

## Divorce and Remarriage?

Today, divorce is commonplace; it is not just a problem contracted by Hollywood movie stars, but has invaded the church at large. It even provides the background for a number of family shows on TV. New converts, coming into evangelical churches are unprecedented in number, are as likely to have been divorced (or divorced-and-remarried). Therefore, to clearly explain the Biblical position on divorce and remarriage is especially important. They are demanding answers based on something better than denominational tradition—they want to know what God’s word says.

The divine ideal for marriage is clearly a lifelong bond that unites husband and wife in a “one flesh” relationship (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5). The marriage union is a holy institution founded by God and it is not to be dissolved at the whim of human beings (Matt. 19:6). God hates divorce for a number of reasons. First, it pictures error theologically. Marriage is designed by God to picture Christ’s love for His Church (Eph. 5:22-33). Divorce rips at the very core of Christianity, namely, an unconditional, eternal bond of love. Christ promises to never leave or forsake His church (Jn. 6:39-40). When divorce occurs, it creates an unbiblical view of God’s love and shatters the hope and power of the gospel. Consequently, it destroys the witness for which it was designed to portray. Second, it always involves unfaithfulness to the solemn covenant that was made by two people before God. Because of the vows promised, divorce becomes a lie. Third, divorce has incalculable consequences not only to married partners, but to their children as well. (Mal. 2:14-16).

Even with the principles already stated, God does allow divorce under certain circumstances. It must be realized that Scripture never permits it lightly. Biblical divorce is only a concession to man’s sin and is not a part of God’s original plan or purpose for marriage. The church’s attitude should be that of God’s and should pursue it only when there is absolutely no hope for reconciliation. With God’s help a marriage cannot only survive but can flourish and be a blessing the way God intends it to be. When a married couple surrenders their marriage to God and their hope is in Christ, nothing is impossible (Phil. 4:13).

In Matthew 19:3-9, our Lord teaches that divorce is an accommodation to man’s sin that violates His original purpose for the intimate, unity, and permanence of the marriage bond. God’s plan for marriage is to “leave” permanently and “cleave” permanently.

Genesis 2:24 For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.

Jesus taught that God’s law allowed divorce only because of “hardness of heart” (Matt. 19:8). Legal divorce is a concession for the faithful partner due to three circumstances. The first condition has nothing to do with personal sine, but is allowed in the death of a spouse (Romans 7:1-3). Two other circumstances allow for biblical divorce. These two are reasons because of personal sin, sexual sin or abandonment by the sinning partners. In all three of these circumstances the living partner or faithful partner is no longer bound to the marriage (Matt. 5:32; 19:9; 1 Cor. 7:12-15).

Matthew 5:32 but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Among the Jewish leaders were two schools of thought regarding the matter of divorce (Deut. 24:1). Those who followed Hillel said it was permissible for a husband to divorce his wife for any reason at all, but the other group (those following Shammai) said divorce was permissible only for a major offense. In our Lord's response, he strongly taught that marriage is viewed by God as an indissoluble unit and that marriages should not be terminated by divorce. However, Jesus does state that there is an "exception clause". This can be understood in several ways. Four of these are: (a) a single act of adultery, (b) unfaithfulness during the period of betrothal (engagement) (Matt. 1:19), (c) marriage between near relatives (Lev. 18:6-18), or (d) continued promiscuity.

Even though Jesus did say that divorce is permitted in some situations, we must remember that His primary point was to correct the Jew's flippant and indifferent view of divorce. They believed that they could divorce their wives "for any cause at all" (Matt. 19:3). Our Lord's response to their question was to show them the gravity of pursuing a sinful or unbiblical divorce. Therefore, the believer should never consider divorce lightly, but only in specific circumstances after all efforts of reconciliation have been exhausted and there is no other recourse.

Are there any biblical grounds for divorce?

The only two New Testament grounds for divorce (other than death) are sexual sin or desertion by an unbeliever. The first is found in Jesus' use of the Greek word *porneia* (Matt. 5:32; 19:9). This Greek word is a general term that encompasses all sexual sin such as adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and incest. When one partner violates the unity and intimacy of marriage by sexual sin, and forsakes his or her covenant obligation, the faithful partner is placed in an extremely awkward and difficult situation. It places the faithful partner in a bondage that God does not expect to be maintained. Because of the distress on the faithful partner God does permit release from the unfaithful partner through divorce.

1 Corinthians 7:15 Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace.

The second reason for permitting divorce is in the cases where the unbelieving mate does not desire to live with his or her believing spouse. When an unbelieving spouse cannot tolerate the partner's faith and wants a divorce, it is best to let that happen in order to preserve peace in the family (Rom. 12:18).

1 Corinthians 7:12 But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. 13 And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away. 14 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. 15 Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace.

Because “God has called us to peace” (v. 15), divorce is allowed by God and may even be preferable in situations where circumstances are extreme for the believing spouse. When an unbeliever desires to leave, trying to keep him or her may create greater tension and conflict. If the unbeliever leaves the marriage and refuses to file for divorce, the believing spouse is placed in an impossible situation. It becomes impossible for them to fulfill any marital or moral obligation. In such cases the believing spouse is no longer obligated to remain married, the believer may file for divorce without fearing the displeasure of God.

Can either spouse remarry after divorce?

Throughout Scripture, whenever legitimate divorce occurs, remarriage is assumed. When divorce is permitted, so is remarriage. By implication, the permission for a widow to remarry (1 Cor. 7:39, 40; Rom. 7:3) because the “bond” is broken, extends to this case where there is no “bondage.” Remarriage is permitted for the faithful partner only when the divorce is on biblical grounds. If we read Matthew 19:9 closely, it includes remarriage as a part of the exception statement.

Matthew 19:9 “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

The faithful spouse who divorces because of adultery, therefore, not only has legitimate grounds for dissolving the first marriage but able to remarry as well. That means that the faithful believer will NOT be guilty of adultery if he or she remarries. In fact, a biblical divorce makes it clear that the faithful partner is free to remarry, but only in the Lord (Matt. 1:9; Rom. 7:1-3; 1 Cor. 7:27-28, 39).

Those who divorce for any other reasons have sinned against God and sinned against their original partner. If they chose to marry someone else they themselves commit the act of “adultery” (Mark 10:11-12). Paul comments on this principle in (1 Cor. 7:10-11). Paul plainly tells believing women who sinfully divorce should “remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband”. If she repents from her sin of unbiblical divorce, the true fruits of that repentance would be to seek reconciliation (restoration) with her former husband.

Matthew 5:23 “ If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

The same is true for a man who divorces unbiblically (1 Cor. 7:11). The only time such a person could remarry another is if the former spouse remarries, proves to be an unbeliever, or dies, in which cases reconciliation would no longer be possible.

The Bible also gives a word of caution to anyone who is considering marriage to a divorcee. If his or her divorce was not on biblical grounds and there is still a responsibility to reconcile, the person who marries the divorcee is considered an adulterer

Mark 10:12 12and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing

adultery.”

Does the church have a responsibility to ensure Biblical truths about divorce?

Believers who pursue divorce on unbiblical grounds are subject to church discipline. The Elders (Pastors) are responsible to lovingly direct the erring parties back to a path of obedience and righteousness. The one who obtains an unbiblical divorce and remarries is guilty of adultery since God did not permit the original divorce (Matt. 5:32; Mark 10:11-12). That person is subject to church discipline as outlined in Matthew 18:15-17). If a professing Christian violates the marriage covenant and refuses to repent during the process, Scripture teaches that he or she should be excused from the privilege of church fellowship and considered to be an unbeliever (17). When such steps are taken and the unrepentant spouse refuses to repent, then the faithful spouse is free to divorce according to the provision for divorce as in the case of an unbeliever departing, as shown in 1 Cor. 7:15). Caution should be taken, however, that appropriate time be allowed for the possibility of the unfaithful spouse returning because of the discipline.

What about those who were divorced before they were saved?

According to 1 Corinthians 7:20-27, there is nothing in salvation that demands a particular social or marital status. The Apostle Paul, therefore, instructs believers to recognize that God providentially allows the circumstances they find themselves in when they come to Christ. If they were called while divorced, and cannot be reconciled to their former spouse because that spouse is an unbeliever or is remarried, then they are free to either remain single or be remarried to another believer (1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14).

What about repentance and forgiveness?

In cases where divorce took place on unbiblical grounds and the guilty party later repents, the grace of God is operative at the point of repentance. A sign of true repentance will be a desire to implement 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, which would involve a willingness to pursue reconciliation with his or her former spouse, if that is possible. If reconciliation is not possible, however, because the former spouse is an unbeliever or is remarried, then the forgiven believer could pursue another relationship under careful guidance and counsel of the church leaders.

In cases where a believer obtained a divorce on unbiblical ground and remarried, he or she is guilty of the sin of adultery until that sin is confessed (Mark 10:11-12, 1 Jn. 1:9). God does forgive that sin immediately when repentance takes place, and there is nothing in Scripture to indicate anything other than that. From that point on the believer should continue in his or her current marriage.

Summary principles

1. Believers are obligated to remain married except for three conditions, death, desertion, and sexual impurity (adultery).

2. If an unbelieving spouse wants to remain married, then it is the responsibility of the Believing spouse to remain married.

3. If an unbelieving spouse refuses to remain married, and all attempts at reconciliation have been exhausted, then the believing spouse can divorce and not displease the Lord.