

A Biblical View of Divorce and Remarriage

Reproduced from: Grace Church, Eden Prairie

Introduction:

God loves marriage. Straightforward and simple—the loving Creator of the world designed marriage as a lifetime commitment between two people. This covenant between a man and a woman is a holy union before God.

From the beginning, God desired that a man and a woman would leave their parents and be united in a holy and solemn covenant. In this covenant, the man and woman would become one flesh¹. The institution of marriage was established prior to the giving of the Law, affirmed under the Law² and reaffirmed under grace³ demonstrating its universality and making it applicable to people of all cultures and generations.

God's design for marriage fulfills four main purposes. It is to provide partnership for a man and woman⁴, pleasure for each⁵, procreation⁶ and purity⁷ of the couple as they battle the temptations of our world.

But something happened...sin entered the world through man's disobedience. And as a result, our sin conflicts with God's will. One of the results of sin is divorce, and God says in His Word that He hates divorce.⁸

Since God is the author and designer of marriage, His desire is to avoid divorce. We should hold the same view as God regarding the permanence of marriage. However, we do find that God makes allowances for divorce under specific circumstances, although it is never in His perfect will.

Divorce and Our Sin

In the New Testament, Jesus teaches that divorce is a concession because of our sin⁹—and that it violates God's original purpose for unity and permanence within the marriage covenant. In Matthew 19:3-9, Jesus was primarily correcting the Pharisees' notion that divorce could be obtained by unilateral dismissal by the husband for "any cause at all."

However, because of our "hardness of heart," God allowed divorce. This was a concession for the faithful spouse as a result of adultery (or abandonment) by his/her spouse. This meant the faithful spouse was no longer bound to the marriage covenant.¹⁰

We need to make sure that we read this passage in context. God still desires marriage to be permanent. Divorce always has consequences, and even under the specified circumstances, it should only be pursued, reluctantly and prayerfully, as a last resort. God's love for us is unconditional, and He gave us His Word to outline the best way to live. Following His truth in all our decisions will help to ensure that we live a life pleasing and honoring to Him

New Testament Grounds for Divorce

The New Testament gives two specific grounds for divorce: persistent, physical, sexual sin; and desertion by a non-Christian spouse.

The first reason can be found in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. In these verses, Jesus uses the Greek word *porneia* to describe persistent, physical, sexual sin, including behaviors such as adultery, incest, homosexuality, and bestiality. These sinful behaviors are encompassed by the term *porneia* and are grounds for divorce.

Any violation of the marriage covenant through physical, sexual sin causes great pain and difficulty for the spouse. This violation is serious and deeply wounds the heart of a marriage; however, God's priority is for repentance, healing, reconciliation, and restoration so the marriage can be saved. But if the spouse initiating the violation does not repent and seek reconciliation, the Bible permits the faithful spouse to seek divorce.¹¹ This is never an easy decision or one that should be entered into quickly or lightly. However, God also recognizes the seriousness of *porneia* and thereby permits divorce as a last resort under these certain extreme circumstances.

The second reason for which God permits divorce is when an unbelieving (non-Christian) spouse abandons or refuses to continue to live with his or her believing spouse.¹² "God has called us to peace,"¹³ so divorce is allowable in situations where a non-Christian spouse refuses to live with a Christian spouse (see 1.a. below).

Biblical Directives for Specific Situations

1) Abandonment

- a) **Physical abandonment:** There is biblical provision to divorce and remarry in the case of physical abandonment, but only if the departing spouse is an unbeliever.

"If the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases..." (1 Corinthians 7:15)

The word "depart" means to leave or to divorce. (In the ancient Greek manuscripts the word was used as a technical expression for divorce.)

The phrase "not under bondage" means to be free of the responsibility of that marriage.

Physical abandonment occurs when an unbelieving spouse physically moves out and/or divorces and will not return. A reasonable time for the process to unfold is necessary, as divorce in this situation should not be undertaken lightly or pursued quickly. There must be time available to prayerfully seek reconciliation and restoration.

If the departing and divorcing spouse is an unbeliever, the believer is permitted to remarry.

If both spouses are Christians, they are not to leave or depart from one another. Both are commanded by Scripture to keep the marriage covenant by prayerfully working at

loving each other and looking out for one another's interests.¹⁴ (There may be circumstances to consider a temporary separation for the purpose of reconciliation. Please see the discussion in the Q&A Section on page 7 regarding separation for the purpose of reconciliation.)

But if either chooses to depart and an unbiblical divorce is sought, both are to remain unmarried or else be reconciled to each other.¹⁵

- b) **Verbal and emotional abandonment:** There is no biblical provision for divorce due to verbal or emotional abandonment.

However, a couple may need to separate for a period of time to address their personal counseling and healing needs in order to facilitate marital reconciliation. The separation should be pursued while under the care of a Christian caregiver who is experienced in marriage and family counseling pertaining to marital separations. (Please see the discussion in the Q&A Section on page 7 regarding separation for the purpose of reconciliation.)

- c) **Mental illness leading to abandonment:** There is no biblical provision to divorce if the sole reason is due to mental illness (see point 4 on Mental Illness).

Mental illness can, however, lead to other issues. If a physical abandonment occurs (see point 1a. above), in combination with the mental illness, and if the mentally ill spouse is an unbeliever who is unwilling to seek and follow the necessary medical intervention to pursue health, then there may be biblical provision to divorce. The biblical principle under consideration is the commitment to a life-long marriage relationship in sickness and in health until death separates them. Godly wisdom and professional counsel are necessary to determine if the unbeliever is mentally disabled by the illness and unable to make rational decisions in light of the illness or if the unbeliever is mentally ill and is rationally choosing to abandon the spouse. If rational and willful decision-making has led to or perpetuated the abandonment, then divorce may be permitted. If irrational decision-making due to the mental illness has led to the abandonment, then divorce would not be permitted as the marriage commitment extends to this time of sickness.

A couple dealing with mental illness may need to separate for a period of time to address personal counseling, healing, and possible physical and emotional safety needs in order to facilitate a future marital reconciliation. The separation should be pursued while under the care of a Christian caregiver who is experienced in marriage and family counseling pertaining to marital separations.

- d) **Sexual abandonment:** There is no biblical provision to divorce if an unbelieving spouse refuses to have sexual relations with his/her spouse.

Additional questions with regard to the matter of abandonment may be submitted to the pastoral staff for further consideration if necessary.

- 2) **Abuse - (physical, mental, emotional, and/or spiritual) Abuse is horrible, be it physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual.** Any form of abuse is sin and needs to be eradicated in the life of a follower of Christ. God specifically states He hates the sin of violence in the marriage relationship.¹⁶ However, in and of itself, abuse is not a biblical reason for divorce. There is no provision in the Scriptures that would suggest abuse to be a valid reason for divorce, and divorces pursued due to such circumstances are unbiblical. In some situations the abused partner may need a separation from the situation for safety and health reasons, in some cases leading to a legal separation from the abuser. In the case of physical abuse,

the abused spouse may need to contact legal authorities to provide immediate protection afforded under the law. Legal separation for reasons other than physical abuse should not be entered into quickly or without biblical and professional Christian counsel. In such circumstances, the physical separation of a married couple should be undertaken with the commitment of church leadership to lovingly confront the abuser of his/her sin according to Matthew 18 and to engage in a process to facilitate reconciliation and restoration of the marriage. If an abuser is unrepentant, with or without a separation in effect, the affected spouse can contact the Elders and initiate Spiritual Restoration as provided in Matthew 18. Church leadership is committed to providing redemptive, biblical, and caring support for both parties in an abusive marriage.

- 3) **Addiction** - Addictions are extremely destructive to individuals and to marriages. They affect all family members and others close to the individual. Pain, frustration, heartache, and significant financial challenges are experienced because of addictions. To be clear, addictions to chemicals, pornography, gambling, and other compulsive behaviors are a form of self-centered idolatry, are sinful in nature, and require repentance.

Addictions, in and of themselves, are not a biblical reason for divorce. There is no provision in the Scriptures that would permit addictions to be a valid reason for divorce, and divorces pursued due to such circumstances are unbiblical.

What, then, is the non-addicted spouse to do? If the addictions lead to violence, the abused spouse may need to contact legal authorities to provide immediate protection afforded under the law. (Please also see the discussion in the Q&A Section regarding separation for the purpose of reconciliation.)

In all cases, the addicted spouse needs to be lovingly confronted about his/her sin in accordance with Matthew 18. The addicted person (and often times the spouse) will also need to seek biblical and professional Christian counseling to assist in the recovery.

- 4) **Mental illness** - Mental illness, in and of itself, is not a biblical reason for divorce. In fact, the covenant love of a marriage is intended to show the world how Christ loves the church with an unconditional love. God desires that the unconditional, self-sacrificial love within a marriage grows and matures independent of circumstances or the health of either individual. Therefore, the spouse of a person with suspected or professionally-diagnosed mental illness is to honor the marriage covenant made before God and remain in a sacrificial love commitment.

This is not to say that this will be an easy journey, or even successful in terms of bringing the sick spouse back to full health. There may be situations that require significant, long-term, specialized care for the sick individual at a health-care facility. Through obedience to the marriage covenant and consistent, loving care for the ill, Christ is exalted.

(If the mental illness leads to persistent sexual sin and/or abandonment, please refer to previous statements in this document.)

Remarriage

Divorce always involves painful and difficult consequences, but there are times when a biblical divorce can help facilitate hope and healing in one or both persons' lives. When a divorce is pursued according to biblical grounds, God's grace permits remarriage for the faithful spouse but only if the remarriage is to a follower of Christ who is free to remarry.¹⁷

Those who divorce due to unbiblical grounds, however, have sinned against God and their spouses, and for them to remarry is an act that the Bible calls adultery.¹⁸ The Apostle Paul teaches that a believing spouse who sinfully divorces should remain unmarried or else be reconciled and remarried to his/her spouse.¹⁹

God's Word also warns those who consider marrying someone who has divorced.²⁰ Unless the divorce was on biblical grounds, the divorced person may still be obligated to reconcile. This is a serious issue and must be strongly considered so as to abide by God's Word. (If this person was divorced prior to becoming a believer in Jesus Christ, please refer to the discussion on this in the Q&A Section.)

Spiritual Restoration for an Unbiblical Divorce

God's Word is clear regarding when it is permissible to pursue a divorce, so a divorce sought on²¹ unbiblical grounds is disobedience to God's Word as outlined in Matthew 18:15-17.²²

If a believer seeks a divorce for unbiblical reasons, he or she will be subject to a spiritual restoration process that is designed to honor the truth of God's Word and encourage biblical responses even in the midst of such painful life circumstances as troubled marriages.

Ultimately, God instructs the Church to withdraw fellowship from a believer who refuses to repent during the spiritual restoration process. This is obviously a distressing situation for all involved, and church leadership does not treat this lightly or without fervent prayer in seeking guidance from the Lord. God earnestly desires for all of us to admit when we fail Him and commit sin. The way back to Him is through genuine repentance leading to restoration and peace.

Question and Answers

Q: What role does the church play in helping divorced believers understand their situations from a biblical perspective?

A: The Church has a significant role to play in helping divorced men and women understand their situations from a biblical perspective. This is especially relevant in cases where biblical teaching may not seem clear—or in cases where one or both of the former spouses could be considered believers at the time of the divorce. In all cases, the Church is available to compassionately assist people in assessing their past decisions and their future course of action in areas of divorce and remarriage. God has placed people in leadership positions in the Church to help apply biblical principles to everyday decisions. The Church eagerly hopes to guide people through difficult circumstances.

Q: What happens when a divorce occurred on unbiblical grounds?

A: In this situation, the divorced person should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to his/her spouse. This is not an easy situation and should be discussed while under the care of biblical counsel. If the spouse reluctant to reconcile later repents, God's grace is evident and a sign of true repentance is for the guilty party to seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

Q: If the original divorce is unbiblical and the "ex" remarries, is the other party free to remarry?

A: Matthew 5:32 " But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery." The simple answer is yes, the unmarried spouse is free to remarry. Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 point out that the party that remarries is committing adultery, which biblically breaks the original bond of marriage, and thus the unmarried party is free to remarry. However, to marry an individual who obtained an unscriptural divorce from his/her former spouse causes the new relationship to enter into an adulterous one.²³ This applies to other forms of immorality i.e.: homosexuality, etc. and to both genders.

Q: Is there ever a completely innocent party in marital discord or divorce?

A: Since we all are sinful, there is never a completely innocent party. Some sins meet the biblical grounds for divorce while other sins, though causing discord and strife, do not constitute grounds for biblical divorce. It is important for both parties to understand their weaknesses, seek and provide forgiveness and attempt to make their marriage better and godlier. It is important to remember that God wants people to draw closer to Him and to become more like Him each day.

Q: Will divorced people be allowed to participate in ministry?

A: The primary considerations for ministry in the church include the spiritual, emotional, and relational maturity of the believer and the leadership requirements of the ministry. Divorced persons may participate in ministry at Community Bible Church. However, if someone is in a spiritual restoration process for an unbiblical divorce, they may be restricted from certain areas of ministry during that process. Any person going through a divorce should prayerfully consider

refraining from stressful ministry situations until the divorce action is resolved, while seeking godly wisdom and guidance

Q: What if two Christians decide to dissolve their marriage based on incompatibility?

A: There are no biblical grounds for divorce due to incompatibility. A couple should seek pastoral and/or professional counsel to address the marriage problems. God will honor their desire to heal and reconcile their marriage if they truly seek His leading and power in their lives. Any unbiblical divorce may lead to a spiritual restoration process at Community Bible Church.

Q: Are there biblical grounds for a divorce if a couple believes their marriage was a mistake or they married the wrong person?

A: The Bible does not recognize grounds for divorce under these circumstances. God promises that He is able to cause all things to work together for good, even considering our mistakes.²⁴ He is a compassionate God and a God who understands our situations; thus, He is able to work mightily in our lives to teach and empower us to live in the midst of our regrets according to the truth of His Word.

Q: What about persons who were divorced prior to coming to faith in Jesus Christ?

A: Just as all other sins are forgiven when one comes to trust in Jesus Christ as Savior, the sin of an unbiblical divorce is also forgiven. However, it is important to note that there are also continuing consequences for some sins and an unbiblical divorce is no exception.

If the divorced person who has found new life in Christ is still single, then he or she should explore the possibility of reconciliation to his or her spouse, even though the spouse may not be a Christian. Even though a legal divorce was granted, this is in man's eyes. The marriage covenant is still valid in God's eyes and restoration is recommended. If reconciliation is not possible nor advised by pastoral counsel, then consideration should be given to the issue of forgiveness so that spiritual closure is accomplished.

Q: Is the divorce policy different for Elders and Pastors than for members of the congregation?

A: Divorce is no different for Pastors and Elders than any other believer except in their responsibility of example. Pastors and Elders are to model for their congregations a life of obedience to the Word of God. In Hebrews 13:7 believers are admonished to "Remember those who rule over you (Pastors and Elders), who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct."

The clear assumption of this verse is that Pastors and Elders will live an exemplary life so all may learn by following their example in both doctrine and conduct. Therefore, all of the commands of God to the Church must, first of all, be lived out by its leaders.

James 3:1 states, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (NIV). This warning to congregations from James, the half-brother of Jesus and the leader of the first church of Jerusalem, is intended to

discourage those who may have an impure desire for authority over others. This is one reason why Paul wrote to Timothy, “Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, (or too quickly)” in 1 Timothy 5:22. He was concerned that Timothy would elevate someone to an office of Pastor or Elder without a thorough investigation of his character and calling.

In 2 Thessalonians 3:7 Paul made himself an example to others with these words, “For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you.” Paul continues in verse 9, “...not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us.” There are two verses in 1 Corinthians where Paul made himself an example to be followed. The first is in 1 Corinthians 4:16, “Therefore I urge you, imitate me.” The other is in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.” While in neither case do these verses speak of the marriage contract, they do speak of the responsibility of leaders to live their lives above reproach. Any obedience commanded of believers must first be lived out by church leaders.

Q: Is a separation for the purpose of reconciliation biblical? Are there constraints or conditions on the separation?

A: Marriage is instituted by God as a holy covenant between one man and one woman. As such, it is to be nurtured and protected. Regarding “Separation,” we first need to define the discussion.

First and foremost, the goal of any separation must be reconciliation and restoration of the marriage. Separation without the desire of and work towards reconciliation is not biblical and should be avoided.

“Separation for the purpose of reconciliation” is not prohibited by Scripture. We, as church leadership, believe that it is allowed if the following, specific commitments are made by both spouses.

The separation must be pursued while under the care of a Christian caregiver who is experienced in marriage and family counseling pertaining to marital separations. There must be a commitment to reconciliation and restoration of the marriage. There must be a timeline discussed so that this separation is temporary.

Sources: “Divorce and Remarriage: The Biblical Perspective,” Stonebriar Community Church, Charles R. Swindoll; “The Biblical Position on Divorce and Remarriage: The Elders’ Perspective,” Grace Community Church, John MacArthur, Jr. “Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage,” Fresh Start Seminars, Inc.

¹ Genesis 2:24. ² Mark 10:6-8. ³ Ephesians 5:30. ⁴ Genesis 2:18. ⁵ Song of Solomon 4:11; Proverbs 5:18-19. ⁶ Genesis 1:28; Jeremiah 29:5-6. ⁷ Hebrews 13:4; 1 Corinthians 6:8-11, 7:2. ⁸ Malachi 2:16. ⁹ Matthew 19:3-9. ¹⁰ Matthew 5:32; 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:12-15. ¹¹ Matthew 5:32; 1 Corinthians 7:15. ¹² 1 Corinthians 7:12-15. ¹³ 1 Corinthians 7:15. ¹⁴ Philippians 2:4. ¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 7:10-13. ¹⁶ Malachi 2:16; Ephesians 5:29. ¹⁷ Romans 7:1-3; 2 Corinthians 6:14; Mark 10:11-12. ¹⁸ Mark 10:11-12. ¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 7:10-11. ²⁰ Luke 16:18. ²¹ Matthew 18:15-17. ²² Matthew 5:32; Mark 10:11-12. ²³ Mark 10:11-12. ²⁴ Romans 8:28.