

Tough Topics: Marriage and Divorce

May Christians get divorced? The “may” speaks to permissibility. Permissible by whom and according to what standards? But the question we seek to understand in light of God’s explicit Word is: **what is His desire with respect to marriage?**

Nota Bene—this is a “tough topic” because so many Christians have gotten divorced. There is no sin more openly prevalent in the Church. This teaching affects nearly every single person. *This a very personal topic.* The Church has failed to adequately teach about divorce and instead often avoids speaking about divorce at all.

What Does God’s Word Say...about Marriage?

To talk about divorce, though, is to talk about something that happened **to a married couple**. We should think of divorce as *two things joined together being ripped apart*.

Genesis 2:18-25 (Lexham English Bible with my emphasis):

Then Yahweh God said, “it is not good that the man is alone. I will make for him a helper [as his counterpart].” And out of the ground Yahweh God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and he brought each to the man to see what he would call it.

And whatever the man called that living creature was its name. And the man [gave names] to every domesticated animal and to the birds of heaven and to all the wild animals. But for the man there was not found a helper [as his counterpart]. And Yahweh God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man. While he slept, he took one of his ribs, and closed up [the flesh where it had been]. And Yahweh God fashioned the rib which he had taken from the man into a woman and brought her to the man. And the man said, “[She is now] bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh; [she] shall be called ‘Woman,’ for [she was taken] from man.”

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cling to his wife, and they shall be as one flesh. And the man and his wife, both of them, were naked, and they were not ashamed.

While we don’t have time to fully talk about marriage, we must see some basic things.

1. God instituted marriage in the very creation of man and woman.
2. Marriage is the joining together of two separate, different, yet related, creatures.
 - a. Different in their created distinctions and roles.
 - b. Related in that both bear the image of God and are equal in value and dignity.
3. This was done before the fall. *Therefore, this order and design is wholly good.*

What Does God’s Word Say...about Divorce?

The question of divorce was raised in the ministry of Jesus. It was a practice permitted by Moses (in God’s Word). But interestingly, Jesus makes a move to go *beyond* and *before* Moses to articulate God’s will rooted in the creation.

Matthew 19:1-10 (Lexham English Bible with my emphasis):

And it happened that when Jesus had finished these statements, he went away from Galilee and came into the region of Judea on the other side of the Jordan. And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. And Pharisees came up to him in order to test him, and asked if it was permitted for a man to divorce his wife for any cause. And he answered and said, “Have you not read that the one who created them from the

beginning made them male and female and said, 'On account of this a man will leave his father and his mother and will be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, man must not separate." They said to him, "Why then did Moses command us to give a document—a certificate of divorce—and to divorce her?" He said to them, "Moses, with reference **to your hardness of heart**, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not like this. Now I say to you that whoever divorces his wife, except on the basis of sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."

Note well that—

1. Jesus is asked a question meant to trap him.
2. He responds not in a debate on Moses but grounds the discussion in creation.
3. He is unequivocal—man and woman must not separate.
4. Divorce was allowed due to sin, to manage it and hem it in.
5. He is NOT setting "rules for divorce".

Two other things. First, what He points to is the fact that sexual immorality rends the marriage bond. Secondly, the immediate reaction of His disciples to this teaching was (like ours) incredulity! God's desire for His creation is not easy for sinners, even repentant and regenerate ones. **But it is His will, and that is what runs the show.**

Another place to look to is St. Paul. Please note that Paul is addressing a different audience and answering different questions/concerns/cultural practices.

1 Corinthians 7:1-17 (Lexham English Bible with my emphasis)

Now concerning the things about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." *But because of sexual immorality*, let each man have his own wife and let each woman have her own husband. The husband must fulfill his obligation to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but her husband does. And likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but his wife does. Do not defraud one another, except perhaps by agreement, for a time, in order that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and then you should be [together] again, lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control. But I say this as a concession, not as a command. **I wish all people could be like myself, but each one has his own gift from God, one in this way and another in that way.** Now I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain **single** as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with sexual desire. To the married I command—not I, but the Lord—**a wife must not separate from her husband. But if indeed she does separate, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.**

Now to the rest I say—not the Lord—if any brother has an unbelieving wife and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if any wife has an unbelieving husband and he consents to live with her, she must not divorce her husband. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the brother, since otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let him leave. The brother or the sister is not bound in such cases. But God has called us in peace. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

But to each one as the Lord has apportioned. As God has called each one, thus let him live—and thus I order in all the churches.

Verse 8: Paul does NOT say *single*, but “as even I myself am”. We must be very careful about reading our context into the text. Paul’s own situation is: unmarried, celibate, and chaste. He goes on to say that each person has a “gift from God” with respect to their calling to marriage. What Paul is arguing is not that single is one of the many lifestyle choices among many, but that one needs a spiritual gift to “live like Paul”. Some people have this disposition and inclination. In my experience, MOST DO NOT.

Paul is dealing with a situation(s) in a Greco-Roman cosmopolitan city and a society where divorce was accepted and could be entered upon by both husbands and wives.

What is Our Christian Response?

In Light of the Forgiveness of Jesus—we live under His grace and mercy. The mistakes, missteps, bad decisions, youthful indiscretions, flagrant flauntings **are all paid for**. There is no sin that is not forgiven. *This is radical*. It is free. It is liberating. It is life-changing.

In Light of the Will of God (the Law)—we seek (in light of the above) to conform our lives and practices to God’s desire for marriage. Knowing what He desires, we try to live as His renewed creatures. While we can’t “unscramble the egg”, we can *go forward* in the free forgiveness and live according to God’s design. This means that our lives will **look different**.

We Need More (Holy) Hypocrites!

“Christians are hypocrites”. How many of you have heard this sentiment? What people tend to mean is a) **people in the church are judgmental against others for their sin, while all along they sin just as much** and b) **Christians very rarely practice what they preach**. *Both criticisms can be and are often true*. But what the world needs from the Church is more “hypocrisy”. This means that Christians, living in the forgiveness of Jesus, exhort, admonish, encourage others to not follow in their past mistakes, but **DO THE OPPOSITE**. This is especially true in conversations with our family and children.

We Need More Weirdos!

This means that Christians will (and should) look strange to the world around us. As we increasingly live in a secular, materialistic age that forsakes the knowledge of a Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, *we look weird*. We stand out because we don’t go along with every trend and fad. In fact, we are skeptical about progress and innovation. We stand apart from our neighbors, not in aloofness, **but not always going along with what is deemed “normal”**.

If the Church practiced “hypocrisy” with respect to repentance and renewal and stood out due to our persistent refusal to engage with secular rituals, **we would have a dramatic effect on society**. We would have a dramatic effect on the future generations in the Church.

The Takeaway—*living according to God’s will generally brings blessings to bear. It can also bring scorn, persecution, and derision, but when God’s people live by His rules they will themselves thrive and flourish. They will be in sync with Him and people around them will benefit.*

With respect to marriage and divorce, what if we actually tried to live (in the forgiveness of Jesus) in accord with God’s design, bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit? What might happen? Because it’s hard, do we not do it? Because of past histories, do we stay silent?