

Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage.

Much study of the Holy Bible, and prayer, should be given if one wants to help people who are facing very challenging decisions like whether or not to get married, or get divorced, or to remarry. The Bible does provide sufficient guidance for us, as God knows the realities of these heavy decisions. If you are a person who believes that you have done “it” wrong, whatever the “it” may be for you, then take heart and know that God’s Word provides details on how to learn from our past and move ahead with confidence and assurance in His will. The Biblical guidelines detailed in this essay are a big-picture look at these deep topics, while understanding that there are many unique circumstances that create a pause before one should give counsel.

Dealing with the theology of divorce and remarriage is so much more than a doctrinal exercise. It is an emotional issue filled with deep reservoirs of pain, disappointment, and destruction, not just for the couple, but for the entire family. Despite these realities, the fact remains that it would be difficult to find another time in human history when abandoning one’s vows and breaking the covenant of marriage was as prominent as it is today.

MARRIAGE

One can hardly overstate how God sees the importance of the institution of marriage. Marriage is a holy institution created by God before sin even entered the world. God created the universe, the world, the animals, and finally His crowning achievement, humans. People are unique with regard to all creation, as we’re created in the image of God; in His likeness of reason, character, morality, etc. God created in Adam a type of loneliness that Adam was to discover on his own. Even though Adam was without sin, and had satisfying communion with the Lord, God saw that it was right and fitting to create another need within Adam. This need was a relational need that Adam knew wasn’t meant to be satisfied with anything else in creation. God’s plan was to remedy this need, and so He did, by creating woman; Eve.

Genesis 2:24 says of marriage, ***“For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.”*** Here we see a clear picture of what a marriage is. A man, one man, being joined to his wife, one wife, and for this reason this man leaves the household of his parents; his father, one man, and his mother, one woman. Twice here it magnifies the fact that marriage is one man and one woman. It’s not one man and two women. It’s not one man and one man. It’s not one woman and one woman. It’s not one man and one child. The Hebrew word for “one” in this verse is the same word as is used of God in Deuteronomy 6:4, ***“The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!”*** The oneness that defines God’s character within the Trinity is the same oneness intended in marriage between husband and wife.

Marriage is also theologically important because it is the earthly manifestation of Christ and His “bride” the Church (Ephesians 5). Marriage is designed to reflect the loving relationship between God and His people and as such it is permanent, treasured, and worth fighting through any manifestation of sin, broken trust, mistakes and failings (as taught in Hosea). As such, repentance, forgiveness and grace are some of the divine qualities of God that our marriages are supposed to reveal and proclaim.

“Doesn’t the Bible Teach Polygamy?”

I anticipate this question will come up as an objection to God’s command that marriage is one man and one woman. There are many examples of polygamy in the Bible, even with people that are revered as being faithful to the Lord. It’s critical to know that just because God tolerated polygamy, He never condoned it. Polygamy is sin. In fact, every example of polygamy in the Bible is shown as creating major problems. You should also know that when Biblical authors wrote historical narratives about people’s lives, the authors knew the original audience already knew that certain things were right or wrong, thus the author didn’t need to pause to say the obvious. For example, the original audience of Israelites knew that both kings, David and Solomon, were in sin with their multiple wives, because the Law of God in Deuteronomy 17:17 said the king was not to have multiple wives. Therefore, when the Scripture says that David had many wives, it doesn’t also need to add, ***“and that was bad”***, because it’s assumed the hearer already knows this.

Biblical Truths About Marriage

1. God created marriage – Genesis 2:22-25.
2. Marriage is reserved for one man and one woman – Genesis 2:22-25, 1 Corinthians 6:9.
3. Marriage is a permanent union – Matthew 19:3-12. When Jesus was questioned about the lawfulness of divorce He reverted back to the creation account and restated the permanence of the marriage union. He stated that God ratified the spiritual union on the basis of the physical union when uniting them in marriage. Since God has joined them together, Jesus argues, no one is to separate them.
4. Marriage is a covenant – Malachi 2:14-16. A man and a woman declare their devotion to one another, stipulate commitments to each other, and bind themselves together with solemn vows in the presence of God and witnesses who officially record and ratify the union. Anniversaries are celebrated to revisit the covenant. A covenant also has high obligations because it calls God as a witness to the lifelong and loyal union.
5. God hates divorce – Malachi 2:16, Matthew 19:8-9.
6. The marriage covenant is broken by death – Romans 7:1-3, 1 Corinthians 7:39.

Severing the Marriage Covenant

Reasons for doing so are as follows,

1. Death of a spouse – Romans 7:1-3, 1 Corinthians 7:39.
2. Adultery – Matthew 19:3-9. Under the Law of Moses, adultery was punished by death. This death freed the innocent spouse from the marriage covenant and created a pathway for the innocent spouse to remarry. Jesus makes it clear in Matthew 19:3-9, that the allowance of divorce in general was due to man's "*hardness of heart*". Jesus says that unless immorality (adultery) exists, divorce isn't permissible. While we understand that a permission is given for divorce under the grounds of adultery, it's God's greatest desire to see reconciliation. Divorce for adultery should only be pursued as a last resort. Unrepentant adultery is key in a decision to divorce.
3. Divorce by a non-Christian to a Christian – 1 Corinthians 7:12-16. In a marriage where one spouse becomes a Christian, the Christian is never to initiate divorce. God gives a concession for divorce if the non-Christian spouse wants to divorce the converted Christian.

Remarriage

1. Remarriage is permissible after a divorce when both the man and woman in the new marriage are theologically single. Just because a person is divorced by today's legal standards, doesn't mean that he/she is single in God's eyes. Jesus reiterates this truth in Matthew 5:31-32, "***It was said, 'WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE'; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.***" See also Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:11-12, and Luke 16:18.
2. The new spouse is also a Christian who loves Jesus – 1 Corinthians 7:39, 2 Corinthians 6:14. The Bible says that a Christian is to be equally yoked with another believer who is also pursuing Christ-likeness. A yoke is a beam tied over the shoulders of two oxen, binding them in movement so that they work in tandem. When yoked, both oxen will pull in the same direction; if one goes left, they both go left, and if one goes right, they both go right. What this means to Christians is that a Christian is not to be in any yoked relationship where one person is not an equally committed Christian. This is any type of relationship where the other person influences your decisions; a girlfriend, best-friend, spouse, business partner, etc.
3. When there's a divorce brought about by adultery, the innocent person who didn't commit adultery is free to remarry without being charged with adultery by the new marriage – Matthew 5:31-32, 19:9.
4. A divorce that occurred before one became a Christian. Now that the individual is a Christian, believing that atonement and regeneration have made all things new, that person is free to marry another believer. 2 Corinthians 5:17. A consideration from 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 suggests that an effort to restore the previous marriage may be in view, assuming both are now believers, 2 Corinthians 6:14.
5. If the previous marriage ended in death – Romans 7:2-3.

“But what about...”

The Bible provides moral truths, and yet while many things are crystal clear, other scenarios leave room for individual circumstances to be evaluated. Christians wrestle as to whether circumstances like physical and sexual abuse, pornography, or drug/alcohol addiction warrant divorce. In circumstances like this, separation is critical, for safety, healing, seeking the Lord, and to call extreme attention to the matter at hand. This separation should remain until there is repentance and substantial progress by the offender. Even when this progress is seen, it is the decision of the offended to decide when he/she thinks it's safe to return, and when the kids are safe to return. Emotional, physical, and sexual abuse should not be tolerated. The Bible doesn't speak to these circumstances as being grounds for divorce, but separation would typically be advised.

What about pornography? This is not a permissible offense for divorce. If there is an addiction, then separation is advised to deal with the severity of the problem. Yes, pornography can, and does, destroy marriages. Lusting over others is a dangerous sin. Jesus speaks to the sin of lust in Matthew 5:27-28, ***“You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”*** Jesus says this to make clear that internal sin is just as sinful to God as outward behavioral sin. However, He is not saying that lusting over another person carries the same earthly consequences as the physical act of adultery, whereas physical adultery is grounds for divorce. If looking at pornography and lusting are grounds for divorce then all marriages would have grounds for divorce as all married people have lusted. This would create flippancy in divorce, and flippancy in divorce is an issue that Jesus addressed with the Jews in Matthew 5:31-32.

Is a Christian required to get divorced when a spouse has committed adultery? No, adultery does not necessitate divorce. Paul encouraged believers who separated from their spouses to remain unmarried so that reconciliation had a chance to occur, 1 Corinthians 7:10-11. Repentance and reconciliation are God's greatest desire, but a permission is given to the offended spouse in this case. Separation should be advised as both parties seek the Lord. Assuming both parties do this, it's likely the marriage can be restored. Repentance is key for reconciliation. Repentance is more than an apology, it's a change in stance and direction. When change is seen and maintained in the offender's heart, then a relationship can likely be reconciled. The goal is not to give up too soon. When adultery is present and the offender refuses to repent, then, after a long-period of separation with no change of heart by the offender, and perhaps with continued adultery, then the Church may counsel for the innocent spouse to divorce.

Conclusion

Not all Christian pastors agree with the counsel provided here. Some say that divorce is not an option, ever. I don't hold that view. However, having different interpretations about issues like this is not a reason to break fellowship with other believers. Instead, it's a cause to seek the Lord, and search the Scriptures that much more intently. These are life-altering topics that require much sensitivity.