

## Does Luke 16:18 Contain "Absolute" Rules?

By Tim Haile

What are the marital rights of a woman who has been civilly divorced by her fornicating husband? Some say that she has absolutely no marital rights. What is their reason for concluding such? They respond, "...whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery" (Luke 16:18b). At first thought, this simple response may appear to be an accurate response to the above question. However, it fails to take into consideration all of the factors that are involved in the question. Thus, the Luke 16:18 response is an *oversimplified* use of the Lord's words. In Luke 16:18, Jesus was not addressing marriages in which *fornication* had been committed. One must go elsewhere for that scenario. Matthew 19:9 is the passage that address that scenario. It teaches that the presence of fornication has an affect upon the marital rights of the innocent party. Matthew 19:9 teaches that an innocent person may repudiate his fornicating mate and marry another *without* committing adultery.

## A Closer Look At Luke 16:18

It should be quite obvious to the careful reader that the Lord's statements in Luke 16:18 have a context, and must be considered and interpreted in light of that context. To demonstrate this, one needs only to cite the first clause in the verse. Jesus said, "*Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery...*" Does this statement apply in all divorce cases? Is it true that one commits adultery *every time* he puts away his wife and marries another? Obviously not, for Matthew 19:9 teaches that one may put away his wife "for fornication" and marry another without committing adultery. Since God cannot contradict Himself, and "*scripture cannot be broken*" (Jn. 10:35), then Luke 16:18a is not an absolute rule that applies in all divorce scenarios. It is qualified by other passages. It is very poor exegesis for one to apply the consequences of Luke 16:18 to a divorce scenario in which one spouse is guilty of fornication. He mixes divorce scenarios and attaches the same consequence to two entirely different divorce scenarios.

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Prejudice and personal pride often lead to interpretive inconsistencies. One takes a position based upon his own opinion of how things should be, then he forces Scriptures to harmonize with that position. It is interesting that most people see the truth regarding the first clause in Luke 16:18, yet they fail to see it with reference to the second clause in the same verse. At this point I plead with the reader to honestly consider the following facts:

1. The Luke 16:18 divorce scenario does not address divorces in which fornication has been committed.
2. Since no fornication was committed, neither party has the right to remarry after the divorce.
3. The reason the put-away person of this verse cannot remarry is not because she was the first spouse to be repudiated: It was because her husband committed no fornication!

By mixing the Luke 16:18 scenario with the "for fornication" scenario of Matthew 19:9, some have mistakenly concluded that a put-away person cannot remarry even if his spouse has committed fornication against him. This conclusion ignores the very point that Jesus was making to the Pharisees. The Pharisees argued for the right of remarriage on the basis

of one's giving a "writing of divorcement" to a mate who had become undesirable. Jesus based the right of remarriage on the innocent person's repudiating his mate for his sexual immorality. The Pharisees focused on the divorce procedure - Jesus focused on the divorce cause. Sadly, some of my own brethren are combining the two positions into one. They combine the Lord's emphasis on **cause**, with the Pharisees' emphasis on **procedure**. However, Jesus did not specify or bind any particular divorce procedure.

### Luke 16:18b

The first clause in Luke 16:18 is not intended as an absolute and universal rule, and neither is the second clause. It is simply not true **in all cases** that "whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." This is easily demonstrated by the following examples.

1. 1 Corinthians 7:11 speaks of a woman "departing" from her husband. She put her husband away and Paul described her as "unmarried." Notice that even though her husband was a put-away man, yet he was permitted to be "reconciled" with his wife. Luke

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16:18b does not prevent him from doing what Paul said he could do!

2. Matthew 19:9 speaks of a man committing adultery by putting away his wife and "marrying another." She is a "put-away" woman. What if he changed his mind and decided to take her back. Could he remarry her? Most would say "yes," and would actually argue that this is what he *should* do! Neither Luke 16:18b, nor Matthew 19:9b forbid her to remarry her own husband.

3. I recently dealt with a case where two people were legally married, but were living in adultery. One was eligible for marriage, but the other wasn't. God had never bound this man and woman to one another in marriage. The ineligible man eventually divorced the eligible woman. She is now a "put-away" woman. Does Luke 16:18 now forbid her to marry an eligible man? Of course not! Since she is bound to no man, she is therefore free to marry another without being guilty of adultery.

In all of these examples, a "put-away" person is free to remarry. Luke 16:18b is not an absolute rule that applies in all divorce cases. In cases involving fornication, the innocent party has the God-given right to

repudiate his guilty mate and remarry. If the exception clause of Matthew 19:9 carries any force at all, it carries this force. It would not matter that the fornicator was first to file for civil divorce, first to win the civil divorce, first to announce repudiation, or first to leave the house. What matters is the presence or absence of the scriptural cause. In the presence of fornication, the innocent person has the God-given right to repudiate the fornicator and marry another. Luke 16:18 does not address a divorce scenario in which someone was guilty of fornication. In the Luke 16:18 scenario, no fornication was committed by anyone. This is why one commits adultery by marrying the put-away woman of this passage. In order to reach valid conclusions, we must stay with the context.

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