

Divorce and Remarriage¹

What does the Bible teach about divorce and remarriage? I don't really want to cover this subject, but divorce is so common in our culture today, and even quite common in the church, that it is appropriate for us to review what the Bible says about it. And the Bible says a good bit about this unpleasant topic.

Young people who will potentially be married in the near future should be well aware of what the Bible says about divorce. Young people especially should make a commitment well before marriage to avoid the conditions that lead to divorce.

As a church, we need to know the biblical teaching on divorce so we know how to deal with it should it come up. Some of you know that we excommunicated someone from the church a few years back for an unbiblical divorce. We should take it seriously and we do take it seriously. Our culture is very casual and tolerant regarding divorce, but the church should not be.

There are many views on divorce and remarriage among Christians. I'll be giving you my view of the subject today. If you disagree with me, that's OK. I don't demand that anyone holds the exact same view as I do. I think my view of divorce is true to the biblical teaching on the subject. And it's the view endorsed by many solid biblical scholars. But I recognize that good people disagree. If you've done the study, the reading, and the research, and you come to a different conclusion than I do, that's OK. There are good people on various sides of this issue, and it is a very complex subject. So I don't expect everyone to come to the exact same conclusions I do. Still, I believe that my position is true to the biblical evidence.

What does the Bible teach about divorce?

- I. God's original purpose in marriage was the life-long union of a man and a woman (Mt 19:5-6). Divorce violates God's expectation for the permanent union of the marriage bond (Gen 2:24).

The proper end to marriage is death of one or both of the spouses. "Til death us do part." Death should be the only way a marriage contract ends. God's intent and expectation is that marriage is permanent.

- II. Divorce is a symptom of sin. When a divorce happens, it's because sin happened. Divorce assumes a sinful failure by one or both spouses.

Jesus said (Mk 10:5) that God allowed divorce "for the hardness of your heart." It would not even be an option if not for sinful behavior and sinful attitudes.

¹ Some of this material is based on John MacArthur's *Divorce and Remarriage* (1987).

Since divorce has a spiritual cause, then it also has a spiritual solution. The solution to sin is confession and repentance. We can avoid divorce and recover from divorce through repentance and submission to God.

We should always maintain the hope that we can overcome sin through the resources God gives us—salvation, the Word of God, the church, prayer, and biblical counsel. Divorce is often a tragic outcome, but it's not the end of the world. God has the power to help us deal with the problems that accompany divorce. God is able to redeem situations and heal people when they turn from sin and submit to him. So there is always hope.

III. God hates divorce.

Malachi 2:16 *For the LORD God of Israel says That He hates divorce, ...*

All believers should have the same attitude toward divorce as does God. We should avoid it with all our strength. It's OK to hate what God hates.

Many people today get married with the assumption that if things don't work out, divorce is an option. Some couples even sign a pre-nuptial agreement that specifies what will happen if the couple gets a divorce. Even before they get married, they acknowledge that divorce may end the marriage.

Christians should enter marriage with the strong conviction and commitment that their marriage is permanent. Divorce is not an option. We maintain our relationship "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health ... 'til death us do part." That should be an unbreakable vow.

IV. God limits divorce.

- A. When the Bible addresses divorce, it is always described in terms of what God has permitted, not what God intended or commanded. God allows it in some circumstances, although divorce is frequently a very bad outcome. But still, God permits it in some cases. That's what the OT law says in Deut 24:1-4, and it's what Jesus said in Mt 19:7-9.
- B. Only one place in Scripture actually commends divorce, and that was in a unique situation where the Jews had inter-married with pagans after the Babylonian captivity (Ezra 9-10; Neh 13). Ezra commands the Jewish men to "separate yourselves...from the foreign wives" (Ezra 10:11). In that case, it was proper for the Jewish men to divorce their pagan wives. The proper solution in that case was divorce. That was an unusual circumstance, and the Bible does not use that example as a general principle controlling divorce.
- C. The only biblical grounds for divorce are adultery and abandonment. Let's look at each of these.

1. Adultery — any sinful sexual activity outside the bonds of marriage. If adultery happened, divorce may be allowed.

Matthew 5:32 *But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.*

Matthew 19:9 *And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.*

In these two passages, Jesus gives an exception to the rule. Marriage is to be permanent, except in one unique case. There is one circumstance that destroys the marital bond, and that is adultery or fornication.

- a) The word that Jesus uses in both of these passages is *porneia*. Some versions translate the word “marital unfaithfulness.” This word is fairly broad in its meaning; it can describe virtually any form of sexual immorality. So if a spouse engages in any kind of immoral contact with anyone other than his spouse, he is guilty of fornication/adultery/marital unfaithfulness.
- b) We should also be aware that in the OT, adultery was a capital crime, punishable by death. So if someone were proven guilty of adultery, he would be put to death. That obviously would end the marriage contract.

Under the NT, adultery/fornication is grounds for divorce. The innocent party may be freed from marriage to an adulterous spouse. Adultery breaks the marriage bond; it obliterates the marriage contract.

Quote: Divorce recognizes and certifies for the innocent spouse that there remains no continuing obligations to the guilty party *as if he had been put to death.*²

- c) Adultery does not automatically trigger a divorce. The couple ought to seek reconciliation even if adultery has occurred. A marriage can be saved even after adultery if the guilty party repents and seeks reconciliation. Even if adultery has taken place, the couple should make every effort to keep the marriage together.

² Bob Burridge, “Of Marriage and Divorce (part 2)” 2002.

- d) But in some cases, the adulterer is unrepentant. Adultery may be habitual or continual or multiple. Perhaps the adulterer is unwilling to quit or repent. In that case, a divorce may be legitimate.
 - e) The one and only exception to the rule that Jesus gave is *porneia*, a matter of marital unfaithfulness/fornication/ adultery/immorality. If that happens, and if the guilty party is unrepentant, divorce is a legitimate option.
2. Abandonment/desertion — Abandonment occurs when a non-believing spouse refuses to live with his or her believing spouse, especially because of his or her Christian convictions (**read** 1 Cor 7:12-15).
- a) How might a believer find himself married to an unbeliever? One spouse could be a convert and the other not. E.g., Timothy’s mother, Eunice, was probably married to an unbeliever.

If a spouse converts to Christ, and the unbelieving spouse does not want to live with a believer, what is to be done? Paul says that in that case, let the unbeliever depart. If the unbeliever abandons the believer, it gives the believer the right to pursue a divorce.
 - b) Believers must not abandon an unbelieving spouse; but if an unbelieving spouse abandons a believer, the innocent spouse is freed from the bond of marriage. I.e., the believing spouse may have to permit/concede to a divorce; the believer is no longer bound to the marriage in such cases. So that’s abandonment/desertion.
 - c) Also, many scholars would see physical abuse as a form of abandonment. That view is somewhat controversial. One writer (Jay Adams) suggests that if a person is acting like an unbeliever, we should assume that he is. Physical abuse of a spouse would certainly bring into question one’s profession of faith, as would outright abandonment.
3. Thus, these are the only two biblical grounds for divorce—adultery and abandonment. If *neither* of these has taken place, then there are no biblical grounds for divorce. Divorce in any other cases would be unbiblical and sinful. Divorce on these grounds *alone* is acceptable.
- a) Every case is unique, and we can’t jump to conclusions regarding whether a divorce is justified or not. We have to look at the details of each case to figure out whether a divorce has biblical grounds. We never want to encourage or promote divorce. We should encourage reconciliation as much as possible.

- b) It's illegitimate for a couple to say, "We no longer love each other, so we're getting a divorce." That's not a biblical exception. The biblical command is, "Husbands, love your wife as Christ loved the church." It's not a matter of falling out of love. Spouses are obligated to love one another. Even if they no longer have a warm feeling of affection for one another, it's not a biblical basis for divorce. If the couple pursues divorce anyways, it's wrong and unbiblical. It would be grounds for church discipline.
- c) Further, if the divorce happens without biblical grounds, there can be no remarriage. To remarry after an unbiblical divorce would be adultery. Jesus is very clear about that. Such a remarriage would also be grounds for church discipline.
- d) If a person has experienced an unbiblical divorce and is remarried, there is often nothing that can be done to change the situation. We often cannot undo what we have done. But it's not hopeless in the eyes of God. God can forgive any sin. The marriage may have been sinful in its origin, but it still could be a legitimate marital union; it's not invalid.

The best thing to do in the case of an unbiblical remarriage is sincerely to repent of past sinful behavior and to seek forgiveness from Christ, whose blood can cleanse all sin. Getting another divorce in that situation would probably not be a good choice; it would not solve the problem. And the principle from Gen 24 implies that you cannot go back to the previous spouse. So the couple has to make the best of the current situation. What's done is done, and now you have to make the best of it.

Paul's advice from 1 Cor 7 is to serve the Lord as best you can in whatever condition you are in. You can't go back and change history. All you can do is get things right now so as to make a positive future.

Family life is often messy. People make bad choices and have to live with the consequences. But all things are possible with God. God can make all things new. God is in the business of redeeming people from sin. If you repent and submit yourself to God, God can redeem a relationship and sanctify it even if it did not follow the biblical pattern.

God is gracious and merciful. If you've messed up your family relationships through sinful and unbiblical decisions, repent and submit yourself to God. That's the best solution to an imperfect situation. God can redeem and restore us, and we must trust him to do that.

V. God permits remarriage in some cases.

Remarriage is permitted for the innocent party when the divorce was on biblical grounds—i.e., in the cases of unrepentant adultery and/or abandonment by an unbeliever—in such cases, the innocent party may remarry.

How do we know that remarriage is permissible in some cases?

- A. The OT pattern, which was still in effect during Jesus' life, allowed remarriage after a divorce.

Deut 24:2 *And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.*

Jewish tradition (i.e., the Mishnah) held that a divorce certificate was not valid unless the husband explicitly said, "Thou art free to marry any man."

- B. The NT allows for remarriage when the divorce was based upon biblical grounds.
1. Jesus said that remarriage would be adulterous *in the case of an unbiblical divorce*. But when there are biblical grounds for divorce—namely, when *porneia* has occurred—remarriage is allowed.
 2. Paul likewise states that a "brother or a sister is not under bondage" (1 Cor 7:15) when an unbelieving spouse insists on divorce. To be "not under bondage" certainly implies that the innocent party is free from the marriage, and if so, he is also free to remarry.
 3. The context in which Paul said these words strongly suggests that that was his intended meaning.
 - a) The language would have been very plain to his first-century readers. The Jews allowed remarriage based on Deut 24 and Ex 21:10-11.

b) Gentile converts also would have understood the words “not under bondage” to allow remarriage. We find similar phrases in the divorce certificates of that time. All Jewish divorce certificates and most Greco-Roman ones contained the words “you are free to remarry any man you wish” or something very similar.³

4. Thus, Paul’s words “not under bondage” imply both that that marriage is no longer binding and that the innocent victim is free to remarry.

Quote: immorality committed after the marriage is formally constituted provides legal grounds for the harmed partner to [divorce] which formally ends the marriage obligations *as if the offending party had died*. Since marriage is only binding as long as both parties are living, this divorcement frees the innocent partner *as if death had ended their marriage*.⁴

C. The marriage *covenant* is essentially a *contract*. Like any contract, it has stipulations (see Ex 21:10-11). Jesus reiterated the stipulations of a marriage contract in Matt 19:5 “For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they two shall be one flesh.” The stipulations for the contract are two-fold:

1. commitment/loyalty/faithfulness to one’s spouse above all others (“leave... and cleave”), and
2. marital fidelity to one’s spouse (“one flesh”)

These two stipulations correspond exactly to the biblical *exceptions* for divorce—adultery/infidelity and abandonment. A divorce that occurs for one or both of these reasons ends the marriage bond. Failure to maintain the stipulations of the contract voids the contract. Once a contract is broken, it has no more power to bind. As Paul says, a brother is “not under bondage” in such cases. The contract does not hold once the stipulations have been violated.

D. In cases where adultery or abandonment did *not* happen—i.e., without biblical grounds—the believer is exhorted to either seek reconciliation or else remain unmarried (1 Cor 7:10-11). In some cases, a legal separation may be part of a solution. A couple may need to separate until they can work out a way to reconcile. They may need biblical counseling.

VI. God brings judgment upon those who divorce without biblical grounds.

A. Believers who pursue divorce without biblical grounds are subject to church discipline because they openly reject the Word of God (cf. 1 Cor 5:1-13).

³ David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Eerdmans, 2002), 202.

⁴ Bob Burridge, “Of Marriage and Divorce (part 2)” 2002. Emphasis mine.

- B. Likewise, one who remarries after an unbiblical divorce commits adultery since God did not recognize the validity of the original divorce (Mt 5:32, Mk 10:11-12).
- C. In both cases, the guilty party is subject to chastening by the Lord and discipline from the church. We should take these matters very seriously.

VII. God desires repentance of sin and restoration of relationships.

- A. In cases where divorce took place without biblical grounds and where the guilty party repents, the repentant party should attempt to restore the marriage if at all possible.

In other words, where two believers were divorced without biblical grounds, the grace of God leads them to repentance and reunion, and they can once again experience the joy of their relationship with Christ and with one another. That's the optimal solution—restoration of the relationship.

- B. If a marriage becomes intolerable, but there's not grounds for divorce, there may be grounds for a temporary separation.

VIII. God desires to protect the institution of marriage.

- A. The church has a responsibility to uphold and support the biblical ideal of marriage. The church must always take this issue seriously because God hates divorce and the potential for sin in the context of divorce is very high. Children almost always suffer in the process of a divorce. In rare cases, divorce actually protects children from harm; but in many cases, divorce is very harmful for children.
- B. Churches should be careful when performing weddings for divorced people. Only under very limited conditions should a church perform a wedding for previously divorced people. We don't want to be involved in establishing an adulterous relationship.

Here's a good summary of the issue: “[God] intends all marriages to be permanent but gives people the freedom to follow or reject his intentions. He permits divorce for adultery or desertion because these sins so undermine the foundation of a marriage that greater pain or evil may result if [divorce] does not occur. Neither of these sins, however, uniquely destroys a marriage; restoration always remains the ideal. ... [D]ivorce should never be considered unless all other approaches to healing a broken relationship have been exhausted. Divorce in biblical times virtually always carried with it the right to remarry; no NT text [overturns] this permission. Neither partner of a divorced couple, in which both have remained celibate, should consider marrying a new spouse unless serious and sustained attempts at reconciliation (either before or after the divorce) have proved fruitless. Those who are already remarried [after an unbiblical divorce]... should earnestly repent of any unconfessed sin and commit themselves to faithfulness to making their present marriage honor Christ.”⁵

In a perfect world, divorce should not be an issue among Christians. Christians should have strong marriages that are not susceptible to divorce. That's the ideal. But the reality is that divorce is common in our culture and it's even common in the Christian church.

Couples must do everything in their power, both before and during marriage, to strengthen their commitments to one another. God hates divorce. Believers should reflect that attitude and should see divorce as a violation of God's expressed purpose for marriage.

I hate to end our Summer Sermon Series on such a depressing note. No one enjoys discussing divorce. But it's a biblical topic that has a huge impact on families, even those professing to be Christian. Young people especially need to understand the biblical principles pertaining to marriage and divorce. Those contemplating marriage must commit themselves to creating strong, vibrant, life-long marriages and to avoiding any possibility for divorce.

For those who have experienced divorce, we should hold out hope and help. Divorce is not an unforgiveable sin. Christ can bring salvation and healing even to the most difficult of life circumstances. Family life can be messy, and things often don't turn out the way we had planned. We make sinful decisions and then have to live with the consequences. But God can redeem and heal our shattered family relationships. There is always hope with God no matter what has happened in the past.

⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, “Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, And Celibacy: An Exegesis Of Matthew 19:3–12,” *Trinity Journal* Volume 11 (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1990; 2002): 161-196.