



DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

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INTRODUCTION

Divorce is painful. There is perhaps no other life event more emotionally and relationally destructive than divorce. In addition to legal battles, back and forth disputes, and concern for the well being of children, divorce is usually accompanied with a sense of shame and loneliness. With an issue like this, it is the responsibility of Jesus' church to speak the truth in love. Jesus was both tender and truthful. We must weep with those who weep, and have hearts of compassion for people dealing with brokenness. We must also faithfully represent the heart of Christ in speaking the truth, and in calling followers of Christ to be obedient to Christ.

THE PERMANENCE OF MARRIAGE

In defining a Biblical picture of divorce, it is important to start with the Biblical view of marriage. In Mark 10, Jesus defines marriage:

"But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." (Mark 10:6-9)

Jesus describes marriage as a permanent joining of lives, where the two lives are so intertwined they can be spoken of as one life. Not only do spouses share a home, children, and a last name, but they share one another's very lives. This is why divorce is so painful, and why Jesus warned us not to separate a marriage. It is as though a person is being ripped apart at the seams.

The marriage relationship is not one that carries into eternity, but there is a permanent reality to the fact that all Christians are brothers and sisters in the family of God. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we are supposed to love one another with the love of Christ. 1 John 2:9-11 says that if you hate your brother, it shows you do not really know God. In that case, a divorce because a couple who 'fell out of love' is essentially showing that they do not know the love of God!

Not only that, but throughout the Bible, the permanence of marriage points to a higher reality—the love of Christ for His bride, the church. Married Christians are to live out their marriages as a daily portrait of the fidelity and steadfast love of God for us. Divorce tarnishes that beautiful picture.

For these reasons, at One Harbor Church, we believe that Christians should not divorce one another. Rather, they should fight for a marriage that reflects the permanent love of Christ for His church.

GROUNDS FOR LEGITIMATE DIVORCE

Although divorce is always contrary to the perfect will of God for marriage, there are several occasions when divorce may be legitimate for a believer. Let it be clear that divorce is never mandatory for a believer, and through the power of the Spirit and with the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, many believers in these circumstances can and should choose to fight for their marriages. Even if divorce may be an option in some instances, working towards reconciliation is always the best option. The two occasions that allow for divorce are sexual immorality in the marriage, and desertion.

Sexual Immorality

They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." (Matthew 19:7-9)

Jesus allows for divorce in the case of sexual immorality, but even then Jesus makes it clear that this is not God's best for us. Jesus desires us to make every effort at reconciliation. Unfortunately, this is not always possible.

The word Jesus uses to describe sexual immorality is a broad term for sexual sin, and could include adultery, homosexuality, addiction to pornography, or other large sexual sins. The fact is however, that none of us are without some level of sexual sin. Jesus says that to lust is just as severe a sin of the heart as to commit adultery. As Christians, we are to model our forgiveness after Christ, who forgave us of everything when we least deserved it. Jesus' allowance for divorce at sexual immorality should not be used flippantly.

For instance, if a wife discovers her husband has viewed pornography, if she quickly filed for divorce and cited Jesus' exception, she would be totally at odds with Jesus' teaching on forgiveness and reconciliation. Only in severe circumstances where sexual sin is continued and unrepentant should a Christian decide to divorce their spouse. This decision should not be made in a vacuum, but within Christian community that is pointing the Christian back to the Gospel of Jesus, and inside the accountability of a local church.

Desertion

If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. (1 Corinthians 7:13-15)

Paul discusses the case of a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever. In such an instance, the overarching command is clear; the believer should not divorce the unbeliever who is willing to remain married. However, if the unbelieving spouse does desert the marriage, the believer is free. The believer is still welcome to pursue reconciliation in their marriage, but they are “not enslaved”- they are not obligated. Similarly, a believer who deserted his spouse and refused to return would be engaging in unrepentant sin, and therefore would be acting as an unbeliever according to the tenets of Matthew 18:17. That person should be treated as an unbeliever. Once again, the spouse would not be obligated to pursue reconciliation. As in the case of sexual immorality, a believer is encouraged to first exhaust every possibility to pursue reconciliation through the power of the Gospel before considering divorce.

We believe that abuse in a marriage is comparable to desertion, in that it is a total desertion of the marriage covenant. In the case of unrepentant and continued abuse, the abused would be encouraged to separate, and would also be expected to inform the church, who will attempt to engage both the abuser and the abused with the Gospel in hopes of repentance. If repentance does not occur, divorce may be appropriate on the basis of the spiritual desertion caused by the abuse. Abuse may include both emotional abuse as well as physical, but marriage should never be hastily abandoned. Because this is a grey area requiring wisdom, the counsel of the eldership should be sought if it felt that abuse is taking place.

Outside of those two situations, Jesus is clear: divorce is not to be pursued. If one is currently considering divorce (or if his or her spouse is considering divorce) for any reason, or if one is currently divorced and is considering remarriage, he or she is expected to immediately inform the elders of One Harbor Church for biblical counsel regarding the process of reconciliation. Even if divorce becomes unavoidable, it should still never be taken lightly. It is tempting to retreat from community during difficult times, but something as devastating as a divorce must be walked out in the loving community of the church, and under the accountability and safety of the leadership.

THE POSSIBILITY OF REMARRIAGE

There is not complete agreement among Christians on the possibility of remarriage after divorce. However, in instances involving one who was divorced on the grounds of sexual immorality or desertion by an unbeliever, remarriage will be considered acceptable within One Harbor Church. In addition, someone who was divorced before conversion may remarry on the grounds that such a person is a new creation in Christ.

For all divorces that have occurred for reasons other than sexual immorality or desertion, the expectation for both parties is to pursue reconciliation. Until reconciliation with the former spouse occurs, both spouses are to remain single and celibate as indicated in 1 Corinthians 7:11.

This may sound extreme to some, but scripture is clear that singleness is a valuable and legitimate lifestyle. If remarriage is not an option due to the nature of the divorce, the Christian should embrace their life of singleness. In Isaiah 56:4-5 God says that He will give the single people who obey Him an everlasting monument and a name that will not be cut off. Christians who find themselves in this position should seek to bring glory to God in the circumstances they are in.

If someone has already been divorced and remarried, even if it was not a remarriage that would have been encouraged by the Church, they should not divorce simply because their marriage was unwise. The couple is encouraged to live out their current marriage biblically, before God, and in community. It is a real marriage in the eyes of God, not a second-rate marriage.

HOPE FOR FORGIVENESS

Many people have already been divorced, and feel a sense of guilt and shame. It should be clear that although divorce is a sin, it is not an unforgivable sin. Forgiveness is available for all sins. Forgiveness is received freely through trusting Christ, as we confess our sins and turn away from them toward God. The sin that remains unforgiven is the sin that we refuse to confess and forsake.

If someone has been illegitimately divorced, the issue is not if they can be forgiven. The issue is: do they admit that what they did was sin? Do they renounce it? And do they do what they can to make it right? A Christian is not defined by the absence of sin, but by the presence of repentance.

THE GOSPEL FUELS HOPE FOR RECONCILIATION

The hopeful resolution to all marital strife is reconciliation, and we have a tremendous hope for reconciliation in the Gospel. The foundation for a healthy marriage is a right relationship with God, a relationship that will only come as we embrace the gospel of love, mercy, forgiveness, grace and humility displayed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Failure to patiently forgive and extend grace thus reflects an unwillingness to be conformed to the image of Christ. Unless one has responded to Him in the gospel by faith and repentance, attempts to reconcile marital or other relationships will never get to the root and will therefore only treat symptoms. Though the work of reconciliation may not be easy, it is certainly worth any cost to see God glorified and His children walking in the light.

In developing this statement, we relied heavily on the statements of Bethlehem Baptist Church and The Village Church.