

What is the difference between adultery and fornication?

Question: When Jesus said, *“But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery; and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery”* (Matthew 5:32, NIV), what did He mean?

Answer:

The terms *fornication* and *adultery* are often used interchangeably in everyday conversation, but the Bible distinguishes between them.

- Fornication (Greek: *porneia*) refers to sexual activity outside the bounds of marriage. This can apply to anyone—married or unmarried. Theologically, it encompasses all acts of sexual immorality, including premarital sex, prostitution, or spiritual unfaithfulness to God.

- Adultery (Greek: *moicheia*) is a specific type of sexual immorality that occurs within the context of marriage: when a married person has sexual relations with someone other than their spouse.

So, fornication is a general term for sexual immorality, while adultery is specific to breaking the marital covenant. This distinction is important for understanding Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. Here, He addresses married couples, explaining that divorcing a spouse for any reason other than sexual immorality causes them to commit adultery. In other words, marital unfaithfulness is the only Biblically valid reason for divorce.

Theological insight:

The Greek word *porneia* (translated as *sexual immorality*) can also refer to spiritual unfaithfulness, not just physical acts. In the Old Testament, God often equates Israel's idolatry with fornication or adultery (Hosea 1-3; Ezekiel 16:27, 43, 58, NIV). Similarly, the book of Revelation describes the unfaithfulness of nations or people to God using the imagery of *fornication* (Rev

17:1–5; 19:2, NIV). This shows that sexual sin is not only a moral issue but also a spiritual one—it represents breaking covenant relationships.

Marriage in the Bible:

The Bible repeatedly commands that marriage be honored (Hebrews 13:4, NIV):

“Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.”

This emphasizes that God intends marriage to be permanent and sacred. Entering marriage carries the responsibility to remain faithful. Committing sexual immorality or adultery within marriage can spiritually and relationally “break” that union. In such cases, divorce may be Biblically justified without being sinful before God.

Forgiveness and grace:

However, not every act of marital unfaithfulness automatically

mandates divorce. God values forgiveness, and the Bible encourages reconciliation wherever possible (Colossians 3:13, NIV):

“Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

Forgiveness, faithfulness, and reverence for God are foundational to a strong marriage. Since God is the one who unites a couple (Mark 10:9, NIV: *“Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate”*), spouses must seek to protect their covenant relationship from sin.

Conclusion:

Fornication is a general term for sexual immorality, while adultery is a specific violation of the marital covenant. Sexual unfaithfulness can break a marriage and, in cases of adultery, justify divorce and remarriage according to Scripture. At the same time, forgiveness, faithfulness, and God-centered fear are essential for maintaining marital integrity.

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Shalom.

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