

Divorce and Remarriage

by Robert Griffith

Do you remember your wedding day? As part of your vows, you probably said words like this:

"To have and to hold from this day forward; for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; until we are parted by death."

Beautiful words. Words of commitment. But think about them - for better or for worse. While these words are found in most traditional wedding services, unfortunately far too many say them but do not mean them. What they do mean is *"for better not for worse."*

Evidence is abundant that this is true. The majority of marriages today end in divorce. If we have not experienced it personally, we know personally someone who has. It's happening everywhere. It seems that when things get rough, people bail out ... and they are getting out in alarming numbers.

What do we say about all of this? What does the church have to say? Well, often the church simply condemns divorce. That's easy enough. The tragedy is many condemn both divorce and those who are divorced - both the action and the person. It's far neater that way. By doing that, we can not only continue to preach against divorce from our lofty platform, but we also will not have to get our hands dirty by grappling with real people who have been divorced.

We must be careful when we listen to what the church says. Often, churches are guilty of twisting the Scriptures to accommodate their own particular bias. Generally, they either raise the standard or lower it. On one hand, well-meaning people raise the standard in their desire to stop divorce.

So they say there should be no divorce for anybody for any reason, and absolutely no remarriage for anyone at any time, period. That sounds nice and neat, doesn't it? The only problem with it is that while it may be well-intentioned, it is biblically incorrect and heartless in many cases.

On the other hand, there are those well-intentioned people who look at the problem of divorce and say we must not forget that people are involved, and we need to love them, care for them, minister to them, and accept them - yet in their ministry to the people they fail to still confront the truth that divorce is not God's intention.

The tendency here is to lower the standard to accommodate everybody. While these churches rightly emphasise forgiveness, they end up lowering the standard to the same as that of the world. And that is biblically wrong and undermines the critical importance of commitment in marriage.

Perhaps we should not be asking what the church says, but rather what the Bible - God's Word says. Does God have a word for the tragedy of divorce? The answer is, yes, He does. And it is a redemptive word for those who have been scarred by divorce; and also a strong word of encouragement for those seeking to build strong Christian marriages.

You see, it is God's desire not only to minister to those who have failed in their marriages, but also to give practical instruction to those seeking to divorce-proof their current marriage. God not only diagnoses the illness, He prescribes the cure. We need to hear that word today. And we will as we examine the Scripture. So let's look at God's Word in order to discover the plain, biblical teaching concerning marriage.

"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." (Matthew 19:9)

There were two schools of thought in Jesus' day concerning divorce and they were propagated by two rabbis: Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai. Rabbi Shammai had taught that divorce was only permissible on the grounds of some sexual impropriety. His was the stricter view. Rabbi Hillel, on the other hand, had a more liberal view and taught that a man could divorce His wife for any reason. If she burned his breakfast, put too much salt on his food, showed disrespect to him, spoke disrespectfully of her husband's parents in his presence, spoke to a man on the street, or even let her hair down in public, he could divorce her.

The view of Rabbi Hillel was the view that was popular in Jesus' day. And it was for this reason the religious leaders tested Him. They wanted Him to become unpopular with the people and they knew He would not side with this more liberal view.

But the testing of the religious leaders was flawed by misinterpretation. This entire controversy was based on a passage of Scripture in Deuteronomy 24. The religious leaders construed this as a commandment: They said to Him, "*Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?*" (v.7)

What is referred to here is what they felt was a commandment to divorce a wife. This passage was misunderstood because it was mistranslated for years. Even in our King James Bible the sense of that mistranslation is perpetuated. Look at Deuteronomy 24:1 from the King James:

"When a man hath taken a wife and married her, and it comes to pass that she find no favor in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her, then let him write her a bill of divorcement and give it in her hand and send her out of his house."

The way this reads is that it is a command to divorce a wife when some uncleanness is found in her. Notice it says "*then* let him write her a bill of divorcement." The New American Standard Version translates this passage more accurately from the original language. It reads:

"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 indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house."

What is being recounted here is not a command to divorce, but the objective account of one who does divorce. It is not a command to divorce, but a permission to divorce based on some "uncleanness."

Now the real issue was what constituted uncleanness. Shammai said that it was sexual impropriety. Hillel said it was for any reason, such as the ones I have already mentioned.

Another rabbi who was of Hillel's school, Rabbi Akiba, took it even further to its logical conclusion by saying that the "indecency" in her meant that a man could divorce his wife when he found another woman who was more beautiful. Such was the climate in Jesus' day. It is not very much different from the climate in our day.

So we see here the religious leaders testing Jesus, hoping that He would discredit Himself with the people by adopting an unpopular view concerning divorce. I'm sure all ears were opened as the crowd waited to hear His response. Jesus did respond. His testimony remembered the detailed instruction of Moses and reminded the religious leaders of it. They confronted Him with what Moses had said. They referred Him to Deuteronomy 24. Then Jesus did what He was so adept at doing. He cut right to the heart of the issue.

"Jesus replied, 'Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.'" (Matthew 19:8)

Rather than entering into a debate over what the "indecency" was, He told the religious leaders why Moses wrote the commandment concerning divorce. Jesus said that it was for the hardness of heart of the people. That was the whole reason divorce was permitted at all. People's hearts had become hard and they were divorcing their wives for any reason. You must remember that the wife never had the authority to divorce her husband. So Moses wrote the law concerning the writing of a bill of divorcement for the protection of the woman. Without such a bill, she had no rights at all. It was because of the mercy of God and the hardness of the human heart that this instruction was given. But the rabbis had taken this as some kind of right to divorce a wife for any reason.

The testimony of Jesus further revealed the divine intention for marriage. Jesus digs deeper and gives these religious leaders a lesson from the very beginning of their Bible.

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." (Matthew 19:4-6)

Jesus points to God's original intention back in creation. You recall there that God made one man and one woman. God didn't create two men; it wasn't Adam and Steve. He didn't create two women; it wasn't Alice and Eve. Nor did God create any extras in case Adam and Eve didn't work out; it wasn't Adam, Eve, and Helen and Steve. It was just Adam and Eve - one man and one woman. That was God's original intent. And that is still His desire for marriage.

Make no mistake about it, God's intent is one man married to one woman until they are parted by death. Because of this, verse 4 indicates that the man should leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and those two shall become one flesh. Verse 6 indicates that they are no longer two, but one flesh. Verse 6 also says that God has joined them together and no man should separate what God has joined. This is the divine intention for marriage.

The religious leaders came to Jesus and tested Him by asking, *"What do you think about divorce?"* He responded to them by saying, *"What do you think about marriage?"* And then He revealed to them what God thinks about marriage. God sees marriage as two people becoming one, committed to one another, in a covenant relationship which lasts a lifetime.

But we still have the question: What about divorce? Does the Scripture have anything to say about that? Divorce is real. Divorce happens. Are there any guidelines? Is there any sure word from God? Is the original intention of God all there is in the Bible by which we judge marriage, divorce and remarriage? How do we deal with people who get divorced? Are there any biblical grounds for divorce? All these are questions which need answers. And while Jesus expresses God's intention for marriage, He does not stop there. He goes on to deal with the issue of divorce.

We need to be clear in the church about this issue. Especially in our evangelical circles, there is a tendency to over-react based on our conservative theology and our high view of marriage. But we must be careful to say what the Scriptures say, not to interpret them based on religious tradition or even the 'rabbis' of our day.

I challenge you to hold the belief you hold based on a thorough examination of Scripture, not based on what religious tradition says or on what Dr. So-and-so says. I want to believe what I believe because of my understanding of the Scriptures, not because I have subscribed to some creed or joined some particular theological camp.

I know too many preachers who line up behind certain teachers or subscribe to certain schools of thought because it's convenient and easy to do. It's far easier to let someone do your thinking for you than to struggle with the Scriptures as you study them and pray over them to seek God's direction as you attempt to apply them to your life.

"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." (Matthew 19:9)

Here Jesus gives a ground for divorce. This ground is also found in Matthew 5:32. There is no doubt that this is the authentic teaching of Jesus because none of the ancient manuscripts of Matthew omit this clause. Adultery in the Old Testament was punishable by death initially. No one would have disputed that marital unfaithfulness was a just ground for divorce.

So we see there are biblical exceptions. Jesus gives us one here: marital unfaithfulness. Just as under the original law, adultery punished by death would break the marital bond and release the partner, so marital unfaithfulness by adultery could do the same. But notice here that Jesus never commanded divorce for unfaithfulness, but only permitted it. What Jesus is saying is that if a man divorces his wife for anything less than adultery, he then causes her to commit adultery and commits adultery himself.

Is there anything else the Scripture says on this subject? Yes there is. In 1 Corinthians 7:8-16 we find another important passage dealing with divorce and remarriage. Remember that Paul is writing to Christians. The first category he addresses are single people:

"Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion." (1 Cor. 7:8-9)

What he's saying here is that if you are single and can remain single, do so. But if you have a need to marry, then that is OK too. Next, he addresses two Christians married to one another:

"To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife." (1 Cor. 7:10-11)

Here we have two Christians married to one another. Paul simply says, *"Stay together."* There is no reason to leave. If there is no unfaithfulness, stay together. It is interesting that he does make a provision for a separation.

In fact, the Bible does not anywhere teach that the wife has an obligation to stay in a home with an abusive man who threatens her physical welfare or the welfare of her children. But if she leaves under those circumstances, she is either to be reconciled unto her husband, or to remain unmarried. There is no biblical reason why two Christians should divorce.

Finally, Paul addresses a mixed marriage - a Christian who is married to an unbeliever. These mixed marriages could happen in a couple of ways. Two unbelievers could be married, and then later one becomes a Christian. That, I believe is the most common way a mixed marriage happens.

The second way is that a believer could marry an unbeliever against the clear advice of the Scriptures. The Bible teaches us that we are not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. It is not a rule put there to make us more miserable. It is a strong warning put there for our own good.

God is trying to save us the misery of being locked into a marriage with someone who is fundamentally different from us, whose values are different, whose outlook on life is different, whose goals are different. Let me encourage you and plead with you - do not be foolish enough to marry an unbeliever. While it is possible for God to do something to save that person, and it does happen, there is no guarantee that it will happen. You may be condemned to a life of misery.

So here Paul addresses mixed marriages and says the following:

"To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce 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 him.

For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace." (1 Cor. 7:12-15)

The teaching here is quite simple: Paul is well familiar with the teaching of Jesus and he, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, expands the exception from marital unfaithfulness to include desertion by an unbelieving partner. He says, "If you are a believer married to an unbeliever, stay with them. God may save them."

"How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" (1 Cor. 7:16)

In other words, he's saying, *"God may do something. Stay with them as long as they desire to stay with you."* But then verse 15 gives us the only other biblical grounds for divorce. When an unbelieving partner leaves a believer, the believer is to let that partner leave.

The Scriptures tell us that *"the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases."* Bondage to what? Obviously, bondage to the law of marriage. Paul speaks of being *"bound by the law of her husband"* in Romans. Here he speaks of being released from that bondage by the desertion of an unbelieving partner.

What the Scripture is teaching here is that Christians should stay with non-Christians as long as the non-Christian is willing. But if the non-Christian leaves the Christian and divorces him or her, then the Christian is released from that marriage biblically, and is free to remarry.

To sum up, there are only three things that release a marriage partner from a marriage:

1. The death of one marriage partner
2. Sexual unfaithfulness by a marriage partner
3. The desertion and divorce by an unbelieving marriage partner.

That is the plain teaching of Scripture and if I am ever counselling or talking to currently married people who are struggling, I stress that these are the only three grounds for divorce offered by God that we know of .. so unless one of those is applicable, I encourage people to do all they can to make the marriage work.

However, while those are the biblical grounds for a divorce, what about those who have divorced outside those grounds? To those, we have to say that what they have done is what God ordained and they have done the wrong thing by God and by their partner. If there is any possibility, they need to go and be reconciled to the one they divorced.

If that is not possible, which most times it is not, then like all the rest of us imperfect sinners, they simply cast themselves on the mercy of God and claim His forgiveness for their part in that sin. They must call it what it is - sin. But at the same time, let me hasten to add that the sin of divorce is no different than any other sin. It is not the unforgiveable sin. It has consequences that can be devastatingly painful for adults and particularly for children caught up in divorce – that's why God is against it – it hurts those He loves. But sin is sin and before God there is no spiritual hierarchy.

To elevate the sin of divorce outside biblical guidelines, above other sins is to commit an even greater sin, the sin of self-righteous spiritual pride. The sinner who casts himself upon Jesus in sincere repentance will find forgiveness.

It is pretty clear then how God treats people who divorce – now how should we treat them? How should the church treat them? That's just as clear - we must forgive those whom God forgives. Love keeps no record of wrongs and God is love. When His forgiveness wipes the slate clean – it's clean.

Our treatment of divorced people who have not been divorced within the guidelines of Scripture is to be the same as God's treatment of them. We stand beside them, arm in arm, side by side as sinners on level ground before the cross of Christ, in need of a saviour as much today and any day and we accept them, love them and welcome them into the body of Christ in the fullest possible way. We are not blessing their actions. We are not sanctioning their divorce. In fact we are not saying anything at all other than, "*God forgives you and so do I.*"

It is sad, but true, that still today in many churches, you could be forgiven for murder, but not divorce. I want you to know that God can heal and restore divorced persons and can use them in His Kingdom, not as second-class citizens, but in the same way He uses all saved sinners. Nothing is closed to you.

During my fifteen years as Pastor of Orange Baptist Church, a significant number of divorced people joined our fellowship. I believe that was no accident. I believe they found a place where sin is still called sin, but also found a place where forgiveness, grace, mercy and healing flow freely to all.

They found a place where, like the woman caught in adultery, they could look into the loving eyes of Jesus himself as He sent all those condemning accusers away and says, "*Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.*"

There are thousands of Christian people who have tripped and fallen and find themselves on the other side of a broken marriage, desperately wanting to find a new day, a new horizon of hope beyond the pain of divorce. If they can't find that hope and that fresh start in the community of faith, in the Church of Jesus Christ, the One in Whom there is no condemnation, then where on earth will they find it?

I dare not conclude this important message without sharing a few biblical exhortations to help us divorce-proof our marriages. We've already referred to the fact that God's original intent for marriage was two people joined in a one-flesh union, committed to one another in a covenant relationship for life. In Ephesians 4:22-33, we have further instruction on the covenant relationship of marriage.

In that passage, the one-flesh, committed union is emphasised. There, the husband is told to love his wife even as Christ loved the church, and gave Himself for her. The wife is told to submit to and support her husband because it is the Lord's commandment. The key to such a relationship is commitment.

Commitment means first, we are committed to God: to be obedient to Him, to follow His word, to put Him first in our life. If a man and a woman are committed and submitted to God, they have a foundation for a marriage that will be divorce-proof. But commitment also means that we are committed to our marriage partner. Because we are committed to God, we can then be committed to that person. Because we are committed to God's word, divorce is not an option.

As a matter of fact, I encourage you to put that word out of your vocabulary - never, never, never use it when you are mad and upset and things are not going well. For the believer, it should not be an option - put it out of your vocabulary and remove it as an option from your mind - completely!

Christians who are committed to God first and committed to one another can survive almost any storm. You may say, "*Well, how can I be committed to someone I don't love?*"

Your love does not make you committed; your commitment causes you to love.

If you will give yourself to that partner to be there for them 100%, to be supportive of them, to be their friend, to look out for their interests, to point them to Jesus, your marriage can work. But it takes hard work. Only commitment can see you through.

We are called to be servants. Jesus said the greatest in the Kingdom of God is the servant of all. Jesus Himself came to serve not to be served. If that is our attitude in marriage, not 'what can I get', but 'what can I give' Not meeting my needs, but meeting his/her needs. If our primary purpose each day is the love and serve God and love and serve the needs of our husband or wife ABOVE OUR OWN NEEDS - if that is what drives us and governs us, then we will go a long way to divorce-proofing our marriage.

If we spend most of our time navel-gazing and looking at our own areas of need and focussing on the things that don't serve us , then we are headed for a very rocky and potentially fatal conclusion in that relationship.

Now in a local Church setting, where we have single, married and divorced people all tossed in together, we need to be all things to all men, as Paul once put it. By that I mean we need to deal with people where they are.

To people contemplating marriage I would exhort you to be very, very careful to let God lead you in that choice of your life's partner and to not consider for one moment that it is wise to marry an unbeliever.

But to those who find themselves already married to an unbeliever, I don't judge you. To you I say hang in there as long as possibly can. Keep on seeking, keep on knocking, keep on asking that God will save your husband or wife. *Live* the gospel in your marriage - don't *preach* it to your partner. Your marriage vows and the commitment you made before God is just as valid and you need to stay married as long as you can. Of course if an physically or emotionally abusive situation arises, then great wisdom is needed in the way you remove yourself from that situation.

Now to those who have found themselves in a marriage where both are believers but it has hit the rocks and things are getting really tough, I plead with you to get help. Don't jump ship like most people do. God is still there in the middle of the mess. His grace and His power and His reconciling love is still available. Get divorce out of your mind as an option and and let someone into your pain so they help.

To those who are separated and not yet divorced, I guess I would need to deal differently again with you. Of course if there is any hope of reconciliation, I would want to encourage you to continue to pursue that as the best course. Sadly, however, I have found that most people who have separated are already divorced emotionally and in some cases, even spiritually and the actual piece of paper that comes later is a mere formality.

That is why I would counsel people against the lie from hell that separation is a viable option for people who want 'time out' to sort things out. If a relationship is in trouble then it has to be dealt with as a relationship.

It only stands to reason that when you separate the two people for any length of time – there is no longer a relationship – only the memory of one - and so it is impossible to resolve a relationship tension when at the same time you are destroying it by being apart. A day or two away from each other to catch your breath and wait on God is fine ... but any talk of separating with the view to that being a positive thing is total nonsense.

Now to those who are living on the other side of divorce, those who don't have the opportunity of heeding any warnings in respect to past failures and breakdowns, I simply bless you, love you and exhort you to move on and seek a new day with God beside you all the way. Let the past be the past. Learn from any mistakes you have made, bask in the restorative, cleansing forgiveness of God and get on with your life and be very cautious, very, very cautious, if you find yourself heading into another marriage.

The majority of second marriages fail – usually because people refuse to deal with the issues that led to the first divorce. Let God sort that out, in you and with you and there is absolutely no reason why you cannot find true happiness and fulfilment in a strong Christian marriage.

Divorce and remarriage is a sensitive issue and I am sure that I will not please everyone by what I've said in this message. I have a habit of upsetting the conservatives and the liberals at the same time on issues like this, but I think that is largely because I committed to finding that radical middle ground where we can have the compassion and grace and love of Jesus whilst at the same time we still call sin what it is and deal with it firmly.

Roman 2:4 tells us that it is God's love and kindness that leads us to repentance - I have staked a lot on the truth of that statement and I believe God is vindicating that more and more each day across His wonderful Church.

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