

## ***“Biblical Perspectives on Love, Marriage and Sex—What the Bible Says About Divorce”***

As we get started today on a very difficult subject, I want to do a quick survey. How many of you, either through a friend, a family member, or you yourselves, have been touched by divorce? Almost every one of us has had some experience of divorce. My parents divorced after 35 years of marriage. It was a very difficult and divisive time for our family, as it is for every family. Because it's something that each of us will have some contact with, this is a subject that we've got to deal with in church, and as Christians. We need to carefully think through what God would say to us about divorce.

In my daily prayers I pray for many of you by name and I know that there are a lot of people here who are experiencing the pain of divorce. Your wounds are still fresh. You were left for someone else, or you were in the middle of a relationship where there was abuse taking place and had to leave. Or maybe your parents divorced and you still remember the feelings from that.

For some of you here today, you're in another place. You are struggling in your relationships, in your marriages, and you've secretly thought about divorce and wondered if life would be easier if you took that step. We live in a society where our culture makes it easy for us to say, "I quit. This is not what I signed up for so I'm outta here."

As your pastor I feel the weight of two things. On one hand I want to bring a word of grace, hope and encouragement, the healing touch of Christ to those who have gone through divorce. On the other hand I feel led to bring a word of courage and challenge to those of you thinking about divorce. I want to say, "Hang in there, keep working, fight to make it work." You'll hear that tension in this message; the tension of offer a word of grace **and** a word of challenge and accountability.

But before we look at exactly what the Bible teaches about divorce I want to talk to the youth and single people here today. Remember that marriage is a calling from God. And it takes communing with God to know if you are called to be married or called to be single. If you believe that you're called to be married then listen to this one very important piece of advice: **[SLIDE...] Triple your investment in the selection process.** Author and researcher Katharine Johnson looked carefully at what made for successful, flourishing marriages. After all of her research she concluded that the single most important factor in long-term, satisfying marriages was identifying the right person to get married to in the first place! In other words, put your time in on the selection side. That may seem obvious, but most people don't do it. People rush into marriage for all the wrong reasons and set themselves up for failure. Instead of doing that triple your investment in the selection process. Before you get serious, and way before you go ring shopping, check off if that person is compatible in these key areas: **[SLIDE: "Important Areas of Compatibility: 1. Spiritually. 2. In Character. 3. Communication. 4. Temperament and Personality. 5. Family Background."]** 1. spiritually compatible to you, 2. is compatible in character, 3. is compatible in communication, 4. temperament and personality and 5. family background.

If this potential spouse passes all the compatibility tests then make sure you get real, solid affirmation from family and friends. Ask them what they think of this person and then listen because they may see things that your love-clouded eyes can't see.

And then give the relationship the test of time. I believe in long courtships and short engagements. Get to know each other through the seasons of life, in good times and bad, in sickness and in health, so you see who they really are. That simply takes time.

If they, and you, pass these tests then you're ready. And then you'll be much, much less likely to face the pain and difficulty of divorce.

Now let's look at what the Bible actually teaches about divorce by starting with the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God spoke through a man named Moses and gave the law. The first five books of the Bible contain this law for the Israelites. The most extensive passage on divorce in that law is in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Listen carefully to this passage of scripture—what it says and what it **does not** say. [SLIDE...] **“Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house<sup>2</sup> and goes off to become another man's wife.<sup>3</sup> Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies);<sup>4</sup> her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife...” (Deut 24:1-4, NIV).**

Notice that it doesn't say divorce is bad, it doesn't say it's good. But it does recognize that 3,500 years ago, in the days of Moses, divorce happened. The Israelite people, our spiritual ancestors, divorced, and God set some guidelines about how they were to go about the process of divorce.

But notice this. It says very clearly that a **man** could divorce his wife if he found her objectionable. That's a pretty frightening thought. I don't know a man who doesn't find **something** objectionable about his wife! And I don't know a woman who doesn't find something objectionable about her husband! Some of the Rabbis interpreted this objectionable behavior to be adultery **and only adultery**. Other rabbis taught that objectionable behavior could be something as minor as putting too much salt in the food! My point is that this law was interpreted very widely in ancient days.

We find another passage on divorce in Malachi 2:14-16. This is a passage that was written almost 1,000 years after the time of Moses. It addressed the Israelite men who were starting to fall into a trend of divorcing their wives and marrying foreign women. So God speaks these words through the prophet Malachi: [SLIDE...] **“The Lord was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did not one God make her? Both flesh and spirit are his... So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth. For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel...” (Malachi 2:14-16, NRSV).**

When we read here that God hates divorce, we need to ask, would we expect God to say anything else? Would we expect God to say, “Well, I think divorce is a pretty good idea. Everybody should go through it two or three times.” No! God wouldn't say that! But, **why** does God hate divorce? The answer is simple: because it tears people apart. Because he knows that it's going to have an impact on children's lives and on self-esteem and on someone's soul and their relationship with him. God knows that in all those areas divorce is painful and hurtful, **and God doesn't want that for any of his children!** That's why God hates divorce.

But this passage doesn't say that God looks at every circumstance the same way. It does **not** say that God looks at people who've been divorced and hates them. It also leaves the possibility that there may be circumstances where divorce is the only way. This passage doesn't address any of those issues. It simply says that God thinks divorce is generally a bad idea.

There's one more passage in the Old Testament that we can look at, Jeremiah 3:8. In this passage, do you know who does the divorcing? God does! God gives Israel a certificate of divorce and divorces her because she has been unfaithful to him! The people went and worshipped other gods. God says, [SLIDE...] **“I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries...” (Jer 3:8, NIV).** Whoa! Even the God who hates the idea of

divorce says that there are times and places that this is a fitting metaphor for what God did when his people abandoned him.

That's what the Old Testament says, so now let's look at the New Testament and some of the very difficult passages there. In Matthew chapter 5, Jesus says you have heard it said, **[SLIDE...]** **“Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matt 5:31-32, NRSV).** Now that is a very hard saying. He's stating that the one acceptable ground for divorce is the same one that God used to divorce Israel, and that is unchastity, or unfaithfulness, adultery.

Then we come to Matthew 19. **[SLIDE...]** **“Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?’... Jesus replied, ‘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’” (Matt 19:3-8 and 9, NIV).**

First let's look at the context here. There were two schools of thought among the Pharisees about divorce. One school of thought was that a man could divorce a woman for **any** reason. But remember that in the first century if a man divorced his wife, she couldn't go out and get a job, she didn't get alimony or child support. Remarrying was often not possible, so she either went to live with family if she had family, or she lived in poverty or she became a prostitute. The other school of thought that said that a man could **only** divorce his wife if she had been unfaithful. That was the reality of first century Judaism.

So how do you think Jesus would side in that debate? A man divorcing his wife for **any** reason, or **only** on the grounds of unfaithfulness? Of course he's not going to accept the idea that a man could divorce his wife for any reason! So he chooses the other side saying that if a man divorces his wife for any reason but unfaithfulness, he commits adultery. Hard words! What do we make of this?

Well, let me start by teaching you something about how we read these words of Jesus. You see, Jesus was not only the savior and messiah, he was also a prophet. And when prophets preach and teach they're not concerned with the exceptions to the rule, they speak in black and white terms. They lay it out there hard and direct because their job is to shake up a complacent people who have missed the mark.

Jesus is pushing the point, he's speaking in black and white terms with the voice of a prophet to shake us out of our complacency so we get the message. But he is **not** dealing with all the exceptions. We know that Jesus certainly would have recognized that people who were being physically abused in a relationship did not have to live in that relationship. He knew that, but he wasn't talking about the exceptions, he was saying, “In general here's the way it is.” And he is very, very direct.

Here's what I believe what Jesus was trying to say about divorce, and we need to hear it loud and clear: Divorce is a bad idea. It's not God's idea. Human beings came up with the idea. He says, “By and large you should not get divorced. It's painful and difficult and it's not what I want.” But God clearly leaves room for the possibility of divorce. God **never** says, “I hate divorced people.” He never says that. He says, “My mercy and grace can cover you in those circumstances as with any other circumstance in life.”

You see, there are many, many reasons why people get divorced, some of them are good reasons and most of them are terrible reasons. Please know that however it happens, divorce is a deeply painful thing. I've heard people talk about how they're going to have a friendly divorce and it's

all going to be easy and great. Well, that's a myth, it's never easy and great. Yes, there are people who are able to remain friends afterward, but they are the exception. The rule is that one spouse almost always has his or her heart ripped out. And financially and in terms of friendships and family, there is no such thing as a painless divorce.

But if a marriage comes down to divorce, there are 4 very important things to remember. **First, if you are divorced or are going through a divorce remember that your ex-spouse is still a child of God.** No matter how much of scoundrel he or she has been, they are still a child of God. They are still someone who needs to be ministered to and prayed for. They are someone who is worthy to be treated at least how Jesus taught us that our enemies should be treated. He said pray for them.

**Second, be just and fair toward your ex-spouse regardless of how they have treated you.** Every once in while I'll hear people going through divorces say things like, "I'm going to make sure that she is utterly ruined for this." Or she says, "I'm going to take him for everything he's got." God says, "Hold on, even in the midst of a hellish trial, I expect you to be a Christian and act like one. I'm still expecting you to be just and fair and not to seek to destroy another human being no matter how much they have hurt you."

**Third, if you are a father who is required to pay child support, or a mother who is required to pay child support, know that this is not just a legal requirement, it's a spiritual issue.** You see, God holds you accountable for taking care of your children, even if you don't see them very often. When kids are old enough to realize that a parent is not paying child support, do you know how that makes them feel? It makes them feel abandoned. Not only that, but it may mean that they are not able to do things, it may mean they go without certain things. And if you're the one **receiving** that child support, then use it wisely. Use it for what it's intended—for the child's well-being, not your own, not your selfish desires.

**And finally parents: don't put your children in the middle.** Don't use them as weapons to get at your ex-spouse, no matter how awful your ex-spouse is. Don't use them as a bargaining tool to get what you want. And don't air your dirty laundry to your kids. Your kids do not need to hear you talk bad about their mom or dad. If you've got to vent about your ex-spouse, then find a friend or adult family member who understands your pain and can put those things in perspective, but don't lay that stuff on your kids. God will hold you accountable for this.

Having given you these rules, please know that God understands the anger that you feel. God knows that there are times when you blow it because of the anger that you feel. But these are the things we should strive for.

Now, let me ask the question, "How does Jesus see divorced people?" What would Jesus do if he came into contact with somebody who was divorced? How would he treat them? Well, there's only one place in the gospels that I'm aware of where Jesus encounters someone who's divorced. It's in John chapter 4. Jesus and the disciples are traveling together and they come to a well near a village. Jesus sends the disciples on into the town and he stays behind at the well. And at that well he meets a woman who had not just been divorced once, or twice, but she had been divorced 5 times and the man she was currently living with was not her husband.

What do you think Jesus said to her? Do you think he said, "Have you never heard of Malachi chapter 2 verse 13?!" Do you know what it says there? It says that God hates divorce?!" He didn't say that. He did not say to her, "Let me tell you what I just lectured the Pharisees on a little while ago..." He didn't lecture her. Do you know what he said to her? He said, "I can tell your soul is thirsty. If you knew who you were talking to you would ask me for living water and I would give it to

you and you would never be thirsty again.” He sensed a deep spiritual thirst in her that no human being could ever full. And so he extended his grace to her, and along with his grace, his love, mercy and new life. That’s what he did.

And do you know what else he did? He took this woman and turned her into an evangelist. He sent her back into the town she came from and said, “Tell everybody that you can what you’ve heard and seen.” She ran back into the village and rounded up everybody she knew and said, “You’ve got to come and see and hear this man!” They came out to see him and the scripture tells us that many who heard believed in Jesus that day. This is what Jesus did.

You know Jesus didn’t come to this world to preach about divorce. He spoke very little about it. It was not a central theme of his ministry. But do you know why he came? He came to save sinners. And we are all in that category. If you look through the Bible you won’t find divorce listed as a sin anywhere. But we have all sinned and missed the mark with God. We all blow it from time to time--sometimes in real big ways. But Jesus came to save us from our sins. He came to deal with our sins and deliver us. He came to give us life and hope, mercy and forgiveness. And that’s the central theme of his preaching and teaching.

This morning as we sit here from various walks of life and various places in our relationships, I think Jesus would say two things to us. First to those of you who are struggling in your marriage and thinking about divorce, Jesus would become a prophet who would speak to you and say, “Whatever you do, keep working at this marriage. Don’t give up! Please let me work through you to make this thing work! You’ve got to make it work!” That’s what I think he would say to some of you.

But here’s what I think he would say to others of you who have experienced the pain and grief and heartache of divorce. I think he’d say, “If you would ask of me, I would give you living water. I would quench that deep thirst you have for real life and real love. I would ease your pain and give you a fresh start. You are my precious child and I love you. Please let me love you.” I believe that’s what he would say. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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