

Divorce

grace church position papers

The subject of divorce and remarriage is a complicated one that must be considered in light of what God has to say in His Word. These subjects, divorce and remarriage, are in many cases related, but we will look at each one separately, and we will start with divorce. Most divorces that occur today are preventable and unsupported by the Scriptures, and so it is important to clearly understand the Biblical teaching on this issue.

God speaks of divorce in numerous places in the Bible. He also gives us a clear picture of how He feels about the dissolution of the marriage vow and commitment. But, to fully understand divorce, it is important that we first understand how God views marriage. Marriage is not a manmade institution; God Himself established it at the very beginning of human existence (Genesis 2:24).

In speaking of the institution of marriage in Genesis, Jesus said:

“Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh?’ Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.”

– Matthew 19:4-6

It is clear from the beginning of Scripture that God instituted marriage as a foundational element of human interaction. Before there was government, business, or religion, there was marriage, the union of a man and a woman instituted by God. So therefore, marriage is not some human invention that can be regulated and modified according to human standards. It is God’s creation and subject to His rules. So while government has assumed the basic administration for marriage and divorce in our society, it cannot change the original meaning of marriage nor can it change the rules of marriage that were established by God.

It is obvious from even a cursory reading of the Bible that God intends marriage to be permanent. How does

one divide “one flesh?” How can man undo what God has joined? God intended marriage to be permanent and to be built on a commitment to these principles found in Genesis. It is to be the primary human relationship between a man and a woman. The word “cleave” from Genesis 2 means to adhere, cling or stick together like glue.

So it would seem clear that God has always intended, from Genesis until the present day, for marriage to be the permanent union of one man and one woman. That is the ideal. That is His ideal. It is interesting to note that no where in the Bible does God give a mechanism to dissolve a marriage, there is no concept of divorce in God’s original design.

However, the reality is that we live in a time where almost 35% of all first marriages and 55% of second marriages end in divorce. Each year, 2,200,000 marry and 2,000,000 divorce. These statistics are virtually identical with the culture as a whole and with those people who profess to be followers of Christ. It becomes vital that we understand what the Bible has to say to us concerning this issue. The Bible is not silent on divorce; the Bible, in fact, acknowledges and regulates divorce. So it is imperative that we understand what God Himself has to say about the dissolution of a union that He intended to be permanent.

First of all, while marriage is a divine institution, divorce is clearly a man made institution. While the Bible speaks to and regulates divorce in certain instances, it was not established by God. It is permitted by God in light of man’s sinfulness, but we should not confuse permitting a practice with establishing a practice. There is no place in the Scripture that can in anyway imply that God established divorce; it is solely man’s creation.

The primary context for divorce in the OT is found in Deuteronomy:

“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, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife, and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance."

- Deuteronomy 24:1-4

Divorce, as we shall see, is God's reluctant concession to the hardness and selfishness of the human heart. Nowhere in the above passage is there any indication of God's approval of divorce. Neither can the passage be read as a general authorization for men to divorce their wives. It merely regulates a situation that must have been occurring, with men coming back to their to remarry their divorced wives who have since remarried lost the second husband to death.

The Jewish people had reached a point where divorce was a seemingly common practice and Moses is addressing a single issue and giving clear instruction. This is in no way an endorsement of divorce; it is an acknowledgement of the reality of the day. This passage must be seen in light of what God has to say about divorce in Malachi. Nevertheless, God has spoken clearly about this man made institution, and it seems that because He regulates it, He permits it within the context of His regulations.

Jesus also speaks to this issue in Matthew 19:8; he says, "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way." From this passage it is clear that the hardness of our human hearts has led to the dissolution of a union that God established as permanent. Divorce is mentioned in the Old Testament in a way that indicates that God acknowledges our human sin and in light of our failures, now regulates the process. While many of the Old Testament passages seem somewhat arcane to us, they do make it clear that by the days of Moses, divorce was common enough among the Jews that laws were established in Deuteronomy to regulate it. The regulations were to protect those women who had been divorced by their husbands.

"For I hate divorce," says the LORD, the God of Israel,

"and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the LORD of hosts. "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously."

- Malachi 2:16

This is God's unambiguous position. But we are sinful and God has also made some concessions, given that sinful nature of people. It is important to understand that while God hates divorce, that hate does not preclude divorce in some instances. Instances that the Bible itself speaks to.

A couple of other OT passages allow us to see God speaking of and apparently even approving of certain divorces. Jeremiah 3 is God's lament over His faithless Israel who has played the harlot. "And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also" (Jeremiah 3:8) God uses the metaphor of a strictly manmade institution of divorce to deal with and warn His faithless people. It seems clear that God fully acknowledges divorce and has no problem using it when applicable.

Even more problematic is Ezra 9 & 10; marriage problems developed between the Jews and pagans that they intermarried with. Upon learning of this, Ezra was distraught and uncertain how to handle the situation. Ezra and other leaders went before God and sought wisdom. The solution they agreed to was the 'putting away' of the pagan wives and their children.

"So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have been unfaithful and have married foreign wives adding to the guilt of Israel. "Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives."

- Ezra 10:3, 10-11

It appears that the solution was to 'put away' or 'send away' the wives. The word used is not the same word normally used for divorce, but that appears to be what happened. And, as you read the end of verse 11, it appears that the solution conformed to the Law. This passage seems to raise more questions than it answers.

What portion of Law is Ezra referring to? The only specific passage is the Deuteronomy passage that we have previously looked at. Can this be the meaning of indecency found in 24:1? “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.” It should be clear that the ‘indecency’ is not adultery; the penalty for that sin was death. What actually happened to the wives and children? Did the Jews provide for their support and care? Were they sent back home? Was any attempt made to convert them? Was Ezra doing God’s will or did he and the other leaders assume that was the right thing to do on their own? There are no answers to these questions provided in the text, and we are left to speculate.

But the fact that God regulates divorce in no way changes His ultimate opinion of it. He continues to hate it while He regulates it and in some cases permits it to occur. Therefore, even though divorce is the result of man’s sin, once a couple divorces, they have broke the union established by God and even though God did not make provisions for divorce, the union is still broken and dissolved. The marriage is dissolved, but there are still consequences that remain.

There can be legitimate causes for divorce even though those cases always involve sin. So while sin leads to the divorce, the divorce itself may not be sinful. A person who has been divorced, other than in those instances spoken directly to in the Bible, has sinned. There is no way to conclude otherwise, and it is a serious sin with long reaching consequences. However, because it is sin, it can also be forgiven. While a divorce obtained against the clear words of the Bible is a serious offense to God that must be addressed, it is not a permanent mark on the soul that cannot be forgiven by God. Divorce is not an unpardonable sin, although many in the church today seem to treat it as though it was.

It seems safe to say that all divorce, even a legitimate divorce on Biblical grounds, involves some form of sin. And all divorce brings with it pain, misery and hurt that can last a life time and have far reaching effects on families. But even the most sinful person with the most sinful reasons for a divorce can be forgiven and restored. However, there are still consequences for these actions that we will discuss later.

So where did the concept of divorce originate? It is

impossible to say; we do know that it has been around long enough for Moses to speak to it in the Law. Divorce, then has been with us for thousands of years and has taken different forms in different cultures. But at its core, divorce is the legal dissolution of the marriage contract and previous promises no longer apply to the husband and wife. The marriage contract is formally severed and broken. In light of Matthew 19:6 (see above), a man and a woman have now put aside the relationship that God had intended to be permanent. That is the essence of divorce, it severs the marriage covenant agreement.

This brings us to the point where we can look at what Jesus has to say about divorce and when it may be legitimate to sever the marriage contract. Jesus speaks of divorce in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Additionally, Paul speaks to the issue in I Corinthians. We will look at what Jesus has to say, with respect to divorce first.

“And 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 cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

– Matthew 5:31

And some Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?” And He answered and said, “Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh’? “Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?” He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

– Matthew 19:3-9

“Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery.”

– Luke 16:18

Jesus makes several points in these passages, He has

been questioned by the Pharisees and responds to their attempts to trip Him up with the whole issue of divorce. The entire issue of divorce was no less controversial 2,000 years ago than it is today. There were various schools of thought among the Jews ranging from free divorce for any reason to no circumstances that would allow divorces. Jesus takes the time to give a thoughtful response.

He first speaks of the original ideal for marriage and quotes from the Old Testament to defend that ideal; that a man and woman become one flesh, and men cannot separate this union. But then He also takes the time to answer the contention from the Pharisees and disciples that Moses has made an exception for God's original plan and allowed for divorce. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus gives an exception, a very limited exception, and makes an allowance for divorce. (Matthew 5:32 and 19:9)

The word he uses for unchastity and immorality is **porneia**, which means, sexual immorality, fornication or adultery and a host of other sexual sins. Porneia may include adultery, but is not limited to adultery; the word has a much broader definition. Fornication in the Bible is sexual sin in the most general sense. It can mean sex between unmarried people, as we take it today in America. Or it can mean adultery, sex involving at least one married person. It can also include incest, homosexual sex and on down the list of sexual sins, which given our depravity and imagination, is almost limitless.

The exception of porneia, then, covers a wide range of sinful sexual behavior, all of which violate the original concept of the marriage covenant. That is the only exception that Jesus gives, and these are exceptions and not meant as a requirement or excuse for a divorce. To the Jewish audience hearing these words from Jesus, this would have been an extremely limiting statement. The only reason that Jesus gives for obtaining a divorce is sexual sin.

Jesus does allow a divorce for these reasons, but He does not require divorce. A married couple who are dealing with this issue should be counseled to deal with the sin, repent of it, and seek reconciliation and forgiveness. Restoration of the marriage should be the goal of the couple and of the church. However, the point that Jesus is making is that in the case of continued sin or lack of sincere repentance, divorce is permitted.

The Apostle Paul also speaks to the issue of marriage and divorce in I Corinthians. He takes the words of Jesus in the Gospels and expands on the legitimate grounds for a divorce. It is important to note that all Scripture is inspired by God and Paul speaks inerrantly and authoritatively to us.

But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not send his wife away. But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace.

– I Corinthians 7:10

Paul states at the beginning of this passage that his words are from the Lord and so carry the authority of God. Paul is talking to two groups, and it is important to clearly understand what he says and to whom. He starts out by addressing married believers, and he reinforces the previous teachings of Jesus. He then addresses another group he adds to the words of Jesus by speaking to an issue that Jesus did not address. His teaching in verses 12-16 deal with a believer married to an unbelieving spouse, a situation not addressed by Jesus in the Gospels. Paul's implication is that the words of Jesus are intended for two believers and he now gives additional teaching to a separate group, believers married to an unbeliever.

Paul's instruction to believers married to unbelievers is really addressing a situation that did not exist during Jesus' life on earth. Years have passed and the church is in its initial growth period, and there are now instances where believers have married unbelievers or may have been converted after their marriages. The situation has now changed and this new dynamic must be addressed. And Paul gives to them and to us some clear direction. Paul says that regardless of the circumstances of your marriage you are to remain with an unbelieving spouse if they are willing to stay in the marriage.

There seems to be a clear principle at work here that

may be beneficial for future discussions on the entire issue of marriage, divorce and remarriage: Paul is telling us that whatever the circumstances are that we now find ourselves in, that is where we are to be obedient to God and His Word, regardless of how we got there.

Having a pagan for a spouse is not reason enough for divorce, quite the opposite. Paul says to remain married for the sake of the spouse in the hope that they will become a believer. However, if an unbelieving spouse refuses to continue in the marriage and seeks a divorce, the believer may let the spouse go. If the unbeliever wants to leave, Paul says to let him or her go; the only situation where attempts at reconciliation are not expected or required. Let him go because God wants us to live in peace.

As we have looked for direction from God's Word on the issue of divorce, we find the following to apply:

- For two believers who are married, the only legitimate reason for a Biblical divorce involves unrepentant sexual sins.
- For the believer married to an unbeliever is added the exception of the unbeliever desiring to leave and end the marriage. They should be allowed to leave.

These are the legitimate Biblical reasons for divorce. Jesus is clear that all other divorce is sin and must be addressed, just as any other sin is addressed. All believers who have sinned by obtaining an unbiblical divorce must come to terms with their sin, repent and seek forgiveness. The entire issue of remarriage after divorce will be handled separately, but the principles of divorce will serve as a foundation for the issue of remarriage.

A person who has been divorced for a reason other than the ones we have discussed has sinned. This person should prayerfully consider the circumstances of the divorce, the part they played in the failure of the marriage and the sin that may have been a part of the divorce.

They must confess the sin before God, to their ex-spouse if necessary and any other persons effected by and involved in the sinful divorce. They should attempt to reconcile with the ex-spouse if that is still possible. And finally they should attempt, as far as is possible, to right all the wrongs from the divorce proceedings such as the legal maneuverings to take advantage of the situation,

including the lawsuit against another believer. This may also include child support, property distributions, visitation, etc. that may have been sinfully pursued.

Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God.

- 1 Corinthians 6:9-11

There is forgiveness and restoration available from God. Grace Church is made of sinners. Paul gives us the words to apply to each of our sins. As believers, each of us has been washed, sanctified and justified in the name of Jesus. There is no greater comfort for each of us than this truth.