

The Truth About Divorce & Remarriage

by Mark Mitchell

As I address the issue of divorce and remarriage, I won't bore you with depressing statistics about the divorce rate in our country. I don't have to tell you that the divorce rate among Christians isn't all that different. When we bring up the issue of divorce, we are speaking about something that is very relevant and very painful. I doubt that there is not a person reading this who has not in some way been touched in a personal way by the pain and tragedy of divorce.

It's not an easy subject to address these days. There are those on the one hand, who are so rigid and self-righteous in their views that people in pain are left to feel nothing but shame and rejection. But then there are those who have become so loose and self-indulgent on this issue that divorce is made out to be some kind of personal victory. I don't know many people who would look back on their divorce as a personal triumph. Yes, there's healing, and by God's grace we can grow from the most devastating experience, but God forbid that we view divorce in such a casual way.

Because of the immense confusion in both the church and the culture on this issue, we must understand what God's Word has to say about it. In Mark 10, Jesus is asked to give his opinion about divorce.

The Reason for Divorce

As Jesus and his disciples travel south towards Jerusalem, he's approached by some Pharisees,

“And rising up, He went from there to the region of Judea, and beyond the Jordan; the crowds gathered around Him again, and, according to His custom, He once more began to teach them. And some Pharisees came up to Him, testing him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife.”

It's important to understand the background of this question. Notice they ask if it is lawful for a **man** to divorce his wife, not vice versa. In Jewish culture of that day marriage was not a union of two equals. Women were not allowed to divorce their husband, but a husband was allowed under Jewish law to divorce his wife. So what the Pharisees are really asking is not if it's ever lawful for a man to divorce his wife, but upon what grounds was it lawful. It was taken for granted that divorce was legal, just as it is today, but on what grounds?

At the center of this question was a passage of Scripture from the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 24:1 Moses speaks of

“a man takes who 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 from the house...”

The purpose of this law was to give legal protection to a woman whose husband divorced her. With a certificate in hand, she was free from false accusation; she was also free to remarry, and her former husband couldn't reclaim her if he had a change of heart. She couldn't be used as a bargaining chip among men. But in Jesus' day there was a debate going on among the rabbis over what this word “indecency” really meant. There was one group who had a strict view of this and said it meant some form of sexual immorality akin to adultery. The other group was much more liberal and said that even if a woman was a bad cook she could be divorced. Even if a man found her to grow unattractive he could just write her a marital pink slip and send her away. It was almost an ancient version of “no fault” divorce. The Pharisees want to know where Jesus stands on this debate.

As Jesus often did, he responds to their question with a question of his own. Look at verses 3–5,

“And He answered and said to them, ‘What did Moses command you?’ And they said, ‘Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.’ But Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment.’”

By asking this question Jesus drives them back to the Scripture. He takes them back to the text that was at the very heart of the debate. In response, the Pharisees quote Moses' words as a justification for divorce, but they refuse to commit themselves on the debate. There is something else here that's easy to miss. Jesus asked them what Moses **commanded**, but they respond by saying what Moses **permitted**. There is a big difference between commanding something and permitting something. Jesus knew that divorce was never commanded by God, and he was forcing them to see that. In practice, the Pharisees acted as if divorce was something God endorsed and approved. They thought that if God permitted it he must

approve of it. They enjoyed writing these marital pink slips. Their main concern was not true righteousness, but what the law would let them get away with.

Jesus tells us he permitted it because of their hardness of heart. He says divorce was God's reluctant concession for hardhearted people. It was a way to stop the bleeding and bring some kind of order and protection to a society that was drifting into chaos. As we've already seen, much of what this law did was protect women from calloused men who thought nothing of ruining a woman's life and reputation by throwing them out on the street. Divorce was never God's desire, but something that he tolerated because of a person's hard heart.

Today we know that the divorce rate has hit epidemic proportions. Why do marriages fail? Is it a lack of communication? Is it problems with the in-laws? Is it sexual incompatibility? Is it financial problems? These things are just symptoms. At the root, the problem is that hearts grow hard. What is a hard heart? It's a heart that's stubborn, a heart that is calloused to God and to others. It's a heart that is bent on going its own way. It's a heart that is cruel and unforgiving. Sometimes that hardness characterizes one person more than the other, but this is the core of the problem. This is still why divorce is sometimes necessary.

Jesus says divorce was a divine concession for hardened hearts. But he doesn't stop there. He goes beyond the law and presents God's original blueprint for marriage. We can only understand how God feels about divorce if we understand what his design for marriage is.

The Purpose of Marriage

"But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, 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."

Jesus focuses **not** on what is permitted due to sin, but on what God's purpose for marriage has always been. Jesus says, "Let's get beyond rights; let's get beyond what's lawful; let's talk about God's purpose." He goes all the way back to creation and shows that divorce is inconsistent with God's original blueprint. He says three things here about God's design.

First, he talks about how God made us. He quotes from Genesis 1:27 and says "*God made them male and female.*" God made two distinct genders of humanity, male and female, for the purpose of bringing them together in marriage. Notice this rules out polygamy which Israel later fell into. He doesn't

say "male and females." It's to be one male and one female. This rules out homosexual unions. It wasn't God's intention to bring two males or two females together. That's not a popular statement to make today, and we're certainly called to have compassion on those struggling with homosexual desires, but this is what God's word says. Marriage was designed to be a monogamous, heterosexual union.

Second, he tells us how God joins us. He quotes from Genesis 2, "*For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and the two shall become one flesh...*" In a mysterious way, God glues together two people. It starts with leaving father and mother. What is the primary relationship in life? Many would say it's between parents and children. That is a crucial relationship, but it's not the primary relationship. The primary relationship is between husband and wife. That's why we leave our father and mother in order to be married. If we continue to see our relationship with father or mother as primary to our existence that's going to interfere with our marriage. An even deeper problem is when we see our relationship with our kids as more important than our spouse. Regardless of how we feel about our kids, the marriage relationship is still primary.

Jesus says when we leave God makes us into one flesh. What does that mean? There is a spiritual, physical and emotional aspect to this. Spiritually, we become one when we make that covenant before God. Something happens in those vows. A spiritual transaction is made in heaven and two become one. Physically, we become one flesh as we enjoy the beauty of our sexual union. The Bible calls this "knowing" each other. It's a nice way to describe a good thing for two people to enjoy who are committed to one another for life. Emotionally, we become one in a process of living together, working together, struggling together and praying together. God uses that process to make us one. It's a oneness that is shaped as we stay committed to each other through all the experiences of life.

The third thing Jesus does in giving us God's design for marriage is warn us. He says, "*What God has joined together, let no man separate.*" Marriage is designed to be a lifelong union. You can't take something God has glued together and separate it with a piece of paper. If it were a man made thing, maybe you could, but it's a God-made thing. I've noticed this over the years as I've watched couples. No matter what kind of awful things might happen in a marriage, when it comes right down to it, it's pretty tough to break it up. You can, but not without tremendous pain and suffering, because you're undoing something God has glued together. That's the deception of divorce. To think we can divide that one flesh and be left with two whole individuals. Jesus says don't even try. What

God has joined together, let no man separate. He's not talking about a court of law, he's talking about YOU the married couple. Don't you mess with what God has done.

Jesus deals with the Pharisees' question about divorce by giving them his view on marriage. That's all they get, but his disciples get more. Look what happens next.

The Reality About Remarriage

“And in the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again. And He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery.’”

As the disciples got into the house later that day they must have been in a state of shock. They'd seen how the religious leaders operated, passing out pink slips, quoting the law. We know that most of these disciples were married men themselves; it's not unlikely some of them had been divorced. And so, they ask him about this. What he says had to shock them even more. He's stricter than they even thought. As a matter of fact, in Matthew's Gospel, after Jesus says this, they say, “We're better off not getting married at all!” By the way, there are a lot of people saying that today. “There is too much pain in this marriage business. I'm just going to play the field. If there's no way out, I don't want in.”

Let me try to paraphrase what Jesus says to them: “Any man who divorces his wife to marry another woman commits adultery against his wife, and any woman who divorces her husband to marry another man commits adultery as well.” Notice how Jesus has included both husband and wife in this. Though the latter example wouldn't happen in Jewish culture, it was happening in the Graeco-Roman culture to which Mark was writing. Notice also that Jesus has provided no exceptions to this rule. Divorce plus remarriage equals adultery. I believe Jesus is so emphatic because he is speaking about hard hearted Pharisees who wrote marital pink slips like they were nothing. We know that in other passages Jesus and Paul do provide some situations where divorce and remarriage are permissible.

Matthew 19 records the same story as in Mark's Gospel. The conversation with the Pharisees proceeds along pretty much the same lines. The Pharisees ask Jesus his opinion on divorce. Jesus takes them back to Genesis and shows them God's original design for marriage. He speaks of divorce as a divine concession for hardened hearts. But then in verse 9 he adds something that Mark left out. Jesus says, “*And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries*

another commits adultery.” Notice Jesus adds an exception. It seems he allows for divorce in the case of immorality. The question is, what did he mean by that?

The Greek word for “immorality” is *porneia*, from which we get our word pornography. It's a word that refers to every kind of illicit sexual relations including fornication, prostitution, homosexuality and adultery. Jesus is saying that any variety of sexual infidelity that involves one with another person constitutes a violation of the marriage covenant that is so deep divorce is allowed. It shows us how serious sexual sin really is. There is nothing that touches at such a deep level as sex. The world wants us to think it's just biology; just a physical act. But it's so much more than that; it involves us at a deep level of soul and spirit. That's why Jesus sees it as a the consummate act of betrayal which can justifiably end a marriage.

This is very similar to something Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:31–32. Jesus makes the same exception, but he takes it a step further and says the man who divorces his wife for the wrong reason makes her commit adultery and makes the man she marries commit adultery. It was assumed back then that a divorced woman could and would remarry. I don't believe Jesus says this to indict the woman or the man she marries, but to indict the man who divorces her because he is now guilty of two more counts of adultery! He has *adulterized* both her and her new husband.

There are two questions that I must address here. First, does infidelity require divorce or just permit it? Jesus was not teaching that the innocent party must or even should divorce an unfaithful partner. He certainly doesn't say that infidelity automatically dissolves the marriage. Jesus is talking about infidelity coupled with this hardness of heart he has already referred to. It's an unwillingness to confess it and deal with it that Jesus is speaking of. We have to remember what Jesus teaches about forgiveness elsewhere. When there is genuine repentance and change in an unfaithful partner there can be forgiveness and healing. I know many couples who have found healing in their marriage on the other side of adultery. They have good marriages. They have a scar. They walk with a limp. They wish it never happened. But God can heal. While infidelity allows for divorce, it doesn't demand it.

The second question is what about remarriage for the person who has divorced on legitimate grounds? Jesus doesn't say it here but there is no question that where he allows for divorce, he also allows for remarriage on the part of the innocent party. This fact is made abundantly clear in the teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7.

In addressing the Corinthians on this issue Paul speaks to two different groups. First he speaks to married believers. In verses 10–11 he says, *“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, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband) and that the husband should not divorce his wife.”*

When Paul says, *“not I, but the Lord,”* he’s referring back to Jesus’ statements in the Gospels we just looked at. Based on Jesus’ own teaching, a believing wife should not leave a believing husband and vice versa. Notice he says nothing about the exception clause. It’s my opinion that it was assumed; he didn’t need to say it. If immorality takes place in the marriage of two believers, divorce is still permissible.

Notice also that Paul recognizes that sometimes two believers do separate or get divorced on illegitimate grounds. I assume that there were people like that in the Corinthian church, which tells me that people like that **can** and **should** be part of the church. They shouldn’t be excluded; they shouldn’t be condemned; and they shouldn’t even be forced to get back together or leave the church. Life is full of “but ifs.” The church is full of “but ifs.” Christians that don’t allow for “but ifs” live in a dream world and try to purge the church of all imperfections. But Paul didn’t live in a dream world; he lived in places like Corinth and the Bay Area where “but ifs” happen all the time. Paul simply says that if this “but if” happens then these two believers should remain single or else be reconciled. If that sounds pretty strict, remember it’s based on what Jesus said about marriage as a permanent one-flesh union. This is why some of us think if two believers CAN’T live together it’s better to obtain a legal separation than divorce. Legal separation prevents remarriage and leaves the room for reconciliation.

The second group Paul addresses are believers who are married to unbelievers. Paul would never encourage a believer to marry an unbeliever, but often times a husband or wife would come to Christ after they had already been married. What should they do then? No doubt some began to wonder if perhaps they should leave the unbeliever since Christ calls us to put away our old way of life. Perhaps they thought that they should leave for the sake of the children. What if my unbelieving wife or husband influenced my children to turn away from Christ? Shouldn’t I leave? Look what Paul says starting in verse 12, *“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, he must not divorce her. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away.”*

When Paul says that this is him speaking and not the Lord he doesn’t mean that his words don’t carry the same weight. He simply means that he is now going to address a situation on which the Lord himself did not give a verdict. Paul still speaks with full apostolic authority! He says that if an unbelieving spouse wants to stay in the marriage the believer must not divorce them. Spiritual incompatibility is **not** proper grounds for divorce. It certainly can make for a difficult marriage. If you are in that situation, you may feel like half of a person because you can’t share the most meaningful part of your life with the one you love. Sometimes it’s hard to come to church because you see couples where both share a love for Christ; it’s hard because you so long for that, and you see how they take it for granted, and even complain about their marriages! Churches need to pray for, encourage and love folks married to unbelievers.

The reason Paul says not to leave is given in verse 14, *“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.”* This doesn’t mean that the unbelieving husband and children will be automatically saved. The word “sanctify” means to set apart or to make holy. Paul means that the spouse and children are set apart in the sense that they are now under the influence of the Gospel. We might think the believer will be corrupted by the unbeliever, but Paul says it’s the other way around; they will be influenced by the believer. That’s not a guarantee that a spouse or children will come to Christ, but it’s certainly an encouragement that they may. If you’re in that situation, this should free you to love your unbelieving spouse with all your heart and be the best wife or husband you can be, and it should give you hope. Your children are set apart by your faith, and so is your husband or wife. You don’t have to be compromised by them; they are being impacted by you.

But what happens if your unbelieving spouse wants out of the marriage? Paul addresses that in verses 15–16, *“Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?”* The idea here is that if the unbeliever deserts and is determined not to return, then let them go. When Paul says you are not under bondage he means that the bond of marriage has been broken and you are free to remarry. That’s the clear implication of what he says. The reasons we should let them go are that we are called to peace and we can’t guarantee we’ll win our unbelieving spouse by trying to perpetuate a union they’ve decided to end.

It's important we understand that Paul clearly envisions a situation where the unbeliever has chosen to leave; the initiative is not with the believer. It's also important we understand Paul is talking about physical abandonment. Many take this and want to make it refer to emotional abandonment, but that's a stretch. We have to be careful not to be looking for loopholes in the word.

Let me summarize what we've learned. First, God's intention in creation was to bring male and female together in an exclusive, permanent, one-flesh union. Second, divorce is nowhere commanded or even encouraged in Scripture, but it is permitted in certain cases. A person may divorce his partner if that partner has been guilty of infidelity. Also, a believer may acquiesce in the abandonment of an unbelieving spouse. And third, remarriage is allowed for the innocent party when divorce has taken place on biblical grounds. If two believers divorce on less than biblical grounds, they're to remain single or be reconciled.

Pastoral Issues

Now there are two situations that Jesus or Paul didn't address that need to be before we finish. First of all, what about abuse? I have no hesitation saying that if a wife is being physically abused she should get out of that situation. My opinion is that this is a deep violation of a person that, unless there is repentance and proven change, even divorce can be the right course of action. On what grounds can I say that since Jesus doesn't make that an exception? I would say that the fact that Jesus or Paul doesn't make that an exception doesn't mean that they wouldn't if they had occasion to address that problem. A case could be made that physical abuse constitutes abandonment or immorality. And we have to keep in mind things Jesus said on other occasions. In Matthew 12:7 Jesus says, *"I desire compassion and not sacrifice."* In Matthew 23:4 he says of the religious leaders, *"They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders..."* God forbid that we do the same!

Now when we talk about emotional abuse we're talking about something different. In extreme cases, this may be cause for separation. But, unfortunately, emotional abuse has become a catchall that permits divorce for almost any reason at all. We do have to be careful not to make exceptions into excuses for divorce. An angry word has been taken as emotional abuse. A lustful eye has been taken as infidelity. The whole tenor of what Jesus and Paul say is that if you are looking for a loophole to get out of a marriage, your heart is in the wrong place.

The second situation has to do with things that happened before we came to Christ. If you were divorced for the wrong

reasons before you were a believer does that mean you can never remarry. Consider Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:17, *"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."* Because of this, I can't see how a pre-conversion divorce should be reckoned against the new believer as sin. This doesn't mean that no attempt at reconciliation should be made if that option is open and if the Lord leads in that direction. But, where reconciliation is impossible, a new life should allow a believer to remarry in the Lord.

Conclusion

I want to finish by speaking to a few different groups of people. First, I want to address those who are single but contemplating marriage. I don't know how else to put it, but it's very important you know what you are getting into. Marriage is God's gift, but don't enter it casually. This is why we take premarital counseling so seriously. This is why we won't just marry anybody. So, before you take the step, seek the Lord in prayer, seek counsel from wise people, and give yourself plenty of time to prepare. Some of you are single and want to be married, but the Lord hasn't provided the right one yet. As painful as it is to wait, hold out for God's best. Let God forge you and shape you into a person who will be great husband or wife.

Second, I want to speak to those who are struggling in marriage. Maybe you're thinking about calling it quits. Maybe you can feel your heart begin to harden towards your spouse. If you're in that situation you may have a hard time reading this, because as the heart hardens the ears grow deaf, and it becomes hard to hear the voice of God. But if that's you, I want you to know that in almost every situation I can think of, it's worth hanging in there. God really does hate divorce. He hates it not because he's a hateful God, but because he loves you. He knows that decision will create wreckage beyond imagination in your life and in those you love. The best reason to stay married is because Jesus tells you to. But let me say something else to you. You can stay in a marriage and still be hardened against your wife or husband. So, besides just staying in the marriage, let God soften your heart. Confess your bitterness and resentment and unwillingness to forgive. Focus more on yourself than your spouse. Be the first to say you're sorry. God loved you when your back was turned to him, now you turn and do the same for your spouse. If you need to, get help. Call one of our pastors. Seek out a Christian counselor, but don't give up.

Finally, I want to speak to those who have been broken by divorce in one form or another. I want you to know that God

loves to come along side of you in your pain and bring comfort. God hates divorce but he doesn't hate divorcees. Because you are in Christ, you don't have to walk around with a "D" on your forehead. You may have been abandoned, but God will never abandon his children. His healing and his grace is available. He will even give you the power to forgive that person that has hurt you. Maybe you're the one that needs forgiveness. If you

come to the Lord with a broken and repentant heart he won't turn you away. Divorce or adultery is not the unforgivable sin. The fact is you cannot sin yourself outside the love of God. Jesus comes to you as he did the woman caught in adultery, "*Look around, does no one condemn you?*" She replied, *No one, Lord.*' Jesus then said, *'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and sin no more.'*"