

## The difference in Greek words used in talking about divorce in the New Testament

It's important to know that the writers of the New Testament used 3 different Greek words in talking about the word that is translated into English as "divorce" - and each word carries a different connotation.

### Apolyo

The word "divorce" as found in Matthew 19:3 and Mark 10:2 ("Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?") and Matthew 19:8 ("Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts are hard") is the Greek word "apolyo" and carries with it a connotation of "to let go of, dismiss, or send away." It is what happens when a spouse does not demonstrate that (s)he is holding onto his/her spouse but is, rather, dismissing their thoughts, feelings, opinions, and value as a partner in the marriage. To "divorce"(apolyo) is not a legal action - it is a behavior of hatred and of not clinging to a spouse (a behavior described as "violence" in Malachi 2:16: "the man who hates and divorces his wife does violence to the one he should protect.") Apolyo is the act of letting go of a spouse without actually freeing a spouse from the commitment/bond of marriage through legal action. This dismissal of a spouse without the legal action to go with it is condemned by Moses and would leave a spouse vulnerable to adultery unless that spouse does not marry someone else.

### Apolytroxis

A "certificate of divorce" as seen in Matthew 5:31, Matthew 19:7 and Mark 10:4 ("Why then did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?") is the Greek word "apolytroxis" and means "to release." It is a legal declaration that the spouse is no longer legally bound to the marriage and is free from the commitment/bond of marriage, thereby allowing the spouse to be free to marry another. It is what God gave his people in Jeremiah 3 when they did not cling to their covenant with him: "I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away."

### Aphiemi

In the 1 Corinthians 7 passage we see yet another Greek word for divorce: "aphiemi" which has the meaning "to forsake, give up, or neglect." Verses 12 and 13: "If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not *divorce* [forsake, give up, or neglect] her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not *divorce* [forsake, give up, or neglect] him."

The word "willing" is the Greek word "syneudokeo" and doesn't mean simply "yeah, I'll live with her/him" but has the heart of approval behind it and demonstrates an approval and appreciation of the marriage and the person he/she is living with.

The passage does not speak to the legal act of divorce but, rather, issues a warning not to forsake, give up, or neglect a spouse just because they are an unbeliever. The heart of the passage is: "If you have a spouse who is not a believer and your spouse approves of you (does not show disdain or show

disapproval toward you) and is approving of the marriage (by demonstrating that they cherish and honor their spouse), then do not give them up.” The passage is letting believers know that, if they have married an unbeliever, they don’t have to give up the marriage just because of that. But if the spouse is not approving, then it is OK to let them leave. It is not appropriate to conclude from this passage that a legal divorce is prohibited or condemned. In fact, it would be appropriate to pursue a legal divorce (a “certificate of divorce”) if the unbelieving spouse does not show approval of the marriage.

### **Further clarification about divorce**

Divorce (as a behavior and not as a legal action) is spoken of as a condition of the heart in which a person’s heart is against their spouse. Just as we see Jesus expanding the definition of adultery in Matthew 5 in order to emphasize that it’s a condition of the heart, he also speaks of divorce as a condition of the heart (“because your hearts are hard”) and not as a legal action. We see God himself being an example of the importance of the heart behind the behavior in Jeremiah 3 when he speaks of the condition of Israel’s heart as “adulteries.” At that time, God gave his bride a certificate of divorce (a legal declaration of Israel’s divorce from God) and sent her away because of those adulteries – none of which were sexual in nature, but were a condition of the heart (turning away from God). By giving Israel a certificate of divorce, God freed her to pursue her other loves.

We also see that Jesus doesn’t proclaim adultery to be an acceptable reason to divorce (dismiss/let go of) someone. Instead, adultery is an indication that the sinning spouse has divorced (dismissed/let go of) the non-sinching spouse. That divorce (dismissal) leads to the command of Moses and the permission from Jesus to give someone a legal divorce.

The importance of the difference between “divorce” and “certificate of divorce” is further evidenced by the fact that someone can divorce (dismiss, let go of, or send away) someone to whom they aren’t even legally married. In Matthew 1:19 Joseph had in mind to divorce Mary, even though they weren’t married yet. This suggests that divorce was seen as a “dismissing” (and not a legal matter), as it wouldn’t make sense to say that a person can legally divorce someone to whom they aren’t yet legally married. Joseph was going to just “dismiss” Mary quietly, not give her a certificate of divorce.