

Divorce and Remarriage

By David Feddes

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” (Matthew 19:3)

The advertisements pop up on my computer screen. One says, “Simple divorce online, low cost, fast, easy, guaranteed. Your online divorce solution: only \$249.” Another offers an even better bargain: “No fault divorce. Only \$25.95.” What could be better than a divorce that doesn’t cost much and is nobody’s fault? Another advertisement is headlined “Easy divorce online” and offers “easy divorce kits.” The company says, “We take great pride in the quality of our divorce kits.” Still another “easy online divorce” company boasts of being featured on TV news programs and offers a 100% money back guarantee. I’m not in the market for a divorce, but it’s apparently a booming business. Online companies compete with more traditional law firms for a share of the profits in the divorce paperwork business.

Is divorce okay as long as you do the paperwork and fill out the right forms? Some people seem to think so, and that’s nothing new. Back when Jesus walked the earth, he met people who thought the same way. They thought it was okay for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all. Many of these people were part of an elite religious group called the Pharisees. They thought God himself gave them the right to easy divorce, as long as they did the proper paperwork. Their position appealed to a lot of people who wanted God on their side but didn’t want to be stuck with one person the rest of their life.

Easy divorce was popular in Jesus’ time, and Jesus’ opponents wanted to use this as a weapon against Jesus. The Pharisees were upset that so many people were interested in Jesus, and they were eager to make Jesus look bad and turn people against him. One sure way, they decided, was to ask Jesus the divorce question: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

If you had to answer that question, what would you say? Is it okay to divorce somebody simply because you want to? Is it okay for a woman to divorce her husband if he leaves the toilet seat up too often? Is it okay for a man to divorce his wife if she gains twenty pounds and he wants to marry someone younger and slimmer? Is it okay for a woman to divorce her husband if he watches too many sports events on TV? Is it okay for a couple to get a divorce because they don’t get along very well? Is it okay to divorce someone if you want to marry someone else whom you think will make you happier? Does God’s law approve of divorcing someone for any reason whatsoever?

In Jesus’ time, many people looked to the teachings of Rabbi Hillel for guidance. Hillel was a popular teacher, and his ideas are still revered by some people today. Hillel took a permissive view of divorce. Some other teachers took a stricter view, but Hillel and his followers taught that a man could divorce his wife for just about any reason. If she didn’t cook well enough to please him, he could divorce her with God’s approval. If he found a more beautiful woman, he could divorce his present wife and remarry the one he found more attractive. Hillel said that this was okay as long as there was a proper certificate of divorce, and he used a snippet from the Law of Moses to show that God supported this. Hillel’s permissive view of divorce attracted a large following.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” they weren’t asking the question out of real curiosity. They already knew that Jesus opposed easy divorce. Earlier Jesus had said that doing the proper paperwork didn’t make divorce right. Jesus mentioned only one exception where God allowed divorce, but, otherwise, he said that divorce and remarriage meant adultery, and no amount of paperwork could change that fact (Matthew 5:32-33).

Jesus’ enemies wanted to use this against Jesus. They asked Jesus the divorce question to make him repeat his opposition to divorce. They knew that a quick way for a preacher to upset people and turn them off is to say something about divorce. They wanted to trip Jesus up. They wanted to highlight how Jesus differed from Rabbi Hillel and from the proper understanding of God’s law given to Moses. They wanted people who had been following Jesus to have second thoughts about him. People might think Jesus’ views on marriage and divorce were unrealistic, and they might switch their allegiance away from Jesus to religious leaders who taught divorce as a God-given right.

Think of what happens today if someone wants a divorce but the church says the divorce is wrong. That person is likely to leave his spouse anyway and to leave his church as well and find a different church. I’ve seen it happen. A man leaves his wife and starts living with another woman. His church elders confront him and say he’s doing wrong, but rather than repent, he takes his girlfriend to a church down the street that is more permissive. Or a woman is fed up with her husband and leaves him for reasons the church says are not sufficient. This upsets her, so she leaves her church and finds one that makes her “more comfortable.” This is the sort of thing Jesus’ enemies wanted to exploit. They wanted to get Jesus to say things about divorce that would go against accepted wisdom and offend many divorced people, so that people would leave Jesus’ circle and join a group where they’d feel more at home.

The Marriage Question

Jesus was not as permissive about divorce as his opponents. This doesn’t mean Jesus was meaner than the Pharisees. Far from it! Jesus had tremendous compassion for divorced people. He went out of his way to befriend a woman who had been divorced five times and was living with a man at the time he met her. Jesus touched her heart and brought her to faith. Today, Jesus cares about divorced people as much as ever. He cares about those who go through divorce reluctantly and against their will and may not be to blame for their divorce. He also cares about those who think they can divorce someone for any and every reason. Jesus cares so much about people and their relationship to each other and to God that he refuses to take divorce lightly.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus the divorce question, Jesus knew that not everybody would like his answer, but he spoke out anyway. He didn’t immediately give a direct answer, however. He asked a question of his own. Jesus took his questioners back to the very beginning of marriage, recorded in the book of Genesis.

“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

In response to the divorce question, Jesus asked the marriage question: haven't you read the Creator's original design? Before we ask, "When is it okay to get divorced?" we first need to ask, "What is marriage?" Before we ask when it might be right for humans to end a marriage, we first have to ask about God's design for starting marriage. If the Creator designed marriage to unite two persons and to make them one in body and purpose, then no human has the right to tear apart such a union just because he or she happens to want out.

That might seem hard to argue with, but Jesus' opponents didn't give up. If Jesus wanted to quote the Scriptures, they could also quote Scripture. "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" They were referring to Deuteronomy 24:1, where Moses says, "Suppose a man marries a woman but later discovers something about her that is shameful. So he writes her a letter of divorce, gives it to her, and sends her away." Moses goes on to say that if this woman ends up marrying another man, the former husband is not allowed to marry her again later. What Jesus' opponents gleaned out of that passage was the paperwork principle: if you want to dump your wife, go ahead. Just make sure you do the right paperwork. Then God will approve.

They even talked like divorce was *commanded* by Moses and by God. But did the Bible really *command* people to get divorced? No, God recognized the reality of divorce among sinful people and gave instruction on how to regulate it. The purpose was to make divorce less frequent, to make it less damaging when it did happen, and to show that divorce is a very serious matter. When the Pharisees quoted Moses' divorce regulation, Jesus replied that divorce was never commanded but only allowed reluctantly because they were so sinful and stubborn. He told the Pharisees,

"Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

When Jesus' opponents read the Bible, they were always looking for loopholes and trying to define what God would let them get away with. But that's the wrong way to read the Bible. Jesus challenged them not to look for loopholes but to seek God's original design for marriage. The first book of the Old Testament, the book of Genesis, speaks of God making two people one flesh, and the final book of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi, also speaks of one flesh. In Malachi 2, God says,

Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.

"I hate divorce," says the Lord God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the Lord Almighty.

So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith. (Malachi 2:15-16)
Old Testament Scripture begins and ends with this emphasis on the one-flesh union of marriage, and God thunders, "I hate divorce!" But hard-hearted people, determined to do their own thing, found one phrase in Scripture that mentioned a certificate of divorce and twisted it to make divorce a divine command.

Nowadays, many people take psychologists and authors as seriously as they used to take religious leaders, and some of these experts are even more eager than the

old-time Pharisees to make divorce sound right and good. One book on divorce makes marriage sound like clothing: if it wears out or if your taste changes, it's time to get rid of the old and get something new.

Yes, your marriage can wear out. People change their values and lifestyles. People want to experience new things. Change is a part of life. Change and personal growth are traits for you to be proud of, indicative of a vital searching mind. You must accept the reality that in today's multi-faceted world it is especially easy for two persons to grow apart. Letting go of your marriage—if it is no longer good for you—can be the most successful thing you have ever done. Getting a divorce can be a positive, problem-solving, growth-oriented step. It can be a personal triumph.

Much as old-time Pharisees made it sound like getting divorced was obedience to a biblical command, newfangled experts speak of divorce as something to be proud of, a sign of a great mind, a badge of goodness, a personal triumph! But Jesus cuts through the nonsense. In light of the Creator's intent for marriage, divorce is a disaster, a sign not of great minds but of hard hearts, a ripping apart of what God joined together.

Divorcing Without Sinning

Jesus opposes easy divorce, but he does not say that everybody who gets a divorce is wrong to do so. Jesus permits divorce where there is "marital unfaithfulness." The Greek word is *porneia*, the source of our word pornography. In this context, *porneia* means sexual activity outside the marriage. If your spouse is sexually unfaithful to the marriage, you are not necessarily sinning by getting a divorce. In such cases, Jesus allows you to divorce your unfaithful spouse and eventually to remarry someone else if you meet the right person.

The betrayal and breakup may be grievous to you, but getting divorced and remarried in such a case is not sinful, and you shouldn't feel guilty about it. Don't let Satan accuse you. Don't blame yourself for something that's not sinful. There is no such thing as no-fault divorce—divorce is always somebody's fault—but sometimes the divorce is the fault of one partner and not of the other. In many cases, both partners are at fault, but not in all cases. Sometimes one partner is unfaithful even when the other has been faithful and loving. No husband or wife is perfect all the time, but it's possible to be a good, faithful partner and yet have your spouse destroy the marriage.

Even if you were a faithful partner, you may feel a terrible sense of failure and guilt if your marriage has been destroyed. You can't help wondering if the relationship could have been saved if only you had done something different. It's common to feel this way, and it's right for you to grieve over the shattering of the union you treasured, but you should not carry a burden of guilt if it was your spouse who destroyed the marriage. This is especially true if your spouse got involved with someone else and committed adultery. You are the person who was wronged. Don't beat yourself up. Don't take the blame for your spouse's wicked choice to disobey God and to betray you. Going through divorce is painful enough without taking the blame for things that aren't your fault.

It's not sinful to divorce someone who has been sexually unfaithful. But does not mean you *must* divorce a spouse who has sinned in that way? No, if your spouse repents of the adultery and wants to continue the marriage, then aim for forgiveness

and reconciliation. The marriage has been violated, but if your unfaithful spouse and you can agree to work toward restoring trust and renewing the marriage, then do so.

Even if your spouse hasn't repented of adultery but remains in an affair, you might still choose not to get a divorce right away. You would not sin by seeking a divorce, but you might still choose to seek repentance and reconciliation for awhile. Be realistic—your marriage has been shattered. It may be unlikely that that your spouse will have a change of heart and want to put things back together again. But unlikely doesn't mean impossible. If your spouse hasn't sought divorce or made a final break, you might choose to wait and to leave the door open for reconciliation. In the Bible, the prophet Hosea had a wife who was very unfaithful and immoral, and Hosea kept loving her anyway and kept calling her back. His mercy and love was a display of God's mercy and love.

You're not required to tolerate ongoing adultery. You would be right and just in getting a divorce, but you would also be right to go the extra mile and leave extra time for your spouse to change. Don't be a doormat as you do this. Be firm—insist on separation if the affair doesn't end. Don't let your spouse try to keep the affair and the marriage at the same time. The choice must be clear: the marriage can be restored only if the sinful affair ends. You may choose to wait awhile after the separation rather than divorcing right away so that the door stays open for repentance and reconciliation. But God doesn't require you to wait forever. Marital unfaithfulness is a legitimate ground to seek a divorce and be free to remarry, because the other partner has already violated the one-flesh union.

Better Not to Marry?

When the Pharisees asked Jesus the divorce question, they wanted to cause trouble, and they succeeded. Even Jesus' closest disciples were bothered by his strong view of marriage. The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry" (Matthew 19:10). The disciples figured that if being married meant being stuck with the same person for better or for worse until death, it would be better to stay single. If your main question about marriage is, "What's in it for me?" then you want to make sure you can escape if it's not as fun as you had hoped.

Even Jesus' own disciples were infected by a weak view of marriage and a permissive approach to divorce. Still today it's shocking and scary to hear Jesus declare, "What God has joined together, let man not separate." We prefer the motto, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." If marriage to one person doesn't go the way you want with one person, cut your losses, end the marriage, and try again with somebody else. But Jesus says that God designed the one-flesh union to be a lifelong bond. Only if your spouse breaks the bond through sexual immorality are you permitted to end the marriage and marry someone else.

You might think, "Give me a break. There are lots of sound reasons for divorce and remarriage besides one partner's immoral behavior. What Jesus says is unrealistic." But is Jesus unrealistic? He is the Son of God, the Creator of reality. How can the Creator of reality be unrealistic? If we think Jesus sounds unrealistic, we are the ones who are out of touch with reality. Jesus' teaching isn't easy, but it is true and right and realistic. If we ignore his words, we end up fighting against the deepest structures of reality, and we cannot win.

The disciples thought that if marriage was to be as permanent and unbreakable as Jesus said, then it was better not to get married at all. Jesus responded by saying, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given... The one who can accept this should accept it" (Matthew 19:11-12). Not just anybody can accept what Jesus says about marriage. Only if God gives you the gift of faith in Jesus and the gift of obedience to his teaching will you accept what Jesus says about marriage and divorce. Otherwise you will find a view of marriage and divorce that you like better than the word of Jesus. But if God gives you the gift of a relationship to Jesus and you can accept him and his words, then you should accept what he says.

Maybe you've already offended God by getting a divorce that went against Jesus' instruction. If so, believe Jesus' words and confess that you have sinned. Then ask God for mercy and forgiveness, and seek his Spirit's power to become faithful and obedient to God from this point on. The Lord's grace can cover your sin, but it's not cheap grace. Jesus paid for this mercy with his own blood, and he calls you from now on to follow the narrow, difficult path which leads to life.

Divorce and Remarriage

These days it's common to assume that if a marriage fails, there's nothing wrong with marrying someone else. In this way of thinking, it's wrong to commit adultery with someone while you're married to another person, but once you're divorced, it's fine to remarry someone else. But what does Jesus say? "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery" (Mark 10:11-12). This means that if someone divorces without biblical grounds and remarries, the decision to find a new mate is adultery.

But what if two people simply can't live together? What if all they do is bicker or quarrel? What if one partner is violent? What if one is using drugs and alcohol? If it's unbearable to live with someone, how could anyone, even Jesus, say it's wrong to divorce and remarry? Well, Jesus takes promises more seriously than we do, and he takes the one-flesh reality of marriage more seriously than we do. There may be times when it is simply impossible to live together. There may be times when it is wiser to live apart than to stay in the same house. But even in such cases, the separation is temporary and leaves open the possibility of change and reconciliation. In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, the Bible says, "A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife." Extreme problems may lead to living apart for a time, but such problems do not justify divorce and remarriage.

There may be marriages where husband and wife are so at odds with each other, so fed up with each other that they can't live together or sleep together. In such cases, separation might not be as bad as daily strife. Separation may be the lesser of two evils, but even if separation is considered necessary, that does not make it moral to get a final divorce and find a new spouse. The ideal is not to separate at all, but if you feel you must live apart, you have two choices: stay single or reconcile to your spouse.

Let's be honest. If remarriage were not an option, there would be far fewer divorces in the first place. A great many marriages would not come to an end and a great many wounded relationships would heal if the only choices were to reconcile or

remain single. Many people would rather struggle in a hard marriage than be alone. But when the possibility of finding someone else and remarrying enters the picture, there's much less incentive to do everything possible to save an unhappy marriage. Sometimes a marriage breakup is a direct consequence of adultery by one partner. But even when adulterous acts haven't yet occurred, just the thought of finding someone who could make you happier than your present spouse can weaken your resolve to keep your vows.

Part of the old marriage vow includes the words "forsaking all others." That's not the language of much modern counseling, but it fits biblical teaching. When you marry somebody, you forsake all other prospects for marriage. If you don't forsake all others, if you allow for the possibility and a new and happier marriage, it's like acid eating away at your present marriage.

When people get divorced and remarry soon after, they commonly say that their first marriage was over no matter what, even if someone else hadn't come along. But they're often fooling themselves. They didn't realize how "trapped" they felt, how "dead" their marriage really was, until they met someone else who was really "compatible" and revealed to them what a good relationship could really be like. But without the possibility of a new relationship, was the old marriage really so dead? When people see marriage as permanent and rule out the possibility of marrying someone else, they are far more determined to bring a "dead" marriage back to life.

In any case, whether or not hopes for a happier second marriage hasten the end of many first marriages, the fact remains that Jesus says, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her" (Mark 10:11). Jesus also says, "Anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery" (Matthew 5:32). Unless the divorce fits the biblical exceptions that we'll look at in a moment, remarriage violates the way of Christ. If you decide to divorce your spouse, it is adultery for you to remarry. Even if you don't want a divorce but your spouse divorces you, it is adultery for you to remarry unless a biblical exception is involved.

This means that if a husband chooses to end a difficult marriage, the wife can't say, "Well, I didn't want the divorce, but now that it's come to that, I'm at least free to find a new man." A man who meets the newly divorced woman can't say, "Great! She's available, and I want her." If a marriage ends simply because of incompatibility, it is adultery to remarry.

Remarrying Without Sinning

What are the biblical exceptions which would allow divorce and remarriage? There are two. The first exception is if one spouse is already guilty of sexual unfaithfulness. In that case, the one-flesh union has been violated. Jesus allows (but does not require) the betrayed spouse to end the marriage and to eventually remarry someone else (Matthew 5:32, 19:9).

The second exception is when a non-Christian spouse abandons a spouse who has become a Christian. The Bible speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16. At the time the New Testament was written, you could get in big trouble for becoming a Christian, and your spouse might be persecuted along with you, even if they didn't share your faith in Christ. If they didn't want to face the trouble, they might want to get out of their marriage to you. Also, it could be just plain upsetting to a pagan for a spouse to

suddenly become a follower of Jesus. Some non-Christians chose to abandon and divorce spouses who had become Christians. The Bible said that these Christians were not bound by their previous marriage. This freed them to start over in a new marriage to a fellow believer.

Still, in cases where the unbelieving spouse was willing to continue the marriage, the Bible says that the Christian partner must not seek a divorce (1 Corinthians 7:12-16). If there was a choice to end the marriage, it must be the unbelieving spouse, not the follower of Jesus, who sought the divorce. "But if the unbeliever leaves," says the Scripture, "let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances" (1 Corinthians 7:15). The phrase "not bound" is, in the original language, a technical term for being free from a marriage and available to remarry.

God permits you to divorce and remarry if your spouse has been sexually unfaithful or if your spouse rejects your faith in Jesus and abandons you. However, if you divorce for any other reason, then to remarry is to commit adultery.

But what if you've already remarried? Is it ongoing adultery to remain in the second marriage? Must you leave the person you remarried? No, you can't undo one wrong by committing another wrong. If you've remarried and made vows, keep those vows. Be the best spouse you possibly can in your new marriage. But don't pretend that your decision to divorce and remarry was just fine if the Bible says it wasn't. Admit your sin to God, and ask him to forgive you for the sake of Jesus' blood. Then press on to do God's will from this point on.

This is not a blank check to say, "Okay, even if it would be adultery for me to divorce and remarry, I'll go ahead and do it anyway, and then count on God to forgive me later." That's a deadly game to play. How do you know God will give you the grace of true repentance? If you harden your heart to him now, how can you be sure your heart will soften later? The gospel of forgiveness is good news, but it is not a guarantee that you can do as you please and get away with it. The Bible warns, "Without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14).

I don't want to minimize the pain of difficult marriages. I don't want to be legalistic or cruel. I don't want to open old wounds or to heap guilt feelings on people for past sins that have already been confessed and forgiven. But I do want God's Word about divorce and remarriage to be clearly understood. And once his will is understood, we must seek not only God's forgiveness but also his cleansing and his power to obey.

Faithful

Why is it so important to be faithful in marriage and to avoid divorce? Well, divorce is usually very hard on those who split up, and it's especially hard on their children. But the problem runs even deeper than the pain it causes. God calls his people to reflect his own character. God is faithful and keeps his promises, and a person who images God always keeps his promise even when it hurts (Psalm 15:4). So when people who claim to have a relationship to God break their vows and are unfaithful to the marriage covenant, they violate the image of the faithful God who keeps his covenant. Scripture even says that marriage is designed to reflect the relationship between Christ and his church. Do we really want Jesus to dump us and split up with us if we do things he doesn't like? If we trust the Savior to keep loving and forgiving his church, how can we stop loving and forgiving our spouse? If we violate our marriage

vows, we send a message that this is how Jesus treats his church, and that is a horrible offense against the Lord.

If you're struggling in your marriage, don't throw it away. Hang in there. Jesus' words may not be easy, but they are best, and you will be blessed if you follow his path. What Jesus commands, he also gives the power to do. With his Holy Spirit working within, you can remain faithful to your marriage.

I mentioned earlier a study which found that most people in unhappy marriages who decided to stick with their marriage found that their relationship ended up getting much better. That may sound impossible in your situation—but it can happen, especially if you desire to please God, trust in Jesus, and depend on the Holy Spirit's power. Listen to a letter a woman wrote:

Dear Pastor Feddes,

I would like to tell you that you have been a great blessing in my life. The Holy Spirit used your sermons to make me fall in love with the Lord and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Of course the evil one didn't waste time and started attacking me through my own family. My husband and I separated. We were talking about divorce. We were both full of hate and anger. I thought our marriage was the messiest of all marriages and that only the greatest miracle on earth would save it.

At that point she was struck by a sermon about Jesus' statement that all things are possible for those who believe. She still thought no marriage could be uglier than hers. "However," she writes,

I decided to take your advice seriously and said, "Yes, it's possible. With God all things are possible." Then I gave everything to God, in the name of the Lord Jesus, and sure enough, everything started gradually changing for the best. It has been almost three years since that horrible nightmare and—praise be to the Almighty!—our marriage can't be better. We are very close to the Lord and often pray, joining hands. Now we enjoy being together."

What if that woman or her husband had chosen the path of divorce and remarriage? That would have destroyed the path to reconciliation and renewed love. At one point they were so angry and hated each other so much that they couldn't live in the same house, but they didn't pursue love with someone else, and eventually God raised their marriage from the dead.

What about you? Is your marriage dead? Are you sure? And even if it is dead, are you sure it can't come alive again? I know a Savior who specializes in resurrection. Do you know him?

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