



Divorce: Bound by the Law or Freed by Grace?

Divorce is a controversial subject in the Christian world. And, it is a painful and complicated subject for those going through divorce, those that are divorced, and those that are in difficult marriages contemplating divorce. There are no simple answers and the church's input is often confusing, legalistic, and simplistic. Many Christians that have gone through a divorce say they received little support with much judgment from the church and much support and much grace from non-Christians. This isn't right.

Four Views on Divorce

There are four views of divorce traditionally in the church:

1. No divorce and no remarriage.
2. Divorce for some things but no remarriage.
3. Divorce and remarriage but only for desertion by a non-believer or adultery.
4. Divorce and remarriage for adultery, desertion, and other reasons.

It isn't my intention to explain each of the views. Biblical scholars disagree and I am not one of them. For further explanations of each of these views, read *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* edited by H. Wayne House where four men who have studied this issue extensively write a defense of one of the above positions and then rebut the others' positions. There are also two articles on this website by Paul Blue ("Divorce in the New Testament" and "Divorce in the Old Testament") that offer an alternative explanation from those suggested in the book. The article on my website on remarriage also offers an in depth explanation of the Scriptures as they relate to whether or not Christians can remarry after divorce. Another good book is *Redemptive Divorce* by Mark Gaither which offers a Scriptural tough love approach.

God is the God of grace. Christ's death did away with the law with the intention of setting us free. There is forgiveness for all and God understands the limitations of sinful men. The question is: Does the church respond with the same grace and understanding that God offers?

A woman called a radio show I was on with a situation that illustrates the rigid and harmful stand that the church can take. Her marriage had been difficult even before her husband left five years before with no contact. She and her children had finally reached a place where their lives were peaceful and then her husband showed up. She wanted to file for divorce now that he was around to be served, but her church told her she had to take him back into the home. I don't know what church it was, but the result of their position was bondage for her and her children. There

was no accountability for her husband and no consideration for the specific factors in her situation or the affect on her and the children.

Another woman relayed to me that she went to her pastor for guidance regarding her marriage to a drug addict who was also decimating their finances and as a result putting the family through one crisis after another. The pastor's response was: "Maybe we should pray he has an affair." The message behind this was "You can't leave him unless he commits adultery." Again, a rigid response that does not address the reality of the situation she finds herself in.

A 40-year-old man came to his pastor to ask him about getting remarried. His wife, a Christian, had left the marriage and filed for divorce several years before, leaving him with their two children. The pastor did not believe the man could remarry since his wife was a believer and told him his only hope of remarriage was with his wife. He was devastated, as his wife hadn't shown any intention of wanting to reconcile and he was tired of being alone. This pastor left this man without hope for a future, even though it was not his fault that he was divorced. His desire was to share life with a mate and yet, he was dependent on a woman who was clearly pursuing her own life without him.

There is no question that God instituted marriage with the intention that it would be a lasting covenant. God doesn't take pleasure in any marriage ending anymore than He does any kind of sin. The breaking of a covenant meant to last carries with it consequences--many of which are lifelong. There are wounds in the hearts of the couple, their children, extended family, and friends—all of whom have their lives affected and suffer various degrees of loss. Even people who say they do not love their spouse any longer and the marriage had been dead for years will still testify that the breakup of the actual marriage was painful. The spouse that doesn't want the divorce suffers the extra pain of rejection.

Scriptures on Divorce

I will summarize the verses that are most important on the subject of divorce. It is recommended that you read the verses in the Bible and do further study on your own. I will follow each with some of the common interpretations and disagreements. Many of the verses use "husband" or "wife" in the verse, yet it is commonly agreed that the principle in the verse would apply equally to men and women.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4: Men were "putting away" their wives for "indecent" or "uncleanness." They weren't divorcing them, just sending them away. The women couldn't remarry and had little recourse but to return to their families or survive by prostitution. Moses addressed this by having the men give their wives actual certificates of divorce which allowed them to remarry.

Matthew 5:31, 32: Jesus' comments on divorce: "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness (Greek word is *porneia* usually translated as *fornication*), causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery" (Matt. 5:31-32, NIV).

Mark 10:2-12: The Pharisees asked Jesus if it were lawful for a man to “put away” his wife. Jesus simply said, “This has already been answered in the Law of Moses.” Jesus asks the Pharisees what the Mosaic legislation was concerning their question. They replied, “Give her a bill of divorce, and [then] put her away.” Jesus affirms what was taught in the Old Testament Law. Jesus did not make it harder to get a divorce. He did not say that you could not divorce your spouse and remarry. Jesus also reminds them that God’s original intent was that marriages not end in divorce.

Matthew 19:3-12: The Pharisees asked Jesus if it was lawful to divorce for any reason. Jesus answered that it was God’s intention for the one flesh union to be inseparable. He explained that Moses allowed divorce because of the hardness of men’s hearts and then stated that if a man divorces his wife for any reason other than marital unfaithfulness (*porneia*), he will be committing adultery if he remarries.

Mark 10:2-12: The Pharisees tested Jesus by asking Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” He answered them that Moses allowed them to divorce because their hearts were hard. He repeats Genesis 2:24: It is God’s intention for marriage that the one flesh union not be separated. He states that anyone who divorces and remarries commits adultery against the first spouse.

Jesus says divorce was allowed because of sin but that God’s intention is that people don’t divorce. He also says that if someone divorces a spouse and then remarries, he/she is committing adultery with the new spouse.

In all of the Scriptures that mention that divorcing a spouse will cause the person, the former spouse, and the current spouse to commit adultery, there are two interpretations based on the meaning of the word “divorce.” The first is that divorce for any reason other than adultery is not allowed by God and that even if the state grants the divorce that God doesn’t recognize it which would mean that a subsequent marriage involving either spouse would be adulterous. However, it is also said that a Christian is free to remarry after the spouse or ex-spouse has sexual relations with anyone else because this would mean the spouse is actually committing adultery which would then be a valid reason to divorce and would make the divorce recognizable by God.

Because the fact has been ignored that there is a definite difference between the words for “divorce” and being “put away,” many have come to believe that remarriage causes adultery. However, if the Scriptures in question are translated properly, there is no doubt of the intent that ultimately removes any concern when it comes to remarriage. Mark 10:11-12, Matthew 5:31-32, and Matthew 19:9 all refer to a person who just “puts away” or leaves the spouse and then remarries another without a valid divorce as being one who commits adultery and causes others involved to commit adultery. This would be true for obvious reasons: the first marriage wouldn’t be dissolved so of course the second would be adulterous. If the first marriage truly is dissolved through an actual divorce, then the second marriage wouldn’t be adulterous.

1 Corinthians 7: Paul says that it is best not to marry if you can handle it, because you can serve God undistracted, but it is better to be married than to burn with passion and neither choice is sin.

Paul says that it is his command (not the Lord's, vs. 10) that believers should stay with their unbelieving spouses and if they do separate, they are to remain unmarried or be reconciled. However, if the unbelieving spouse leaves, it is best to let him/her go--a believing woman or man is not bound in that circumstance because God has called us to live in peace. He also states that a woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive and only free to remarry when her spouse dies.

The new believers wanted to know if they should leave their unsaved spouses. Paul told them that if the nonbeliever wanted to leave then it was okay to let him/her go because the believer is not bound in that circumstance. Otherwise, believers should stay in their marriages and if they do separate, they should work toward reconciliation. Some Christians say a believer is not bound to their spouse, if the spouse abandons them physically or emotionally by severe mistreatment or a refusal to fulfill his/her marital obligations in the marriage to love the partner. Others argue over what makes a spouse an unbeliever and expand it to include a believer who isn't living a godly life based on 1 Timothy 5:8 where Paul says that someone who does not provide for his immediate family is worse than an unbeliever.

Romans 7:1-3: In explaining how a Christian is dead to the law when he belongs to Christ, Paul uses the example that as long as a woman's husband is alive, she is bound to him by marriage and she commits adultery, if she marries another man. But if her husband dies, she is free to remarry and would not be committing adultery.

This teaching states that remarriage after a spouse dies is okay. It then appears to restate Jesus' teaching that a second marriage is adultery if the first spouse is still alive, but it does not address what constitutes a valid divorce, because the purpose of the passage is not to explain marriage and remarriage; it was to illustrate a principle about the believer being set free from the law.

Ezra 9-10: The people of Israel had entered into forbidden mixed marriages with women from pagan nations. The remedy was to send these women and their children away.

Some argue that this supports divorce; others say it was situational for the people of Israel at that time and was directly related to the influence of the foreign wives on the Israelites and their disobedience to God. The sending away of the wives signified their repentance.

Genesis 2:24: God describes marriage as two individuals becoming one flesh. Christ brings up this verse several times and adds that God joined the two together and that man should not separate them.

Jeremiah 3:6-8: God divorced Israel for her adulterous ways.

Malachi 2:13-16: God is angry with the people of Judah for breaking the marriage covenant with the wives of their youth. God says, "I hate divorce." It is believed that men were abandoning their older wives for younger woman and that God was saying he hated that practice.

The book of Hosea: God told Hosea to marry an adulterous wife. He married Gomer and even though she left him and was unfaithful, he takes her back.

Many believe this is an allegory about God's unhappiness with Israel's unfaithfulness to Him, but He was willing to forgive and restore them. It is suggested by some that this shows it is God's ideal to forgive adultery as well as other transgressions.

In Conclusion

It is surprising to me that there is so little in the Bible about divorce. And to make it even more difficult to interpret, many of the passages contain teachings that are in response to a specific situational question or problem. Yet even with these few teachings, biblical scholars disagree on the meanings of the words and the interpretation of the passages.

Relationships are complicated. Some believe that it is the church's right (pastor, elders, or board) to sanction a divorce. Others believe that it is only the husband and wife who can decide whether they will divorce. The church needs to address the real issues and pain of those that are struggling with divorce. Offering black and white answers that offer no hope and a life of singlehood or existence without options in a destructive marriage is offering a legalistic response that increases burdens and pain.

In Luke 11:37-52, Jesus lists a series of "woes" to the Pharisees, two of which follow: "But woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the later undone....And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them."

Is the church attempting to be an expert in the law regarding divorce and thereby ignoring the true burdens people are carrying? Are divorce and remarriage the only issues the church needs to address in a difficult marriage? Is God willing to forgive divorce and remarriage? Is there no hope of a better life for this subset of Christians?

Divorce brings its own devastation. I believe in trying to make a marriage work. I worked very hard to save my own marriage. Yet, I struggled for years wondering if it was scriptural for me to separate and/or divorce in my difficult marriage. I can say in hindsight that there were times it was right for me to stay, because things were not bad enough for me to leave, and there were times that it was wrong for me to stay, because by doing so, I tolerated sin and allowed it to negatively affect all our lives. One of the things I struggled with was not being able to remarry especially when I was in my 20's and 30's. It felt like there would be a curse on my life if I left and remarried without God's blessing. But my heart was mostly on trying to make it work, if at all possible. Later, I even forgave adultery. My marriage after 30 years is now good but there was much loss over the years and damage to my children.

I work with women and men in difficult marriages who are dying emotionally, physically, and spiritually in the midst of all kinds of heavy dysfunction and while divorce presents its additional stresses and pain, it is adding an additional burden to them to tell them that they

cannot ever consider divorce, that they are stuck without hope, and if they do leave they are to be resigned to a single life. Some spouses refuse to change until they are faced with the inevitability of divorce. Without this option, hardened spouses are allowed to continue to sin and force their families to suffer rather than having to bear the consequence of the loss of the marriage.

Separation is an option often suggested and sanctioned by the church, as long as it is with the intent to work on the marriage and reconcile. Separation can be a healthy option. It sends a message to a stubborn spouse that his/her actions have consequences. It gives both partners time to work on themselves and correct their own problems and allows them to work on the marriage without the day-to-day stressors triggering the old relational patterns. Statistics show that separation increases the possibility of divorce. It does so because it allows the partners the chance to live singly and become independent, but it also reflects the fact that the marriages were probably headed for divorce anyway and the separation was the first step in ending the marriage.

It is clearly God's ideal for marriages to stay together until one spouse dies. But because of sin, people fall short of that ideal. Is there grace for those who divorce? Does God hate the divorce but understand that because of the hardness of men's heart that it happens? Does He have compassion toward those affected by the sin that ruins marriages? Yes. There are many things that God hates as much as divorce (Proverbs 6:16). In fact, God hates all sin and hardness of heart, yet He knows the frailty and shortcomings of sinful men (John 3:24).

Are there things that can be done to live better or differently in a difficult marriage? Absolutely! My first two books address that issue directly: *10 Lifesaving Principles for Women in Difficult Marriages* and *When Love Hurts: 10 Principles to Transform Difficult Relationships*. Should a partner try hard to hold the marriage together? Yes, and it is my experience that they usually do.

But what about those people who say they have tried everything and are beaten down and unable to live dignified and victorious in whatever complex circumstances they are in and just can't do it anymore? What about those whose children are being negatively affected by problems in the home? Do we truly believe that divorce was allowed in the Old Testament under the law more liberally than in the New Testament time of grace? Should the church respond to these people with the law or with grace? I propose that it should be handled with grace, understanding that relationships are complicated. There should not be a sanction for easy divorce nor should there be a callous and simplistic answer that communicates hopelessness and despair to those stuck in a destructive marriage. And, churches should not stand in judgment over whether a member has the right to leave or not. It is difficult for people that do not understand the difficult dynamics of marriages to make that judgment. I have seen an abuse of this sanctioning of divorce by untrained individuals who believe the lies of one partner over another and then stand in judgment of the one who wants to leave. I have seen individuals leave churches and not return in these circumstances, while the truly errant spouses continues to stay and even serve in the church. This isn't right.

The church needs to be a place where wounded people can go for a tangible experience of God's grace. And to those reading this who are contemplating divorce, I cannot tell you what to do. You must know you have done what you can to save your marriage, including working on yourself and learning to respond differently to the problems, but you must also be willing to use tough love and take a stand against sin. You must discern what God would have you to do and what you believe the Bible teaches on divorce. Hebrews 4:16 promises that you can go confidently before a compassionate Lord who understands sin to obtain mercy and grace to help you. I also pray you find the same mercy and grace by the Christians you reach out to at this difficult time.

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