

Divorce and Remarriage: What Does the Bible Really Say?

Matthew 5:31-32

1 Corinthians 7:2

(cite Ralph Woodrow, John MacArthur and R.C. Sproul)

Summary of Biblical Principles Related to Divorce:

As we can see, the Bible gives principles that can serve as guidelines. But you will not find a specific verse that addresses each specific divorce situation. Each case is different. Every person must be fully persuaded in his own mind concerning the decision to divorce.

You must decide whether a better purpose can be served by two individuals staying together, or would it be better if the marriage was dissolved?

Only the individuals concerned can know the intimate details, the problems, the pros and cons of a marriage. These are deeply involved questions and Christians with Spirit-guided consciences will not take them lightly.

Let's summarize what we can about divorce:

The Bible gives two exceptions where divorce is permitted:

- 1) adultery**
- 2) abandonment**

First, let's look at the issue of adultery, sometimes stated as sexual immorality, or (my own preference) unfaithfulness. Unfaithfulness may be a better way of understanding it. Unfaithfulness can occur physically and emotionally or mentally as we have discussed.

Secondly, particularly for Christians, divorce is permitted when an unbelieving spouse abandons the relationship. The Christian is not to be the cause of a divorce. The Christian is not to be the one who abandons the unbelieving spouse. But if the unbelieving spouse leaves, then the Christian is free.

Don't forget that we also mentioned that abandonment isn't necessarily limited to the physical absence of a spouse. It can also be mental, emotional, and other ways that a spouse absences him or herself from the marriage.

So, as Jesus said, divorce for any reason or cause is not allowed. The Scriptures are clear on the two exceptions, but within the exceptions of adultery and abandonment is a lot of room and there are many nuances to each of those two areas.

Remarriage

In Genesis 2:18, God said that it is “not good that man should be alone.” So He made Eve and she and Adam became husband and wife. Now suppose there had been another man in the world, and in the course of time, Eve went off to live with him leaving Adam again “alone.” Would these circumstances then make it “good” for Adam to be alone? Could some evil that Eve did change that which was “good” for Adam?

Now some preachers who haven't really thought this through might say “it's not good that man be alone *if he has never been married*. But if he was formerly married, then God requires him to be alone for the rest of his life. It's good for a divorced man to be alone.”

But I would ask, “Why? “What purpose is served by forcing someone to be celibate; to remain single the rest of their lives? Is this some form of penance for past mistakes? Is Christ's atonement not enough? Must we somehow make our own atonement for wrongs committed? Is this the unpardonable sin? Why should a person who has suffered failure in marriage be forbidden to pick up the pieces and, with God's help, make a new start in life?”

Ralph Woodrow tells the story of a young man he knew that had an outstanding conversion. Old things had passed away and all was made new. But his wife did not go along with the change God had made in his life. She soon left him, caring nothing at all about trying to live “right.” Adding to this young man's problems (he was only 19), was the fact that a child had already been born into the marriage. And the church that he was saved in taught that divorced people had to stay single and could never remarry. They told him that he could never remarry and that he must remain single the rest of his life. So being serious about following God, he assumed that life-long singleness was God's requirement. Why would God want to punish *him* for what *someone else* did?

Certainly Jesus taught that marriage – not divorce – was the original ideal. But if divorce does occur, why should we assume that Jesus requires all divorced persons to remain forever single?

Think of the problems that forced singleness can cause... Let's say a guy gets divorced and believes he should never remarry. So he lives the single life. But because he's lonely or maybe for economic reasons, he moves into an apartment with another guy. It may not be long until there will be talk that he is a homosexual. As a matter of fact, the gossip may get so far out of hand that people begin suggesting that that's the reason his

wife left him. AND, if he establishes any friendships with women, some will begin to talk that he is a woman chaser.

So forced celibacy can push people into a corner in which they are condemned if they do and are condemned if they don't.

Do you remember the account of the woman at the well in John 4? Jesus offered living water (eternal life) to this Samaritan woman who had been married and divorced five times. But isn't it interesting that Jesus didn't tell her that she had to stay single the rest of her life?

Or the account of the adulterous woman who was brought before Jesus... The strict people would have stoned her to death (and would have been hypocrites because they forgot that Jesus said even lust is adultery). But Jesus told her, "neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more." He didn't say, "go and live single for the rest of your life."

Now the apostle Paul does teach in 1 Corinthians 7 that the single life is good if one can do it. But no one was forbidden to marry. As a matter of fact, in **1 Corinthians 7:2**, Paul says that "every" man should have his own wife and "every" wife should have her own husband.

Paul taught that in order to head off and avoid sexual sin, every man and every woman should be married. This included everyone who had been previously married and was now single. Sexual sin would be just as much a temptation to a man who had been married before – if not more so – than a man who had never been married. Paul didn't say everyone had to get married, but they could if they wanted to.

Now there are those today who believe that God only recognizes first marriages. But this belief is hard to follow consistently. Listen to this story about Lucy.

Lucy married Marvin at age 18 after they went together for a short time. Both were nominal Christians, but very young and immature. The marriage lasted only two years and ended in divorce. Lucy later married Neal who had not been married before. Children were born.

About 15 years later, they were confronted by a preacher that God only recognizes first marriages. Since this was her second marriage, they were told they were not truly married "in the sight of God" and that they were "living in adultery." This resulted in a lot of unrest and confusion.

Well, Lucy became interested in another man. And when word came that Marvin – husband number one – had died, she left Neal for this other man who became husband

number three. Now listen – if God does not recognize a second marriage, she was free to do this – right?

Her first husband died – she could not go back to him. Her second marriage, according to that preacher, was not recognized by God. So leaving this was not wrong – she was only quitting a life of adultery – and was free to marry a third time since her *only* husband was now dead!

Now let's take this a step further. According to this idea, suppose she had married six times. If only the first marriage was recognized by God, just as soon as husband number one died, she could marry a seventh time. Isn't that ridiculous? But these are the problems those with strict interpretations regarding divorce and remarriage get into.

If it's really true that through a consensual sexual union that two become one flesh – for instance, the Bible says that when Isaac took Rebekah into his tent that “she became his wife” – If the consensual sexual union is the act of marriage, then men who have been involved sexually with other women prior to marriage, but who boast theirs is a “first” marriage – and possibly condemn those in a “second” marriage – are not really so righteous and holy as they profess.

Here's another true-life story... A man gave his testimony about how God saved him from a very wicked life. Although he was raised in church, he rebelled at an early age, got involved with gangs, got into drugs, cursed God, and chased women – living with one and then another – though he never legally married any of them. Then he got saved and went to Bible college where he married a Christian girl and is now an ordained minister.

We can all rejoice in what God has done for him. But there is a serious inconsistency here.

The denomination which ordained him does not allow divorce and remarriage. Had he married even one of these women he lived with, any marriage after that would not be a “first” marriage and ordination would have been refused.

If this man, who lived in sin with *many* women, was allowed to marry, why shouldn't a man who married *one* woman have the same right? Assuming both men were unsaved at the time, the only difference between the two would be that one had a piece of paper called a marriage certificate and the other didn't. Is God's power to give a man a clean slate limited by a piece of paper?

The one man may have lived with a hundred women – and even fathered children for all he knew or cared at the time. When he received Christ, he was allowed to marry (most pastors would have gladly officiated his wedding) and he was ordained to the ministry.

But the other man who had the decency to actually marry a woman, but whose marriage ended in divorce - when he receives Christ, marriage for him is frowned upon. If he remarries, it is supposedly “living in adultery” the way some look at it. Some ministers would not be allowed to perform a ceremony for him. Any other sin he might have committed could be wiped out as though it had never been done. But with a previous marriage, according to some, he must atone for this by staying single the rest of his life.

And what some teach, perhaps without realizing it is – “Don’t get married. Just live with somebody. God will forgive this. Then, if you finally do get married, it will be a first marriage. But if you marry and it doesn’t work out, you can never get married again. God won’t forgive this because He does not accept second marriages.” This is completely unbiblical.

Well, let me ask some more questions...

Must a Christian who has divorced and remarried – possibly without totally valid grounds – break up his marriage in order for God to forgive him? Do two wrongs make a right?

We are told in the Bible that a Christian is to marry only “in the Lord” and is not to be “unequally yoked together with unbelievers.” However, it does happen, does it not? The believer who has married an unbeliever has gone against the Bible. That means they’ve sinned. BUT, can that believer be forgiven of his sin without breaking up his home? Absolutely he can.

There has been a lot of inconsistency on the part of preachers who claim to oppose all divorce and remarriage. They may take a remarried couple into the fellowship of the local church, but they would not perform a wedding ceremony for that couple. They might allow them to be members, but will not allow them to hold any office in the church.

By these actions, are they not saying that God has forgiven some people *more* than others? Some preachers won’t accept the marriage of people who have remarried, yet they will accept their money. There’s some inconsistency here.

Some who preach against divorce, pointing out the problems of broken homes, should be consistent and also point out problems in homes that are *not* broken. They talk about problems in second marriages as though there were no problems in first marriages. Some attempt to show that second marriages are not as good as first marriages. But this is not always the case.

The way some look at it, each person is given only one chance in life at marriage. If he makes a mistake with that one chance, he must be penalized forever after!

How can you explain the fact of thousands and thousands of dedicated Christian couples who have had a previous marriage?

Can you name me one sin that is harder for God to forgive than another?

What if a man's first marriage was in Mexico and not recognized in the United States. Can he, as an American citizen, remarry since his first marriage was not legal? What about a man who lived with a woman for a year with no marriage license – can he later marry someone else?

What if a man's wife joins a church that tells her she must go back to her first husband? If she does, who can *he* go back to if he was never married before? What if a girl lived in a foreign country in which her father and the groom's father made the marriage contract? Is she forever bound to a contract that someone else made for her?

It seems clear that Paul gave the right to marriage to every man and every woman, including those who had been married before. Now, it is true that Paul urged those who could to remain single so they could focus all their energy and resources on serving the Lord. But to those who could not, he told them that it is better to marry than to burn with lust.

God designed marriage. And his ideal for it is one man and one woman committed for a lifetime. God designed it for happiness and peace; to be a blessing and a benefit. Marriage, not divorce, was the original plan of God.

But when a marriage degenerates into a state in which neither party is benefited or blessed; if being tied to another person becomes marital martyrdom; if it becomes hurtful or disastrous, then divorce – as a last resort – is a biblically recognized alternative.

To say the Bible condemns all cases of divorce all the way from Genesis to Revelation is simply not true.

So when a couple comes with serious marriage problems, practically speaking, they see only two real options – status quo or divorce. If the status quo is really intolerable, the option of divorce becomes highly desirable. If these are the only options, most people will choose divorce.

But what happens if the option of divorce is removed? If a couple considers divorce firmly prohibited (like Melissa and I do), they are left with two alternatives – status quo

or a redeemed marriage. When these alternatives are in view, it is nothing less than amazing to see the sudden willingness of one or both parties to undergo the necessary changes and discipline for a redeemed marriage, even if those changes are severely painful.

Many people who are faced with chronic illness and pain are willing to undergo radical surgery or painful therapy in order to alleviate their misery. I mean, if a toothache hurts enough, most people are willing to face the dentist's drill. But if there is some other less painful procedure that offers relief from the ache, the average American will try it. We are a nation of unrefined hedonists, always seeking the less painful route.

You say, "Pastor, I'm divorced." You've been divorced for the wrong reason (maybe). Maybe you've remarried. You say, "What about me? What do I do now?"

I say – You can't change the past. What's done is done. But you can determine the future. Remain true to your vows if you've remarried. Submit yourself to the lordship of Christ and to His church. See to it that you get under the teaching of the Word of God and study it yourself and pray regularly. Attend church regularly. Worship God regularly. See to it, as much as it depends on you, that your family is in church with you.

Start today by being committed to God and His Word. He is committed to you and will never let you down. You can trust Him.

Now I realize that I have probably raised more questions than I have answered by now. And those of you who know me know that I am a very conservative person – theologically and politically. But my conclusions in this area of divorce and remarriage may not be the same as others who consider themselves conservative Bible students. But that doesn't make them right and it doesn't make me wrong. I believe the question should be "Is my position Scriptural?" And I believe it is.

I take the Bible literally where it is meant to be taken literally. I really try to be honest with the Scriptures.

There have been people who would not eat potatoes or tomatoes because they couldn't find those words in the Bible. As far as that goes, the word "rapture" or "trinity" or "Bible" is not in the Bible.

But there is something I do know for sure. We are all sinners. And I know something else for sure... God forgives the sins of those who, by faith, receive His Son Jesus Christ and He gives people a new start. The Bible teaches that people who are forgiven of past sins are given a clean slate (READ 1 Cor. 6:9-11). Such WERE some of you.

I am convinced that a strict, unforgiving, inflexible attitude that some have developed concerning divorce and remarriage does harm to the work of God.

And I can honestly say that some of the finest, most dedicated Christians I have known, have been people who experienced failure in marriage at some point in the past and who, subsequently, have remarried.

Because they remarried is no sign they lack devotion. Many of these would become martyrs – if need be – for Christ Himself. They just do not believe they were meant to be martyrs for a meaningless marriage. If God has forgiven people of their past marital mistakes or sins – if He has accepted them – why shouldn't we?

I've got a lot more to say next week on the subject of remarriage. I hope you'll come back and join us then. And I hope you'll come tonight at 7pm as we study Genesis 17.

As I said, God forgives and forgets when you come to Christ. And believe me, we all need Christ. Because one day, God will judge this world by His holy law, and we're all lawbreakers and we will all come under God's judgment if we don't repent today and receive Christ as our Lord and Savior. Only Christ forgives.

As we sing this closing hymn, if you are serious about getting your life right with God and receiving Christ, you come down here where I am and tell me about the commitment God is leading you to make today. Maybe God is leading you to become a member of this church? Whatever God leads you to do, you do it as we sing...