



## What Jesus Meant by Adultery in Matthew Chapters 5 & 19

### Description



I didn't really write this article to stand alone. I was writing

[another article about Jesus words on lust](#) that got too long with the stuff below included. So I lopped this off and made it its own separate article.

With that disclaimer let's tackle the topic of adultery and what it really means in the Bible.

### The Definition of Adultery

Here is how we define adultery today, and I borrowed this [definition of adultery from Merriam-Webster's dictionary](#).

voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than that person's current spouse

However, **the way we define adultery today is not the same way they defined it in the Bible**. Adultery is a specific sin with a specific definition.

## The Biblical Definition of adultery

We'll look at every place the Bible defines "adultery" to get a good definition for this sin. To do this, here is every word the Bible uses that's translated "adultery."

Here are the words I looked up: (5 Greek, 3 Hebrew)

### Greek words:

- "ἡ μοιχάλις" ([moichalis](#)) meaning "adulteress" (female). The technical definition is: "(a) *an adulteress (that is, a married woman who commits adultery)*, (b) *Hebraistically: extended to those who worship any other than the true God*"
- "μοιχεύω" ([moicheuō](#)) a verb meaning "to commit adultery". The technical definition is: "*to have unlawful intercourse with another's wife, to commit adultery with*"
- "μοιχεύω" ([moicheia](#)) meaning "adultery". The technical definition is also "adultery", with nothing further given from the lexicon.
- "μοιχεύω" ([moicheuō](#)) a verb meaning "I commit adultery". The technical definition is "to commit adultery with, *have unlawful intercourse with another's wife*"
- "μοιχός" ([moichos](#)) meaning "adulterer" (male). The technical definition is: "*an adulterer, that is, a man who is guilty with a married woman*"

### Hebrew Words:

- "נָאֵפֵחַ" ([naaph](#)) a verb meaning "to commit adultery". Technical Definition is: "*literally commit adultery; usually of man, always with the wife of another; with accusative woman*" (this is the word used in the Ten Commandments)
- "נִיּוּפִי" ([niuph](#)) meaning "adulteries". No Technical definition given, but related to "naaph" above, so sharing the same definition.
- "נִיּוּפִי" ([naaphuph](#)) meaning "adultery". No Technical definition given, but related to "naaph" above, so sharing the same definition.

You may have noticed there's a common thread among all of those definitions. Every single one of them referred to a man having sex with another man's wife. If you click the links, you can look at every single place those words are used. You'll find that same common thread in all of them.

**Whenever the adultery is described (*more than just "they committed adultery"*) it always involves a married woman.**

Every single time.

## Now let's look at the places the Bible defines adultery

This first one comes in the middle a bunch of regulations about sex, so it's right on topic.

### Leviticus 20:10

10 If there is a man who commits adultery with another man's wife, one who commits adultery with his friend's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.

And that's it for definitions in the Old Testament, though I admit it's not technically speaking a definition. There is one additional passage that sheds some light.

### Deuteronomy 22:22

If a man is found lying with a married woman, then both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman; thus you shall purge the evil from Israel.

Again, the Old Testament is consistent with the use of the words meaning "adultery". Adultery ***always*** involves a man having sex with another man's wife. Every single time you get more than "they are adulterers" it's always a man having sex with another man's wife.

No exceptions.

Now the New Testament, starting with Romans:

### Romans 7:2-3

2 For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband.

3 So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man.

I'd like to point out at this point that the Bible – including Paul in the New Testament – has been extremely consistent regarding the definition of adultery. The mean of all the words and all the passages point to a single definition:

**Adultery is only committed when a man has sex with another man's wife.**

That's the only definition that's Biblically supported thus far. Adultery has a specific and technical definition. Further, it's not the same definition that we modern Christians think it is.

**If a husband has sex with an unmarried woman he does NOT commit adultery.**

To be sure, he's being sexual immoral, (*specifically fornicating*) but it's not the specific sin of adultery. And just to be clear, [Yes, The Bible CLEARLY Says Sex Outside of Marriage is Wrong](#). That includes both Adultery and fornication. (*fornication = all sex outside of marriage; adultery is technically one type of fornication*)

Both sins are serious.

Very serious.

**However, they aren't the same sin.**

Murder and adultery are both serious sins, but they aren't the same. Likewise adultery and "sexual immorality" (*or fornication*) aren't the same sin, even though both are serious. However, that doesn't change the fact that a man can only commit adultery if he has sex with another man's wife.

I'm not the only one who's come to this conclusion either. According to Easton's Bible Dictionary:

conjugal infidelity. **An adulterer was a man who had illicit intercourse with a married or a betrothed woman, and such a woman was an adulteress. Intercourse between a married man and an unmarried woman was fornication.** Adultery was regarded as a great social wrong, as well as a great sin.

**Remember, adultery is a technical term with a technical meaning that is 100% consistent throughout scripture.**

It means it means a man having sex with another man's wife. That's it. No other sin falls under the definition of "adultery". If a married man sleeps with a woman who isn't his wife, that's still a serious sin. However, it's not the specific sin of "adultery" because it doesn't fit the definition.

**Please keep in mind that adultery ALWAYS means "a man having sex with another man's wife"**

(or you could say "a married woman having sex with a man who isn't her husband."; same meaning, different phrasing)

**This is crucial: a man CANNOT commit adultery unless he sleeps with another man's wife.**

He can be a fornicator/"sexually immoral", but not an adulterer. Please remember that because it will be important soon.

**Now, we need to look at the Old Testament procedure for divorce**

**Deuteronomy 24:1**

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 **indecenty** in her, and **he writes her a certificate of divorce** and **puts it in her hand** and **sends her out from his house**,

The word translated “indecenty” is the Hebrew word “עֶרְוָה” (**ervah**) and it means “nakedness”. Of the 54 times it’s used, 48 it’s translated that way and it has no other meaning. The nakedness for this word implies shameful or lewd exposure. It can’t refer to sex (*adultery*) because the punishment for that was death; not divorce. the actual meaning was – and is – hotly debated.

anyway...

A legal divorce in the Old Testament required three things:

1. The husband must have a certificate of divorce.
2. The husband must give the certificate to his wife. In Rabbinic tradition, this had to be done with witnesses to make it official.
3. The husband had to “**put out**” (“**Send away**“) the woman from his house so that they were separated.

However, some (*wicked*) men didn’t do it the proper way. These men would skip straight to the “putting out” stage without a bill of divorce, which was a great evil.

**Putting out is altogether different than divorce in Jewish culture. A man would permanently kick his wife out, denying her the Jewish divorce certificate.** This woman would still be legally married, but with no home. Her dowry and children would be retained by the husband. She would have already surrendered her virginity to him. **She would be ineligible to remarry, since technically, she was still legally bound to her husband.** Further, her culture would label her as an adulteress since she did not have a valid divorce certificate. And this lady couldn’t just rent an apartment and get a job teaching kindergarten **“there was no place for a put out woman in Jewish culture of that day except prostitution.** Since the marriages were most often arranged, this whole horrible chain of events would have been completely out of her control. **The husband, however, was free to marry again and to do this as much as he liked.** That is why Moses required a divorce certificate to be given...so that the marriage was legally, fairly, and religiously terminated and the woman would be free to remarry and go on with life.

*(explanation from Religion Mythbusters: “Marriage and Divorce Myth #1 “Does God Hate Divorce?”)*

**Now, with this context in mind, let’s look at Matthew 5**

**Matthew 5:31-32**

31 It was said, "WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE";

32 but I say to you that everyone who **divorces** his wife, except for *the* reason of unchastity, **makes her commit adultery**; and whoever marries a **divorced** woman commits adultery.

The word translated "divorced/divorces" in the passage above is the Greek word "ἀπολύω" ([apolyō](#)<sup>3</sup>). It means:

*"I release, let go, **send away**, divorce"*.

The inclusion of the word "divorce" in the definition (*which I lined out*) is based almost entirely on the "divorce" passages in the Gospels. Here's a few examples of how it's used elsewhere:

**Matthew 15:32** And Jesus called His disciples to Him, and said, "feel compassion for the people, because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to **send them away** ([apolyō](#)<sup>3</sup>) hungry, for they might faint on the way."

**Matthew 15:39** And **sending away** ([apolyō](#)<sup>3</sup>) the crowds, Jesus got into the boat and came to the region of Magadan.

**Acts 13:3** Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they **sent them away** ([apolyō](#)<sup>3</sup>).

Did Jesus divorce the crowds twice? Did the church at Antioch "divorce" Paul when they sent him away? I hope you see that this word simply means to "send away" (*or in some case to "release away from you"*). In either case, the idea is about the same.

So let's look at Matthew again with this understanding of the word:

### **Matthew 5:31-32**

31 It was said, "WHOEVER **SENDS AWAY** HIS WIFE, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE";

32 but I say to you that everyone who **sends away** his wife, except for *the* reason of unchastity, **makes her commit adultery**; and whoever marries a (*merely*) **sent away** woman commits adultery.

Hmm...

Notice what's missing in verse 32?

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Anyone?

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...

### **Yes that's right: a "certificate of divorce" is missing!**

If the husband didn't give a certificate of divorce to the wife and send her from his house, the woman was still married to him. No certificate of divorce = no divorce.

Remember the definition of biblical adultery? It's "a man having sex with another man's wife", and that's what would happen here. **If a Jewish man "sent away" (or "put out") his wife without giving her a proper bill of divorce, she was still legally married to him.** Her only option in that culture was (often) prostitution because of the way society was setup.

**So by "sending away" his wife without divorcing her, he essentially forced his wife into prostitution; he "makes her commit adultery".**

The woman couldn't get married because she was still legally married. That's why whoever married the "sent away" woman committed adultery, because he was sleeping with another man's wife.

Make sense?

### **Now, let's look at Matthew 19**

Let's move on to the other (*longer*) passage in Matthew. But before we do that, we need to pick up even more context. **There was a great debate raging in Jesus's day about what was sufficient cause to divorce your wife.**

There were two schools of thought at the time of this writing: Rabbi Hillel's and Rabbi Shammai's. Rabbi Shammai said Deuteronomy 24:1 meant that the husband could not divorce his wife except for one cause and that one cause must be sexual immorality. The school of Hillel, however, held that the husband need not assign any reason whatever; that any act on her part which displeased her husband entitled him to give her a bill of divorce.

[Source](#)

This was one of many great debates the Jewish people had in the day, so it's not surprising that the Pharisees asked Jesus about it. **However, remember the Pharisees were "testing" Jesus here; they were trying to lay a verbal trap to catch Him.** They didn't come to Jesus merely to get his opinion; they were trying to trap Him so they asked a trick question.

**Remember, it's a trick question.**



(That's important)

### Matthew 19:3-6

3 Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce **send away** his wife for any reason at all?"

4 And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE,

5 and said, "FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH"?

6 "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man **separate**."

Notice, the Pharisees didn't ask about "divorce" (*that's a different Greek word which we'll get to in a bit*). They ask about divorce *next*, but haven't yet. They specifically asked Him if a man could "send away" his wife for any reason.

### Remember, this was a raging debate in Jesus' day.

Jesus answered the question honestly and in a very straight forward manner supported by scripture. He said no, husband and wife shouldn't "separate" as long as they are married. The Greek word translated "separate" is the word "χωρίζω" (*chōrizō or xōrizō, depending on how you spell it*).

5563 χωρίζω (from 5561 /xá<sup>1</sup>ra, "open, vacated space") "properly, separate, divide" ("put asunder"), i.e. depart, vacate; **create "space"** (which can be very undesirable or unjustified).

Again, the issue here is not divorce (*yet*) but rather the "sending away" that some wicked husbands would do in that culture. Next, the Pharisees spring their trap by mentioning divorce.

### Matthew 19:7-9

7 They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to GIVE HER A **CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE** AND **SEND her AWAY**?"

### Notice the topic hasn't changed.

As we just read in Deuteronomy, that was the procedure for divorce. You gave the wife a certificate and sent her away.



The Pharisees are still driving home this question about “sending away”. Remember the context. Jesus just said “*you can’t send your wife away*”, so the Pharisees replied “*oh yeah, Moses said we could “send them away” if we got a bill of divorce*”

### Notice the Pharisees’ verbal trap.

- They asked if a man could send away his wife for “*any reason*”.
- Jesus said No, a married couple shouldn’t be separated.
- The Pharisees – in the form of a question – replied “you’re wrong, Moses said we could send away our wives if we got a divorce” (*It’s part of Jewish culture to answer a question with another question; they do it to this day*)

### Notice, the topic is still “sending away”, not divorce.

Everyone knew you could divorce your wife. That wasn’t in dispute because it was in the Law. The procedure was clear, and all you had to do was follow it. The things that weren’t clear were:

1. What constituted reasonable grounds for divorce?
2. Could you send your wife away without giving her a bill of divorce?

Jesus answers both of those questions in his next statement. In fact, He turns up the heat by imputing sin on the husband.

### Matthew 19:8-9

8 He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to ~~divorce~~ **send away** your wives; but **from the beginning it has not been this way.**

(*^because a married couple is supposed to live together, like Jesus just said in verse 6*)

9 “And I say to you, ~~whoever divorces~~ **sends away** his wife, except for immorality, and **marries another woman** commits adultery.”

**Very important: Jesus does NOT say the woman in verse 9 has a certificate of divorce; she was merely “sent away” and therefore is still legally married.**

Now, the Greek word translated “another woman” is very interesting here. It’s one word in Greek, which is “ἄλλοις” ([allos](#)) and it means:

**243 ἄλλοις (a primitive word) “another of the same kind; another of a similar type.**

It’s in the feminine form here, so “another woman” is a perfectly appropriate translation. Now consider, if the woman he marries is “*another of the same kind*”. If the first woman is merely “sent away”, and the second woman is another “of the same kind”, then what kind of woman is the second woman?

## Wouldn't another woman "of the same kind" mean she's merely "sent away" and not properly divorced?

Possibly?

Remember, a man can only commit adultery if he has sex with another man's wife. That would certainly happen if he married "another woman of the same kind" who was merely "sent away".

Now, let's go to the parallel passage in Mark to get some further clarity.

### The Passage in Mark

If you check the preceding verses, you'll see this is the same event as Matthew 19.

#### Mark 10:11

**10** In the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again.

**11** And He said to them, "Whoever divorces [sends away] his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her;

**12** and if she herself divorces sends away her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery."

First, the Greek word translated "another woman" in verse 11 is the exact same word as in Matthew 19.

Next, the Greek word translated "against" is the word "ἐπί" (epi). It can be translated "against", but it primarily means "on" in various senses, both literal and metaphorical. One of those senses is "on account of". Using epi to mean "against" is actually a fairly rare usage of the word. Not impossibly rare, but very uncommon. (Typically you'd use "ἑναντίον" (kata) if you wanted to say "against".)

**So he commits adultery "against on account of her".**

The next question is: which woman does "her" refer to? The obvious answer is the woman closest to the pronoun "her" in the sentence, which is the second woman; the "another woman". That is, the second woman who is "another of the same kind", meaning a merely "sent away" woman. Since she was merely sent away and not properly divorced, she's still married. Since she's still married, he's committing adultery because she's still married.

**Remember: it simply cannot be adultery unless a married woman is involved.**

Ever.

**A man can't commit adultery by having sex with an unmarried woman.**

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Ever.

He can certainly sin grievously, and God promised that He would punish all sex outside of marriage in Hebrews 13:4. However, it's not adultery if a married woman isn't involved.

Thus, Mark makes it clear that the man's adultery isn't because of remarriage to an unmarried woman. It's because of marriage to/sex with a merely "sent away" woman who is still married to another man. Thus, he's actually having sex with another man's wife.

### But what about when she sends him away?

Again, a woman can only commit adultery if she's married *and* has sex with a man who isn't her husband. She could remarry if she was validly divorced. (*Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians 7, and says she "is not bound" if validly divorced*). So if a Jewish woman kicked her husband out of the house to marry someone else – without a divorce certificate – she was committing adultery because she was still married.

I hope that clears things up.

The root of the misunderstanding is a mismatch between our English definition of adultery and the definition of the original Greek and Hebrew words.

**Remember, by definition a man CANNOT be guilty of adultery unless he sleeps with another man's wife.**

**You can't force the meaning of our English words onto their Greek or Hebrew words.**

You just can't.

*(Well, you can but then you're sure to get an inaccurate translation)*

This is doubly true when the whole of scripture defines adultery one single way with perfect, 100% consistency. You've already seen Easton's Bible Dictionary has the same definition for adultery. If we change the meaning of Greek or Hebrew words to fit our modern ideas, we've added to the words of God to suit the traditions/language of men.

## On Divorce & Remarriage

**EDIT:** I finally finished my full length article on divorce and remarriage: [Biblical Reasons for Divorce, When Remarriage is Allowed, and How Adultery Figures In](#). It goes through every reason that Christians can get a divorce and when remarriage is allowed. It's long, but extremely complete. If you plan to read it, you can [skip to the conclusion of this article](#), since the rest of this article's content is contained in the other article. *(And in much more depth too.)*

Since we are on the topic already, I thought I'd pop round to divorce and remarriage because it requires some of the same context.

The first thing most people do when the topic of divorce comes up is quote Malachi 2:16 and say that "God hates divorce". However, that's not quite what that verse is saying. For context, let's look at God's divorce. Yes, you read that correctly; God Himself got a divorce once from faithless Israel and Judah.

## God's Divorce

### Jeremiah 3:6-8

6 Then the LORD said to me in the days of Josiah the king, "Have you seen what faithless Israel did? She went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and she was a harlot there.

7 "I thought, "After she has done all these things she will return to Me"; but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it.

8 "And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, **I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce**, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also.

God's proscription for divorce is to give the wife a writ/certificate of divorce and send her away. That's exactly what God did. As we already saw, God allowed a man to divorce his wife if some (*sexual*) "indecency" was found in the wife. That is, if the wife was unfaithful.

Israel and Judah were repeatedly unfaithful to God over their long history. God followed His own rules and gave them a writ of divorce. If God Himself did it, that means that divorce isn't always wrong. Further, the Church is the Bride of Christ, so clearly God is okay with remarriage.

Remember too that Jesus wasn't condemning remarriage after divorce. We know this because Paul specifically allows for remarriage after divorces in 1 Corinthians. (*but more on that in a minute*)

## Now, let's talk about Malachi 2:16.

First, let's get some context for the passage.

### Malachi 2:13-16

13 "This is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the LORD with tears, with

weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand.

14 “Yet you say, ‘For what reason?’ Because **the LORD has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.**

15 “But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then to your spirit, and **let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth.**

16 “For I hate **divorce**,” says the LORD, the God of Israel, “and him who covers his garment with wrong,” says the LORD of hosts. “So take heed to your spirit **that you do not deal treacherously.**”

The word translated “divorce” in verse 16 is the Hebrew word “שָׁלַח” ([shalach](#)). It means:

to send, **send away**, let go, stretch out

I bet you know what I’m going to say next don’t you?

I suppose the word could mean divorce. It’s possible. However, of the 847 times it’s used, it’s only translated “divorce/divorces” four times. 4 times out of 847; that’s 0.4% of the time. Well over half the time it’s translated “sent/send”, often with the implication of “sending away”.

Notice the context though and the number of times God says they’re dealing treacherously with the “wife of their youth”. **Divorcing is not “dealing treacherously” when done properly**. There was a procedure in the Mosaic Law for how to divorce. God allowed for it and even got a divorce Himself.

**However, sending away your wife...**

Again, if you merely sent away your wife in that culture (*without a writ of divorce*) she would probably be forced into prostitution. Can you think of a more treacherous way to treat a wife? Jesus said that “*what God has joined together let no man separate*”. God intended for married couples to live together and certainly didn’t intend for husbands to force their wives into prostitution.

## On Remarriage

**EDIT:** I’ve finally finished [my article on divorce and remarriage](#). While doing the research for it, I discovered that while the below is *generally* true, there are a couple exceptions. Please see my article on Divorce and remarriage for details.

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In both the Old and New Testament, if you had a valid divorce you were allowed to get remarried. That's really the only requirement for divorces, except the person they marry must be a follower of God. (*Jew in Old Testament, Christian in the New.*)

I can see no difference between the "never married" and the "properly divorced" in terms of marriage. Assuming the divorce was proper and for the reasons God allowed. (*I'm working on an article about the acceptable reasons for divorce, though it'll probably be a while.*)

If you can find a verse that says remarriage isn't allowed, please leave a comment below or [send me an email on the contact page](#).

## Conclusion

Adultery only happens when a man has sex with another man's wife. Any other sexual sin is still serious, but it's not adultery.

The Hebrew divorce procedure requires that the husband gives his wife a divorce certificate and send her from his house. If the wife didn't get a divorce certificate, she was still married. Some immoral men would send their wives away without giving them a divorce certificate, which in that culture often forced them into prostitution

In Matthew chapter 5, Jesus says the husband makes the wife commit adultery by sending her away without a divorce certificate. This is because she would often be forced into prostitution, even though she was still married.

In Matthew chapter 19, Jesus says that if a man sends away his wife (*as in Matthew 5*) and marries "another woman of the same kind" he commits adultery. The "same kind" means another woman who's merely "sent away", and thus not properly divorced. Since she's not properly divorced, she's still married to her original husband. Thus the man who marries her has sex with another man's wife.

In Mark chapter 10, Jesus say much the same thing as Matthew 19 only using slightly different words. It's even clearer that his adultery is "on account of" the "another woman" who wasn't properly divorced.

Whew, ~4500 words to provide context for [another article](#). That might be a record for most effort spent on context. You might also be interested in my article: [Biblical Reasons for Divorce, When Remarriage is Allowed, and How Adultery Figures In](#).