

For the Love of the Family Ministries
Missionaries to America's Forgotten Mission Field, the Family
What Does the Bible Say About Divorce and Remarriage?
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What Does the Bible Say About Divorce and Remarriage?

Because this question is asked of us quite frequently, we want to answer the question here. I am attempting to give a basic biblical view of this subject that causes so much pain in the lives of people, their family, and the church. Well over 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce and more than 75 percent of second marriages end in divorce in our country. This is a legitimate question and certainly a problem for the home, families, and children.

God hates divorce. He hates it because it always involves unfaithfulness to the solemn covenant of marriage that two partners have entered into before Him, and because it brings harmful consequences to those partners and their children (Malachi 2:14-16). In Matthew 19, Jesus states that God ordained the institution of marriage, and He has decreed that in every marriage, the husband and wife are to become one for life. Divorce destroys the marriage and thus breaks asunder a union that God himself has established (Mark 10:9). Divorce in the Scripture is permitted only because of man's sin. Since divorce is only a concession to man's sin and is not part of God's original plan for marriage, all believers should hate divorce as God does and pursue it only when there is no other recourse. With God's help a marriage can survive the worst sins.

In Matthew 19:3-9, Christ teaches clearly that divorce is an accommodation to man's sin that violates God's original purpose for the intimate unity and permanence of the marriage bond (Genesis 2:24). He taught that God's law allowed divorce only because of the "hardness of your hearts" (Matthew 19:8). Legal divorce was a concession by the sinning partner, so that the faithful partner was no longer bound to the marriage (Matthew 5:32, 19:9; I Corinthians 7:12-15). Although Jesus did say that divorce is permitted in some situations, we must remember that His primary point in this discourse is to correct the Jews' idea that

they could divorce one another “for every cause” meaning for any cause at all or for anything they wanted to (Matthew 19:3). He wanted to show them the gravity of pursuing a sinful divorce. The rabbis were teaching that if a wife displeased her husband for any reason, he could give her a writing of divorcement. Jesus stated that was never the purpose of Moses’ Law. In fact, Jesus teaching on divorce was given specifically to refute the rabbinical loopholes. Furthermore, He so rigidly opposed divorce that when He had completed His teaching, His disciples concluded that it would be better never to get married (Matthew 19:10).

Therefore, the believer should consider this a serious matter and should never consider divorce except in specific circumstances (see next section), and even in those circumstances it should only be pursued reluctantly because there is no other recourse.

The Grounds for Divorce

The only New Testament grounds for divorce are sexual sin or desertion by an unbeliever. The first is found in Jesus’ use of the Greek word *porneia* (Matthew 5:32; 19:9). This is a general term that encompasses sexual sin such as adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and incest. When one partner violates the unity and intimacy of a marriage by sexual sin—and forsakes his or her covenant obligation—the faithful partner is placed in an extremely difficult situation. After all means are exhausted to bring the sinning partner to repentance, the Bible permits release for the faithful partner through divorce (Matthew 5:32; I Corinthians 7:15).

The second reason for permitting a divorce is in cases where an unbelieving mate does not desire to live with his or her believing spouse (I Corinthians 7:12-15). Because “God hath called us to peace” (verse 15), divorce is allowed in such situations. When an unbeliever desires to leave the marriage, trying to keep him or her in the marriage may only create greater tension and conflict. Also, if the unbeliever leaves the marital relationship permanently but is not willing to file for divorce, perhaps because of lifestyle, irresponsibility, adultery, or to avoid monetary obligations, then the believer is in an impossible situation of having legal and moral obligations that he or she cannot fulfill. Because “the brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases” (I Corinthians 7:15) and is therefore no longer obligated to remain married, the believer may file for divorce without fearing the displeasure of God.

The Possibility of Remarriage

The Bible teaches it is better for the divorced Christian to remain unmarried (I Corinthians 7: 8, 10-11). The Old Testament contained a few provisions governing the remarriage of divorced people (Leviticus 21:11, 14, Deuteronomy 24:1-4). There are those who teach that the two reasons above, adultery and desertion by an unbelieving mate, are the only grounds for remarriage. Many have called them the exception clause. However, the Apostle Paul gave some strong words on the matter

of remarriage. He stated that remarriage is permitted only if your former spouse has died and then “only in the Lord” (I Corinthians 7:39, Romans 7:1-3). Those who divorce on non-Biblical grounds have sinned against God and their partners, and for them to marry another is an act of “adultery” (Mark 10:11-12). This is why Paul says that a believing woman who sinfully divorces should “remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband” (I Corinthians 7:10-11). If she repents from her sin of unbiblical divorce, the true fruits of that repentance would be to seek reconciliation with her former husband (Matthew 5; 23-24). The same is true for a man who divorces unbiblically (I Corinthians 7:11). In this instance the only time such a person could remarry another is if the former spouse dies, in which case reconciliation would no longer be possible. They then should only be remarried to a godly Christian (I Corinthians 7:39, Romans 7:1-3).

The Bible also gives a word of caution to anyone who is considering marriage to a divorcee. If the divorce was not on biblical grounds and there is still a responsibility to reconcile, the person who marries the divorcee is considered an adulterer (Mark 10:12). Certainly the Bible gives some very strong words and direction on the matter of divorce and remarriage and it is considered a very serious matter in the Scriptures.

The Role of the Church

Believers who pursue divorce on unbiblical grounds are subject to church discipline because they openly reject the Word of God. The one who obtains an unbiblical divorce and remarries is guilty of adultery since God did not permit the original divorce (Matthew 5:32; Mark 10:11-12). That person is subject to the steps of church discipline as outlined in Matthew 18: 15-17. If a professing Christian violates the marriage covenant and refuses to repent during the process of church discipline, Scripture instructs that he or she should be put out of the church and treated as an unbeliever (verse 17). When the discipline results in such a reclassification of the disobedient spouse as an “outcast” or unbeliever, the faithful partner would be free to divorce according to the provision for divorce as in the case of an unbeliever departing, as stated in I Corinthians 7:15. Before such a divorce, however, reasonable time should be allowed for the possibility of the unfaithful spouse returning because of the discipline.

The leadership in the local church should also help single believers who have been divorced to understand their situation biblically, especially in cases where the appropriate application of biblical teaching does not seem clear. For example, the church leadership may at times need to decide whether one or both of the former partners could be legitimately considered “believers” at the time of their past divorce, because this will affect the application of biblical principles to their current situation (I Corinthians 7:17-24). Also, because people often transfer to or from other churches and many of those churches do not practice church discipline, it might be necessary for the leadership to decide whether a member’s estranged or former spouse should currently be considered a Christian or treated as an

unbeliever because of continued disobedience. Again, in some cases this would affect the application of the biblical principles (I Corinthians 7:15; II Corinthians 6:14).

Pre-conversion Divorce

According to I Corinthians 7: 20-27, there is nothing in salvation that demands a particular social or marital status. The Apostle Paul, therefore, instructs believers to recognize that God providentially allows the circumstances they find themselves in when they come to Christ. If they were called to salvation while married, then they are not required to seek a divorce (even though divorce may be permitted on biblical grounds). If they were called to salvation while divorced, and cannot be reconciled to their former spouse because that spouse is an unbeliever or is remarried, then they are free to remain single or to be married to another believer if their former spouse has died. Some people teach the exception clause of adultery would also apply here to remarriage.

Repentance and Forgiveness

In cases where the divorce took place on unbiblical grounds and the guilty partner later repents, the grace of God is operative at the point of repentance. A sign of true repentance will be a desire to implement I Corinthians 7:10-11, which would involve a willingness to pursue reconciliation with his or her former spouse if that is possible, however, because the former spouse is an unbeliever or is remarried, then the forgiven believer should seek to live for God and remain wherever they are at the time they repent (I Corinthians 7:20). If their former spouse has died they are free to remarry only in the Lord, I Corinthians 7:39. Again, there are those who believe that the exception clause of adultery by the other partner allows remarriage here.

In case where a believer obtained a divorce on unbiblical grounds and remarried, he or she is guilty of the sin of adultery until that sin is confessed (Mark 10:11-12). God does forgive that sin immediately when repentance takes place, and there is nothing in Scripture to indicate anything other than that. From that point on the believer should continue in his or her current marriage.

Serving In Leadership Positions in the Church

Leadership in the local church is a serious matter and should be taken very seriously. No one who has been involved in a divorce for any reason at any time may serve as a pastor, missionary, evangelist, or deacon. Men who are in these God given leadership positions are required to have testimony that is above reproach. I Timothy 3:1, “A bishop must be blameless, the husband of one wife”. I Timothy 3:4, “One that ruleth his own house well”. I Timothy 3:5, “For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the house of God?” I Timothy 3:7, “Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall

into reproach and the snare of the devil". I Timothy 3:10, "blameless", I Timothy 3:12, Titus 1:6-7. The Bible teaches that God gives spiritual qualifications for these positions. Therefore, some are disqualified. God is sovereign and we trust His judgment and calling in these matters.

Divorced people who have repented of their sin or have been involved in a divorce because of sexual sin or abandonment by an unfaithful or unsaved spouse should seek to use their gifts and be encouraged to serve God in the local church. They should seek to live a godly life and to be a testimony of God's grace to other Christians and the lost.