never be true. The only other seemingly possible scenario is if a husband puts away his wife—*not for fornication*—and he remains single. But if she remarries after being put away, then she and her paramour would be in adultery because of Matthew 5:32. However, according to the Remarriage Exception View, because she is committing adultery with another man, the original husband is free to remarry per Matthew 19:9—but if he is free to remarry, that means she is not actually beholden to him, which means she is not, by definition, an adulteress like Luke 16:18 and Matthew 5:32 otherwise assert. One begins to appreciate the meaning of spiraling absurdity.

In the end, this view conveniently weaponizes adultery—casting it as a sin when sympathy is sought and as a solution in the stony pursuit of new spouses. Beyond its logical breakdown, the real cruelty of this doctrine is felt most by those who desire to emulate faithfulness.

⁹ Mark 10:11-12 demonstrates that Jesus’ teachings on marriage and adultery apply equally to men and women.

What does the Remarriage Exception View offer the abandoned wife who refuses to betray her vows? Nothing. She waits in hope that her husband will repent and return to her, only to be told that her faithfulness is vain—that her covenant is in a state of dissolution because she is free to remarry. The same is true for the man whose wife leaves him. He remains steadfast, honoring the marriage he contracted before God. But according to this view, his fidelity means nothing. His wife’s decision voided the covenant because he is free to remarry per Matthew 19:9.

This whole dilemma is not just played out on the human level. It is precisely the position that God himself has held (and still holds) in relation to Israel. Throughout Scripture, God is portrayed as the faithful yet betrayed “husband”—the one who endures separation without taking another “wife.” He does not void the marriage. He does not seek a replacement. He waits.

Far from being a man-made analogy, the Bible explicitly identifies marriage as the image of Christ’s relationship to his people. In Ephesians 5:32 Paul declared, “this mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.” If a believer’s marriage is supposed to reflect Jesus’ own righteousness, how could it possibly be administered in such a way where infidelity dissolves all commitment?

Proponents of the Remarriage Exception View cannot account for this divine pattern because they treat adultery as a contract breaker rather than a faithfulness tester. If this doctrine were true, then God should have abandoned Israel and taken another people instead. But this is not what God has done through Christ. And it is not what true faithfulness looks like.

Matthew 19 presents a unique challenge for Christians seeking to rightly divide and interpret the word of God. The rigorous exegetical and logical analysis just presented dismantles the Remarriage Exception View, offering strong reasons to reject it. However, disproving one view does not automatically determine which of the remaining should be accepted, if any.

Many fall into a critical error of reasoning here. They assume that unless an alternative interpretation of Matthew 19:9 can be proven with the same certainty used to reject a false one, its rejection is somehow unfair. This is a false dilemma, implying that unless the correct reading is

perfectly resolved, no view can be definitively ruled out. But sound reasoning does not work this way. The inability to prove an alternative view with absolute certainty does not revive a view already shown to be false. The prohibition against remarriage stands—not because an alternative reading of Matthew 19:9 is airtight, but because the Remarriage Exception View is demonstrably incoherent. To demand a flawless replacement before discarding error is not only arbitrary—it is inconsistent. Those who initially accept the Remarriage Exception View rarely do so on the basis of airtight proof, so requiring that standard from a challenger is unprincipled.

We have already achieved the most important thing by showing that Jesus’ teachings are not contradictory. The scriptures hold together perfectly. The New Testament does not contain hidden loopholes threatening to unravel the sanctity of marriage or basic moral intelligibility.

What remains is not a frantic search for clarity in a sea of confusion, but a relatively non-urgent, non-committal analysis of how best to understand the peculiarities of Matthew 19:9. The three remaining views all conform to Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5. Their differences notwithstanding, they compete on friendly ground.

While a full-scale defense of each remaining interpretation is beyond the scope of this paper, what follows provides detailed summaries of their respective strengths and weaknesses. The goal is not to resolve every grammatical or theological question, but to evaluate the three views in light of what has already been made clear. For those desiring deeper exploration, citations are provided throughout so readers may pursue further study and examination.

What matters most has already been settled through the exegetical analysis of Matthew 5 and the exposed errors of the Remarriage Exception View: marriage endures for life, second marriages are adultery, and Jesus does not contradict himself in these matters. Despite centuries of theological hedging, there is no need to agonize over the “exception clause” when Jesus’ words are already clear. Matthew 19:9 is not a make-or-break text on the moral structure of marriage, but a grammatical curiosity that—no matter how it’s parsed—does not permit what so many have assumed. Rest assured, the hardest part is over.

Summary Analysis of the Remaining Views

Two out of the three remaining views interpret the contested clause of Matthew 19:9—εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ (except for fornication)—as semantically equivalent or functionally identical to παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας (except for the cause of fornication) in Matthew 5:32. They focus on identifying which action—divorce or remarriage—is qualified by the exception. While they offer slightly different approaches and conclusions, both ultimately align with Jesus’ core teaching in Matthew 5, as does the third. However, the third view does not affirm semantic equivalence between the two clauses. Instead, it interprets Matthew 19:9 not as an exception clause, but as an *exclusion* clause—which sets aside fornication cases from comment and the general rule Jesus gave in response to the Pharisees.

The **ECHOED EXCEPTION VIEW** is the first of the two views which concede semantic equivalence, arguing that Matthew 19:9’s exception applies only to putting away (divorce), just as it does in Matthew 5:32. The permission to put away sexually immoral spouses does not extend to a permission to remarry.¹⁰

Strengths of The Echoed Exception View:

- **Provides a non-contradictory exception (for divorce only)** – For those fully persuaded that the underlying Greek implies exception, this view allows for a qualified exception without undermining Jesus’ core teaching in Matthew 5 prohibiting remarriage. Two very early non-Byzantine Greek New Testament manuscripts from the 4th century (Vaticanus and Sinaiticus) differ in three out of the four phrases comprising Matthew 19:9. Even though ancient and modern scholarship has largely affirmed the reading from Sinaiticus, this paper acknowledges that Vaticanus’ version of Matthew 19:9 contains παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας in lieu of μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ. This fact

¹⁰ See article, “Remarriage Addendum: Exception Clause Comparison” for a robust articulation of this view www.biblestudying.net/adultery-stealing.html

has contributed to no small consent among scholars that the exception clauses of Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 are semantically equivalent.¹¹

- **Maintains a strong anchoring to Matthew 5:32** – By interpreting Matthew 19:9 in light of Matthew 5:32, this view ensures that Jesus’ first and primary teaching on divorce and adultery remains the interpretive key and foundation for all later references or questions about marriage and adultery.
- **Keeps Jesus’ response tightly within the scope of the question** – The Pharisees’ repeated inquiries in verses 3 and 7 focus on the legitimacy of divorce. They did not technically ask about remarriage. If Jesus only meant to address divorce as a mechanism for separation and not remarriage, and if a genuine exception was expressed, then it should be understood as affecting divorce only, sustaining the prohibition on remarriage.
- **Balances Jesus’ marriage-for-life ethic with prescribed separation** – Given the radical nature of Jesus’ insistence on a lifelong marriage standard, some early disciples may have feared that any form of separation—even from an unfaithful spouse—was forbidden. This view alleviates those concerns by reaffirming that separation from an adulterous spouse is consistent with Jesus’ teachings (without granting remarriage).

Weaknesses of The Echoed Exception View:

- **Original audiences would have naturally linked divorce to remarriage** – Putting away a spouse according to the legal process outlined in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 inherently involved the provision to remarry. Any exception related to divorce in the context of references to the law of Moses would have been understood to include tolerances for remarriage unless explicitly not conferred—like in Matthew 5:32 where it

¹¹ See, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament: An Adaptation of Bruce M. Metzger’s Textual Commentary for the Needs of Translators* by Roger L. Omanson and Bruce Manning Metzger www.christianpublishinghouse.co/2022/12/20/matthew-199-is-and-he-who-marries-a-divorced-woman-commits-adultery-an-interpolation and Donald A. Hagner’s *World Biblical Commentary, Volume 33B: Matthew 14-28* 548-549.

is clearly the husband's guilt of causing adultery through remarriage that's being exempted, not remarriage itself. Matthew 19:9 is less explicit, making it difficult to conclude Jesus was limiting the exception strictly to separation alone.

- **The sentence structure prevents isolating the exception to divorce alone** – The grammatical structure of Matthew 19:9 makes it difficult to restrict the exception clause solely to “shall put away” to the exclusion of “shall marry another.” The two actions are conjoined by καί in the sentence, just as they are in Luke 16:18 and Mark 10:11 where divorce and remarriage are treated as a combined action. Typically, an exception clause applies fully across the relative clause actions (or protasis). If a genuine exception exists in Matthew 19:9, it should extend to both divorce and remarriage alike, rather than divorce alone. Proponents of the Echoed Exception View may argue otherwise; but without a stronger grammatical defense, it remains vulnerable to the criticism of being merely theologically assertive.
- **Strange change in phrasing** – If Matthew 19:9 was meant to restate the same exception for divorce found in Matthew 5:32, why does it use a different phrase? If, for the sake of argument, εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ is truly equivalent to παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας, then this forces εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ to take on meanings beyond its established idiomatic usage.¹² The conjunction εἰ μὴ everywhere else in the New Testament consistently functions as an exception from none (zero), not as an interchangeable equivalent to παρεκτὸς λόγου. If Matthew intended to reinforce the very same exception from chapter 5, why did he introduce a different phrase? The shift creates grammatical ambiguity, undermining the claim that Matthew 19:9 echoes the exact same exception.

¹² See the late Dr. Allen R. Guenther's article “The Exception Phrases” 92-95 www.tyndalebulletin.org/article/30243-the-exception-phrases-except-including-or-excluding-matthew-5-32-19-9.pdf and the late Dr. Leslie McFall's “The Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage” 168-175 www.wisereaction.org/wp-content/uploads/leslie-mcfall-the-biblical-teaching-on-divorce-and-remarriage.pdf

- **Exception clauses invite loophole thinking** – The linguistic distinction between an exception and an exclusion is crucial. An exception explicitly permits a specific case within a general rule, making it prone to workarounds or loophole thinking. By contrast, an exclusion simply removes subject cases from consideration without granting permissions for or against them. Because the Echoed Exception View treats εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ as a genuine exception, it potentially gives ground needlessly to those arguing for allowances. Exclusions do not warrant permissions—any consequences for actions taken by the excluded category must be resolved elsewhere. This is particularly germane given that the only exception we have for marriage (Matt. 5:32) was divorce.

Bottom Line of The Echoed Exception View:

The Echoed Exception View attempts to explain the similarities and reconcile the tensions between Matthew 19:9 and Matthew 5:32; but it struggles to explain why the exception clause applies only to divorce but not remarriage from a grammatical standpoint. These are extraordinarily nuanced considerations, and the difficulty may not ultimately lie with the original language itself, but with how modern readers impose syntactical expectations onto it.

If the exception clause were placed at the end of the sentence, it exaggerates the problem: Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, except for sexual immorality. This reads as an allowance for remarriage following cases of fornication—the opposite of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:32.

Granted, the modifying clause does not appear immediately after the first relative action (“shall put away”) and before the secondary conjoined action (“shall marry another”). Proponents of the view may argue that the ordering sufficiently restricts the exception to the first relative clause, and not the second. However, the problem becomes protracted because the main clause (apodosis) of the sentence depends on the second relative clause (“shall marry another”) to make sense. While Greek generally allows conditionality to be restricted by the ordering of clauses, Matthew 5:32 itself demonstrates that an exception affects the relative clause (protasis) and

depends on the main clause (apodosis) for its meaning. In Matthew 19:9, the main clause makes an adulterer out of the divorcing husband, which is only possible if he remarries. This reinforces the inclusion of “shall marry” in the relative clause (protasis) if a genuine exception exists.

Matthew 5:32 Structure:

Relative Clause (Protasis): Whoever shall put away his wife

Exception Clause: except for fornication

Main Clause (Apodosis): causes her to commit adultery.

In Matthew 5:32, the exception clause distributes to both the action of putting away and the resulting consequence (her committing adultery). This gives precedent for how Matthew 19:9 should be read if it contains an equivalent exception. In other words, the exception clause depends on the main clause (“causes her to commit adultery”) for its meaning. What is the divorcing husband exempted from exactly?—causing adultery.

Matthew 19:9 Structure:

Relative Clause (Protasis): Whoever shall put away his wife

Exception Clause: except for fornication

Conjoined Action of the Relative Clause (Protasis): and shall marry another

Main Clause (Apodosis): commits adultery.

If we apply the same structural reading as Matthew 5:32, then the exception ought to include both actions—divorcing and remarrying, because the main clause is meaningless if the man does not remarry. The remarriage is grammatically conjoined (καί) and follows the pattern of Luke 16:18 and Mark 10:11-12 where the judgment of adultery depends on the remarriage. This parallel is why many conclude that if an exception is granted, it applies to remarriage as well.

While proponents may nevertheless insist that the exception applies only to divorce, this creates a grammatical inconsistency between the two verses being compared for their alleged similarity. Matthew 5:32 establishes a pattern in which the exception distributes wholly. In Matthew

19:9, the main clause (committing adultery) hinges on the husband remarrying, making it difficult to restrict the exception to divorce for textual reasons—despite the logical reasons.

The **NON-STARTING EXCEPTION VIEW** also interprets the “exception clause” in Matthew 19:9 as semantically equivalent to Matthew 5:32 but applies it specifically to marriages that were never valid to begin with—such as incestuous unions, unlawful betrothals, or other relationships explicitly forbidden by biblical injunction. Rather than permitting divorce and remarriage after a legitimate marriage, Jesus affirmed in Matthew 19:9 that unions which are null from the start could be dissolved—after which a valid marriage might then be possible.

Strengths of The Non-Starting Exception View:

- **Extends the exception to both divorce and remarriage** – Unlike the Echoed Exception View, this view acknowledges that the exception distributes to both relative actions of the protasis—putting away and remarrying. For those convinced that the exception cannot be limited to just the first action (divorce) this view offers a better interpretation which still upholds the general prohibition against remarriage after valid marriages.
- **Aligns with Jewish legal thought** – Jewish law recognized that certain unions were invalid from the outset, such as incestuous relationships or other marriages forbidden under Levitical law. This view fits within that framework, treating Jesus’ exception as referring only to cases where the first “marriage” never had covenantal standing to begin with.
- **Aligns with new Judeo-Christian legal thought** – Under the New Covenant, the prevalence of illegitimate marriages would rise, particularly as Christianity spread into cultures where polygamy, concubinage, and adulterous unions were more common. This view draws support from the imminent increased demand for dissolving marriages that were never valid in the first place.

Weaknesses of The Non-Starting Exception View:

- **Potential internal contradiction** – If a union is invalid on diriment grounds, divorce would not just be permitted—it would generally be required. But in that case, Jesus’ exception for “putting away” becomes puzzling, since invalid marriages shouldn’t need permission to dissolve. This creates tension in the text, as Matthew 19:9 appears to operate as though actual marriages are in view, and risks making Jesus sound gratuitously explicit, as though he’s saying: “Whoever puts away his wife—except if it’s his sister or someone else’s wife—and marries another commits adultery.” Was that clarification necessary? Possibly. Whether this warrants contention is not so clear. The gratuitous concession could be explained as facilitating discourse since we commonly refer to unions as “marriages” even when they are biblically invalid.
- **Overly narrow scope of fornication** – While *porneia* broadly encompasses sexual immorality, proponents of this view tend to restrict it to cases like invalid betrothals or incest—which, though uncommon today, are prominent in Matthew’s narrative. Some even insist that because the word is not *moicheuō* that Jesus meant to rule out cases of adultery. This view generally makes the exception clause apply to fringe or trivial cases, not standard ones we might expect to encounter more frequently today. Though prior bonds technically qualify as diriment impediments—and adulterous second marriages based on Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5 could and should be dissolved under this view—most advocates do not treat them as primary examples. This may be due to the asymmetry of such cases, where only one spouse (the one with no pre-existing marriage) would be free to remarry. Compared to clearer cases like incest—where both parties are released—scenarios involving second marriages are morally complex and hard to disentangle. That said, all three views under consideration affirm that second marriages should be terminated, and that remarriage may be legitimate for those with

no original spouse. The key difference lies in whether or how Matthew 19:9 teaches or indirectly supports that conclusion.

- **Invites loophole thinking** – If Matthew 19:9’s exception clause applies only to illegitimate marriages, it may inadvertently encourage an exception seeking mentality where people focus on finding ways to retroactively invalidate first marriages to justify new ones. This weakens Jesus’ thrust, which consistently presents marriage as binding and second marriages as adultery.

Bottom Line of The Non-Starting Exception View:

The Non-Starting Exception View interprets Matthew 19:9’s exception clause as applying only to marriages that were never valid from the outset, rather than allowing for divorce and remarriage following a legitimate marriage. Under this interpretation, Jesus affirms that invalid unions—such as incestuous relationships or unlawful betrothals—could be dissolved, making way for a valid marriage thereafter.

This view has notable strengths. Unlike the Echoed Exception View, it acknowledges that the exception must apply to both putting away and remarrying, making it more grammatically coherent for some readers. It also aligns well with both Jewish legal precedent, which recognized invalid unions as non-binding, and the emerging Christian context where unlawful marriages would be more rampant. However, it faces some conceptual hurdles. If a marriage is inherently invalid, then no exception should be needed to justify its dissolution, making Jesus’ phrasing somewhat redundant. Additionally, restricting *porneia* to only a narrow class of unlawful unions risks arbitrarily limiting its broader biblical usage. Finally, this interpretation could foster loophole mentalities, fueling attempts to retroactively declare first marriages invalid as a way to justify new ones.

Ultimately, while the Non-Starting Exception View attempts to reconcile Jesus’ words with legal precedent, it introduces its own logical and textual challenges that remain unresolved.

Lastly, the **EXCLUSION VIEW** maintains that Jesus was not communicating an exception in Matthew 19:9. Instead, husbands who divorce for fornication were excluded from the subject group altogether. In contrast to an exception, which typically distributes (or applies) across all clauses in a sentence, a restrictive modifying phrase (that we'll call an "exclusion phrase") functions to prepositionally limit the antecedent clause.

Example of an Exclusion Phrase Modifying a Verb:

"Whoever leaves the room not for an emergency will be punished."

Relative Clause: Whoever leaves the room

Exclusion Phrase: not for an emergency

Main Clause: will be punished.

The exclusion phrase ("not for an emergency") restricts the scope of the relative clause ("whoever leaves the room"). It does not directly modify the punishment itself—it filters out a category of people from consideration before the main clause applies. This means that while the rule certainly affects those leaving for non-emergency reasons—the sentence does not commit to a conclusion about what happens to those who leave for emergencies. It's possible they too could face some sort of punishment. Their status is left unstated.

A critic might argue that there is no meaningful difference between an exclusion and an exception clause, dismissing it as mere semantics. But consider the difference between the following two sentences. The distinction is quite real, even if we are slow to recognize it.

Sentence 1:

"All laborers who don't work for Mike will be paid in cash at sundown."

Relative Clause: All laborers — *This is the subject of the sentence.*

Exclusion Phrase: who don't work for Mike — *This is the modifying phrase.*

Main Clause: will be paid in cash at sundown. — *This applies to the filtered set of laborers.*

The exclusion phrase modifies "all laborers" and restricts those being considered before the main clause applies. Laborers who work for Mike are never considered part of the subject. The

sentence does not explicitly say whether Mike’s workers will or will not be paid, or in what form—it just removes them from consideration. This is how exclusion works. Any conclusions about Mike’s workers in Sentence 1 rely heavily on context or assumptions, whereas Sentence 2 invites a clearer, grammar-based inference:

Sentence 2:

“All laborers, except for those who work for Mike, will be paid in cash at sundown.”

Relative Clause: All laborers —*This sets the subject of the sentence.*

Exception Clause: except for those who work for Mike —*This is the modifying phrase.*

Main Clause: will be paid in cash at sundown. —*This applies to all laborers with exception.*

The exception clause does not remove Mike’s laborers from the subject group; it exempts them from the rule of the main clause while still considering them a part of the core subject group. The main clause applies universally to all laborers, but the exception modifies the rule, not the subject. This serves to deny Mike’s workers the stated benefit, making it a true exception because it first establishes a general principle before identifying exemptions. Consequently, this phrasing provides a stronger basis for inferring that Mike’s workers will in fact not be paid.

Looking at both cases, someone might still ask, “It seems like Mike’s workers don’t get paid either way—so what’s the big deal?”

In Sentence 1 (with the exclusion), laborers who work for Mike are never part of the subject. The sentence offers no direct information about whether they get paid, or in what form. The speaker may simply be excluding them for contingent uncertainties. Hearers may still make inferences, but they would fall outside the grammatical scope of the statement.

In Sentence 2 (with the exception), Mike’s workers are included in the subject, but they are exempted from the rule. This means that the main clause would have applied to them if they had not been identified by the exception. Rather than excluding them from consideration, Sentence 2 includes them but explicitly denies the stated benefit—making it a true exception.

For further illustration of how exclusions and exceptions function, consider these sentences:

Sentence 1:

“Whoever drives a car *with no fewer than 6 cylinders* can easily reach 130 mph.”

Sentence 2:

“Whoever drives a car *except one with fewer than 6 cylinders* can easily reach 130 mph.”

If someone means to say that 4-cylinder cars can’t reach 130 mph easily, they will prefer Sentence 2. But if their intent is simply to assert that 6-cylinder cars (and larger) can easily reach this speed, without implying anything about smaller engines, they will prefer Sentence 1.

Finally, let’s apply this working definition of an exclusion to the text of Matthew 19:9 in order to clarify who is being excluded from Jesus’ declarative statement.

How Exclusion functions in Matthew 19:9:

“But I say unto you, that whosoever shall put away his wife, not for fornication, and shall marry another, commits adultery...”¹³

Relative Clause: whosoever shall put away his wife (and shall marry another)

Exclusion Phrase: not for fornication

Main Clause: commits adultery

The relative clause, which defines the subject of the sentence, initially includes anyone who puts away his wife and marries another. However, the exclusion phrase—“not for fornication”—modifies this subject by removing those who divorce on account of fornication. As a result, Jesus’ statement applies only to men who put away their wives *without* the cause of fornication.

This means Jesus is not commenting on what happens when fornication is involved. The declaration is tightly constrained to one group: those initiating divorce with prejudice—that is, based on personal resentment or disfavor. Whatever someone wishes to say about divorces involving sexual sin, Jesus says nothing about them here. What he does say is that those who divorce and

¹³ The Darby Bible (DBY) formally: *The Holy Scriptures: A New Translation from the Original Languages by J.N. Darby.*

remarry are committing adultery, generally speaking. Note this directly answers the Pharisee's original question concerning marriage law under Moses.

Strengths of The Exclusion View:

- **Fully aligns with Jesus' prior teachings on marriage** – This view upholds the permanence of marriage as taught in Matthew 5:27-32, Matthew 19:1-6; Mark 10:11-12, and Luke 16:18, without contradiction. By refusing to admit the presence of a genuine exception in Matthew 19:9, it coolly forces readers back to Jesus' core and sufficient teachings to resolve questions about marginal cases involving fornication.
- **Prevents conflation between Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9** – The exception clause in Matthew 5:32 clearly applies to putting away—not remarriage. Reading Matthew 19:9 as an exclusion phrase rather than an exception clause keeps the two passages distinct, preventing superfluous interpretive overlap or distortion.
- **Better contextualizes Mark's and Luke's omissions** – If Matthew 19:9 contained a groundbreaking exception for remarriage, we would expect to find it repeated in Mark and Luke. The simplest explanation for its absence is that there was never a permissive exception to begin with, but a narrow exclusion—one so limited in scope that it could be omitted entirely without loss of meaning. Mark and Luke report the core moral rule without qualification, reinforcing that the exclusion in Matthew was not doctrinal but contextual—likely included to highlight a uniquely Jewish legal dilemma for a Jewish audience. What is absolutely clear from the narrative is that husbands who divorce for reasons other than fornication and remarry commit adultery.
- **Fits the context of the Pharisees' intent to trap** – Matthew clearly states that the Pharisees approached Jesus to “tempt him” (Matt. 19:3). They were not seeking wisdom, but testing him. A rundown of valid and invalid marriages according to Jesus' burgeoning paradigm would have dignified these tempters and fueled unproductive

dispute. Instead, Jesus focuses on God’s general and original design for marriage before offering them a firm answer to their question. Anything more would have been out of place in this adversarial setting. Furthermore, if the Remarriage Exception View were correct, Jesus’ allowance for remarriage would not have appeared in his chief instruction—the Sermon on the Mount—but would instead be embedded in a hostile exchange, which alone makes the view deeply suspect. But why did Jesus structure his response this way at all? Why did he exclude husbands who put away for fornication in his answer to their question: “Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?”

- **The legal conundrum for Jewish lawyers** – Deuteronomy 24 does not address how to handle an adulterous wife—because under the law of Moses she was to be put to death (Lev. 20:10-16; Deut. 22:22-24). By Jesus’ time, Jewish courts were prevented from enforcing such penalties due to Roman oversight and diminishing *ius gladii* (right of the sword).¹⁴ This created a legal and moral paradox for Jewish officials: what should happen to wives and paramours who commit adultery when capital punishment is not an option? Bills of divorce became a natural but dubious workaround.¹⁵ Moses’ divorce regulations controlled domestic discontent and separations; but they were hardly meant to compensate for Israel’s failure to purge sin. By setting aside cases of fornication (including adultery) in his response, Jesus deftly answered their main question without providing any sanction or relief for the budding legal conundrum, though nevertheless alluding to it.

¹⁴ See John 18:31 and Jewish rabbinic traditions which record that around 30 CE the Sanhedrin “relinquished their right to inflict capital punishment” www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/865-adultery including the Talmud (b. Sanh. 41a) which notes that the “Sanhedrin ceased judging capital cases” about 40 years before the Temple’s fall www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.41a

¹⁵ See Dr. William R. G. Loader’s article, “Did Adultery Mandate Divorce? A Reassessment of Jesus’ Divorce Logia” 69 www.billloader.com/LoaderDivorceNTS.pdf

- **Jesus' teachings resolved the paradox, but not for his opponents** – Whether the Pharisees cared to acknowledge it, Jesus' commandments actually solved their problem. By invoking the endurance of marriage (with conditional instruction to separate from sexually immoral spouses) he replaced civic tolerances with an uncompromising standard of love and devotion, and provided rules that could be followed under any empire or exile. But by responding to the Pharisee the way he did, Jesus gave no explicit resolution to their legal woes. They could write him off as an idealist, ignorant of the domestic realities of ruling, but by bracketing out fornication he essentially highlighted their dilemma without doing anything to relieve it. Relief would require listening and following him like a disciple.
- **Possible link to the woman caught in adultery** – Though speculative, it is worth noting a possible narrative connection between Jesus' exclusion of fornication in Matthew 19 and the episode in John 8, where a woman caught in adultery is brought to him. Whether the woman was caught before or after the Pharisees tempted him about divorce matters little. If it occurred after, and the Pharisees interpreted Jesus' refusal to comment on fornication as a critique of their cowardice in administering the law, catching her would put his own convictions on display. If it occurred before, then Jesus' exclusion of fornication may have been a nod to the incident and how it was resolved without bills of divorce or execution. In either sequence, the movements reveal escalation—traps designed to make him contradict Moses or incite Roman authorities. Jesus evades them all, exposing their duplicity while offering no breach in the law. At a minimum, John 8 proves their difficulties in upholding the law. But it also suggests something deeper: while they were scrounging for a legal pretext to disqualify this Nazarene—and getting foiled at each turn—Jesus

was repurposing their growing hostility. The violence they would not level on adulterers would soon be turned on him, but used rather to secure redemption for the very people the Jewish leaders were failing to lead.

- **Or else, the practical reality of non-starting, unlawful unions** – If the exclusion phrase was not ultimately meant to expose the legal paradox of divorcing adulterous wives, why else vocalize it? The only other explanation for why Jesus excluded them was for the purpose of acknowledging “diriment exceptives.” Despite already providing sufficient instruction to conclude he only allowed original marriages (Matt. 5:30-32; 19:5-8), by excluding fornication in Matthew 19:9, Jesus prompts everyone in scandalous unions involving fornication to think and act on their situation: either leave paramours and remain single, reconcile with original spouses, or marry “again” (if no original spouse exists). Not every fornication case under the New Covenant results in the same outcome following a divorce. There is no one-size-fits-all answer. Herod and Herodias’ union was a form of fornication that required separation (divorce) but whether they could remarry according to Christ would depend on whether they had been married previously. On the other hand, an adulterous affair affecting two original spouses warrants separation—but would not permit remarriage. Could the fornicator from 1 Corinthians 5 who “had his father’s wife” take another wife after repenting? It depends. Additionally, the more successive marriages there are in a society, the greater chances that at least one spouse would be free to marry again by entering an original marriage for the first time.

Weaknesses of The Exclusion View:

- **Overly nuanced and counterintuitive for most readers** – Because English speakers instinctively interpret exceptions as permissive and because the distinctions between an

exclusion and exception are not commonly reflected upon, to view the clause as excluding rather than permitting can feel unnatural. (It's hard to maintain a view only grammarians appreciate.) For those unfamiliar with syntactical distinctions or who refuse to let them balance their interpretation, this view holds little sway. Moreover, confessional Christians are resistant to any suggestion that English renderings can have deleterious impacts on meaning (especially the King James Version). Many prefer to trust that their common English Bible alone can form the basis for doctrinal research and conclusions, which stems from entrenched notions about the perspicuity and sufficiency of Scripture. To propose that linguistic study and syntactical considerations are needed to gain knowledge about critical moral truths is a hurdle most people will opt to go around—not over.

- **Makes Matthew 19:9 insufficient to instruct on cases of fornication** – Unlike other views that attempt to address fornication cases directly from Matthew 19:9, this view forces readers to consult other scriptures to resolve them (e.g., Matt. 5:32; 14:4; 19:1-6; 1 Cor. 7) to understand how fornication affects marriage standards under the New Covenant. Some may see this as an interpretative weakness because it portrays Jesus' response to the Pharisees as having less practical and instructive value.

Bottom Line of The Exclusion View:

The Exclusion View effectively exposes the illusion that Matthew 19:9 offers a loophole for those seeking to replace their original spouses with new ones. Admittedly, it does so through a rather dry but crucial analysis of Greek manuscripts and syntax. Still, it offers fresh air in stale debates where Christians continue to defend the view that remarriage is adultery against the unified chorus chanting *“except it be for fornication.”*

Exclusion is not exception—but the fact that Jesus deliberately excluded fornication still raises an important question. If cases involving fornication could in any way affect whether divorce and remarriage are permissible—or if their exclusion was meant to highlight a legal paradox otherwise

resolved through new commandments—why wouldn't Jesus address them here? Simply put, the Pharisees weren't seeking actual instruction.

Their intent was not to learn from Jesus but to trap him (Matt. 19:3). And their question had nothing to do with cases of fornication—which they may have preferred to avoid anyway. It was whether a man could freely divorce under the law of Moses. Their focus was on divorce, not sexual crime. John 8 demonstrates they knew what the law said about these. When they brought the woman caught in adultery to Jesus, they weren't confused—they were testing his own convictions about it, especially in front of Rome. They knew Deuteronomy 24 didn't strictly apply to adultery. Therefore, we can infer that their challenge in Matthew 19 was *already* restricted to cases not involving fornication. And Jesus answered accordingly.

Given that different types of fornication lead to different outcomes under the New Covenant, the insincere challenge brought by the Pharisees was neither the time nor the place to elaborate on them. Instead, Jesus simply upheld his foundational standard—enduring commitment between a husband and wife while both are alive. The Pharisees (not Jesus) were operating under a fading system tangled up in legal dilemmas involving sexual immorality and imperial subjugation. It was their problem, not his, but if they wanted a way through, it stared them in the face.

This reading is not a subtle workaround—it is a grammatical reality. The distinction between exceptive (or exemptive) clauses and exclusionary clauses may appear strange to English readers in this biblical context, but that's because English translations have produced interpretive biases. Any complaint that the Exclusion View is not intuitive enough is really just an admission the Greek has not been fully examined. That is not a problem with the view—it is a problem with English-driven assumptions stemming from the inclusion of εἰ in front of μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ in a couple of prominent Greek New Testaments from the 16th century.

The Exclusion View provides a straightforward, textually sound, and logically consistent way to read Matthew 19:9—whoever divorces not for fornication and remarries commits adultery. Does this say people who do divorce for fornication may remarry? No. Does it forbid it? Also no. All it

means is that those who divorce for any reason besides fornication and remarry commit adultery. Anyone intent on finding permission to remarry after a union involving sexual immorality must consult Matthew 5, the anterior parts of Matthew 19, and more importantly (even if they happen to be in a diriment case) contemplate what God models by his love for Israel. This reading neither weakens his teaching on marriage nor creates contradictions. It merely recognizes that Jesus responded bluntly to the Pharisees' question.

At the heart of this view is the conviction that Jesus' words must be taken as they are—without distortion, without loopholes, and without theological gymnastics. It removes any conflict with Matthew 5:32, Mark 10:11-12, and Luke 16:18, ensuring that Jesus' prohibition on remarriage remains absolutely clear. The Exclusion View handles the major textual issues of the disputed clause better than any alternative.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that second marriages are not simply unfortunate or less-than-ideal situations—they are adulterous unions that must be ended under the law of Christ. This conclusion cannot ultimately be sustained by abstract theological musings or tradition-bound consensus—it can only be reached by a direct path through Jesus' core teachings in Matthew 5 and a disciplined exegesis of Matthew 19:9. While others cobble together arguments from scattered texts, this paper has shown that Jesus' mainline instruction is self-contained, comprehensive, and capable of bearing the full doctrinal weight of marital standards under the New Covenant.

The confusion surrounding Matthew 19:9 has been exposed as the fruit of late-stage doctrinal distortion, where the so-called "exception clause" has been scaffolded to justify exactly what Jesus condemns. At best, this clause has been overread; at worst, it has been weaponized to excuse ongoing adultery under the guise of liberty. But as this paper has demonstrated, none of the views permitting remarriage can survive close examination. The Remarriage Exception View is grammatically fragile, morally incoherent, and doctrinally dissonant with the rest of Jesus' teaching.

To reach this conclusion, readers must admittedly pass through the weeds of syntax, legal background, and ancient Jewish polemics. The reason for this chore is not Jesus' fault—it is the doctrinal baggage Christians have inherited from generations of interpretive compromise. And what makes this baggage so precarious is not just that it's wrong, but that it obscures what should have been obvious: Jesus meant what God has always exemplified. If God's faithfulness endures in the face of betrayal, abandonment, and hatred, what grounds do we have to model the opposite? The Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus' natural appeals to Edenic marriage leave us with a standard that is as idealistic as it is intelligible: one man, one woman, for life.

It may be hard to unlearn what has been taught for so long, harder still when the alternative views—while consistent with Jesus' words—lack airtight consensus among themselves. But the inability to resolve every question is no excuse to continue in sure error. It is always right to reject falsehood and affirm alternatives that are at least tentatively sound. This paper has utterly rejected the Remarriage Exception View, while offering plausible and grammatically justified alternatives which maintain the doctrinal integrity of what Jesus actually said.

One final word must be given—not as a doctrinal claim, but as an appeal to Christian conscience. The implications of this teaching are not theoretical; they touch at the real lives of believers, especially women who find themselves convicted to leave adulterous second marriages. What then? Who will care for those who lose financial support, companionship, and social standing for the sake of righteousness? The answer must be the church. Christians must rise up and care for the righteous poor—not only through material provision, but by offering what is sometimes harder to give: friendship, dignity, and emotional strength. Anything less would make us complicit in the cost of their obedience. For a fuller treatment of this responsibility, readers are encouraged to consult the companion paper *Fellowship as Joint Equity* on christianpapers.net.

If the church will not recover the teaching of Jesus here, it will continue to hemorrhage moral authority. But if it will defend the hope of lifelong love in action, and not just in word, it will radiate a faith worthy of its King.